

MY DEAR FAR-NEARNESS

The Holy Trinity as Spiritual Practice

Robert A. Jonas

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

Introduction

The trinitarian God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can seem speculative, and too patriarchal for twenty-first-century Christians. According to a February 2019 poll by the PEW Research Center, eight out of ten adults in the United States know that the doctrine of the Trinity holds that there is one God in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹ But most people have only a vague idea of what this means. Without reflection and instruction, we probably think of the Persons as anthropomorphic characters or mythical beings in a magical world outside of us. However, in this book (and in my life) I regard the Holy Trinity as a symbol of a transcendent Presence that is *within us and outside of us*, intimately connecting inner and outer, above and below, heaven and earth. It may be relatively easy to recite the Nicene Creed as a *belief* in the Trinity, but it is more challenging and more rewarding to enter the Trinity as if it were an inner cathedral, with stairs that bring us downward into our personal depths and stairs that bring us upward into the boundless reaches of the Divine. Read from a contemplative perspective, the Nicene Creed is written like a code that must be deciphered, a code that, when broken open, reveals a map of our spiritual awareness.

The great councils of the fourth and fifth centuries that proclaimed God as Trinity were careful not to imply that God is composed of three separate gods who exist in a heaven at another plane of reality. Rather, in my reading of the historic creeds, the three Persons are centers of subjectivity that circulate within one another, each capable of awareness and volition. Creator, Son (or Child) of God,

¹ PEW Research Center, “What Americans Know about Religion,” July 23, 2019.

and Holy Spirit each has a distinct role to play in our enlightenment and salvation.

Creator is limitless, vast, and sacred Mystery. I can only understand this Mystery when I understand the mystery that I am. Creator cannot be adequately perceived as an object of my awareness—cannot be grasped by conceptual knowing. But God’s Mystery, and the mystery that we are, can be experienced in a deeper intuitive level of knowing, which is understood in the Christian contemplative tradition as *unknowing* or as the *apophatic* or *via negativa* path. Standing in this unknowing, I realize that I don’t know everything about myself—some aspects of my identity are hidden from me, some will emerge later, and some I will never know. Yet I can trust that I am fully known, understood, and loved by the Creator. Only from the place of unknowing within myself can I glimpse the vast, boundless dimensions of the Creator’s love.

Son is Christianity’s way of naming the embodiment of the Creator in a visible, mortal person. The Son shows us how the Creator functions in our personal relationships. I experience Second Person awareness when I sincerely say “I love you” to God or to another person.

Holy Spirit is the energizing, creative love that flows ceaselessly between the Creator and the Incarnate One, between the Creator and the created world, between the Creator and us, and between us and others. The Holy Spirit is a sacred “betweening.” I experience the Holy Spirit when I sense the dynamic “we space” that connects us to others in a bond of love.

HOW DID I GET HERE?

I’ve always been drawn to basic questions of existence: Who am I? Why am I here? Is there a way to experience and manifest ultimate truth in a way that transcends the particularities of culture, race, nationality, gender, and politics? When I began this journey decades ago, I knew that my search for ultimate truth would fly into the headwinds of the postmodern assertion that there is no such thing as truth that transcends location, culture, race, religion, and time. But I have persisted. In praying and meditating in Christian and Buddhist traditions, I’ve come to think of myself as a contemplative Christian

who is attracted to the revelatory power of silence. Exploring silence is one of many spiritual practices that draw seekers of all religious traditions to the hidden presence of the Divine. Although each tradition has its own vocabulary and its own ways of framing reality, I believe that, in the end, all traditions point to the same ineffable and compassionate reality.

I didn't begin to understand the power of silence, much less the common experiences at the center of all the world religions, until I was in my twenties. Growing up Lutheran in a working-class family in northern Wisconsin, I never heard that silent meditation could reveal God's intimate Presence. I was taught that divine revelation comes through scripture, belief, verbal prayer, moral behavior, and worship. In fact, it was implied that silence is an unproductive waste of time and an avoidance of work. When I was eighteen, I entered Luther College to become a Lutheran minister. However, within two years my Christian faith had begun to fade. As the war in Vietnam exploded, I transferred to Dartmouth College and majored in government, convinced that religion was irrelevant and powerless to resolve injustice and conflict.

