On Presence

John Hadley

At the start of the last chapter in his *Christology*, Gerald O'Collins comments that "Unquestionably the notion of presence recalls and even summarises many significant items which have surfaced in this book". In the next few paragraphs he refers to the divine presence in creation, in delivering the suffering people, and in the Temple. He then moves on to the specifically incarnate presence of the Word of God and the continuing presence of the Lord in his people for our salvation by the power of the Holy Spirit in the Church, the sacraments, etc. He intends to use the notion of presence to "synthesize a fully deployed Christology", and recognises that to do this he needs "first to analyse the notion and reality of presence", in order "to exploit the possibilities of this notion for expounding more coherently faith in Christ as the universal Saviour who is at once truly divine and fully human".

However, at this point he encounters a "major challenge": philosophers have not had much to say about "presence". The philosophical encyclopaedias virtually ignore the topic; and among philosophers only Husserl, Heidegger, and other phenomenologists and (later) deconstructionists have paid any attention to it. He sketches out a few pointers of his own in the succeeding few pages, and then draws various Christological conclusions.[1]

I don't think the picture is quite as bleak as O'Collins painted it – but the literature is indeed sparse. Gabriel Marcel does have points to make which are relevant to "presence"; similarly, the works of Martin Buber, and, from a different stable, John Macmurray's *Persons in Relation*, also provide some pointers. George Steiner's *Real Presences* is mainly concerned with aesthetics and the reception and life of works of art in society, but is relevant to this study. Ralph Harper's *On Presence* does treat the topic directly, but suffers (to my mind) from being decidedly strange: it's a sort of extended meditation on the works of Marcel Proust, with occasional forays to Eliot, Hopkins, and Dostoevsky, and the odd genuflection to Marcel and Heidegger.

In this paper I intend to sketch out some themes in regard to the notion of "presence", and then to point to the theological usefulness

[1] G. O'Collins: *Christology* (OUP, 1995) pp 306, 309.

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of the topic, which would suggest that it is worth much more attention than the philosophers and the theologians have been paying to it.

Spatial and Temporal Presence

Marcel claims (rightly) that the only form of presence worthy of the name is personal presence to a person. This is part and parcel of the standard existentialist theme that the proper study of philosophers is "being" in the sense of "human existence" in the whole range of existing.[2] However, it is useful to make a few comments about low-grade forms of presence, in order to shed light on the real thing.

The first point, fairly obvious, is that there is both "presence of . . ." and "presence to . . .". Both features need to be analysed. Then (also obvious) there is "presence in a place" and "presence at a time".

Characteristics of "presence of an object in a place": first of all, they are "extended": they take up some space, no matter how small. I suspect that sub-atomic particles don't count as objects locally present: perhaps that is one of the consequences of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle – it is not possible to be accurate beyond certain limits about where they are and how fast they are moving.

Secondly, they have potential for interaction; objects have an effect on other objects which are nearby. There are degrees of this potential: living objects have more potential for interaction than inanimate objects; animals more than plants (by and large). Some animals at least will start to use objects for their own purposes: birds building nests – Jays, for instance, putting objects in their nests. Some animals have playthings. I suspect that this is more the case with so-called domestic animals, but I also suspect that it is not restricted to them.

Thirdly, we can ask whether the objects present are stable or transient. Local presence of an object implies some measure of temporal presence.

Does temporal presence imply some measure of local presence? If we consider an animal having some experiences at a particular time – smells, for instance, or sounds, or feelings of alarm or fright – then these are produced (usually) by other objects, even if those objects are not locally present. I wonder whether animals daydream – a suggestion of temporal presence which is not local, in the sense that, in the daydream, the animal's experiences are not of the place in which the animal currently is situated.

Turning to presences *to a person*, we can think again of local and of temporal presence.

[2] cf Macquarrie: *Existentialism* p 14f.

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Characteristics of local presence to a person: firstly there is now greater potential for the locally present objects being taken into a more stable relationship with the person. This can be seen in the process of instrumentation: objects are "ready-to-hand", as Heidegger put it; but persons can (and do) see the potential for purposeful use, and fashion the objects for that stable purpose.

