

# WHAT IS THE TRINITARIAN CHRISTIAN FAITH ?

## A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

by

**Frater I.D.V.A.**

Every true Rosicrucian is required to profess the Trinitarian Christian faith, but at no stage in his or her progress on the Rosicrucian path is the neophyte given 'official' instruction in the nature and implications of such faith. It is simply assumed implicitly that he or she both knows what that faith involves and subscribes to it. Thus it is timely that we consider just what such belief and profession require of us.

Let us first look at the noun, 'faith', in particular as supported by the adjective 'Christian'. Now faith, in the words of St. Paul is 'the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1), and Jesus says of those who have faith, 'blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed' (John 20:28). A secular definition may be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where faith is defined as:

Belief in the truths of religion as contained in Holy Scripture or in the teaching of the Church.

This, of course, begs the question for we accept those truths as such only when we have come to believe in them - in other words, when we place our trust in both the message and the messenger, in both the testimony and the person of Christ.

Faith of this nature is not just a vaguely held opinion, or a belief based upon ignorance or misunderstanding of natural laws (*e.g.* that the Earth is flat, or that the Sun revolves around the Earth). Nor is it derived from empirical knowledge or experience, or from any form of 'secret' knowledge or Gnosis. It is a conviction of absolute truths, founded upon the experience of divine Grace, that is, certainty of religious truths that we obtain as a direct gift from God. Our awareness of such an experience is expressed as absolute trust in God.

But what, or who is God ? God is the creator, preserver and ruler of the universe, and thus in one sense utterly beyond our comprehension, although not entirely so. The paradox of His being at once beyond our comprehension while at the same time being encapsulated in human form was caught beautifully by Julian of Norwich. In her first Revelation, or 'Shewing' of Jesus Christ,

He shewed me a little thing, the quantity of an hazel-nut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with eye of my understanding, and thought: What may this be ? And it was answered generally thus: It is all that is made. [*Revelations of Divine Love*, edited by Grace Warrack. 1901, p 10]

The image of the totality of creation held in the palm of one's hand is startling. But the paradox is explained in part. Julian goes on to say,

I marvelled how it might last, for methought it might suddenly have fallen to naught for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasteth, and ever shall last for that God loveth it. And so All-thing hath the Being by the love of God. [*ibid.*]

God, in the Christian understanding of the term, is thus consciously and willingly concerned with and for His creation, and expresses that concern by entering His creation in human form. But why should He do this ?

And so to the adjective 'Christian'. We apply this term to our particular faith because we believe that God came into this world in human form, in the person of Jesus Christ. The reason for this event lies in our nature as human beings. We are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), but this does not imply that God is limited in His own being to human form. The story of creation is a myth, in the sense of an expression in poetic, narrative form of events for which we have neither an adequate language nor the mental means of understanding them. What we can understand from the myth is that both God and man have both mind and will, and that God expects man to act, and freely to desire to act, in accordance with the Will of God. To enable man to make such a free choice, he is given freedom of will - as far as moral issues are concerned; clearly we cannot flout empirical laws of nature - but man chooses to follow the dictates of his own self-centred nature and to disobey God's will.

The consequence of this disobedience is that man loses his exalted status (his 'primal innocence and happiness', *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2e, p500) and is cast out from the presence of God into the material world. Man now has the capacity for evil and will inevitably sin, that is, he will disobey the Will of God as revealed through the patriarchs and prophets, and as recorded in the Scriptures. At the same time, man recognises his fallen nature and desires to return to his primal state - to the presence of God. Or rather, he recognises this as an ideal, preferring to ignore his conscience and his spiritual self, and to spend most of his time and energy in self-gratification. God also recognises that this is the way man is, and not wishing to remove man's freedom of moral choice (a more appropriate expression, I feel, than 'free will' - which is ultimately impossible given that God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, unless one attributes to God the desire to deny Himself an awareness of the specific choices made by individual human beings), He seeks a means of offering to man a way of escape from the natural human state of sinfulness. The means chosen by God is that of incarnation - of taking human form and nature while retaining his divinity; of being both God and Man at one and the same time in the same individual, human person: in Jesus Christ.

