

Trinity as Trope

The Relational Turn in Communication Studies

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Previous “systems” of rhetoric, which have arisen as responses to felt needs, emphasize an individualist paradigm whereas the contemporary system, responding to current impulses, tends toward a relational paradigm. The “Trinity” is proposed here as a trope that both prefigures this relational and dialogical turn in communication studies and suggests the ethical ends toward which communication praxis should aim. In particular, the Trinitarian thought of Chiara Lubich offers a unique perspective on the relational current in communication studies, especially its links of ontology with praxis, relational being with communication, and kenosis with perichoresis.

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Douglas Ehninger’s groundbreaking synthesis of historic patterns in communication studies, which appeared in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* in 1968, recognizes common characteristics of rhetorical inquiries arising out of felt needs within three respective eras. Ehninger calls rhetorical investigations that participate in a common response to needs of these given periods “systems of rhetoric.” Implicit in each of these “systems” is a philosophy of being: for the period that Ehninger names “Classical,” persons are *rational beings*; for the “Enlightenment Period,” persons are *cognitive beings*; and for the Modern Period, persons are *social beings*. Three loci of inquiry correspond with Ehninger’s three systems and attendant philosophies. For Classic rhetorical theory, the *syllogism* could locate much of rhetorical investigation. For the Enlightenment Period, the *mind or thought* could be viewed as the central site of exploration. And for the Modern Period, the *society* takes central spot. Almost prophetically, in characterizing the Modern Period as “sociological” in its concern with human relations and social cohesion,¹ Ehninger anticipates a fourth period that is the subject of this essay.

We are now removed more than 40 years from the period at which Ehninger’s review stops. An updating or extension of the Modern Period profile into what can be called the Contemporary Period thus seems warranted. Modern theories that Ehninger described in his article continue to exert influence today, yet substantial new theories have taken their place alongside the feted rhetorical ideas advanced during the middle to late part of the twentieth century. This essay will focus on one significant development in

1. Douglas Ehninger, “On Systems of Rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (1968): 131–144.

contemporary theory anticipated in Enhinger's analysis: the dialogical current.

This extension of Ehninger's analysis will revisit his depiction of the "felt need" of our times and will identify key strands of communication studies² that arise out of that exigency and work to remedy it. In so doing, I seek to deepen our understanding of an evolution in emphasis begun within the past half-century, from the three previous systems' emphasis on *individualist* paradigms of discrete speakers, texts, and thought processes to a *communitarian* paradigm that stresses both the re-definition of beings as social, relational creatures and the interconnectedness of communicators and their jointly constructed messages. In the realm of new media, for example, Chen and Ding find that a linear, monologic and technique-oriented model has given way to a relationship-oriented and dialogic model.³ Examination of such a shift sheds light on the collective nature of communication inquiry as we come to understand how theorists respond together, even if unwittingly, to common impulses and as we consider the good to which new grasps of communication might be put.

My aim in this analysis is to identify the ontological view that contemporary theories advance. To do so, I begin with a profile of "the felt need" out of which contemporary theory arises and present that theory, dialogical in nature, as a response to "the felt need." Next, I present "the Trinity" as a theoretical trope that prefigures this theory and functions as an emblem of the collective qualities in contemporary theory. Finally, I contemplate a relational communication ethic that might derive from the Trinity trope as a

fitting response to contemporary impulses. In short, this essay situates and sketches a major current in communication studies and points to the ends toward which contemporary communication studies might work.

The "Felt Need" of Our Times and the Quest for a Solution

Rapid sociopolitical change has produced "anomie in the past several decades."⁴ The effects of anomie, as Durkheim noted, have been a lack of regulation (social norms) and a lack of integration (concern for welfare of others).⁵ A profound sense of separation from God, from one another, and from oneself permeates the land. With this separateness have come disillusionment and the experience of loss.⁶ The incidence of two world wars in the twentieth century and persistent regional and international conflicts and wars in the twentieth-first century, to say nothing of terrorism, attest that the fabric of the human family is torn. As early as 1985, Bellah and his collaborators had declared that we live in a time and "culture of separation."⁷ Today deep fractures within and among nations, religions, ethnic and other identity groups, political parties, families, and individual selves can be seen. The rise of pluralism often intensifies the rift as groups pit themselves against perceived detractors in asserting their rights and privileges and elbow one another for a more prominent place at the table. As Papa and her

4. Ruohui Zhao and Liqun Cao, "Social Change and Anomie: A Cross-National Study," *Social Forces* 88 (2010): 1210.

5. Hayden P. Smith and Robert M. Bohm, "Beyond Anomie: Alienation and Crime," *Critical Criminology: An International Journal* 16 (2008): 2.

6. Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), p. 150.

7. Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 277.

2. Hereafter, I shall abbreviate "communication and rhetorical studies" as "communication studies."

3. X. Chen and G. Ding, "New Media as Relations," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 2 (2009): 367-379.

collaborators lament: “Fragmentation occurs when there are multiple voices and interpretations present in a cultural setting. This multivocality separates people from one another rather than unifying them into a consensus.”⁸ Communication theory itself often eschews unifying critical schemes, warding them off as authoritarian devices that oppress and silence powerless peoples, advocating, instead, an “uncivil tongue.”⁹

Communication praxis mirrors this pervasive disconnectedness. This is evident in the fragmentary, polemic, and often inflammatory forms that messages take, particularly during election cycles, as they fly toward us on cable television, talk radio, and web logs. Even the vaunted “connectivity” of our times leaves “users” at once wired but remote as electronic devices tend to be consumed privately and remain to the individual user as solitary “*my*-spaces,” leaving us, in the words by which Sherry Turkle has entitled her recent book, “Alone Together.”¹⁰

