

CAN I BELIEVE IN THE TRINITY?¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the First Sunday after Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, 4 June 2023

IN THE NAME OF GOD, FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

A Trinity Sunday sermon is about the nature of God. How can anyone dare to preach such a sermon? Can such a sermon even be preached? What I do know is that nobody ever puts their hand up to preach on Trinity Sunday. You get assigned. That must tell us something.

Are you sure that there is something here to talk about? As Rowan Williams has said, “The Bible has no arguments for the existence of God”.² It tells us that we learn about God from experience. The want of an argument for God is not from lack of trying or because I, and others, are too dumb to succeed. The reason is more fundamental than lack of effort or skill.

I recently finished reading a novel based on the activities of Monsignor Hugh Flaherty, an Irish Vatican official who, after the Nazis occupied Rome during WWII, ran an escape line for Jews and fugitive Allied POWs. The author, Joseph O'Connor, has Flaherty say:

Like many of my sex, I have often felt profoundly that God made a terrible mistake in not making me God, that the world would be without darkness or difficulty if only I ruled it. Had I been the Almighty, I would have put several matters rather differently. But I wasn't.

God was.

And is.³

He made this comment when, after the war, he was asked, by the former cruel and violent head of the Rome Gestapo to baptise him. The former SS officer was in prison awaiting trial for war crimes. Flaherty didn't know whether the request was genuine or an attempt to present a war criminal in a better light.

In making his comment, the Monsignor was repeating the story of the Fall in Genesis. The temptation recounted there was to be like God, knowing good and evil. That is us; and by imagining ourselves to be like God, we create a god in our own image. So, beware of the danger of imagining God.

The reason why we cannot say anything accurate about God, prove God's existence or define God is that God is not an object within our created universe. To prove or describe anything means that the object of our reasoning is within our realm of understanding. God is neither in our created universe nor within our realm of understanding.

As Iain McGilchrist says

[T]here is an ancient and powerful apophatic tradition, or *via negativa*, which holds that all positive assertions about God will be false: we must approach God by clearing away untruth,

¹ Readings:

² Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2007, p.21

³ Joseph O'Connor, *My Father's House (Rome Escape Line)* Random House, 2023, pp. 273-274.

as we reveal the statue by discarding stone from the primal block. So St Augustine warns that 'if you understand, it is not God you understand'.⁴

In speaking to an interfaith gathering, Rowan Williams commented that we could learn more about each other by considering what we do not believe than by considering what we do believe. He said:

[Judaism, Christianity and Islam] agree in disbelieving in a God who is one of the items that exists within the universe, who is subject to time and change as finite beings are, who shares the same conceptual territory as do the limited agents we are familiar with.⁵

We know, of course, that everything we say about God is an analogy or a metaphor. We may call God our Father or our Mother, but we know that God is neither father nor mother. There are some other equally important items for our disbelief. God is neither male nor female. While Jesus was a man, God the Son is not. God is not white. God is not heterosexual. God is not an Australian. God is not old, or, if anyone imagined it, young. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu has famously said, 'God is not a Christian.'⁶

This brings me to the place where, within myself, I start all theological discussions. In his sermon on the Trinity,⁷ John Wesley commented that we commonly believed things that we can't explain. But he declined to equate belief in the proposition, in the intellectual statement, with the mystery. We assent to the belief but experience the mystery.

Don't be afraid of mystery. McGilchrist says:

Mystery does not imply muddled thinking. On the other hand, thinking you could be clear about something which in its nature is essentially mysterious is muddled thinking. Nor does mystery betoken a lack of meaning – rather a superabundance of meaning in relation to our normal finite vision.⁸

It is always useful, indeed a duty, to explore theological or biblical issues, but we should not equate what God has done with our explanations of it. In his *Proslogion*, Anselm of Canterbury coined the phrase *Fides quaerens intellectum*, "Faith seeking understanding".⁹ We do not seek understanding so that we can believe. We first believe and then seek understanding.

So, in our faith-seeking-understanding journey, what can we do? Our inability to bring God within our own sphere of understanding and to find God by our own searching leaves us with what God has chosen to reveal to us.

⁴ , Iain McGilchrist. *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World*, Perspectiva Press pp. 1855-1856)

⁵ Rowan Williams, 'Analysing Atheism; Unbelief and the world of Faiths', Georgetown University, Washington DC, Monday 29 March 2004 [Judaism, Christianity and Islam] agree in disbelieving in a God who is one of the items that exists within the universe, who is subject to time and change as finite beings are, who shares the same conceptual territory as do the limited agents we are familiar with.'

http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/2004/040329.html

⁶ <http://www.layman.org/layman/news/2006-news/tutu-god-is-not-christian.htm>

⁷ John Wesley. Sermon 55 "On the Trinity" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson [Sermon On the Trinity by John Wesley via Words Of Wesley Quotes](#)

⁸ McGilchrist, p. 1942

⁹ [Proslogion - Wikipedia](#)

To follow the *via negativa* is an intellectual process in which we recognise the inadequacy of our conceptions of God, but it is not at all the same as just giving up hope of knowing God.¹⁰

The first thing we can do is allow ourselves to be open to mystery, to wonder and to awe. Many, possibly most, people have experienced feelings of mystery, wonder and awe, even though they never tell anyone else or find themselves without the words to express their experience. At the same time, when they do speak, they tell of its effect. The psalmists speak frequently of awe, often using the word “fear”, which we usually misunderstand as “terror”. To see the pounding surf in a storm is to experience mystery, wonder and, even, fear. Not that we, as watchers, are in fear of our lives or experiencing the terror of immediate drowning. But the power of the ocean can produce fear in the terms of awe. In such a way, we face the sheer power of the created order. The other side of awe is humility, an act of not seeing ourselves as the centre of everything.

The second thing we can do is follow the gospel as it unfolds in the story of Jesus. If we want to increase our understanding of God, follow the Word made flesh. That is what we mean by the Incarnation. It tells us that we may find God more in relationships than in propositions.

The third thing we can do is to develop our awareness. That is, we must participate in the world, take risks, be alert. Iain McGilchrist records this story:

There was a very poor, but good, rabbi whose life would have been very much more comfortable if he had money; and so he prayed repeatedly to God: ‘Please just let me win the lottery’. And his prayer never seemed to be answered. One day he was at prayer as usual, when God said to him, ‘Look, Manny, meet me halfway: buy a ticket’. Understanding any spiritual truth depends on at least buying a ticket.¹¹

If you don’t take risks, you will never find anything.

If you think that mystery and awe, following the gospel and being aware together come close to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you might be right, but don’t tell any theologians that I said so.

The words of men make me very afraid.
They make everything sound so terribly clear:
This is called ‘dog’, and that is called ‘house’,
And here’s the beginning, and there is the end.
I fear their intentions, their playful sneers,
They know all that was and ever will be;
Now there’s no mountain can fill them with awe;
Their estate reaches right to the border with God.
I want to resist them and shout: ‘Keep away!
I so love to hear the singing of things.
You touch them – and they fall as silent as stone.
You’re destroying the life of things for me’.¹²

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¹⁰ McGilchrist, p. 1863

¹¹ McGilchrist, p. 1887

¹² McGilchrist pp. 1893-1894. His translation of a poem by German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)
[Quote by Rainer Maria Rilke: “I am so afraid of people's words.They describe ...” \(goodreads.com\)](https://www.goodreads.com/quote/rainer-maria-rilke/I-am-so-afraid-of-peoples-words-they-describe...)