

The revelation/evolution of THE TRINITY

In the Church Year, today is the golden anniversary of the dedication of the apse window in the Morton (IL) Community United Church of Christ. When near the beginning of his sermon this morning our pastor said "The word 'Trinity' may not mean much to you," I thought how few words mean more to me! My people had given me, their pastor, the privilege of seeing to it that our new building was throughout a visibilization of God's revelation & the Church's theological response; & the Trinity window--high above the altar, the morning sun glowing through its full spectrum of color, set in wall of dark purple that seems black by contrast--is what most draws the eye as one enters from the narthex (as, in Christian theology, the Trinity should center one's inner vision). (The hymn I wrote for the dedication mentions, in descending order, the visuals of Father, Son, & Holy Spirit. Full details of the window, & all the church's other symbolic visuals, were in "Your Guide to....," recently republished as a rewrite not by me but by a member whom I had baptized as a confirmand.)

REVELATION (what God has to say to the world) is what is heard & seen inside the church, so the Trinity window is seen inside. What is seen from the outside, at the aisle end opposite from the Trinity window, is the ten-foot rose window whose center proclaims JESUS IS LORD, the early-Christian loyalty oath which became the seed of all Christian creeds (& which appears in Ro.10.9; 1Cor.12.3; & Phil.2.11).

Visuals of the Faith are continuations of the Christ Event (the incarnation through the ascension). "Sir, we would SEE Jesus" (Jn.12.21); "God be in my eyes / and in my SEEING" (the Shield of Patrick). Our Lord Jesus, who was the divine Charity become visible, is SEEN when we Christians are "One in hope and doctrine, / One in charity" (in "Onward, Christian soldiers," doctrine is upheld between hope & charity). Charity (original meaning, viz. love in action) is the Faith made visible: "Lead on, O King Eternal....For not with swords' loud clashing, / Nor roll of stirring drums, With deeds of love and mercy / The heavenly kingdom comes."

1 Knowing that up & down are relative to our human reality rather than descriptive of space "in itself" (whatever that phrase may mean), we're free to visualize heaven as up & both earth & hell as down. On this humanly necessary model, revelation is down (God comes down on Sinai [high mountains being the real estate closest to heaven], & Moses takes the Tablets of the Law down the mountain to the people; Jesus comes down from heaven (the incarnation); in Islam, the Qur'an is "sent down" to Muhammad).

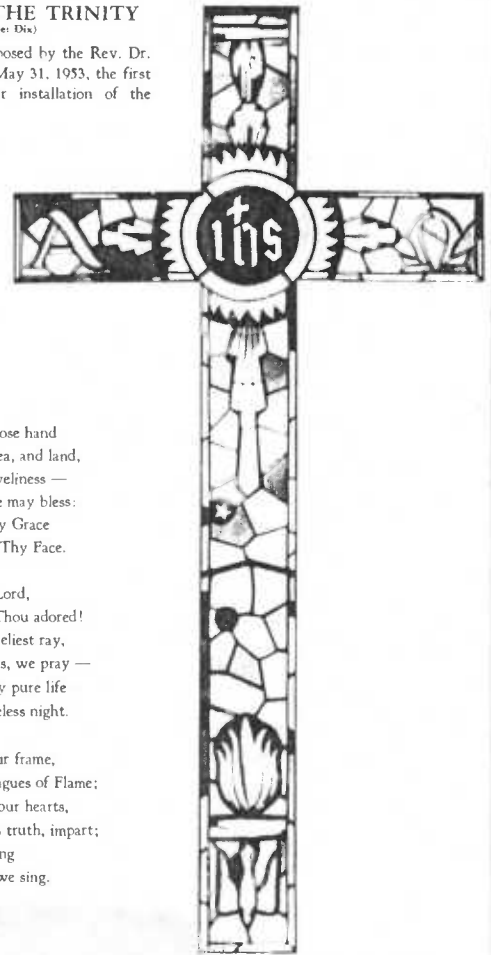
What, then, of evolution? Let's say it's an up process of natural (rather than, as in the case of revelation, supernatural) development occurring in the physical & the historical worlds (though neither world is, contrary to evolutionism [one form of atheistic scientism], closed to revelation).

To show both the separation & the interaction of the two, this Thinksheet's title uses the dual expression "revelation/evolution." The Great Tradition of the Faith, along with Mt.28.19, presents the doctrine of the Trinity as revealed knowledge; but its articulated truth was realized through a rough process of development, many factors & forces in the fray. Historical belittlers & doctrinal disparagers (such as "soppy Gnostic Pagels", as Ken Woodward called her in an e-mail to me today) try to discredit classical Christian teaching by overclaiming the importance of politics (e.g. as Pagel does in explaining the fading away of Gnostic-Christian literature); but in the historical-evolutionary process, political "factors & forces" are not to be bracketed as somehow unallowable in doctrinal formation.