Secondly, there is the potential for a person to use objects which are "to hand" as an expression, or even an extension, of their personality. Objects are, in some ways, brought into the person's stable field of view, to such an extent that they become (almost) a part of the person. For example, a number of years ago a man was left on an uninhabited Scottish island for some weeks to see how he would survive (he had been trained in survival techniques!). When a TV crew went to interview him after a week or so, a camera operator stumbled and dropped the (expensive!) TV camera on a hard rock. The man shouted at him furiously – "Mind my rock"! Ownership of objects is in some sense integrated into our personal lives: so that even though we may be away from the objects themselves, our ownership means that they are still in some way "present" to us. So "presence" has some durability, and is not restricted to presence in that place at that time.

Which leads on to temporal presence to a person. Apart from the objective (local) presence referred to above, there are other forms: objects present in memory or (I suspect) will. Persons may keep going through all sorts of deprivation by concentrating on some objects which they own – or perhaps intend to own. Slightly differently – but still relevant to temporal presence, perhaps – is the experience of Trachtenberg, who kept going through his time in a concentration camp by developing the rules for easy manipulation of numbers.

But there may also be temporal presences to a person which are not of objects at all. There are thoughts and ideas; feelings; and dreams. These may be fleeting – and there are occasions when we have such a fleeting moment which we then wish to reconnect with, but can't quite remember it. There's a story that that is what happened to Samuel Taylor Coleridge when writing *Xanadu*: he was interrupted, and when he could return he'd forgotten the rest of the theme. Other thoughts, ideas, feelings, dreams, may be longer lasting. If so, then they may have something of a life of their own. Alfred North Whitehead suggested that nothing original has ever been written down which had not been said previously by someone else who was not the first to think of it. But the thoughts, ideas, feelings, dreams, have to be the experiences of some person at some time – so they must be temporal presences to a person.

In this context, we may also talk about the presence of good and evil. Why is it that we can go into a Church and have a real feeling of the presence of God, and into another and feel nothing at all? A

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colleague of mine tells me that when touring in Scotland he came into a range of hills and had a very uncomfortable feeling – a feeling of evil. He later discovered that he had strayed into Glencoe.

So what can we say about presence of a person (personal presence)? Drawing the threads together from what has already been said, there is the ability and willingness to shape the environment, to impose a structure upon it, to make it an extension of the personality. In particular, we use objects as instruments, and impose our own thoughts and ideas on the environment by using objects as extensions to our own hands. But perhaps the most important aspect of presence of a person is the way that persons use the environment, and their experiences, for personal growth and development. Persons do this because of a particular reflexive feature of their consciousness. Persons not only know, but know themselves in the knowing of the objects. In other words, as there are presences to a person, and the person is present to objects, so the person becomes present-to-self.

Personal Presence

Having in this way sketched out the basics, it is now possible to move to consider presence in the real sense of the term; that is, presence of a person to a person. What are the characteristics of such forms of presence, over and above what has been already said? In doing so, we might reflect that it is possible for two fully conscious human beings to be "present" in the same place at the same time, without being personally present to each other: they are present as objects (local and temporal presence), but that is all. It has been said that on a tube train in rush hour every part of the body is in contact except for the eyes!

So what characterises personal presence to a person? First of all, we would note that there will be *communication*. This will be more than the (impersonal!) communication that is all too common – such as railway station announcements, or the voice message when we dial 1471. It is well known that personal communication involves some content (though this may not be significant or important as such); but more importantly there will be self-disclosure on the part of the one communicating, and some request for response (feedback) from the other person. Personal presence, then, involves an offering of the self (to some degree at least), and looks for a response in kind – some degree of personal disclosure from the person addressed.

It is, of course, possible for persons to be physically present and active, and producing a (perhaps-considerable) effect on those nearby, and yet not *personally* present to those in their immediate neighbourhood. I have heard it said that when Lloyd George left a cabinet meeting (having been fully involved as a politician) it was as

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though there had been nobody there. T.E.Lawrence records an occasion when officers (including himself) on a station platform had to deal with four very senior officers marching up and down in conversation. "Officers saluted once: twice: still they marched up and down. Three times was too much. Some withdrew to the fence and stood permanently to attention. These were the mean souls. Some fled: these were the contemptibles. Some turned to the bookstall and studied book-backs avidly: these were shy. Only one was blatant".[3] The "presence" of the generals to the junior officers was authoritative only: they made no effort to "be present" personally to them. But Lawrence himself responded to their authoritative presence by being personally present to them: and General Burmester noticed and spoke to him.

