

One move, these days, in Christian theology, is to speak of the Trinity rather than of God: the only God there is, you say, is the Trinity, the God whose Word became incarnate in the history of Jesus Christ, the God you worship as Father Son and Holy Spirit. So — all these pestilential people, publishing books and becoming very rich, rubbishing the very idea of God, you can deal with very smartly — you don't believe in their god either, the god they don't believe in: some abstract anonymous all-purpose god, some generic god, nobody's god — you as a Christian have never believed in that God either, we believe in the Holy Trinity.

His friend Con Drury reports a conversation with Wittgenstein in 1930. (Wittgenstein was living at the time on a grant of £100 awarded by Trinity College, £50 for the summer vacation, £50 for Michaelmas term; the following year he moved in and started teaching in his rooms here.) Wittgenstein informed Drury, with all the authority of an ex-Catholic, that “it is a dogma of the Roman Church that the existence of God can be proved by natural reason”. (Wittgenstein's mother was a devout Catholic; he'd been brought up in Vienna, taught the catechism by a clever young priest hired by the family to teach the children the elements of the faith.) He was right enough about that. “Now this dogma would make it impossible for me to be a Roman Catholic — If I thought of God as another being like myself, outside myself, only infinitely more powerful, then I would regard it as my duty to defy him” (Recollections ed Rush Rhees, 1984, page 107). He was wrong about this. The dogma does not commit Roman Catholics to thinking of God as another being like oneself, only bigger etc.: what the dogma commits us to holding is that the existence of God is not something you accept purely as a matter of faith — that God exists is open to rational argument — as regards this idea of God as a being like yourself only out there and much bigger, on the other hand, Catholics needn't and shouldn't commit themselves to that (‘Deus non est in genere etiam substantiae’, to quote St Thomas Aquinas: ‘God is not in the class even of a substance’, God is source and goal of all things, not one of them — long story) — though it's obviously what Wittgenstein thought, as he was about to start the revolution in Cambridge philosophy (if that's what you think it was) — I guess it's what a lot of Catholics do indeed think — if they think about it at all.

However, finding something less alienating to say about God as Trinity is not so easy. Saying something intelligible on Trinity Sunday has never been very easy, at least in the tradition I belong to. I left the Royal Air Force in 1956 and joined the Dominican Order. Before that date I have no recollection whatsoever of any Trinity Sunday sermon though I must have heard quite a few! As a young Dominican friar, however, I was soon introduced to the Dominican assumption that only the most learned or anyway the most senior theologian in the community preached on Trinity Sunday. At Blackfriars, Oxford, the task always fell to the Regent Master (the medieval scholastic term) — one year as it happened a canon lawyer — another year a logician making a name for himself in what was then called symbolic logic — each reeled off a baffling account of processions, relations, persons, and notions, straight out of the Summa Theologiae of St Thomas Aquinas — the great Dominican theologian.

Utterly incomprehensible! — It was as if incomprehensible theology was the most fitting way to honour and respect the incomprehensibility of God. It implied also that you had to be very clever to say anything fundamental about the specifically Christian God.

So what should you do if you wanted to remind people of what to believe about the true God? — not God as a being like yourself but bigger — nor this equally alienating ‘unearthly ballet of bloodless categories’ (F H Bradley, though not referring to the doctrine of the Trinity).

You might begin with Jesus, the strange figure in the gospels. Of course some people, most people I guess, find Jesus and the gospels of no interest whatsoever. Some people (however) do find him intriguing — even admirable. Wittgenstein (if I may cite him again), in notes made

in December 1937, seems to have been thinking quite a lot about Christianity, sin and that kind of thing — culminating in an amazing page on Christ's resurrection (Culture and Value, 1998 edition, page 38). He finds he could call Jesus 'the paragon' (Peter Winch's translation — das Vorbild: the model, the example, some one you might imitate — is the notion of the imitation of Christ somewhere in the back of Wittgenstein's mind? — 'paragon' seems wrong.) — but he couldn't call Jesus 'Lord'. Why not? — "Because I DO NOT BELIEVE (heavily underlined) that he will come to judge me — because THAT says nothing to me — and it could say something to me only I were to live QUITE DIFFERENTLY". None of this is possible because, as Wittgenstein says, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians chapter 3) and this hasn't happened to him. (W. has been reading the St Paul: he kept returning to the Bible off and on all his life — in the 1930s he and his friend G.E. Moore Professor of Philosophy in this University planned to read St Paul's Epistle to the Romans — in Greek of course — they soon gave up! The Cambridge Apostles meet The Apostle!)

But here Wittgenstein is right: one can take Jesus as some one to imitate, perhaps — seeing Jesus as Lord, however, is something you can do only by the Holy Spirit. If the figure in the gospels is allowed into your life as your judge — the judge who is your saviour, your redeemer, and all that — then it is only by your having the Holy Spirit in your heart that you can take him as Lord. But then, when you see Jesus in that light, you find him deflecting attention from himself — 'He who sees me sees the Father' — 'No one has ever seen God — God the only begotten, who is in the bosom of the Father has unveiled him' — and so on —

If God is the Holy Trinity, this is not some unearthly ballet out there, as it were independently of you — on the contrary you are right in it!

If (and only if!) you have the Holy Spirit you see something extraordinary in Jesus — 'Jesus is Lord' — 'our Lord' — and if you can say that then you are already looking beyond Jesus — 'His God is our God' — 'His Father is our Father' — That's the message Mary Magdalen takes from the empty tomb to the disciples. — That's what it's all about. Being a Christian is being held in this strange way by the figure of Jesus, which happens simply and solely because you have received the Holy Spirit — and seeing Jesus you see the Father — Jesus's God is your God — God is not remote and alien, beyond you — you already belong in God, so to speak, God as Trinity surrounds you, includes you, enfolds you — something like that.

Is that enough?

Obviously not, if you have an inquiring mind, you will want to go further, you will have to go further — which will take you into the doctrine of God as Trinity — the doctrine that has provoked and delighted Christians intellectually for hundreds of years.

It's only where you have to start.

As to discussing all this with people who are sure there is no God — those of us who believe in God as Trinity should not be reluctant to say so — a good deal of argument is a waste of time because it's not clear which God, whose God, the debate is about.

However, we live in a world in which Islam as well of course as Judaism, in several different forms — Buddhism and many other religious traditions — are as challenging intellectually as the kind of scepticism, agnosticism and atheism with which we are familiar in our 'secular' society. Travelling around the world it's not the decline of religion that one sees

— on the contrary —there is more religion than ever, flourishing, far too much of it if you ask me!

If Christians are to engage in real debate — to be critical and self critical of religion and anti-religion, of superstition and idolatry, of all that is alienating and humanly destructive in so much religion, then Christians need to remember their starting point — Jesus is the image of the invisible God – No one can say that except by the Holy Spirit — His Father is our Father.

Fergus Kerr  
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