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HILARY OF POITIERS AND THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

ABSTRACT

Hilary of Poitiers deals with the question concerning our knowledge of God. Knowledge of God will never be attained by human efforts. God is only known through Jesus who is God in the human flesh. We learn this not from philosophy, but from the apostle John. The reality of God in Christ precedes our knowledge of God, and this knowledge dominates language. The word “Trinity” refers to this knowledge, but it has no meaning apart from the confession that Christ is *homoousios* with both the Father and the Spirit. Consequently, Hilary does not attempt to render the Trinity understandable. It is simply another word for *homoousios*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Enlightenment, theology has struggled with the problem of the knowledge of God. As metaphysics has been replaced by critical human thought, speaking about a Being beyond the visible world has no solid ground. Kuitert (1974:28; 1997:40) summarises the problem in his aphorism: “Any speaking about above comes from below”. Speaking about a transcendent God has no other meaning than the statement: “There is no God.” If such a God should exist, we cannot know him and speaking about him is mere speculation.

Twentieth-century neo-orthodoxy claimed to have an answer to the aporia of theology after the Enlightenment. The answer was *Trinity*. Barth (1932-1970:I,1:311-320) made Trinity the basis of his theological construction. If God were a monolithic entity, he would be enclosed within himself and not be able to reveal himself. However, God is trinitarian. Relations belong to the very being of God, thus he can have relations and

create relations. As a relational God, he has relations with relational human beings, who, in turn, mirror his relationality (Barth 1932-1970:III,1:220). From these ideas, later theologians such as, for example, Zizioulas (1997; 2000), Moltmann (1980) and Rohr (2016) have developed a social Trinity. Jenson (1984; 1997) gave substance to the dynamics of divine diversity through the progress of history.

In this context, it is interesting to note that Hilary of Poitiers (± 315-367) also makes a connection between the doctrine of the Trinity and theological knowledge and language. He also stresses that there are distinctions in God. He does not tire of stating that any knowledge is trinitarian knowledge, because the Son reveals the Father. Because Hilary lived more than a millennium before the Enlightenment, it is interesting to analyse his reasoning.

2. REALITY FIRST

When reading Hilary, it immediately becomes clear that his position differs from that of Barth. Barth uses the concept of Trinity to answer the question as to how God can be known. Trinity is the answer to the question about God. For Hilary, it is exactly the opposite: Trinity evokes the question about God. The confession of the triune God is a given – and this confession causes many problems. It is as basic to Christianity as baptism. Being a Christian means being baptised in the name of the triune God. According to Hilary, the whole of Christian theology is already given in the baptismal formula. It “contains the exact words to be used, the essential acts, the sequence of processes, and insight into the Divine nature” (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,1). It is the *summa theologiae*.

Nothing will be found lacking in that supreme perfection which embraces, in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, infinity in the eternal, splendid appearance in the Image, fruition in the Gift (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,1, translated by Meijering 1982).

This is Christian reality: being baptised. This reality precedes any theological discourse. Words always follow reality. Any theological concept that must indicate orthodoxy is only secondary to the reality of faith.

A Catholic about to state that the substance of the Father and the Son is one, must not begin at that point: nor hold this word all important as though true faith did not exist where the word was not used (Hilary *On the Councils* 69).

We can also be orthodox Christians and true believers without the words of Nicea. Hilary did not even know about this creed until he was exiled to Asia because of his orthodox faith (Hilary *On the Councils* 91, 88).

Because language and understanding are consequential, they cannot define reality.

If we assume that an event did not happen, because we cannot discover how it was done, we make the limits of our understanding into the limits of reality (Hilary *On the Trinity* 3,20, 3,24).

Indeed, this reality evokes theological questions, so that Trinity is not the solution to the problem of theological knowledge, but rather the source of fundamental theological problems.

Barth also argues that reality precedes possibility (Barth 1927:304-308; 1932-1970:I,1:194-198). It seems that he does not differ from Hilary. However, they have different opinions about what reality is. For Barth, God's reality is the reality of revelation. Revelation is the presence of God incarnate. For Barth, however, incarnation is not the historical Jesus. In fact, Barth is not interested in history (Busch 1978:96; Van der Kooi 1987:243). It is about the message of the revelation as proclaimed in the world. After Barth stated that God can only be known by revelation and that God can reveal himself because he is relational, the content of this revelation is determined by Barth's own critical vision of civil societal theology.¹ His concept of revelation is a function of his critique of 19th-century mainstream theology, and thus an entrance to a *critical* theology. Human beings must respond to the message of this critical theology which is the message implied in revelation. They are called to participate in renewal of the world according to the will of God.