2 Human beings THINK within the powers & limits of particular languages & within the funded memories of particular cultures--all of which let's call "interpretive resources." Last week, I labeled "And God said, 'Let there be COLOR!'" a 1965 painting of mine, an experimental display of primary/secondary/tertiary interactions. I

HYMN TO THE TRINITY (Tune: Dix)

This hymn was composed by the Rev. Dr. Willis E. Elliott for May 31, 1953, the first Trinity Sunday after installation of the Trinity Window.



Holy Father, by whose hand
Thou appeared sky, sea, and land,
Creation's winning loveliness --
And our souls that we may bless:
Grant a portion of Thy Grace
That we may e'er see Thy Face.

Holy Jesus, Savior, Lord,
Light from Light, be Thou adored!
Ceaseless radiance, loveliest ray,
Shine within our minds, we pray --
That redeemed by Thy pure life
We may conquer ceaseless night.

Holy Spirit, move our frame,
Burning Bush and Tongues of Flame;
Dove Divine, possess our hearts,
Gentle strength, love's truth, impart;
Sanctify the all we bring
As Thrice Holy now we sing.

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remember the joy of opening the tubes & deciding the oils' distribution on my palette --the joy of anticipating the use of my interpretive resources (palette, brushes, pigments, mediums, color-mixing knowledge/experience, imagination) in creating something new. All who met--all who meet--Jesus use their interpretive resources in trying to understand him & what he preached, viz. a "kingdom" that was both "new and old" (Mt.13.52). Then imagine yourself as an early Christian baptized in the name of the Trinity (Mt.28.19 again): what interpretive resources would you have for understanding the Trinity? One resource would be myths (cosmic dramas). The rest of this Thinksheet shows how one myth got taken up into trinitarian thinking. It illustrates an aphorism of theopoetician Amos Wilder (on p.246 of Paul S. Minear's *THE BIBLE AND THE HISTORIAN* [Abingdon/02]): "Before the message there must be the vision, before the sermon the hymn [in our case, the hymn in Philippians 2], before the prose [in our case, the articulated doctrine of the Trinity], the poem." I haven't found the myth written anywhere, but it's implicit in the Greek word ἁρπαγμόν *harpagmon* "something to grasp after" (related to Eng. "Harpy," from the Gr. vb. "to snatch, to seize"). The word's in the first sentence of the early Christian hymn quoted by Paul in *Phil.2.6-11* TEV: Jesus "always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God."

THE DRAMA (COSMIC MYTH)

Before the worlds were made, two heavenly beings had a running disagreement about how to live their lives. One just couldn't get it out of his head that, being in his own eyes as good as God, he should be as powerful as God, and so should have a throne equal to God's--as gem-encrusted, as large, & as elevated--right next to God's. When God got wind of this power-grabber's intention, he was not amused, knowing that an equal throne would be a rival throne. (On Crete, I saw the world's oldest extant throne, ca.1,400 BC/BCE: nothing else ever attached to that wall of the audience room of the Palace of Minos.) (2Enoch 29.4-5: An angel "conceived an impossible thought, to place his throne higher..., that he might become equal in rank to My power. And I threw him out from the height with his angels. [next verse, which is 30.1:] And then I created all the heavens...." [2Enoch, by a Hellenistic Jew, had considerable influence on early Christian thought (e.g., Rev.12.9 NRSV: "The great dragon was thrown down...called the Devil and Satan...and his angels were thrown down with him"; L.10.18 NRSV: "I [Jesus] watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning [which may also reflect the mythic merging of Lucifer/Satan--on which see also the passage behind 2Enoch, viz. Is.14.12 NRSV,ESV: "How are you fallen from heaven, / O Day Star, son of Dawn!" 1Cor.11.14: "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light"; & some such passages present this rebel angel not as an aspirant to equality but as a rival intending take-over or the setting up of a parallel hegemony].)

The other heavenly being, like the first, couldn't get something out of his head. What the first couldn't get out of his head was power, *his* (authority, control), *himself*. He wants to go up. The other wanted to go down "to seek and to save the lost" (L.19.10 TEV). He couldn't get others' needs out of his mind. And the Lord, who had thrown down the first, lifted the second up--he had gone down among the needy--& enthroned him as an equal.

THE POEM (CHRISTIAN HYMN)

Now, if, when we think of Jesus' Temptations (M.1.12-13; Mt.4.1-11; L.4.1-13), we hear resonances from (let's call it) the Myth of the Two Angels, we may hear the first angel say to the second, "What are you doing down there? If you come up here & worship me, I will give you power over all the world!" Their secrets are out: the first angel wanted to be worshiped (liturgical service), the second "came [down] not to be served but to serve, to give his life to ransom the lost" (Mt.20.28; M.10.45; cp.1Tim.2.6). The second angel worshipped "the Love that moves the worlds" (Dante).

Our hymn--Phil.2.6-11--sings the revelation behind & beyond the evolution (story-line) in the myth. Imagine the perichoresis (circle-dance) of the co-equal "persons" of the Trinity on the highest stage-level, above the myth-level stage. On the highest stage, two levels above earth, the second heavenly being is God the Son, Suffering-Servant Savior & Lord. Let the lowest stage rejoice & sing!