Why Feminizing the Trinity Won't Work: *a Metaphysical Perspective,*

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In recent years it has become increasingly fashionable in liberal theological circles to envision the third person of the Trinity as feminine. For many reasons both linguistic and archetypal this designation seems to fit. It can be argued that the Holy Spirit is really identical with Sophia, the wisdom of God, personified as female in the Old Testament; that the "spirit" words in our Biblical tradition tend to be feminine; and that in its intuitive, indwelling perceptivity, the Spirit embodies a "feminine" way of knowing and being which counterbalances the more "masculine" knowing and being of the Logos, or "Word made flesh" in the male personhood of Jesus Christ.

Certainly, from a practical standpoint, this gender corrective yields tremendous gains. If, as seems sadly true, the Church's exclusively male representation of the inner life of God laid the theological groundwork for an exclusively male political hierarchy which has systematically devalued the place of both the feminine and women in Christianity, then an authentic female representation among the persons of the Trinity would seem a graceful way to redress the grievance and correct the imbalances that have distorted so many areas of the Church's life.

But while, as a woman, I wish it could be done so simply, I am more and more convinced that it can't. It is "doing the right thing for the wrong reason." For in this case, the extremely shortsighted metaphysical thinking it introduces is likely to do a lot more damage than the short-range good accomplished. However laudable the attempt to secure a feminine presence in the Trinity, the present strategy leads to a serious confusion of metaphysical systems whose long-range effect will be to leave Christianity adrift in a post-Jungian archetypal sea, its own intuitive genius fatally blunted, and divine revelation itself compromised.

Some of the more astute feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson have already sensed the trap in this short-range corrective and argued the need for a more comprehensive revisioning. In her influential She Who Is, Johnson demonstrates how the attempt to reclaim the third person of the Trinity as "the feminine dimension of God" represents a double-danger, diminishing the full range of womanhood by a gender stereotyping which associates the feminine only with those qualities of nurturance, tenderness, and receptivity, while diminishing the fullness of divinity by "anthologizing sex in God," extending human divisions to the godhead itself.2 Her solution, based on a recognition of the symbolic nature of language, is to offer a comprehensive set of equivalent metaphors, allowing one to

depict all three persons of the Trinity in feminine imagery. But while her proposal is headed in the right direction, it still remains largely a surface rearrangement, which re-visions the persons while leaving the concept of divine personhood itself intact. It is thus a solution at the theological level. But the real source of the conundrum—and hence, the leverage needed to resolve it— lies at the metaphysical level.

Metaphysical Corrective

To describe the metaphysical error on which this feminizing of the Trinity rests is not so easy, however, for Christians themselves are not used to thinking of their beloved Trinity in terms of metaphysical process. They have been drilled to think that the Trinity is about "persons" — whose names are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and who live in an eternal, self-generating, and self-sustaining community. While the complex interrelationship among these divine persons may escape all but the trained theologian, the fact that these persons actually exist—and that they are the three unique manifestations of the unseen fullness of God—comprises the theological cornerstone of Christian theology and experience. I have startled several people by suggesting that the Trinity might actually be seen as the Christian equivalent of the East's symbol of yin/yang. In which case the Trinity is primarily about how God is and moves even beyond the manifestation of persons. About how God changes from one form into another within the domain of manifestation and interpenetrates the mutability of creation with the wholeness of divine being. The idea that the Trinity might be about process rather than persons seems to be a radical notion.

It is this idea I need to start with: that the Trinity is primarily about process. It encapsulates a paradigm of change and transformation based on an ancient metaphysical principle known as the Law of Three. The persons are not incidental to the Trinity, certainly, but they are derivative to the extent that they unfold and manifest according to this more foundational principle which shows itself to be (intuitively, at least) at the heart of Christian metaphysical self-understanding. So, we need to begin our inquiry by considering this system in its own right.

