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A SPIRITUAL TRINITY (reprinted)

This article by The Rev'd William H. Ralston, Jr. is reprinted from October 18, 1998.

The central dogma of any religion is what it believes about God. Christianity is defined by a particular (not to say peculiar) belief that God is three "persons" subsisting co-equally in a unitary Being. We must remember that this belief is not a metaphysical construct, invented by the ingenuity of man, but a long-considered religious response, impelled alike by the testimony of the Bible, continuing experience of life in Christ in the Church, and the necessity of response to significant misstatement and error.

In defining this dogma the Church was embracing a paradox, not so much of the arithmetic of three and one, but of the age-old philosophical question of "the One" and "the Many". From the beginning of known speculation about the nature of the world, the quest had been for a single principle of explanation. My favorite set of thinkers, the pre-Socratic philosophers, ran the gamut: water, air, fire, the "unlimited", number, all four "elements", and, a little later, atoms. Plato attempted an integration of all these theories in his discovery of the forms, the unchanging eternal "ideas" which appeared in and gave meaning to all actual phenomena. His doctrine of God was supremely ethical (governed by the idea of "the good") and theologically rich in implication, but not wholly coherent or systematic. Aristotle took the next logical step, and provided the notion of God as "first cause" or the "unmoved mover of all motion". Plotinus went on from Plato and Aristotle to a notion of God as the absolute "One", a solitary ineffable Being. Both these run the categorical risk of absolute monism.

All this was in the intellectual and religious background of the Church when it tried to define its own faith in the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The meeting of Jahveh of the Old Testament and the powerful understandings of the great Greek thinkers was the matrix out of which came the statement of the Trinity. The traditional way to consider this is that God provided Greek philosophy as the intellectual tool by which Christianity shaped the statements of its faith, and therefore was in itself an intrinsic element in God's Providence.

Lying deeply at the root of this supreme response of the theological reason was an (apparently) simpler and profoundly religious

understanding. It has to do with three characteristic "properties" of God, each one able to be associated with one of the three "persons" of the Trinity, but obviously indissoluble in the unity of their spiritual substance. They are purity, humility, and charity.

Purity is an element of holiness, which does not connote exclusively ethical righteousness, though it includes it. Holiness, with its concomitant quality of purity, means something "different", or set apart; something true to itself, not mixed-up, but single. It is the virtuous aspect of "the One" — what we say of God as unchanging, of one substance, forever what He is. It preserves the distance between God and any of His creatures, including the whole of His creation. There is that about God which can never be equated with anything other. Whatever "purity" may sound like to us in terms of particular human states of mind or heart, or what thoughts it may raise in us of matters of sensibility and conduct, it is basically beyond questions of actual value. It is a determinant of the very nature of God the Father, of His invariable being. One of our hymns refers to the "awful purity" of God, and we remember that Biblical literature begins in the revelation of God as the pure power of the storm and volcano, essentially impersonal in its manifestation and interior energy, and beyond ethical classification.

Just as purity is the inevitable associative quality we sense in relation to God the Father, so is humility of God the Son. The heart of Christianity is the conviction that the pure and holy God, out of His own determination, joined a creature to Himself forever, thereby perfecting all the intimations of commingling with the divine that the human race has marveled at or attempted to attain all over the world throughout recorded time.

That the pure and single God would choose to do this, and show us that He had done so, is both the glory and the scandal of Christianity. The New Testament is everywhere cognizant of the strangeness and nearly unbelievable wonder of it, not only in the quiet admissions of Jesus himself, but in the responses to him of everyone around him. He manifests this humility, and the confidence toward God which it gives him, everywhere. St. Paul remains astonished by it, as, I think, is everyone who reads the Gospels with open eyes to this day.

The purity of the Father, the humility of the Son, and the charity of the Holy Spirit: these three constitute the spiritual trinity which corresponds to the creedal and dogmatic one. It is, I think, easier for us to grasp the truth of the idea in this way. The metaphysical and theological rationale for the experience is strictly necessary, to protect it and clarify it. But the inner spiritual structure of it is better conveyed by purity, humility, and charity. We are talking about the same reality, the one yet threefold God, single in nature and essence, but threefold in inner life, in revelation, and in human religious experience.

The three qualities, no less than the three "persons", must not be separated from each other. They subsist together, of one substance. And we must remember that they are "names", not labels to be pasted on the appropriate divine person. They are, if you please, metaphors of the divine Nature, and more of the nature of poetry and suggestion than anything else, which makes them more real, not less. We must also recall that we are speaking of forms of participation, not relationships. Very much mischief has come from thinking of the

Incarnation as a mode of relationship between the divine and the human. When the Word of God took human flesh, he united it with Himself. He did not, in our deceptive terminology, "enter into a relationship" with us. That way of thinking tends to focus our attention on an abstraction, the relationship as such, and to neglect the two substantive things which are united to each other. The old services of marriage make it very plain. Marriage is a union of male and female, two persons in one flesh. Only secondarily is it a "relationship", to be entered into or dissolved at will, as if in a contract.

So purity, humility, and charity are an inner and spiritual analogue for the Holy Trinity. I think they make it easier for us to pray "in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

The Rev'd William H. Ralston, Jr.

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