

# Theological Reflection

## Religion as a Human Creation

### 3. Spirit and Trinity

Dinah Livingstone ponders a classic Christian doctrine.

#### Spirit

I am writing this shortly before the feast of Pentecost, which is immediately followed by Trinity Sunday and the long series of Sundays after Trinity. In the Acts of the Apostles we read:

When the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. And suddenly there was a sound like a rushing mighty wind and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit ...

The spirit is a rush of energy like a mighty wind or tremendous breath. Like tongues of fire it falls upon the bereft little group of apostles and family and friends of Jesus, infuses them with new life and confidence, so that together they become a living body. Jesus has gone but now the spirit of him and his Father breathes into this little group the community spirit that makes them become his body still active on Earth, the body of Christ.

So what is spirit? When someone dies, those to whom he or she has been important often feel that person's spirit lives on. When we say an individual has spirit we mean their oomph, their generous energy. That spirit may come and go, 'it blows where it will'. For example, sometimes I feel listless and don't 'get it together', sometimes I feel I just can't write what I want to, but then suddenly something clicks and it starts pouring out. 'Inspiration' comes.

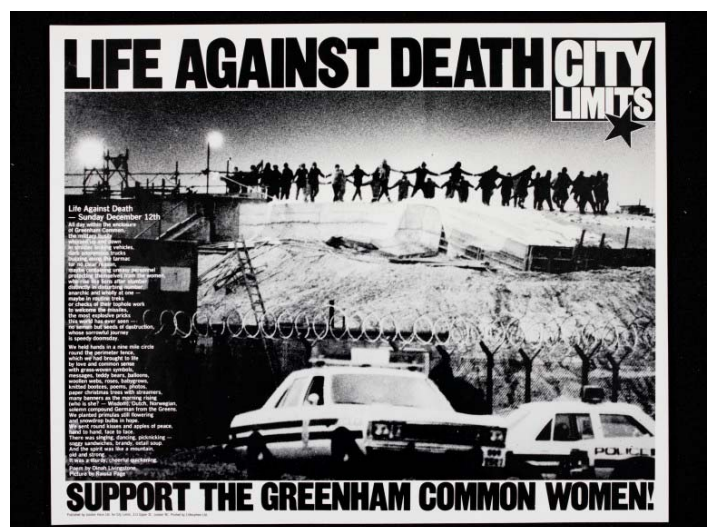
When we talk about the spirit of a place, such as the spirit of London or the spirit of Exmoor we mean its particular energy or ethos. We may speak about the spirit of a group of people, a city perhaps infused with a common energy or purpose, as in in 'the spirit of the blitz', or a country trying to create a better

society after a terrible war, as in the title of a recent film, *The Spirit of 45*. Or at Greenham Common women sang: You can't kill the Spirit, / she's like a mountain, old and strong. / She goes on and on and on.

In the past that spirit was often personified – or 'supernaturalised' into a supernatural person. As Blake puts it:

The ancient poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations ... And particularly they studied the genius of each city and country, placing it under its mental deity...

Such supernatural personification is a poetic activity but it is a poetic way of talking about *real* energies active in the world. At Greenham, for example, I don't think most of the women thought of the Spirit as an actual person, more as a communal female energy against the weapons of mass destruction. But the spirit there was strong enough to 'move mountains' or, in fact, US nuclear missiles.



'You can't kill the Spirit.'

In the New Testament the Greek word for spirit, πνευμα (*pneuma*), is neuter. Sometimes it refers to a distinct person but sometimes the appropriate pronoun for it could equally well be 'it'. For example: 'The spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing' (Jn 6: :63). Or 'You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption υιοθεσια (*huiothesia*: 'sonship': Rom 8: 15).

But when Jesus speaks of the Spirit as the 'Comforter', or 'Counsellor': παρακλητος (*paraclete*), which is masculine in Greek, he is referring to a person: 'The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, *he* (ἐκεῖνος, masculine) will teach you everything...' (Jn 14:26). And in the rest of the New Testament when the Holy Spirit is portrayed acting as a conscious agent, this is the activity of a *person*. For example, 'We do not know how to pray as we ought but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words' (Rom 8:26).

