

### “Trinity of Love”

There is a series of YouTube videos made by Lutheran Pastor Hans Fiene under the name Lutheran Satire. The videos feature two cartoon characters named Donnell and Connell who are medieval Irish peasants. They claim to be totally ignorant yet can argue theological concepts like learned scholars. One of the conceits of the videos is that Donnell and Connell call everyone Patrick. So it is fitting that they should have a video with St. Patrick; it is one of my favorite episodes. St. Patrick is portrayed as an icon with all of the traditional aspects of iconography—including him holding a lavishly decorated book, probably The Bible, and a shamrock and decorated with lots of gold leaf. In the video Donnell and Connell ask St. Patrick to explain the Trinity.<sup>1</sup> He is a saint so this should be easy work for him.

As Patrick begins to define the Trinity, the brothers stop him and ask that he use an analogy because they “are simple people without your fancy education, books and learning and we are hearing about this for the first time so try to keep it simple.” Patrick begins by saying that the Trinity is like water which can be found in the form of a liquid, ice and vapor. The ignorant brothers look on in disbelief. They quickly point out that his analogy is the heresy of modalism. Modalism maintains that God is not three different persons, but God reveals the Divine person in three different forms. This was condemned as heresy by the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Having been chastened by the two brothers St. Patrick tries again. This time he says that the Trinity is like the sun which is a star, light and heat. Once again the ignorant brothers point out that this analogy is a heresy. This time it is the heresy of Arianism. That is that Christ and the Holy Spirit are creations of the Father and therefore not co-eternal or of the same substance as the Father. This belief was condemned as a heresy by the First Council of Nicaea in the year 325. The same Council that gave us the first portion of the Nicene Creed.

Poor Patrick then goes for another analogy this time focusing on the three leafed shamrock that he is holding. But before he gets the words out of his mouth the brothers say that he is about to confess the heresy of Partialism. That is that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each one-third of the Godhead and therefore not fully God until they are joined together. Also, determined a heresy by the Council of Nicene.

He tries the analogy of a man who can be a father, a son, and a boss which the brothers point out is modalism again. He then tries the analogy of an apple with the seed, the pulp and the skin which is once again partialism. St. Patrick finally gives up and gives a full technical definition with the basic understanding that the Trinity is a mystery that humans are not able to understand but can only accept by faith.<sup>2</sup> The Trinity is a tough one and unless

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQLfgaUoQCw> accessed June 1, 2023

<sup>2</sup> A short list of Trinitarian heresies can be found at <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/Trinitarian%20Heresies.html> accessed June 1, 2023

we want to be burned at the stake it is one that we should avoid attempting to explain.<sup>3</sup>

Since attempting to explain the Trinity beyond the three in one and one in three is so difficult, it might be more appropriate to discuss what makes the Trinity important. The answer is straightforward and is clearly stated in the First Letter of John. “God is love.”<sup>4</sup> The Trinity being made up of three co-equal persons is a God that exhibits love within itself. That love pours out from the Godhead into the universe. One of the best examples of that love pouring out is the Creation as told in the first chapter of Genesis. I am not a creationist and Genesis 1 is not a science text. The poem intends to explain the relationship between God and creation. It is a poem about how God loved the creation into being. God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—working in unity creates the world *ex amore* out of love God uses the void of gasses and water that are the primordial aspects of the pre-creation to create the universe. In this poem we see God’s loving a chaotic void into an ordered system where each portion of creation has meaning and order to it.

We might ask why I assert that God loves creation into being? Fasten your seatbelts for this is where the theology kicks in. Theologians assert that God created all things *ex nihilo*, that is out of nothing. In Hebrew the word for this type of creating is בָּרָא (bara). In fact, the very first words of the book of Genesis are בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, בְּרֵאשִׁית (Bereshit bara Elohim) To begin God created...The Hebrew verb “to create” as if you or I were to create something is בָּרָא. לְבְרֹא is reserved for God, because only God can create out of nothing. We have to create with matter that we have at hand or from our minds which we did not create.

One of my favorite novels is called *Mr. G* by Alan Lightman. The main character Mr. G lives in the void a place where nothing exists except for him. The book begins with Mr. G saying, “As I recall, I had just woken up from a nap when I decided to create the universe.” A funny line, but the importance of it is that Mr. G creates *ex nihilo*. Mr. G goes on to create and expand the universe and even makes some mistakes. He mostly creates out of boredom. This is not the case with the God of Genesis 1. This God, our God, creates out of love. I know this because of the care with which the poet tells us about how God creates.

God is not bored or careless. God creates carefully. First creating light so that the creation can see itself. Then God creates a dome to separate the waters from above and below in order to have dry land. Once there is dry land God speaks into being the vegetation that will cover the land. And so forth.

With each step along the way God observes that the thing that God has created is “good.” God at no point creates something bad. God is only creating goodness, because God’s ultimate creation, human beings, will be created “in

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<sup>3</sup> For a list of nontrinitarian heresies and beliefs see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nontrinitarianism> accessed June 3, 2023

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 4:8b

our image, according to our likeness.” God is creating a place where God’s likeness will exist. God does not intend for what resembles, imitates, or represents God to live in a place this is not good. Indeed, God’s love in creating is part of God’s own self-care. The same self-care that will also create the Sabbath as a day of rest for God and creation.

Medieval mystics liked to describe the Trinitarian God as living in an eternal sacred dance. This God is creating a universe that has all of the needed attributes to be a self-loving creation. It also has all that is necessary to love not only itself but to love God. That breaks down when the human creature starts to think that it is the one capable of creating out of nothing, or at least not needing anything in order to create. It is when humanity gets too big for its britches as my mama says, that it pushes God aside as unnecessary. We are going through such a time now, but it is nothing new humanity has done it before. My prayer is that we will come out of our self-congratulatory fantasy to realize that we are not our own creators and that we do need God.

Thus while the Trinity is a mystery that all of our best analogies cannot describe. What we can describe and live into is the love in which the Trinity exists and out of which the Trinity created us and all matter ex nihilo and ex amore. This is the God in which we live, and move and have our being.