

Trinitarian Experience and the Ecological Imperative

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The trinitarian experience of God

‘The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth’ (Jn 4:24).

The Christian experience of God begins in the communal worship of God, ‘in Spirit and Truth’. What, or more properly who, is this Spirit, and what, or more properly who, is this Truth? And who is this God we worship, in Spirit and in Truth? What interest does this God have in this beautiful, complex and yet ailing world, of which we find ourselves living parts? These questions can be, and traditionally are, summed up in a short-hand way by speaking of God as Trinity: of God as Spirit, of God as Truth (or Word or Wisdom), of God as the unutterable beyond everything we can name – and yet experienced, quite immediately and concretely at times, as source of Spirit and of Truth and – in another way entirely - of all that is. In this communal worship we boldly claim to approach God as children of God (we address God as ‘Our Father’), we experience ourselves welcomed as privileged sons and daughters of God, as *liberi* – as free. And little by little we find ourselves, it is to be hoped, undergoing a metamorphosis, a transfiguration into what we claim to be: free children of God.

The breathing out of God

‘A wind/ Spirit from God swept over the face of the waters...’ (Gen 1: 2).

So who is this Spirit (*ruah*), in whom we worship? This is the Spirit who is said to have sighed over the primordial waters at creation. God breathes out, calling forth the earth and all things living; sings the dry land to appear, beckons and invites and coaxes the living things in all their diversity into being. There is a divine calling to life to come into being, for things to take on lives of their own. These lives are deeply interconnected, they have all emerged from the same primeval waters. They are each declared by God to be fundamentally ‘good’ (*tov*). Taken together, in all their living interconnectedness, they are ‘very good’ (*tov ma’od*) (Gen 1:31). There seems to be no sign of any initial divine plan in all this profusion of emergence, except for God’s decisions simply to ‘let be’, for things to come into being and then grow, each according to its kind, or – as other biblical reflections on creation put it - each according to its own particular ‘way’ (*derek*) of becoming and being. But each of these ways is interconnected with all the others. And the Spirit is there, in and under these life forms, giving impulse to each to live fully according to its own way of being, impulse for each to be creative and re-creative in its own right.¹ The uncreated energies of the Spirit give impulse to another order of energy, the created and creative impulses deep within each living being and within the living complex of relationships between them.

Though this emergence does not necessarily imply any initial divine plan, there does seem to be an end purpose – namely that life will co-create with God. This purpose lies within the created order itself, not outside it. It may of course be that God has some other purpose beyond this reality we know, but that is not the subject of these biblical creation stories. Our business is this Spirit-animated reality in which we find ourselves, and for which we may just carry some responsibility. We shall return to this question as to what this human responsibility in and for the creation might be.

There is of course much more to be said about the breathing out of God, of the Spirit in creation, for this is also the Spirit who speaks through the prophets – speaks words of truth and justice concerning human beings, the animals, and the earth itself. This is also the Spirit through whom, in time, the Word, or the Truth, is to become flesh.

The going out of God

‘The Word became flesh and lived among us...’ (Jn 1:14).

So who is this Truth through whom we approach God in worship? For Christians, this is the one to whom Pontius Pilate put his famous ‘what is truth?’ question, little knowing the truth stood silently before him, in person. Again, we start from our communal experience – Jesus is the way, and the truth. Christians together are the community brought together by this fundamental insight. This is how we have come to know God, this is the way in which God has sought us out and found us, and continues to seek us out and find us. Because of our communal experiences of who Jesus is – the stories about him, the stories he has told, our own encounters with him in Spirit – we also know what God is like. Christ is the one who has revealed God’s face to us; and so we claim him to be ‘God with us’ (Mt 1:23). But like the Spirit, this Jesus has a history, or rather a pre-history. For this our point of reference is Jn 1:14: ‘the Word became flesh’.

There are several things to notice here. First, there is a self-distinction in God: God’s Word is distinguished from God. Then there is a going out, or being sent out – technically, the mission - of the Word. This represents an exile or better, an expatriate experience on the part of God’s Word. Here the Word dwells (literally, has pitched a tent – *eskēnōsen*) with us, but does far more than just dwell in flesh. The Word *becomes* flesh. There is a transformation of the Word, a becoming flesh that goes beyond any simple dwelling with, or alongside of, or even within. There is an integral union here of Word and flesh, and it takes place in a person. But even this is to jump too far ahead.

