

The Replacement Trinity

A new twist on non-Trinitarian ways of reading the Bible has emerged in our times. It has reached the scale of an epidemic and requires special attention. It can be understood best, I think, as a replacement Trinity. Unlike the depersonalized readings of the text that we have just marked (intellectual, practical, inspirational), this way is very personal and also very Trinitarian, but also totally at odds with what is achieved while reading in submission to the authority of the Holy Trinity.

Trinitarian thinking/praying before Holy Scripture cultivates a stance and attitude that submits to being comprehensively formed by God in the way God comprehensively and personally reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Holy Scriptures. The alternative to that is taking charge of our own formation. The most popular way of conceiving this self these days is by understanding the self in a Trinitarian way. This way of self-understanding is not as an intellectual interested in ideas or as a moral being seeking a good life or as a soul looking for solitary solace, but as a divine self in charge of my self. And this divine self is understood as a Holy Trinity.

Here's how it works. It is important to observe that in the formulation of this new Trinity that defines the self as the sovereign text for living, the Bible is neither ignored nor banned; it holds, in fact, an honored place. But the three-personal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is replaced by a very individualized personal Trinity of my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings.

We live in an age in which we have all been trained from the cradle to choose for ourselves what is best for us. We have a few years of apprenticeship at this before we are sent out on our own, but the training begins early. By the time we can hold a spoon we choose between

half a dozen cereals for breakfast, ranging from Cheerios to Corn Flakes. Our tastes, inclinations, and appetites are consulted endlessly. We are soon deciding what clothes we will wear and in what style we will have our hair cut. The options proliferate: what TV channels we will view, what courses we will take in school, what college we will attend, what courses we will sign up for, what model and color of car we will buy, what church we will join. We learn early, with multiple confirmations as we grow older, that we have a say in the formation of our lives and, within certain bounds, the decisive say. If the culture does a thorough job on us — and it turns out to be mighty effective with most of us — we enter adulthood with the working assumption that whatever we need and want and feel forms the divine control center of our lives.

The new Holy Trinity. The sovereign self expresses itself in Holy Needs, Holy Wants, and Holy Feelings. The time and intelligence that our ancestors spent on understanding the sovereignty revealed in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are directed by our contemporaries in affirming and validating the sovereignty of our needs, wants, and feelings.

My needs are non-negotiable. My so-called rights, defined individually, are fundamental to my identity. My need for fulfillment, for expression, for affirmation, for sexual satisfaction, for respect, my need to get my own way — all these provide a foundation to the centrality of *me* and fortify my self against diminution.

My wants are evidence of my expanding sense of kingdom. I train myself to think big because I am big, important, significant. I am larger than life and so require more and more goods and services, more things and more power. Consumption and acquisition are the new fruits of the spirit.

My feelings are the truth of who I am. Any thing or person who can provide me with ecstasy, with excitement, with joy, with stimulus, with spiritual connection validates my sovereignty. This, of course, involves employing quite a large cast of therapists, travel agents, gadgets and machines, recreations and entertainments to cast out the devils of boredom or loss or discontent — all the feelings that undermine or challenge my self-sovereignty.

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In the last two hundred years a huge literature, both scholarly and popular, has developed around understanding this new Holy Trinity of Needs, Wants, and Feelings that make up the sovereign self. It amounts to an immense output of learning. Our new class of spiritual masters is composed of scientists and economists, physicians and psychologists, educators and politicians, writers and artists. They are every bit as intelligent and passionate as our earlier church theologians and every bit as religious and serious, for they know that what they come up with has enormous implications for everyday living. The studies they conduct and the instruction they provide in the service of the god that is us, the godhead composed by our Holy Needs, Holy Wants, and Holy Feelings, are confidently pursued and very convincing. It is very hard not to be convinced with all these experts giving their witness. Under their tutelage I become quite sure that I am the authoritative text for the living of my life.

We might suppose that the preaching of this new Trinitarian religion poses no great threat to people who are baptized in the threefold name of the Trinity, who regularly and prayerfully recite the Trinitarian Apostles' and Nicene creeds, who begin prayers with the invocation, "Our Father . . .," who daily get out of bed to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior and frequently sing, "Come Holy Spirit, heavenly dove. . . ."

But this rival sovereignty is couched in such spiritual language, and we are so easily convinced of our own spiritual sovereignty, that it does catch our attention. The new spiritual masters assure us that all our spiritual needs are included in the new Trinity: our need for meaning and transcendence, our wanting a larger life, our feelings of spiritual significance — and, of course, there is plenty of space to make room for God, as much or as little as you like. The new Trinity doesn't get rid of God or the Bible, it merely puts them to the service of needs, wants, and feelings. Which is fine with us, for we've been trained all our lives to treat everyone and everything that way. It goes with the territory. It's the prerogative of sovereignty.

What has become devastatingly clear in our day is that the core reality of the Christian community, the sovereignty of God revealing himself in three persons, is contested and undermined by virtually ev-

EAT THIS BOOK

everything we learn in our schooling, everything presented to us in the media, every social, workplace, and political expectation directed our way as the experts assure us of the sovereignty of self. These voices seem so perfectly tuned to us, so authoritatively expressed and custom-designed to show us how to live out our sovereign selves, that we are hardly aware that we have traded in our Holy Bibles for this new text, the Holy Self. And don't we still attend Bible studies and read our assigned verse or chapter each day? As we are relentlessly encouraged to consult our needs and dreams and preferences, we hardly notice the shift from what we have so long professed to believe.

The danger of installing the self as the authoritative text for living, at the same time that we are honoring the Holy Scriptures by giving them a prominent place on the shelf, is both enormous and insidious. None of us is immune to the danger.

That is why it is so urgent to revive the strong angel's command to St. John. If we want to keep our identity, if we want a text to live by that keeps us in the company of God's people, keeps us conversant with who he is and the way he works, we simply must eat this book.

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The blunt reality is that for all our sophistication, learning, and self-study we don't know enough to run our lives. The sorry state of the lives of the many who have taken their own experience as the text for their lives is a damning refutation of the pretensions of the sovereignty of the self. We require a text that reveals what we cannot know by simply pooling the acquired knowledge of the ages. The book, the Bible, reveals the self-revealing God and along with that the way the world is, the way life is, the way we are. We need to know the lay of the land that we are living in. We need to know what is involved in this Country of the Trinity, the world of God's creation and salvation and blessing.

God and his ways are not what most of us think. Most of what we are told about God and his ways by our friends on the street, or read about him in the papers, or view on television, or think up on our own, is simply wrong. Maybe not dead wrong, but wrong enough to mess up

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the way we live. And this book is, precisely, revelation, a revealing of what we could never figure out on our own.

Without this text, firmly established at the authoritative center of our communal and personal lives, we will founder. We will sink into a swamp of well-meaning but ineffectual men and women who are mired unmercifully in our needs and wants and feelings.