

The Richness of the Mystery of God

A reflection on the Trinity
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G.K. Chesterton once said that one of the reasons he believed in Christianity was because of its belief in the trinity. If Christianity had been made up by human person, it would not have at its very center a concept that is impossible to grasp or explain: the idea that God exists as one but within in three persons.

How do we understand the trinity? We don't! God, by definition, is ineffable, beyond conceptualization, beyond imagination, beyond language. The Christian belief that God is a trinity helps underscore how rich the mystery of God is and how our experience of God is always richer than our concepts and language about God.

This is already evident in the history of religion. From the very beginning, humans have always had an experience of God and have worshipped God. However, from the very beginning too, humans have also had the sense that God is too rich and too-beyond any one set of categories to be captured in any human conception. Hence most ancient peoples were polytheistic. They believed in many gods and goddess. They experienced divine energy and the need to celebrate divine energy in many different areas of their lives and had gods and goddesses to accommodate that. Thus they had gods and goddesses for every longing and every circumstance, from war, through growing crops, through sex, through understanding why your father wouldn't bless you, there was a god or goddess to whom you could turn.

Sometimes they believed in one supreme god who ultimately ruled over lesser gods and goddesses, but they sensed that divine energy was too rich a reality to be contained in a single being. They believed too that sometimes the gods were at war with each other. As well, their gods and goddesses often times messed around within human lives, making special deals with humans, having affairs with them, and sometimes even having children with them.

Many of the most powerful myths ever told arose out of the experience of God's overwhelming richness and the ancient peoples' incapacity to conceptualize God and God's activity in any singular way. Whatever else might be said about polytheism and ancient myths about the gods and goddesses, ancient religious practices and the incredible canon of mythology that these produced speak of how rich, untamed, and beyond simplistic imagination and language is the human experience of God. The ancients believed that their experience pointed to the existence of many deities.

And then a massive shift took place: Judaism, soon followed by Christianity and Islam, introduced the strong, clear, doctrinaire idea that there is only one God. Now all divine power

and energy was seen as coming from a single source, monotheism, YHWH, the Father of Jesus, Allah. There were no other gods or goddesses.

But from the time of Jesus' resurrection onwards, Christians began to struggle with simple monotheism. They believed that there is still only one God, but their experience of God demanded that they believe that this God was somehow "three". Stated simply, when Jesus rose from the dead Christians immediately began to attribute divinity to him, yet without identifying him as God the Father. Jesus was understood to be God, but somehow different from God the Father. Moreover, inside of their experience, they sensed still a third divine energy which they couldn't fully identify with either Jesus or God the Father, the Holy Spirit.

This experience left them in a curious and sometimes perplexed state: They were monotheists, God alone was God. Yet, Jesus too was God, as was the Holy Spirit. Their experience of grace and God's action in the world was at odds with their simplistic conception of monotheism.

God was one and yet God was somehow three. How to fit this together? It took Christianity three hundred years to finally arrive at a formula that somehow honored the richness of the Christian experience of God. The Council of Nicea in 325 gave us the creedal formula we profess today: There is one God in three persons; except they wrote that formula in Greek and the words there state literally that God is one substance in three subsistent relations.

That formula isn't meant to give us perfect clarity. No formula can ever capture the reality of God because God is too rich to ever be captured, even half adequately, in imagination, thought, and word. The God that atheism rejects is precisely a conceptualized God, a God captured in a picture. In the end, atheism is less faithful to human experience than was polytheism which more rightly sensed deity, gods and goddesses, hidden under every rock.

To what does this call us?

To humility. All of us, believers and atheists, need to be more humble in our language about God. The idea of God needs to stretch, not shrink, the human imagination. Our actual experience of God, just as for ancient polytheism, is forever eating away at all simplistic conceptions of God. Thank God, for the complexity of the doctrine of the Trinity!

