

What's the Trinity? That's the question one of our kids asked their Kids' Time teacher a while back. Said teacher related the story to me, as well as her own struggle and frustration trying to answer the question in kid-friendly language. Of course, the problem is that we have trouble answering the question in adult-friendly language. But every year on Trinity Sunday we try. We trot out the three interlocking rings and the ice/steam/water demonstration. But when it comes down to it, when a 5-year-old comes up to you and asks "What's the Trinity?" we get the same deer-in-the-headlights look. Or we go into some convoluted explanation that leaves everyone else with the deer-in-the-headlights look.

Trinity Sunday presents a problem to modern Christians. First of all, it's the only holy day that celebrates a doctrine, even though the specific formulation of a Trinity does not appear in the Bible. However, the scriptures did play an important role in the debates over how best to express Christian belief in God, that is how to affirm the significance of Jesus without jettisoning monotheism. So they drew on the biblical texts for insights into the puzzle. If we affirm all these things about Jesus, what are we saying about God? Imagine Advent through Pentecost as a mathematical problem, with Trinity Sunday as their solution.

Then there's the political side of it. Trinity Sunday has been observed in the Western Church only since the 14th century, when the definitive formulation of the doctrine came with the creeds agreed upon at the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople. Those statements were composed to address the political need for the church to resolve conflict between opposing views. Unfortunately the definition of Trinity they agreed upon has created the dichotomy of being either orthodox or heretical.

John Cobb (quoted in KIT): "The identification of the acceptance of the Trinitarian formula with the essence of Christianity has done untold harm throughout the centuries, and it continues to be damaging today. It has contributed to a view of Christian faith as acceptance of dubious ideas on authority and on pain of punishment. It has driven from the community of faith many who would otherwise continue within it but who find their personal integrity violated by the demand that they believe what is meaningless to them."

So – what do we do with this day? Some would say that we just ignore it, put it in the file of antiquated and irrelevant church history. Become Unitarian. Others still find meaning in the symbolism of the Trinity, for instance in Celtic Christianity, where the Trinity knot is a popular design on everything from ancient manuscripts to jewelry and tattoos.

And then there's *The Shack*, a self-published novel that was promoted initially only through a \$300 website, that stayed on the NY-Times bestseller list for 70 weeks. The story is about a father whose daughter has been murdered and his descent into what he calls "The Great Sadness." His journey to the shack is an encounter with the Trinity. God the Creator is in the form of an African American woman who calls herself Papa. Jesus is a Middle-Eastern carpenter, and the Holy Spirit is an Asian woman named Saraya. He also has a conversation with Sophia, the personification of God's Wisdom.

I was first invited to read *The Shack* by my hairdresser. I didn't know anything about it, but when I began to read reviews about it accusing the author of heresy, I decided it was worth a look. And to be honest, it's pretty good. Yes, it's heretical – if you want to get into the fine points of modalism, which denies that God is a single person. And critics rant about the blasphemy of portraying God "the Father" as a human being (although I doubt they were concerned when he was an old, white man). And the appearance of Sophia as a fourth "person" is confusing. But as one reader blogged: "I don't agree with you that *The Shack* is not a good. It's doing a better job of showing the truth about how the Trinity works and how its three person are to be in relationship with us and others than some of the clergy have done over the years."

And as Patrick M. Roddy, an Emmy award-winning producer of ABC News wrote on *The Shack* website: "*The Shack* is a one of a kind invitation to journey to the very heart of God. With every page, the complicated do's and don't that distort a relationship into a religion were washed away as I understood Father, Son, and Holy Ghost for the first time in my life."

Well, who knew The Trinity could be so popular?! And understandable?!

What this tells me is that many people are looking for a way to understand how God works, especially when we're confronted with the big questions of life: why is there suffering; does my life have meaning; how can I forgive? And that there is value in exploring the Trinity as a way to enter into the mystery that is God.

It actually affirmed something I've been thinking about as we continue to define our mission and the ways we communicate what we're about. And that is that we are, or can be, a bridge – between the traditional language and liturgies of the Church and language that is emerging. (“Imagining a Future for the Bible in Tomorrow’s Churches and a post-Christian World” – Common Dreams Conference)

I actually spent a good bit of time this week reading about the Trinity. And I found that when I got away from it as an item of belief, as something we can't understand, but have to accept on faith – new possibilities opened up. For instance, I discovered that some theologians prefer to talk about a “Binity,” the dual nature of God as both transcendent and immanent, God as Other and God within ourselves.

John Cobb: “I believe that this binitarian doctrine is more important than trinitarian doctrine. Nevertheless, it does not exclude a trinity.” And if, like in *The Shack*, when you add Wisdom, you have a quaternity. There are so many interpretations and explanations of the Trinity, none of them written in stone, that we are free to use the Trinity, not as a litmus test of correct belief, but as a way to organize our thoughts about God – as Creator, Father/Mother, Abba/Ima, as Redeemer, Christ, Divine Wisdom, as Spirit, Sanctifier, Comforter – and all of the other ways we think about God.

So I like that as an answer to that pesky question: What is the Trinity? Answer: It is our way of organizing our thoughts about God. We do not need to get into fruitless explanations that only distract us from more important theological discussions.

The more I thought about this more expansive way of looking at the Trinity, the more reconciled I became to it. Especially to the Celtic triquetra, the Trinity knot (illustrations). The remarkable things about Celtic knotwork is the way in which its lines have neither a beginning nor an end. One strand wraps into and onto itself, becoming a three-lobed, yet singular design.

For the Celtic pagans this design symbolized the connection of the three planes of existence: mind, body, and spirit. To Christians, it illustrated the core belief that within one God was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For both beliefs, the Trinity knot symbolized the way in which three separate essences were vitally interconnected. Which made me think of a mandala. A mandala is a form of sacred artwork which can be used as a form of sacred prayer. In Sanskrit, the word mandala means sacred circle. Most mandalas have images in them that are embedded in a circle. It is believed by many this is a way in which we can communicate with the Divine.

They're different, but both symbolize the Divine, Oneness, interconnectedness. Both serve as portals to pondering the internal life of God and God's external manifestations in the world. From KIT: “To take trinity seriously is to recognize the awesome mystery of the Godness of God.”

So we can appreciate the traditional trinitarian formulas: they were ways that the people of the early centuries of Christianity found helpful in organizing their thoughts about God. But we should not only be allowed, but encouraged, to think afresh about how God works in the world, without worrying that we're treading into heresy. In fact, willingness to affirm what one does not understand is far more a sign of acceptance of church authority than of faith in God.

We are living in a time when the unexamined doctrines do not hold. When you talk to a Muslim or a Jew and are asked to explain how you can be a monotheist while worshipping the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. When you talk to a Hindu and are asked how the Christian Trinity is like the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. When your children ask you “What's the Trinity?” What will you say?

It is simply our way of organizing our thoughts about God. Anything beyond that, it is a mystery.

Amen

