

COMMENT

In the course of some very sensible remarks recently about christian unity and plurality, Cardinal Hume pointed out that the foundation of unity for christians must lie in the mystery of the unity of God. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God." For us this is more than simply a matter of excluding other gods, though this is important enough in itself.

As a revolutionary people dedicated to changing history and transforming the ways in which we live together, the judaeo-christian movement had to begin by challenging the gods of the world, the gods which legitimised the power of the established rulers and which were born of the fears and anxieties intrinsic to that power. Injustice and, indeed, all human corruption has to be accompanied by fantasy and illusion, whether at the individual level in the self-flattering images we create for ourselves to hide our deep unease, or at the social and political level in the gods and ideologies that the unjust society fosters to mask its brutal reality. The western world has to imagine itself free and democratic, the eastern bloc has to pretend to be socialist. If their peoples really confronted each other they could unmask each other, there could be a mutual destruction of the gods; but instead of that the gods confront each other and it is the people that are destroyed.

The gospel is about the destruction of all gods in the confrontation of people, about the ending of the rule of fantasy and sin through that critical, unsentimental acceptance of each other that we call forgiveness and love. But christian faith in the mystery of the unity of God is more than such monotheism, more than the end of idolatry; it is a proclamation of unity in community, in trinity.

On Trinity Sunday, in common with several hundred other people, I had the misfortune to go to Mass in a parish in Cardinal Hume's archdiocese where the priest (not, by the way, one of the secular clergy) evidently felt obliged to say something about the trinity. It was embarrassingly obvious that the teaching meant nothing at all to him—we were to hold it because Holy Mother

Church told us to, and there was a clear implication that life would have been a lot easier for this priest and for the rest of us if Holy Mother Church had kept quiet on the subject. Theologically this kindly but conservative clergyman was as unitarian as any 'radical' critic of Christ's divinity. For him God was still the ultimate boss and we were his slaves.

The doctrine of the trinity tells us that God our Father does not only deal with his creatures, that his life is not spent, so to say, either in isolation or in the company of those infinitely his inferiors. The doctrine of the trinity tells us that God is capable of more than the kindness of a good master towards his slaves, that he is more than the benign dictator of the universe; the doctrine tells us that God is grown up, that he is capable of that adult love between equals that we just occasionally find in ourselves.

That the Father loves Jesus, that there is love between them at the level of equality—not the love between master and well-treated slave but between father and son—this is the very centre of the gospel. This means that we, the brethren of Jesus in faith, treat with the Father at the level of equality—not because God has abdicated his divinity, but because we are taken up into it. This is the christian answer to those like Nietzsche and Marx who fear that to exalt God is to diminish man and that in the end christianity is inimical to human freedom: first of all our God is not a god; but more than this, he is not just the one God of justice and freedom ruling the universe; for our trinitarian faith, because man is in God, God is in man; we are taken up into his trinitarian life, his life is amongst us.

Love between equals, the love whose ultimate expression is the Holy Spirit, the love between Father and Son, is what the christian movement is about, and that is why it must be opposed, in the end, not only to all forms of injustice and exploitation, the worship of the gods, but also to all the forms of paternalism and 'doing good' that belong to a unitarian doctrine of God. The paternalist structure of the church itself is a scandal in a movement that has democracy at its very heart; not the fake democracy of bourgeois ideology but democracy at every level, economic, social, political and individual. Not that the structures of the church matter very much in themselves (and the obsessive concern with them shown by some 'progressives' can be merely diversionary) but they may be literally a scandal in the sense of getting in the way of the real christian task in the power of the Spirit of remaking the world in the image of the triune God.

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