# Appendix on the Nicene Creed

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# Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity declares that for Christians there is only one God, but this singular God exists as three "persons" called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The word "doctrine" means "teaching," and any teaching is an interpretation. This particular teaching is inextricably dependent upon the Neoplatonic world-view and philosophical habits of late classical antiquity. Those are not our habits of mind, nor our world-view. As a result, the interpretation it offers no longer makes much sense to most people. And that's a huge problem.

As a result of this problem, religion and spirituality have lost touch with one another within Christian tradition. Some of that undoing can be traced to the flagrant misrepresentations and political machinations of fundamentalism. I've said that before: Christianity has lost control of its own identity, its own "brand." But some of the lost connection between religion and spirituality can be attributed to the fact that Christian tradition can seem trapped within its own arcane theological obscurities and rigid anxieties around orthodoxy.

That anxiety is understandable. After Christianity became the exclusive state religion of the Roman empire, "heresy" and "treason" became interchangeable terms. Any failure of scrupulous orthodoxy could prove fatal: after the Nicene Council issued its famous creed, "heretics" faced far more grief from the government than nonbelievers did, because *heretics* were directly challenging the ideological foundation of state authority.[1] In the early centuries of this hazardous theocracy, creed followed creed followed creed, each more elaborate than its predecessors. Standing invisibly behind each of them are the regional rivalries, political intrigues, ethnic tensions, and raw power politics entailed by the long slow collapse of the Roman Empire into the Europeans "dark ages." I'm only exaggerating a little when I say that every word in every version of the Creed began to carry an immense burden of hyper-technical theological explication. And then heaven help you if you said or thought anything contrary to how your political opponents parsed these explications.

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[1] Jarsolav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*

Given the inescapable obscurity of the Trinity to the modern mind, of course there are countless contemporary attempts to explain the doctrine in ways that make sense to people today. Garry Wills offers the best, most persuasive, least technical account that I've ever seen in *Why I Am a Catholic,* chapter 5. If you want a full-throated theological account, take a look at the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, issued in two steps in the 1990s under Pope John Paul II.[2] It nicely summarizes the growing complexity of Trinitarian theology as church council after church council weighed in on technical disputes. And in concise, unembarrassed ways it delineates the acute logical contradictions that the Trinity entails.

Unfortunately, both of these fine accounts can leave any outside observer with the impression that to be a true Christian one must believe a whole stack of logical contradictions before breakfast every morning. As I said at the outset here, that's a problem. Furthermore, and as I explain in more detail in *Confronting Religious Violence,* chapters 5 and 6, what Jesus himself taught is conspicuously absent from the creeds. That's an even bigger problem. The teachings of Jesus define Christian faith and spirituality—not the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus never proclaimed that God is triune, nor that he himself was "one in Being" with God, nor that the Spirit "proceeds" from him and God jointly. He proclaimed that God is non-violent and non-punitive. The theory of the Trinity is a body of interesting and influential theological speculation from centuries after Jesus. But that's all it is. It's commentary, not "revelation."

In the following pages I'm not going to try my own hand at explicating trinitarian orthodoxy. That's been done already at great length and by people with far better theological credentials than mine. I want instead to set the text of the Nicene Creed into its own cultural context. As we look back over the span of 1700 years, what did this text *achieve* in its own day? What "work" did it do? And what were its political and cultural consequences? It's a text of immense historical and cultural importance *whether or not it accurately describes the interiority of God.*

I doubt that it's possible to describe the interiority of God. I doubt that it's meaningful to try to do so. I think the effort to speculate say much more about us than it

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[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church, revised in accordance with the official Latin text promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm

ever will about God. And I think the same was true of those contentious councils with their elaborate creedal claims about the interior structure of God. We need to look at the creeds as human texts—not as absolute and unquestionable Truth About God that one must believe or be damned. The God of Jesus damns no one.

And so, in what follows I'll sketch three of the seldom-recognized cultural consequences of Christian trinitarian systematics. It has strongly influenced our answers to four culturally important questions: (1) Is compassion realistic? Or is should we write it off as "liberal nonsense," because the greater truth is that nice guys finish last? (2) Are human rights universal? Or is that yet another liberal political scheme to take from the makers? (3) How does the mind work? Is truth possible, or are alt-facts and anything-goes lying the only game in town? (4) Is reality rationally structured? Does rigorously objective inquiry attest accurately to genuine facts? Or is it merely "liberal bias" or perhaps Western cultural imperialism? For centuries—for more than a thousand years—Western culture argued such issues by and through arguments about the inward structure of the divine. That's how pre-modern culture worked. The classic and medieval world thought symbolically not empirically, and "God" was the single greatest symbol organizing how the West thought about reality. Although theology has lost its standing as "the Queen of Sciences," its major conclusions about reality persist.

I'll end with a story. If you are a story-first person, then by all means jump ahead and read the story before continuing. "1992: A Mountaintop Moment" describes a day when I recognized—yet again—that God can't be boxed in by doctrines like the Trinity.

## The Text in Question

Let's begin with a quick look at the exact wording of the Nicene Creed. English translations of course vary; the one I'm going to cite comes from the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* (1982). For ease in comprehension, I'll divide it into four paragraphs, one for each member of the Trinity and one for a catch-all collection of non-Trinitarian items that were nonetheless contested points amidst the theological diversity of early Christianity. Here's something to watch for as you read: unlike the earlier Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed explains the interrelationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That was its major—and controversial—theological innovation. These inter-relationships

constitute the "tri-unity" of the divine, so notice them as they whiz past. To help with that, I'll italicize them.

