

HOLY TRINITY - CONCEPT OR MYSTERY?

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There are two unshakable pillars on which the Christian faith stands. These are aspects which we do not find in other religions. These two stand together as the hallmark of the Christian Faith. In fact our fathers have taught us that if we accept anything from external or pagan wisdom (including philosophy, science and other religions) each such external teaching must first be tested to see if it conflicts with these two - namely the worship of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, on the one hand, and on the other the incarnation and incarnate Ministry of the Second person of the Holy Trinity, Our Lord Jesus Christ.

These two however cannot be understood as mere doctrines or concepts that we can logically prove or conceptually express. They both belong to the Grand Mystery of our universe, revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We shall explain later what we mean by Mystery.

In this brief paper we touch only upon the first aspect of the Grand Mystery - worship of and union with the Holy Trinity. The other aspect - the Economy of the incarnate Ministry of Christ, we will have to omit for the time being, though the two are closely inter-dependent.

Unfortunately too many Christians look for the “concept of the Holy Trinity” in the New Testament, and not finding it directly expounded there, relegate it to a “later addition” by the Christian Church. As if the New Testament itself were not a creation by the Christian Church, out of the Apostolic Testimony and Teaching! The Holy Trinity was not created by the Church, early or late. The Church was created by Him. The New Testament too, was created by the Triune God, through the Apostles and the Church. The presence of the Triune God was only a shadow in the Old Testament, though we see the Father, the Word and the spirit operating together in the very first verses of the Old Testament, bringing the creation into being, into order, with the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we begin to see more clearly the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as three persons acting in Unity as One God.

Our mistake is in looking for the “concept” of the Holy Trinity. The Concept of the Holy Trinity is just that - a concept, something conceived within the human mind, with all its limitations. The concept is not God.

The Holy Trinity, Father, son and Holy Spirit, the Triune God, is a unity of three persons in one ousia, not a concept. And it is not a unity of three persons like other persons we know. He is the Living God, like whom there is none else that we can compare with and comprehend.

Our human mind can conceive only finite entities - things in time and space, which can be defined. Only finite entities can be comprehended or defined by the human mind and its conceptual structure.

There are three things about the Holy Trinity which we can say, because the Fathers have so taught us. This, however is not to define or describe the Trinity.

I. INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

In fact the first thing the Eastern Fathers teach us is the incomprehensibility of God. The one thing we can comprehend about God is that He is incomprehensible. Why? Because He is not someone - finite who is in a particular time or place; because he has no boundaries in terms of which we can understand Him. He is not like anything we know in our finite Time - Space world.

He cannot even be truly named - because the name Father, son and Holy Spirit are but words in the English language; Abo wabro walruhoqadisho is Syriac, Pithavum puthranum Parisuddha Ruhayum is Malayalam. These are translatable words we use to denote Him, but none of them is God's proper Name. That is why the great Father St. Gregory Nazianzen sang, “O Thou of a Thousand names, but whom no Name can truly name!”

The Fathers, however make a distinction: it is the OUSIA of God that is incomprehensible. His ENERGEIA we can grasp and experience.

What does that mean? Ousia means is - ness. When we say of a given finite reality like a book, for example, we know what it means to say that the Bible as a book is or exists. It is in people's homes, in the bookshop, in someone's hand, at someone's bedside. We can see it, locate it, touch it, read it. But God's is-ness is not like the is-ness of a book. We cannot locate Him in one place, we cannot see Him as we see a book or a human being, we cannot photograph Him. God's is-ness is not like the is-ness of anything else we know.

But we can know God's Energeia - His workings, His doings, His operations in our world. We know that the universe is God's Energeia, and so we can have some notions about the Ousia from which that Energeia comes, though we do not know the Ousia itself of the Creator. Many of His Energeia we know: He spoke in ancient times through the prophets, and in these last days has revealed Himself in His Sons Jesus Christ. He has given us the Holy Spirit, as a foretaste of our future union with Him. He cares for the poor and the needy; He protects and redeems the oppressed; His Grace forgives us our iniquities and cleanses us from our sins. These are all His energeia, and through these we know Him and love Him, but we still do not comprehend his Ousia or is-ness.

In Jesus Christ, the incarnate Lord, the Ousia of the Triune God is fully present, but reduced to our scale in a Human person, whom we can behold without being burnt. We cannot claim that we know or comprehend the Ousia of the Triune God, Just because we have known Jesus Christ.