The difference between Barth and Hilary can best be illustrated by their thought on baptism. Barth (1932-1970:IV,4) ends his *Church Dogmatics* with adult baptism. Baptism is man's free answer to the calling of God in his revelation (Barth 1932-1970:IV,2:96, 144-146). Being a Christian is not a reality, but a response that calls for realisation that will never be completed, because God is always beyond our history. For Hilary, baptism is the most basic reality of a Christian. The question as to whether God exists, is not a matter of metaphysics and revelation, but one of reality. God's presence is as real as Christians are real. It is their very being, because they are baptised in Him. Being baptised is their very existence, and baptism is in the name of the triune God. God is historically present – as historically as the baptismal rite which is performed. It is not necessary to explain that God exists and how human beings can know him or speak about him. He is. And he is *present*: in baptism. God in his presence is triune.

1 See Tillich (1964:16): "The famous 'No' of Karl Barth against any kind of natural theology, even of man's ability to ask the question about God, is in the last analysis a self-deception."

For Hilary, Trinity is not instrumental in explaining how God can reveal himself. God is present as triune in the baptismal formula and this formula does not help us make theology more understandable and acceptable for critical minds. On the contrary, it is a stumbling block for human understanding. Hilary enjoys stretching the problems of thought regarding the Trinity to their extremes.

3. THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE FATHER

When we are baptised in the name of the Father, we must realise that the Father represents God's incomprehensibility (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,7). He is the Father in heaven, inaccessible, invisible, untouchable. The Father is God whom nobody has ever seen. What does this imply? If God is invisible, we cannot know him. We cannot even know that he exists. Hilary uses all the arguments of modern atheists against a transcendent being with fervour. God cannot be known. And if human beings try to find language to express such a being, their speaking falls short. "All is ineffable, unattainable, incomprehensible. Language is exhausted by the magnitude of the theme" (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,5, 2,6). God is incomprehensible for finite beings, because He is infinite. This is the basic paradigm of Hilary's theology (Meijering 1982:183).

However, Hilary's conclusion is the very reverse of the response of modern atheists to God's incomprehensibility. God exists. No question about this. However, our language about his being is insufficient. God is not the problem; we are the problem. We are limited creatures. We are unable to express in our words who God is. God is not incomprehensible to himself, but to us. We share his presence in the communion of the church. And it would be best to observe worship and adhere to a life according to his will, without questions calling for answers that can never express sufficiently what we worship and how we live. Nevertheless, we cannot be silent, in order to silence the opponents of faith. "The error of others compels us to err in daring to embody in human terms truths which ought to be hidden in the silent veneration of the heart" (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,2, 2,5).

We thus search for words, concepts, and formulas that refer to God. The language we use is not heavenly language. It is the language of common life indicating what we believe, experience and live in the communion with God.

We could conclude that God-talk is metaphorical, maximally an analogy, which always has the aspect of being improper. In this instance, Hilary (*On the Trinity* 2,7) does not allow himself to be forced on the defensive, but he takes the argument of the opponents further.

If you hear that He is incomprehensible, that is as much as to say that He is non-existent, since contact with Him is impossible. If you say that

He is invisible, a being that does not visibly exist cannot be sure of its own existence. Thus our confession of God fails through the defects of language.

There is no analogy between God and human beings, not even an analogy of relation or faith. The only illustration that might convince critical minds is the worst example: miracles, such as the changing of water into wine or the multiplication of the loaves (Hilary *On the Trinity* 3,5-3,7). These do not constitute an argument to underpin God's existence (Meijering 1982:93), but only a counter to the opponents: they cannot explain what happened in these instances. They are too dull for such events. Of course, this will not convince the opponents. Hilary is well aware of this. This is exactly the problem with the opponents of faith: they can only accept that which fits into their own frame of mind.

If there is no correlation or analogy between human language and God's being, we are left empty handed. Hilary (*On the Councils* 79) refutes this conclusion. "If it cannot be expressed in words, is it therefore unknowable?" (Hilary *On the Councils* 79). God is known because he is present in his Son through the Holy Spirit and we refer to this, even if the words as such are inadequate (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,7) and can only be understood by those who share the same knowledge.

For Hilary, theological language means that we use words from common language and apply these to the ineffable reality of God. These words are ordinary words, but in theological language, they receive a specific meaning only relevant within this discourse. They are theological *technical terms*. Such terms must be understood in this context. The same words may be used in other contexts, but there they have a different reference, since technical terms generally have specific meanings. Everybody knows that a crane in a harbour refers to something other than a crane that bird watchers seek, and we must not investigate the bird in order to understand how a derrick works. God-talk thus uses common words in a specific discourse; we should not analyse such words according to their meaning in other discourses. If we speak about God the Father, it is about the incomprehensible God and we should not introduce in that discourse the meaning of a dear daddy, unless the theological discourse itself requires such aspects.

