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“That They May Be One, As We Are”

*The Significance of the Cappadocian Fathers’
Trinitarian Comprehension of Divine Persons for the
Theological Understanding of the Constitutive Features
of Human Persons*

Abstract

The Trinitarian theology of the Cappadocian Fathers gives the theological basis for the Christian understanding of God and relations with Him. It was in the process of formulating and clarifying the Trinitarian teaching that the Holy Fathers of the fourth century elaborated the theological notions which became the foundation of the terminology of Orthodox Christology and, hence, of the whole of Orthodox theology as well. While giving the verbal expressions of the different aspects of the Christian experience of divine-human communion, the Cappadocian Fathers defined the Trinitarian content of the notions of *person* (πρόσωπον), *hypostasis* (ὑπόστασις), *individual* (ἄτομος), *distinctive feature* (ιδίωμα), *self-being* (τὸ καθ’ αὐτό), *mode of being* (τρόπος τῆς υπάρξεως), *relation* (σχέσις), *nature* (φύσις), and *essence* (οὐσία), in a broad soteriological perspectives. Keeping in mind these soteriological concerns of the Cappadocian Fathers, it is of obvious theological interest to take into consideration their use of such peculiar means of natural languages as personal names, personal and demonstrative

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pronouns, the adverb *how*, and grammatical gender.

The basic needs of contemporary theological anthropology and the humanities give a special significance to the representation of the consequences of the Cappadocian Fathers' Trinitarian teaching in the form of a set of features that characterizes the personal way of living and therefore constitutes the understanding of human persons according to their divine exemplar. This set of characteristic features includes *relatedness, irreducibility of a person to nature, freedom, openness, uniqueness, immutability of a person*, as well as its *unknowability by objectifying methods*. Above all, it is these characteristic features which assure the elaboration of the apphatic definition of the theological notion of human person.

Keywords

Trinity, theological anthropology, person, hypostasis, nature, essence, individual, mode of being, relation, freedom, openness, uniqueness.

The anthropological significance of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity developed by the Cappadocian Fathers in the fourth century becomes clearer due to their theological understanding of the human being as an image of the Holy Trinity, called to attain a likeness of his or her Divine Prototype¹. To be more specific, the mode of being of Divine Persons sets for human persons the goal of absolute personal perfection, i.e. the goal of living through love². The Second Person of the Holy Trinity, — the Lord Jesus Christ, reveals in human created condition all the fullness of the intra-trinitarian personal mode of being³. He thereby opens for human beings the possibility of reaching absolute perfection in the personal mode of being and becomes for them “the way, the truth, and the life”⁴.

While clarifying the theological content of the basic Trinitarian notions, the Cappadocian Fathers begin to use words πρόσωπον (person) and ὑπόστασις (hypostasis) as close synonyms⁵. Thus the word *person*,

¹ Gen. 1:26–27; 5:1; 9:6; Sap. 2:23; Sir. 17:1–13; 1 Cor. 11:7; Col. 3:8–10; Eph. 4:24; James 3:9.

² Psal. 81:6; Matt. 5:48; John 10:34–35; Eph. 3:14–15; 1 John 4:17.

³ John 10:38; 12:45; 14:7, 9–11, 20; Philip. 2:5–7; Col. 1:15; Hebr. 1:3.

⁴ John 14:6. Cf.: Acts 4:12; Rom. 5:2; 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Eph. 2:18; 5:1–2; 1 John 1:2.

⁵ Basilios Cappadociae. Epist. 38. S. 8; Epist. 52. S. 3 (*Lettres*, éd. Y. Courtonne. Vol. 1. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1957); Epist. 210. S. 5; Epist. 214. S. 4 (Ibid. Vol. 2. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1961); Epist. 236. S. 6 (Ibid. Vol. 3. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966); Gregorius Nazianzenus. Orat. 31 (De spiritu sancto). S. 9 (*Die fünf theologischen Reden*,

signifying in their theology the Divine Persons — the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit — receives an absolute ontological sense inherent in the word *hypostasis*. At the same time, the notion of *hypostasis* acquires the personal connotations characteristic of the word *person*.

