

Reflection | A Perichoresis of Possibility, Generosity and Space Making

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Cameron Fraser

You put your right hand in.

You take your right hand out.

You put your right hand in,

And you shake it all about.

You do the Hokey Pokey

And you turn yourself around.

That's what it's all about!

On one level, this reflection will attempt to answer the question...

What if, as the song suggests, doing the Hokey Pokey is, in fact,

What it's all about.

On another level, this reflection is an invitation to ponder the Christian idea of Trinity

An idea that has often been an unnecessarily convoluted, exclusionary almost litmus test of orthodox doctrine,

And to wonder instead whether it might in fact be understood as an important foundation for a generous, ethical, and profoundly pluralistic Christian Theological imagination.

Today is Trinity Sunday.

You may have noticed that we mark a great number of special Sundays here at Knox-Met.

Last week was Pentecost Sunday, and the week before was Ascension Sunday.

Both are named for the important moment in the Christian story which we remember on those days.

Transfiguration Sunday, Baptism of Jesus Sunday, Easter Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are similar examples.

We'll also from time-to-time name particular modern observances.

In addition to Pentecost, last Sunday, within the United Church was also Pride Sunday.

At the beginning of August, we'll mark Emancipation Sunday.

And in the fall, World Communion Sunday, World Food Sunday, Reformation Sunday, All Saints Sunday, Peace Sunday, and Remembrance Sunday.

But today is not marking a special moment in the Christian story, nor a historical event

Trinity Sunday is named for a Doctrine, or Teaching of the Christian Tradition.

And a kind of complicated one at that.

Now, I'd like to suggest that Theology and Doctrine are in fact pretty important

Not because we need to ensure that we believe the right things.

In an attempt to relate to, to find common ground with someone in my life with an extremely rigid belief system, I once bought a book I knew was a favourite of theirs.

It was called, DOCTRINE: WHAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD BELIEVE.

I got a few pages in and decided that I would instead try to relate to this person based on their love of sports.

That's not what I am talking about when I say Theology is important.

I don't think it's about a checklist and if you check enough boxes, well then you're a proper Christian, or person of faith.

I think that what we believe how we understand our beliefs, and how we related to them has a tremendous effect on how we are in the world – how we feel about ourselves and others.

And my hope is that Theology, instead of feeling like a really complicated discipline that requires all this insider knowledge, could be something that anyone feels they can engage.

To ask curious and sometimes critical questions about belief, ideas, religious traditions and narratives.

There's a term I've been using in reflections over the past few months - Theological Imagination.

And I think that term points towards, the sometimes spoken, but often unspoken, ideas that frame how we interact with the world around us.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtC6vsxi-Q>

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a very public theologian, meaning that she writes, not for academic precision, but seeks to write and speak so that her work is able to be accessible and relatable by all people

But also useful to navigate personal and communal struggles and questions.

She was asked what faith means, and in answering she refers to queer Catholic Theologian James Alison...

I like to think about Faith as relaxing, as in the way that you relax when you are in the presence of someone you are certain is fond of you. When you are in the presence of someone you are certain is fond of you, you are more creative, funnier, you are more spontaneous, time seems to pass differently.

What an intriguing notion.

Faith, not about being an intellectual assent to certain religious ideas, but about a sense of relaxing in a knowing of one's own beloved-ness and belonging...to God, within oneself, in the world.

In James Alison's own words...

Faith is what enables us to relax enough to be stretched into being something much more than we could ever imagine. One of the odd consequences of this is that, as it happens in life, it ceases to become so important to "be good"

(he's using air quotes or scare quotes here)

...as we find ourselves loved, we're all the more able to give up trying to manipulate people into loving us. This is when we also find ourselves able to do genuinely good things out of soft-hearted generosity rather than out of a need to prove or justify ourselves.

Alison uses the term manipulate here, and he means it in a number of ways.

There's our typical understanding of it as malicious and intentional,

but there's also this sense,

and I understand how the term manipulate fits,

but I wonder if there is a better term

to name how we sometimes conform to what people want or expect,

or try to appease and compromise seeking love and acceptance.

So it makes me wonder, do people's experience with religion make people feel more relaxed into a sense of belonging, a sense of being at home in themselves?

At home in the world?

Or do people's religious experiences create anxiety about self-worth, acceptance, belonging?

Do they cause us to twist who we are, tone down, seek to adapt?