The conclusion must be that Christians are baptised in the name of the incomprehensible Father, whom they worship and with whom they live in communion. They use words to indicate this reality which they cannot explain. Every effort to explain it will not only fall short, but is also a denial of the reality to which it refers: the incomprehensibility of God.

We must not repose so blind a confidence in human intellect as to imagine that we have complete knowledge of the objects of our thought, or that

the ultimate problem is solved as soon as we have formed a symmetrical and consistent theory. Finite minds cannot conceive the Infinite (Hilary *On the Trinity* 3,24).

4. THE SON

When Hilary bases his theology on the reality of God's given presence, he is not a fundamentalist with a positivistic view of Scripture and revelation. Theology has no solid foundation. In the deliberations on the Father, we have left a coast without a harbour. Then Hilary comes to his thought about the Son.

We would expect that theology now reaches calmer waters. The Son is God in his revelation. We can know God by his coming. Hilary (*On the Trinity* 2,8) again turns to the other side:

We have now exchanged the perils of a harbourless coast for the storms of the open sea. We can neither safely advance nor safely retreat, yet the way that lies before us has greater hardships than that which lies behind. The Father is what He is, and as He is manifested, so we must believe. The mind shrinks in dread from treating of the Son.

Thinking about the Son does not make theology easier. It is a higher stumbling block than speaking about the incomprehensible Father.² In this instance, Hilary comes precisely to the point where later Islam focused its critique on Christianity: God has a companion. How is this possible? According to Hilary, Greek philosophers cannot help us answer this question. They have struggled for centuries about the One and the many without finding a solution to the problem (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,12). Even Moses and the prophets cannot help us in this regard, for they did not know about the historical coming of the Son. Christians who argue that we should restrict ourselves to telling the story of Jesus also do not help us; simply telling stories does not make clear that it is *God* who came in the Son. Stories must be interpreted (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,12).

Hilary (*On the Trinity* 2,13) finds another helper in his search for serious theology about the Son.

2 In *On the Trinity* 6,26, Hilary mentions that the Son is just as unknowable as the Father. This seems inconsistent with 2,7 and *On the Councils* 79, where he writes that God can be known. As for the use of the word "unknowable", *ignorabilis*, this is inconsistent, indeed (Meijering 1982:83). However, with *ignorabilis*, Hilary rather means "incomprehensible", "ineffable", in 6,26 and *On the Councils* 79. Materially, there is no necessary contradiction.

There stands by my side, to guide me through the difficulties which I have enunciated, a poor fisherman, ignorant, uneducated, fishing-lines in hand, clothes dripping, muddy feet, every inch a sailor. Consider and decide whether it were the greater feat to raise the dead or impart to an untrained mind the knowledge of mysteries so deep as he reveals by saying: "In the beginning was the Word" [John 1:1].

The Word is in the beginning. Hilary focuses on "in the beginning", not on "the Word". We would expect that "the Word" would open a track about communicability in God and so about revelation. This would calm the rough sea of theological discourse. But Hilary does not wish to calm the waters. The Word is not only God's revelation, but the Word is in the beginning, which is a beginning before the beginning of the world, because the Word has priority over all things, which have become into being by the Word. The Word is thus not a reference to God's communicability, but to the eternal being of the Son (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,13).

Hilary argues that the Word is not a mere voice. A human word has no substance. Before it is spoken, it is not yet and, after it was spoken, it has gone (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,15). Hilary speaks about the word similar to Augustine (*Confessiones* 11,15) about time: it is the moment of transition from future to past which has no extension and no being. Not so the divine Word.³ When we use the term "Word" in a theological discourse, it has its specific meaning in that discourse: the eternal Word which has everlasting reality. It is a real being. "The Word is a reality, not a sound; a Being, not a speech; God, not a nonentity" (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,15). We are informed by the fisherman from Galilee: "The Word was *with* God". It is a reality next to God. Before running to the conclusion that consequently it is not God, because it is another being than God, the fisherman has already interrupted us: "The Word is God." There is God next to God. God has a companion, *socius* (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,18).

Hilary does not try to explain how this is possible. It is reality. First, the reality of being baptised in the name of the Son, interpreted by John as the eternal Word, a being next to the Father from eternity.

He is the perfect Son of the perfect Father, for He Who has all has given all to Him. Yet we must not imagine that the Father did not give, because He still possesses, or that He has lost, because He gave to the Son (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2:8, 2:22).

