

God, Trinity, Process

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The little knot of fear deep in my solar plexis materialized not in the hospital, but as I was leaving. It had been a minor stroke, with no residual behavioral effects, but what about a “next time?” Would I be incapacitated? And the little knot of fear felt like ice.

My two daughters were with me, which was surely a delight. We went back to Joan’s house, made dinner together, laughed all through the meal, and the whole family went to see a favorite movie soon after. But the knot of fear persisted. “God,” I’d said inside myself, “I have to talk with you about this, but I don’t have time now—can we talk about it right after I go to bed for the night?”

So the appointed time came, and I began explaining to the God who is always present what this little knot of fear was all about, and could you please take it away. But in the midst of asking for it to be taken away I was conscious that I don’t really deserve any special favors, and so I began apologizing to God for being such a lousy Christian. And in the midst of my apologies it came: “It’s never been about that.” It was as distinct as if it had been an external rather than internal hearing, and it was accompanied by a flood of sheerest love filling my being. And when it subsided, the little knot of fear had melted, and was gone. I had met Grace again.

We theologians delight in puzzling about God, and writing copious tomes explaining as best we can just how it is that God is this and/or that. We draw primarily from Scripture and from the long tradition of Christian history; we utilize whatever knowledge

we have about how the world as a whole is and works; we incorporate personal and communal ecclesial experience as much as possible. We write about God. But no matter how much we write, and how grandly, our writings never match the actual wonder that is the reality of God. How can a mere description ever be adequate? And so with such a caveat, I undertake my assigned task: How does a notion of the Trinity developed through process categories square with more traditional notions of the Trinity? Does it have a Scriptural basis? And does it fit with experience?

Trinity and Soteriology in the Tradition

Initially, and perhaps always, the doctrine of the Trinity has been soteriological. Is not God always soteriological? How else do we Christians know God save as the One who addresses us in our need, sustains us in our every becoming moment, giving courage for whatever we must face? But how we in the Christian tradition have exactly defined our need has never been exactly the same thing. And the way we develop our notions of God has depended in large part on how we have named our need.

Early in the tradition the need was defined by our mortality. We required One who could save us from our mortality by enabling us to participate in immortality. And the reason why we needed help in this matter was not simply our finitude, but the grossest of realities that separates us from all that is immortal and holy, our sin. Sin was the great barrier between

us and God, keeping us from the immortal bliss for which we were created.

Sin in itself was such a dreadful malady that it held us trapped in its sticky mire. Sometimes this holding was considered a bondage to the Devil, to whom we justly belonged because of our sin. Sometimes it was considered a living death that was merely preparatory to an eternal death. But always, sin's grip was so strong that there was no earthly way that we could be freed from sin and hence flee toward God and immortality. To the contrary, we were totally helpless, bound in sin beyond our ability to find release.

But of course the very naming of the trouble as sin was witness to a redemption that had miraculously occurred. Since no human could release him or herself, an Other had to do this work for us. And the only one capable of the work was God. God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, was sinless and hence deserved no death. Yet he had suffered death on the cross. Having no sins of his own to expiate by death, his death was taken as the expiation for as many as would unite with him by faith. By his resurrection, all believers were also raised to new life, and through the sacraments, began even now to participate in immortality.

How did this soteriology lead to a notion of God as triune? The issue is simple: If God dies on that cross, who is sustaining the universe? Numerous New Testament texts, along with selected texts from the Christian canon drawn from the Hebrew scriptures, began to feed the solution. This God who is present in Jesus Christ is not "exhausted" in that incarnation; rather, God is infinitely more than can be poured into incarnation. God exists as One, but in three modes of being: Father (because Jesus prayed to God as Father), Son (because if Jesus calls God Father, then Jesus is Son), and Holy Spirit (because Jesus specified that he would send the Spirit).

One Yet Three

From the time of Tertullian in the 2nd century onward, theologians probed what it means to call God One yet Three. Given Greek metaphysics, it was particularly important in the early church to maintain the simplicity and immutability of God. How to

adapt simplicity to the complexity of Trinity, and immutability to the dynamism of incarnation, became a metaphysical and theological conundrum exercising the finest minds of the tradition.

Arguably the most important theologian in western Christian history, particularly in reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, was Augustine. He laid down what became the classic contours of the western (as opposed to Eastern Orthodox) doctrine. Augustine's model was the human psyche. Because we exist as beings with knowledge and will, there is a kind of threefoldness about us, even while we are a unified whole. In an infinitely more wonderful way, God is also three-in-one. God has God's own being within God's own self; this being is both intellect and will. In God, being, intellect, and will are as three pulsating centers sharing the same nature: Trinity.