And I think that there is some ample evidence, that for many it is sadly more the latter.

So, what does Trinity Sunday have to do with this?

Many people explore this experience of seeking to understand all the things we do to find a sense of safety and acceptance and love through things like attachment style theory, or models like the enneagram.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/krispin-mayfield-what-attachment-style-do-you-have-to-god/id1330504752?i=1000554251699>

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/chichi-agorom-how-can-the-enneagram-be-a-tool-for/id1330504752?i=1000555705264>

These things invite us to ask questions

Like about how we struggle to gain feelings of love and belonging?

What strategies/defenses do we rely on that sometimes act as armour?

And a lot more.

And I think that along with these things, questioning how our Theological Imagination shapes our understanding of the world is a fertile project within communities of faith,

Both for personal exploration,

But also recognizing how Christian hegemony has historically shaped European and by extension North American societies.

How does the Christian teaching of Trinity offer space for this sort of internal work?

I would suggest that much of what is called Trinitarian theology is embedded in a static and hierarchical imagination of God and Universe.

The term Trinity does not appear in the Bible, but it gets picked up in the first centuries of the Christian Tradition, and gets picked up in different ways.

Passages like what we heard this morning have these deep and lovely sense of a mysterious intertwining relationship.

From the Hebrew Scriptures there is this interplay of God and Wisdom and in the Christian Scriptures Jesus speaks of this interconnectedness between Spirit, God, who he calls Father or parent, and himself (and his followers incidentally, but this idea gets muddled in the creation of the idea of Trinity).

To grossly over simplify things...

By the 4th century the idea that the Christian God is triune – tri = three – une = unity/one is pretty central to the Councils of the Church which is now the official religion of the Roman Empire.

God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And there are these theological battles about this notion, and very firm and precise boundaries are drawn.

And this trinue God rules above and over the universe demanding obedience and order.

It becomes and remains, almost a litmus test for what is truly Christian.

But also it becomes an exclusionary thing, because if the Christian God is uniquely trinitarian, then any other vision of God that isn't either can't be in conversation, or must be understood as "not quite right".

At the same time this is going on in the halls of emerging Christendom with all its power and influence, the mystics and monastics have picked up these same passages and done something different.

They read in the relationship between God and Wisdom, God, Jesus, Spirit this dynamic of interaction, intertwining, that instead of becoming a shared personhood focuses on relationality.

And the term they use is perichoresis.

Circle Dance.

An action made of many participants, but that is ultimately a union, a communion of many.

And while the Creeds and the Councils sort of downplayed how Jesus's community of friends were part of this dynamic in the writings like John, the mystics make this central.

Divinity is a Dance, it's not above and removed from the universe and humanity, but it includes the Universe and all of humanity in its rhythm.

While this is of course a hugely truncated summary, I wonder if you can sense the implications here.

What kind of relationships, society, and community flows from a tightly guarded theological argument about static power over and above and what kind of relationships, society, and community flow from imagining divinity as participatory, creativity, generosity, and space making?

What sort of personal implications flow from a divinity that must be conformed to rather than a dance that we are all swept up into making space for diversity and difference?

Going back to my opening question,

What if the Hokey Pokey is in fact, what it's all about?

I would suggest that the Christian Teaching of Trinity when picked up not as a complicated litmus test of orthodoxy that maintains a static and hierarchical structure of the universe creates the possibility for all sorts of anxiety. It becomes about policing what can fit and what must be left out.

In contrast, a dynamic dance of space-making offers a powerful metaphor and operating assumption.

It's not about making exclusive claims to truth that need be argued or defended.

It's something to be embraced, embodied, practiced both within our own spirituality, within our communities, and also our work in the world.

This metaphor resonates and moves in rhythm with many other religious and philosophic ideals, and if we attend to it, offers us the chance to move in rhythm and harmony in creative partnership with others rather than either demanding conformity or refusing to participate out of a fear of pollution from the "other".

And it calls us to a profound ethical responsibility of space making – to remake our communities, institutions and societies to allow for greater flourishing.

And it allows us personally the possibility to relax into a knowing that there is space for all of us,

All of us,

And all the parts of each one of us.

It's about bringing the fullness of who we are into relationship and conversation with the fullness of others.

It's a very different posture.

So I wonder,

How does this land with you?

Where does this land?

I wonder what questions and possibilities this opens?

I hope we can keep the conversation going.