The going out of God has a purpose – to dwell with us. The text states not that the Word was made human, far less ‘made man’ as the older version of the creed used to put it, but flesh. This immediately brings us into a far wider mental space for considering the scope of the incarnation. The Word does, it is true, become a human baby, a particular human person, but the Word’s first port of call, as it were, is flesh. The association here is with the notion of ‘all flesh’ (*kol basar*) in the Hebrew Scriptures (for example, in Gen 8:17) – meaning all things living. ‘All flesh’ can carry a more restricted reference to all human beings, but there are places where it has to be read in this wider sense.² I suggest we listen to this passage in the spirit of the Earth Bible Project,³ with its attempt to read from the perspective of the earth. It is a way of listening that can open us to new elements even in very familiar texts. Here, such a listening suggests that in the Johannine prologue, the Word’s primary affirmation is not simply of the human reality, but the living earth reality, all flesh. As Dorothy Lee puts it in her contribution, ‘The phrase “all flesh” enlarges our understanding of the incarnation to include all that is formed by the generative and regenerative power of Christ’. This point cannot be stated strongly enough. Christ’s coming to us is a becoming flesh; the *us* with whom he comes to dwell is not just human flesh, but *all* flesh.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This wisdom, or truth, is also there with God – from eternity. Just as there was never a time when God was without Spirit, life,

breath, so in the same way there was never a time when God was without wisdom, or truth, or Word. The Word was and is from the beginning, as was the breath, the Spirit. But these two come to dwell in and with and through the world God makes – giving it both a vitality and a way, a wise and reasonable way, of being itself. This way starts with a self-distinction (procession) in the divine being and moves into a going out (mission) into the created spaces. It is the way of Jesus Christ.

God the source

‘By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made;
And all their host by the Breath of his mouth.’ (Ps 33:6).

Word and Breath work together in God’s activity of creation. Even the heavens and their hosts are creatures of God. The term ‘heaven’ or ‘heavens’, according to Michael Welker,⁴ can stand for the unseen sides of reality. There are unseen and uncomprehended sides of reality, and contemporary cosmology seems to suggest these may be necessarily unknowable, and so will never be comprehended. And yet even these stand in a derived relationship to the God who sends forth both Spirit and Word, who allows Godself to be encountered in Word and Spirit; who creates a living community of living beings, an ecosystem, and who invites the creation into a living community, in Spirit and through Word.

Who is this sending and inviting God? For Christians, this is the one whom Jesus calls ‘Father’, and invites us to address as Father: ‘When you pray, say: “Father...”’ (Lk 11:2). For this reason Christian worship is addressed to the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and Christian theology has traditionally spoken simply of God the Father. Simply, because like many other theological formulations, this is a short-hand formulation, a code-word that bears a load of associations. We have been made well aware of some of the negative associations with this term ‘father’, first by modern psychology and then by feminist theologians. Positively, the term ‘father’ personalises this God: the God of the Christians is a personal God. The term also emphasizes that our deepest personal experiences have to do with relationships. Parenthood is a gift that a child gives to an adult – the adult becomes a mother or father only at the conception of her or his child. God’s existence is also first and last an existence in personal, and interpersonal, relationships. This is our experience of ordinary human life, it is our experience of God, and it is true also of God’s experience before we or anything in creation existed.

The trinitarian doxology

‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’ (Isa 6:3).

The God of the Christians is not simply the collective force or forces of nature, a God who would describe the way things simply are, offer security in an uncertain world, and impart timeless wisdom about how to endure life in such a world – though we are not unfamiliar with such descriptions and wisdom. God is beyond purely immanent deities. The God of the Christians is also not simply an undifferentiated One, for whom we might spend a life-time searching, or approach in fear and trembling - though we are not unfamiliar with such oneness. God is this side of utter transcendence.

To address God (doxology) or to think about God (theology) we need to address or think about a God who exists eternally in a network of personal relationships. This is

the point of the classical trinitarian formulas for speaking of God. The network of relationships ecological science sees in nature can be understood as a reflection, a hint of these divine relationships, a *vestigium trinitatis*. The natural order is, as John Dunnill puts it in his essay, “‘iconographic’”: it represents to us the One who has created it’. If God exists in communion,⁵ in a network of relationships, we would expect a world created by such a God also to exist in communion, or in a network of relationships. And this is indeed the sort of world we inhabit, or better, the world of which we are living, integral parts. The doxology in Isa 6:3 makes this connection explicit: the thrice-holy one is also the one whose glory fills the whole earth.

The ecological imperative

‘The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life’ (Gen 2:7).

Trinitarian theology over the past thirty years, for convenience since the publication of Moltmann’s *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*,⁶ has emphasised its practical, ethical and even political consequences. A very recent contribution to this ongoing discussion reminisces on the sense of excitement this new wave occasioned among theological students at the time, and argues that speech about God the Trinity in Godself is to be understood not propositionally but as contemplation of the vitality of God, with the trinitarian persons as ‘openings to contemplation’ – with concrete, practical consequences.⁷ We could extend this impetus to include contemplation of God’s creation as a hint of God’s presence, and practical ethical action. We could extend this impetus, in other words, to an ecological imperative for the good of the good creation.

