

Trinity as Source, Word, and Spirit of Love: Relationship as Core of Reality by Heidi Russell

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If you google the word “Trinity” and click on images, here is a bit of what you will see. All of these images portray some version of the “two men and a bird” Trinity. In my time in parish work, I found that many people I encountered were at least ditheists, if not tritheists. In other words, they thought of God as at least two separate beings, God the Father and Jesus, if not three, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They imagine three separate individuals, beings or gods.

Now most people in religious life or ministry or academia, have a less literal image of God. However, in contemporary times, the social analogy of the Trinity has taken hold of people’s imaginations as a way to talk about what it means to be a person and what it means to be community. We are to be persons as the Three in the Trinity are persons, and we are to be in community as the three are in community. The idea is that in modeling personhood and community after the Trinity, we move from interiority to intersubjectivity, from individuality to community, and from the immanent Trinity to the economic Trinity.

The attempt is to use the Trinity to change our meaning of person, so that like the Trinity we become persons in mutual and equal communion with one another. The problem is that rather than adjusting our idea of person to model the Trinitarian Persons, we end up modeling the Trinitarian persons after our own understanding of human persons, thus making them into three individual beings, sitting around a table relating to one another. Our human experience of relating always involves relationship to someone, so we form a mental image of the Trinity as three “someones.”

In my own prayer life, leaning more toward modalist tendencies than tritheist, I have always tended away from images that made God into a being or three beings. Early on in my adult prayer life, I discovered the People’s Companion to the Breviary done by the Carmelites of Indianapolis. This prayer book used the formula, Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit, which formed my image of God for many years.

My own Trinitarian thought, however, has moved from the image of God as Being, to the image of God as Love. God as Being too easily turns into God as *a* being. And God who is *a* being too easily becomes a God who does *for* us, the great fixer in the sky, the one who makes everything turn out the way we want. God who is Love, however, does *through* us. God who is Love means *we* are called to confront the evils and fragmentation of the world. We are called to be the wounded healers of a wounded world. God’s promise is not to fix it for us, but to be with us and in us, enacting Love in a broken, and yet grace-filled world.

Love as an image of God works for me, because it can be both a noun and a verb, so we can address God personally as Love. I started replacing the word “Lord” with the word “Love” in my prayer and in my reading of the Psalms. I have only recently, belatedly discovered Nan Merrill’s beautiful psalter, Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness, which uses this same type of language for God.

In a Trinitarian formula, God, Abba, is the Source of Love, Revealed in the Word of Love, which has been spoken in creation and incarnation. That Source and Word is Enacted in the Spirit of Love which has been breathed into the community itself, forming it into the Body of Christ.

In this Love revealed in Word and enacted in Spirit, we learn who we are and what it means to be a person. We learn what it means to be a person not by looking at the Trinity, but by looking at Love incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. The Word of Love is made flesh. We are created as the potential to incarnate, to en flesh the Word of Love, in our lives. That potential that we are was perfectly fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. That same potential is enacted in each of us, albeit not perfectly, by the power of the Holy Spirit. I cannot fulfill that potential by myself, but when I do not close myself off to Love, when I do not say no to Love, the Spirit of Love moves within me and unites me to the rest of the Body, the community – all of you, and to the head, who is Christ.

The Spirit of Love – Enacted Love – is community and communion. Love forms community and enables communion, so long as we do not close ourselves off from that Love. Religious communities, whether parishes or religious orders have a vocation to be enacted love in the world, to incarnate God's spirit of love. That same Spirit of Love is enacted in this conference, this community of leaders each facing similar challenges, coming together to strengthen and uplift each other, to grieve with one another, but to also move beyond grief together to enact love in new ways.

Last year in her keynote, Jan Richardson spoke of her prayer in the aftermath of her husband's death – praying, "May my love be more fierce than my grief." Therein lies a prayer to the Holy Spirit, to live and move and breathe in us at a time when we are paralyzed by grief or despair, when the world seems beyond repair. It is a prayer that moves us beyond our own necessary processing into action. When our love is more fierce than our grief, death leads to resurrection.

In the one of the conversations we had leading up to this conference, someone, I believe it was Tere, said of this grieving experience of religious life, "witness the joy! Dance! There is a lot of dying, but how you die will make a difference – with faith in the resurrection. To die with faith, and joy, and dancing!"