3 Hilary (*On the Trinity* 2,17) argues, like Augustine (*Confessiones* 11, 13), that time is created. Contrary to Augustine, Hilary focuses on the aspect of time that it can be measured, and so grasped. Human words are also created, but the divine Word is uncreated, eternal. The Word *is* and, as divine reality, it cannot be grasped by measuring.

Just as in his discourse on the Father, Hilary does not try to make the confession of the Son understandable. “The manner of this birth is ... a secret confined to the Two” (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,9). Hilary only demonstrates its incompatibility with philosophical thought. Theology cannot and may not do more than use words – such as “Word” – as technical terms for a discourse of its own standing.

5. THE WORD BECAME FLESH

It is not surprising that, in his deliberations on the incarnation, Hilary does not attempt to make it understandable. For him, incarnation is not something divine indwelling in human beings, or especially in Jesus as the ultimate human being. On the contrary, in his view, incarnation means that God is personally present in the very historical person of Jesus, just as concretely as a human person is historical, visible, and touchable. “He passed through every stage; through conception, birth, wailing, cradle and each successive humiliation” (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2:24). Hilary (*On the Trinity* 2,25) follows earlier theologians such as Tertullian and Origen in their predilection for the paradoxical language of incarnation:

He at Whose voice Archangels and Angels tremble, and heaven and earth and all the elements of this world are melted, was heard in childish wailing. The Invisible and Incomprehensible, Whom sight and feeling and touch cannot gauge, was wrapped in a cradle.

God’s presence in the Son is the most incomprehensible reality. The infinite God is known in the condition of a human being, even in the death of a human being. “That the Immortal died, that the Eternal was buried, do not belong to the rational order” (Hilary *De Trinitate* 1,13).

This real humanity of Christ, his incarnation with all that human existence in the flesh implies, is *God’s* reality. While emphasising Christ’s humanity, his true divinity may not be forgotten.

Lest perchance fastidious minds be exercised by cradle and wailing, birth and conception, we must render to God the glory which each of these contains, that we may approach His self-abasement with souls duly filled with His claim to reign, and not forget His majesty in His condescension (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,26).

Hilary (*On the Trinity* 2,27, 3,15) comes to the most serious paradoxes. “An infant wails; angels are heard in praise. There are coarse swaddling clothes; God is being worshipped”. The truth about God can only be expressed in such paradoxes. This is the reality of God in whose name Christians are

baptised. This is their reality which they live and experience and about which they can only speak by using common human words as technical terms, which are mere nonsense outside this discourse.

If there be any teaching that you can extract from his words, more than their plain sense conveys; if you can translate into other terms the truth we have elicited, publish them abroad. If there be none – indeed, because there are none – let us accept with reverence this teaching (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,21).

Although Hilary lived after the turnover of Constantine, his theology, like that of Athanasius in the East, is the theology of the theologians before Constantine. It is the paradoxical theology of the eternal God who suffered death, and his community shares this fate. It is the theology which Paul summarizes in his aphorism: “They crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8). The holy glorious God of Mount Sinai (Ex. 19) and of the vision of Isaiah (Is. 6) was executed on a cross. This is “what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” (1 Cor. 2:9). This sentence is not about heavenly glory, but about God who was killed by the powers of this world. Hilary does not need to be on speaking terms with these powers. They cannot and will not understand the wisdom of God. They can only think within their own limited frame of mind. For them, it is absurd that the everlasting, almighty God would be as human as a child and die as a tortured young man, not even with the serenity of Socrates but, after a night of agony (Mk. 14:32-42), crying when he died: “My God, why have you forsaken Me?” (Mk. 15:34). To those who do not accept this, Hilary (*On the Trinity* 3,24) states:

Unbelief is the result of incapacity engaged in argument. Men are sure that an event never happened, because they have made their minds up that it could not happen.

In this instance, Hilary comes to the core of his work: Christ is the presence of God. The following books of his *On the Trinity* are a defence of the Nicene Creed. The Son is God from God, the Creator of the universe, who became a human being and died on the cross. He is *homoousios* to the Father. What the term “*homoousios*” refers to is the core of Hilary’s theology, and it is in this term that his theological method becomes most clear. The term refers to the paradox of God’s presence in the world. He who died on the cross is of the very essence of the infinite Father. As his humanity is pushed to its ultimate consequences, so is his divinity.

