

Article

# Representation and Interpretation as the Basis of Participation in the Trinity

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**Abstract:** I suggest that God’s life is the Spirit’s eternal interpretation of the Word as the perfect sign (representation) of the Father. Creaturely interpretations imperfectly mirror the perfect coherence of being and representation that is God’s life. When we respond to the incarnate Word we are adopted into the place occupied by the Spirit within the Trinity. By responding to the Word with the fullness of our being we are incorporated into the divine dynamic of truthful representation and loving response. Ontologically, this approach invites a retrieval of the idea of “vestiges of the Trinity in creation”. Epistemologically, it affirms that the basis of God’s self-communication (revelation) is the coherence of Being and Representation within God’s-self. Ethically, it challenges us to respond to suffering and injustice as these are illuminated by the incarnate Word, and to act as mediators for the incorporation of the whole creation into God’s life. The sacrament of the Eucharist is a sign that actualizes what it signifies, where what it signifies is the gift of participation in the divine life.

**Keywords:** interpretation; participation; semiotics; theosis; trinity

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## 1. The Trinity, Representation and Interpretation

This paper aims to show how creaturely processes of representation and interpretation are the basis of participation in the triune divine life and to explore the ontological, epistemological and ethical implications of this account.

The proposed approach draws on philosophical insights into the structure and dynamics of sign-processes. Specifically I draw on C.S. Peirce’s theory of signs [1,2]. Peirce’s concept of signification is triadic.

Interpretation occurs when an agent makes a purposeful response to something, a sign, the latter standing *in lieu* of something else, the object. Object, sign and interpretative response are the three elements of any event of representation and interpretation. However, the triadicity of sign processes would be of little interest for trinitarian theology if it were not for striking parallels between the specific pattern of this triadicity and the main tenets of the Christian way of speaking about the triune being of God [3,4].

These parallels may be summarised as follows: (1) in Christian thought the Father is unbegotten, unoriginate, unknown and unknowable (even to himself) unless represented in some way. The Father therefore corresponds in some sense to the “object” of a sign, prior to the object’s representation; (2) The eternal Word is the image of God, the perfect and full representation of God’s glory. The Word is therefore the sign, or representation, of the Father within the eternal Trinity: “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1: 1). Of course it is this same Word who, according to trinitarian thought, became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the ultimate revelation of God’s character: “He is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1: 15); (3) Scriptural warrant can likewise be adduced for understanding the Spirit as the basis of interpretation. Paradigmatically, at Pentecost the Spirit enables people from every nation to hear the gospel in their own language (Acts 2: 6), thus instituting the universal community of faith that is the church. Without the Spirit’s gift of the capacity for interpretation, the Word would be meaningless and the Father would remain unknown to the world.

Pursuing this line of thought further, if the Spirit is the basis of creaturely interpretation of the incarnate Word then, a fortiori, the Spirit must be the eternal interpreter of the Word within the eternal triune God. If not, then the creature’s Spirit-led interpretation of the Word could not lead to true knowledge of the Father, since then the Word would mean something different within God’s being than it means to the creature. Of course, there are differences between creaturely and divine modes of interpretation. Creaturely interpretations are finite, partial and fallible. When we humans interpret signs we may be mistaken: worldly signs are vulnerable to misinterpretation. Even if we correctly interpret a sign, we are usually only thereby availed of partial knowledge of the object that is represented. In contrast, within the Trinity the Word completely and infallibly represents the Father. We may therefore say that *the life of the Trinity is the Spirit’s eternal interpretation of the Word as a perfect sign (representation) of the Father* ([4], p. 69).

One of Peirce’s important insights was his recognition that, contrary to common understanding, interpretations are not necessarily conscious thoughts: they can also be actions or feelings ([1], pp. 200–6). Consider the driver of a car who is engaged in conversation with her passenger. Suppose that the passenger is an academic or business colleague who is presenting a reasoned argument or set of ideas to the driver. In that case the driver’s interpretative responses are likely to be mostly reasoned *thoughts* (whether expressed or not). On the other hand, if the passenger is the driver’s spouse and the conversation concerns a matter of disagreement between the two, the driver may become aware of an interpretative response constituted primarily by a *feeling*. A growing awareness of frustration or anger may be the driver’s first clue to herself that something important is at stake in the information being conveyed to her. And imagine that the driver, whether engaged in conversation with a colleague or loved-one, is now approaching a traffic junction at which the lights have just turned red. The driver may be so engaged with the conversation that she is not consciously aware of the presence of the sign—the red light—that gives her a warning of the need to stop at the junction. Nevertheless, her experience as a driver enables her to respond appropriately to the sign without the sign or response being at the forefront of her

conscious awareness. Applying her foot to the brake pedal is in that case an interpretative *action*, an interpretative response to the red light which she undertakes automatically and subconsciously while continuing her conversation or argument.