The call to incarnate love to be a person in the image of Christ is to become the wounded healer – to move beyond grief to the woundedness of the world. In those conversations we had Cathy asked, "What do we still want to bring to the heartache of the world?"

Last year you talked about being the presence of love and the power of transformation – in fact that mission is what your founders have incarnated in your various charisms from the beginning of your orders! Now, how do you live that vocation in today's fragmented world? In preparing this talk and familiarizing myself with last year's conference, I read the litany of sisters in your orders who have died from violence. I was so struck by the lived kenosis, the spirit enacted and embodied love that made these women Christoform, literally images of the crucified Christ. Here is the brokenness of poverty, of racism, of violence. Here is the solidarity that is who you are as religious and the witness you share. You don't just sit in white towers and espouse the evils of oppression in the world. You live with those who are oppressed and suffer the same fate.

The wages of sin are death. We might also say, the wages of fragmentation are death. Only love and relationship overcome fragmentation.

The physicist David Bohm has an image of the way in which wholeness is enfolded, meaning folded into, and then unfolded in the world. Bohm's idea of implicate order is the idea that the whole creates and organizes the parts in such a way that the order or design of the whole is enfolded in each part.

According to Bohm, the whole dwells at the core of each part and then unfolds itself in and through all of the parts. Each part is unique, in that it unfolds its own independent yet interconnected existence, but as it does so, it participates in the unfolding of the whole.

Using this image to talk about God, God the Source of Love is the wholeness. Love is creative. Love creates through the Word. Love speaks love, and the world is created. That Word of Love is inscribed on every heart, and thus Love is enfolded, folded into each one of us. This Love that is God is *perfectly* unfolded in the person of Jesus the Christ. What it means to be a person is ultimately to unfold the love that has been enfolded into us.

The Spirit of Love, Love enacted, unfolds that Love in our hearts in the world. As I unfold my independent, yet interconnected existence, I participate in the unfolding of the whole. I participate in the unfolding of Love, of God, in the world. Every unfolding of Love in each part, of the whole in each life, is unique and is unfolded according to its own context. The wholeness is infinite and thus can only be unfolded in diversity.

We also have the gift and responsibility of freedom. We can refuse to participate. We can choose to live lives of fragmentation and brokenness rather than love and connection. David Bohm would point out, we live in a world of fragmentation. We tend to understand things by breaking them down into parts. It is one of the ways our minds work, how we figure things out, by dividing, separating, fragmenting. However, if we leave our knowledge in the breaking down and breaking apart, we miss the deeper reality of the wholeness and oneness of all things.

Bohm explains that fragmentation helps us to think about things. The problem is when this useful way of thinking about things is mistaken for actuality or reality. It can be bad when we divide humanity along ethnic, racial, nationalistic, or class lines. The Trinity can be an antidote for this fragmentation.

The Source of Love that has enfolded Love into creation through the Word, now unfolds Love in our hearts moving us from individuality to community from fragmentation to wholeness.

Another physicist, Lee Smolin suggests that in the beginning of our observable universe, everything was connected to everything else through nonlocal connections. Up until quantum theory, the world had been understood through local causality.

We are familiar with this notion of cause and effect. I push the ball, it rolls.

Quantum reality, however, demonstrates what scientists call nonlocal causality, meaning what happens to one particle can effect another, without the two touching or communicating. This aspect of quantum reality is called entanglement.

Scientists presume that this can occur because the two particles are part of one system, one whole. What happens to a part, happens to the whole.

Lee Smolin explains using the images of an apartment building vs. a cellphone network. We experience reality in our three-dimensional world like an apartment building, where we have the potential to have six neighbors, above below, right/left, front/back. He asks us to imagine reality as a cellphone network, where distance is not defined by physical space, but rather how *often* you talk to someone.

Smolin suggests that at the beginning of our universe, all of these networks were turned on, but as the universe cooled, there was less energy for creating and maintaining these connections, and most of them were turned off, leaving only the few connections of our three-dimensional world, and space as we know it emerged.

Smolin's idea is that "space is an illusion and that the real relationships that form the world are a dynamical network a bit like the Internet or cell-phone networks. We experience the illusion of space because most of the possible connections are off, pushing everything far away." Reality, Smolin suggests, is all about relationship.