The term “*homoousios*” is but a symbol to indicate this reality, which we cannot express more adequately in other words. In fact, the word itself is irrelevant. Any other word can be used, if it is clear as to what it refers. Hilary argues that the word “*homoousios*” is not perfect. It was used by Paul of

Samosata in a different meaning and this can cause confusion (Hilary *On the Councils* 81). Other interpretations can cause new confusions. “We must not declare it without giving our reasons” (Hilary *On the Councils* 71). We could also use the word *homoiousios*, as some contemporaries of Hilary preferred. This word is more ambiguous than *homoousios* (Hilary *On the Councils* 89), but as such not to be rejected. “When I had heard neither word, my belief was always such that I should have interpreted *homoiousion* by *homoousion*” (Hilary *On the Councils* 91). However, because all words are inadequate and only function as symbols, which refer to the reality of Christ, we should keep to the technical term which the church has chosen. For, at the very moment that the term is rejected, we get the impression that the belief to which it refers is also rejected. This is the risk of those who would like to replace *homoousios* with *homoiousios*. “Why should you be thought to be Arians by denying the *homoousion*?” (Hilary *On the Councils* 88).⁴

For Hilary, theological language has a similar function as mathematical language for modern physicists. Their language is mere formulas. These, such as $E=mc^2$, have no meaning at all without the reality to which they refer. Sometimes the reality is so complex, such as in snare theory, that even leading physicists cannot imagine it. “Because there does not exist an analogy that we know from common life, it cannot be grasped by words” (Hanson 2015). However, the data are congruent with the research results. We cannot find an analogy in order to explain it in ordinary words, either to ordinary people, or even to confreres. We can only write down a formula that refers to an incomprehensible reality.

Theologians are often inclined to simplify theology. What we mean and who God is must be explained to anybody, even to those who have no relation to God at all, to those who have not been baptised in the reality of the triune God, who was present in Christ in whose death we are baptised. Physicists know that such a simplification of reality is impossible and adhere to their mathematics. If physical reality has an incomprehensible character, how much more should we realise that divine reality is incomprehensible. “Since the work transcends our thoughts, all thought must be transcended by the Maker” (Hilary *On the Trinity* 1,7). This does not mean that we are not aware of their reality. The results of modern physics penetrate our entire life. The reality, to which theology refers, not only penetrates our entire life, but is its ground, the ground of any reality. *Homoousios* is one of those formulas to indicate this divine reality. Surely, it can be replaced by any other term, as Hilary mentions. But why should we do so? Why should physicists replace the E of energy with the P of power? It does not make physics simpler and it causes more confusion. Not struggling with terms and simply adhering to the traditional

4 For Hilary and the Homoiousians, see Weedman 2007:113-115.

formulas indicate what it really means. Whoever wants to change formulas is suspect of rejecting the reality to which they refer – and suspect of not realising that divine reality exceeds any formula. Such theologians must reflect whether they do not make God the Father so human that it is not necessary to call the Son God.

This is the risk that Hilary points out. After his discourse about the Son, he returns to the theology of the Father. “The name *Father* has thus been revealed to men; the question arises, what is this Father’s own name?” He is no other father than the Father of Christ. “The Father is glorified through the Son when men recognise that He is Father of a Son so Divine” (Hilary *On the Trinity* 3,17). The Son is God in our midst. He has revealed the nature of his divinity by his crucifixion. In this, he is the Son – the divine Son. And such a divine Son must have a divine Father. To many people, the divinity of the Father is more obvious than that of the Son. They run the risk of not realising the exact nature of the Father’s divinity. They project their own ideas of fatherhood on God as the father of gods and human beings. The divinity of God is most visible in the Son. Knowing about the character of the divinity of the Father is through the Son. Twentieth-century Christians often speak and think about God the Father as an analogy of the ideal father in the books of Benjamin Spock. According to Hilary, such an approach is a shortcut. The Father can only be known through the Son as the Son knows Him: as the Father whose will is ultimate and must be obeyed – even if the Son appeals not to drink the cup. The Son obeys the Father because He is the Holy Father (John 17:11), the Righteous Father (John 17:25), and not “Dear Father”. This is the Father of a Son so divine.

6. TRINITY

The vast majority of modern trinitarian models have an analogy between the intra-trinitarian and the human relations or historic dynamics. The Trinity is somehow mirrored in human social patterns or activities. In his analysis of the doctrine of the Trinity of Augustine, Wisse (2011) opposes this approach. The mirror function presupposes participation of human beings in the divine identity. Wisse strictly rejects this participation theology.⁵ God is God and human is human. Although Barth emphasises this, nevertheless in his doctrine on the Trinity, he does not keep to his own adage. Wisse argues that Augustine designs a non-participation trinitarian theology. However, upon closer analysis,

5 Wisse uses “participation” in a very broad sense, including both ontic relationship and analogy of different kinds. Perhaps he should rather have chosen “mirror function” as his key concept and left “participation” to soteriology: the participation of Christians in Christ. His critique is that something of God can be seen in human beings.