Binary Systems and Ternary Systems

Most of the world's ancient metaphysical paradigms are binary systems. That is to say, they function on the principle of paired opposites. Yin/yang is an obvious example. In binary systems the universe is experienced as created and sustained through the symmetrical interplay of the great polarities: male and female, light and darkness, conscious and unconscious, yin and yang, prakriti and purusha.

The categories masculine and feminine also belong to a binary system; in fact they are perhaps the primordial binary system within creation. Life sustains and expresses itself in the tension of opposite, and a slackening of this tension through an imbalance of the parts leads to a collapse of the whole system.

A ternary system envisions a distinctly different mix. In place of paired opposites, the interplay of the two bipolarities calls forth a third, which is the "mediating" or "reconciling" principle between them. In contrast to a binary system, which finds stability in the balance of opposites, the ternary system stipulates a third force which emerges as the necessary mediation of these opposites, and which in turn (and this is the really crucial point) generate a synthesis at a whole new level. It is a dialectic whose resolution simultaneously creates a new realm of possibility.

Let's consider a few simple examples. A seed, as Jesus said, "Unless it falls into the ground and dies, remains a single seed." If this seed does fall into the ground, it enters a sacred transformative process. Seed (the first, or "affirming," force) meets ground (the second, "denying" or receptive). But even in this encounter, nothing will happen until rain/sun; the third, or "reconciling," force enters the equation. Then among the three they generate grain, which is the actualization of the possibility latent in the seed—and a whole new "field" of possibility.

Or take the analogy of sailing. A sailboat, as nearly everyone knows, is driven through the water by the interplay of the wind on its sails (first force) and the resistance of the sea against its keel (second force). The result is that the boat is "shot" forward through the water, much like a watermelon seed. But as any sailor knows, this schoolbook analogy is not complete. A sailboat, left to its own devices, will not shoot forward through the water; it will round up into the wind and come to a stop. For forward movement to occur, a third force must enter the equation, the heading, or destination, by which the helmsperson determines the proper set of the sail and positioning of the keel. Only if these three are engaged can the desired result emerge, which is the course made good, the actual distance traveled.

Later in this paper I will have more to say about the relative strengths and weaknesses of binary and ternary paradigms on precisely that issue, forward motion. In terms of the main question under consideration, however, the point is that a binary and ternary system cannot be mix-and-matched because they stem from fundamentally different metaphors for process. It is like playing three-against-two in a Brahms sonata; the beats do not line up. In a ternary system the categories masculine and feminine do not strictly compute, for the ternary system is not about paired opposites but about threefold process.

Is the Trinity a Ternary System?

From a historical standpoint, the doctrine of the Trinity appears to have emerged almost ad hoc from a series of defense positions hammered out during the fourth century in response to the successive waves of Arian challenges to the divinity of Christ.4 But when viewed phenomenologically, the Trinity is a prime example of what is sometimes called in sacred tradition a legominism: a densely encoded symbol (image, sacred gesture, or liturgical formula) which, when read by an illumined heart, conveys objective metaphysical knowledge.5 In this case, the Trinity, viewed as the first manifestation of the unknowable, super-essential divine unity, provides the template by which all further manifestation will be made known, both as eternal principle and as temporal process.6 With the Law of Three as its hermeneutical key, the Trinity reveals the knowledge of how God, the hidden, unmanifest, inaccessible light, becomes accessible light, manifesting and creating love; and how love in turn becomes the driveshaft of all creation, bringing all things to their fullness not by escaping createdness, but by consummating it.

To demonstrate that this is so, intentionally and anterior to the persons, can be done, but not without wading into metaphysical seas that few save Jacob Boehme have been able to negotiate. In a subsequent paper I will attempt to unpackage more fully Boehme's brilliant but intricate metaphysics as he follows the journey by which the divine Unity "brings itself forth" 7 into form and diversity—insights which, to my mind still hold the key to unscrambling the present Trinitarian conundrum.