> We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.
>
> We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God*, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.* For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and *was made* man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.
>
> We believe in the Holy Spirit, *the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.* With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.
>
> We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

And here's the earlier, simpler Apostles' Creed. Once again there are various translations. This one appears in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

> I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
>
> I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Under Pontius Pilate He was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
>
> I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of

saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

This simpler Creed had been used in baptismal rituals from very early in the tradition, well before the year 100. Initiates to the faith were submerged in water three times. With each symbolic rebirth, they affirmed their trust in and commitment to God—to Yhwh Elohim, the Lord God; to Jesus himself; and to "the Spirit," a major synonym for "God" within Hebrew scripture.

A sidebar note: as I explain in *Confronting Religious Violence,* chapter 5, the repeated formula "I believe in" is somewhat misleading as a translation. Prior to 1500 or so, "belief" mean "be-love," which is to say "trust in" or "commit to." It did not yet mean "intellectual assent to a theory about," much less "intellectual assent to that which is inherently dubious," like "believing that the earth is flat." Those connotations of "believe" developed much later.[3]

Here's the bottom line: in these crucial early centuries, new Christians were not committing to any specific trinitarian systematic theology when they affirmed their trust in and commitment to God, to Jesus, and to the Spirit. Although it's possible to read a Trinitarian orthodoxy back into the Apostles Creed, it's probably inaccurate to do so. For these earliest generations of Christians, the Apostles' Creed presupposes that the relationships among God, Jesus, and the Spirit were already embodied in biblical narratives. It's only much later in the tradition that these key biblical stories are eclipsed by abstract neoplatonic philosophical-theological theorizing.

When in the 1500s Martin Luther insisted *sola scriptura*—Christianity is based upon the Bible and nothing else—he was objecting to how this highly abstract theologizing had surpassed scripture at the heart of the tradition. I don't mean to suggest that Luther objected to the Nicene Creed, of course: the *sola scriptura* principle has always been in practice far more circumscribed that it sounds. Nonetheless, Luther's key assertion continues to resonate for many of us.

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[3] For a well-illustrated history of the evolution of the meanings of "faith" and "believe," see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton NY: Princeton University Press, 1979).

# The Context of the Nicene Creed

The doctrine of the Trinity was enunciated by the Council of Nicaea in 329 CE. Here's how that came to pass.

A decade or so after his somewhat dubious "conversion to Christianity" at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, the Emperor Constantine summoned church leaders from major cities across his empire. They gathered in 325 in Nicaea, a lakeside resort town in Turkey, east of what is now Istanbul. The emperor presided in person because he wanted to insure that this meeting, unlike previous efforts, would definitely affirm that Christianity was a monotheism: one God, one emperor. As the emperor saw it, or wanted to see it, the one-and-only supreme God had given "all power in heaven and on earth" to Jesus, and Jesus had conferred it upon Constantine at the Battle of Milvian Bridge.[4]

But to define Christianity as a secure monotheism required settling—once and for all—the problematic metaphysical relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and Yhwh Elohim, the Lord God of the Jews. That relationship was unsettled because ideas about Jesus were all over the map.

Some Christians believed that Jesus was identical to God, pure and simple. Jesus was Yhwh Elohim, the Lord God of the Jews, here on earth for a while in human guise. That made perfectly good sense to ex-pagan Gentile Christians in the ancient world. Greek gods disguised themselves as human with some regularity. And in his Epistle to the Philippians, Paul describes Jesus as having been "born in the likeness of men" and "found in human form" (Phil. 2:5-8)—word choices that might be understood to imply that Jesus merely *appeared* to be human. But in fact he was *not* truly human. He was divine.

There was a second option. Other Christians believed that Jesus was not identical with God but rather something God had created. Jesus was akin to "the angel of the Lord" or "the Spirit of the Lord," figures who appear from time to time all through Hebrew scripture. They appear sometimes in human form, sometimes in dreams,

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[4] Jaroslav Pelikan offers a lovely short account of these events in *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), chapter 4.

sometimes as disembodied voices. In Judges 6:7, a figure identified as "the Angel of the Lord" comes and sits under an oak tree near where Gideon is threshing wheat. The angel greets Gideon, and the two begin what sounds for all the world like an ordinary human conversation. By Judges 6:11, however, Gideon's interlocutor is identified simply as "the Lord," the Lord *himself,* not "the Angel of the Lord." This narrative fluidity is common in Hebrew storytelling. The appearance of such figures was also common throughout ancient-world narratives: strangers show up who are in fact gods or subsidiary spirits in the form of an apparently ordinary human being.

The word “angel” in Greek means “messenger,” which was of course the role played by Hermes (Mercury) in the Greco-Roman pantheon. Hermes is also the god of doorways and intersections and liminal spaces of any kind. In narrative terms, figures like Hermes often personify the "otherness" or the "otherly" quality of intuitions and unconscious material newly arising into consciousness. And so it makes a certain cultural sense to read the gospels as stories about a Hermes-like, spirit-messenger figure moving among us in an uncommonly continuous and physical way for a year or so. The gnostic gospels clearly tend in this direction: Jesus is an uncanny spirit-messenger in human form, come to rescue us from our entrapment within material reality. In the Gospel of John, that's very much what Jesus sounds like. And a somewhat long-winded messenger at that, prone to lengthy philosophical disquisitions about his own identity. In John's Gospel, Jesus does not seem even remotely human.

And there was a third possibility. Perhaps Jesus was a demigod, a half-human and half-divine hybrid. Or perhaps the human Jesus acquired divine *status* because God adopted him into divinity, an adoption that didn't change the fact of Jesus's own human identity or human nature. These closely-related options were also familiar entities in ancient-world culture.

Logically speaking there was a fourth option, of course: Jesus was a human being, plain and simple. He was a prophet in the proud and ancient lineage of Jewish prophets—and nothing more. As the long-promised Messiah, Jesus was the all-time definitive leader of the “kingdom of God” and authoritative spokesman for God himself. But Jesus was human.