In addition to this internally psychological image, Augustine also developed a trinitarian image after the order of love. Love, to be love, indicates a lover and a beloved. Furthermore, uniting the lover and the beloved is the love itself. God, to be love, must include love itself, plus the beloved. But since God is totally self-sufficient (another requirement of Greek metaphysics), this Lover-Love-Beloved must exist internally within the divine being. This can only happen if God is triune.

Yet a third way of discussing the internal nature of the Trinity is through the notion of "origin," which is itself a qualified term, since God does not originate. There is, however, a logical primacy to God as Father. The Father eternally generates the Son, who reflects the Father as a perfect image. The Holy Spirit everlastingly proceeds from Father and Son, and is the union of both. This eternal and internal generation and procession mark the differences of origin that comprise the trinity of God.

Trinity *ad intra*, Trinity *ad extra*

Furthermore, Augustine defined the trinitarian nature of God both internally and externally. That is, within the divine self, God is an intense threeness in the unity of a single nature. But insofar as God acts beyond God's inner being, the internal threeness yields an external differentiation in the divine work.

The Father, who internally generates the Son, externally creates the world. The Son, who internally reflects the Father, reveals the Father in the created world. The Spirit, which like Love Itself everlastingly unites Father and Son, also unites the redeemed creation to God.

While these three different works are appropriated by the different Persons of the Trinity, the very unity of the Trinity means that no work can be totally separate from the other members. For example, God the Father creates, but does so through a word (the Son) and the Spirit. The Genesis texts support this by portraying the creating God as speaking a word, and as a Spirit moving over the face of the waters. Likewise, the Son reveals the Father, but this revelation is communicated by the Spirit. And on the cross, the Son yields the Spirit to the Father. The Spirit is both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. Thus while the threefold nature of God can be discerned through the external works of God, even here, the differences cannot be division. Divine unity encompasses divine diversity.

The developing tradition tended to follow Augustine, particularly exploring further his images of God as Being-Intellect-Will and Lover-Beloved-Love. Thomas Aquinas expanded the triune notion of God as Being, Intellect, and Will with concision and beauty. Richard of St. Victor probed further the notion of God as Love. Utilizing the Greek notion of *perichoresis*, which implies a kind of “dancing around” motion, Richard wrote of divine love as a mutual inhering of each divine person within the other two, so that the fullness of the unity of God is integrally and intensely a unity of Love.

During the period of the Reformation the most alarming notion relative to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity was the challenge represented primarily by Servetus, who paid with his life for suggesting that the notion of the Trinity leads inevitably to a kind of tri-theism. The rise of Nominalism in the late Middle Ages had given much greater emphasis to empirical experience in the world, and the notion of person was becoming increasingly identified as a separate, conscious, and autonomous individual. This shifting understanding of “person” contributed to Servetus’ repudiation of Trinity as tri-theism.

In the Enlightenment of the 18th century philo-

sophical Deism crowded out any novel explorations of God as triune. And when Schleiermacher inaugurated 19th century theology with his monumental *Christian Faith*, he notably made the Trinity a postscript at the end of his work, considering it a doctrine not given in experience and therefore a bit dubitable. But the 20th century, particularly in and through the writings of Karl Barth, could arguably be called the century of trinitarian discussion, for one theologian after another began probing this ancient doctrine for its soteriological implications, and for its metaphysical basis. Midcentury, Karl Rahner collapsed the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity: the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa. What we *only* know of God is how God works! Theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann and Catherine Mowry LaCugna eagerly embraced Rahner’s insights, each writing extensively on the Trinity.

Meanwhile, the twentieth century also saw the demise of ancient Greek metaphysics, which had yielded the notions of “substance” and “hypostases” so critical to trinitarian doctrine. Metaphysical assumptions that posited an intensely relational universe slowly emerged to take the place of the classical views. Foremost among persons analyzing a relational universe was the mathematician and physicist turned philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, whose seminal *Process and Reality* provided a metaphysics of relation. A number of Christian theologians turned to this work in order to rethink the classic Christian doctrines, not now in substance terms, but in relational terms. What happens to the doctrine of the Trinity when it is recast in a process frame of reference?

The Trinity in Process

I began the discussion of the Trinity by suggesting that the base of the doctrine is thoroughly soteriological. How we define the problem from which God saves us has a good deal to do with how we define God. But the problem that early process theologians wrestled with was far removed from the ancient notion of bondage to sin and the devil as that which keeps us from immortality. In many respects,

the horrific events of two world wars changed the focus from sin to evil: How is it that God does not intervene in what 19th century Hegel termed “the slaughterbench of history?” How is the salvation we receive in Christ to be considered efficacious in light of unrelieved human suffering such as happened in the Holocaust and in Hiroshima? This became exacerbated as the century moved on by the increasingly pressing problems raised by African Americans, third world theologians, and feminists. Each in their turn identified social structures of evil. How does God save us from enmeshment in structures that orient us toward violence and ill-being?