Augustine also has a participation Trinity (Van de Beek 2017:264), perhaps even more so than modern theologians.

Not so Hilary. For him “Trinity” is a concept that only refers to God. After arguing that the Son is distinct from the Father, the objection could arise that he teaches ditheism: there are two distinct persons who are both God. Hilary rejects this objection with a text from the gospel according to John 14:11, where Jesus states: “Believe Me, that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me.”. On the one hand, both are clearly distinct: I and you. However, the one is in the other and the other in the one. Both are fully identical. They are one and the same divine being (Hilary *On the Trinity* 7,41), “for the life of the living God is in the living Christ” (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,11).

Hilary rejects any form of subordination. The Son and the Father are equally God, and the Father not only dwells in the Son, but the Son also in the Father (Hilary *On the Trinity* 3,4).

The words of the Lord, “I in the Father, and the Father in Me” [John 14:11], confuse many minds, and not unnaturally, for the powers of human reason cannot provide them with any intelligible meaning. It seems impossible that one object should be both within and without another, or that (since it is laid down that the Beings of whom we are treating, though They do not dwell apart, retain their separate existence and condition) these Beings can reciprocally contain One Another, so that One should permanently envelop, and also be permanently enveloped by, the Other, whom yet He envelops. This is a problem which the wit of man will never solve, nor will human research ever find an analogy for this condition of Divine existence. But what man cannot understand, God can be (Hilary *On the Trinity* 3,1, 7,41).

There is no analogy for the relation of the divine persons in this world and we cannot even imagine what it is to be fully in the other one and the other one in us. We can only express it by a technical term. This is what the word “Trinity” means: not only are the Father and the Son distinct and simultaneously fully in each other, but also the Holy Spirit is in both and both in Him. “Trinity” is the short formula for expressing this divine being. It is not even a word borrowed from common use, such as “Father” and “Son”, and subsequently adapted in theology as a technical term for speaking about God. It is a new word, especially designed for referring to the mystery of God. It cannot be used for any other subject. It is only valid and only has meaning in the discourse on God, not in order to explain God, but rather to indicate his very identity which is different from anything human. “The proper service of faith is to grasp and confess the truth that it is incompetent to comprehend its Object” (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,11).

Consequently, the Trinity cannot be used to explain historical dynamics and even less as an ethical paradigm for human social relations. Trinity is not about human beings, but about God. It is no more than a word that refers to the God in whose name we are baptised. It is not about any fundamental structure of created reality. Neither does it explain anything about God. It only refers to the reality of God.

For Hilary “Trinity” has the same meaning as *homoousios*. The term only refers to the unity of the distinct persons. *Homoousios* is normally used for the Son, and “Trinity” for the three Persons of God; but the Spirit, too, is *homoousios* with the Father and the Son. Even in the doctrine of the Trinity, the focus is on the Son. In modern designs on Trinity, the relations and dynamics of the three form the basis of the discourse. In early Christian thought on Trinity, the focus was on unity, after the specific work of the persons was described. “Trinity” expresses that the three names in which Christians are baptised are one name. No less, and no more than that.⁶

How often Trinity and *homoousios* have the same meaning is displayed in early writings on the Trinity. Hilary’s *On the Trinity* is a classic example of this: almost the entire work is about the divinity of the Son. It is a Christological discourse. The relation to the Father is an integral part of Christology. It is from this relation that the doctrine of the Trinity was developed. And the Holy Spirit? He comes at the very end. This is not because the Holy Spirit is not important. However, the reality of the Spirit as God’s presence is so basic that it is not necessary to spend much time and space on it. I think it wrong to discuss the question of his existence. He does exist, inasmuch as he is given, received, retained (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2:29, 12,56). His presence is the basis of everything we know and say about God. His presence is the ground and power of Christian worship, beginning with baptism in the triune name. Baptism is to be baptised with the Holy Spirit. Hilary has no need to speak about the Holy Spirit. He only does so briefly, because some people deny the Spirit’s personal reality and argue that he is only God’s dynamic presence (Hilary *On the Trinity* 2,29). The divinity of the Spirit is not the problem. The Son is the problem: that God is bodily present in a young man who dies on the cross. In him, it is disclosed that the Spirit is the Spirit of *this* God, and the Father is

6 The concept of “person” in the doctrine of the Trinity is also such a technical term. Its meaning in this discourse is unique and cannot be derived from philosophical or psychological views about human persons. Because it is a technical term, it does not make sense to deliberate if another word would be better (see, for example, Barth 1932-1970:I,1:374, 379. Barth [1932-1970:I,1:387] rightly states that this is only an attempt and certainly not the claim to be “eine absolut bessere Antwort”). Such deliberations arise from a notion that God can be compared with created beings and deny his divinity.

this Father. Christology is the key to true theology, and *homoousios* the key to understanding “Trinity”.