In this understanding of the Trinitarian meanings of the words *person* and *hypostasis* the word *person* assumes a special theological importance. The Cappadocian Fathers denote the Divine Hypostases with the word *person* even though the Sabellians compromised this word through using it for expressing the modalistic understanding of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit⁶. To expose the significance of the Trinitarian teaching for Christian anthropology it is also important to note that among four main theological notions — *person*, *hypostasis*, *nature*, and *essence* — the word *person* is, firstly, the only word originating not from philosophical but from everyday language. Secondly, this word was primarily associated with human beings⁷. Therefore the word *person*, well known to the addressees of the Cappadocian Fathers through their experience of interpersonal relations, provides an opportunity to give Trinitarian language a clearer soteriological sounding. The Trinitarian considerations of the Cappadocian Fathers make their soteriological concerns even more evident through their regular use of the examples regarding human beings⁸.

To express the different aspects of Divine revelation which human beings are called to grasp in communion with God, the Cappadocian Fathers distinguish between the pairs of synonyms — *person-hypostasis* and *nature-essence* — with the help of a number of criteria. In different theological contexts, they elucidate the content of the notion of *person*, or *hypostasis*, using seven main interrelated markers to distinguish it from the notion of *nature*, or *essence*.

Hrsg. J. Barbel. Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1963); Idem. Orat. 20 (De dogmate et constitutione episcoporum). S. 6 (PG 35. Col. 1072D); Orat. 39 (In sancta lumina). S. 11 (PG 36. Col. 345C–D); Orat. 42 (Supremum vale). S. 16 (PG 36. Col. 477A–B); Gregorius Nyssenus. *Ad Ablabium quod non sint tres dei* (Gregorii Nysseni opera, ed. F. Mueller. Vol. 3.1 Leiden: Brill, 1958. P. 48); Idem. *Ad Graecos ex communibus notionibus* (Ibid. P. 21, 33); Maximus Confessor. Epist. 15 (PG 91. Col. 549B).

⁶ Basilius Cappadociae. Epist. 210. S. 5; Epist. 214. S. 3.

⁷ Gregorius Nazianzenus. Orat. 31. S. 22.

⁸ Basilius Cappadociae. Epist. 38. S. 2–3; Epist. 214. S. 4; Epist. 235. S. 2 (*Lettres*. Vol. 3); Idem. *Adversus Eunomium* (PG 29. Col. 589C–D); Gregorius Nazianzenus. Orat. 31. S. 22; Idem. Carm. 3 (De spiritu sancto) (PG 37. Col. 410A–411A); Gregorius Nyssenus. *Contra Eunomium* B. 1. Ch. 1. S. 496–497; S. 563–567 (Gregorii Nysseni opera, ed. W. Jaeger. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1960); Idem. *Ad imaginem dei et ad similitudinem* [Sp.] (PG 44. Col. 1329C–1332A).

Firstly, while specifying Trinitarian terminology they distinguish between the notions of *person-hypostasis* and *nature-essence* by defining the former as *particular* (τὸ καθ' ἑκαστον) and the latter as *common* (τὸ κοινόν)⁹. As an important consequence of this understanding of divine *persons*, or *hypostases*, specific particular being acquires the highest ontological rank.

Secondly, the Cappadocian Fathers state that every *person-hypostasis* as *particular* differs from *nature-essence* as *common*, and from other *persons-hypostases* due to its *distinctive feature* (ιδίωμα, ιδιάζον σημεῖον, ιδιότης)¹⁰.

They also explain this last point with the help of such specific grammatical means as personal names. Indeed, the majority of the words of natural languages refer the realities they describe to some genera or species, bringing them into correlation with other realities or natural features. Only a personal name immediately implies a personal uniqueness. The author of the famous Trinitarian treatise widely known as Letter 38 by St. Basil the Great points out that the names Paul or Timothy distinguish two human beings through their peculiarities. Since these names “no longer” (οὐκέτι) apply to common nature, the peculiarities, which they imply are understood here in an absolute way, such that they are characterized as “having nothing” (μηδεμίαν ἔχουσα) in common¹¹.