Unlike the transitory appearances of God in human form encountered in other religions, in which the apparently physical being is merely a simulacrum, the historical Jesus Christ is fully God *and* fully man. In Him Godhead and Manhood are continually and constantly united. But what was, and is, the specific role of Jesus Christ ?

Throughout the mythical and recorded history of the Hebrew people - whom we may see as typifying humanity as a whole - there is a procession of prophets, urging repentance on the people and warning of the dreadful consequences of disobeying the will of God as expressed in the Commandments given to Moses. The prophets also foretell the coming of the Messiah, the anointed one of God who shall deliver His people from sin and oppression. But God's ways are not our ways, and when He takes on human form it is not as a mighty conqueror but as a humble carpenter who travels the Holy Land preaching and teaching. The essence of that teaching is repentance of past sin, obedience to God's will as laid down in His law, forgiveness of and love towards one another, and preparation for the eternal Kingdom of God - which is a spiritual kingdom, not of this world. Our duty, then, is plain: listen to the Word of God, obey His law and look for

eternal fulfilment in the presence of God in Heaven. And, of course, we all do exactly what God wishes we would not do: we ignore Him and go merrily on the broad road to our damnation.

Or rather, we did before Christ came to show us just how we could turn away from self-destruction and towards salvation. The immediate reaction to the historical Jesus Christ was hostility: he was falsely accused of blasphemy and heresy, found guilty, and judicially murdered. But in so doing he gave us the power to seek and to find salvation; by sacrificing Himself on our behalf he demonstrated God's love for humanity. By rising from the dead he empowered us by demonstrating the life-giving power of that love, which is given by grace to all who truly seek it. The Incarnation brought God into the little world of matter, and the Resurrection drew mankind out of the material world into the Kingdom of God. If, that is, mankind chose to accept what Jesus offered. By calling ourselves Christians we are making a clear and categorical statement that we have chosen to follow Jesus: to accept His claims - that He *is* God and that we *can* enter the Kingdom of Heaven - as true.

There is also the little matter of obeying God's will. Being a Christian requires not only particular beliefs, but also particular actions. Perhaps the essence of Christianity can be summarised thus:

- (a) There is one God who has created and who sustains the universe and all that is in it
- (b) The Will of God is revealed to mankind in history and we are to follow His commandments
- (c) But we have chosen to disobey God's will and have fallen from our primal state of innocence and happiness. By that fall we have been excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven and thus from the Presence of God
- (d) By this disobedience we have also become sinful and subject to death
- (e) This is not what God wills for us and He has taken on human form to enable us to obtain salvation [the mechanics of His actions are, admittedly, beyond comprehension, and the manner in which salvation operates is, to put it mildly, a matter of vexed debate among the many self-selected varieties of Christians]
- (f) His death and resurrection are the specific means whereby that salvation is possible
- (g) We are required above all to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves
- (h) We demonstrate our love of, and allegiance to Jesus Christ - Who is very God - by private prayer and devotion, and by regular acts of public worship.
- (i) We believe that we shall, by maintaining faith in Jesus Christ and by obeying the will of God in all that we do, live after our physical death and enter the Kingdom of Heaven, to live with God to all eternity.

It must be admitted that this is a gross simplification of the various Creeds of the Universal Church and of the creeds, doctrines and dogmas of the many branches of the Church that constitute the divided Christendom of today. I have also left open the question of precisely how and when the Second Coming of Christ has taken, or will take place, and of how the Final Judgement will operate. Otherwise there is, I believe, little or nothing in this summary with which Christians of any denomination may disagree. But when we come to consider the third word - Trinitarian - agreement disappears and the devil comes into his own.

He, the devil that is, does deserve a mention, if only because I have not yet considered the consequence of *not* being a Christian, of not being counted among the saved. One of

the early Church fathers, I forget which but it is of little consequence, argued that one of the greatest pleasures of the saved was to watch the torments of the damned. Now this is far from representative of Christian love and forbearance, but we can understand how a persecuted Church must have felt about its enemies, and the image illustrates all too clearly just how far fallen from grace we are.