In the face of the decided thrust toward separation and division, however, a countercurrent within communication studies, intensified in the closing decades of the twentieth century, works to restore human community and mutual understanding. “Our time is marked by a yearning for wholeness,” writes Rushing.¹¹ A discourse of “connection” has emerged, particularly in feminist

and environmental rhetorics, in which we find metaphors such as “bridge,” “web,” and “consensus” as legitimating epistemological and argumentative standards.¹² “Solidarity” ranks among the cardinal virtues as “a key virtue needed to address the problems of our world.”¹³ “There is a basic movement in the human world,” writes Stewart, “and it is toward relation, not division.”¹⁴

Within the past several decades, communication studies have engaged in this discourse of connection by pushing vertically and horizontally. Along the vertical axis, Rushing, for example, looks to myth as a unifying scheme that works over and above the divergent factors existing in culture at a given time.¹⁵ In the area of mass communication, Newcomb searches out the embeddedness of character types and plots within a “larger dialog.”¹⁶ Frank assesses the constructive contribution of the “new rhetoric” as “nesting different and incompatible values within a larger realm of rhetoric.”¹⁷ The vertical gaze contemplates a “big tent” in which divergent ideas find agreement stretched-out above in a transcendent vision.

If the vertical movement for unity or integration is transcendent, the horizontal thrust is dialogical. It seeks not transcendence

8. Wendy Papa, Michael Papa, Krishna Kandath, Tracy Worrell, and Nithya Muthuswamy, “Dialectic of Unity and Fragmentation in Feeding the Homeless: Promoting Social Justice through Communication,” *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 13 (2005): 250.

9. Nina Lozano-Reich, and Dana Cloud, “The Uncivil Tongue: Invitational Rhetoric and the Problem of Inequality,” *Western Journal of Communication* 73 (2009): 220–236.

10. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

11. Janice Hocker Rushing, “E. T. as Rhetorical Transcendence,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71 (1985): 188.

12. Mary Belenky, C. Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Thomas Farrell, “Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory,” in J. L. Lucaites, C. M. Condit, and S. Caudill (eds.), *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader* (New York: Guilford, 1999), p. 144.

13. David Hollenbach, *The Common and Good Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 50.

14. John Stewart, *Bridges Not Walls: a Book about Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, McGraw Hill, 2009), p. 9.

15. Cf., Rushing.

16. Horace Newcomb, “On the Dialogical Aspects of Mass Communication,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1 (1984): 42.

17. David Frank, “Argumentation Studies in the Wake of *The New Rhetoric*,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 40 (2004): 270.

but lateral “connection” as a mode of managing human affairs.¹⁸ For example, Bakhtin, whom rhetorical theorists count among themselves,¹⁹ counsels not a transcendence of pluralism but an acknowledgment of the inherent unity-diversity dynamic in ordinary human action that he describes as both “centripetal” (tending toward unity) and “centrifugal” (tending toward distinction). Noting the “situational nature of rhetoric,” Cherwitz and Darwin present a “relational” approach to meaning, positing an understanding of language “*embodying the dynamic inter relationships among rhetors, auditors, and other entities in the world*” and that “refers with” instead of “referring to.”²⁰ Hatch explores a dialogic rhetoric that fosters racial atonement and reconciliation.²¹

Whether moving “upward” or “sideways,” an array of contemporary rhetorical and communication studies participates in a common exploration for that which facilitates community, relationship, understanding, and communion. Thus, one can recognize within communication theories of the past several decades a shift in focus from the *singular communicator* privileged within Ehninger’s first three systems of rhetoric to the *collaboration of communicators*. Stewart makes this same point: “Humans live in worlds of meaning, and communication is the process of collaboratively constructing those meanings.”²² Recognizing the disciplinary

coherence of these studies, however, requires a grammar for viewing various studies in the field as a collective unit. Later, this essay proposes “the Trinity” as providing such a critical grammar.

In the phenomenological tradition, one finds a relational perspective in Carl Rogers’ development of “empathic listening” or “therapeutic listening.” Widely incorporated in interpersonal communication studies, Rogers’ approach asks whether two people can get beyond surface impressions and connect on a deeper level . . . and describes conditions for personality and relationship change. Rogers’ much-acclaimed “Empathic Understanding” entails temporarily laying aside one’s own views and values and entering into another’s world without prejudice: an active process of seeking to hear the other’s thoughts, feelings, tones, and meanings. Along similar lines, the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory of Strangers’ Intercultural Adjustment applies this same perspective in the intercultural realm.²³ According to AUM, successful “sojourners,” in a process of “mindfulness,” step outside of themselves and their cultural systems to enter a host country with a goal of attaining effective intercultural communication.²⁴ Cissna and Anderson extract the metaphysical implications of such dialogic perspectives:

[D]ialogic theory presumes an elemental human truth that emerges only in the meeting of person with person, with the moments of I meeting Thou with the serendipity of reply. Within postmodern assumptions dialogic truth is not a

23. William B Gudykunst, “An Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory of Strangers’ Intercultural Adjustment,” in William B. Gudykunst (ed.), *Theorizing about Intercultural Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005): pp. 419–458.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 289 ff.

18. G. T. Fairhurst, and L. Putnam, “Organizations as Discursive Constructions,” *Communication Theory* 14 (2004): 5–26.

19. John Murphy, “Mikhail Bakhtin and the Rhetorical Tradition,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87 (2001): 259–277.

20. Richard Cherwitz and Thomas Darwin, “Beyond Reductionism in Rhetorical Theories of Meaning,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 27 (1994): 314, italics theirs.

21. John Hatch, “Dialogic Rhetoric in Letters Across the Divide: A Dance of (Good) Faith toward Racial Reconciliation,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 12 (2009): 485–532.