Thirdly, in some cases the Cappadocian Fathers directly call *person-hypostasis* itself the *distinctive feature*¹². While defining the notion of divine *person-hypostasis* in such a way, they emphasize the *invariability* and *inimitability* of its *distinctive features*¹³. This approach contributes to the imparting of an absolute ontological importance to the notion of divine person. For anthropology, this means the uniqueness of human persons, giving theological reasons for claiming the absolute value of each human being.

Fourthly, while underlining the absolute ontological status of *person-hypostasis*, the Holy Fathers highlight its *self-being* (κατ' αὐτό, καθ'

⁹ Basilius Cappadociae. Epist. 214. S. 4; Epist. 236. S. 6.

¹⁰ Basilius Cappadociae. Epist. 38. S. 3; Epist. 214. S. 4; Gregorius Nyssenus. *Ad Graecos...* P. 26, 30–31; Idem. *Contra Eunomium*. B. 1. Ch. 1. S. 277–278.

¹¹ Basilius Cappadociae. Epist. 38. S. 2. Cf.: Gregorius Nazianzenus. Orat. 29 (De filio). S. 12 (*Die fünf theologischen Reden*); Idem. Orat. 41 (In pentecosten). S. 9 (PG 36. Col. 441C); Gregorius Nyssenus. *Ad Graecos...* P. 19, 20.

¹² Basilius Cappadociae. Epist. 38. S. 5, 6, 8; Gregorius Nazianzenus. Orat. 21 (In laudem Athanasii). S. 25 (PG 35. Col. 1124D); Idem. Orat. 31. S. 28; Idem. Orat. 33 (Contra Arianos et de seipso). S. 16 (PG 36. Col. 236A); Orat. 34 (In Aegyptiorum adventum). S. 13 (PG 36. Col. 253B).

¹³ Gregorius Nazianzenus. Orat. 25 (In laudem Heronis philosophi). S. 16 (PG 35. Col. 1221A); Orat. 39. S. 12 (Col. 348C); Orat. 42. S. 15 (Col. 476A–B).

ἑαυτό)¹⁴. Approaching the matter from an anthropological perspective, St. John Damascene asserts that *person-hypostasis* as *self-being* (κατ' αὐτό) preserves the identity of the human being even in death¹⁵.

Sometimes the Cappadocian Fathers use the category of grammatical gender in their Trinitarian explanations¹⁶. In such cases they relate the words *one, other, another, whole, this* in *masculine form*¹⁷ to *person, or hypostasis*, and the same words in *neuter form*¹⁸ to *nature, or essence*. The exemplary theological pattern of this way of distinguishing *person-hypostasis* from *nature-essence* belongs to St. Gregory of Nazianzus who elucidates the difference between these notions as follows: “[T]he Saviour consists of ‘it’ and another ‘it’... but not of ‘he’ and another ‘he’... And I say ‘it’ and another ‘it’ in a sense which is opposite to what I mean when speaking about the Holy Trinity. Because there are ‘he’ and another ‘he’, in order that the Hypostases may not be confused, but there are not ‘it’ and another ‘it’ since the Three are one and the same in divinity”¹⁹. This way of explanation associates the notion of *person-hypostasis* with the ideas of activity and certainty while associating the notion of *nature-essence* with those of passivity and uncertainty. This contrast stresses the *self-being* of *person-hypostasis* in such a degree as to imply its determinative role in defining the *nature-essence*.

¹⁴ Gregorius Nazianzenus. Orat. 23 (De pace 3). S. 8 (PG 35. Col. 1160C); Orat. 33. S. 16 (Col. 236A); Orat. 40 (In sanctum baptismum). S. 41 (PG 36. Col. 417B); Joannes Damascenus. *Dialectica sive Capita philosophica* (Recensio fusior). S. 67 (Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, Hrsg. B. Kotter. Bd. 1. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969); Ibid. (Recensio brevior). S. 43.

¹⁵ Joannes Damascenus. *Dialectica...* (Recensio fusior). S. 67.