None of us can know for certain what our own future state will be, let alone that of others, and we do not know how God has dealt with, deals with and will deal with the rest of humanity. That said, it is clear that there is provision for those who reject and deny God to spend eternity in a less than happy state, but to what extent that will be a tormented and suffering state we cannot be sure - although Jesus repeatedly says (in the Gospel according to Matthew) that for such there will be a 'furnace of fire' in which there will be 'wailing and gnashing of teeth'. But of this, and of the possible nature of Satan and his fallen angels, it is enough for Christians to know that there is such a state and that there are agents who do therein whatever dreadful things are to be done. Beyond that we need not concern ourselves unless our consciences dictate otherwise.

And so to the Trinity. As a doctrine it was formulated to provide a meaningful framework within which can be placed in proper relationship the various forms and natures by which God is made known to man. Theologians of the early Church wrestled with the problem of God as deity, as man and as spirit - distinct from each other and yet being one God. Among them Augustine was the most profound thinker and the most determined student of this particular mystery, but even he was ultimately defeated in trying to produce a perfect formula, as this story from *The Golden Legend* makes clear:

[Augustine] made a book of the Trinity, in which he studied and mused sore in his mind, so far forth that on a time as he went by the sea-side in Africa, studying on the Trinity, he found by the sea-side a little child which had made a pit in the sand, and in his hand a little spoon. And with the spoon he took out water of the large sea and poured it into the pit. And when S. Augustine beheld him he marvelled, and demanded him what he did. And he answered and said: I will lade out and bring all this water of the sea into this pit. What ? said he, it is impossible, how may it be done, sith the sea is so great and large, and thy pit and spoon so little ? Yes, forsooth, said he, I shall lightlier and sooner draw all the water of the sea and bring it into this pit than thou shalt bring the mystery of the Trinity and his divinity into thy little understanding as to the regard thereof; for the mystery of the Trinity is greater and larger to the comparison of thy wit and brain than is this great sea unto this little pit. And therewith the child vanished away. [Caxton's translation, edited by F.S. Ellis, 1900 Vol. 5, p66]

That should give us pause for thought, but we can yet attempt to understand the nature of the problem even if we cannot solve it.

The problem, which none of the Ecumenical Councils solved to universal satisfaction, is that of understanding how One God can exist in Three Persons (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) while yet being of One Substance. That Jesus *is* God is plainly stated in the Gospels: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Same was in the beginning with God. In him was life; and the life was the light of men.' (John I: 1-4) Also in John, 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.' (*ibid.* v 14) After His resurrection, Jesus told the disciples to go and

teach all nations, and to baptise them 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost' (Matthew 28:19) He also stated categorically that 'I and my Father are one' (John 10:30) and that 'I am in the Father, and the Father in me' (John 14:11). That the apostles perceived Christ in this light is clear from the Epistles - Paul's letter to the Philippians provides a good example, 'Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God' (Ch. 2, vv5-6).

Over the following centuries there were violent disputes about the relationship between the persons of the Trinity - and about whether or not there even *was* a Trinity, but while the multitude of heresies is interesting and the plethora of false doctrines fascinating, we can ignore Arius, Sabellius, Nestorius and others of their ilk for we are concerned only with *Trinitarian* Christianity properly so-called. Now just as Augustine wrestled with the problem in vain (although he did end up with a formula), so can we be excused from solving the problem. Let us be content with seeing how the doctrine of the Trinity was stated and how we might reasonably present it today.

The Apostle's Creed acknowledges belief in Father, Son and Holy Spirit while making no attempt to explain the relationship (it also provides an excellent summary of Christian doctrine, so just to remind you here it is:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead and buried, He descended into Hell;  
The third day he rose again from the dead, He ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Ghost; The Holy Catholick Church; The Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body, And the life Everlasting. Amen.)

At the Council of Nicaea, called in 325 A.D. expressly to deal with the Arian heresy, there was a determined attempt to make a definitive statement and the concept of  $\mu\omicron\omicron\upsilon\omega\iota\omicron\nu$  [*homoousion*, of one substance] was included in the Council's credal statement (the Nicene Creed). Thus article two reads:

[We believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, both those in heaven and those on earth.

Thus far, thus good, but schisms and heresies were not at an end. By the middle of the fifth century a further statement of the nature of the Trinity, and of the relationships between the three Persons, was urgently needed. Augustine, despite his study of the Trinity, did not provide a definitive statement and what appeared was attributed to St. Athanasius (296-373). However, it is clear from the content of the Athanasian Creed - known also from its opening words, *Quicumque vult*: Whosoever will [be saved] - that it postdates its supposed creator by at least half a century; it is now dated as post-428, but still of the fifth century.

