

TRINITY SUNDAY



from the Proper Preface for Trinity Sunday: "For with your co-eternal Son and Holy Spirit, you are one God, one Lord, in Trinity of Persons and in Unity of Being: and we celebrate the one and equal glory of you, O Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Amen.

A few years ago, during my Sabbatical I attended a class at Hartford Seminary, entitled "Building Abrahamic Partnerships," a course that had been offered there for over 18 years and was internationally well-known and respected. The seminar was

directed by a Jewish rabbi, a Muslim imam, and a Christian minister. The class was limited to only 30 people, equally divided between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as between women and men. Because of the international acclaim of this course, we had two Muslim students from Singapore, an Anglican priest from Kenya, a Syrian Orthodox Christian theologian, two Shiite imams from Iran, a Zionist settler living in the occupied territories and his next-door neighbor, Ali, a Palestinian Muslim, who was jailed as a teenager for throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers, and jailed again later as a member of the PLO. So, this wonderfully diverse group met and talked together for an intensive eight days, from 9 in the morning until 9 at night, telling our stories, discussing our faith, examining each other's Scriptures, sharing meals together, worshipping with each other in each other's places of worship, and focusing on improving our relationships with one another. It was a remarkable experience, and there were some exceedingly difficult conversations there to be had, and we had them, with tears and with anger and even fear.

For example, on the very first day, I was distressed by the negative characterization of Christians by one of the Asian Muslims, who said bluntly that unlike Jews and Muslims, we Christians were not monotheists. She said that we do not believe in the one true God. She dismissed us as polytheists because of

our belief in the Trinity. The next day, as it happened, one of the professors at Hartford Seminary gave a lecture to us on the Trinity, surprising quite a few of them, including some of the Christians, when he declared that the doctrine of the Trinity was not biblically based. That it developed hundred of years after Jesus lived, culminating in the famous Nicene Creed of the fourth century.

For instance, the professor noted, the verse where Jesus instructs his followers in Matthew's Gospel to go make disciples of all the world, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the only **explicit** mention of the Trinity together in the New Testament, and the text is problematic. One hundred years before our oldest extant manuscripts of this text, the early Church historian Eusebius, at the beginning of the fourth century, quotes this verse several times in his writings, but always quotes it with Jesus saying, go baptize them 'in my name,' not mentioning the Trinity. And in fact, the Book of Acts (2:38, 8:16, 10:48, 19:5, 22:16) repeatedly records that the first disciples did indeed baptize their converts in the name of Jesus, not the Trinity. The suspicion is that this biblical verse was altered later, after the Trinitarian debates of the fourth century, to reinforce the orthodox conclusions of those debates. Similarly, though perhaps not surprisingly, there is but one possible **direct** reference to Jesus as God in the whole

of the New Testament --- on that occasion when the doubting Thomas was confronted with the Risen Jesus and exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" Yet many biblical scholars understand this passage not as a theological declaration that Jesus was God, but simply a personal exclamation, just as we might say "Oh my God" when we come upon something unexpected. Moreover, there are several New Testament passages that suggest a significant differentiation between Jesus and our Father in heaven. For example, in Mark's Gospel (10:17-8) when the rich man runs to Jesus and asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (And) Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Or later in Mark's Gospel (13:32) when Jesus talks about heaven and earth passing away and says: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father," despite the later doctrine of the Trinity declaring that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are co-equal and co-eternal.

In the New Testament, most people saw Jesus as an inspired Jewish prophet. For the first hundred years or so of the Church's life, Christians argued with religious Jews about whether Jesus was really the long-awaited Messiah, and what that meant, and not about whether Jesus was God. Instead, they argued about whether the followers of Jesus had to be circumcised or keep the Mosaic dietary laws or keep the Jewish sabbath holy.