The fact that interpretations can take the form of thoughts, feelings or actions means that interpretation potentially engages a person's whole being, not just their intellect. A further crucial point is that interpretation always involves some kind of change in the interpreter. In responding to the sign in question the interpreter is now thinking, feeling, or acting in a way that was not the case before the sign was presented to them. It follows, also, that when an interpretative response occurs the interpretation can itself become a sign. If the driver feels her anger-level rising she may ask herself why the conversation with her passenger is making her feel angry. The anger itself has become a sign to her that the present conversation has connections with wider aspects of her relationship with the passenger. Conversely, if the passenger's eyes are on the driver rather than the road and the driver suddenly slams on the brakes, the passenger will probably interpret this as a sign that an unexpected obstacle has appeared ahead. The driver's sudden stop is an interpretative response to something, the response in turn having become a sign to the passenger. (As with any creaturely response to a sign, this may turn out to be a *misinterpretation* on the part of the passenger: the road ahead may be clear, the driver having stopped to throw her argumentative passenger out of the car).

An important aspect of this view of interpretation is that interpretative responses, whether feelings, actions or thoughts, do not require a conscious interpreter. It follows that not only can a conscious agent perform an unconscious interpretation (as with the driver who unconsciously responds to the traffic signal) but also that non-conscious entities (such as simple organisms) could in principle make primitive interpretative responses. I shall return to this latter point at the end of Section 3. The relevance to the trinitarian model I am offering is that different kinds of interpretative agent are characterized and constituted by different kinds of capacity for representation and interpretative response. Consciousness is a product of representation and interpretation, rather than representation and interpretation being a product of consciousness ([1], pp. 52–53). It follows that the trinitarian model summarized above does not imply a divine mind whose contents *include* signs, objects and interpretations. Rather, the divine being *consists in* the eternal irreducible relations of divine object (Father), divine sign (Word/Son) and divine ground of interpretation (Spirit). The model therefore has no need to posit an underlying divine essence of which Father, Son and Spirit are contingent manifestations.

## 2. Representation, Interpretation, and Participation in God

To recap, interpretations are purposeful responses to signs ([1], pp. 156–59). Creaturely interpretations are partial and subject to error. Interpretations can involve any aspect of an interpreter's being, whether feelings, thoughts, or actions. If a response to a sign involves all three of these modes of interpretation then the interpreter's being is fully engaged. Finally, any interpretative response can itself become a new sign, either to another interpreter or to the original interpreter as she interprets her own interpretation to herself.

These features of interpretation of signs offer the basis, I suggest, of a way of understanding what it means to say that creatures are able to participate in God's life ([4], pp. 67–75). The concept of participation in the divine life (as the Western tradition terms it) or deification (the more common terminology in the Eastern Orthodox tradition) is sometimes referred to by the word *theosis* [5]

comparison of the different traditions regarding the concept of theosis is beyond the scope of this article). Theosis has a clear scriptural basis (e.g., 2 Peter 1: 4) but, at least in Western Christianity, does not have a prominent role in popular piety. Part of the reason may be a lack of clarity about what such participation might mean. One option is to understand participation in a weak form, analogous to the way in which a circle “participates” in circularity. In that case, creaturely “participation” in God would amount merely to a mirroring of some aspect of the pattern of God’s being. Alternatively, participation may be understood in a strong form, as when a musician “participates” in a musical ensemble. Such participation is potentially more active, more intimate, and more personal than the rather abstract conception of participation involved in the weak form. However, Christian theology has been short of ways of conceiving of the basis of the strong kind of participation when applied to creaturely participation in the divine nature.

I propose that “strong” participation in God occurs when we interpret the incarnate Word as a sign of the Father. In doing so we are adopting, or, better, being adopted into, the place occupied by the Spirit within the divine life ([4], p. 69). That is because, as we have seen, within the divine life it is the Spirit who interprets the Word. When, as creatures, we interpret the Word, it is we who are adopted into that role of interpreter. Just as the divine Spirit interprets the eternal Word as a perfect representation of the Father, so we finite creatures now likewise interpret the incarnate Word as the image of the invisible God.

We may say, then, that we participate in God’s life when we respond to the Word with appropriate feelings, thoughts, or actions. This may mean responding to the Word itself, primarily presented to us through the medium of the gospels. In addition, it may involve responding to the world as we now see it afresh in the light of the Word ([4], pp. 76–86). And since interpretative responses potentially involve the whole of our being—thoughts, feelings and actions—participation in God engages our whole self, not just our intellect, and includes practical involvement with the world around us, not just observance of certain “religious” customs and practices.

Participation in God’s life through the interpretation of signs is not limited to our adoption, as interpreters of the Word, into the place of the Spirit. Crucially, as I have already noted, in any interpretative response the interpreter is always changed in the process. It follows that within the eternal life of the Trinity, when the Spirit interprets the Word the Spirit must be “changed”, and hence become a *new* sign available for further interpretation. But within the perfection of the divine life the Spirit cannot become a sign of anything less than the perfect goodness and love of the Father, otherwise the divine being would be continually degraded in living its own life. Therefore we may infer that the Spirit, in interpreting the Word, must continually generate new likenesses of the Word. That is not to say that a multiplicity of Words is generated within God’s life, but that the intra-Trinitarian dynamic may be understood as a continual magnification and glorification of the Word.

A consequence of this way of picturing the life of the Trinity and our participation in it is that it offers a context in which to understand the scriptural claim that by responding to the Word we are progressively transformed into a closer likeness to the Word (e.g., 2 Corinthians 3: 18). For if the Spirit’s interpretation of the Word must, by virtue of the logic of the intra-divine dynamic of perfect representation and interpretation, result in further expressions of the Word, so, if we properly interpret the Word as a sign of the Father, we must be incrementally changed into likenesses of the Word ([4], pp. 70–71).