¹⁶ Basilius Cappadociae. *De Spiritu Sancto*. Ch. 18. S. 45 (Sources chrétiennes. Vol. 17 bis, Ed. B. Pruche. Paris: Cerf, 1968); Idem. *Contra Sabellianos et Arium et Anomoeos* (PG 31. Col. 604B, 608C). Cf.: Didymus Caecus. *De Trinitate*. Buch 1. Ch. 27. S. 32 (Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie. Bd. 44, Hrsg. J. Hönscheid. Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1975); Ibid. Lib. 3 (PG 39. Col. 788A, 969B).

¹⁷ εἷς, ἕτερος, ἄλλος, ὅλος, ἐκεῖνος.

¹⁸ ἓν (Cf.: John 10:30; 17:11; 17:21–23; 1 John 5:7), ἕτερον, ἄλλο, ὅλον, ἐκεῖνο.

¹⁹ Gregorius Nazianzenus. *Lettres théologiques*. Epist. 101. S. 20–21 (Sources chrétiennes. Vol. 208, Ed. P. Gallay. Paris, 1974): ἄλλο μὲν καὶ ἄλλο τὰ ἐξ ὧν ὁ Σωτὴρ (...) οὐκ ἄλλος δὲ καὶ ἄλλος. (...) Λέγω δὲ ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο, ἔμπαλιν ἢ ἐπὶ τῆς Τριάδος ἔχει. Ἐκεῖ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλος καὶ ἄλλος, ἵνα μὴ τὰς ὑποστάσεις συγχέωμεν· οὐκ ἄλλο δὲ καὶ ἄλλο, ἐν γὰρ τὰ τρία καὶ ταῦτὸν τῇ θεότητι. Cf.: Concilium universale Ephesenum anno 431 (Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum. Vol. 1.1.7, Hrsg. E. Schwartz. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1929. S. 47); Joannes Damascenus. *Dialectica...* (Recensio brevior). S. 9; Idem. *Expositio fidei*. S. 52 (Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos. Bd. 2. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973); Idem. *De fide contra Nestorianos*. S. 3 (Ibid. Bd. 4. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981).

Fifthly, as opposed to a common nature which is divisible according to different natural qualities to multiform multilevel subgroups, a *person*, or *hypostasis*, is characterized in fourth century patristic theology as *individual*, or — literally — *indivisible* (individuus, ἄτομος)²⁰. This characteristic expresses the unconditional *immutability* of divine persons and their human images. An important anthropological implication of this aspect of the understanding of *person-hypostasis* enables a theologian to state that the personal identity of human being is not impaired in the processes of birth, maturation, education, acquisition or loss of different skills or any other processes in which his or her individualized nature had been involved throughout its whole life.

Sixthly, the Cappadocian Fathers specify divine *persons-hypostases* as different *modes of being* (τρόποι τῆς ὑπάρξεως)²¹. They also express this way of representing the person-hypostasis using the adverb *how* (ὅπως, πῶς)²².

St. Basil the Great characterizes as the *mode of being* which is the *distinctive feature* of the Father the property *unbegotten* (τὸ ἀγέννητος)²³. This approach to describing *person-hypostasis* underlines that its *distinctive feature* is neither a part nor a property or quality of the nature. In other words, the *distinctive feature* understood as peculiar *mode of being* of *person-hypostasis* is *irreducible* to nature. This means the *otherness* (ἑτερότης) of each person holds both with regard to the common nature with its individual natural properties, and to other persons. This way of interpreting *person-hypostasis* allows the unity of the divine nature to be expressed without exception of any natural contents in the least.

One of the means that is used in natural languages for expressing the intuition of person as an out-of-nature reality is *personal* and *demonstrative pronouns*. While denoting a *person*, or *hypostasis*, in such a way the Holy Fathers avoid any mediating reference to natural aspects. This is especially useful for communicating the perception of the

²⁰ Gregorius Nyssenus. *Ad Graecos*, P. 23, 24, 31; Cyrillus Alexandrinus. *De Sancta Trinitate* [Sp.] (PG 77. Col. 1149A–C); Joannes Damascenus. *Dialectica* (Recensio fus.). S. 43.