22. John Stewart, *Bridges Not Walls: a Book about Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, McGraw Hill, 2009), p. 18.

matter of propositions but of presence, and it is available to be examined not propositionally, but conversationally.²⁵

Similarly, the Theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) maintains that “persons in conversation co-construct their social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create.”²⁶ CMM is concerned with “what kind of identities, episodes, relationships, and cultures are being constructed by the patterns of communication put together as people interact with each other.”²⁷ CMM, like Martin Buber, advocates “dialogic communication” as the optimal form of communication. Buber explains that dialogic communication “involves remaining in the tension between holding our own perceptions while being profoundly open to the other,” a unity-in-distinction tension.²⁸ Like Buber, Pearce and Pearce hold out the possibility of authentic human relationships through dialogue—an intentional process in which “the only agenda both parties have is to understand what it’s like to be the others.”²⁹ The impetus for the theory was the resolution of “conflicts between incommensurate social worlds.”³⁰

The area of Relational Dialectics also generally maintains that bonding occurs in both interdependence with and independence

from the other. Baxter and Montgomery³¹ are principal protagonists of this area of study, and they draw heavily on Mikhail Bakhtin, who saw “dialectical tension” as the “deep structure” of all human experience. They believe that relationships are always in flux, and they see dialectical tension as providing an opportunity for dialog, an occasion when partners work out ways mutually to embrace the conflict between unity with and differentiation from each other. Baxter, for example, often cites Bakhtin’s core belief that two voices constitute the minimum for life, the minimum for existence. Baxter and Montgomery have focused on three overarching relational dialectics present in all relationships (Integration-separation; Stability-change; and Expression-nonexpression). Likewise, Kim³² in her Culture-Based Conversational Constraints Theory, conceptualizes the independent/interdependent self-construals that manifest in intercultural communications. She charts the cultural individualistic-collectivistic axes on which persons operate. People are “both joined and separate,” wrote Burke, “at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with one another.”³³ In being identified with B, A is “substantially one” with a person other than himself or herself. Yet at the same time he or she remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he or she is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another.³⁴

While Burke states that persuasion results from a sense of oneness that a rhetor could create with another person, Buber has

25. K. N. Cissna and R. Anderson, “Theorizing about Dialogic Moments: the Buber-Rogers Postmodern Themes,” *Communication Theory* 8 (1998): 88.

26. E. Griffin, *A First Look at Communication Theory*, 6th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2006), p. 69.

27. W. Barnett Pearce, “The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM),” in Gudykunst, p. 43.

28. W. B. Pearce and K. A. Pearce, “Combining Passions and Abilities: Toward Dialog and Virtuosity,” *Southern Communication Journal* 65 (2000), p. 172.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

30. Pearce, p. 45.

31. Leslie A. Baxter, and Barbara Montgomery, *Relating: Dialogue and Dialectics* (Guilford: New York, 1996).

32. M. Kim, “Culture-Based Conversational Constraints Theory,” in Gudykunst, pp. 93–117.

33. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 21.

34. *Ibid.*

written about the essential role of “distance” in “unions.”³⁵ He maintains that “distancing” or “setting at a distance” is “plain from the fact that one can enter into relation only with being which has been set at a distance, more precisely, has become an independent opposite.”³⁶ Czubaroff maintains that such distance is fundamental to communication, including in communication marked by conflict:

Where logical unity, synthesis, and agreement are goals in dialectic, the dialogical meeting of persons is marked by “over-againstness” and, often, by “tragic conflict” which may arise because “each is as he is.” However, though a dialogue may not result in logical agreement or unanimity, it reminds us that real otherness “can be affirmed in opposing it.”³⁷

For Buber, however, “the other” is not left “out there.” He views people as interdependent and affirms their capacity to “commune and to covenant” with one another.³⁸ In fact, he extols “reciprocity”: “Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity.”³⁹ Buber sets out prerequisites for this communion, which Czubaroff delineates.⁴⁰ Unity, or “becoming one,” arises out of these conditions. Buber explains that:

35. Martin Buber, “Distance in Relation,” in *Knowledge of Man*, trans., M. Friedman and R. G. Smith (New York: Harper Row, 1965), p. 44.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

37. J. Czubaroff, “Dialogical Rhetoric: An Application of Martin Buber’s Philosophy of Dialog,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86 (2000): 170.

38. Martin Buber, “Elements of the Interhuman,” in Friedman and Smith, trans., p. 91.

39. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans., W. Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribners, 1970), p. 67.

40. Czubaroff, p. 177.

When my partner in a common situation becomes thus alive to me, here and now for the first time does the other become a self for me. . . . This becoming a self for me is to be understood not in a psychological but in a strictly ontological sense, and should therefore rather be called “becoming a self with me” . . . it is ontologically complete only when the other knows that he is made present by me in his self and when this knowledge induces the process of his inmost self-becoming.⁴¹

Quigley maintains that this impulse to identify with the other “arises out of division; humans are born and exist as biologically separate beings and therefore seek to identify, through communication, in order to overcome separateness.”⁴²

In short, Burke contemplated identification and consubstantiation more than sixty years ago. Buber philosophized about communion and reciprocity nearly forty years ago. And Stewart published his earliest edition of *Bridges Not Walls* about that same time. Viewed collectively, a dialogical current began in the mid-twentieth century and now cuts across contemporary communication studies in which communication scholars navigate the relational tension between “the person” and “the other.” Together these studies envision communicating partners in trusting relationships comprised fundamentally of the two parties’ disposition toward “making themselves one” with each other. The goal of interdependent self-construal, writes Kim, “is to maintain

41. Buber, “Distance in Relation,” p. 71.

42. Brooke Quigley, “‘Identification’ as a Key Term in Kenneth Burke’s Rhetorical Theory,” *American Communication Journal* 1 (1998). Retrieved on February 7, 2013, from <http://ac-journal.org/journal/vol1/iss3/burke/quigley.html>.

connectedness and harmony with significant others.”⁴³ But to grasp the relational dynamic around which a body of contemporary communication studies coheres calls for a grammar for viewing various studies in the field as a collective unit. “The Trinity,” I will argue, provides that critical grammar. Moreover, I will show that Trinitarian thought contributes to the relational, dialogic line, especially as explored recently in the work of Chiara Lubich.