Actually *ruach*, the word for spirit, wind and breath in Hebrew (and cognate languages Aramaic and Syriac), is feminine and for some centuries the Holy Spirit was held to be feminine in the ancient Syriac church. I recently read the fascinating book, *Sisters of Sinai* by Janet Soskice, which tells the story of two intrepid Scottish Victorian ladies, Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson, who discovered, among other things in St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai desert, an ancient Syriac Gospel in which the Holy Spirit is feminine. However, eventually, even the Syriac church changed the Spirit's gender to masculine to conform with the other Christian churches.

In his article Edward Walker speaks of Jesus' baptism (and see picture on page 9), when the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove and the Father's voice from heaven says: 'This is my beloved Son.' After this in Luke's gospel Jesus begins his ministry by going into the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath day and quoting the prophet Isaiah (Lk 3:18-21):

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim  
release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim favourable year of the Lord.

Then he rolls up the scroll and says: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' He proclaims he is inaugurating the reign of God, the reign of kindness, about to come on Earth

Jesus leaves his disciples still believing this will come quickly, because 'God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rom 5:5). They are hoping for 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God', for which 'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now and not only the creation but we ourselves who have received the *first fruits* of the Spirit groan inwardly while we wait...' (Rom 8:21-23). They have received the 'first fruits' but are hoping for fulfilment, they must 'fill up what is wanting' for the reign of kindness, the spirit of love, to prevail on Earth. 'For the reign God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 4: 17).

Of course, except here and there, the reign of kindness still has not prevailed in our hearts or society. But we can still believe in the spirit of love, – that you can't kill the spirit – still hope and perhaps try to contribute to a reign of kindness, even knowing we have no supernatural guarantee.

## Trinity

Father, Son and Spirit, all three are present at Jesus' baptism. At the end of Mathew's gospel the apostles are told to go out and make disciples 'baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

Over the next few centuries the church developed a theology of God as Trinity, with the Son being proclaimed as true God, consubstantial with the Father, at Nicea in 325 and the full divinity and equality of the Spirit at the later Council of Constantinople in 381. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is associated with *breath*, yearning *sighs and groans*, with God's *love pouring out* and with *communion*. Paul's triple farewell greeting at the end of his letter to the Corinthians is: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion (fellowship, κοινωνια: *koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit be with you all' (2 Cor13:13).

At the beginning of the fifth century Augustine explores the doctrine in his monu-

mental *De Trinitate*.