As far as I know, nobody at Nicaea would have argued point-blank that Jesus was a human prophet and nothing more. Jesus had to have an authentic claim to some degree or kind of divinity. The theological quandary was simply figuring out what kind of claim that was—and then reconciling Jesus's divinity with the classic Jewish monotheism encoded by authoritative texts like "Hear, oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4, KJV).

Despite the assumption that Jesus had to be divine in some regard, scholarly historians also insist that many early Christians were fiercely determined that Jesus had to be authentically human, whatever else he was in addition. His genuine humanity was vital, because if Jesus were God—God pure and simple, God from God and nothing else—then he didn't die. Gods can't die. And if he didn't die, then he wasn't raised from the dead. And if neither his death nor his resurrection were humanly real, then neither his life nor his death nor his resurrection have any ultimate transforming significance for my life, for my suffering, and for my inevitable, impending death. His life and death and resurrection would be reduced to an illusion, a trick like Zeus and the swan or grey-eyed Athena. For the life, death, and defiant courage of Jesus to have human relevance, Jesus has to be human. His humanity could not have been a bit of divinely convincing special effects.

The problem was resolved—or at least given a definitive shape—when the Council of Nicaea laid out the doctrine of the Trinity: God is three "persons" (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) who are "one in being." God is *one.* Monotheism is preserved through the "one in being" formulation and through subsidiary statements in the Creed that attempt to specify further details within this overarching claim. In *Jesus Through the Centuries,* Yale historian Jaroslav Pelican estimates that the Nicene formulations remained controversial for a thousand years. In *The Jesus Wars,* Baylor professor Philip Jenkins recounts the details of horrific civil wars lasting centuries—civil wars in which competing ideas about Jesus became closely interwoven with regional rivalries and ethnic tensions among the major geographic and administrative regions of the Roman empire. In *Beyond Belief,* Princeton historian Elaine Pagels estimates that half of all Christians at the time would not have agreed with Nicaea's formulations.

But like many other Christians, I grew up thinking that (except for a few scattered heretics now and then) all Christians everywhere had always understood and agreed with the Nicene Creed. As these scholars attest, that is not the case.

I was startled to learn that fact. I was startled because the variety of early beliefs about Jesus is erased when, week after week, congregations recite this creed aloud as if it has always been incontrovertible truth universally accepted among Christians. It's not. It never has been.

I know plenty of faithful, deeply engaged Christians who quietly refuse to recite the Creed because it is *not,* in fact, what they believe about God, about Jesus, and about the Spirit. "The Father Almighty"? Maybe not. Maybe deifying patriarchy is what's heretical. Some churches, even some Catholic churches, have come up with "statements of faith" that substitute for the creed in a worship service. Some of these are far more satisfying and thought-provoking than the Nicene Creed. Having put in some serious time working my way clause-by-clause through the philosophical technicalities of the Nicene creed—having done so more than once over the years—I do wonder how many people in the ordinary congregation actually understand what they are saying. Or how many care about the theological arcana at stake. As I said at the beginning here, many of these disputes are based upon a worldview that is almost incomprehensibly distant from our worldview.

Furthermore, the text that so many Christians could have recited from memory by age ten is not, in fact, the creed issued by the Council of Nicaea. It’s a revision issued by the Council of Constantinople in 381. That later council tried—without much success—to elicit agreement on the philosophical technicalities of the original statement issued in 329. The Council of Constantinople did this by translating certain troublesome terms from Greek into Latin and then claiming they meant something different. (Politicians do this all the time: what's the difference between "increasing taxes" and "closing tax loopholes"?)

I'm not going to get into those weeds. I'm not going to speculate about the interior structure of God. I'm far more interested in the Creed as a human document. I'm interested in how this document functioned at the time; I'm interested in its longer-term

cultural consequences. That's fascinating stuff. Any of us ought to care about the issues at stake in the cultural consequences of the Nicene Creed.

It seems to me that there are four human cultural issues for which the Nicene Creed turned out to be quite influential indeed. Let's look at them one at a time.

## 1. Is Compassion Realistic?

When the Jesus movement opened out to include Gentiles, the question, “who was Jesus?” was rapidly assimilated to platonic and neoplatonic philosophical speculations about the nature and structure of reality. The reality attested to by Jesus of Nazareth had to be fitted in to the philosophic cosmology of the ancient world—a cosmology derived from Plato.

In vibrant, often bitter controversy across the first five or six hundred years after the death of Jesus, Christian theologians continued trying to reconcile Greek and Jewish views of reality—"Athens and Jerusalem," in the usual shorthand. This reconciliation progressively transformed the historical Jesus of Nazareth into Jesus the “Logos,” the rational, logical structure of the cosmos as that was described in Greek philosophy. At the core of this transformation was the creedal claim that Jesus is he “through whom all things were made.” As the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus was the co-eternal creative agency directly responsible for all of reality. In terms more familiar to us, perhaps, he might be called the "executor" of God the Father's transcendent identity as "maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." Jesus's role in creation was a huge claim made in a small, easily missed little clause both in the Nicene Creed and in the opening lines of the mystic-gnostic Gospel of John.

What did that clause mean? What were they getting at? What did that claim achieve, or what difference did it make? In cut-to-the-chase terms, here's the key issue as I see it: the Creed asserts the accuracy and authority of what Jesus taught. Let me explain how that works, or how at least how I think it worked in the fourth century.

Jesus of Nazareth made many very radical claims about how we ought to live. Then and now, some of his teachings appear quite unrealistic. Share all wealth equally? Forgive our enemies and pray for those who harm us? Return no man evil for

evil? Judge not, that we be not judged? Radical compassion can seem radically crazy. Ambition can seem quite a bit more realistic than generosity. Nice guys finish last, cynics say. Or get crucified. Don't be a fool, cynics warn: some of what Jesus taught is suicidal not spiritual; it's over-the-top romantic, not realistic. Look out for number one, not for the least of these.