In short, the processes of creaturely responses to the Word—in thoughts, feelings and actions—are the basis of our adoption into the place of the Spirit and our transformation into a likeness of the Word.

This, I suggest, is what constitutes our participation in God's life. Knowledge of God is participation in God, where "knowledge" is understood in the broadest sense in terms of the engagement of the whole person in interpretative response to a sign. Or, one might say, *semiosis is theosis*: the dynamic of representation and interpretation *is* participation in God.

### 3. Ontological and Epistemological Implications

This account of participation in God's life has epistemological and ontological repercussions. The epistemological implication of the model concerns the basis of the possibility of revelation. Creaturely forms of inquiry (such as science) rest on an assumption that there is some connection between what we know about the world (its ontology) and the way we come to know it (epistemology). If this were not the case we could not expect any congruence between knowledge and reality. The various forms of nominalism, non-realism and anti-realism result from a denial of such a congruence. In contrast, scientific enquiry and common-sense both approach the world in ways that assume and depend on such a congruence.

The question arises, what is the basis of this congruence between epistemology and ontology, supposing that science and common-sense alike are justified in presupposing it? On the account offered here, the correspondence arises within the very being of God: the Word's perfect representation of the Father within the eternal Trinity establishes Being and Knowledge as ultimately related to, and inseparable from, one another. Knowledge is always mediated by representations of various kinds, so God's eternal act of self-representation and self-interpretation is an eternal act of self-knowledge. Ontology and epistemology are indissolubly linked because Being and Representation are essential and equal aspects of God's eternal nature.

God's eternal act of self-representation is, similarly, the basis of God's self-revelation to the world. God's absolute Otherness from the world would make the infinite gap between creature and Creator unbridgeable were it not for the fact that God's eternal nature is one of self-representation. Because representation is essential to God's nature it is possible for God's eternal Word to reveal God's very self, even to creatures who are not essentially divine. This requires the eternal Word to be embodied in a form that is accessible to, and interpretable by, such creatures. In other words, it requires the Word to become incarnate and the Spirit to enable creatures to be interpreters of that incarnate Word, just as the Spirit eternally interprets the Word within God's essential being. On such a view, God may be understood fully to reveal God's-self to creatures, and thereby, as we have seen above, to enable creatures truly to become participants in God's eternal life.

Importantly, none of this amounts to a reduction of theology to philosophy or of revelation to reason. One way of seeing why this is not the case is to recognise that even if creatures were to come to understand the structure of interpretation by their own efforts (including, *per impossibile*, its basis in God's being) independently of some form of divine revelation, they could not, except through the Incarnation, anticipate in advance the "quality" of God that the Word will reveal. The semiotic approach to the Trinity that I advocate offers a philosophical framework within which it is possible to affirm that the incarnate Word is the full and perfect representation of God to creatures ([4], pp. 45–58). Further, it shows why affirmation of the fullness of God's self-revelation in Christ requires a trinitarian understanding of God's eternal being. It does not, however, enable the philosopher or theologian to use the power of human reason to achieve a grasp of God's nature.

In other words, *that* the Word reveals the Father makes sense within the framework of the “semiotic model” of the Trinity. *What* the Word reveals about the Father is a matter of empirical experience in the lives of those who met Jesus in person or encounter him through the gospels. This perspective is able to emphasize that the primary focus of Christian experience and life lies in our responses to the incarnate Word, such responses including, as we have seen, the full range of our embodied existence including thoughts, feelings and actions. Contemplation of the eternal Trinity is not the primary or ultimate aim of Christian discipleship; rather, it is the kind of second-order reflection on the significance of Jesus’ life that is forced upon us if we obediently submit to interpreting the incarnate Word as the full and perfect representation of God the Father.

The ontological implication of this account of participation in God’s life is that creaturely processes of interpretation mirror, in a partial and finite way, the perfect life of representation and interpretation that is the Trinity. Moreover, since interpretative processes are found in all living things, not just conscious agents [6], the wider creation is encompassed within this view of God’s offer to the world of participation in God’s very being and nature.

Contemporary theology has become nervous about entertaining the possibility of a “natural theology”, by which is meant any move from empirical observation of the world to theological conclusions. The concern, which is particularly associated with the influence of Karl Barth, is that any such form of theological reasoning inevitably results in theological outcomes shaped by human sinfulness rather than by divine revelation. On such a view, human reason is too corrupted by sin to be capable of moving from creaturely knowledge to spiritual understanding. While there is much to be said for caution in this regard, a complete rejection of the capacity for human reasoning about God may amount to a denial of God’s gracious invitation to be drawn into the divine life. So-called natural theology does not necessarily require that the concept of revelation be entirely by-passed. Rather, natural theology may amount to an affirmation that one aspect of the goodness of creation is that creatures have been granted the capability of being the recipients of divine revelation. An element in such a capability may be the ability to reflect on the world in the light of revelation, and, in turn, to use such reflection better to understand what has been revealed.