7. INCONSISTENT

Reality precedes possibility and theological language is only a technical way of speaking about God’s being. Reality first. This is the reality in which we are baptised and about which the fisherman and other biblical authors wrote. That is Hilary’s method. It is a warning not to go beyond what we have received and not to speculate about what God *should* be.

Hilary’s lesson is clear. However, it is a hard lesson, even for the teacher. Hilary himself does not succeed in being consistent. When he deals with the sufferings of Christ, in the tenth book of *On the Trinity*, he argues that Jesus did not feel pain because he is God.⁷ His body is a “body which borrows its glory from its association with the divine nature” (Weedman 2007:177).

Hilary gives several examples from the gospels. Jesus suffered the scourging by his opponents and the nails pierced his hands, but he did not feel pain. The objective actions are real, but subjectively they do not hurt him.

A dart passing through water, or piercing a flame, or wounding the air, inflicts all that it is its nature to do: it passes through, it pierces, it wounds; but all this is without effect on the thing it strikes; since it is against the order of nature to make a hole in water, or pierce flame, or wound the air, though it is the nature of a dart to make holes, to pierce and to wound. So our Lord Jesus Christ suffered blows, hanging, crucifixion and death: but the suffering which attacked the body of the Lord, without ceasing to be suffering, had not the natural effect of suffering. It exercised its function of punishment with all its violence; but the body of Christ by its virtue suffered the violence of the punishment, without its consciousness (Hilary *On the Trinity* 10,23).

In all the examples that Hilary gives, the suffering is cancelled out by Christ’s power to overcome it (Hilary *On the Trinity* 10,23-10,35). This is even the case with the suffering on the cross, which is only visible and audible for our behalf, but not agony for Jesus himself. The cry: “My God, why have You forsaken Me?” is not a question for himself, because he knows he will be glorified (Hilary *On the Trinity* 10,31). In an extensive discourse on Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, Hilary (*On the Trinity* 10,36-10,43) argues that he prays for the disciples and not for himself. “Do you suppose, heretic, that the Lord of glory feared to suffer?” (Hilary *On the Trinity* 10,27).

⁷ About the possibility of suffering in Christ in the work of Hilary, see Borchardt (1966:117-130); Weedman (2007:166-179).

Hilary (*On the Trinity* 10,30) argues that the moments of suffering must be viewed in the perspective of Jesus' power to overcome these, because otherwise it would be inconsistent. Suddenly, consistency is an argument for understanding God's reality. It is no longer the fisherman who guides him, but analytical philosophy.⁸ Inconsistency can apply to both sides. Hilary emphasises Jesus' power at the expense of the seriousness of his pain. He could also have argued the other way around. However, he does not do so, because the Arians had done so. Finally, a philosophical idea of an impassionate God overrules the reality of God's presence in Christ and his soul does "stray and linger in some delusion of heathen philosophy" (*Hilary On the Trinity* 1,13), which he himself refuted. Even Hilary does not dare to push the paradox to the end: that the impassionate suffers unto death and *really* suffers with real objective and subjective pain. He does not do so at a loss of wonder and adoration.

Hilary's position can be illustrated by his interpretations of "likeness" (*similitudo*). Concerning the divinity of Christ, "likeness" must be full likeness as equality, not only similarity without true identity (*Hilary On the Councils* 73). Concerning the likeness of Christ to humanity, he stresses that it is likeness indeed (*Hilary On the Trinity* 10,21,10,25), but not identity, because Christ had not only no sin, but also no weakness. As often occurs in a high Christology, Hilary does not escape the risk of emphasising divinity at the expense of true humanity. He is "sailing rather close to the cliffs of Docetism" (Förster 1888:662). His discourse in Book 10 would have gained much more depth if he had pushed the paradox to its ultimate. Because he is infinite in his divinity, Jesus suffers pain to its ultimate reality. He suffers pain and agony and the burden of the guilt of sin as no other human being ever suffered and can ever suffer.