The Trinity as Trope

To examine these theories with a view toward clarifying their collective quality and overriding motives, I adopt the “Upward Way” that Kenneth Burke employs in his study of language entitled *Grammar of Motives*.⁴⁴ Burke’s system is a hermeneutic in which “a vision of the One” enlightens, in a downward move, the “many divergences” of the elements that fall under the vision and aids in “the discovery of *essential* motives” of those elements.⁴⁵ In *Rhetoric of Religion*, Burke states that “in the study of human motives, we should begin with complex theories of transcendence (as in theology and metaphysics) rather than with the terminologies of simplified laboratory experiment.”⁴⁶ The particular “complex theory” that he uses—at once both extrinsic and analogous to communication studies—is Christian theology. Burke finds an interpretive, unifying framework, particularly in “the Trinity,” that, by way of analogy, brings fresh insight into his language study, or “logology.” Burke defends the use of a religious form to investigate the secular study of language, insisting that no religious belief is

43. Kim, p. 105.

44. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), p. 5. (Hereafter referred to as RR.)

45. *Ibid.*, p. 430.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

required in the process. He explains that theology adopts language of the material world to explain the immaterial and argues that he is merely reversing the process. He reasons that “statements that great theologians have made about the nature of ‘God’ might be adapted *mutatis mutandis* for use as purely secular observation on the nature of *words*.”⁴⁷

But Burke is interested primarily in symbols (words) not the broader concern of relations and communion constituted in or performed through communication. Burke’s principal project is to understand language theory by consulting religious studies of motives because those studies, he observes, overcome reductionist tendencies found in language studies. He selects the particular religious figure of the Trinity because it expresses a dialectical interdependency of the word and the thing named. He seeks to explore the nature of language. Nevertheless, the Trinity seems useful to my present purpose as well in arguing for the communitarian tendency of contemporary communication theory and of proposing a communitarian ethic of communication.

The Trinity furnishes an integrative, if at first glance abstruse, model for encapsulating these communitarian impulses within communication studies that respond to the pressing needs of our time. While providing an organizing scheme for a variety of theories in the field, it prefigures, on the ontological level, a contemporary view of human interchange. More than this, the Trinity brings to light “something more” than what is contained in contemporary communication studies; it helps to advance a philosophy of communication that poses “communion” as its principal function and to impart ontological status to human connection-making. It stands as a counterpoint to today’s tendency to obscure personal

47. *Ibid.*, p. 1, italics his.

relations in its emphasis on the collective or sociological dimension, and, instead, locates communication in the inter-human. As such, the Trinity serves as an apt architectonic of communication studies, not merely as a theological construct but as a trope that prefigures the dialogic current in communication studies. I thus apply the Trinity beyond the study of language as Burke used it, to consider an ideal of communication toward which communication practice might aim. Burke deciphers the framework of Trinity from Augustine's reflections on his conversion in his *Confessions*. Instead, I want to broaden the conceptual contours of the Trinity to draw out the communitarian dimensions that I find salient in contemporary communication studies.

To explore the ontological implications of the Trinity for communication, I refer first to The Nicene Creed, the text that expresses its contents most explicitly. It serves as a touchstone of Christian belief for Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and most Protestant Churches and is organized around the three Persons of the Trinity. Each of the Persons possesses distinctive characteristics:

- The "Father" is maker of all things;
- The "Son" is consubstantial to the Father;
- The "Holy Spirit" is the Lord and giver of life.⁴⁸

Although the Persons of the Trinity are here presented as three distinct Persons, their distinctiveness as Persons obtains relationally not substantially: The Father is Father of the Son; the Son is Son of the Father; the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love between

48. The language of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is the foundation of the Christian tradition. Yet "Parent, Child, and Love" might capture the relational dimension that I want to emphasize.

Father and Son. And their relational kenotic giving themselves over totally to each other accords them one nature. The Persons exist simultaneously as distinct and one, or "triune," sharing one being or substance. Downey states succinctly that "the mystery of God is profoundly relational, and this relational mystery is expressed in the language of Father, Son, Spirit."⁴⁹ Bakhtin recognizes this same facet of Trinitarian unity and distinction in his theology of discourse, as Mihailovic notes:

As people have intuited, there is much in Bakhtin's criticism that does indeed lend itself to theological paradigms: his conceptions of dialogue and polyphony seemingly resonant with trinitarian unity within diversity and the notion of embodied social discourse highly suggestive of an incarnational model.⁵⁰

A philosophy of being issues from this Trinitarian construct. The belief in God of the Cappadocian Fathers' in the fourth century as a "relational unity" extended to an understanding of the human person, made in the image of God, as likewise a relational being. Thompson explains how the belief expresses a philosophy of human being:

[I]t gives concrete particularity to the persons who interrelate and so constitute the deity, and at the same time it conceives God's being in these distinctions as creative of or in

49. Michael Downey, *Altogether Gift: A Trinitarian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 12.

50. Alexar Mihailovic, *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 1.

fact existing as communion. As a paradigm for humanity it sees personhood as basically relational, concrete and communitarian. In this way it has reciprocity and relationship as its very essence and so counters all trends to define and understand personal existence in purely individualistic terms. . . . So central was the notion of “mutual relations” to St. Augustine that he objected even to the use of “person” in describing the Trinity because of its suggestion of individualism.⁵¹

To speak of relationality is to remain vague and perhaps naively idealistic about human communication. However, the Trinitarian model also offers unique resources in naming a precise sort of relationality generated and sustained by the notions of *kenosis* and *perichoresis*. Central to this triune being is *perichoresis*: the notion of the indwelling of each of the three Persons in the other two Persons. This mutual indwelling is the result of *kenosis*, or the self-emptying of the Father/Parent and the Son/Child in the loving donation one to the other.¹ The action is mutual, and this circulation of love through the Holy Spirit reflects a relationship of three Persons (*hypostases*) in one *homousion* (being or nature) and communion among the three Persons. Each communicates to the others the Person’s whole being as gift of to the other who, in turn, reciprocates. Each is known fully to the other because each has fully given and fully received the other. As Wilken notes, “*gift* and *love*, as used in the Scriptures, are relational terms and have built into them reciprocity and mutuality.”⁵²

51. John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 127.

52. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2003), p. 104, emphasis his.