For Smolin, reality at its very beginning was total interconnectedness, and yet somehow most of these connections have been turned off. Similar to Bohm's understanding of wholeness versus fragmentation, we have here a metaphor for the fall of humanity. At our core we are interconnected to one another and to God, and yet somehow we find ourselves limited in our relationality, finite in our capacity to connect to one another.

We hear a lot in recent years about the google bubble, meaning that we can isolate ourselves, intentionally or unintentionally, so that we only hear and see that which reinforces our own beliefs. Rather than using this incredible social network to multiply our connections in love, we are using it to turn off the connections to those who think differently than we do. I cannot learn from another's story, from another's perspective, if I isolate myself from people who are different than me. Isolating ourselves has the further implication of reinforcing our implicit biases and perception biases.

Implicit bias is an internalization of this fragmentation in ways that aren't even conscious, creating an "us" and "them" mentality, creating the "other" as "other". For example, studies have shown that people in the US see black males as bigger, stronger, and more threatening than their white counterparts.

People do not know they are perceiving black males falsely, and they are not doing it on purpose. This implicit bias in turn can then trigger a biochemical response of fight or flight in people's brains

when they encounter a black male. These biases are implicit, not explicit – it does not mean a person is consciously racist – though some people certainly are.

Studies show that one antidote to implicit bias is relationship. Harvard University has developed an online implicit bias test. The test determines if you tend to associate faces of people with words and images that are either positive or negative. When I first took this test, my results stated that I had a slight preference for people who are white over people who are Black. Since the first time I took the test, I have adopted children who are Black, and when I took the test more recently, I had a preference for people who were Black. My relationship with my children, the fact that I associate their faces with everything that is goodness and love in my life changed my brain and my implicit biases. Relationship and love heals fragmentation.

Implicit and perception biases also mean we cannot address this issue of race without understanding that we are interconnected parts of a whole. Thus when we focus on individuals rather than the whole, we ignore both implicit bias and social sin. The headlines of our papers tragically illustrate this issue of looking at society as if we are each individuals separately interacting with one another instead of being more like electrons that can't be understood apart from the system to which we belong.

In the example of racial bias, debate often centers around the individuals and the particular circumstances surrounding each police shooting of a black person. Movements such as Black Lives Matter challenge us to step back and look at the system itself and the pattern that emerges when one looks at the whole.

To say that BLM is not to say that all lives don't matter. To use St. Paul's metaphor, it is to say that one part of the body is in pain and needs the attention of the whole body. It is to say that the whole body is not functioning, because the body is suffering from the disease of racism and white supremacy. That disease does not just impact people of color. It impacts the whole body.

Also because of the social structure of sin, one cannot treat the body for racism, without dealing with the interlocking -isms of classism, sexism, etc. and without dealing with the interlocking systems of education, culture, family of origin, and yes, religion. Social sin can be thought of in terms of nonlocal causality. There is nothing that happens to one part that is not also happening to the whole. We need to think of the global world as one system, as an interconnected whole. When Jesus asks me, "Who is my neighbor?" he does not mean my apartment complex neighbors. He means my cell-phone network neighbors.

I became a foster parent about six years ago. Becoming a foster parent instantly forces you to engage the stories of people that are different from you. I imagine many of the ministries your congregations are involved in do the same. I entered the world of fostering in a color-blind world of white privilege. Of course, I would accept children of any race! After all, I am a middle class white liberal. *Not* being racist is part of how we identify, it is part of the false narrative we tell ourselves.

When my African American son was placed in my arms and in my home, suddenly those stories in the newspaper about black boys being killed that had been just one more tragic headline, made my

heart skip a beat. Suddenly my nights were filled with wide awake moments wondering what was going to happen when my son got his driver's license.

I woke up living in a reality that the African American community has lived with since the founding of this country. Dr. Shannen Dee Williams spoke to this assembly 2 years ago about the sins of racism in the church and in religious communities - the exclusion of women of color; the acceptance only of women who could "pass" for white; and then the continuing discrimination and dehumanization of those women within their supposed communities.

Then as African American women formed their own religious orders, they too faced discrimination and attacks from white Catholics and from the Ku Klux Klan. They also faced the silence of white Catholics, in the face of this open assault and discrimination. This assembly and religious communities in this country were asked by Dr. Williams to face the hard truth about racism and to stop white-washing history.