To this fundamental problem of evil was added issues posed by new discoveries in the sciences. How can we know God in a world as complex as this? Is the God who creates through evolution the same God we “knew” from the *creatio ex nihilo* bequeathed to Christians from Greek metaphysics? If everything we call “reality” is internally related to that which is other than itself, is God also real in this way?

The tools with which process theologians such as John B. Cobb, Jr. and Shubert Ogden worked were provided by Whitehead’s keen analysis of the dynamics of a relational world. Existence itself takes place through pulses of energy events. To exist is to experience a welter of energies from the past, to coordinate these energies into some form of compatibility, and to offer the result to a future. To put it another way, existence is like a dance of receiving, integrating, and giving. This pattern takes place not only at microscopic levels, but also in the *gestalt* of innumerable combinations of energy events that go into making the world of our everyday experience—including ourselves. It is a relational world, through and through.

In Whitehead’s metaphysics, God necessarily exists as the supremely relational one. God is the source of novelty whereby chaos gives way to increasing complexity and order—not as a one-dimensional movement through history, but in a myriad of trajectories of sometimes complementing and sometimes competing events. How does this answer the problem of theodicy? Process theologians such as David Ray Griffin constructed detailed arguments to show that God works through persuasive power, creating *with* the world rather than *on* the world. Every momentary finite occasion whatsoever begins not only with the

feelings of its historical past, but also with a feeling received from God directing it toward its best possible outcome in light of its particular place in history. *That* the becoming occasion must deal with God’s call is inescapable, but *what* the occasion does with God’s call is variable, depending upon the occasion’s own response. Thus evil enters the world not mysteriously, but practically, moment by moment, due to the world’s varying responses to God. Creation is therefore not *ex nihilo*, but from multiple sources. Every moment is created by God, by a particular past, and by each occasion itself as it responds to these influences. In a sense, it is a dancing universe in partnership with God in the ongoing beauty of creation. In this dance, the world is in some respects responsible for itself.

And what is salvation? Clearly, salvation rests with the specific gift of God in every moment. According to Cobb, God is the source of creative transformation; God is the power of resurrection from the evils we encounter. In Womanist terms, God is the one who “makes a way out of no way.” The focus is very much on “this world” salvation. And as can easily be seen, the dynamics that once so long ago pushed toward a trinitarian understanding of God in order to solve the problem of sin and salvation are changed in process thought. What is needed for salvation is an intensified revelation of God’s call toward deeper, more harmonious complexities—toward community. God saves from evil by empowering us toward creative transformation. The focus is on richness of life in community.

God as Primordial, Consequent, and Superjective

Does this mean, then, that there is no way from process to a trinitarian notion of God? Not at all. Basic to Whitehead’s construction of a relational God is a peculiar threefoldness. For complicated metaphysical reasons, Whitehead posited an eternal everlasting “primordial” nature to God. This aspect of God is the ground of all possibilities whatsoever—*ALL* possibilities. Any and every universe that could ever be is potentially present within God’s primordial nature, not in haphazard fashion, but in an ordering

that bespeaks God's nature as a fundamental will toward harmony. From this primordial wealth of possibilities, God leads every occasion within the universe toward what it can most optimally be within its particular context; it is the drive of creation.

But a relational God is not only primordially with all worlds, a relational God also everlastingly receives all worlds. Remember, the relational dynamic involves a dancelike movement of receiving from others, integrating those influences into the becoming self (be it a molecule or a human), and giving the results of one's own becoming to others. If God is relational, God not only gives to others from the primordial nature, God also receives from all others—*ALL* others—through what Whitehead called the consequent nature of God. Does something happen in the world? God knows it feelingly, taking it into the divine nature.

But God is one, not two. To name God as "primordial" and "consequent" is not to name two Gods, but to name a fundamental polarity within God's own self. God is always both primordial and consequent in a dynamic and inexhaustible unison of becoming. And just here the third aspect of Whitehead's metaphysical naming of God comes into play. God everlastingly integrates that which God receives from the world into God's primordial vision. Through this integration, various possibilities move into relevance with regard to the becoming world in all its incredible variety. God not only feels the world as it is, God also feels the world as it can be. And these feelings for the becoming world are called by Whitehead the "superjective" nature of God, or God's "givingness" to the world.