Just as Jesus's earliest followers called him "Son of God" as a way of claiming the cosmic validity of his teachings about God, so also these later philosopher-theologians asserted the cosmic validity of what Jesus taught by assimilating him to the essentially Greek concept of the "Logos," the cosmic principle of orderly coherence.

The Creed in effect declares that Jesus was an absolutely reliable guide to what's realistic and what's not realistic because "reality" was Jesus's work to begin with. He's the author of the source code. He knows how the system works. And so, exploitation sustained by violence and by political oppression are what's crazy. Self-seeking is ultimately self-destructive. Ambition and greed are blind to the authentic sources of the authentic good life. And so forth.

Needless to say, that's not how we would make such an argument today. In our day, we would collect statistics demonstrating that the well-being of even the wealthiest segment of society is a function of the well-being of the most impoverished segment. For example, in *Spirit Level*: *Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (2009) epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett demonstrate that the top percentiles of rich people in more egalitarian economies do better on every single measure, including longevity, than top percentiles of rich people in countries like the US or Britain where the gulf between rich and poor is vast. Or another example: in *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (2000), economics professor Robert Lane collects statistics demonstrating that increasing wealth does not correlate with increasing happiness; happiness correlates instead with moral commitments and personal relationships. Or consider this: there's also an empirical argument to be made against political violence. For example, there's increasingly dramatic historical evidence that the nuclear arms race between the US and the USSR was almost suicidally expensive on both sides. And social science can track the speed with which violence escalates, or the persistence and consequences of outrage at political oppression. The urge to kill our

enemies is what's irrational, not nonviolent conflict resolution and nonviolent confrontation with evil-doers.

We argue using data like these because we are a massively empirical culture. We start with “the facts.” A sharp, contemporary Council of Nicaea might take testimony from reams of social scientists if they wanted to demonstrate the accuracy of Jesus’s insights and therefore the meaning of messianic claims made about him by his followers.

But as we are empirical, the ancient world was philosophical. They did not have page after page of spreadsheet data on longevity or child outcomes or the relationship between happiness and disposable income. They relied instead upon complex metaphysical storytelling, storytelling from which the abstract-minded derived rigorous, somewhat mechanistic philosophical systems. And so they argued for the truth of what Jesus taught by saying that Jesus-as-human was simultaneously Jesus-as-God and, quite specifically, the creative Logos or the creative organizing principle of reality across the board.

They argued like that because in the ancient world, the question *Who was he?* and the question *Were his teachings true?* was in fact a single question.

In the ancient world, authority and personal status were fundamentally inseparable. If Jesus’s extraordinary teachings were to have absolute validity, then of course Jesus himself had to have absolute (i.e., divine) status. Truth comes “down from on high.” That’s the only direction from which it comes. Jesus can’t be correct in his teachings simply because his teachings are *empirically* correct, much less similar to what religious sages have taught globally about the sources of human well-being and social harmony. That empiricism is our cultural mind-set, not theirs. They could not have imagined our empiricism, just as we have trouble imagining our way into their merger of accuracy and personal status.

But we have to try. That's the crucial lesson, the crucial discovery, of the first Christian humanists: they realized that the past is profoundly different from the present. They discovered the remarkable influence of historical context and cultural context. And thus they discovered that a text's meaning can change, sometimes quite abruptly, when the text is restored to its context.

For instance, when we hear that Jesus was the "Son of God" we might think that's a claim about extraterrestrial sperm. But it's not. Thinking that way is biblical literalism. Biblical literalists first-and-foremost deny that cultural context shapes the meaning of a text. When they insist that scripture needs no "interpretation," they are opposing the work of cultural historians and biblical scholars who are trying to restore these vitally important texts to their original contexts. Only when we restore a text to its context, it seems to me, are we in any position to decide whether *what the text says* is true or meaningful in our own day.

That's what I'm trying to do here. And I do a whole lot more of it in *Confronting Religious Absolutism,* where I critique both biblical literalism and papal infallibility, and in *The Confrontational Wit of Jesus,* where I demonstrate repeatedly how major gospel stories change their meanings when we recognize and restore them to their own cultural context.

## 2. Are Human Rights Universal?

These dramatic claims about the divinity of Jesus testified to more than his status. They also testified to Christian claims about what it means to be human.

These Christian claims were not entirely new, of course. The Christian view of human nature is deeply rooted in Hebrew scripture: in Genesis, we are told that all of humanity is made "in the image" of the divine. In Jewish theology, all of us count as sons and daughters of God—not just Jesus. When Christianity spread throughout the Roman empire, that classic Jewish idea went viral in the ancient world, upending established Greco-Roman beliefs that there is no value at all in the lives of girls and women, slaves, laborers, defeated nations, and so forth.

When Jesus himself is declared "one in Being" with God, "God from God, light from light, begotten not made," that's a considerable expansion of inherited ideas about the divine within the human. We are not simply "in the image of God." As Jesus demonstrates, the divine dwells within us in a very full and active way. Only in Jesus is this divinity completely manifest as what has been called the Human Divine. But divinity dwells in all of us. Each of us can realize or manifest this divinity more fully than we do. And Jesus's teachings were a guide to doing that. In his compassion and inclusivity, in

his speaking up for the poor and the outcast, Jesus demonstrates in human form who God is—and thus what it would mean for any of us more fully to claim the divine within ourselves.

Less than a century after Jesus himself, Iraneus of Lyon was saying that "the glory of God is man fully alive"—that is, both Jesus himself and each of us to the extent that we too realize or manifest our true nature as children of God.[5] In the 300s, Athanasius said, "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." In the 1200s, Aquinas echoes Athanasius when he says, "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods."[6] That is, by following what Jesus taught, we can more fully realize our true nature, which is the human in full communion with the image of God within us—the fact of divinity itself dwelling within us.