As I said at the end of the previous section, I want to introduce into this conversation the Trinitarian thought of Chiara Lubich especially because it provides a unique perspective on this topic that links ontology with praxis, relational being with communication, and *kenosis* with *perichoresis*. I will argue that her mystical theology and spirituality make significant contributions to the current of dialogical thought in communication studies. In his recent work, *The Trinity: Life of God, Hope for Humanity: Towards a Theology of Communion*,⁵³ Thomas Norris explains that fundamental to Lubich’s Trinitarian ontology is an integration of the categories we have been discussing, namely: relationality and reciprocity, *kenosis* and *perichoresis*, unity and communion. But he also makes it clear that for Lubich, one cannot speak of these realities without mention of the Cross. And one cannot understand the Cross, or indeed the Trinity itself, without understanding love.

For Lubich, the event of Jesus’s crucifixion and accompanying experience of abandonment (Matthew 27:46) is central to her Trinitarian understanding of kenotic love. In the abandonment, Jesus poses a question, “Why,” to which he does not receive an answer. What Lubich calls “The Cry” encompasses disrupted communication and communication breakdown, a certain *ex*-communication as well as silence.⁵⁴ Only then does Jesus place his spirit into the hands of the Father. The vision of Trinity proposed here is thus not a communicative utopia: a one-to-one correspondence between what is intended and what is understood between two persons. Instead, it is the emptying and donation of self without condition

53. Thomas J. Norris, *The Trinity: Life of God, Hope for Humanity: Towards a Theology of Communion* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009).

54. Chiara Lubich, *The Cry: Of Jesus Crucified and Forsaken* (New York: New City Press, 2001).

which discloses the essential characteristic of the Trinity: Love as the kenotic giving of oneself as gift to the Other.

Lubich finds in this aspect of the Cross a glimpse into communication within the Trinity itself. In *Essential Writings*, a collection of her writings and speeches, Lubich contemplates the “cry” of the Person of Jesus, which she describes as his fullest expression of the Word, the height of his communication. The “great communicator,” whom Lubich names “*Jesus Forsaken*,” found himself alone in his “Cry.” Lubich infers a similar communication role in Mary, made “desolate” by the loss of her Son, the Word, in this Trinitarian disposition. Lubich says:

The word must rest on silence, like a painting on a background. Silencing the creature in them and on this silence letting the Spirit of the Lord speak, professionals in communication will be more like Mary, the transparency of God.⁵⁵

The Cry instantiates the *kenosis* of “non-being” of Jesus in the moment of his abandonment. He rests his spirit on the silence of God who is Love, and thereby works his greatest communicative act of Love for humanity. Thus he *is* precisely in the moment in which he is *not*. Buber has addressed this phenomenon of *being* when one is *not*:

The non-active quality of the dialogical educator’s influence seems to be related to the fact that, as a dialogical and not instrumental rhetor, he is not motivated by particular

55. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings: Spirituality, Dialogue, Culture* (New York: New City Press, 2007), pp. 300–301.

needs or goals and does not have a preset particular message, “nothing particular, nothing partial is at work in man and thus nothing of him intrudes into the world. It is the whole human being, closed in its wholeness, at rest in its wholeness, that is active here, as the human being has become an active whole.”⁵⁶

Lubich explains the *kenosis* of love as “non-being” in the communication of one’s relational self in the economy of the Trinity in more metaphysical terms:

The Father generates the Son out of love, he loses himself in the Son, he lives in him; in a certain sense he makes himself “non-being” out of love, and for this very reason, he *is*, he is the Father. The Son, as echo of the Father, out of love turns to him, he loses himself in the Father, he lives in him, and in a certain sense he makes himself “non-being” out of love; and for this very reason, he *is*, he is the Son. The Holy Spirit, since he is the mutual love between the Father and the Son, their bond of unity, in a certain sense he also makes himself “non-being” out of love, and for this very reason, he *is*, he *is* the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷

If we consider the Son in the Father, we must think of the Son as a nothingness (a nothingness of love) in order to think of God as One. And if we consider the Father in the

56. Czubaroff, p. 181.

57. Lubich, Chiara, “Toward a Theology and Philosophy of Unity,” in *An Introduction to the Abba School: Conversations from the Focolare’s Interdisciplinary Study Center* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), p. 24.

Son, we must think of the Father as a nothingness (a nothingness of love) in order to think of God as One. There are three in the Most Holy Trinity, and yet they are One because Love is not and is at the same time. . . . [E]ach one is complete by not-being, indwelling fully in the others, in an eternal self-giving. . . . Herein lies the dynamics of life within the Trinity, which is revealed to us as unconditional, reciprocal self-giving, as mutual loving, self-emptying out of love, as total and eternal communion.⁵⁸

In the second quotation, we can see how kenotic love can be mutual, reciprocal self-giving and receiving in a way that creates communion. Here we see what Norris meant when he said that all the categories we have been discussing in this article are integrated in Lubich's thought.

Similarly, Thompson draws on theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar, who had great respect for Lubich, to explain how in the moment of separation, Jesus reveals his true nature and that of the Trinity:

There is therefore no ontological separation in God. Balthasar sees this as analogous to the distinction and even distance within God between the Father and the Son by the Holy Spirit—a distance which is overcome by their unity in love. . . . The drama of this event as a paradox of unity and otherness is possible only because it is based on the prior

drama of the triune life, where, in the relationship between Father and Son, there is a distance and distinction and yet unity by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁹

The distinction-unity reality of the Son expresses Jesus' *kenosis*: "the self-emptying of Jesus Christ first in the Incarnation and then on the cross, whereby he makes himself vulnerable, entering into the condition of human vulnerability as the icon of God's love."⁶⁰ The kenotic act in the process of communication opens oneself to the other in an act of love that makes one vulnerable but also places oneself in the other. If the other responds, there is communion.