Finally, Hilary was trapped in the pitfall of the heretics. Anti-Nicene theologians used the examples of Jesus' sufferings for denying his divinity. Against them, Hilary not only stresses Christ's divinity, but also denies the reality of the suffering. He knew that heretics force us to say things we would not like to say (*Hilary On the Trinity* 2,2), because any concept is insufficient and can be misinterpreted by the opposite heresy: by combatting Adoptianism and Arianism, there is the risk that Modalists interpret our arguments to their own advantage (*Hilary On the Trinity* 5,2, 7,3). In this case, however, it is not about ambiguous language, but about a position that does not give the full weight to the fisherman's teaching: "The Word became flesh." In this instance, it could ultimately have been profound, because Hilary, no less than the Alexandrian theologians of the 5th century, emphasises the full unity of the person of Christ. Nestorianism, or even a division "in his humanity – in his

8 See Meijering 1982:65: Hilary describes "how far [he] wanted to be a speculative theologian not, however, how far he actually was a speculative theologian".

divinity” is alien to him. “There is not one Son of Man and another Son of God” (Hilary *On the Trinity* 10,19, 10,62).

After having argued at length that Christ was not hurt by pain, Hilary (*On the Trinity* 10,56, 10,55) feels compelled to reject any suggestion of Docetism:

Tears are not for Him Who is about to give life, or grief for Him Who is about to receive glory. Yet He Who wept and grieved was also the Giver of life.⁹

Hilary moves within the strictest interpretation of Nicea – but even the most orthodox theologian can blunder on the slippery road in the combat against heretics.

We can wonder why Hilary, in Book 10, does not keep to the paradoxes he so eloquently proposes in Book 2. Most probably this has to do with his biography. In the beginning of Book 4, he relates that he wrote the previous books quite some time ago (Hilary *On the Trinity* 4,1). He probably wrote the first three books at home in Poitiers, where he was the bishop.¹⁰ Although he planned the outlines of the entire book in the beginning (Hilary *On the Trinity* 1,21-1,33),¹¹ his circumstances influenced the way in which the themes were elaborated. Books 4-11 were written when he was in exile in Asia Minor, where he became involved in debates with homoiousians and Arians. The latter used the texts about the pain of Jesus as an argument against his divinity. Obviously, Hilary resisted this critique by proposing that the pain was not felt by Christ because of his divinity. Hilary was thus trapped by his opponents to

9 One could argue that Hilary rejects a physical, objective Docetism: The body and even the phenomena of suffering are real. However, he does promote a psychological, subjective Docetism. The factual suffering has no impact on his feelings.

10 Bardenhewer (1912:378) states that Hilary wrote the entire work when he was in exile. However, Galtier’s (1960: 36-41) arguments that the first three books were written in Gaul are convincing. Especially the lack of use of Nicean language in the early books is important for the debate. The remarks in Book 10,4 that he speaks “by these books as an exile” do not imply that *all* books were written there. It rather means that *these* books (4-12) were written there while the other books were written elsewhere. Either way, there is a considerable span of time between Books 1-3 and Books 4-12, as Hilary (*On the Trinity* 4,1) himself states. During that time, he was involved in intense debates with Asian theologians which, of course, influenced his thought and language as well as his originality.

11 I agree with Meijering (2018:8) that he planned the outlines from the beginning and did not add the outlines after writing the whole work. Nevertheless, the frequent use of the perfect tense for his work on the later books besides the present tense suggests at least that he revised *De Trinitate* 1,24-1,36 after he had finished the work. His description of the earlier books has only the present tense (*De Trinitate* 1,21-1,23).

take a position that is hardly acceptable in Christian theology. When in Gaul, he felt free and he challenged his opponents by pushing their arguments to the extremes with his paradoxes: the incomprehensible God is a wailing child. In his exiled situation, he may have felt more endangered and missed the freedom for his challenging theology, so that he yielded to his opponents.

8. CONCLUSION

According to Hilary, theological language only refers to God's real presence. It cannot be derived from human ideals and projections. From God's coming in Christ, as recorded and interpreted by the evangelists and the church, which has been created by his Spirit, we have a sense about God. However, this life in him exceeds all our words and imaginations. We can only refer to it by using insufficient terms as symbols of the God with whom we live in his Spirit.

Living with God in a relationship is basic to Hilary's position. We cannot speculate about the identity of a person with whom we have a relationship. Our identity can only be known from our real presence and, even for human beings, the person is always more and different than our words can express. In addition, speculations about a divine being are senseless. They fall short of Kuitert's adage, and they do so "since their wisdom was cognisant only of matters which lay within their narrow horizon" (Hilary *On the Trinity* 3,25; see Borchardt 1966:45). The only meaningful discussion about God can be with reference to God being below. "For He Whom we can only know through His own utterances is the fitting witness concerning Himself" (Hilary *On the Trinity* 1,18).

Because God is of a different category, it is impossible to derive human characteristics from God's identity. Wisse is right in his rejection of non-participatory theology. Ethics cannot be derived from a similarity between God and human beings. God has his own unique way of operating. Human ethics are not anchored in God's being, but in his calling for justice and baptism in his name.

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