

The Tri-une God of History

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IN the 60 years that I have been attending church services mostly (but by no means only) Episcopalian, I cannot recall a single sermon on the role that God has played, and is now playing, in the collective history of the human race. I mean history in the historian's sense of the word: the history of Europe and America, the history of the Church, world history in the second half of the 20th century. We are often told by preachers that God had a plan for the Hebrew people in the centuries from Abraham to Moses to Jesus, but we are told little, if anything, about God's plan for what have turned out to be thousands of years between early Christianity and Christ's coming again.

A basic reason for this omission, I believe, is the *de facto* removal of the Holy Spirit from the clergy's vision of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit, who in biblical history spoke through the prophets and at Pentecost brought a common understanding to people of diverse languages, is that person of the Trinity who inspires us, teaches us, to fulfill our historical destiny as the people of God, in whose trinitarian image we are created.

As God the Father is our Creator and Lawgiver, he has given us, his children, the capacity, with his help, to create new life and to hand down just laws; as God the Son is our Brother and Redeemer, he has given us the capacity, with his help, to live for others and to forgive even our enemies; as God the Holy Spirit is our Inspirer, Teacher, and Prophet, she has given us the capacity, with her help, to inspire, teach, and form new relations of community. Indeed the Holy Spirit in us helps us in the course of history to form relationships of community that can reconcile the dialectical polarity between parental law and brotherly / sisterly love.

Theologians have traditionally given the name "economic" Trinity to these three manifestations of God's activity in the world, as contrasted with the "immanent" Trinity, signifying the reciprocal

relationships of the three with each other. In recent decades some theologians, such as Jiirgen Moltmann, have begun to ascribe a divine trinity of characteristics not only to individual human beings but also to social formations.

A great – and greatly neglected – Christian historian and philosopher, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, taught that God acts in our collective history over generations and centuries, and more specifically, that the three persons of the Trinity are represented in different ways in the three millennia of the Christian era. In the first millennium Christian missionaries taught the European peoples to give up their multiple gods and their worship of monarchs and tribal chiefs in favor of the one true God, the Creator, the Father of the risen Christ. Their common faith in one God was a necessary foundation for the tribal peoples of the West eventually to come together in the late 11th and 12th centuries in a common visible hierarchical Roman Catholic Church under the papacy.

The second millennium of the Christian era saw, in the West, the rise of Christian national states. In the period after the Protestant Reformation, Catholic and Protestant rulers sent to all continents of the world missionaries, merchants, and military to convert, to exploit, and to conquer, usually in the name of the incarnate Son, the human Christ on the Cross, the Redeemer. Largely through their efforts, guided and misguided, the whole world in the course of time has become an economic and political reality.

The historical challenge of the third millennium of the Christian era is to create out of the many peoples of the world a single community. In seeking to accomplish that goal, the emphasis of Christian faith must be on the third person of the tri-une God, the Holy Spirit, who prophesies unity and, taking many different forms, inspires people of diverse belief systems and loyalties to listen to each other, to learn each other's languages, and to overcome their mutual hostilities.

In Rosenstock-Huessy's words, "The story of salvation on earth is the advance of the singular against the plural. Salvation came into a world of many gods, many lands, many peoples. Over against these it sets up a singular one God, one world, one humankind."(*The Christian Future, or the Modern Mind Outrun*)

Surely it is providential that gradually, starting with the most ancient civilization, in the course of 5,000 years, all humanity has been brought into a condition of economic and political interdependence. In material terms we live in one world, and we are now challenged to bring humanity together in spiritual terms as well. What St. Paul said, as a matter of faith, that God has created all peoples of one blood, has now been proved scientifically as a matter of fact God the Holy Spirit, active in many different belief-systems, now teaches us to transform our common humanity from a material also to a spiritual reality, as God the Father commands us to embody that spiritual reality in universal legal institutions and as God the Son challenges us to do so with sacrificial love.

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