

Karen Armstrong wrote *A History of God* in 1993 to present the story of God as it unfolded in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic history. The real world conflict of the three Abrahamic religions had produced an appetite for understanding the roots of the hostility among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. At the time the book was released, people who ordinarily would have been content to leave the history of religions to the back rooms of the universities and seminaries were suddenly pressed to understand the background of the daily news coming out of the Mideast. I suspect that the popularity of Armstrong's book came from a sensational title more than the unique content. Obviously no one is really qualified to write a history of God—call it what you will: biography, myth, or revelation. But we do have a rather extensive history of the way people think about God; and that is, in fact, what Karen Armstrong attempted to give us. Her book was a best seller, not a small accomplishment for a dropout nun, who was refused her earned doctorate in literature at Oxford and who lacked academic credentials in Christian theology and world religions.

Armstrong described the God of Judaism as "One God," the God of Christians as "Trinity," and the God of Islam as "Unity." She ended up doing what most theologians do with the Trinity; she tells the story of the conflict in the Church supposedly settled at Nicaea in 325 CE. The Trinity could only be described as history. I learned as a graduate student in theology in the 1960's that academic achievement was marked by the ability to tell the story of Nicaea in detail, like Armstrong's book, describing the personalities and defining the terms. It was akin to rattling the tongue-twister for public speakers, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, etc." I quickly discovered outside the classroom that the theological tongue-twister neither explains nor settles the questions behind the Trinity.

The Trinity is rooted in the Christian tradition. Tradition is the religious format for history. Tradition, from the Latin *traditas*, means passing down previous conclusions to future generations. So, Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3 writes not only in terms of his own experience; he passes on the word that he had received from others—the tradition. Tradition describes the past and sometimes lays down a precedence to keep us from reinventing the wheel. But history hits limits when past experience becomes prescriptive for future identity and decision. On the level of personal psychology, we learned from Freud the importance of remembering our past; but good counselors lead us from memory to resolution. We sometimes remember in order to reject where we have been and what we have received through tradition. The work of memory is to remember who you are and to decide who you are going to become.

The Jews taught us to love history. We gain tremendous understanding of ourselves and the character of our community by knowing and understanding our past, but we must always live in our own time and deal with our own problems. History is a great teacher but a poor master. The Jews learned the importance of memory, of holding on to the events that have shaped their faith and their nation; but the revelation of God did not end at some point in the past, so that questions of faith and action settled by our forebears can relieve us of responsibility for our own decisions. God has continued to walk with the people and to face with us issues and concerns that have little or no connection to previous generations. We have learned to reach beyond our history in dealing with issues that have come of age in our time: like slavery, gender equality, and sexual orientation. It has taken a large part of my life to come to terms with history as it unfolds in the Bible and the church and to realize that the past cannot dictate the future.

I grew up with a prescriptive idea of how the Bible is supposed to work for us. I had a Bible proof text for every question—until I hit questions for which no precedence existed either in the Bible or church history. Then I found myself learning to rely on biblical and faith principles. Sometimes I had to rely on conscience, a strong inner-sense of what is good and bad in life's situations. I had to learn to listen not only to my own conscience but to trusted friends; I learned to share experience in the community of faith. So, tradition *alone*, historical precedence could never become the Law of God. Just because we have always done it that way or the church has always thought that way does not mean that I am compelled to adopt the tradition as "Christian." Growing up in faith required

acceptance of responsibility for my own view of God and decisions about my own behavior in God's world.

For anyone familiar with Church history, the Council of Nicaea was not the end so much as the beginning of a long debate over the nature, or rather two natures, of Christ and the relationship of Father-Son-Spirit in the Christian life. The blood of martyrs, who died for their explanation of God, and the bloody hands of authorities who killed for Trinitarian orthodoxy have smeared Church history and discredited Trinitarian theology for many Christians. We have developed an ecclesiastical schizophrenia about the Trinity. We keep on singing "Holy, Holy, Holy. . . God in three persons, Holy Trinity" while snorting at the mathematical riddle of how three persons equals one God. The rationale is incomprehensible for people inside and outside our faith. Muslims and Jews insist that Christians are polytheists, worshiping multiple gods, while Christian theologians and pastors keep insisting that our God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If you have come to the place in your life where you have to confess to yourself that the traditional Trinity does not have a place in your faith, I commend your responsible acceptance of your own faith and refusal to repeat the past just because it has been the tradition. I appreciate the word of Jürgen Moltmann (*The Trinity and the Kingdom*) that he refused to write a theological system because church dogma has a way of becoming church decree. In this community of faith, we exist by mutual respect and determination to love one another as God in Christ has loved us. We have to allow room for a variety of Christian experiences.