In the context of this cautiously positive view of the possibilities for a natural theology, it is legitimate to see the patterns of representation and interpretation in the world as potentially reflecting the very nature and character of God. It is not that we can derive an understanding of God’s being simply from contemplating the structure of the created order. Rather, in reflecting on the Christian claim that God’s character is revealed in the incarnate Word, we come to affirm that God’s eternal being must be one of representation and interpretation. In then reflecting on the nature of worldly patterns of representation and interpretation we may be led to a clearer formulation of what revelation through the Word may imply about the being of God, and may come to see such patterns in the world as legitimate analogies or likenesses of the triune Creator. Furthermore, in the context of the affirmation that God’s gracious gift to us constitutes an invitation to become participants in God’s own life, we may legitimately suppose that the possibility of such participation may depend on God’s “prevenient” grace—a grace which is the basis of the congruence between divine self-revelation in the Word and creaturely capacities for Spirit-grounded interpretation of that revelation.

Indeed, I wish to go further by suggesting that the parallel between divine and creaturely forms of interpretation invites a retrieval of the neglected idea of “vestiges of the Trinity” in creation. By this I

mean that not only do creaturely patterns of representation and interpretation offer an *analogy* for the being of God, but that such patterns reflect the direct and continuous creative work of the Father, Son/Word and Spirit, each actively imprinting their distinctive mark on the structure of the world ([4], pp. 117–28). Paul Tillich famously describes God as the “ground of being” or the “creative ground” of reality ([7], p. 7). My proposal amounts to a trinitarian outworking of such a view, according to which the Father is the creative ground of all that has the capacity to be expressed or represented; the Son/Word is the creative ground of all expression and representation; and the Spirit is the creative ground of all interpretation and meaningfulness.

The field of theoretical biology known as biosemiotics seeks to understand biological systems and processes in terms of the operation of signs and interpretations [6]. An interdisciplinary collaboration in which I have been involved has produced theoretical and empirical evidence that a capacity for interpretation, albeit sometimes in very primitive forms, may be a characteristic feature of all living things and hence relevant to a scientific understanding of the origin of life [8]. In that case, the vestiges of the Trinity to which I am referring may be discerned in the natural order at least as far back or as “far down” as the very simplest living things. I have also suggested that certain patterns may be observed in so-called “emergent” phenomena that may be understood theologically as analogous to, and grounded in, the intra-Trinitarian relations of the Father, Son (Word) and Spirit [9].

Of course, the qualified version of natural theology that emerges from these reflections does not aim at deductive conclusions about God’s existence or nature. For example, I do not offer a *proof* of the irreducibility of sign, object and interpretative response in human sign-use, or of the role of representation and interpretation in the simplest biological entities or emergent phenomena. Therefore the use to which the semiotic analogy is put in imagining the intra-trinitarian relations must be assessed according to the criterion of coherence, not that of deductive validity. In other words, the model stands or falls on the degree to which it makes sense of a range of issues in trinitarian theology (see Section 6 below) and the extent to which it makes trinitarian theology newly relevant beyond its usual confines. The latter aspect of the model’s coherence includes its implications for the concept of theosis, its relevance to contemporary scientific and philosophical issues (such as the origin of life and the nature of emergent phenomena), and its ethical and ecological implications.

#### 4. Ethical and Ecological Implications

The semiotic-participative view of the relation between God and the world has ethical ramifications. As I noted above, our interpretative responses to the incarnate Word include responding to the world as we are now enabled to see it afresh in the light of the Word (*cf.* Matt 25: 34–46). Moreover, since interpretative responses potentially involve the whole of our being—thoughts, feelings and actions—participation in God engages our whole self, not just our intellect. Interpretation of the Word therefore includes practical and ethical engagement with the world.

We do not need to elaborate here on the kind of ethic that this might lead to, though clearly, since it is based on the affirmation that Jesus’s life and death reveals the nature of the Father’s love, it will be one centered on the recognition of the world’s suffering and on taking sides with the poor and the oppressed. The criterion for our ethical positioning in relation to any particular situation will always be the question, how, given the light shed on this situation by the revealed Word, can we respond to the

situation as the Spirit would? We are called, in other words, to see the world through God's eyes and respond to it in the place and power of God's Spirit.

The important point I wish to make about ethics here is that this view goes beyond an understanding in which righteousness consists merely in doing what is pleasing to God or conforming to certain standards of behaviour. Ethics becomes, much more than that, a question of participation in God's life. Justice is not just a matter of ensuring that good things are distributed fairly, but of building the Kingdom, which, on this view, amounts to growth in the degree to which the world is enabled to share in God's life. Clearly, also, this makes ethics a collective as well as an individual responsibility.

What specific difference might be made to the approach to any particular ethical decision by viewing ethics in terms of participation in God's life? The difference depends on three general consequences of understanding ethics within the semiotic-participative framework. First, the perspective makes a difference to the *motivation* behind the decision. The participative perspective shifts the emphasis from self-centered to God-centered, from doing the "right" thing to doing that which is consistent with participation in God's life. When the motivation for ethical decisions is participation in God, the basis of the decision is clearly understood as grounded in God's nature, and in seeking conformity to that nature. This theocentric ethical perspective offers a safeguard against the continual dangers of self-righteousness.

Second, and related to this, the semiotic-participative perspective may influence our understanding of the *process* of ethical decision making. Specifically, it would help us to be mindful of the fallibility of human efforts at morality. Even our highest moral and spiritual insights are liable to be corrupted by self-righteousness and self-justification [10]. When the standard against which our decisions are to be judged is not merely that of an ethical code or law but that of fitness for incorporation in the very life of God, we may be less liable to grant ourselves premature satisfaction with our efforts.

