

"What, may I ask, is your religion?" is a question my wont is to ask strangers. Day before yesterday, one responded

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"I HAVE MANY RELIGIONS, NO PARTICULAR ONE."

His next words were "When I go, I go to the Unitarian Church." Like Hinduism, Unitarianism worships many gods, in this man's view. The fact that his view is the diametrical of the Big Idea birthing that denomination in the religiously roiling USA 1830s (which produced also another spinoff of Christianity, viz. Mormonism) is enough to give pause to philosophers, especially philosophers of religion. As some people are born in one religion & come to embrace another, so some religions are born in a religion (eg, Christianity born in Judaism, feminist egalitarianism born in Christianity) & come to self-consciousness as another religion....The Unitarian Universalist Association now has its first nonChristian president, though this new religion (born in Christian Unitarianism & Christian Universalism) has yet to be named (will it be "Pluralism" or "The World Faith" [philosophia perennis] or....?).

OCCASION: Yesterday, a journalist who's doing a Trinity piece for a secular magazine asked me--four times in the conversation!--to comment on the question **"What difference does it [the Trinity] make?"** The simplest response I can think of at the moment is an imagined Trinity-conversation with a stranger in "the public square"--say, the stranger atop this Thinksheet. (I needn't entirely imagine. Christian apologetic-polemic literature, of which we have examples as early as the 2nd c., has this as one of its major themes.Many opening chess-moves, many ways this genre of conversation begins. Here's one (**boldface** being the questioner).

- 1 **Why do you Christians believe in more than one god? Who says we do?**
- 2 **Jews & Muslims, for examples.** You are right. They believe in one simple God, & we Christians don't: we believe in a complex God, Three in One, whom we made up a word for, by combining two Latin terms meaning "three" & "one": Tri-[u]n-ity." The uniqueness of this vision, the Bible's vision, appears in the very fact that we had to make up the word "Trinity": there was no such word in any language (though Latin as early as Caesar had "trine"--eg, in his GALLIC WARS, he speaks of "three camps together" [*trina castra*]).
- 3 **Life is complicated enough. Isn't a simple god better? Yes, if the deity-situation is simple. We Christians say it isn't.**
- 4 **How would you know that?** God told us. That's the short answer. It's so offensive to everybody else that it's surprising--isn't it?--that anyone would ever become a Christian! But on closer look, you'd notice that all religions claim privileged knowledge whether or not it's called--as Judaism, Christianity, & Islam call it--"revelation." Buddhism calls it "enlightenment." In the film "The Gods Must Be Crazy," primitives who find a Coke bottle (absentmindedly thrown out of the open cockpit of a small airplane) assume that this strange object is a message from the gods; & trying to decipher that message takes the rest of the footage of this uproarious gentle spoof of the human experience of transcendence, of the strange-from-the-beyond or (as in Ex.3, Moses' burning bush) the odd-within (here, it being odd that the flames didn't consume the bush).
- 5 **I believe in religion & science, not any of that transcendence stuff.** Did you notice that you said "believe"? Rationalism & scientisms are beliefs, not objective knowledge. We humans are all in this transcendence business together: no way out. We make our commitments (marriage, eg.) on partial & defective knowledge, not being able to wait till all the evidence is in: it never is. The only escape from faith, the ultimate-commitment business, is some form of suicide (cynicism being one form).
- 6 **You say God told you the Trinity. Just how?** "Jesus loves me. / This I know, / for the Bible tells me so." Little children learn to sing it, & Albert Schweitzer (a Christian eminent in music, biblical studies, & medicine) said it to patients in his African hospital when they asked him why he cared about them. And he often added, "Jesus tells me to love you." Simple words like those, in our time, of Mother Teresa, honored as a saint by all religions in India: "I see Christ in the face of every dying patient." God begins to tell us the Trinity in deeds, not words--deeds of Christian compassion, a virtue the other religions adopt (as the Dalai Lama, currently the world's best-known Buddhist, says he has: "From Buddhism we learn enlightenment, & from Christianity compassion").
- 7 **I asked how God told you Trinity, & you answered only how God told you Jesus.** Jesus is, for us Christians, where the rubber hits the road, where heaven touches earth, where what is true everywhere becomes true for us here, here in our human history. He is our Coke bottle "from above." The Trinity is the simplest explanation of this central Christian conviction.