Hence we can see that the presence of a person to a person involves *an opportunity to form a relationship*. We may say that all personal communication implicitly involves an invitation to form a relationship; but that invitation may not be accepted. Whether it is or not, the opportunity must be there if it is a case of personal presence. It is instructive to consider what prevents relationships from forming. One obstacle will be a lack of trust. David Hume recognised that we have to have a certain level of trust to live at all – and yet we cannot provide a rational basis for trusting. If this is true for the laws of nature, so much more is it true (as Hume saw) with personal relationships. Since personal presence involves communication, which in turn must involve an offer of (at least some rudimentary level of) personal relationship, it follows that personal presence to a person must also provide an offer of (at least a rudimentary level of) trustworthiness, and an invitation to trust and to be trusted.

It follows that "personal presence" involves a level of genuineness. There is a necessary quality of personal integration. Because personal presence is a statement "This is me", the statement must be true or the presence is not there. It may succeed in masquerading for a time as presence: but true presence demands that there be openness, integration of verbal and non-verbal messages, and a level of trustworthiness which others can recognise and respond to with their own honest replies. If such a genuine invitation to trust and be trusted is accepted, it opens the way for a greater level of communication, of personal presence to person, and hence of self-disclosure. In other words, personal presence to a person will include the potential for love.

Personal presence to a person may become exclusive. This does happen, at least sometimes, in the early stages of a relationship. But if it stays this way, it is defective and probably harmful to the persons.

[3] T.E.Lawrence: *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* p 327

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Such a close, exclusive, relationship, in which the persons have eyes and thoughts only for each other, closes off the possibility of personal development through contact with other aspects of the world and (in particular) other human beings. True personal presence to another invites the other to become personally present not only to the discloser but to other persons as well: it invites those addressed to develop their "presence".

A more positive development is for other relationships to be brought into the focus of the developing relationship. If the development proceeds sufficiently, there is the opportunity for a developing network of relationships of persons. The various personal relationships have the potential now of shedding light on each other, and aiding personal and relational development. In the higher forms of this development, we can see this as being the potential for forming a community of persons. Once there is an embryonic community of persons in relationship, there is an enhanced degree of potential for personal growth for all members, involving a much higher degree of personal self-disclosure, on the basis of a much deeper and pervasive level of trust. Such developments have a momentum, and the momentum is (perhaps irrationally, in the sense that there is no rational basis for it) optimistic. Or, we might say, personal relationships built on faith issuing into love produce a level of hope.

Indeed, Marcel would claim that hope without presence is impossible. He distinguishes between "desire", which is a movement towards something (or someone) intent on possessing the other, and "hope", which is a movement of self-giving, and with a momentum towards communion. Personal presence must always have such a dynamic. Indeed, communion is only possible when two (or more) persons are intent on being "personally present" to one another. Without this, there may be communication, but no communion.[4]

Marcel claims that it is not possible for presence to be possessed: it is only experienced in giving. The one who wishes to be "personally present" to others will do so in self-disclosure, self-gift, to them; and if a person responds by attempting to "possess" the presence, the possibility of communication is destroyed. Presence, then, is not "objective", in the sense that it is always subjective, or, better, intersubjective.[5] Of course, it is possible for persons to have some success in pretending "personal presence" in such ways: of appearing to be "personally present" in order to extract something from the others. Conmen do this all the time. But such presence does not last: if they are successful in their deceit, they will have absented themselves physically (and permanently) before the pretence is discovered.

[4] cf K.T.Gallagher: *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, pp 23–4
[5] G. Marcel: *The Mystery of Being* I, p 207f; *Presence et Immortalité* p 188.

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These personal presences may have started with a communication on the level of intellectual content, or perhaps, emotion. If the communication leads to a developing relationship, however, it cannot stay on a purely intellectual or emotional level. It must be all-embracing, involving all aspects of the persons – physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual. In other words, personal presence in (at least potentially) holistic; and if it develops according to its potential, it will become holistic. The whole person, in other words, becomes present to the whole other person. There is, then, a quality of openness in personal presence. It starts with self-disclosure and invitation to a response of like kind; and develops as the level of trust, love, and hope develop to ever greater openness.

