

Most people assume that everything that bears the label “Christian” must have originated with Jesus and His early followers.

But clearly, this is not the case...all we have to do is look at the words of Jesus, and we can see...it’s definitely not true...

In our scripture reading today, Jesus warns of various false prophets and teachers who will rise up from within the Church...and in this series on church doctrine, we are starting to see how that has played out over the centuries.

We have talked quite a bit about how the original followers of Jesus who were mostly Jews, became marginalized and scattered, while others, who were mostly gentiles, transformed his teachings into a whole new religion, with many of its concepts rooted in Greek philosophy and ancient paganism.

We have talked about how this new religion went from persecution to power, and how ultimately, it came to dominate even the mighty Roman Empire!

And I think we are starting to gain a pretty good understanding of how our church doctrine has been articulated, formulated and expressed, largely in response to the cultural and political needs of all of the ages leading up to today.

By now you may be feeling really challenged by all this revelation – and that is perfectly understandable because it is some very challenging stuff.

But hopefully this series is also shedding some light on some of those things that don’t make any sense –

Things that are deeply embedded in our Christian faith and practice, yet clearly have nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus or his followers.

Because we’re going to need that light – today we are going need all the light we can get as we take on that massive elephant that always seems to take up half the room while we look away and pretend not to notice.

Yes, today is the day we take on the doctrine of the Trinity – arguably, one of the most difficult topics associated with the church.

Part of the problem, I think, is that there is no such thing as the Trinity – at least not in the way we tend to think about things.

It's not biblical; in fact, the word "Trinity" didn't even make its way on to the scene until the fourth century, along with that infamous Roman Emperor – Constantine.

Depending on who you ask, Constantine was either a bloodthirsty pagan or he was the most saintly of saints, but what historians do agree on is that his reign as Roman emperor dramatically changed the direction of Christianity.¹

Have any of you ever listened to that NPR radio program Hidden Brain? I was listening a couple of weeks ago to a fascinating episode called "Creating God" where they interviewed a psychology professor who studies religion from a psychological perspective.

This psychologist,² pointed out that up until about 12,000 years ago, humans did not live in groups any larger than 50 – 100, and the reason for that is because from a genetic standpoint, we're only built to be able to cooperate with as many people as we can know well.

He said that for the vast majority of human history, we lived in small groups where everyone knew everyone else, which meant that if you told a lie, or stole someone's dinner or didn't defend the group against its enemies, there was no way to disappear into the crowd. Everyone knew you, and you would get punished.

But in the last 12,000 years or so, human groups began to expand from a few dozen to thousands, making it much harder to identify the cheaters and the thieves.

So we needed something big. We needed some kind of cultural innovation that would allow us to succeed in these larger groups.

And religion, was one of these cultural innovations.

But not just religion in general – it was one of the specific aspects of religion – the idea of a supernatural punisher also known as God. Because if we are convinced that a god is going to punish us for cheating our group, then we will be far less likely to cheat on our group.

¹ (A.D. 306-337)

² Azim Shariff

Whatever Constantine may or may not have been, he obviously understood human psychology. During his reign, there was a lot of turmoil within the Roman Empire and he needed something powerful to hold it together.

No one is really sure why he chose Christianity, but his decision to make it the official religion of the empire was a huge turning point in our Christian history.

Constantine's strategy for unifying his empire was to create a "catholic" – or universal – church that would blend elements from many religions into one.

Which meant that the "Christianity" Constantine endorsed was different from that practiced by Jesus and the apostles.

You may remember from an earlier sermon the famous Arian controversy, which led Constantine to convene the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325.

Arius, who was a bishop from Alexandria, believed that Christ, being the Son of God, was a special creation of God.

Athanasius, also a bishop from Alexandria, opposed Arius by claiming that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were one, but at the same time, were distinct from each other.

The council of Nicaea was called to settle the matter, but according to the historian Karen Armstrong:³

*"When the bishops gathered at Nicaea...to resolve the crisis, very few...shared Athanasius's view of Christ. Most held a position midway between Athanasius and Arius"*⁴

Since the council was so divided, that placed the Emperor Constantine in the unusual position of deciding church doctrine even though he was not even a Christian.

³ Most of these quotes are from "The Surprising Origins of the Trinity Doctrine" | United Church of God <https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/booklets/is-god-a-trinity/the-surprising-origins-of-the-trinity-doctrine-8/19>

⁴ Karen Armstrong, A History of God (P. 110)

Constantine supported Athanasius, and this led to the church's first creed – the creed of Nicaea – which among other things, explicitly affirms the co-essential divinity of the Son.

More importantly, the text ended with the words "We believe in the Holy Spirit" which later led three theologians from the province of Cappadocia to propose the idea that God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit were coequal and together in one being, yet also distinct from one another.

These men were all trained in Greek philosophy, and in their view the Trinity only made sense as a mystical or spiritual experience.

