

Trinity Thoughts
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for the Rt. Rev. Sam B. Hulsey Chair in Episcopal Studies
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One of the most intriguing claims that Christians make is that they are re-birthed at baptism, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Three divine names invoked, that resonate inside us, that change and re-form us. A burst of divine light, that illumines the roots of our being. A friendship with God, begun; at zero-distance.

The rumor of friendship with this indwelling, triune God lured me to academic theology. I crave to know more about intimacy with this God. I know how unlikely this sounds, but truly, the search for more understanding about the Trinity sometimes keeps me awake at night. And I daydream about it when I ought to be doing other things. My heart is riveted.

I think the Trinity is rather more weird than Christians are letting on. Do you know, that according to Christian dogma, *all* experience of God is an experience of these three divine persons? Students in seminary are often encouraged to talk about God's nature abstracted from these divine persons; but technically, no Christian can expect to meet this nature in the wild, as if it were some isolated fourth thing, cut loose from Father, Son, and Spirit.

Who are these divine persons, who are distinct from one another, without adding up to more than one God? I am so glad that you ask! I have been wondering the same, as part of my research. I invite you to think some Trinity-thoughts with me this morning. You can tell me next week, whether they keep you awake at night.

I

Imagine Father, Son, and Spirit in a line-up. Can you tell them apart? What do they look like? Is one a kindly, elderly chap, with a beard; and

another, a 30-something who bears obvious family resemblance; and a third, a kind of wispy, ghostly image of the other two? Would you recognize a divine person if you bumped into it at lunch today? (If this happens, please contact me, immediately.)

Christians cannot literally *see* the differences between the Father, Son, and Spirit; they must *think* them. But how? There are two main ways, passed down in the tradition.

The first is to tell a story about the divine persons, that puts them in distinctive relations with one another. Their identities arise from the relations. This is by far the most popular approach. It has been dominant for one thousand, seven hundred years, and counting. Let's call this, the *relational* theory.

The second way to think the difference between the divine persons is to assume from the get-go that each has a certain *this-ness* to it, even apart from any relations it shares with the others. This idea was given its best expression by a 13th Century Franciscan philosopher, named Duns Scotus. Not many theologians know about it. Let's call this, the *non-relational* theory.

I do not think that Christians can afford to continue using the *relational* theory. Although it *could* be powered by a range of stories that narrate relations in God, it nearly always reverts to one story in particular – an ancient one, about the origins of the divine persons from one another. I think this story makes far more trouble for Christians than it is worth.

Here is that story: A Father, who is without origin, begets a Son; and through the Son, breathes a Spirit. Most Christians are not aware that this is a *theory*; they think it simply *is* the set of relations from which the persons of the Trinity take their identities, and the only possible basis for understanding who these divine persons are.

The problems with this origins-story are the hierarchy it implies, between the Father, Son, and Spirit, and the continual conceptual pressure it places on Christians, to make divine persons more like one another than they really are.

The relations in the origins-story are asymmetrical. There is one origin-less divine person, the Father, who is active from the beginning. He reproduces twice. There is a second divine person, the Son, who receives his existence passively from the Father, and then joins the Father in actively producing the Spirit. And finally, there is a divine person, the Spirit, who is only passive in this story of origins.

Even when Christians insist that these are *eternal* origins, with no temporal differences between them, the formal sequence – Father-Son-Spirit - remains. And precisely because these are *eternal* relations, the sequence never changes. There is a first, a second, and a third divine person, in that order. Even with the best intentions, when Christians tell Trinity-stories that rely on relations of origin, they tend to perpetuate formal hierarchies in God. And these God-hierarchies too easily reinforce distorted asymmetries of power in human communities.

The origins story is not merely about the emergence of two persons from one, but also about their genetic, tightly-ordered family identity. Unfortunately, this God-story often plays out in the form of ecclesial and social practices of conformity, rather than distinction-in-unity. In my own ecclesial context – the Anglican Communion – I not infrequently hear arguments to the effect of: the three persons of the Trinity live in perfectly like-minded community, and we should too. But that is to forget just how wonderfully weird these divine persons are!

How weird are they? Very. Tradition tells us that the word ‘person’ when applied to God is misleading. We should use it with an asterisk. The asterisk means: our rules for categorizing things just don’t work for the Trinity. In a manner of speaking, they are so distinctive that no one category of ours can contain all three of them. If Christians would take this truth about God to heart, they might be less prone to coercing each other toward conformity, at the cost of their distinctive identities.

We might do better by taking the theological road less traveled – that is, by using a *non-relational* theory to explain divine identities. The point of this theory is to say: who the Father or Son or Spirit is, is *not* determined by its relations to the others. Yes, the three divine persons do stand in relations to one another; but what makes each of them who it is does not actually depend on such relations. This frees Christians to

let go of the ancient origins-story, with its implied hierarchies, formal sequence, and its dubious application in various discussions about church unity.