What might this human responsibility in and for the creation be? This question is answered in the second creation story which, like the first, starts with primordial stuff, and Spirit. The stuff here is dust of the ground (*adamah*) rather than water. The dry land has already emerged, but the breath or Spirit is the same. The human ‘earth creature’ (*adam*) is still unspecific – gender and other accidental characteristics come only later in the story – but this one thing is clear: *adam* is, as several contributors to this collection point out, indissolubly connected with the ground (*adamah*) and comes to life with the breathing in of God’s breath (*ruah*). The human responsibility for the earth is framed by these connections. The God-given purpose of *adam* in this story is to serve (*abad*) and preserve (*shamar*) the land (Gen 2:15).⁸ In doing so, the *adam*, the earth-being, is serving and protecting its own God-given life. But, as Norman Habel has argued, not all biblical texts are quite so earth-friendly. There is a tension between what Habel calls the grey texts and the green texts we find mixed together in holy Scripture. We need to exercise discernment in approaching these texts. As Christians we have such a means of discernment. The trinitarian basis for an ecological imperative is embedded in both our origin and our calling.

We have already seen the first trinitarian basis for an ecological imperative – the reflection or hint of God in God’s creation: God *is*, in relationships, and so analogically creation *is*, in relationships – both internally with itself, and externally in relation to God its creator. The first, internal sort of relationship is an axiom of contemporary ecology: the natural world is an interconnected network, an ecosystem. The second, external relationship, is an insight of Christian theology: the natural world is created; that is, it stands in a derivative and ultimately dependent relationship to God. But the point is that with this God as its creator, the created world is as we would expect it to

be, a complex network of relationships. This is the first trinitarian basis for an ecological imperative: a way of seeing the world, of hearing the voice of the earth, and indeed a way of seeing ourselves in relation to earth.

There is a second trinitarian basis for an ecological imperative: we participate in worship as children of God, and we are transformed into children of God. God invites us to be what God intends for us, children not slaves. Children are essentially free, and children grow up. To be a child is to contain this impulse to grow and mature, and God expects us to be grown up children. This means we carry a responsibility. We may remain children, but our child status is not intended to infantilise: we cannot expect God, even God the Father, to bail us out, to magically fix every problem. The second trinitarian ground for an ecological imperative is our calling to mature into grown up children of God. These are the mature, grown up children of God that the whole creation ‘waits with eager longing’ to see (Romans 8), children of God *being* children of God – acting out our proper human calling in the creation, taking responsibility. We are, as Heather Thomson puts it in her contribution, ‘pushed from behind... to live up to the glory conferred upon us, pulled towards the future...’. The first basis has to do with our origins within the creation of the triune God, the second with our future in communion with the triune God; the first is protological (it has to do with our origins), the second eschatological (having to do with our final end and purpose).

Conclusion

So the ecological imperative that we find so deeply grounded in a trinitarian vision of God is this.

First, the Spirit permeates the whole creation, but we are the ones who have experienced the Spirit’s presence in our communal worship and our shared lives. We are obliged to exercise discernment, for not every spirit is of God. But we also have no excuse for failing to recognise the Spirit’s presence, and its creative impetus to vitality within creation. This is the first ecological imperative for Christians.

Second, the Word, wisdom, comes to his own things, his own people, his own places, but these things, people, and places have failed or refused to recognise the coming Word. But we, according to the Johannine writer, are the ones who have seen, and recognised. We are the ones who affirm and receive this coming, or rather, this *becoming flesh*. And in doing so, we have no choice but to recognise the full scope of this term ‘flesh’, in all its associations and interconnections, and to recognise ourselves as inextricably embedded within these interconnections. This becomes the second imperative, a non-negotiable requirement of any way of living or of discipleship that claims the name Christian.

This then is our responsibility in and for creation. For Christ’s disciples this is ultimately very simple: Christ is the real human being, the new *adam*, and Christ came, in his own words, not to be served but to serve. This, according to Gen 2:15, was always the proper task and calling of human beings. The ecological imperative that arises out of a trinitarian faith today is unambiguous: it is to discern the movement of the life-giving Spirit, to recognise Christ’s coming as a coming to and for all flesh, and to accept and shoulder the human responsibility to serve and preserve the earth.

Questions for Discussion

What is the nature of the relationship between God and his creation?

How does the Trinitarian God (Spirit, Word and Source) provide the ground for an ecological imperative for us?

What does the Trinity tell us about our human responsibility in and for the creation?

¹ For this notion of impulse I am grateful to Norman Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?* Adelaide: ATF, 2009.

² I have explored this theme in my contribution to Denis Edwards (ed.), *Earth Revealing-Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 2001, pp. 69-83.

³ Norman Habel (ed.), *Readings from the Perspective of the Earth*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, especially pp. 33-53.

⁴ Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994, p. 139.

⁵ An idea explored at length by John Zizioulas, in *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's, 1985, and *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. P McPartlan, London: T & T Clark, 2006.

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinität und Reich Gottes*, München: Chr Kaiser Verlag, 1980; ET *Trinity and the Kingdom of God: the doctrine of God*, London: SCM, 1981.

⁷ Ulrike Link-Wieczorek, 'The Doctrine of the Trinity – The Major Stumbling Block in Inter-religious Dialogue? Reflections on the Methodological Function of Theological Concepts', in Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday (eds), *Trinitarian Theology After Barth*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, forthcoming 2010.

⁸ Habel, *An Inconvenient Text*, pp. 68-72.