A trinitarian faith can be based on Christian experience. Tradition accounts this day as Trinity Sunday. On the Sunday after Pentecost, when the story of the Christ has reached the high note on Easter and the work of the church has found the source of life in the persistent power and presence of God's Spirit, we are reminded again that the God of Christians is presented in our New Testament as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although the word *Trinity* never appears in the Bible, and God is never numbered as *three*, early Christians kept repeating their experience of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the New Testament about 120 statements refer to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together without any attempt to explain or define God. Since Nicaea was nearly three centuries removed from the first Christians, how do we explain this repeated reference to God? Is it possible that early Christians were merely bearing witness to the way in which they had experienced God?

With all questions of orthodoxy aside, can we allow room for Trinitarian faith to be an authentic part of Christian experience? Questions raised in the Gospels for which answers are given as the word of Jesus himself can be assumed to be issues under discussion by the earliest Christians. So in the Fourth Gospel, when Jesus announces his departure as going to dwell with the Father, and he calls for disciples to "Believe in God, believe also in me," the inquisitive Thomas pipes up with an expression of uncertainty about where he was going or the way to get there. Then Philip joins in with the request, "show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." These were not just questions belonging to the fringe; they were the cry for understanding from the church. The word attributed to Jesus is a statement of the unity of the Father and the Son: "I am in the Father, and the Father is in me."

This discussion in John's Gospel was at the center of the debate that led to the Council of Nicaea more than two centuries later. The primary question was not the mathematics of three in one; it was the identity of Jesus as Son of God. I find some credibility in John Dominic Crossan's *God and Empire* that the titles of Jesus in the Gospels, like Son of God, overlap with the titles assigned to the Emperor of Rome. According to Crossan, early Christians may well have been more intent on challenging Roman authority in the person of Jesus than they were the identity of one God as Father and Son.

Paul takes up the question in a different context in his Epistle to the Galatians. He defends the Gentile right to adoption as the children of God, the same rights assumed by the children of Abraham. Without explanation, Paul makes the statement of our adoption as children of God: "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" Paul was touching base with the experience of God in the life of the Gentile Christians addressed in his letter. He did not need to defend the orthodoxy of one God in three persons. He needed only to describe the Christian experience of people who had come to be children of God through faith in Christ the Son and the experience of His

Spirit in their hearts.

Now the question falls on the other side of the fence. If we are going to allow that some people of faith do not resonate with Trinitarian orthodoxy, are we also going to allow that for a vast community of Christians the experience of God that can only be described in terms of Father, Son, and Spirit?

Augustine saw the Trinity in the metaphor of God the lover, reaching out to his beloved Son, bound together in the Spirit of love. He chose to ignore the formula of Nicaea in favor of his own experience of God. The Trinity was Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself. For Augustine, unless knowledge of God is experienced, it is empty.

Jürgen Moltmann came out of an agnostic background through the disillusionment of Hitler's war to find God in the death of Jesus on the cross. There he saw in the face of the crucified a mirror to his own agony and suffering. The Trinity for Moltmann became God's story written in the concrete existence of a man in history, Jesus of Nazareth; he found God in the suffering love of Jesus for the world and continues to see God in the power of love that takes up the cross for God's children.

In this new world of religious pluralism, where we can neither assume that everyone is Christian nor that everyone is eventually going to come around to our way of thinking, the plurality of a triune God is a bridge to understanding the *koinonia*, the community that brings us together as the children of God. If we continue to insist as Christians that we are strict monotheists, we can at least understand that the One God is not simple and that the mystery of God has never been exhausted.