No matter how genuine our desire to be fully open to others, we recognise that there are already limits – physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual – to our self-disclosure. These limits are likewise to be found in our self-knowledge and self-understanding. We may say that we can be present to others only to the extent that we have become present to ourselves. Heidegger views this limitation in terms of our mortality, and of our failure or refusal to acknowledge it. It is characteristic of human being to "become what we are". All human beings have the potential – through our reflexive ability – to take control of our lives, to make something of our future; and yet such potential and such choices are limited by the limitations of nature and of circumstance – in a word, by mortality. Thomas Sheehan sums it up in this way: "Mortal becoming is the way human being (a) is meaningfully present to itself and (b) renders other entities meaningfully present to itself. . . . Things are present to human being insofar as human being is present to itself."[6] So the horizon of presence of humanbeing to itself, and of the presence of other beings to humanbeing, is death. From this it follows that the more intense the presence, the more intense will be the horizon of absence.

We experience this horizon in many situations, but particularly those of intense enjoyment. Our pleasure is always tempered by the knowledge that "it won't last". Perhaps that is why, when young children laugh uncontrollably, it usually ends in tears.

As personal presence to and relationship with another person develop, certain words, objects, and actions adopt a certain extra meaning because of remembered events in which they played a part. If the relationship has developed to involve other persons in a community, then these words, objects, and actions can take on an added dimension of community meaning. In other words, ritual develops as an aspect of personal presence to a person. This is clearly seen in families, which tend to have their own particular phrases and ways of

[6] T. Sheehan: "Heidegger" in *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (ed. Edward Craig) vol IV pp 310–1.

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doing things which speak of the presence of each member to the others – even when (particularly when?) they are not *locally* present at that time.

Just as mortality, and our failure to accept it, imposes limits on our presence-to-self and presence-to-others, so also there are limits to our communication. Part of this limitation lies within ourselves: we do not disclose ourselves fully or with total genuineness. Part of it lies in the means of communication: they do not entirely understand what we are disclosing: words, actions, gestures, are not entirely univocal, even within a single culture. Part of it lies in the recipients of our communication: their own lack of presence-to-self and presence-to-us limits their attentiveness precisely to what it is that we are communicating. It is for such reasons that people have to be trained in communication skills and, even more importantly (and with greater difficulty!) in listening skills. So in all our communication there is some aspect of distance, of my being "not personally present to others", of others being "not personally present to me".

This aspect of (non-) communication has been considered by Derrida and the deconstructionists and by George Steiner in *Real Presences*. It relates to the fact that, no matter how intense one person might be to another, there is an unavoidable distance precisely because the other *is* other. Furthermore, in any developing personal relationship, the increasing levels of self-disclosure to each other re-inforce the experience of the other *as other*. The goal of total union with the other in this world – whether by communication or by any other aspect of presence – is beyond our reach. This is another aspect of the mortality of human being. It leaves open, of course, the possibility of union with a personal presence out of this world, by the power of that (*extremely other*) divine personal presence. Perhaps this is what Derrida is expressing when he claims that all communication betrays a theological assumption. Or, as Steiner has it, "The intelligible face of the sign remains turned to the face and the word of God . . . The age of the sign is essentially theological".[7]

A related issue is that we can never know another person fully. I recall Archbishop Patrick Kelly saying to me that a sure sign that a loving relationship is in serious trouble is when one person says to the other "I know you". This entails that the speaker is no longer willing to admit that the other can deliver a surprise – perhaps because the other has become so de-personalized in the relationship that he or she is no longer capable of mounting such a surprise. Whatever the reasons may be, the failure to be surprising, or to accept that the other may surprise on occasions, displays a failure or a refusal to "be personally present". A technique offered to couples preparing for

[7] G. Steiner: *Real Presences*, pp 119f

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marriage, which I have also used for couples whose relationship has run into difficulties, is "You are the sunshine of my life" – an invitation to each person to say to the other what they see in the other as good for them. A variant is for each person to say to the other, every day. "Today you have done. . . . for me".[8] Such techniques are an invitation to partners to look for ways in which the other still does surprise, to keep the "newness" of the relationship ever fresh and alive.