Our country is in a similar place today. The white majority, if not actively participating in racial oppression stays silent in the face of it. It is the uncomfortable silence of not wanting to disrupt the narrative that we are good people; the willfully blind silence that wants to counteract the observation of white privilege with stories of why we have really had it hard too; the ignorant silence of colorblindness that responds to Black Lives Matter by saying that All Lives Matter.

Would to God I could put my privileged white body between the world and my son's black body, but I cannot. As my son grows, he will move from being this cute adorable face that white people go out of their way to fawn over, to the image of a thug, of someone people cross the street to avoid, and clutch their purses in fear of.

I was struck by this point a few years ago while waiting for my parents outside a grocery store in Marco Island, FL. As all of the white people walked by my son and me smiling at us and occasionally commenting on how cute he was at the age of 2, I wondered how they would respond to him, were he waiting outside that same grocery store for his grandparents at the age of 13 or 16. Would they call the cops? Would they avoid his eyes and hurry inside? Would they inform the manager that there was a suspicious person loitering in the parking lot?

In an interview with Daily Theology.org, Dr. Williams states:

"Does the bishops' collective silence toward the growing "Black Lives Matter" movement mean something different if you remember their reluctance to endorse the Brown [vs. the Board of Education] decision some sixty years ago? If all lives matter, then black lives matter. So, why aren't all Catholics screaming "Black Lives Matter?" I think black Catholic history provides the key to answering these questions."

Why is it, that in my hometown the mostly white Unitarian Universalist church flies a banner proclaiming, "Black Lives Matter," but my own parish does not? None of the Catholic parishes in my city do.

However, it probably comes as no surprise to most of you here, that the Racine Dominicans did a series on racial justice this spring, addressing how to be better allies and exploring the systemic

nature of racial injustice. While Dr. Williams has made us aware that we can no longer white wash our history, many of your congregations are now on the forefront of fighting for racial justice, facing fragmentation with love and relationship.

Love provides us with a nonlocal spatial connection. God as Love creates a web that connects all of our life stories to one another. Our stories are interrelated parts of a whole. The whole is Love. A Love that has been enfolded into creation itself through the Word and is being unfolded in creation through the Spirit. In that Spirit, we become the ongoing revelation of the Word of God. In the Christian tradition, we say we become the Body of Christ.

Paul tells us that those who eat and drink without recognizing the body, eat and drink judgment upon themselves. We are called to recognize those who are a part of us, those of whom we are a part, those with whom we are entangled. We all belong to one body, what Augustine calls the *totus Christus* - the total Christ made up of Jesus the head and all the members of the body. That Body of Christ, that interconnection of each of us to one another and to the head, is called to be the ongoing incarnation of Love in the world. The Body of Christ is called to be the sacrament of God's love and mercy in the world.

There are also implications for our relationships to one another, both within our communities and to those outside of our communities. As communities, we must ask ourselves, Whose voices do we not hear? What connections have we turned off? Who are those at the margins of our communities?

As they are part of the Word of Love, we cannot know Love without knowing those people, without learning their stories. They are part of our own reality, and they can teach us things we cannot learn from our own experience. So within our communities and outside our communities, we are called to greater inclusivity and listening. We are called to turn on the connections that have been shut off, re-activating the connections of love.

We also need to think about inclusivity in terms of those outside our own religious traditions. Again, the incarnation was not about the union of God with Christians, it is the union of God with humanity – all humanity, all creation, really. All of creation is part of the whole that is Love and is part of the unfolding of Love. And so we must also understand ourselves to be one, to be entangled with all humanity, with all creation.

I do believe that changing the way we image God can help us foster this sense of interconnectedness. An ancient axiom of the church is *lex orandi, lex credendi*. As we pray, so we believe. And some add *lex vivendi*, and so we live.

And so I leave you with a prayer from Nan Merrill's translation of Psalm 68:

"A new dawn is rising;
 great will be the understanding
 of those who know Love;
 The darkness of ignorance will
 be overcome!
 The nations will be united in

their diversity,
living in harmony and with
integrity—
Like the wings of a dove covered
with silver
its pinions with gold.
Then will fear be no more,
Love will reign in every heart!
...

Yes, the Beloved will empower us
with love,
as we face the fears within.
Love ever whispers, "I will break
down the walls of illusion,
I will shatter the fears
that bind,
That you may walk in a new dawn,
that you may dance with
light hearts
and spread peace throughout
the earth."