For now let me simply set the stage by suggesting that the core theological triad— "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"—rests on for an even more foundational metaphysical triad— Unmanifest (Hidden)/ Manifesting/Manifested. The Mystery of the Trinity begins deep within the stillness of God, where all is at rest in the hidden ground, and love does not exist as an outward energy. Here, in the eternal, unfathomable depths, all must be envisioned as a unitive equilibrium: a being so still that it is indistinguishable from non-being.

And yet within this unmanifest is also a manifesting principle. The prologue to the gospel of John calls it the Word: that which breaks the symmetry of stillness and gives rise, deep within the Godhead, to that outward impetus toward self-communication and manifestation.

The interplay of these two forces calls forth the miracle of the third, or reconciling: the manifested. Something is flung outward—an outward and visible expression of what the inner

and hidden heart looks like. The ousia of God (as the Cappodocian Fathers termed God's innermost being), passing through the prism of manifestingness, emerges as the energia of God, God's holy outwardness—not as a distant reflection of the original essence, but the essence itself, made expressive in a new dimension. The hidden ground of love becomes the cornerstone of the visible universe. And following this same principle still further in its descent into time, this hidden ground of love (which could be described metaphorically as Father), manifesting in principle (as Spirit), gives rise to "the Word-become-flesh" who dwelled among us full of grace and truth (as Son)...8 "...and we beheld his glory." As dictated in a ternary metaphysic, the dialectic results in making the hidden essence fully manifest in a new dimension, in even more concentrated and intense form, like light gathered in a magnifying glass. This mystical culmination of the Law of Three is the seat of early Christianity's intuitively accurate identification of Christ as the ultimate "holy reconciling"—"in whom all things hold together."

Without diving too far into these sacred mysteries at this point, I would merely hope to convey some sense of the expansiveness inherent in a ternary system. While Christianity has yet to fully tap the explosive transformative power locked up in those covalent bonds of the Trinity, the potential has not gone entirely unnoticed. As Olivier Clement astutely comments in The Roots of Christian Mysticism:

A solitary God could not be "love without limits." A God who made himself twofold, according to a pattern common in mythology, would make himself the root of an evil multiplicity to which he could only put a stop by reabsorbing it into himself. The Three-in-One denotes the perfection of Unity—of "super-unity," according to Dionysius the Areopagite— fulfilling itself in communion and becoming the source and foundation of all communion. It suggests the perpetual surmounting of contradiction...

Twofoldness leads to cyclic recurrence. All progression, or forward motion through time, operates under the Law of Three, its very asymmetry creating the necessary forward impetus. There is no progression apart from the Law of Three, and no Law of Three apart from progression. This deceptively simple point is actually at the heart of Christian metaphysics, if we only knew how to tap it better.

The Quarternity

The quarternity was first suggested as an "improvement" to the Trinity by C.G. Jung, who noted that the square form (or more specifically, the mandala, or square combined with

the circle) has a greater stability and archetypal completeness than the triangle. He suggested that the "missing feminine" in the Christian Trinity could be found by extending the form into a quaternity, adding the feminine as the bottom, or earth pole. Jung's insight has furnished both the agenda and to a large extent the strategy for contemporary efforts toward a more androgynous revisioning of the Godhead.10

In a very important recent contribution to this field, Fr. Bruno Barnhart in Second Simplicity enthusiastically embraces Jung's fourfold schematic while at the same time introducing a significant variation: he locates the feminine at the third (rather than fourth) pole.11 In this position it coincides with the traditional placement of the Holy Spirit in Trinitarian thought, emerging in this new overlay as "the immanent and unitive Spirit .... the divine Feminine..."the inner wisdom and power that moves the history of humankind toward its consummation." 12 Here Barnhart bridges the worlds between feminine and Jungian thought, bringing powerful new theological support to a feminine designation of the Holy Spirit.