Lubich highlights another key feature contained in this model of the Trinity. She characterizes the Trinitarian relation as consonant with the understanding that God is love. Love by its nature, says Lubich, suggests at least two persons. It tends toward company. This calls to mind a triune God in which mutual love is the essence of God as Trinity. Its antithesis is single-person power that tends toward aloneness; one who seeks power generally seeks it for himself or herself. A single-Person God tends to represent sovereign power without the crowning element of love. Lubich thus notes that "the heart of Christian anthropology" is contained in Jesus' "New Commandment" to "love one another," "with which it is possible to live the Trinitarian life on earth."⁶¹ Schindler comments on this ontological meaning of the Trinity and its dynamic of unity as a basis for human relations: "The fullness of each person coincides with the 'self-emptying' entailed in being *wholly for* the

58. Quoted by Piero Coda in "The Experience and Understanding of the Faith in God-Trinity from Saint Augustine to Chiara Lubich," *New Humanity Review* 15 (2010): 38.

59. Thompson, p. 52.

60. Downey, p. 27.

61. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, p. 25.

other.”⁶² Lubich herself writes about the life of the Trinity lived in the midst of people:

And so I no longer love only silence, but also the word: the communication between God in me with God in my brother or sister. And if these two heavens meet, a single Trinity comes to be, where the two are like Father and Son and among them is the Holy Spirit.⁶³

Such a view of Trinity is accessible and applicable to human affairs. In Downey’s words, it is “an eminently practical teaching, expressing not only who and how we understand God to be, but what we think human persons are called to be and become . . .”⁶⁴

Toward a Trinitarian Communication Ethic

We can thus add to the philosophies of being that are attached to Ehninger’s systems of rhetoric—humans as *rational beings*; humans as *cognitive beings*; humans as *sociological beings*—the philosophy marking today’s scholarship that humans are *relational beings*. Whereas Burke has used the Trinity in *Rhetoric of Religion* to show how logology appropriates insights about language from theology, highlighting the interdependency of the word and the thing named, I am proposing in this essay a correspondence between the *dialogical* relating among the Persons of the Trinity and the nature of communication among human persons. By applying the lens of the Trinity to view communication studies collectively,

62. David L. Schindler, “Introduction,” in *An Introduction to the Abba School: Conversations from the Focolare’s Interdisciplinary Study Center*, p. 8

63. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, p. 33.

64. Downey, p. 12.

I want to affirm within these studies the notion of our *interrelatedness* as persons in dialogue.

The dialogical communication ethics I submit thus goes beyond Burke’s logology that investigates religious discourse for its insight into *language* (understood as a *system of symbols*) though John Stewart maintains that even language might better be understood as “articulate contact,” dialogue, or relating. I should like to direct attention, instead, from language to human *communication*. Likewise, the dialogic I have in mind pushes past the “modest” and “minimalist” dialogical ethic of Arnett, Fritz, and Bell that privileges *tolerance* and “*common ground*” over *unity* or *communion* among disparate standpoints as a moral standard. Arnett and his collaborators posit a “bookstore” as an emblem of the minimalist ethic they advocate:

Within the physical walls of the bookstore, one encounters many others who adhere to competing views of the good, but who share an interest in reading and learning. While one person shops for books on Catholic perspectives on marriage, another may seek a secular volume on relational health for gay couples. Yet another person seeks information about planning an estate sale.⁶⁵

The good of communication in such a place would be to “find some commonality”—the bookstore itself—and to “learn from difference.” Arnett and his collaborators stress diversity and otherness in advancing their “minimalist” ethics. Subscribers of such a

65. Ronald Arnett, Janie Harden Fritz, and Leanne Bell, *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialog and Difference* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), p. 19

view might contend that humans are far more diverse and “other” (strange) than the co-eternal Persons of the Trinity. Added to their case might be the fact that we inhabit separate physical bodies with various imperfections, limitations, diseases, and deformities; we spring from myriad different gene pools (ethnicities); we grow up in radically different cultures; we live in alienated social locations; we have competing or incommensurable needs (through the accidents of nature and history); and so on. They might insist that we cannot trust our interlocutors indiscriminately and empty ourselves into everyone equally. At best, they might concede that the Trinity would seem to give us an ideal or exemplar to which to aspire in parent-child, or more generally, family or communities of faith relations. They might conclude that tolerance and a willingness to learn from the “other” might serve as the only practicable ideals for which to aim in this world of power plays, fractious politics, and wars.⁶⁶

But Kahane asks, “[I]f justice is interpreted as the recognition and accommodation of differences . . . then what will hold together the more encompassing political community?”⁶⁷ Christiansen, too, points to the limitations of such a dialogic of tolerance:

A dialog that is just an exchange of ideas is doomed to become intellectual combat [whereas a] dialog that emerges out of a complex web of relationships is likely over time

66. The author acknowledges the assistance of John Hatch in suggesting the “minimalist/optimist” dichotomy, in anticipating objections to a Trinitarian ethic, and for offering other helpful comments in shaping the essay.

67. David Kahane, “Diversity, Solidarity, and Civic Friendship,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 7 (1999): 267.

to produce far more light than heat, more respect than resentment.⁶⁸

In place of the “minimalist” ethic, I propose an “optimalist” ethic grounded precisely in *relationship*, which, as we have seen, has been highlighted in theological study, especially in recent decades. An optimalist ethic advocates that interlocutors affirm fellow interlocutors as persons, make each other fully present, and accept each other as partners.⁶⁹ An optimalist ethic pushes further still, in the vein of Bakhtin, who actually speaks of “*perichoresis*” (interpenetration) as an ideal state of communication, which would stand in contrast with the “impenetrability” of egoism.⁷⁰ Buber suggests the distinction between such an optimalist ethic and a minimalist one and envisions the potential of the former:

But where the dialog is fulfilled in its being, between partners who have turned to one another in truth, who express themselves without reserve and are free of desire for semblance, there is brought into being a memorable common fruitfulness which is to be found nowhere else. At such times, at each such time, the word arises in a substantial way between [persons] who have been seized in the depths and opened out by the dynamic of an element of togetherness.