Virtually the whole of the Athanasian Creed is given over to a detailed, uncompromising statement of the nature of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity can be known only by Revelation, and as a Mystery it is above reason and is an article of faith - although it is not incompatible with the principles of rational thought. Nor has the credal statement ever satisfied philosophers, who wish to analyse statements to ensure that they are logically meaningful, but as a statement of faith on the matter it may be taken as definitive. There is no need to quote the text of this creed in full, as its flavour is immediately apparent from these representative clauses (and you may read the whole in the *Book of Common Prayer*, of the Anglican Church; the Church, that is, of St. William Laud and Anthony Trollope, not of the latter-day riff-raff masquerading as Christians under the banner of the atheistic rag, tag and bobtail of 'The Sea of Faith' movement):

And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity,  
and Trinity in Unity;

Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance.

For there is one Person of the father, another of the Son: and another  
of the Holy Ghost.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all  
one: the Glory Equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate: and the Holy Ghost uncreate.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy  
Ghost incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal.

And yet they are not three eternal: but one eternal.

And the same is then said for their uncreate, incomprehensible and almighty natures.

The whole is summed up thus:

So the father is God, the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God.

And yet they are not three Gods: but one God.

Further,

So there is one Father, not three Fathers: one Son, not three Sons: one Holy  
Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.

And in this Trinity none is afore, or after other: none is greater, or less  
than another:

But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together: and co-equal.

So that in all things, as is aforesaid: the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity  
in Unity is to be worshipped.

Which should be clear and definitive enough for even the most nimble casuist. The matter has rested thus for fifteen hundred years; argued about by Scholastic philosophers (following Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas); surviving the upheavals of the Reformation; and only threatened by those *soi-disant* Christians who would deny the divinity of Christ. But with deists such as the Quakers and Unitarians we need not be concerned. Our faith is, or should be, that of Trinitarian Christianity. Its essential features and principles I have mapped out above. The various Christian denominations will continue to dispute particular points of doctrine, and will sometimes attempt to set out a rational exposition of the Trinity. In this, however, they will continue to fail: the doctrine of the Trinity is a true Mystery of Faith, forever beyond the limitations of the human intellect and accessible to us in its essence only when we finally attain to that Divine Vision and Divine Union which are our ultimate goals.

Certain practical issues do arise, however. As Rosicrucians we are committed to the person of Jesus Christ as God and man, as we are also dedicated to Christian spirituality and to an appreciation of the inner meaning of the Gospels; to an understanding of just such Mysteries of faith as they impinge on our spiritual experiences, and to what might broadly be termed 'Esoteric Christianity'. But in none of these pursuits should we lose sight of the essential nature of Christianity itself: that through love of his sentient creation the Creator indwelt in human form and sacrificed Himself that we might return to a blessed and eternal life with Him. Nor should we forget our bounden duty: to love God and our neighbour as ourselves.

This necessarily involves us accepting that we are less than God. Our prayer to Him should be, 'Not my will, but thine'. If we subscribe to such pernicious doctrines as that we may be as gods, or that our supposed 'Higher Self' is in any way co-equal with God, or that we in some way become Christ when He dwells within us (as opposed to our having an inner awareness of His presence), then we are neither true Christians nor true Rosicrucians.

Ours is not the way of the pagan or of the self-aggrandised magician, nor of the antinomians for whom evil is good and sin both acceptable and justifiable. Equally no Rosicrucian can deny the true divinity of Christ, nor accept that any religion other than Christianity can be wholly true, as opposed to containing elements of the truth. We must not deny the right of every human being to choose his or her own faith and to practise it in peace, within the law of the land - but we must not accept relativism, nor the illogical and untenable notion that truth can vary from person to person. Religious truths are either true or false: conflicting faiths may be equally false, or one alone may be true; what cannot be so is that they can all be true.

Trinitarian Christianity is, however, a tree with many branches, and no Rosicrucian could or would claim to find the truth only in one particular branch of the Christian Church, for wherever Christ is present in the spirit, there the truth is also.