Third, the participative perspective may influence our understanding of the *effect* of our ethical decisions. Since those decisions and their effects potentially involve incorporation of the participants (those acting and those acted upon) within God's life, what is at stake in the effect of the decision is not simply the avoidance of harm or injustice to others but the mediation of God's grace. When we act justly towards others the Kingdom is enlarged; when we act with injustice the reception of God's grace is compromised. In the example below I will expand on the way in which we are responsible for the incorporation of others, and indeed the whole world, into God's life. Incidentally, the combination of this point with the emphasis that theosis is not simply a matter of intellectual engagement avoids any suspicion that the account of participation in God offered here excludes those with cognitive (or other) impairments.

Applying these thoughts to a specific issue, one of the most pressing moral and practical questions of our time concerns our relation to the natural world, especially the issue of human responsibility for climate change. The participative understanding of the God-world relation suggests a possible theological perspective on these issues. Full participation in God's life depends on the possession of the particular kinds of imaginative and interpretative capabilities that characterize human beings. These, though arising in continuity with nature's other manifestations of representation and interpretation, are not fully developed in other creatures. Although other creatures make and interpret signs as part of their adaptedness to their environment and their competition or cooperation with members of the same or other species, only humans have a high degree of freedom and creativity in their sign-making. Furthermore, when humans interact with and alter the natural world, for better or for worse, we thereby create signs through the products of our activity. The created order may come to bear signs of



fruitfulness, creativity and vision or, alternatively, signs of selfishness, greed and destruction. Often, of course, righteousness and sinfulness in these regards are not far apart: human virtue is only ever one step away from corruption [10].

The particular perspective offered by the semiotic-participative view of the God-world relation is that human creativity has the effect of producing signs that may be “offered up” for inclusion in God’s life of representation and interpretation. Human “stewardship” of creation is therefore, in theological terms, much more than a matter of mere conservation or even sustainable development. For, in addition to these, the human impact on the natural world makes the whole of the created order (at least the earthly part of it) into a sign. The theological question is, does the sign that is the human-influenced totality of the earthly ecosystem have a place within God’s eternal life, a life in which only that which has been transformed into a likeness, or representation, of God’s self-giving love merits inclusion?

In this sense it makes sense to speak of humans as priests as well as stewards of creation. A priest is often considered a mediator between humanity and God. Specifically, the priest offers something to God, paradigmatically a sacrifice, on behalf of the people. It is notable, however, that a sacrifice is a kind of sign. The sacrifice represents something; it is offered in place of something. More generally, therefore, we may say that the priest forms a sign and offers it to God. (I will indicate more about what this means in terms of the Christian Eucharist below.) To say that humans are priests of creation is therefore to say that we are called to make ourselves, and the created order, into signs to be offered to God (*cf.* Romans 12: 1 and 15: 16). Such signs are able to be incorporated into God’s life if they are worthy likenesses of the quality of God’s self-giving love.

We saw in Section 2 that if we ourselves are transformed into likenesses of the Word then we are thereby incorporated into God’s life. Likewise, if, in response to the Word and empowered by the Spirit, we transform some aspect of the natural world such that the purposes and relationships embodied therein become likenesses of God’s quality of inner relationality, so those aspects of the world are incorporated within, adopted into, the Trinity. Conversely, to the extent that our relation to the natural world embodies qualities of exploitation and destruction, these will not have a place within God’s eternal life.

## 5. Signs and Sacraments

We have seen that the life of the Trinity is the Spirit’s eternal interpretation of the Word as a perfect sign of the Father. We participate in the life of the Trinity when, in the same way, we properly and fully interpret the Word as imaging the Father and are thereby adopted into the place of the Spirit. In doing so we are necessarily transformed into a likeness of the Word, and hence into deeper participation in the triune life of God.

What, then, is the role of the sacraments? According to one definition a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace. A fuller definition, which does not contradict the first, is that a sacrament is a sign that causes the grace that it signifies. (The first definition is a paraphrase of something St Augustine says in *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*, 26.50. The second is articulated by St Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, III.62.3 and Suppl. III.30.1.) Re-phrasing this, we may say that a sacrament *actualizes* what it signifies. We may also see that two things are actualized when a sign is formed and interpreted. The first is whatever the sign is in itself. The second is whatever interpretative response is made to the sign. It is immediately obvious that various kinds of sign and interpretative response might actualize what they signify and not all are called sacraments. For example, a kiss can signify the love

between two people. The love is represented by the kiss. But the kiss is also an actualization, an embodiment, of that love.

A sacrament, then, may indeed be a form of signification that follows the pattern of causing what it signifies to become actual, but it must be something more. Specifically, a sacrament is a sign that actualizes what it signifies, *where what it signifies is the gift of participation in the divine life* ([4], p. 71). Participation in the divine life is the grace that the sacrament signifies and actualizes. In other words, we may say that a sacrament is something (a sign) that incorporates its makers, its interpreters, or the sign itself (or all three of these) into the life of God. And since in a sacrament the makers of the sacramental sign are also its (primary) interpreters, these elements (*i.e.*, making and interpreting the sign) tend to converge.

