

## “God In Technicolor”

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Proverbs 8:1-4, Romans 5:1-5, John 16:12-15 = Trinity as mystery

Cardinal Cushing of Boston told the story of when he was a young priest he called on the home of a dying man. In offering the dying man the last rites, Father Cushing rather nonchalantly asked “Do you believe in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?” The dying man’s answer:



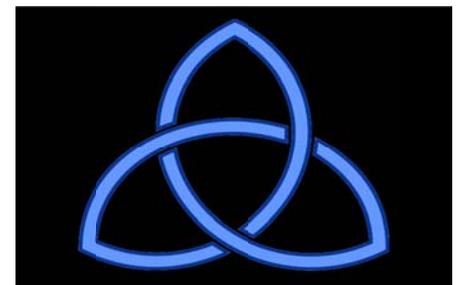
“Here I am dying, and you ask me a riddle!”



The idea that God is three separate persons eternally united is a riddle wrapped up in a mystery. It is difficult to comprehend and in all honesty no one really get it, yet our spiritual progress requires us to make the attempt. So, today I will try and unravel a little bit of the riddle.

Don’t be shocked but the doctrine of the Trinity was an invention of the early church. Their intention was to attempt to reconcile the various ways God has been experienced: calling one childless couple from Ur of the Chaldees and making them a great nation, liberating that nation out of Egypt, guiding them on Mt. Sinai, sitting on a throne in the Jerusalem temple; up thru Jesus the messiah; and a continuing real presence after Jesus was taken up into heaven.

There are hints at the Trinity in the Bible, as an expression and baptism formula in Matthew 28,<sup>1</sup> but not yet as a fully formed doctrine. The doctrine was fully developed only in the Nicæan Creed of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. The Trinitarian formula then formed the backbone of every subsequent creed.



The Nicæan Council was called by Emperor Constantine soon after his battlefield conversion to Christianity and his ascent to become the most powerful emperor in the world. He called the Council for a political purpose, and thus the

outcome, the trinitarian Creed, was to help Constantine subdue an unruly empire. That doesn't make it wrong, just that we should be somewhat suspicious of its pedigree.

The doctrine did make perfect sense in that context. In Latin the term 'persona' denoted the masks an actor of the day used to change characters. This term suggests that there is but one male God, a divine actor, taking up and utilizing different masks to manifest as Father, Son and Spirit.



The doctrine had a certain logic in Latin which works in that language and cultural context. The sad fact is that the formula works in the polytheistic and male dominated Roman Empire, but the clarity vanishes when taken into almost any other cultural context. For example, looking through the lens of Hebraic high monotheism, the Latin formula of three 'persona' appears as three distinct deities, an idea absolutely heretical in Judaism.



As for imaging God as only male, many cultures are far from the male domination of Rome, and some even know the Creator to be female, many Native American religions for example. Just so in the Proverbs 8 passage we read today. There we see the one true God represented by "wisdom" an attribute of God deemed female. Surprisingly from these and other passages we see even in Judaism God depicted in both masculine and feminine guise, and of course, transcending both.

So the doctrine of the Trinity, suspect in its origin, dated and confusing, does it have relevance for us today? Can we make sense of this riddle wrapped up in a mystery?

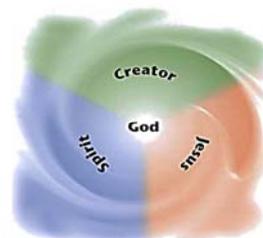
Christian Schwarz, a German theologian and international church leader created the spiritual gifts inventory we used in a recent year's Session retreat. In it, he has done a good job updating the Trinity. He talks about experiencing God in three significant encounters, in three distinct ways, yet it is God, the same God in each.





He proposes a new analogy rather than the misunderstood 'persona.' Schwarz suggest a better metaphor would be the color wheel made up of the three primary colors: *red, green,* and *blue.* As the three primary colors are separate and distinct, each perfect in themselves and independent, yet when combined they form white light. So with the Trinity three becomes one becomes three.

*Red* represents Jesus the Messiah, *Green* God as Creator; and *blue* the Spirit. Easy to remember if you associate them this way: *red* as Jesus' blood, *green* as creation's nature, and *blue* as the Spirit's sky is cool and inviting.<sup>2</sup>



If one finds oneself in the **green** area, God the creator, one tends to relate to God in a rational and reflective way. One emphasizes the walk of faith as tolerance, reconciliation, social and environmental justice. The perspective of the congregation in which I grew up is to be found here. The Presbyterian Church in general and mainline denominations are commonly found in this quadrant.

If one finds oneself in the **red** area, God the human messiah, one tends to relate to God in terms of commitment, application and activism. One emphasizes evangelism and discipleship. This perspective tends to be the one found in the pietistic and evangelical streams of Christianity.

If one finds oneself in the **blue** area, the Holy Spirit quarter, one tends to relate to God in terms of transformation and emotional connection. One focuses on emotional health and spiritual power. Pentecostal and charismatic Christians and denominations tend to fall in this area.<sup>3</sup>

Which of the "colors" has been most influential in your personal pilgrimage? With which orientation do you most easily relate? Most of us relate to God more in one color than the others. Some of us have one foot in a couple of colors, or grow through one color to another in our personal pilgrimage. But few of us live in all three at once.



Have you moved from one to another? Christian Schwarz in his personal journey talks about growing up in a *red*, evangelical environment; how he moved from there to *green*, ministries focused on peace, justice, ecology and reconciliation; then after a near fatal health episode, he came

to find the *blue* approach the way he was most comfortable relating to God.<sup>4</sup>

Another way to look at this is to compare it to child development. As Jesus said in our reading today from John, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” With children there are many things they are not yet ready to understand. With many adult issues, such as abduction, war, trafficking, reproduction, we teach our children with age-appropriate versions. So it is with God and the Trinity.



God could not communicate to us everything at once, not even in entering life as Jesus. Thus the Trinity represents God's successive and progressive self-revelation to us. If God cannot communicate everything to us at one time, then it is no surprise there are very few of us who comprehend it and live in all three colors at once.

Can we redeem a Trinity which in its original form was expressed in terms of Roman male dominated political imperialism, an all-powerful, a distant divine actor appearing in various disguises as Father, Son and Holy Spirit? How do we contextualize this for today's church?



Christian Schwarz comes a long way, but we still need to address the patriarchy. A new modern translation of the Apostles' Creed begins:

“I believe in God the almighty parent, maker of heaven and earth”

The Trinitarian formula has been updated as well, in light of our Proverbs 8 passage where feminine “wisdom” steps in for the divine:

“Wisdom, Messiah and Spirit of Truth”

All formulae are partial and incomplete. Nevertheless one step better is to take gender out of the equation and talk functionally:

God as “purpose, presence and power”

Yet that formulation leaves out the personal relationship. Far better would be to include the three actors but non-gendered. Of such is our Trinity:

“Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer”

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:19

<sup>2</sup> Christian A. Schwarz, *Color Your World with Natural Church Development*, Ch. 2

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, Ch. 2

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 46-47