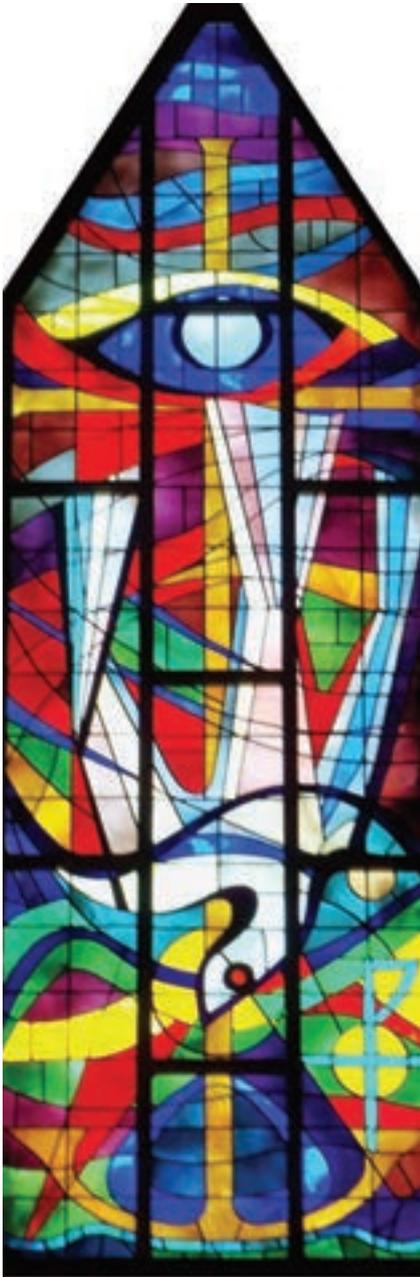


Father, Son and



With a preface by Martin Cavender, this is an edited version of an address given by Dr Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury in September, 2004. He was speaking in Egypt at the conclusion of a Dialogue between the Anglican Communion and al-Azhar al-Sharif.

Further and deeper into the doctrine of the Trinity

It seems impertinent to preface a piece by Archbishop Rowan Williams, now Lord Williams of Oystermouth, especially when it speaks of the community of the Trinity, but I'm going to take the risk. For the last few years I have been quoting some sentences from another lecture by Archbishop Rowan, in that case an address to Muslim students at the Islamic University in Islamabad in November 2005; largely because I have found them immensely helpful.

Explaining the Christian faith to the students, +Rowan said, "Let me begin with the most obvious features of Christian prayer. We pray 'through Jesus Christ our Lord', and the best known of all Christian prayers begins with the words 'Our Father in heaven'. These belong together. Probably the most important Christian belief is that we are given the right to speak to God in exactly the same way that Jesus did, because the life, the power, the Spirit that filled Jesus is given to us also . . . We say that the one God, who is both source and outward-flowing life, who is both 'Father' and 'Son', is also active as the power that draws everything back to God, leading and guiding human beings towards the wisdom and goodness of God. This is the power we call 'Holy Spirit'.

The final paragraph of this five-page address (of which I shall be glad to post or email you a copy) includes the words, "What the Christian hopes and prays for is that at the end he or she will be brought by the grace of God's Spirit to see the glory of God as it is shown in the face of Jesus, and to be so united with his prayer to the Father that we never fall away. All that the observer might see in a Christian meeting for worship is directed towards this. We seek to let the life that was alive in Jesus, Son of Mary, be alive in each one of us through the gift of God's Spirit; and we pray that this life will, through us, bring healing and peace to all the world".

I am often told that Archbishop Rowan is difficult to understand, but I don't find that so from this passage. Indeed, it wouldn't surprise me to know that all those students had become believing Christians as a result of his words. In what follows the Archbishop (as he then was) takes his audience at al-Azhar al-Sharif in Cairo further and deeper into the doctrine and persons of the Holy Trinity, the most complete intentional community, who invite every one of us to become one with them.

Martin Cavender

I am here as a Christian, to speak to you of some of those matters which both unite us and divide us.

In these few remarks, I want to meditate a little on the greatest theme of both Muslim and Christian faith, the doctrine of God.

The belief that God could have a son is, for the faithful Muslim, a belief suggesting that God needs something other than Himself and is subject to the processes of limited bodies by 'begetting' a child. How can such a God be truly free and sovereign? For we know that He is able to bring the world into being by His word alone.

Yet these anxieties do not belong only to Muslims. Egypt was, in the first centuries of the Christian era, the location of great debates on just such matters. Indeed, without the contribution of Egypt, Christian theology would have been infinitely poorer, for many of the greatest minds of that period were natives of Alexandria. And one of the great concerns of these thinkers and their successors was this: if Christians say that the eternal Word and power of God was fully present in Jesus, son of Mary, can we avoid saying this in such a way as to imply that God is subject to a physical process, or that God has a second being alongside Him? These Christian sages believed as strongly as any Muslim that God was self-sufficient and free, and that He could not be affected or limited by physical processes and did not act as a physical cause among others. They say quite explicitly that when we speak of the Father 'begetting' the Son, we must put out of our minds any suggestion that this is a physical thing, a process like the processes of the world.

