

## Finding the Spirit

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Have you ever wondered why Christianity has a Trinity? God in three persons? If the ancient Christians wanted Jesus Christ to be the Son of God, why are there not just two persons? And, if one must picture God as a threesome, why not include a goddess? Many Roman Catholic Christians revere Mary, the mother of God, almost as if she were a goddess. It would make a charming, and more consistently anthropomorphic domestic image, if we could picture the divine as a happy little nuclear family.

Instead Christianity has the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Or, as I heard it in the Anglican church in which I grew up, the Holy Ghost. With that name the third person of the Trinity sounds mysterious and haunting, or becomes a figure of fun. In the land of Hockey, anything called the Holy Ghost is just asking for a horrible pun. The version I heard when I was small was, "Did you hear about the birthday party thrown by Johnny Bower for Gordie Howe's son Mark? A great time was had by all, including the Father, the Son, and the Goalie Host."

So let us instead go with the name Holy Spirit. Now, netminding aside, the trouble with the Holy Spirit is that it has no personality. So how can you begin to call it a person? Compared to God, which most people have trouble imagining, because, as the Bible says, "God is spirit," God's holy spirit seems doubly removed from our experience. It is a spirit of a spirit. Try to get your mind around that.

In a way the Holy Spirit, as presented in the New Testament, is a bit of a consolation prize. Jesus tells his followers that when he is gone, they will be sustained by a new presence, the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately this new divine person is also given the name the paraclete spirit. Now tell me that is not funny. What does your mind conjure up when you think of that name? And speaking of parakeets, the Holy Spirit is often pictured as a dove. But a dove, as you know, is essentially the same thing as a pigeon, a bird which few associate with divine thoughts.

I hope you do not now think that, just now, in my little bit of theological stand-up, I have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit, which the Bible tells us is unforgivable. For, in my defense, I am making fun of the images and the names of the Holy Spirit in a good cause. I really do want to talk seriously about the Holy Spirit. But first I must tell you what it is not. The Holy Spirit is not a heavenly being somewhere out there. Nor is

it a divine messenger service. Nor is it a touchy spirit, quick to become insulted and slow to forgive. It is not a god or even one third of a god. But to explain what I believe that the Holy Spirit really is, I must first make a bit of a historical digression.

We are all Calvinists. I'll bet some of you didn't know that. We all like to think of ourselves as anti-Calvinists. Most of us think of ourselves as non-Christian, and, because Calvinists are Christians, of course we cannot be Calvinists. This logic seems impeccable. But the historical record is also quite clear. Unitarianism evolved out of the Presbyterian and Puritan churches in Britain and North America. We are children of John Calvin, descendents who, like it or not, retain something of our parent's genes.

Let me tell you a little bit about Calvin's thinking about God and humanity.

At first glance, nothing looks less Unitarian than Calvin's doctrine of humankind, for his theology starts with his exalted idea of the glory of God and the infinite gap between the exalted divine and the miserable inhabitants of the created universe. In his view, human beings, corrupted by original sin and condemned by God, are unable to choose any course of action that is not sinful. And any good that a person might do is credited not to him or herself, but to God as the work of the Holy Spirit, the divine agent that makes it possible for human beings to rise above their depraved tendencies.

While it cannot be denied that Calvin's theology, in its strictest sense, is quite opposed to liberal religious thinking, I believe that his doctrine of humankind can be transformed into something resembling Unitarianism by making one simple alteration. Suppose that what Calvin calls the Holy Spirit is not actually an external person, something belonging only to God, and something that comes to us from above or beyond, but is something something inherent, something already inside us and part of ourselves, a source of inspiration and wisdom from within.

In that case, much of the goodness that Calvin credited to God alone, in his guise as the Holy Spirit, can be attributed to our own positive efforts. By recognizing that the Holy Spirit is inside us, and not outside us, and that the holy spirit is us and is not someone else, we human beings, though limited by our mortal state, can be seen as free moral agents with the ability to choose good over evil.