An important effect of personal presence to a person, which has been implicit in the "characteristics" given above, is the invitation to the other to become personally present. If a group of people are together but not communicating – not personally present (e.g. in a waiting room?) then the appearance of another person who does become "personally present" invites the others to do the same. They may not respond: but they have been given the opportunity to do so.

A further effect is that presence is no longer restricted to time or place. Personal presence, indeed, appears to transcend time and space. Sometimes, the originating communications were only tenuously local – for example, a couple whose communication for some considerable time was purely by telephone. (Romance of pen pals does involve more "local" presence in the form of the letters, which are, at least, objects. I suppose we now have romance entirely by e-mail, which is less local. It is perhaps relevant that e-mail romance seems to be particularly susceptible to misuse by paedophiles.) But when personal presence develops, the "local" and "temporal" aspects are less essential. The persons may still be present to one another by memory. This may take a conscious effort: but in the effort each person "makes the other present" to themselves. Sometimes, there may not be any effort involved at all. Personal presence has a particular dynamic which unites past, present, and future. Here again the aspect of hope, which always emerges in the context of real personal presence, can be found.

There are also anniversaries, and even places which are invested with added meaning for the persons concerned. Memory has a large part to play in this, of course, but so also has ritual. So there are places which are important for the persons (have an aura of personal presence) because of events associated with them; and there will be days on which the persons always tend to do certain things (e.g. go out for a meal). About thirty years ago it was (wrongly) reported that Michael Tanner, a Fellow of Corpus Christi, Cambridge, went to a particular teashop every Thursday afternoon and ritually sat in the same chair, and ate and drank the same food, in memory of his mentor, Wittgenstein. People do such things, and they do them in

[8] cf M. Grimer: *Making Marriage Work* pp 16–17, 78ff

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order to perpetuate a presence. If that were not so, the story about Tanner would not have gained credence. The personal presence is by no means restricted to these times and places, but is more intensely felt then and there.

In particular, certain objects may develop a special meaning in relation to personal presence. These may loosely be described as "relics". These are not "reminders" of someone who is absent. They serve an entirely different function; to be the presence of the person who is not (locally and temporally) there.

A particular form of authoritative personal presence is that of the acknowledged master. Insofar as others attempt to follow his or her ways, the master's presence is felt among them. The intangible effects of personal presence are very important, particularly if they are woven into a coherent (or semi-coherent) system in which the persons in the relationship have a vested interest. Such systems of ideas exert a powerful hold over the other persons involved, and there is a strong personal presence in the ideas and (especially) the system. In many ways, the power is all the greater because the person concerned is no longer (locally and temporally) present: it seems that personal presence through the ideas left behind can be all the more intense and powerful. Max Weber has spoken of the ritualization of the charismatic leader's ideas: the community perpetuates the ideas, but because the founder is no longer (locally and temporally) present, the ideas take over as the continuing presence. The new community leaders produce an organization to perpetuate the charism (but in fact stifle it). Nobody may argue against the system, because to do so is to argue with the presence of the founder. As a parish priest, I have discovered that it is very difficult to change anything in a Church where the memories of the people who built or decorated it live on. It is far easier to deal with the people who did the building and decorating themselves, if they are still alive! I wonder whether there is a similar quality underlying John 16:7 – if I go, I will send the Paraclete to you. The presence of the Lord in the power of the Spirit is superior to his physical (local and temporal) presence to the disciples.

The community itself, and particularly community structures, can therefore operate as the presence of the founder. The essential and important aspects of the personal presence of the founder to the "disciples" must be reflected and crystallized in the community structures, which therefore have an authority of their own. Important issues, such as the way that money is handled in the community, and the ways that disputes are resolved, express the personality of the founder, and are therefore the founder's continuing presence.

These structures, and the ways they are used, cannot be value-free. Hence there will be presence of good and evil in the community, as an essential aspect of personal presence continued in the community itself. If the personal presence is highly developed, then so will the

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sense of good or evil. Just as the personal presence to other persons cannot be limited to time and place, so also with the presence of good and evil. They will be associated particularly with certain places, no doubt; but their effects will be felt further afield.