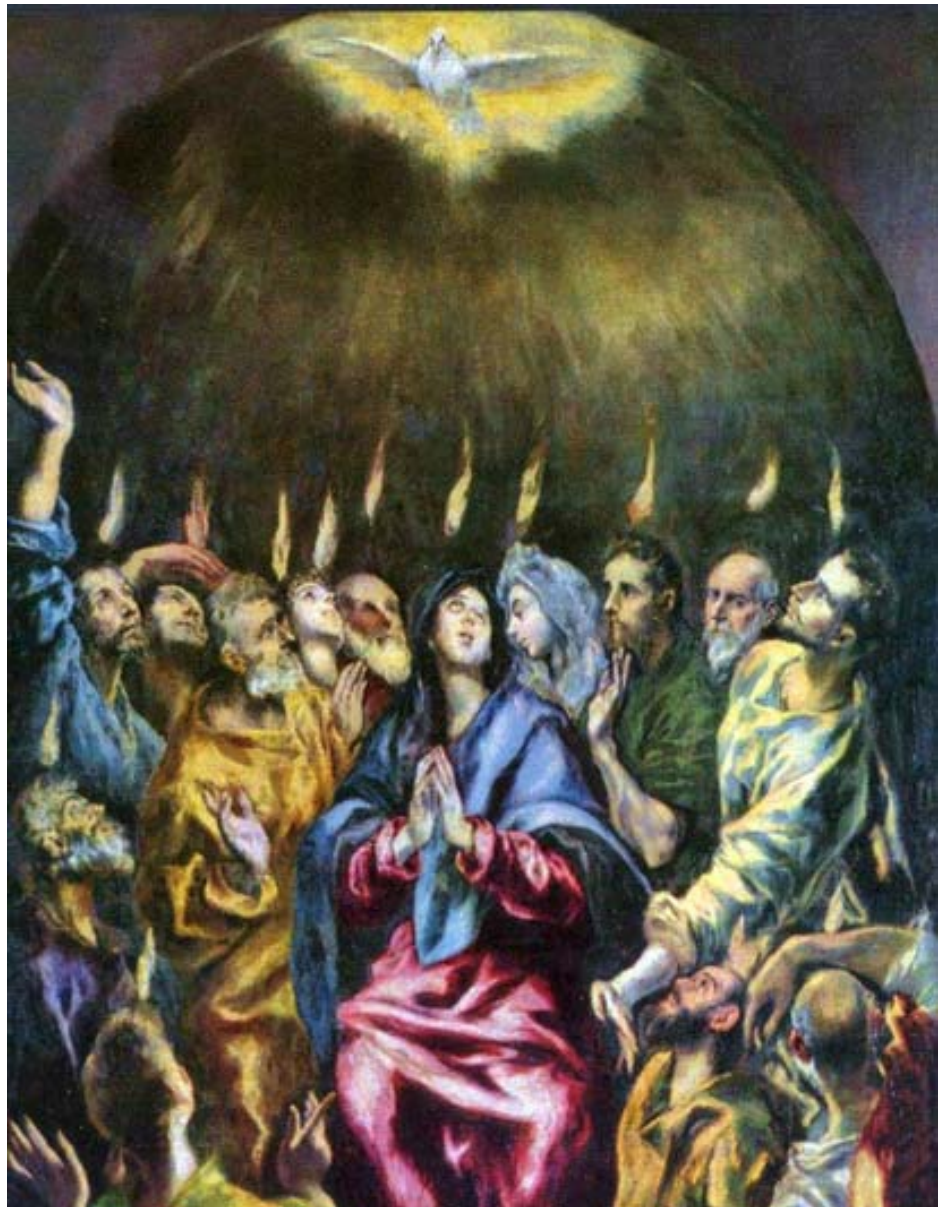
Very briefly, Augustine says that all three persons of the Trinity wholly possess the one same divine nature or substance, everything that God is. They are one God but as three persons, they are distinguished by their *subsistent relationships*. The Father *begets* the Son and together they *breathe* the Holy Spirit. Just as the Word, which expresses God the Father's self-knowledge, is so perfect that it is a distinct person – the Son – so the Father and the Son love each other so perfectly that this love is also a distinct person – the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from both of them, their mutual love:

The Holy Spirit, according to the Holy Scriptures is neither of the Father alone, nor of the Son alone, but of both; and so intimates to us the mutual love with which the Father and the Son love each other: *communem qua invicem se diligunt pater et filius nobis insinuat caritatem* (*De Trin.* XV:17:20).

In his *Summa Theologica* Thomas Aquinas develops his theology of the Trinity, closely following Augustine.

As therefore we say that a tree flowers by its flower, so do we say that the Father, by the Word or the Son, speaks himself, and his creatures; and that the Father and the Son love each other and us, by the Holy Spirit of Love proceeding (*Summa* I: 37:2).

Both Augustine and Thomas go to great lengths to expound this very complex doctrine. They explore what is meant by the term 'person', but although they insist that the Holy Spirit is a



El Greco, *Pentecost*, Museo del Prado, Madrid, 1596

person, his 'personality' remains less fully 'realised' than that of the Father and the Son.