No further theological mutation to Calvinism is required to undermine orthodox Trinitarianism entirely. Calvin believed that a special divine/human mediator, Christ, was needed to bridge the infinite gulf between God and human beings. With the reassignment of the Holy Spirit from God to ourselves, we have, in ourselves, the ability to become mediators, that is, people who can communicate spiritual wisdom to others. There is no longer any need to believe that Jesus Christ was unique, or specially divine. Thus he is not *the* Word of God, as many Christian theologians would have it, but only *a* word of God. You and I are also words of God. And perhaps all of creation that we see outside of ourselves speaks to us with a divine authority which, by the light of the Holy Spirit that shines from within us, we may interpret for good. Thus a liberalized Calvinist theology acknowledges that we all possess in ourselves the ability to seek and find salvation, with or without Christ, with or without the Bible, and with or without any other part of the specifically Christian message.

In this way we can see how Unitarianism came to be a faith that embraces both Christians and non-Christians. We Unitarians are not a heterogeneous group of people who, as it is sometimes said, can believe in anything we want. We are, rather, a bunch of liberal Calvinists who have come to realize that what most people recognize as Christianity is, for us, optional. Nevertheless, despite our Unitarian name and our solid anti-trinitarian credentials, we may still make use of the idea of the Holy Spirit.

Let me go over my Unitarian interpretation of the Trinity again. The Holy Spirit is us. The spirit is the part of us that would be good and can do good. It includes our conscience, our sense of altruism, and our ambition to do good and to enrich life for everyone. It is our creativity, our disinterested love, our compassion, and our recognition of the good and the possibility for good in others.

To understand our liberal equivalent of Christ, or what many Christians also call the Word, we just have to remember that theologians have been accustomed to call Christ the second person. Now, in grammar the second person is you. I am the first person. You are the second person. So while the Holy Spirit comes from within, the Word comes to us from the outside. You, collectively and individually, are all to me part of the Word of God. And I am part of the Word of God to you. As I speak to you in the rather formal role as a preacher I am modelling the fact that a person can be the Word, or the divine message, to other persons. But a sermon is actually no more the Word than any other kind of communication.

Your smile when you greet me this morning is the Word. A flower in bloom or a bare tree in winter is the Word. A landscape, the view out the window, the night sky, a pile of boulders, children playing, a penny on the pavement, a scurrying bug, even a flock of un-dovely pigeons chasing scraps in front of City Hall, is the Word. Any book we read, or movie that we see, opening to us the mind or vision of its creators, is the Word for us.

The big question is: with all of this Word, with all of these words, all of this input, purporting to tell us what we need to know, how do we interpret it aright? For what if the Word for us, as we encounter it, is something hurtful or even horrible? The Word, as it is presented to us, contains many difficult texts. We must rely on the inward spirit to read these texts aright. Just as the Christian requires grace from the spirit of God to interpret the hard passages in the Bible—for example, Jesus cursing the fig tree and that business about the sin against the Holy Spirit—so do we require our best spirit, the best within ourselves, to help ourselves lovingly to overcome adversity.

I have just pictured the two of the persons of the Christian divine trinity as a drama that happens within and amongst ourselves. We are not as Calvin thought, cut off from all

that is good, except for occasional random acts of divine *noblesse oblige*. Two thirds of the good stuff is right here, in ourselves and in each other. That is a lot to go on.

But the word and the spirit that we possess is not everything. There is something else, that other third of the Trinity. This is the other, the beyond, the thing or things that we cannot or only barely know. This is the whatever is just beyond our ability to picture or to understand. We may call it God if that pleases us. Or, if the name God has picked up too much baggage in our old faiths, we may feel ourselves free not to call it God. All that is meant by the last third of my humanized trinity is that in addition to ourselves and to the rest of the Universe that we can get to know, there is more. Hamlet says, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” It is this sense of more that energizes a lot of religious thought and striving. It is what keeps us unsatisfied with our progress and makes us look for new things. It is that dream of what is not yet, that might be, if we but strive to make it so. That last third of the human trinity is that more. It is that spur, that pull to learn more, to find more, to do more, and to be more. This is what keeps us going, and growing.

And in the immortal words of Oliver Twist, “Please, Sir, I want some more.”