Conversations about Jesus' divinity do not occur until Christians had separated from the larger Jewish community and became predominantly a Hellenistic religion of its own. It was only when Christians moved out from the synagogues to house churches and the catacombs, that they began to argue in the Greek marketplace about Jesus' humanity and divinity. The audience now was no longer religious Jews but Hellenized Greeks and God-fearing Romans. Greeks and Romans, of course, were long accustomed to entertaining the idea of many Gods, and of Gods that often took a human form. This was the era of the great Christological debates of the church, as Christians struggled to retain their Jewish monotheistic heritage while at the same time remaining faithful to their understanding of the uniqueness of the person of Jesus. Those Christological debates of the second and third century lead in time to the great Trinitarian debates of the fourth century.

As Christianity became officially accepted by the Emperor Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century and then declared by the end of that century to be the official religion of the Roman Empire by Emperor Theodosius, the Christian religion became an instrument of political power. The debate about the Trinity was often much less about theology and orthodox thinking, and much more about party politics and influence. A few years ago, I read a fascinating book about the

fourth century entitled "When Jesus Became God: The Struggle to Define Christianity during the Last Days of Rome." The book was authored by Richard Rubenstein, who was not a theologian or a church historian, but a professor of Conflict Resolution and Public Affairs at George Mason University in Washington. It was a fascinating insight into the theological debates that divided the church and the Empire during the fourth century, culminating in the Nicene Creed, followed by the expulsion of heretics, the expulsion of those who do not agree with us. I followed that reading with a book entitled, "(The) Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 years" by the historian John Philip Jenkins.

One of the principal results of those great theological debates and power struggles in the fourth century is the Doctrine of the Trinity that we celebrate today --- our declaration as Christians that we believe in One God in Three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the singular doctrine that most distinguishes Christianity from the other world religions. For in some sense, we declare that our founder, Jesus, was God, very God of very God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father. This kind of declaration is not said of the Buddha, or Confucius, or Moses, or Muhammad, peace be upon him.

But the doctrine of the Trinity has also become, perhaps more than any other Christian doctrine, incomprehensible and meaningless to the average person in the pew. A careful explanation of the Doctrine of the Trinity often appears more like a mathematical puzzle or a theological game, than a crucial expression of the simple faith of common people. The relevance or importance of these principles in our everyday lives is often lost. Because this basic understanding has been so formalized into creeds and confessions, most of us blindly assent to Trinitarian statements and declarations without any real connection with them to the history and politics of the Church, or to our own personal struggles in life and faith.

In the past, I suggested that Christianity is not a system of beliefs or a particular way of thinking; it is a way of living. A Christian is not, I think, one who simply asserts certain claims about God, often without knowing or understanding what one is saying; a Christian is someone who lives out his or her life day by day consciously struggling with our relationship with God, the Father and Creator of us all, and with Jesus of Nazareth, our Teacher and Master, and with the Spirit of the holy which infects and inspires our world still.

I for one would be more than happy to throw out the established Doctrine of the Trinity entirely, so that we Christians could each begin afresh with that essential religious

struggle, without being fed someone else's words and someone else's understandings, with concepts and ideas that are not entrenched in Greek and Latin theologies or politics of the fourth century, so that we could each find for ourselves the words and phrases that help us understand and help us articulate the spiritual dimension of our lives, so that we could each find for ourselves the words and phrases that help us understand our relationship with Jesus, and the meaning of God for us here and now. That, I think, is the essential Christian endeavor, which because of the doctrine of the Trinity and its long and complicated history, most of us never really engage in.

The late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, reminded the Church earlier last century of a spiritual law which we seem to have forgotten: that religious experience must always precede theological interpretation, and not vice versa. We should therefore spend more time trying to experience God in our lives, than in trying to understand and define him. For Christians, Jesus is indeed experienced as a unique reflection of the Mystery of God, which somehow makes God more real and accessible to us. Our words and our phrases and our feeble doctrines cannot ever really articulate the Truth of all of this, they can only hint at it. For in the end God does, and must, remain a mystery, not to be understood, but to be experienced. AMEN.