Then and now, there are major political implications to such claims about human nature. From an imperial perspective, these dangerous ideas about human equality had to be corralled within a securely hierarchical structure. That desire for hierarchy and control was shared by many bishops and other leaders who also worried about the radical individualism and anarchic tendencies implicit within these ideas. As Walter Wink so nicely explains in *The Human Being,* it's difficult to claim or to recognize the divine within us without being either inflated into grandiosity or collapsed into despair that humanity so often and so easily fails to be humane.

The theocratic merger of church and state provided the necessary hierarchical structure—at least to some extent. As I explain in *Confronting Religious Violence,* chapters 6-9, over the next thousand years and more, church and empire would compete fiercely for control over the theocratic merger of church and state.

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[5] Here's a nice essay explaining what Iraneus meant—and what he didn't mean. http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=25-05-003-e

[6] Lest you think I'm being selectively or excessively "liberal" in quoting these exceedingly famous lines, here they are repeated in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church.* http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p122a3p1.htm Some strands within Christianity—those derived from Luther and, even more so from Calvin—take a much darker view of human nature. They believed, as Augustine did, that the image of God in us was completely destroyed by Adam and Eve. I discuss this strand in *Confronting Religious Judgmentalism,* chapters 5, 6, and 10.

One of the most revolutionary achievements of the first Christian humanists was rediscovering, translating, and publishing ancient-world speculation about the Human Divine and the potential manifestation of the divine within the human. In particular, the humanists retrieved and reinterpreted this long theological effort to reconcile Jewish theology with Greek philosophy. They did so in part by rethinking the key issues in light of a thousand years of subsequent Trinitarian systematic theology. As a result, they laid out an original, robust, theological account of the innate dignity of the human.[7] Their new syntheses of these ancient strands provided the conceptual foundation for the slow, unsteady rise of democracy and for modern beliefs about universal human rights. Their scholarly achievements were floated into general circulation by that new invention, the printing press. Their mastery of the social media of their own day set off the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment.

## 3. How Does the Mind Work?

As I've said repeatedly here, the Creed offers an analysis of the interior structure of the Godhead. One of its lesser-known consequences is the impact it had on how we conceptualize the interior structure of the human mind. How does the mind work? How do emotions and intellect together generate the fabric of self-awareness? What does that fabric show us about human motivation and, thus, the impact of culture upon the individual? What is the relationship between the structure of consciousness and possibility of accurate knowledge about the world around us? Is the structure of the mind attuned somehow to the structure of reality, such that what seems logical to us in the abstract will in fact prove empirically true?

These are important questions in the West. Our near-obsession with such questions is a defining feature of Western culture—no less central to the West than our orientation toward science. Much of our thinking about the mind can be traced to brilliant speculation by Augustine of Hippo, who died just as the Huns attacked his city in 430 CE. That’s a full century after the Council of Nicaea, but his work is rooted in what

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[7] The most famous is probably Pico della Mirandola's "Oration on the Dignity of Man." My copy from graduate school was so yellowed and crumbling as to be nearly useless, so I was thrilled to find this famous discourse widely available online: http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/world_civ/worldcivreader/world_civ_reader_1/pico.html

Nicaea said about the Trinity. It's rooted in Nicaea because controversy about the nature of the Trinity was still at full boil during Augustine's lifetime. He was also, prior to his late-midlife conversion to Christianity, a neoplatonic teacher of some importance.

The theological-philosophical question addressed by trinitarian speculation was this: how are the three "persons" of the Trinity inter-related? How and why can they be said to be *one,* not a trio? *Perichoresis*, some said: dancing around. That's a great metaphor: God as electron cloud, quantum weirdness set to music. Left to my own devices, I might leave it at that. The Trinity is a metaphor, so let's explain it metaphorically. God needs poets far more than systematic theologians. So here's the major moral consequence of the Trinity: *we are invited into the dance.* It's an ancient claim: Jesus was the Lord of the Dance. (In fact, there's a song about that: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fzRZuGEr04 In my high school, we sang that song at Mass all the time. This particular performance is beyond a doubt my favorite theological statement about the Trinity.)

But philosophers don't think using music and metaphors. Philosophers want to work out a strictly logical mechanism to account for everything. And so what Augustine did, more or less, was construct a logical mechanism for the Trinity by analogy to his remarkable analysis of human consciousness.[8] Whether or not you are persuaded by ancient-world philosophical mechanisms—and I'm not, particularly—what Augustine said about human consciousness reverberated ever after in Western culture. It underlies our recognition that perception is not a passively mechanical process. The mind is active in perception, for better for worse. Cultural context influences perception in easily demonstrable ways.

Paraphrased in down-to-earth terms, Augustine's analysis goes something like this. I exist. *Me.* The core self. But I also have an image of myself. And there's a difference between my core self and my self-image. Any of us encounter that difference every time we become aware of our self-image changing. If I handle a difficult situation with grace and everything works out beautifully, my self-image can be "Wise Woman." When I mess up, my self-image changes in a blink to "Insufferable Dolt!"

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[8] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (Princeton NJ: Yale University Press, 1985) chapter 7, pp. 71-82.

We all know what that's like. Watching such dynamics play out, we can see something of own motives for acting as we do in different situations. For instance, I'm afraid of my own negative self-images, so I try to avoid activating them. Or I have standards for myself, and I try to live up to those standards. Augustine was fascinated such motives, both his own and those of others.

Then there's a third relationship or a third dimension to consciousness. This third dimension is revealed by the relationship between the core self and the self-image. That relationship becomes conscious whenever I find myself capable of critiquing my self-image. I can stand back and look at my various self-images in a thoughtful way. Such moments reveal the reality of a third aspect or position within consciousness. This third thing is neither my core self nor my self-image. It's best described as the capacity to become conscious of the relationship between core and image. This capacity is an odd yet familiar and in fact undeniable dimension of human consciousness.