²¹ Basilius Cappadociae. *De Spiritu Sancto*. Ch. 18. S. 46 (PG 32. Col. 152B); Idem. *Contra Sabellianos* (Col. 613A–B); Gregorius Nyssenus. *Contra Eunomium*. B. 1. Ch. 1. S. 216, 497. Cf.: Amphilochius Iconiensis. *Fragmenta spuria*. Fragm. 1 (Amphilochii Iconiensis opera, ed. C. Datema. Turnhout: Brepols, 1978).

²² Basilius Cappadociae. *Adversus Eunomium* (Col. 545B, 548B). Cf.: Maximus Confessor. *Mystagogia*. Ch. 23 (PG 91. Col. 700D–701A); Idem. *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*. S. 8, 28 (Eds. C. Laga and C. Steel. Vol. 1. Turnhout: Brepols, 1980); Joannes Damascenus. *Dialectica* (Recensio fusior). S. 67; Idem. *Expositio fidei*. S. 8, 10, 49; Idem. *Contra Jacobitas*. S. 52 (Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos. Bd. 4).

²³ Basilius Cappadociae. *Adversus Eunomium* (Col. 681A): Ὑπάρξεως οὖν τρόπος τὸ ἀγέννητος, καὶ οὐκ οὐσίας ὄνομα.

irreducibility of the human being to any natural aspects, qualities or properties.

In anthropology, the patristic understanding of *person-hypostasis* as *mode of being* gives a terminological way to define the theological notion of human freedom with special lucidity. Indeed, human freedom in the deepest theological sense consists in a human person's determining his or her way of living through setting the personal *mode of being* for his or her individualized nature, thus contributing to the determining of the state of the whole of human nature. In an ultimate eschatological perspective, such freedom means giving the whole of the created world some kind of personal dimension in the sense of its embracing both the personal communion of human beings with the Holy Trinity and human interpersonal communion.

In Orthodox theological anthropology, the personal *irreducibility* to nature, and the personal *freedom* of human beings are considered to be closely connected with the *openness* of a personal way of living. In other words, it is in actualizing personal *openness* that the human person overcomes its absorbedness by nature with its final universal determinacy, which subsumes psychological, social, environmental, and other genus-species and individual structures. Such personal *openness* means the ability of the *person-hypostasis* to preserve its invariability while changing its natural content. The ultimate realization of this peculiarity of personal *openness* has been wholly revealed to human beings by Jesus Christ who, having possessed as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity all the fullness of the divine uncreated nature, has assumed without any personal self-transformation all the fullness of a completely other human created nature.

Put more cautiously, the *openness* of the *person-hypostasis* has two sides. On the one hand, it expresses itself in *emptying* natural content from the individual in the course of the service of God and of neighbour. This side of personal *openness* is also expressed throughout Orthodox theology by means of the notion of *kenosis* (κένωσις)²⁴. On the other hand, the *openness* of the personal way of living means an *acceptance* of the whole of human nature²⁵. For the human person, the utmost completeness of personal *openness* requiring the fullness of both *emptying* and *accepting*, consists in partaking in the divine nature²⁶ as adoption of the uncreated divine energies.

²⁴ Philip. 2:7–8.

²⁵ Mark 10:29–30; Matt. 19:29; Luke 18:29–30; John 15:15; 1 Cor. 9:19–22; 2 Cor. 6:11–12; 11:29.

²⁶ 2 Peter 1:4.

Seventhly, in their Trinitarian reflections the Cappadocian Fathers define *person-hypostasis* as *relation* (σχέσις)²⁷.

The Holy Fathers of the fourth century also paid special attention to the relational character of the divine names Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For example St. Gregory of Nazianzus considers the name Father to be the name “neither according to essence, nor according to operation but according to relation and to the way the Father treats the Son and the Son treats the Father”²⁸. Moreover, St. Amphilochius of Iconium characterizes the names of the Divine Persons as follows: “Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the names of the mode of being, that is relation”²⁹. This explanation means that three Divine Persons as *modes of being* constitute themselves not by any *individual natural qualities* but through their *relations*.

For theological anthropology, the patristic definition of *person-hypostasis* as *relation* suggests that it is in *personal*, or *hypostatic*, relations that human *persons*, or *hypostases*, actualize their unique *mode of being* and achieve ontological fullness. Therefore this understanding of *person-hypostasis* makes it possible to substantiate that, from the Christian point of view, the perfection of the human being depends above all on the profundity of his or her personal relations with divine and human persons.

