

Trinitarian Genealogies: Father, Son, and the Spirit of Modernity
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Who am I?

This simple question may sound banal, but only if we do not take its simplicity seriously enough. On the one hand, this question concerns a simple identity, for I am who I am, and this identity is best expressed by my own name. From the moment Moses approached the burning bush, every name seems to be a name only insofar as it also says: I am who I am (Ex 3:13–14). On the other hand, my name is that by which my mother, father, and others address me. My identity is not just mine but includes all the relational determinations that place it in a chain of species and genera.

More than anything else, modern man has tried to break these metaphysical chains and relations in order to finally become the master of his own past, of what he comes from, to be a true father of himself and not a son; to be a son of himself and not a father, or to be autonomously born of a pure idea, as Dostoevsky has it when he prophetically [writes from the very depths of the modern underground](#): “We’re stillborn, and have long ceased to be born of living fathers, and we like this more and more. We’re acquiring a taste for it. Soon we’ll contrive to be born somehow from an idea.” But the fire of that burning bush shining through all names and identities cannot be controlled, and every attempt to do so ends in contradiction. To be a father of oneself, to be an image related to oneself, or to be born from an idea is to gain power over the question “Who am I?” at the cost of permanent contradiction.

Can the method of genealogy save us from this identity crisis into which the project of modernity willy-nilly leads us? Philosophical and theological genealogies seem to promise both a critical revision and a creative reconstruction of all the relationships in which our lives unfold as belonging to a particular familial, national, cultural, political, or cosmic genus. However, if our genealogies were only to critically challenge modernity, they would still be a means of repeating the foundational gesture of all modern thought: the subject-centered refusal of the tradition of being from its source. Critical genealogies are suspicious, they question everything, and thus reveal ontological identity as only attainable through radical difference. For them, there are no fathers except those who must be rejected and “unfathered” including the fathers of modernity itself. They uncover modern narrations of progress as an idealised past that should be forgotten, and show the previously forgotten past as the proper subject of modern consciousness and self-realization. Creative genealogies seem to build on this second, positive movement of critical genealogies, freeing it from a merely negative dialectic as to identify the opportunities of new relations.

This may seem like a promise that it is after all possible, even in an “unfathered” world without good fathers, to be sons of our own past, which we can rediscover, embrace, develop, and have control over. But again, if creative genealogies were only the negation of the negativity implied in critical genealogies, they would still remain the result of the modern dialectic. The opportunities for new relations opened up through them would still follow the logic of what is possible. Our relationship to the past would depend on what we can accomplish, not on what we are actually gifted with. But a true reconciliation in a flowing succession of generations cannot be the result of the possibility or power to negate: it must relate to a certain genealogical reality that is, from the very beginning, the real peace beyond anything what might or might not be. New relations can only be real on the basis of participation in a relational reality that is not merely intentional and dialectical.

There is more to genealogy than criticism leading to nothing and creativity coming from nothing. This is why a number of 20th century theologians and philosophers thought that the key genealogical task in relation to modernity must be to come up with a genealogy of the forgetting of the Trinity (“Trinitätsvergessenheit”). Christian Revelation renders the genealogical relations in creation real through participation in the subsisting Trinitarian relations. Relational structures become problematic outside this analogical context because they tend towards abstraction and absolutization. This can also apply to the Church. Karl Rahner (1904–1984) is generally acknowledged to have coined the term “Trinitätsvergessenheit” when he observed that practical significance of the mysterium Trinitatis has been largely denied in the life of Church since modernity. More radically, German philosopher Erwin Schadel (1946–2016) argued that “Trinitätsvergessenheit” is not merely a theological problem but concerns the whole character of modernity. Schadel describes the unfolding of Trinitarian metaphysics from its patristic beginnings, its development by medieval masters, and its decline in modernity leading to a purely dialectical, subject-centered conception of being. The dialectical “identity of identity and non-identity” does indeed express the constitutive movement of the subjectivity, but according to Schadel, this movement must not be confused with the reality of being nor that of the subjectivity itself.

Everything depends, after all, on whether, within our genealogical efforts we merely move within the realm of mere possibility, or whether we want to take on the task of following Christ. A Christian genealogy of modernity must by no means stop at the antagonistically structured schematizations. If the logos of self-giving love shapes all reality, the critical or creative struggle cannot possibly keep the central or even the last word. Rather, I propose to speak of *genea-logy* from within the spiritual reality of the logos implied in Trinitarian “generatio”. In his *De Trinitate*, Augustine (354–430) thought of “generatio” as distinguishing between generations of parents and offspring in a way that avoids the temptation to see the fatherly begetter as an absolute authoritative ruler of self-generating power (“potentia quae se ipsa genuit ut sit”, c.f. *De Trinitate* I and VII), and the begotten son as an absolute self-referential, narcissistic image of himself (c.f. *De Trinitate* VII, 1). The spirit of modernity, who is the Mephistophelian genius who always denies (*Faust* I, 1323), encourages both of these hybrids which, as Augustine already saw, consist in the perversion of Trinitarian substantive relationality. In contrast, the logic of Trinitarian “generatio”–Trinitarian genealogy–renders parental “genitor” and begotten “genitus” as loving each other with the love of the Holy Spirit, who is neither parent nor offspring, but is like a desire and self-giving love which embraces them, and joins them in “generatio” (c.f. *De Trinitate* VI, 10, 11). As Augustine states, the Holy Spirit is not begotten, but She is the generosity of parental “genitor” and begotten “genitus” transcending all genera (non genitus, sed genitoris genitique suavitas “ingenti” largitate), and pouring out upon all creatures, so that they may ever renew their genealogical relations, and finally find their rest and peace.

From the moment Moses' approach to the burning bush was made everlastingly new as foreshadowing the Pentecostal fiery outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17), all epistemological strategies implied in critical or creative genealogies must relate to a genealogical reality that we can imagine as the Trinitarian generosity itself. Trinitarian metaphysics should name this genealogical reality as to express how everything is called to be overshadowed by the fire of the Holy Spirit and transformed on the way of the real peace and reconciliation. Despite all modern contradictions, this is the way to make that simple question “Who am I?” glowing and full of hope again.

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