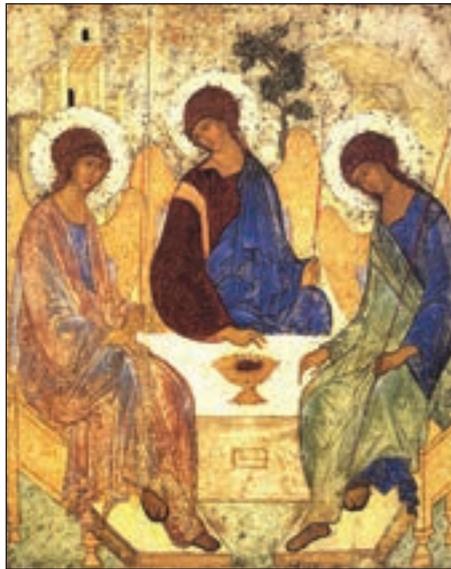
Those Christian thinkers and their successors developed a doctrine

Holy Spirit

which tried to clarify this: they said that the name 'God' is not the name of a person like a human person, a limited being with a father and mother and a place that they inhabit within the world. 'God' is the name of a kind of life – eternal and self-sufficient life, always active, needing nothing. And that life is lived eternally in three ways which are made known to us in the history of God's revelation to the Hebrew people and in the life of Jesus. There is a source of life, an expression of life and a sharing of life. In human language we say, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit', but we do not mean one God with two beings alongside him, or three gods of limited power. Just as we say, 'Here is my hand, and these are the actions my one hand performs', but it is not different from the actions of my five fingers, so with God: this is God, the One, the Living and Self-subsistent, but what God does is not different from the life which is eternally at the same time a source and an expression and a sharing of life. Since God's life is always an intelligent and purposeful life, each of these dimensions of divine life can be thought of as a centre of mind and love; but this does not mean that God 'contains' three different individuals, separate from each other as human individuals are.

Since God's life is always an intelligent and purposeful life, each of these dimensions of divine life can be thought of as a centre of mind and love; but this does not mean that God 'contains' three different individuals, separate from each other as human individuals are.

And Christians believe that this life enters into ours in a limited degree. When God takes away our evildoing and our guilt, when He forgives us and sets us free, He breathes new life into us, as He breathed life into



Adam at the first. That breathing into us we call the 'Spirit'. As we become mature in our new life, we become more and more like the expression of divine life, the Word whom we encounter in Jesus. Because Jesus prayed to the source of His life as 'Father', we call the eternal expression of God's life the 'Son'. And so too we pray to the source of divine life in the way that Jesus taught us, and we say 'Father' to this divine reality.

But in no way does the true Christian say that the life and action of God could be divided into separate parts, as if it were a material thing. In no way does the true Christian say that there is more than one God or that God needs some other in order to act or that God promotes some other being to share His glory. There is one divine action, one divine will; yet (like the fingers of the hand) there are three ways in which that life is real, and it is only in those three ways that the divine life is real – as source and expression and sharing. It is because of those three ways in which divine life exists that Christians speak as they do about what it means to grow in holiness.

And the Christian also says something which may again be a source of disagreement. God is a loving God, as we all agree; but,

God does not love simply because He decides to love. He is always, eternally, loving. His very nature, His definition is love. And the interaction and relation between the three ways in which God lives, the source and the expression and the sharing, is eternally the way God exists

says the Christian, God does not love simply because He decides to love. He is always, eternally, loving. His very nature, His definition is love. And the interaction and relation between the three ways in which God lives, the source and the expression and the sharing, is eternally the way God exists. The three centres of divine action, which we call Father, Son and Spirit, pour out the divine life to each other for all eternity, a sort of perfect circle of giving and receiving. And the only word we can use for that relationship of pouring out and giving is love. So as we grow in holiness, we become closer and closer in our actions and thoughts to the complete self-giving that always exists perfectly in God's life. Towards this fullness we are all called to travel and grow.

Rowan Williams

About the illustrations

Opposite page: *The Trinity Window from the sanctuary of Central United Methodist Church, Radford, Virginia in the USA. The window contains traditional Christian symbolism.*

The eye of God reminds us of His providential care. The dove characterizes the Holy Spirit. The fish symbolizes Jesus Christ. The circle stands for the continuation of life eternal. The anchor characterizes Christian hope and the cross binds everything together.

On this page: *This famous icon of the Trinity was painted by the Russian artist Andrei Rublev and is currently in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Rublev was born about 1360 and died*