My assumptions about the spiritual life were turned upside down at Dartmouth when I happened to walk into a class on Tae Kwan Do and Ch'an, Chinese Buddhist meditation. I enrolled in the class and gradually learned to sit still in silence, making contact with a reality that transcends intellectual understanding. During my academic classes I was trained in the best methods of Enlightenment knowledge, and after class I would let all of that go as I meditated on a cushion, slow danced the karate moves, broke bricks with the edge of my hand, and walked barefoot in the winter snows of New Hampshire, warming my feet with the sacred energy of *Chi*. I began exploring Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism. I still assumed that there must be only one correct way to experience ultimate Reality, one right belief, and I considered becoming Buddhist. But I also wondered whether the experience of sincere Buddhists was so different from that of sincere Christians. Little bridges of thought led me to wonder whether Jesus would have been considered enlightened if he had been born into a Buddhist society. I wondered whether Jesus had experienced *Chi*.

The value of silent meditation gradually rooted itself in me. As an undergraduate I still prayed the Lord's Prayer at bedtime, as my German Lutheran grandmother had taught me, but I was confused about which practice was better—devotional prayer on the Jesus Way, nature-centered Taoist meditation, or Buddhist silence on a cushion. While I pondered these questions, I began reading contemplative Christian texts that suggested I didn't have to choose between silence or vocal prayer. Perhaps they were both avenues into ultimate Truth, into God.

Jesus had always been a source of hope for me. Praying, especially at night, and singing hymns at Lutheran church services nourished my innate longing to feel loved, to love life, and to belong to a caring community. I am sure that attending services and becoming a youth leader at my church during high school gave me a sense of safety that offset the uncertainty, chaos, and danger in my childhood home.

While at Dartmouth I enjoyed being trained in theories of political governance, democratic history and decision-making, public policy-making, and international relations. I avoided worship services. I felt ashamed of my Christian faith, as if it were a premodern relic and fundamentally naive. It took me a while to understand that meditative silence and the artistic forms of Tai Chi could awaken a valid, nonrational kind of knowing. As I look back on these formative years, I think I was beginning to glimpse the Cloud of Unknowing (the term used by an anonymous fourteenth-century English mystic), though I didn't know that yet.² My yearning to trust something beyond physical existence led me to the fathomless silence found in Taoism and Zen. I still didn't understand that stillness and wordlessness could also be a Christian experience, and I had no idea how to connect my inner exploration with the demands of a competitive, intellectually demanding classroom. In my twenties, academic knowledge, Christian devotion, and Buddhistic silence were separate categories in my mind, honored in totally discrete arenas.

In the early 1970s I converted to Catholicism and took vows as a lay Carmelite. At The Common, a monastery in Peterborough, New

² William Johnston, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Doubleday, 1973, 1996).

Hampshire, I discovered the writings of St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Catholic mystic and poet who practiced both contemplative self-emptying and devotional prayer. Navigating among reason, silence (alone and with others), and prayer gradually became my lifelong spiritual journey.

As I continued to transition from Lutheranism to Catholicism, I discovered the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Although he had taken a vow of silence, Merton wrote more than fifty books, two thousand poems, and countless essays, reviews, and lectures. This gifted man had found a way to honor both the *kataphatic* (Greek: knowing with our senses, especially images and words) and *apophatic* (Greek: intuitive, wordless, and imageless knowing of the heart) pathways to holiness. I was soon devouring everything he had written. Merton revealed to millions of Christians that the *kenosis* (Greek: self-emptying; Phil 2:7) of Christ shares common experiential ground with the emptiness of Zen, with the proviso that Christian “emptiness” is saturated with divine Love.