II. THE THREE PERSONS ARE OF THE SAME AGE - THERE IS NO SENIOR OR JUNIOR, SUPERIOR OR INFERIOR

It is difficult for us to envisage a situation in which the son is of the same age as the Father, if they are truly Father and son. we say, by the logic of our experience in this world, that the Father must have existed for some time before the son was born, and therefore that the Father is by necessity older than the Son.

In fact this was the chief argument of the Arian heretics to prove that the son is not God. The Father must have existed for "some time" before the son was begotten. During that time the son did not exist, or He was not. Which means that there was a time when the son was not and that the son came from notbeing into being; so He cannot be God. it was our Father the scholarly St. Gregory of Nyssa who defeated that argument by the same logic and thus saved the Trinitarian belief, which was the faith of Nicea.

All right, St. Gregory argued, let us take you at your own words. According to you, the Father lived for a finite or X number of years before he begat the son. And you say that the son has a beginning in time, and that he has now lived for Y number of years. By your own logic then, we know the age of the Father, i.e. the number of finite years the Father lived before He begat the Son, plus the age of the son, or $x + Y$, which has to be always finite. The Father, according to your logic, was born $x + y$ years ago. Before that He too was not. He is therefore not "Unoriginate" (agennetos) which you define as the necessary quality of God. So in our Logic, The Father too cannot be God, because we can trace the date of His origin.

Everything in the created world is extended in time and space. That is the very nature of this creation which we know. Everything is diastaton, or extended. God, on the other hand, the cappadocian Fathers (St. Basil, St. Gregory Nazianzen, and St. Gregory of Nyssa, living in the 4th century) taught, was unextended or adiastaton. God, The one ousia in Three Persons, has no extension in time and space, in God, there is no here and there, no yesterday, today and tomorrow, no past, present and future. Nothing exists outside God, but God is not space or time. Everything in Creation is extended in time and space. In the creator, there is no extension, time or space.

In God there is no Senior and Junior, because the Son is eternally begotten, and the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father. When the Father was, the Son also was and so also the Holy Spirit. All three are eternal and infinite, and no One Person is younger or older man the Other. You cannot count the three persons as if they were three Gods, each distinct from the other. There is no finite boundary where One ends and the other begins. Together they constitute one infinite God, one Supreme power, one Ruling Authority, one Creator God from whom all things have come and on whom all existents are contingent. The Divine person does not have to be absent in one place in order to be else-where at the same time.

When the Son was incarnate in our world as a human being, He was in no wise absent from His eternal abode with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The only distinction we make within the one Ousia of the Holy Trinity is this: The Father is the One who begets and is not begotten; the son is begotten by the Father and does not beget the Father and the spirit. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and is not begotten; neither is He the begetter of the Father or the son.

All that I have said is not a conceptual description of the Trinity, but some “guard statements” to protect us from saying the opposite and falling into error, as the Arians and others did. They also protect us from assuming that we comprehend God through some special analogy, something tasken from the created order.

III. THE HOLY TRINITY AS THE GRAND MYSTERY

Western Christians often accuse Eastern Christians that they resort too easily to the word “mystery” whenever they find some-thing difficult to explain. This is not true. We mean something precise when we use the word mystery, musterion in Greek, Rozo or Raza in Syriac, Mistir in Ethiopia

Greek Musterion comes from the root Mueo, which means to initiate. A mystery is something which you do not experience until you are initiated. The Grand Mystery is the awareness of who God is and what He is doing. The world is uninitiated and do not know either who God is or what He is up to in Christ Jesus. The Christians are initiated into this Grand Mystery by the first of the “Mysteries of the Church”, the “roze d’ idtho” namely Baptism - Chrismation - the double mystery of initiation into the Body of Christ and into His spirit. The initiated grow in their awareness of the Grand Mystery as they grow in the life of worshipping community through the second great mystery of the Church - the Eucharistic Communion in Christ with the Triune God.

That is where the Grand Mystery is experienced - not in thought or concept. To experience that mystery is also to be totally dedicated to the Triune God and to what He is doing in Chrtist - bringing all things into mutual reconciliation and harmonious unity - the good creation united without mixture of evil, as the manifestation of the glory of the One True God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Holy Trinity is know by initiated participation, not by human logic or concept. To Him be glory, for ever and ever, in Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen!

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