8 Simplest! To us outsiders, it looks as if you're trying to spin three gods into one! Why bother? What difference would it make if you had only one simple God? The simplicity, the elegance, of Trinitarian logic is visible only from within the Christian Faith, though outsiders can imagine it by thinking through the Christian Story, the account we Christians give about how things came to be & why they are as they are & what the future holds. The Christian Story demands, & is signaled by, our teaching the Trinity.

Think of the Lord's Prayer. It says things aren't as they should be (as everybody knows) & will be (as we Christians believe): "Our Father *in heaven*, your kingdom come *on earth as it is in heaven*." History is not meaningless, it has a project, & we're invited to participate in the project. Using the "name" of the Trinity (as at the end of the New Testament's first book), here's the Story that reveals the project: God the Father sent God the Son as a rescue operation, which involved the Son's death & resurrection, after which God the Son sent God the Holy Spirit to abide with us, granting in & through the Church comfort, courage, illumination, & guidance "till kingdom come." The impact of Jesus lit up the whole of history, which from below is the period before Jesus came (ie, the period of the Father), Jesus' period (the period of the Son), & the period since Jesus' resurrection, the first Easter (the period of the Holy Spirit).

9 Aren't "Father," "Son," & "Holy Spirit" merely names for what you call the three historical periods? That's what it looks like from below. But think about it: the viewpoint of the Lord's Prayer, & of the whole Christian Faith, is from above: life is to be lived from heaven (through prayer & "heavenly" attitudes & deeds) to earth (which we are to prepare, in so far as it lies within our powers, for "kingdom come"). And, logically, it therefore is to be lived from the future (the fulfilment of God's historical project) into the present (where we are living with our joys, our sorrows, & our responsibilities). And--again, by revelation--in all of this past/present/future we experience God in all the tangencies he has chosen to touch us & has asked us to call him, in all those tangencies historical & other, "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit." It doesn't make sense outside the Christian mind (everything that makes sense does so within some "mind," some way of looking at the world & human life): it makes perfect sense to those who willingly & joyfully daily submit themselves to Christian inner ("spiritual" & "intellectual") formation, by practicing God's presence, attending to God in prayer & Bible--&, at least weekly, attending Christian meetings for worship. As the Levy's bread ad says, "Try it, you'll like it."

10 You talk a lot about the Trinity & history: what about nature? Nature & history are under, & creatures of, the only God there is. Some have claimed that history is deity: Karl Marx, eg. And some claim that nature is deity, the many varieties of Nature worshipers. We Christians claim that only God, the Lord of nature & history, is to be worshiped. (Worshiping history leads to totalitarianism, worshiping nature leads to scientism--both, creeds diminishing humanity.)

God is visible in both history (with its Jesus center, as in BC/AD dating) & nature (as in Romans 1:20: "his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made"; so we're all, all human beings, "without excuse" when we behave as though God were not & we were free of responsibilities to God, neighbor, & nature).

11 Your Christian teaching about God seems still to me unnecessarily complex, in violation of the law of parsimony (minimal hypothesis). People can be "spiritual" without your so-called "Holy Spirit." Of course they can! That's implicit in monotheism, our teaching that there's only one God! Like water seeping into cracks, God "seeks in holy love" (as a creed puts it) to reach every person, "to save from aimlessness & sin [God-amnesia & disobedience of the best one knows, which amounts to disobeying God]." As is the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is in the continuous creating & re-creating of "the world," the universe. In this widest sense, any human being's experience of transcendence is a spiritual experience, an experience in & of spirit, an experience of the divine Spirit who, in the Christian language, is called "Holy Spirit." Christianity claims special revelation but not special status: God does not "play favorites" (as is often said in the New Testament). What we Christians do claim, as gift & burden, is the clearest vision of God & therefore of what the world & life mean & are meant for. We try to share that Trinitarian vision.