But while the initial attraction of the principle of quarternity is strong representing, in Barnhart's words, "the wedding of the masculine principle of structure and polarity with the feminine principle of wholeness, simplicity, and unity," 13 in terms of the metaphysical system laid out so far, the flaw should be apparent. For the quarternity is in fact merely a double binary and hence operates under the earlier mythological law of paired opposites, in this case doubled pairs. While it does bring a "mandalic" completion to the Trinity, it has also switched tracks metaphysically and hence leads to a muddying of the waters and a weakening of the dynamic asymmetrical driveshaft of the ternary system's whole self- understanding. While binary systems seek completion in a "reabsorption into the whole," as Clement observes, ternary systems seek completion in the drive into a new dimentsion. To find the "missing fourth" according to the Law of Three, we must seek for it at a whole new level. The fourth is not a final and stable completion, but the "new arising" which emerges inevitably from the dynamic interplay of the three.

Letting the Trinity Flow

Hence, to my mind, at least, the price paid for feminine participation in the Trinity (at least by the present strategies) is far too high. The result is to collapse a dynamic metaphysic of change and transformation which we have not yet begun to fathom into a staid principle of

symmetry, or balanced opposites, which can sustain at a given level but lacks the ability to drive into the new.

The real source of the present theological dilemma concerning the attempt to feminize the Trinity or "correcting" the Trinity as a quarternity lies at the metaphysical level—and it is the very problem that the Trinity, but its own inner hermeneutic seeks to avoid: the conflation of eternal principle and temporal process. The difficult seam of Jesus as human being and as divine hypostasis has bedeviled theologians for centuries and remains at the core of the present conundrum, where a "male" eternal principle seems to demand a counterbalancing "female" one. In the same way The Holy Spirit, when the distinction between eternal and temporal realms is lost, emerges as a conflation of eternal Wisdom with the energetic presence of the risen Christ, a tension of opposites which even Barnhart cannot satisfactorily reconcile.14

But the solution is not to abandon the ternary principle, but to apply it, by permitting the Trinity to flow again. As a metaphysical principle, the Trinity is by nature kinetic, over-spilling itself into new expressions of its tremendous creative energy. In our dogmatic insistence upon only ONE triad of this eternal manifesting principle (Father/Son/Holy Spirit), we have bottled up its energy and conflated its unfolding manifestations. But the solution is not to find "more inclusive-language-expressions" of this one triad, but to become much more fluid in our use of the Law of Three, realizing that Father/Son/Holy Spirit takes its place among many triads of God's expressiveness in a ternary metaphysical system—each revealing a different facet of the divine wholeness:

Unmanifest/ Manifesting/ Manifested

Hidden Ground of love/ Wisdom/ Word

God/Word/Word-made-flesh

Mother-Sophia/Jesus-Sophia/ Spirit-Sophia 15

Father/ Son/ Holy Spirit

Affirming/ resisting / reconciling… (etc)

The great secret of the Trinity, viewed as metaphysical principle, lies in its knowledge of "the impressure of nothingness into something," in Boehme's words: 16 how eternal principle comes to manifest in time and form. Time—i.e., sequential process— is an essential ingredient, and it is in time that we will find the missing feminine. From the above list we can see as well how the ternary is a principle that cuts across the paired opposites and engages both the masculine and feminine at shifting points, according to the particular triad (the feminine will not always automatically be the "resisting" or

receptive force, but can be resisting affirming or reconciling; the stations are fluid.) 17 In this flexibility there is liberation not only from the lack of feminine participation but from the gender stereotyping so prevalent in contemporary psychological models.

Once again, the real roots of the conundrum lie in Christianity's age-old confusion of metaphysics and theology.18 If the feminist dilemma is to be satisfactorily resolved, the real task before us is to have the courage to let go of the Trinity as Christianity's theological ace of clubs (using it only to prove that a human being was fully God), and to approach it instead in its cosmically subtle role as an ordering and revealing principle, of which Christ is its culminating expression. In misusing the metaphysical principle as a doctrinal prop, we have missed the inherent energy for transformation. If we could bring a new expansiveness to our search, we might discover that the Trinity has treasures we have not yet begun to unlock. But also, to abandon it or adulterate the leguminous out of a well-intentioned but ill-reasoned attempt to strengthen the "feminine" dimension of Christianity is to make a wrong and very dangerous turn.

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