When I step back like this to critique my self-images, I can see that some of my self-images are inappropriately negative. Some are grandiose. Some are reactions to powerful events in my past. And so forth. Above all, I can recognize that all of these versions of me are simply *images* of my core self or perhaps developments within my awareness of my core self. They are snapshots from my personal history, some more influential than others. These images are not my core self in-and-of itself. They are images like the images of ourselves that we see reflected in store windows as we walk down the street. That is, they are partial. They are cluttered with irrelevant visual information. Their clarity and accuracy are subject to the light. And so forth.

As you pause here to play in your mind with what I've just said, remember that Augustine's world did not have the plate-glass mirrors we take for granted. Nor did it have photography. *Image* as a metaphor did not refer to the remarkable accuracy made possible by such technologies. If we remember how murky *any* reflected image would have been in Augustine's day, then *image* becomes an even more intriguing metaphor for how hard it is, at certain points in life, to have a "clear image" of the core self.

And so, Augustine concluded, consciousness itself also has an essentially trinitarian structure. There's "core self," there's "self-image," and there's a third thing, a third aspect of the self, a self-aware self who can to step back thoughtfully to examine a

self-image and to consider the relationship between core self and the momentary self-image. In short, Augustine provided an early, widely influential *map* of human consciousness. In my first career as a Coleridge scholar specializing in theories of creativity 1620-1832, I watched in amazement as major thinkers one after another explored the implications of Augustine's ancient map of consciousness. Creativity, the West came to agree, is a function—perhaps *the* function—of this elusive self-aware self.

In theological terms, here's how Augustine's analysis works out as an explanation of the Trinity—and an account of Christian spirituality. As Augustine saw it, God's self-image is always accurate. Although you and I are more or less continually aware of discordances between our self-images and our core selves, for God that doesn't happen. God is continuously aware of how perfectly Jesus mirrors in human form who God is. And that continuous awareness—that level of consciousness—is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

Because Jesus is the perfect and complete self-image of God, it's true to say that Jesus simply *is* God. And yet Jesus is also human, because God made us in his image to start with. Jesus is thus the ideal human—the Human Divine. He's not a hybrid. He's a revelation to us about who we most truly are.

That turns the historical Jesus of Nazareth into a remarkable demonstration of who God is. The key theological issue here isn't simply that *Jesus is divine.* No. Watch what happens when you turn that claim around. You get to the claim that *God is like Jesus.* That was the claim that mattered. It was fiercely defended. In utterly classic Christian theological terms, Jesus is as perfect an image of who God is as anything we can imagine. At least for Christians, he's it.

When Jesus says he will "send the Spirit" to us, the Spirit who will make "all things clear" to us, what he promises is, in effect, a change in human self-awareness. By following his teachings, we can come to share in his own extraordinarily intimate relationship with God. In that relationship with God—through that new, deeper recognition of our own core self in its morally ideal form—we will get a small, first-hand glimpse of what it would mean to become fully human. Roughly speaking, that's akin to what Buddhists are getting at when they talk about "becoming buddha" *ourselves.*

I can get a glimpse of what it would mean for me to become my morally-authentic core self. You can get a glimpse of what it would mean for you to become your morally-authentic core self. What would it mean if you and I and everyone else were to lay claim to the very best that is in us? To lay claim to our deepest talents, to our richest capacity for compassionate generosity, to our most courageous capacity for integrity, to our most resilient capacity to face suffering?

In Christian theological terms, to lay claim to all of that is simultaneously to lay claim to relationship with the ultimate source of these gifts, which is God. When we are attuned to the authentic core self in just the right way, we see through the core self to the divine. The core becomes translucent to the Eternal Light. It may be an elusive, evanescent, fleeting glimpse, a momentary light revealing a truth about us and a truth about the world which is otherwise invisible. It may be a nearly invisible glimpse, felt rather than seen, happening at gut level. And yet, as poets have attested for centuries, even one such glimpse of the deepest core self can change the self-image in a permanent way.

Maybe Jesus of Nazareth provided that kind of glimpse to his disciples. I don't know. I do know that believers even today continue to talk about discovering an intimate, transformative relationship between the deepest core self and the sacred. That transformation arises from or within spiritual practices. I think that two of the best teachers about such matters are Brother David Steindal-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness* and Laurence Freeman OB, author of *Jesus: The Teacher Within* and director of the World Community of Christian Meditation. But of course, there are many fine teachers. Philip Newell, for instance, especially these three titles: *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation; The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*; and *Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night Prayer.*

Before we move on, I want to admit something. I think there are easier, more persuasive, more direct ways to make the key theological points that Augustine makes through his trinitarian systematics. I think that's almost self-evident. But as I said before, *This is how people argued in the ancient world.* Because the Trinity is by now an indelible part of Christian tradition, it behooves us to recover this sense of what the teaching meant at the time—what it *accomplished* at the time.

The fact remains that grappling with Trinitarian systematics ought to be an optional exercise for the philosophically inclined—not a bizarre obstacle to the comprehensibility of what Christianity stands for in our own day. In conversation with spiritual seekers or potential collaborators in seeking the common good, Christians have far more important things to say about God. And about Jesus himself, for that matter.

## 4. Is Reality Rationally Structured?

Trinitarian systematics also underlie the rise of science and technology in the West. Bear with me a minute as I set that up.