THE FIRST KEY PARADOX

The reflections in this book rest on paradoxical assumptions. The first is that God as Holy Trinity is everywhere, beyond and within us, and that God is present in every now moment of clock-time. God’s Presence is not limited to a particular time or place.

As a child I was taught that God was “somewhere else” and that if I was faithful and diligent in prayer, God could be called upon to descend into my time and place. I now believe that God is already and always present in our time and place. God as Holy Trinity abides in the depths of our personhood and is at the same time infinitely beyond us. The title of this book reflects this paradox.

Why do I emphasize that God is both inside and outside us? I do so because most believers assume that God is more outside than inside. I imagine that God would be very lonely out there all alone. And we would be lonely too. Instead, I agree with the fifteenth-century German theologian Nicholas of Cusa, who explains, “Everything that actually exists is in God, for God is the actuality of all things. . . . God who is in the universe, is in each thing and each actually existing

thing is immediately in God, as is the universe.”³ God is infinite, and infinity has no location and cannot be captured in clock-time. Nicholas experienced the material world and time as a “contracted infinity.” Divine infinity is contracted so that we can experience it from our limited perspective. Spiritual practices, such as the trinitarian ones presented here, help us to see through the bounds of reason and language into God’s boundary-less Presence. The “everywhere-ness of God” was expressed by fourteenth-century Dominican friar Meister Eckhart when he exclaimed that we can “expect God . . . in all things evenly.”⁴ He and other early Christian mystics would say that there is no place that God is not, just as the theologians who created the Nicene Creed would say that there never was a time in which Christ was not.

But if God is everywhere and in everything all the time, what does it mean for a Christian to believe that through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God became manifest as a particular person in a specific place at a unique time? Are we, today, completely separate from Jesus of Nazareth, from his Middle Eastern culture, and from his life and death more than two thousand years ago? I’ve concluded that the incarnation of Christ was both a one-time event and an event that transcends clock-time. Eckhart helped me accept the paradoxical integration of time and timelessness, limited and unlimited reality. Speaking of Christ, Eckhart writes, “The same One, who is begotten and born of God the Father, without ceasing in eternity, is born today, within time, in human nature. . . . St. Augustine says that this birth is always happening. And yet, if it does not occur in me, how could it help me? Everything depends on that.”⁵ This book offers practices, grounded in scripture and in ancient Christian doctrines, that enable us to release the constrictions of reason, rigid belief, and fear that prevent us from experiencing the birth of the infinite Divine within us.

³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. and ed. H. Lawrence Bond (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 140, 179.

⁴ Meister Eckhart, in *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. and ed. Raymond Bernard Blakney (New York: Harper and Bros., 1941), 250.

⁵ Blakney, 95.

God is not a separate being who created the cosmos from somewhere outside it. God transcends the limits of time and space. We can acknowledge this while also affirming that the incarnation of Christ two thousand years ago was unique and definitive. The incarnation was unique because it opened a wormhole between eternity and each moment in the clock-time of our lives.⁶ God is always right where we are.

When Eckhart said that Christ is born in us, he obviously didn't mean that there can be a literal rebirth of Jesus of Nazareth within a person. He meant that there is a divine formless Presence within the limited forms of our daily lives. This Presence is here, now and now and now. Transcending clock-time and space, this Presence is always present. But we don't always perceive this Presence if we are embedded in clock-time and space, attached to the sensory and material world. Christians name this Presence *Christ*, who *was* born and is *always being born* in the infinity of our hearts. We become aware of this inner birth in an intuitive way as our contemplative practices blossom. When the Divine resides in the deep center of our souls and we choose to be rooted there, we can manifest the fruits of this birth with others. We can become the midwives of the eternal birth in our everyday lives.