Consider the case of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Eucharist signifies the kingdom of God. It represents the kind of unconditional grace-dependent fellowship which Jesus modelled and inaugurated in his ministry as a whole. But it not only *represents* that transformative table-fellowship, it also *creates* such fellowship, the fellowship that is the community of the Kingdom. In that respect the Eucharist is, in a sense, no different from any meal shared by family or friends. An everyday meal is often a sign of the ordinary bonds of kinship, friendship and love. But an ordinary meal can also be a means by which such bonds are formed. Gathering around a table and eating together may be a sign, for example, of trust and forgiveness but, crucially, the sign constituted by such an act of table fellowship is also one of the ways in which trust and forgiveness are enabled to become real.

The Eucharist is essentially no different to an ordinary meal in the way that it actualizes what it signifies. The difference lies in what exactly is actualized. The function of the Eucharist, beyond but not unrelated to the significance of an ordinary meal, is that of shaping the participants into the community of the Kingdom. The Eucharist actualizes what it signifies in the same way that an ordinary meal does, except that what is signified and actualized is the Kingdom of God.

This difference between the Eucharist and an ordinary meal arises, first, because the Eucharistic meal is an interpretative response to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; indeed, it is the response that Jesus asked his followers to continue to make in memory of him. In other words, the Eucharist is an interpretative response to the incarnate Word. Notice that this means that the Eucharistic sign is itself an interpretative response to another sign, the Word. That is why in our liturgies the ministry of the Word precedes the ministry of the sacrament. Furthermore, our Eucharistic response to the Word engages the fullness of our being: thoughts, feelings and actions. We have already seen that when we properly interpret the Word as a sign of the Father with the fullness of our being we are adopting (or being adopted into) the place of the Spirit within the Trinity. Therefore we may say that our Eucharistic response to the Word actualizes the kingdom of God by incorporating us into God's very being.

In short, the Eucharist is a collective interpretative response to the Word that makes us "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1: 4). More than this, we have also seen that when we fully and properly respond to the Word as the perfect representation of the Father we are transformed into a likeness of the Word. It follows that the Eucharistic interpretative act results in a transformation of the participants into a likeness of Christ. And since the Eucharistic action is a collective action it follows that this likeness is a collective likeness. "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it", says St Paul (1 Corinthians 12: 27). Just as the very quality of God was embodied in the human person of Jesus, so a properly directed response to this perfect sign of the Father cannot fail to result in the transformation of

the participants into a collective embodiment of that same quality. The church is called to be the embodiment of the transforming presence of God that Jesus himself embodied. By responding to the one Word we are incorporated into God's own life and become, collectively, an expression of that same Word.

The Eucharist, then, is the mould in which our collective embodiment as the quality of God's transforming love takes shape. The Eucharist has a particular role in actualizing the Kingdom but of course it is not the sum-total of the Kingdom's actualization. A key concept is the formation of habits ([4], pp. 73–75). We tend to regard habits as blind propensities to repeat certain behaviours. More positively, habits can also be the ultimate form of interpretation ([1], p. 58). We have seen that interpretations can be feelings or actions as well as thoughts. It is not surprising, then, that we can develop habits of thought, habits of feeling, and habits of action. Such interpretative habits can be honed and refined by monitoring their adequacy as ways of making sense of the world. They are tried and tested patterns of behaviour that help us to navigate the sea of signs.

The fact that interpretative responses can be habitual doesn't mean that such interpretations are meaningless or mindless. Habits can be living and dynamic. Complex dynamic systems in the physical world show an analogous kind of habit-formation. Consider the patterns of currents and eddies in a fast-flowing stream. The movement of the water is entrained into certain kinds of recurring pattern by meeting the shapes and obstructions of the river bed. In physics the relatively stable patterns that arise in complex systems are called "attractors". Attractors are not immutable. If the shape of the river bed changes or the flow of water increases or decreases different kinds of flow patterns will arise. Likewise, some habits of interpretation that have been stable and effective for a long time may need to be revised and re-shaped in response to changing circumstances. A certain kind of interpretative habit may cease to be appropriate in the light, for example, of a new scientific discovery or fresh moral insight. The important point here is that ordinary interpretative habits can be tested for their continuing capacity to help us make our way in the world. This is a reflection of the fact that such habits are answerable to the way that the world really is. If they do not conform to the bedrock of reality they will not ultimately turn out to be stable. The pace of change may be slower than the changes of habit of water-flow in a stream, but interpretative habits can nevertheless evolve to track reality.

Habits, then, are very ordinary, practical, propensities of behaviour but they are also important modes of interpretation. It is no accident that C.S. Peirce, the founder of the school of semiotic theory on which the ideas set out in this article draw, was also the founder of the philosophical school of "pragmatism". Pragmatism holds that the meaning of a concept is ultimately given by the sum of its practical effects ([1], pp. 56–59). The practical consequences of concepts are reflected in the habits of interpretation to which they give rise. When interpretations regularly match the way things actually are they become habitual. According to Peirce the "ultimate interpretants" of signs—the kinds of interpretation that can bring an otherwise potentially infinite sequence of interpretations to an end—are habits. In other words, the ultimate forms of interpretation, the kinds of interpretation that bring the processes of signification to a resting place, are not mystical flights of fancy or highly abstract forms of conceptualization. Rather, interpretation terminates on ordinary, concrete, embodied habits of action.