In Jewish thought, God's primary characteristic is his "chesed," his loving-kindness. But in Plato, the primary characteristic of the Nous or Mind is absolute rationality. And as I said before, one of the big goals of the Nicene Creed was reconciling Jesus and Jesus's Jewish theological tradition with Plato, neoplatonists like Plotinus, and Greek philosophical tradition generally. As Jewish theology and Platonic thought slowly merge, Yhwh Elohim*,* the Lord God of the Jews, acquires Platonic absolute rationality in a synthesis that came to be called "Christian Neoplatonism." The first step in this synthesis arose in 270 BCE when Hebrew scripture was translated into Greek. In that translation, when God defines himself from within the burning bush speaking to Moses, the Hebrew phrase "I will be what I will be" was translated into Greek as the platonized "I am that I am." (I discuss this scene in detail in *Confronting a Controlling God,* chapters 8 and 9.)

The Nicene Creed summarized a major second step: because "God the Father" and "God the Son" are ultimately one, and the world was created *through* God the Son, who is "one in being with the Father," the physical world must have an observable, rigorously rational fundamental structure.

That's a bold Christian appropriation of "logos" as a concept. For the Jews, creation was God's own direct handiwork, handiwork God over and over again declared to be good. For Plato, of course, material reality was the shadow of an image of the Ideal. For Plato, material reality was morally decadent and metaphysically derivative. For the Greeks, only abstractions are logically consistent. Only *thought* is rational. The

material world is not. And that explains the abiding inconsistencies and illogic we see in the world around us.

Why do the evil prosper and the good suffer? Because reality is irrational. Why do healthy young people die of influenza but older people recover? Because reality is irrational. Why does hard work by talented people sometimes lead to success and sometimes to bitter failure? Because reality is irrational. The race is not always won by the swift, nor do the wise always prevail over the foolish. *Reality is irrational.* So are most people, in fact. For Plato, philosophers are a distinctive subset and an inherently "higher" order of humanity. The movement of the stars might be regular (except for a few eclipses and meteors now and then, and except for a few “wandering stars” that nobody could explain although everybody tried). But there was, for Plato and for traditions of inquiry derived from the Greeks, a massive, irreconcilable difference between the orderly night skies and the inherently irrational, inconsistent unpredictability of the sublunary world.

But if Jesus-as-God created and sustains the sublunary world, and God is ultimate rationality, then there has to be an essential rationality to the physical world at every level. Maybe we don’t see it, just as we don’t see how generosity and forgiveness and nonviolence can be realistic. But the orderliness has to be there. That’s the second kind of “work” done by the idea of the Trinity. (Would the trinitarian systematics of Plotinus have achieved the same thing? No. Neoplatonists saw all of material reality as corrupt and inconsequential.)

Over time, trinitarian systematics rendered it both reasonable and morally appropriate to look rigorously into the natural world seeking this rational order. In the 500s, John Philoponus argued that—*contra* Greek philosophy—material reality had to reflect the consummate rationality of its creator.[9] His argument didn't get very far at the time, because Aristotle and Plato so dominated the intellectual culture of the West. But over time, it came to be said that we have two great books of divine self-revelation. The Bible is one. “The Book of Nature” is the other. God reveals himself to us through the

[9] David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 69 and chapter 6 generally.

fundamentally rational, orderly, humanly comprehensible character of the physical cosmos—no matter how much difficult, scrupulously careful research is demanded to discover these essentially orderly principles.

Therein lies the cultural origin of Western science. No other similarly advanced civilization developed science with the speed and to the extent that Westerners did, just as no other civilization developed our thorough-going commitment to democracy, universal human rights and the unquestionable moral value of each individual. Western metaphysical confidence in the invisible rational structure of the natural world derived from Christian theological speculation, and quite specifically from how the doctrine of the Trinity *disagreed* with Platonic and Neoplatonic attitudes toward embodied material reality.

Secular fundamentalists commonly complain that Christianity itself is inimical to science. As an historical matter, that is profoundly mistaken. Christian fundamentalists are inimical to science, yes. But they are equally opposed to biblical scholarship, historical theology, and cultural criticism of the kind I'm doing here.

## 1992: A Mountaintop Moment

In the Christian view of things, and thanks to trinitarian systematics, God is manifest in the elegance of all that mathematicians and scientists have discovered—and furthermore in the very fact that we are capable of such discoveries in the first place. But that's not all. God is also manifest in the breathtaking beauty of the natural world. God is present in small ways like the motionless pink and silver surface of Lake Michigan at sunrise this morning, or in glories of yellow and purple pansies planted outside the front door of a friend's house last Friday night. I see these things and I am grateful for them; if I'm paying attention I feel the divine translucent within them. But for me, the touchstone experience—my own private quintessential encounter with the Trinity—took place in late July some years ago.

A friend of mine, a thorough-going agnostic and avid backpacker, drove me up to see the tundra in bloom in Rocky Mountain National Park. Our five kids were stashed, none too happily, in the back seats of her blue Toyota minivan: my three, nine-year-old twins and an eleven-year-old; her two, a toddler and a child about five. We zig-zagged

through switchbacks for hours, then stopped for a picnic lunch by a small lake surrounded by the biggest pine trees I had ever seen. I think they were blue spruces, but I'm not sure. Spruces on steroids, maybe: so help me, these perfectly symmetrical giants were as wide at the base as three city buses parked end-to-end. After lunch we rounded up the kids, buckled them in, and took off once again.

Eventually we climbed above tree line—and still we kept going. I'd never been above tree line, but I confess I had long since stopped looking out the window. I was getting queasy from thin air and dizzying turns. In those old Toyota vans, the engine wasn't out there beyond the windshield. It was tucked under the front passenger seats. As a result, the windshield rose steeply from a point maybe three or four inches behind the front bumper.

That made for a stomach-lurching view around hairpin turns. The cliff-face plummeted thousands of feet down--beginning just a few inches beyond the passenger side door. And there were no guardrails this high up. We had long since passed a sign warning that the road was closed for the winter after August 15. Two weeks from now. How high were we? I didn't ask.