68. Drew Christiansen, “Staying Cool When It’s Hot: Reporting on the Christian Middle East,” in Dennis D. Cali, ed., *Faith and the Media* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), p. 67.

69. Buber, “Elements of Interhuman,” pp. 78–81.

70. Jostein Børtnes, “The Polyphony of Trinity in Bakhtin.” Retrieved on September 18, 2010, from http://www.hum.au.dk/romansk/polyfoni/Polyphonie_V/Bortnes5.pdf, p. 141.

The interhuman opens out what otherwise remained unopened.⁷¹

I maintain that the Trinity theologically prefigures such an understanding in contemporary communication studies. It supports a Trinitarian communitarian ethic that offers *unity and distinction*; *the person as constituted relationally*; *self-communication/gift*; *reciprocity*; and *relationship* as operative principles in fulfilling the ultimate function of communication: *communion*. The Trinity analogizes to the human community inasmuch as it demonstrates an ongoing, mutual “I-thou” relationship enacted through the communication of selves and the communion that follows. The Trinitarian grammar proposes *kenosis* and *perichoresis* as key ingredients, the “something more” of full personhood: to be united in a mutual relation of love.

Scholars have applied Trinity to human affairs in various ways, as Thompson has observed.⁷² Jacques Maritain saw in the Trinity a supreme representation of the essential relationality of personhood.⁷³ Along similar lines, Larentzakis, in his essay entitled “The Social Dimension of the Trinitarian Mystery,” sees the Trinity as a society of persons and, as Thompson summarizes his view, an “archetype for the social teaching of the church.”⁷⁴ He writes that “the person, distinguished from the individual, will be properly

understood only in fellowship with others.”⁷⁵ Joseph Oomen studies the practical applications of the Trinity to the praxis of Christian life.⁷⁶ Hollenbach recognizes the Trinity as offering guidance in common life and civil society.⁷⁷ Similarly, Moltmann states that “The trinity is our social programme. . . . the exemplar of true human community, first in the church and also in society.”⁷⁸ And finally, Kasper sees in the Trinity a *vision of politics* that transcends the left-wing, right-wing partisan divide:

Such a vision is as far removed from a collectivist communism as it is from an individualistic liberalism. For communion does not dominate the individual being and rights of the person but rather brings these to fulfillment through the giving away of what is the person’s own and the reception of what belongs to others. Communion is thus a union of persons and at the same time maintains the primacy of the always unique person. This primacy, however, finds its fulfillment not in an individualistic having but in giving and thus granting participation in what is one’s own.⁷⁹

75. Ibid.

76. Joseph Oomen, “The Concept of Trinity and Its Implication for Christian Communication in India,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 34 (2002): 75–82.

77. David Hollenbach, *The Common and Good Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

78. Jürgen Moltmann, “The Reconciling Power of the Trinity in the Life of the Church and the World,” in *The Reconciling Power of the Trinity. Conference of European Churches*, C.E. C Occasional Paper No. 15 (Geneva: C.E.C, 1983), p. 56.

79. Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans., Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 307.

71. Buber, “Elements of Interhuman,” p. 86.

72. Thompson, pp. 106–108.

73. Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

74. Grigorios Larentzakis, “Trinitarischer kirchensandnis,” in *Trinitat: Aktuelle perspektiven der theologie*, ed., Wilhelm Bueuning (Freidburg: Herder, 1984), p. 178, as described by Thompson, p. 108.

Again, I would like to introduce the Trinitarian thought of Chiara Lubich into this conversation, this time not so much in terms of ontology but spirituality—the praxis of faith. Based on her spiritual experience, Lubich writes: “I felt that I was created as a gift for the person next to me, and the person next to me was created by God as a gift for me as the Father in the Trinity is everything for the Son, and the Son is everything for the Father.”⁸⁰ This vision of the human person as gift grounded Lubich’s desire to live out what she has understood: “The life we must try to imitate is the life of the Holy Trinity, by loving each other, with the grace of God, in the way the persons of the Holy Trinity love one another. . . . the mysticism of a unity of souls who are a reflection, here on earth, of the Trinity above. . . .”⁸¹

For Lubich, this is possible since humanity as a whole has been created in the image of God—of the Trinity. It is not that just each individual person is created in the image of God, but the humankind is created as a collective image of the Trinity. The goal of Lubich’s spirituality of unity is to realize this shared nature of our relational personhood in daily life. However, she also recognizes the objections I raised earlier, namely the limitations of our finitude. But she affirms that the Trinitarian life can be lived to a degree because the divine life of God is within each person: “Human beings are finite and cannot penetrate each other, but God can penetrate each.”⁸² In the following, Lubich speaks about this using the word “heaven” for this inner presence of God:

80. Judith M. Povilus, *United in His Name: Jesus in Our Midst in the Experience and Thought of Chiara Lubich* (New York: New City Press, 1992), p. 67.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

I will love then, not silence, but the word . . . that is, the communication between God in me and God in my neighbor. And if the two heavens meet, there rests a single Trinity where the two are like Father and Son and among them is the Holy Spirit. We must recollect ourselves also in the presence of our neighbor, not by escaping our neighbors—but rather by recollecting them into our heaven and recollecting ourselves into their heaven.⁸³

I believe that Lubich’s spirituality of living the Trinitarian life poses a model and a grammar of communication that synthesizes, on one level, major strands of current communication studies, and, on another level, the communication act itself: both the “way things are” and the “way things might be” in the communication process. One can see reflections of the Trinity within the coordinates of the conventional model of the communication process. But the Trinity proposes “something more.” It is distinguished from a “minimalist” perspective in that it advances a gymnastic of a giving and receiving—“addressivity” and “receptivity”—*of love* and the creation of communion as the ideal of communication. In a Trinitarian ethic lived by persons following the model of Lubich, each person is engaged in mutual gifting, simultaneously and actively “giving to” and “taking in” the other. Each exists in a situation encompassing them both, and something is generated out of this union, a message, Logos. Even in Burke’s system, “. . . the word for perfect communion between persons is ‘Love.’”⁸⁴ Thus, the element of love must be added to the communication

83. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

84. R R, p. 30.

act and to communication studies to engage them more purely in Trinitarian grammar. Person 1—Message—Person 2—Feedback and Feedforward—Environment can be viewed as coordinates of the Trinitarian dynamic when the two (or more) persons engage in mutual *kenosis* and, in turn, *perichoresis*, or mutual indwelling as far as possible for finite human beings. The Trinity can thus be viewed as Icon of communication and for communication studies.