Moreover, the understanding of *person-hypostasis* as *mode of being* and *relation* implies the unknowability of the human being as a person through objectifying analytical methods dealing with different natural qualities and properties. The only way to understand a human person is to join in such a communion with him or her, which is based on personal relations, i.e. the “face to face (πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον)”³⁰ relations of trust and love. The *sine qua non* condition of such relations and consequent communion consists in the mutual *openness* of both the person who is understood and the one who understands.

Supposing *persons-hypostases* to be *modes of being* and *relations* also permits an important theological anthropological conclusion: due to their personhood, human beings are personally responsible for the *way* their nature exists, manifesting its qualities and properties, and fulfilling its operations.

²⁷ Gregorius Nazianzenus. Orat. 31. S. 9; Idem. Orat. 23 (Col. 1160C); Basilius Cappadociae. *Adversus Eunomium* (Col. 517A, 557C, 588C–589A, 621B); Gregorius Nyssenus. *Contra Eunomium*. B. 1. Ch. 1. S. 159–160, 553, 556, 557, 558–559, 560–561, 568–574; B. 3. Ch. 2. S. 158; B. 4. Ch. 1 (Vol. 2. P. 319).

²⁸ Gregorius Nazianzenus. Orat. 29. S. 16: ὅτι οὔτε οὐσίας ὄνομα ὁ πατήρ, ὃ σοφώτατοι, οὔτε ἐνεργείας, σχέσεως δὲ καὶ τοῦ πῶς ἔχει πρὸς τὸν υἱὸν ὁ πατήρ, ἢ ὁ υἱὸς πρὸς τὸν πατέρα.

²⁹ Amphilochius Iconiensis. Fragm. 1: τὸ γὰρ πατήρ, υἱὸς καὶ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, τρόπου ὑπάρξεως ἤτουν σχέσεως ὀνόματα, ἀλλ’ οὐκ οὐσίας ἀπλῶς.

³⁰ 1 Cor. 13:12.

Conclusion

In placing the notion of *person*, or *hypostasis*, beyond the content of the notion of *nature*, or *essence*, the Cappadocian Fathers found the conceptual means for further affirmation of such characteristics of divine being as *uniqueness*, *freedom*, and *relatedness*. Human *persons*, or *hypostases*, are called to approach as near as it is possible for them as created entities to this personal perfection. It is this Trinitarian comprehension of *person*, or *hypostasis*, read in terms of the soteriological concerns of the Cappadocian Fathers which means understanding a human being not merely as a natural entity, but also a person capable of accepting the supernatural dimensions of abundant life³¹.

According to theological interpretation, the Christian formation of the human being consists in his or her conversion, as it were a switching over from individualistic life determined by the laws, needs and motives of common human nature and particular natural features to a personal way of living being constituted through personal relations and expressing itself in actualizing the seven above characteristics. However, all these features characterize the personal way of living in an apophatic manner; in the final analysis, they reveal different aspects of the irreducibility of the *person-hypostasis* to nature. It means the consequent impossibility of the positive definition of the theological notion of *person-hypostasis*. Nonetheless, the aforementioned set of constitutive features provides theological anthropology with an important opportunity to define *person* in an apophatic way. Such a definition may be formulated as follows: A human person is the ontological core of the human, which defines the way of being of his or her individualized nature, actualizes itself in creative communion caused by interpersonal relations, and is characterized by *irreducibility to nature*, *freedom*, *openness*, *uniqueness*, *immutability*, and *unknowability by objectifying methods*.

This apophatic understanding of person as an extra-natural reality could for example help theologians to avoid pantheistic implications while formulating the doctrine of deification in terms of the personal adoption of uncreated divine energies. On the other hand it makes obvious the incompatibility of the personal actualization with any individualistic way of living defined by private characteristics of nature. Furthermore, the proposed interpretation of the human person may serve as a metaphysical base for theological reflections on a wide range of contemporary issues in psychology, sociology, philosophy of religion, philosophy of culture, ecology, and other humanities.

³¹ John 10:10.