

9. When Three is One

Christianity has claimed to worship One God, but also speaks of Three. When this is viewed as three hominid-type persons dwelling in an upper deck, the genius of the Christian breakthrough is buried in confusion and nonsense. Paradox can be meaningful in religious expression, but a meaningful paradox is not the same as a literalistic dogma that points to no experience in our lives.

A much improved appropriation of the Christian Trinity is achieved when “faces” is substituted for the image of “persons.” The experience of the One God has three faces. And this is not merely a Christian dogma, but a human experience. Any experience of the Infinite Presence has three faces, three inseparable aspects.

I find it helpful to start unpacking this universal Trinity with what Christianity calls “the Holy Spirit.” Our Spirit is Holy when it is whole or authentic. The Holy Spirit is the real me. The Holy Spirit is what every human being is underneath the layers of unholiness that hide this profound human essence.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien tells of a council meeting in which the topic is: who will carry the dangerous ring to the mountain of doom and cast it in? The young hobbit Frodo is among those at this meeting. He has been bearing the ring, and the more powerful figures at the council are not good candidates to do so, for the ring tends to turn them evil. So during the pause after this question was asked, Tolkien tells us about Frodo’s inner workings:

All the council sat with downcast eyes, as if in deep thought. A great dread fell on him (Frodo), as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken.

An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo’s side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. “I will take the ring,” he said, “though I do not know the way.”

This is a fine expression of how our true nature of Holy Spirit breaks through our ordinary states of consciousness and becomes the director of our lives.

The term “Holy” has two poles of meaning: the glorious and the righteous. The *righteous* aspect is pointed to with words like “authenticity,” “true self,” “realization,” “wholeness,” “health.” This is a type of righteousness that has a “being” quality rather than a moral quality. It is not a righteousness achieved by human effort, but a quality given with our birth, tragically lost through our departures into unreality, and restored as a fresh gift.

The *glory* aspect of the idea of the Holy is well explored by Rudolf Otto when he defines the Holy in terms of experiencing a “*tremendous mysteriousness*” that casts us into dread and fascination and requires of us the courage to embrace this intensification of our consciousness. Another word for the glory aspect of the Holy is “Awe.” The experience of Awe and the experience of Holy Spirit are the same experience. Today, many people tend to overuse the term “awesome,” applying it to a new automobile, computer, or orgasm. Awe in its profound religious meaning has to do with standing in the Presence of the Infinite, the Eternal, the Final Mystery. Both “wonder” and “shock” are aspects of Awe. Awe so defined has both an internal reference and an external reference. Awe is not a totally inward state without reference to the wholeness of our human living. Rather, we stand in Awe before the Eternally Awesome. When we are in Awe, the whole Earth is full of glory. When a room full of people are in Awe, Awe is in the room like thick air that you can almost cut with a knife. Perhaps we have sensed this thickness in the wake of a really good sermon or class or workshop or ritual or birth or death. “Thickness” may not always be the most accurate description.

“Clean air after a rain” might describe the state of Awe that fills some public room. Often, this public manifestation of Awe is experienced as a sort of buzz of talk that has about it a sense of freedom, spontaneity, or release. My point is that when a group has experienced a happening of Awe, that Awe is alive in the room. Some members of the group may be left out of the experience, but even they may sense that something has happened to the others. Awe is a real presence, as real as a big spider on your coffee table.

The experience of Awe may produce visions like the dazzle of Jesus speaking with a dazzling Moses and Elijah, or like the ramp extending from the rock where Jacob is sleeping up into the heavens with angels coming down and going up that ramp. Jacob dreamed his Awe vision in the double-deck metaphor. An experience of Awe may have very ordinary “visions” that attend it, but these pictures are **Great Thinks** because they carry Awe. For example, we might sense Awe as we contemplate the following image created by Carlos Castaneda when his character, Don Juan, claims that death always walks with us; if we turn our head quickly to the left we might catch a glimpse of its presence. Poets like Rumi or Nikos Kazantzakis have written many lines of poetry that are clearly Great Thinks that occasion Awe. Nikos Kazantzakis begins his poetic book, *The Saviors of God*, with this line: “We come from dark abyss, we end in a dark abyss, and we call the luminous interval life.”

An Awe experience also has **Great Feels**. Our emotional life is aroused in some way. It may be an intense dread, fascination, release, horror, a joy unspeakable, a peace beyond understanding, or a rest from a lifetime of restlessness. In addition, the Awe moment entails some sort of **Great Resolve**. It takes courage to be in Awe. Our customary habits manifest as an inclination to suppress Awe or flee from it. The courage of resolving to be in Awe may manifest in specific choices to move away from some silliness, obsession, rigidity, or sentimentality. For example, Isaiah, after the Awe experience of forgiveness for his lying lips, offered himself to be a teller of truth to a people who would not listen. Awe is not an escape, but a taking on of a more solid truth.

So, once we see these Awe experiences in our own lives we can notice that Awe is connecting us with an Eternal Awesomeness that is occasioning the Awe. The Awe and the Awesome are two faces of the Christian Trinity – the Awe is the Holy Spirit, and the Awesome is typically referred to as “the Almighty.” It is fairly easy for our minds to notice that there is no experience of Awe without the Almighty Awesomeness, and there is no experience of the Almighty Awesomeness without the personal intensification of consciousness we call “Awe.” The Awe and the Awesome are two faces of ONE experience.

So what is the third face of this ONE experience? It is our flesh and blood specificness in our space/time coordinate in history. It is Jesus. It is the disciples of Jesus. It is all of us who join Jesus and those disciples in Awe before the Awesome. There is no Awe and no Awesome without this third face of the Awed Ones in history. These Awed Ones are the resurrected Jesus. And Jesus has sheep who are not of the Christian fold. Any person anywhere practicing any religious practice or no religious practice may be part of the Awed Ones. The Awed Ones almost invariably invent religion of one sort or another. Usually we Awed Ones reinvent the religious heritage with which we are most familiar or with which we have had the most transforming moments. Rarely do we invent a totally new religion. Rarely do we do without any religion to assist us to express and maintain our presence among the Awed Ones in history.

Religion thus becomes one of the outward manifestations of being an Awed One in history. Christianity, as a religion, was not created by Jesus, but by the Awed Ones whom his life spawned. They created the Christian religion and made Jesus’ sayings

part of that religion. Most of all, they found in Jesus' death on the ruthless cross of Roman execution a revelation so profound that it carried them into resurrection visions by which they commenced to live the life of Jesus in their own historical bodies.

In conclusion, here are the three faces of the ONE experience of Divinity: (1) The Awesome, (2) the Awe, and (3) the Awed Ones: (1) The Eternal Almightyness, positer of our existence, (2) the Wind of authenticity blowing through us, and (3) the flesh and blood members of a "league" of realistic historical living blown by this Wind and loyal to this Eternal Almightyness.

In the imagery of a patriarchal age, they called this Trinity "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," But we can also call it, "Mother, Daughter, and Holy Earthiness." Or we can call it, "Yahweh, People of Yahweh, and Spirit of Yahweh." Or we can call it, "Dharma, Buddha Body, and No Self." Or we can call it, "Allah, Islam, and Fidelity." The Divine is not synonymous with the names that we humans invent for these three aspects of our experience of the Divine. Nevertheless, with its vision of the Trinity, Christianity has made a contribution to the religious lucidity of our species. Radical monotheism has three faces. And every experience of Ultimate Reality has the same three faces.