Reporter and communication scholar Michele Zanzucchi provides an example of the Trinitarian perspective at work in a newsroom:

We have the practice of submitting articles to at least two other editors so that what we write truly reflects a sharing of ideas and perspectives. We also work hard to ensure full communication and input between the editorial staff and those who work on graphic design and layout, so that there is a unity between what we say and how it appears in the magazine. As with any staff, we have different opinions and ideas—so it’s often a real exercise to “empty” ourselves so as to fully understand and appreciate what the other is trying to communicate. But in this atmosphere of giving and receiving, of mutual love, we are usually able to achieve the unanimous consent before the magazine is published.⁸⁵

85. Cali, p. 24. Other scholars have applied this Trinitarian model to their own fields, mainly in Europe where Chiara Lubich is better known: Antonio Maria Baggio (politics), Brendan Leahy (theology) Bernhard Callebaut (sociology), Pasquale Ferrara (international relations), Donald W. Mitchell (interreligious dialogue), Brendan Purcell (philosophy), and Luigino Bruni (economics).

I have observed such an ethic in my own communications with administrators and colleagues. I remember, for example, feeling some anxiety in anticipation that what I would be disclosing to a dean might provoke adverse reactions, but then feeling peace when she seemed more motivated to understand what I was saying than to judge it. She listened to me express concerns in an “active” silent way and entered the heart of what I sought to convey, and, in turn, offered her own “voice” on these matters. I have sought to maintain such a communication disposition with colleagues as well and ordinarily with productive results. It is an Every Person’s ethic, applicable in both grand and vastly broadcast communications and in the more prosaic communications of responding to a student’s untutored question, answering the phone, or responding to an e-mail. Such an ethic might be reckoned a “virtue ethic” in that it does not prescribe what to do in particular situations that pose particular moral dilemmas. Instead, it offers an orientation, an outlook, for viewing fellow interlocutors as persons to whom one would give oneself and from whom one would in turn receive. Indeed, within the constraints of fast-paced communication of today—“a hurried email, followed by a text message, a brief phone call made between a sandwich and an appointment”—a spirit of fellowship may be often the only “tool” available to communicators to preserve an “awareness that at the other end of the message is not an object but a person, a person to be loved, and who can also love in return.”⁸⁶

86. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Final Reflections

The current dialogical wave in communication studies gives prominence to “the other.” Within that focus, some attend to “difference” and suggest means by which understanding and tolerance might be achieved. Others underscore “the person” and suggest means by which “harmony” might be achieved through communication between persons. While the communication studies reviewed here do not convey the fullness of the Trinitarian grammars of *kenosis* and *perichoresis*, they nonetheless strain toward communion. Thus the Trinity stands both as an emblem of these contemporary studies and a paradigm of that to which they aspire.

My analysis demonstrates that the Trinity serves as a useful capsule of significant impulses in contemporary communication studies. It synthesizes those studies but with its grammar of *kenosis* and *perichoresis* also goes beyond them. The Trinitarian perspective advanced in the dialogical current of contemporary communication thought, then, has practical application to the field of communication. First, it stresses that the *person* matters most, not the medium through which the communication occurs nor even the message itself. “The Trinity” emblemizes that the person, realized relationally, is something more than a theoretical “other” but is instead the one with whom “I” am intimately bound. Secondly, the goal of communion necessarily admits of distinction, as with the three Persons of the Trinity, who, though one, are, at the same time, distinct as Persons—*Unity and Distinction*. Central to the Trinitarian view of communication is a third notion of *reciprocity*: the action is not uni-directional or serial but a coming-and-going. Communion is achieved not through the communicator’s singular act of scoping out the needs and expectations of one’s fellow interlocutor, but through a mutual giving between self and other.

The Trinity thus proposes that to communicate, interlocutors must “make themselves one,” which entails a certain vacating of self, *kenosis*, and a simultaneous fulfillment of self-in-relation, or *perichoresis*: I in the other person, the other person in me. The Trinity, thus encompassing a major strand of contemporary communication, performs two functions. One, it highlights the essentially *relational* character of persons; and two, it *names* that relationality in specific ways: love in the form of *kenosis* and *perichoresis*. This, then, is the “something more” of mutual love that the Trinitarian position proposes that accords its unique value as a unifying ethic.

All of this brings to light dimensions of communication studies—including interpersonal, mass, and rhetorical—that stretch kenotically toward “the other,” toward “reciprocity” and “communion,” and toward a reality that is generated among two people engaged in authentic communication and who thus overcome mis-communication. The spiritual and theological reflections of Downey, Lubich, Thompson, and others and the Trinitarian studies in other disciplines help bring into relief elements embedded within major contemporary theories in the field of communication studies. It is my contention that Chiara Lubich best captures the contemporary and emerging paradigm: the essence of personhood, as expressed in the Trinity, is *being for* one another while *being in* unity with one another. For her, the person is not defined essentially by substance but by the relationship of giving and receiving where each is gift for the other. The dialogical current in communication studies can collaborate with Lubich’s Trinitarian thought and praxis in articulating what persons are, a “here-and-now reality,” and what they can become, a “reality-yet-to-come.”⁸⁷

87. Schindler, p. 12.

Together they can explore the Trinity as a paradigm for communication studies.

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