

## A HYBRID DIVINITY - FROM THE CANON THEOLOGIAN

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When I was growing up, I was told never to talk to people about religion or politics. I'm going to break both these rules of old fashioned polite society this morning—I'm going to start my exploration of the Holy Trinity with you by talking about the federal election.

Back in my youth, nearly everyone voted for one or other of the major parties. I read in the press recently that these days it's a bit below two-thirds. Lots of people don't even know what either major party stands for any more.

Many have to go on the ABC's 'Votecompass' website to find out. You answer ten simple questions and the website plots your position on the political spectrum, with many voters ending up somewhere in between the traditional divisions. So much for Labor or Liberal, for left or right.

Indeed, this blurring of established categories is present in our major parties themselves. Conservatives on the right can't abide Malcolm Turnbull because he's embracing Green-sounding causes like climate change and liveable cities, while socialists on the left resent how right-leaning Labor has become on a range of policy issues. And there's more. While people on both sides of politics condemn the idea of another Labor/Greens alliance, such political hybrids are going to become more and more inevitable. The only duopoly we've got left is Coles and Woolworths!

Friends, this means is that ours is no longer a black and white world, despite many people's nostalgia. We've got more choices now than either Labor or Liberal, Ford or Holden, Catholic or Protestant. We're even beginning to realise that insisting on two clear genders doesn't do justice to the richness of human experience, so that social institutions like education and marriage are being challenged to keep evolving.

The world of human sexuality and human relationships has always been complicated, but these days we're more willing to recognise and accept that complicatedness, rather than silencing, banishing or brutalising those who don't fit yesterday's strict either/or.

We've built our modern world on such neat, strict, either/or distinctions, so that our rational minds have been trained to dislike anything hybrid or blurry. Yet it's this either/or mindset that the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was challenging, in his poem "Pied Beauty," with the line "Glory be to God for dappled things"—and the fact that Hopkins was of homosexual inclination added a special poignancy to his words, since he knew what it was like not to fit the official categories.

Friends, in the wide world of religions we've seen things in terms of a similar either/or distinction. There's monotheism, the religions of one God, and there's polytheism, the

religions of many Gods. Judaism and Islam are the religions of one God, while Hinduism and the so-called Greater Vehicle or Mahayana Buddhism are religions of many gods.

But my point on this Trinity Sunday is that it's not right to call Christianity a radical monotheism, like Judaism and Islam—although I know that conservative Protestants and even some Sydney Anglicans seem closer to Muslims than Catholics in many ways.

But we Christians aren't polytheists either, worshipping many gods. Instead, we worship one God in three persons, to the confusion and amusement and sometimes the irritation of Jews and Muslims. We believe three ways in one God, as the English Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash put it. Or, to paraphrase the great Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth, we believe that our God is the communicator, that which is communicated, and the communication—that our God is more like an engaging human process of communication than a single loud voice with a megaphone.

Now, why do Christians believe this way? Because, through the long history of the Bible, and in the subsequent age of the creeds, Christians found that a remote, sovereign God was not an adequate way to describe their religious experience. Let's put in some Christian answers to the theological Votecompass and see what we come up with? And to do this I'm going to look at today's readings.

Our Proverbs reading today (Prov 8: 1-4, 22-31) shares Israel's belief in its one God, the God of the Covenant. But this one God was also experienced in the beauty and order of the world, and as a God bound up with the lives of God's people. In Proverbs today we see Israel imagining a creature called Divine Wisdom, who was there from the beginning as God's delight and God's companion. It was with figures like this Divine Wisdom that the Bible began to talk about God in richer, more involved terms—a God near as well as far; a God in stereo, not just in mono.

Without sacrificing monotheism, the Old Testament began to personify God in figures like Wisdom and Glory and Spirit, and here we find the beginnings of a journey that led Christian thinkers to the language of three persons in one God.

Our reading from Romans today (Rom 5: 1-5), and our Gospel from John (John 6: 12-15), are beautiful spiritual passages that belong to people who love and pray and who know God through living the Christian life. And these readings point to a dynamic vision of God—the God of Israel who stands behind all reality erupts into that reality in person through Jesus Christ, who draws us in through a living process.

Friends, our picture of God as Trinity emerges from this experience of what I call everyday Christian mysticism. Christianity is anything but some desiccated, self-conscious, backward looking exercise in teeth gritting obedience.

This is why John's Jesus, in our Gospel today, talks about the Holy Spirit bringing the mind of Christ to birth in us—a Spirit sent to us at Jesus' behest from the Father. And Paul, in our Romans reading today, emerges as every bit the Christian mystic. For Paul, in our reading today, God the Father, the God of Israel, the one true God, is working our side of the street, too, in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ draws us into his own life with his Heavenly Father, even into his sufferings, in order to transform and perfect us, and it's the Spirit who bonds Jesus together with his heavenly Father who is now poured out on the Church.

So, friends, we talk about the Threeness of God because, in the living spiritual reality of our life in Christ, we need a very special form of monotheism to do it justice. And we talk about the Oneness of God because the ingathering of all truth, of all beauty, of all godliness

through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, is too focussed and too unified for polytheism to do it justice.

Now, something that I always insist on when I preach on the Trinity is that this is a practical, not just a cerebral business. I began today by saying that the age of black and white is over: from our national politics to our gender politics. We live in a much more hybrid era, which has been called post-modern, and in these conditions many religious people throw up their hands.

Many Christians are nostalgic for a simpler time—though in truth it's not for the cosmopolitan world of early Christianity that they pine, or for the diverse world of medieval Christianity that was anything but monochrome. Rather, it's the certainties of recent modern generations that they miss, the certainties of the 1950s. But, friends, if we worship one God in three persons, if we take our monotheism with a dash of pluralism thrown in, if our sovereign God is busy deconstructing "His" sovereignty on the cross and in the rough and tumble of our spiritual life together, then the Church may be way ahead of the game.

Maybe our sense of God as Trinity helps us to be ready for these less certain times, because the certainties of our faith, while real, are liberating rather than constricting certainties. In a world where many crave the old divisions and exclusions, we Christians can relax into a more magnanimous and even a more progressive posture. And we do this, not by denying our Christian convictions, but precisely because of our Christian convictions.

So let me wrap up. Our worship of one God in three persons holds together the one and the many, the near and the far, the almighty and the all-vulnerable, the God above and the God in our midst, the glory of heaven and the brutal, crucifying history of earth. Friends, you and I are children of the Holy Trinity, whose circle dance of love opens a place for us to join in, here in the Eucharist today. Through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, God the Father is making us a singular people indeed, and the world needs what we've got.

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