THE SECOND KEY PARADOX

A second paradox is that we can only understand God from within God's own consciousness. We cannot prove scientifically that God exists or that God "has" consciousness. But for those of us who experience an eternal Presence called God, we trust that God as Creator has "intentionally" given birth to the cosmos and given creation an essence that is good. We have faith that God creates for good purposes and that the consciousness of creatures emerges from our infinite Source in God. Following the Great Flaring Forth about fourteen billion years ago, consciousness as we humans know it has gradually emerged through the evolutionary process and from the divine seed

⁶ In physics, a wormhole is a hypothetical connection between widely separated regions of space-time.

of consciousness that is eternal.⁷ Consciousness is both within us and beyond us. Our personal consciousness is a unique location of the infinite field of awareness that is Creator's.

Scripture and the recorded wisdom of contemplative Christians through the ages suggest that God's awareness circulates within our own awareness. God is within everything we experience—our sensations, visions, and memories, our feelings of grief and joy, of hope and despair. Our understanding of God changes dramatically when we understand that God's free awareness is the background or infinite stage within which all our personal, everyday experiences occur.

Whether we know it or not, our ego self-awareness is potentially in union with the infinite awareness of God. Our awareness dances across the transparent boundary between our ego-self "I" and the divine Self "I." Our ego self-awareness is grounded in clock-time, in our personality, an identity that is usually bound to our mortal and conditioned experiences. But if we take seriously St. Paul's statements, that our very bodies are members of Christ, that we are temples of the Holy Spirit, and that we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 6:15, 6:19; 2:16), then we realize that we are each gifted with an unlimited Self that is grounded in the eternal God. Daily spiritual practices help us to know, speak, and act from the Self as much as from the self. When we manifest Self-awareness with others, they will experience not only our personalities but also a certain Light, and a lightness of being in our presence. With God's grace, as we practice meditation and prayer in solitude and with others, we are freed from attachment to our worries, and to the past and future. When we stand in God's awareness, in our larger Self, we witness and bless the everyday concerns of our ego-selves and personalities, but we are also free of them—available to love and be fully alive.⁸

⁷ The popular name for the initial conflagration of the cosmos is Big Bang, but I favor a name that was coined by Passionist priest Fr. Thomas Berry and cosmologist Brian Swimme, the Great Flaring Forth. See Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999); and Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁸ St. Irenaeus, Greek bishop (second century CE) is often quoted as saying, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." Some translations say

Living as temples of the Spirit is a challenge because our egos want to be in control. But actually, when ego is in control, we feel constricted and limited in our love and our creative powers. Our self-consciousness confines us, so we don't feel Nicholas of Cusa's contracted eternity; we only feel contracted. When we surrender to God's awareness within us, we feel seen and known in the eyes of our Creator, known with an ambience of care, mercy, and liberating love. Such an experience of the Divine stands in stark contrast to the belief that has burdened too many Christians over the years: the belief that God is an external, patriarchal being who is eager to find fault and condemn us or who is essentially uninterested in and absent from his creations. Harboring such a belief does damage to one's soul and spirit and limits our understanding of God's true nature. When we realize our own unlimited capacities to love, this is God as Spirit realizing God within us, and it is us realizing ourselves (1 Cor 2:10–11).

TRINITARIAN CONSCIOUSNESS

I believe that consciousness is a product of the biological evolutionary process and is also a direct gift from the divine Mystery. Moment by moment our consciousness springs from our genetic inheritance and also from God's consciousness. There is a holy Presence within us that includes and transcends our personal presence. Science cannot say exactly what or where consciousness is, because we cannot study awareness as though we were on the outside looking in. In the same way we cannot stand outside of God and look at God, because God is both within and outside us. But we are always participating in God's consciousness, if we know how to look.