Finally—finally—we pulled into a parking lot that already held perhaps a dozen cars. Sternly, kindly, without explanation—all this had happened without explanation—she directed me to a steep flight of stairs to an even steeper, very narrow gravel path. I didn't have the heart to tell her that stairs set off my asthma even at Chicago's elevation, which is 594 feet above sea level. At this elevation, there was so little air in the air I couldn't imagine what held up the sky. *How high were we?*

I didn't want to know. I also didn't want to disappoint my friend, so I climbed the stairs very cautiously. At the top of the stairs a stern sign demanding that hikers stay on the narrow footpath because the vegetation was fragile. Foot traffic created damage that remained visible for hundreds of years.

Vegetation? Cursing my new bifocals, I took off my glasses and crouched to take a look. The stony ground was carpeted with brilliant flowers, as if a rainbow had melted, spattering the landscape in primary colors. The tundra was alive, teeming with life, exuberantly alive, wild with flowers on inch-high plants that were centuries old. Their roots grow only infinitesimally each year, seeking space between stones. These were

miracles like the coastal redwood giants, but I had to kneel to see them clearly. Kneeling felt like the appropriate human response. "Glory be to God for dappled things . . . " a voice in my head said. "All things counter, original, spare, strange, /whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how)."

I continued slowly upwards along this path, dumbfounded, stopping repeatedly to crouch for a closer look at these ancient, tiny, gutsy flowers.

Before long I was breathless. I tried resting balanced on the balls of my feet, hoping to catch my breath. But a steady stream of downhill hikers made it impossible to crouch for long enough: in crouching, I blocked the narrow path. Up ahead, I could see a wider gravel-clad area where people were standing around. It didn't look that far away. My brains befuddled by lack of oxygen, and stubborn pride, and, yes, by a desire to see the view from that point, I kept climbing upward. Slowly. I'll catch my breath up there, I told myself, and I'll be fine. I just need to sit somewhere for a while.

I was getting dizzy by the time I got there. I settled with great relief into the shadow cast by a granite outcropping the size of a two-story house. I closed my eyes and sat, waiting for my heart to stop pounding. As it did, I looked up and around. From where I sat, mountains shouldered mountains all the way to the horizon in all directions. All of these bare peaks were covered in tundra flowers, or so I assumed. But as I sat there, I realized something else: the mountains were starting to shimmer. Soon they were swaying, undulating as if they were waves on some granite sea. I stood up, looking down to the parking lot, focusing on the straight lines in an effort to make the world to stop spinning around me. That helped, but only momentarily. The steep downward path looked terrifying. So I sat down again, focusing instead on the shoelaces of my sneakers, forcing myself to breathe as deeply and as slowly as possible.

My heart was pounding like a sledgehammer on an anvil. I could feel my pulse across my skull and down my arms. The other hikers had all departed. My throat was so dry I could hardly swallow. My vision was starting to fade toward shades of grey, as if a fog had blown in that only I could see. Down in the parking lot I could see the kids running around. For a while I tried concentrating on getting my very most athletic, most intuitive kid to look up at me, hoping he would feel some alarm and demand to be

allowed to climb the path to be with me. If I could hang onto him for balance, I'd be okay walking down. He never looked up.

Don't pass out sitting here, I told myself sternly: JoElyn won't recognize what's happened. But if I fell on the open trail, she'd see me. With my best effort a deep breath, I stood up again.

By the time I made it back down to the parking lot, the bored kids were plainly hostile. JoElyn was a bit tense herself. And then, once she got a good look at me, she was alarmed. She herded the kids into the car and off we went. She drove even faster downhill than she had uphill, and that's saying something.

But she had brought along plenty of water. Getting re-hydrated helped quite a bit. So did getting out of the cold wind. Nonetheless, I sat with my eyes closed for a while, afraid of getting sick as we zipped back and forth through all those hairpin switchbacks. As the worst of the dizziness began to settle and I could in fact inhale a reasonable breath, I rummaged in my purse for my asthma inhalers. That helped too. How dumb of me to have left my inhaler in the car when I headed up the stairs.

Once I could breathe enough to speak, I struggled to explain what an overwhelming experience it had been. How could such extravagant beauty carpet every mountain as far as the eye could see? What does it say about the world that there is such astounding beauty in such remote places, for no "purpose," for no "reason" that human mind can grasp? Why such abundance? What does it mean? No matter how wretched I felt, it had been glorious. I was grateful.

She took one hand off the steering wheel and placed it over mine, silencing my incoherent fumbling.

"It's God, Catie," she said. "It's God. I just wanted you to see it."

*It's God.* It was indeed God--but a God she had never found in the churches her parents sometimes made her attend when she was a child. Truth be told, this was a God I'd never found in most of the churches I'd attended either. Once in a while, I guess, enough to sustain my wavering faith; but only once in a while. The God of Christianity can seem all too often captive within the arcane restraints of the Nicene Creed and the dullness of dogma.

I didn't say any of that. I was not capable of thinking such thoughts. I was silenced and humbled by what an effort she had made to bring me up there. She wanted to share with me an experience of the holy as she experienced it—and then she reached out even further, naming her experience using a word that belonged to my tradition not hers.

We drove a long time in silence. Me, the believer; she, the nonbeliever. Our five kids in the back seats, all of them sound asleep. Those impossibly steep roads, roads as steep and mountains as impassible as the distance between us and the Council of Nicaea in 329, or the distance between religious belief and secularity. The Holy One can indeed bridge any distance, especially once we stop trying to box it into our own narrow theories. Spirituality is the core capacity for relationship between the human and the holy—by whatever name the Holy One is named.

The Jews have as one of their ancient spiritual practices naming the thousand names of God in Hebrew scripture. For me one of those names is now Tundra Flower on Mountaintop, Gift of JoElyn.