So this is the first Trinity-thought I want you to consider: *What makes each divine person distinctive is something non-relational. A mysterious 'this-ness,' that does not depend on who the other two divine persons are.*

II

Now, if Christians go this way (and I assure you, that the non-relational approach, though rare, is dogmatically orthodox), they are still left with a host of serious challenges to describing a friendship with God worth having. The chief problem here is that the three names that early theologians selected for the divine persons are a smuggler's paradise for social distortions. Let me explain.

By dint of everyday associations with the words 'Father' and 'Son,' Christians consciously or unconsciously assume that the Trinity is like a family gathering of male relatives, complete with social defaults for race, sexual orientation, temperament, and even political persuasion. If we add to this a dollop of divine immutability, these social defaults – whichever dominate – get *permanently* inscribed in the heart of the Trinity.

Classical theologians *do* remind us over and over, that none of those earthly identity markers apply to the *heavenly* versions of Father and Son, but I do not think such reminders have an appreciable effect on the habits of our imagination. If you think the God-is-not-like-we-are caveat fixes things, test your faith by trying one of the following simple experiments: Switch the traditional order of divine relations in your private prayers – pray to the Spirit, *through* the Father; and right at the end, add the phrase, 'with the Son.' Or mix the genders of the three names, when you are called upon to bless the meal at your extended family's Thanksgiving dinner. Or re-paint Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity, using three African American figures. Or suggest that our heavenly Father supports public entitlement programs, or that the Son is bi-sexual.

Your assurances that all is well with these alternative ways of speaking about divine persons, because God does not actually have hierarchy or gender or race or politics or sexual orientation, will fall on angry deaf ears. Suddenly it will appear that divine persons *do* have these identity markers; and you have slandered your Creator, not by assigning such features to God, but by selecting the wrong ones!

Perhaps, then, we would be advised to re-consider our assumptions about God's names, as these can carry so much bad freight. Usually, 'Father,' 'Son,' and 'Holy Spirit' are understood as God's proper names, and all other names that we may find in scripture or glean from our experience are regarded as nicknames, that we must set aside when we get truly serious about God and ourselves.

But here is a second Trinity-thought. One of those that might keep you awake at night. *What if the divine persons of the Trinity do not have proper names, in quite the way that we do? What if 'Father,' 'Son,' and 'Spirit' are not God's permanent, legal names?*

Imagine the Trinity is stepping through airport security at DFW. You stop the Trinity and demand to see its passport. What names would you expect to find there? Now imagine that you are a stalwart security officer, as well as an eager theologian, and you catch the Trinity going through the line one month later. You ask to see that passport again, and – behold! There is different set of three names printed. To guard the safety of your country and to assuage your theological scruples, you beg a final answer: which set is it?! And the Trinity smiles, and replies, 'I AM WHO I AM. I AM WHO I WILL BE.'

Perhaps the persons of the Trinity are pleased to be called Father, Son, and Spirit on occasion; but also, at other times, Crone, Mother, and Daughter. Or because the Gospel of John continues to be central to trinitarian theology, how about this set: Father, Legal Advocate, and Another Legal Advocate? (This one holds special attraction to me at the moment, as the Anglicans in Fort Worth wrangle in court.)

Notice: to say that the Trinity does not have one single, permanent set of proper names, is not to say that the divine persons attached to those names don't truly exist; nor is it to imply that God is deceptive or coy.

Nor does it mean that any old three names are as good as three others. Rather, it is a way to recall, that *these three divine persons share an infinite nature*. Literally, that means: they share a nature that has no limits.

In classical, dogmatically orthodox Christian theology, it is precisely the divine nature's not having limits that prevents distinctions between Father, Son, and Spirit from breaking God into pieces. This holds true *regardless* of whether these distinctions are theorized as *relational* or *non-relational*.

To say that the persons of the Trinity are not restricted to one set of proper names may just be a pretty cool way of celebrating this God without limits.

III

And this brings me to the third and last Trinity-thought I invite you to think with me. *What if these three divine persons, somehow one God, can and do actually change?* What if the limitless nature that they share is a matrix for new things? What if, oh, what if, the mystical rebirth that Christians undergo at their baptism – that resonance of three names inside of us, that burst of divine light that illumines the roots of our being – is the after-flash of something that happens over and over again, at the roots of God's own being, where Father, Son, and Spirit reach inward to touch the limitless nature they have in common.

Three divine persons, who are who they are, who claim many names, and who will be who they will be.

Imagine being close to that Trinity. How close? Really close. Closer than a breath. Closer to us than we are to ourselves. Zero-distance.

What would an ever-deepening friendship with *that* Trinity be like?

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