Christians use the word *Christ* to name a mortal person who lives fully from within God's larger, vastly inclusive awareness. This is why St. Paul, who had experienced a deep spiritual transformation, could say, "Now, not I, but Christ in me" (Gal 2:20). In fact, I assume that when we release our self-centeredness and our

simply, "For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God." See Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, trans. Dominic Ungar (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), book IV, chap. 20, para. 7.

self-consciousness, our awareness participates in God's awareness. This can be a frightening realization because our ego-selves assume that our awareness is a personal possession. We can never say that our awareness *is* God's awareness, but neither can we say that our awareness is *separate from* God's awareness. Releasing our grip on the ego-self view, we can participate in the Holy Trinity, allowing the Trinity within us to participate in our personal seeing, hearing, and knowing. Still, detaching from our ego-views will never completely dissolve the ego, so I might amend Paul's declaration. He could have said, more accurately, "Now, my ego 'I' and God's 'I' within me." This latter statement resonates most clearly with the Christian idea of incarnation and personhood, wherein we are taught that Jesus Christ was fully human *and* fully divine. Our personal incarnational journey mirrors the incarnation of Christ.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

St. Augustine described the Holy Trinity as Lover, Beloved, and the Love that flows between. The fifth-century Greek theologians who composed the Nicene Creed suggested that the trinitarian God is a *perichoresis* (a "dance-around").⁹ I believe that at the heart of the Trinity, Love is dancing.

According to the mystical theologians who authored this definition of God, three aspects of God's Presence are rotating or dancing as One, and these aspects are called *Persons*—the First, Second, and Third Persons of the Trinity. These three Persons are relationally distinct appearances of Love, but they are not separate. The One God is not three gods. When, in the Book of Genesis, we read that we are created in the image and likeness of God, the Hebrew word for God in this case is *Elohim*, often translated as plural, suggesting to some theologians that the inner life of the Creator is multidimensional and

⁹ *Perichoresis* derives from the Greek verb *perichorein*, sometimes translated "to make room for one another." The related Greek verb *perichoreo* is found in Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 389/90). See G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (UK: SPCK, 1964), 291. See also Brian T. Scalise, "Perichoresis in Gregory Nazianzen and Maximus the Confessor," *Eleutheria* 2, no. 1 (February 2012).

intersubjective. As creatures we are children of the Creator, gifted with divine DNA. All of God's creatures are kin. We are each an ineffable mystery that is multidimensional and intersubjective to the core.

When we practice prayer, meditation, and contemplation, we can visualize and even experience the perichoresis and align ourselves with this divine dance of transcendent Love. Recognizing trinitarian perichoresis as our essence, our spiritual awareness is revealed as a participation in each of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. We are fully alive, and our awareness moves in a threefold dance of

- being open and present in each moment, letting go of our inordinate attachments to things, events, people, and memories, awakened into Creator's boundless mystery and love (First Person);
- relating with God and other beings in intimate interpersonal ways, in sincere and responsible I-Thou and I-thou relationship (Second Person);
- participating in Spirit-led communities that embrace all persons and the rest of the natural world in an ultimate intersubjective unity (Third Person).

Although what I propose in these pages is a radical reinterpretation of the Holy Trinity, it is one that is entirely in keeping with scripture and with traditional Christian understandings of God. I expect that some theologians will take issue with my approach because I bypass most academic theological perspectives. Still, I will use valuable theological terms that point to spiritual experiences available to any dedicated seeker.¹⁰

Father Henri Nouwen describes the spiritual journey as a "furnace of transformation."¹¹ This journey is not easy and can't be undertaken if we settle for understanding the Holy Trinity as nothing more than a religious concept. Living the Holy Trinity is a difficult and rewarding

¹⁰ Approaching the Holy Trinity as three dimensions of human consciousness has been explored beautifully in theological terms in S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), and works by Raimon Panikkar, such as *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

¹¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 13–17.

discipline that requires seeing through the scaffolding of our personalities. I can't promise that the trinitarian way makes everything easier. In fact, in following this path we might actually feel our inner distress and the suffering of others more keenly. Psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl often said that "what gives light must endure burning."¹² Trinitarian transformation offers us a way to let God burn away all that is not love. This fire does not destroy the ego but renders it *transparent* to divine Presence. This is the dance of love that is always happening and always available to us.

¹² See Frankl's excellent book, recounting his experience in the Nazi death camps, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959, 2006).