In particular, good and evil may be experienced in certain places, or in certain groups of people. Sometimes, the reasons for the experiences of good or evil will be plain enough, but on other occasions they may not be. There are sufficient accounts of people experiencing "haunting presence" or "abiding presence" for us to take such matters seriously. We don't necessarily have to talk of demonic possession and the like to be able to understand what is happening. I used to come across it frequently enough in Grimsby, where people would come into contact with various forms of satanism at regular intervals, and requests for exorcism (which I would not do!) were not unusual.

Any personal presence to another will have a lasting effect on the other. If the presence is intense, durable, community-oriented, then the effect will be considerable. It will affect the other person's thoughts and feelings, even likes and dislikes. This may be intentional: it is not unknown for people to "make themselves present" to others in order to initiate some course of action. Salesmen are adept at such matters! But it need not be. The presence to the other may have been entirely self-giving, an offer of friendship to be enjoyed, for example. But the particular quality of the ideas etc. permeating those friendships affects the ways that the persons act towards each other and towards other persons (even outside the "community"), and even non-persons. If we consider the pathological intense closed two-person relationship, for example, we would still be aware that this relationship will colour (for the worse?) the ways that the two persons themselves relate to others.

A final point is that the effects of personal presence to persons cannot be constrained too tightly. There are many occasions where a particular person is unable to be (locally and temporally) present to another; and yet a presence is affected by means of an intermediary. The possibility of "representing" another person at an official occasion (e.g. a funeral), or as an ambassador of state, for example, is well entrenched. In canon law, that is how the vicar general and the episcopal vicars are in relation to the Bishop: they are to be the presence of the Bishop to such an extent that if they speak or act, it is the Bishop who speaks or acts.

Theological Consequences

Gerald O'Collins considers that the notion of "presence" can be helpful in systematizing Christology. Obviously the notion is also of great importance in regard to the Eucharist, and to the Church. In

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these respects, theological work has already been done – such as Nicholas Lash: *His Presence in the World*. But it seems to me that more attention to the theme of "presence" would enable us to rework some areas of theology which have suffered in the past from either under-development or a problematic development.

Underdeveloped areas would perhaps include sacramental theology as a whole. Too often "presence" is restricted to the Eucharist, as though the doctrine of Real Presence implied that everywhere else there was absence. Not wishing to take anything away from the developments in sacramental theology and liturgical practice over the last 30 years or so, I suspect that including the idea of the presence of the Lord in these ways would augment the existing theology. Such a theme, tying together ideas of faith, hope, love, community, and ritual, would perhaps provide a way of holding together aspects of sacramental theology which have a tendency to become separated. In particular, the theme could be applied anew to the Eucharist, recognising that Real Presence and ritual are by no means exclusive concepts. Patrick Fitzpatrick's *In Breaking of Bread* suggests that ritual is the key to understanding the Eucharist. If we can ally ritual with presence, as outlined above, his suggestion attains greater force.

The area of theology which always seems to me to suffer from problematic development is the theology of grace. Despite the best efforts of writers on the subject, there is always the tendency to relapse into viewing grace as a substance. Forty years ago, Father M. Flick SJ developed the theory of grace in terms of friendship with Christ. This avoids the problem; and yet the notion of "friendship" seems too weak to bear the weight of salvation. Perhaps "presence" would do the job better. It is certainly not antipathetic to "friendship"; I suggest that "presence" in this context would include "friendship", and because it is a broader and deeper concept, is sufficiently robust to bear the weight which must depend on it.

Another, somewhat more dynamic, application would arise from the relationship between presence and mystery, and between presence and glory. These themes are pervasive throughout theology, rather than being concentrated in any particular "theological tract". But I think that the areas of self-disclosure, of the distancing inseparable from intense personal relationship, and of faith, hope, and love, will show the possibilities of developing the themes of mystery and of glory in new directions with the help of the concept of presence.

There are certainly other areas of theology where the theme of presence could make a useful contribution. I would suggest that the theological virtues, ecclesiology (obviously), revelation, and creation, would be prime candidates. I would also suggest that considering the trinitarian relationships in terms of the presence of each person to the others (perichoresis) would be helpful in understanding those

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relationships issuing "ad extra": for presence has an inherent outward dimension. If there is mileage in the ideas I have put forward, then perhaps these developments may come about in good time.

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