Can we, then, decide that God's primordial nature is like God as Father in the tradition, with the superjective nature given to the world being like God as Son? Is God's responsive feeling of the world and unification—reconciliation?—of that world within the divine nature akin to God as Spirit? While this is possible, it would be arbitrary to attach the traditional names of "Being," "Intellect," "Will," to the trifoldness of process thought. And "Lover," "Beloved," "Love" is almost too simple a naming for the vast complexity that is the love of God. If God resurrects the entire universe into Godself, moment by moment, with a will toward that universe's wellbeing,

then God's entire nature is an enormous intensification of love. It is too simple to say the primordial nature is love, the consequent nature the beloved, and the superjective nature the love that unites them. Nor is the tripartite nature of the Whiteheadian God like the three "hypostases" of the ancient trinitarian tradition. The most that one can say is that God is always primordial, always consequent, always superjective. Superimposing the names of Father, Son, and Spirit upon the metaphysics is arbitrary.

Joseph Bracken, S.J., and I edited a volume of essays called *Trinity in Process* (New York: Continuum, 1997). The essays were written by nine different process theologians, and to our amused surprise, nine very different notions of Trinity developed. That there is no single way to name a process God "trinitarian" follows from the fact that the original naming of God as triune came out of totally different metaphysical assumptions about the world. The Greek metaphysical categories used to express Trinity don't "work" in a relational world view, and while the Biblical naming of Father/Son/Spirit can be applied analogously, the Biblical names are not exact correspondences for the Whiteheadian functions within God. Given the diversity of trinitarian opinions in process circles, then, let me suggest the following argument for the importance of trinity as a doctrine, and for a process way of addressing it.

Trinity: A Contemporary Argument

While we necessarily understand the world through our own anthropological focus, we no longer consider ourselves either the center of the universe or the most complex species possible. Contrary to 18th century philosophers, we no longer consider "man" the "measure of all things." Nonetheless, being human is all we really know, and so when we speak of the awesome reality of God, we clothe this God with human characteristics. And after all, the "image of God" tradition gives us warrant for doing so, even though we sometimes uncomfortably suspect that we have turned it round, and made God in our own image, sometimes ratifying this process by calling it "revelation." Sometimes I imagine those tiny balloons with little images on them; we blow them up, and

the image simply gets bigger. Have we done this with God—blowing ourselves up ten thousand times and naming the result the revelation of God?

But we have learned that species differ through nigh infinite complexities. Must it not be the case that God is infinitely more complex than we humans? How do we express this? Whatever else Trinity has meant, it has meant that God is more than human. God is such that God is capable of relating to humans, including ways as deeply personal as that experience recounted in the beginning of this essay. God is certainly not less than personal—but perhaps God is suprapersonal, which is to say, personal in an infinitely more complex way than humans are persons. How can we “say” a God who is more than human, yet personal and more so? If we as a human species are complex, is God not even more complex? For centuries theologians argued for the simplicity of God—again, due to Greek metaphysics—but must we not now argue for the infinite complexity of God? Naming God as “Trinity” is a way to name the “Godness” of God, the “more than” by which God surpasses our human mode of existence. “Trinity” saves us from the idolatry of reducing God to ourselves.

And what of salvation? Is there a way in which the complexity of this threefold-natured God of process also is the God of salvation? I have written in many places of the way in which a relational God renders “incarnation” a most meaningful and salvific concept, thus giving us the empowering revelation we need in Jesus Christ. But let me now sketch in a way that almost parallels the early church’s connection of salvation with immortality.

If a process metaphysics is at all close to adequate in describing the way God creates and works with the world, then it is given that God receives the world in every moment into the divine life. In ways uncannily akin to some of the sensitivities in the epistles, by God’s grace we are made “partakers in the divine nature” as God takes us into the consequent nature, there to reconcile us with God’s own character in the

primordial vision. In a process world, God saves us in two ways: by taking us into the divine self everlastingly, and by guiding us toward our next becoming historically. As God pulls us everlastingly into a process of purification from the consequent nature into the primordial nature, God redeems us; God is heaven. Because of this redemption in heaven, new modes of redemption—of creative transformation—are made possible for us in our continued earthly history. The threefold—trinitarian?—nature of the process God is precisely the God of our salvation.

But of course metaphysics, whether Greek or relational, are rude tools to use to discuss the nature of God. The reality necessarily surpasses mere description. When push comes to shove, we play with the metaphysics and study the history of doctrine because we are within a tradition based on God’s gracious self-giving in the event we call Jesus Christ. We have been baptized into Christ, and live in the complex 2,000 year-old trajectory of those who trust God in and through Christ. We experience the saving grace of God in our living; we know that we are empowered by God in the community of Christ’s church to offer God’s love and our own love—to others, whether within or without the church we call “home.” I am convinced that when the “dark glass” of our finitude gives way to the depths of knowing God everlastingly that we, like Thomas Aquinas so long ago, shall account all our finite descriptions as so much straw. More true than our descriptions is the deeper knowing of the living God. Perhaps we shall someday experience God saying in response to our meager attempts at theology, “It’s never been that.” But I know from the depths of my being that we will recognize with joyous familiarity the unimaginable wonder of this God we name as Trinity, this God of ever-present and everlasting love.

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