With his usual psychological insight, Augustine spends several books of *De Trinitate* investigating memory, understanding and will in a single human mind as the image of the Trinity:

Since, then, these three: memory, understanding, will, are not three lives, but one life; nor three minds, but one mind; it follows certainly that neither are they three substances, but one substance (*De Trin.* X:11:18).

Augustine thinks of the human mind as the image of the Trinity, but we can look at it the other way round. The Trinity is an ideal model of the possibilities of the human psyche. God the

Father personifies the origin, the generative power giving us the life that we receive from parents and from the cosmos through evolution. By knowing himself he pours all this into his Son, his Word, with nothing held back, his whole divine nature, so that the Son has everything that the Father has. Then together they pour that same whole divine nature into the Spirit, into *love*, so that the Spirit is the personified 'mutual love with which they love each other'. The term used is 'circumincession' – 'flowing round into': life-power flows into knowing; life-power and knowing together flow into loving; and knowing and loving flow back round into life-power.

Similarly, although of course we are neither perfect nor infinite, we humans pour our energies into knowing (and speaking). But knowing on its own is not enough for full humanity; loving is also necessary. On that Trinitarian model all our knowing should pour into loving. Or as Augustine and Thomas would put it, *breathe* love.

As well as seeing the Trinity as a model of the human psyche, we can look at it cosmically. In their major work, *The Universe Story*, 'geologist' Thomas Berry and mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme describe a cosmic, material trinity in a triple Cosmogenetic Principle, which operates throughout the cosmos, and 'assumes that the dynamics of evolution are the same at every point in the universe'. The Cosmogenetic Principle, they say, 'states that the evolution of the universe will be characterised by *differentiation*, *autopoiesis* and *communion* throughout time and space and at every level of reality'. Or perhaps we could call these three processes individuation, self-expression and relationship.

It is easy to see a parallel between that cosmic trinity and the theology of God as Trinity: God the Father as the origin, the creative life-power; God the Son as self-expression, Word; God the Holy Spirit as love, communion. That is not to say that there is any supernatural principle at work in the universe. On the contrary, the contemplation of the universe may lead people to express reverence for it by *deifying* forces they find in it. But it remains very fruitful to reflect on the Trinity as a work of the human poetic genius, supernaturally personifying real forces that are in the cosmos and actually or potentially in ourselves.

One insight the Trinity affords is that our power and our knowing should flow into loving. Another is that one God in three persons combines the insight of monotheism: a single ground of being of a single ordered cosmos, with the insight that God is *social* – three persons 'flowing round into' one another. This reminds us that we ourselves need other people in order fully to become persons, to become human. Cosmologists speak (non-supernaturally) of the 'initial singularity', from which the Big Bang exploded, and number three in Berry and Swimme's Cosmogenetic Principle is *communion*, corresponding to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, as love, communion. We need to love and be loved, we need communion. As they put it:

The loss of relationship, with its consequent alienation, is a kind of supreme evil in the universe. In the religious world this loss was traditionally understood as an ultimate mystery. To be locked up in a private world, to be cut off from intimacy with other beings, to be incapable of entering the joy of mutual presence – such conditions were taken as the essence of damnation (*Universe Story*, p.78).

Two further points. As we noted, the 'personality' of the Spirit remains less 'realised' in the story and we often use the word 'spirit' to express an impersonal energy. In John's gospel Jesus promises the Spirit 'will lead you into all truth'. Perhaps it will be this shadowy Spirit that makes us realise divine persons are not real, but poetic personifications of real forces in our world.

Secondly, we saw that (after some opposition) all three persons of the Trinity are usually regarded as male. Although I think the Trinity is a very rich doctrine, this seems like a glaring flaw in it. Was it a male-dominated society that created a male God in its own image and then that male God reinforced the male-dominated society? In this respect the ancient Toltec Supreme Deity Ometeotl (which means 'God Pair'), the Lord and Lady of Duality, seems better imagined. I must leave it there but my Theological Reflection in the next *Sofia* will be on Woman.