Part of the purpose of the Eucharist, I suggest, is to entrain certain kinds of "ultimate" interpretative habit. The Eucharist is the seed, the initial disturbance of symmetry (to echo the language of chaos theory's account of the origins of pattern formation) around which the interpretative habits of Christian discipleship begin to form. John's Gospel reflects this when the story of the institution of the Eucharist

at the Last Supper is replaced by the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. After doing so Jesus says to them: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13: 14–15).

Here Jesus is commending a habit that constitutes an interpretation of a sign. The initial sign is constituted by the person whose feet are dirty. The habit of interpretation that Jesus commends, namely washing that person's feet, both indicates and actualizes the value of that person. But the act of foot-washing itself becomes a new sign, open to interpretation by those who witness it and are moved to respond to it. The Kingdom of God grows when, in response to the Word, new embodiments of the Word are actualized and new responses to the Word are triggered. And since, as we have seen, interpretative responses to the Word result in further actualizations of the Word, participation in God's life can be a runaway process.

## 6. The Semiotic Approach in Relation to Other Trinitarian Theologies

The semiotic model can be located in relation to other traditional and contemporary approaches to trinitarian theology. A detailed analysis of the important similarities and differences is beyond the scope of this article, but some brief observations may be helpful.

Some of the earliest systematic thinking in the Christian tradition is reflected in the development of "Logos Christologies". These ideas about the relation between the Father and Son drew on the scriptural notion of the Son as the Word/Logos of the Father. Greek thought distinguished between the inner word (the *logos endiathetos*) and the expressed word (our inner thoughts converted into outward speech, the *logos prophorikos*). The Logos model had the advantage of a scriptural basis (*cf.* John 1.1). However, it suffered the disadvantage that, as formulated within the constraints of prevailing ideas about the relation between thought and speech, the Word inevitably appeared subordinate to the Father, since the Word's existence appeared to depend on the Father's will to utter it ([11], pp. 21–48). The inherent subordinationism of the early Logos Christologies may explain in part why they did not survive the fourth century trinitarian controversies, centered on the debate about Arianism [12], and therefore are not echoed in the Nicene or Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creeds. The approach to trinitarian thought that I have set out here, drawing on more recent insights into the nature of representation and interpretation, may be regarded as a contemporary form of Logos Christology. Importantly, however, the semiotic approach avoids the implicit subordinationism of earlier Logos Christologies because the Peircean triad of object, sign and interpretative response, while having a logical order (*taxis*, as the tradition calls it), does not imply an ontological hierarchy ([3], pp. 97–108).

Traditional trinitarian theologies have had to steer a delicate course between subordinationism and modalism, or Sabellianism. Modalism is the position according to which the Father, Son and Spirit lose their real distinctiveness from one another and are regarded as mere manifestations of a more general underlying divine essence. Although now regarded as an oversimplification, it is sometimes said that the Greek, Eastern traditions err towards subordinationism on account of their tendency to locate the unity of the Trinity in the person of the Father, the "source" of the other two persons. Latin, Western traditions, in contrast, are often accused of a tendency to modalism because of their alleged strategy of beginning with the essence of God and deriving the divinity of the persons from this underlying essence. More recent scholarship has shown that the historical development of, and relation between, Greek and Latin trinitarian thought was more complex than this simple dichotomy would suggest. Nevertheless, the

tension that continues to exist in principle between subordinationist and modalist leanings is a useful way of analyzing the character of different trinitarian approaches.

Just as the semiotic model avoids subordinationism, so its emphasis on the real irreducible differences between Father, Son/Word and Spirit distinguish the approach from modalism ([4], pp. 38–43). As I pointed out at the end of Section 1, Peircean semiotics understands consciousness and other “higher” mental processes as products of the processes of representation and interpretation, rather than seeing representation and interpretation as products of higher mental processes. Modalism is therefore avoided because the semiotic model of the Trinity does not posit an underlying divine essence or mind which produces the processes of representation and interpretation. Rather, the divine life is understood as *constituted by* the eternal interplay between the divine “object”, the divine sign, and the divine act of interpretation. As I put it earlier, *the life of the Trinity is the Spirit’s eternal interpretation of the Word as a perfect sign (representation) of the Father*.

In the light of the semiotic-participative model’s avoidance of subordinationist and modalistic tendencies, we might say that the standard trinitarian heresies may be understood as departures from orthodoxy to the extent that they undermine an affirmation of the possibility of creaturely participation in God’s life. Thus if the Word or Spirit were less divine than the Father (subordinationism) then participation in God’s life would be impossible for creatures because interpretation of the Word would not amount to a true encounter with the Father. Similarly, if the Word and Spirit were merely different modes of manifestation of the Father (modalism) then there would be no genuine divine “life” of representation and interpretation into which creatures could be drawn.

One potential effect of efforts to avoid modalism is that a strong affirmation of the distinctive realities of the three trinitarian persons may risk erring towards seeing them as three independent entities, in which case it may appear that Christians worship a triumvirate of Gods. A safeguard against such a tendency can be found in the idea of the perichoresis, the mutual indwelling, of the trinitarian persons. This is often put to use in contemporary “social models” of the Trinity, in which the relation between Father, Son and Spirit is understood on analogy with the interrelatedness of human persons in community [13]. Social models of the trinity are especially liable to suspicions of tritheism, in response to which the concept of perichoresis is offered as a way of affirming the inseparability and mutual dependence of the persons of the Trinity ([14], pp. 174–76).

The semiotic model offers a novel way of articulating the concept of perichoresis, based on the generative dynamic that characterises the web of signs involved in human interpersonal relationships ([3], p. 107; [4], pp. 44, 61–64). On such a view, the ever-moving dynamic of representations and interpretations in human interpersonal communications and relationships offers an analogy for the eternal “dance of meaning” that is the inner life of the Trinity ([4], p. 32ff.). However, the semiotic model is not a “social” model of the Trinity in the usual sense, since it does not posit three distinct centres of consciousness within God. Neither, however, is the semiotic approach a “psychological” model of the Trinity, in the sense often traced to Augustine’s psychological analogies ([15], Books IX to XV), since it does not take individual human consciousness as such as its model for the intra-trinitarian relations. In fact the semiotic model arguably incorporates the respective theological advantages of the social and psychological models while avoiding the pitfalls of each of these traditional approaches. Specifically, the semiotic approach offers a way of understanding the unity-in-distinctiveness of the trinitarian persons (where social models tend to imply three persons of the same fundamental kind)

without lending support to any implication that the human mind is an isolated autonomous entity (as psychological analogies are apt to do) ([4], pp. 60–64).

Another important debate in recent trinitarian thought concerns the relation between the immanent Trinity (the Trinity in itself) and the economic Trinity (the activity of the trinitarian persons in the world). A major recent insight is that the trajectory of trinitarian thought over the centuries has led to a focus on the logic of the inner trinitarian relations at the expense of seeking to understand trinitarian theology as a way of reflecting on God's ways with the world [16]. Indeed, this tendency to separate the immanent from the economic Trinity has become so marked that trinitarian thought has arguably become effectively irrelevant to ordinary Christian life and discipleship ([17], pp. 10–15). The semiotic model offers to bridge the chasm that has opened up between the immanent and economic Trinity without falling into the opposite tendency of collapsing the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity and hence failing to articulate the absolute Otherness of God from creation. In this regard the approach to participation in the divine life that I have outlined is particularly relevant because it frames God's relation to creation, and creaturely participation in God, in terms that connect God's inner life with the activity of the trinitarian persons in the world.

A further recent line of trinitarian inquiry has investigated the concept of the trinitarian "mediation" of creation. This is the idea, rooted in Scripture, that creation is not only an activity of the Father, but also of the Son and Spirit [18]. As I have noted above (Section 3), the semiotic approach offers a way of articulating the roles of Son and Spirit in creation. According to this view, the Son/Word may be understood as the ground of all Otherness within creation, mirroring the Otherness of the Father and Son. As such, the Son/Word is the ground of all representation, specifically the Otherness of signs from the objects they represent. Similarly, the Spirit may be understood as the ground of all Mediation within creation, reflecting the mediatory role of the Spirit within the Trinity and manifested in the mediation (between objects and interpretative agents) to which signs give rise. A distinctive feature of the semiotic model is that it connects the idea of trinitarian mediation with the concept of "vestiges of the Trinity in creation" ([4], pp. 117–28). In this regard I press the former concept further than Karl Barth, an important advocate of the trinitarian mediation of creation ([18], p. 157), who was nevertheless firmly opposed to the notion of vestiges of the Trinity ([19], volume I/1, pp. 333–47). Conversely, I understand the vestiges concept in a stronger sense than the one traceable to Augustine [15], for whom trinitarian vestiges were understood as analogies for, rather than the actual imprint of, the triune creator.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

To summarize, we become partakers of the divine nature by responding to the Word with the fullness of our being, and thereby being adopted into the place of the Spirit. In making such interpretative responses to the Word we are transformed, by virtue of the logic of the divine perfection, into the image of the one to whom we are responding. Epistemologically, the congruence between, on the one hand, God's eternal being as a process of representation and interpretation and, on the other hand, the patterns of representation and interpretation in the world, is the basis of the possibility of God's self-revelation. Ontologically, the mirroring of God's eternal self-interpretation in creaturely modes of interpretation may be understood in terms of the traditional concept of vestiges of the Trinity in creation, giving rise to the possibility of a qualified form of "natural" theology. An implication for ethics is that our understanding of justice may be changed from thinking about doing the "right" thing to thinking in terms

of justice as participation in the divine life. Indeed, humanity's role as priests of creation involves our active transformation of the created order into a sign to be offered up for participation in God. The sacraments, paradigmatically the Eucharist, are signs that cause (actualize) the grace that they signify, which is participation in the Trinity. The habits of interpretation which the Eucharist entrains are the basis of the church's becoming the "body of Christ", which is to say becoming the embodiment of God's self-expression (Word) in the world. The semiotic model of the Trinity is able to articulate traditional forms of trinitarian thought in ways that may resolve some of its perennial difficulties, including the issues of subordinationism and modalism, the concept of perichoresis and its relation to psychological and social analogies for the Trinity, the relation between the immanent and economic Trinities, and the role of the trinitarian persons in creation.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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