It was not a logical or intellectual formulation, but an imaginative paradigm that confounded reason.

Gregory of Nazianzus explained that contemplation of the three in One induced a profound and overwhelming emotion that confounded thought and intellectual clarity. He said:

"No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendor of the three; no sooner do I distinguish three than I am carried back into the One. When I think of any of the three, I think of him as the whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking escapes me."⁵

Obviously, this new Trinitarian theology generated a lot of interesting conversation, which led the Emperor Theodosius to convene the Council of Constantinople in the year 381.

Gregory presided over the council urging them to adopt his view of the Holy Spirit. But the Macedonian bishops refused to accept the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, and they walked out of the council.

Soon after that, Gregory became ill and had to withdraw from the council, which left no one to preside other than an elderly senator named Nectarius who was not even a Christian.

So it was up to this senator who knew absolutely nothing about theology, to determine what the church would teach regarding the nature of God, and it was

⁵ Karen Armstrong, A History of God, p.117

he who affirmed the divinity of the Holy Spirit, which, up to that point, had nowhere been clearly stated, not even in Scripture.⁶

With this declaration, the Trinity as generally understood today, became the official belief and teaching concerning the nature of God, and any who disagreed were branded as heretics and dealt with accordingly.

And today, there are still many adherents who claim that if you don't believe in the Trinity, then you can't be a Christian, despite the fact that many, perhaps *most*, Christians have little or no understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.

So why do we hang on to the doctrine of the Trinity? Heck, when you think about it, why do we hang on to religion?

Well, if you look around, you might notice that a lot of people no longer do.

Going back to that Creating God interview on Hidden Brain, we come into the world not just with our genetic inheritance but also with an entire line of cultural ideas, and religion is one of those cultural ideas.

Hands down, throughout the centuries, religion has been the most influential cultural idea ever, but if you notice, there is another cultural idea that is contending for the title and that is our institutions and government.

One of the studies talked about in the interview showed that the countries who tended not to have a lot of interest in religion were the ones with the highest faith in the rule of law.

In our world we have come to place a lot of trust in our institutions, like the bank or the police or the justice system, and we expect that they will work. And for the most part they do – for the most part people are not running amok and large groups are working better than you would expect.

So religion is no longer needed in the same way it was needed in the past, and in the face of its long and sketchy history, people are leaving religion – in droves.

⁶ The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism, "God," p. 568

And that's not necessarily a bad thing because if religion no longer has to serve as watchdog for the world, then we no longer need an angry, punishing God.

And if we no longer need an angry and punishing God, then that leaves all sorts of room for using our religion as a way to bring ourselves closer to God.

You all have heard me say it many times, for me, religion is like a scaffolding, or tool, or even like a gate into the greatest mystery we'll ever encounter...it is a way to access the thing, but it is not the thing itself.

Religion gives us language to talk amongst ourselves about this great mystery that we usually encounter alone – and religion gives us each other so that we can try and understand it together.

Religion gives us practice – and the only way to get better at it is to keep doing it and allowing it to take you where it will.

Religion has given us some pretty awful things in the past, but it has also given us story, tradition, connection and hope –

And – it has given us a most precious jewel in the depths of the Trinity.

I don't know the agenda of those Cappadocian fathers who came up with the Trinity, but based on that earlier quote of Gregory of Nazianzus, I would have to say that either they were very good at riddles or there was definitely some deep mysticism involved.

Father Richard Rohr, in his Circle Dance meditation tells us that “The Creation story in Genesis gives us a wonderful insight into God's character by using plural pronouns: “Let *us* create in *our* image” (Genesis 1:26-27).” And he goes on to say that the Cappadocian Fathers finally turned to a word from Greek theater, *perichoresis*—circle dance—to describe the foundational quality of God's character: relationship and communion. In the beginning was relationship.”⁷

And you see **this** is what I love so much about God. I love how God can move right in to the middle of the most twisted and worst theology there is and own it.

God is not the dancer but the dance itself!

⁷ <https://cac.org/a-trinitarian-revolution-2017-02-28/>

And in the middle of all that muck – an emperor under pressure to get his kingdom under control – religious leaders getting lost in their own ambition as they claim to follow Christ – court intrigue and arbitrary doctrine, in the middle of all that, the dance continues its constant flow.

The Trinity has had a long and battered history. It has formed our creedal and liturgical language for centuries, but not many members of the church can even explain why. Yet there are still some religious communities that require belief in the unbelievable as a basis to secure loyalty.

I know I am attracted to the Trinity, but it's not because I believe Jesus was God – which I don't – nor is it because I believe that some percentage of Jesus was God and some other percentage was human – because I don't even care about all that.

What draws me to the image of the Trinity is that it reveals a *hidden faithfulness and goodness* at the heart of the universe.

Rohr says “You become the God you worship. In other words, *your image of God creates you*. If you get the image of God wrong, everything else that builds on it is going to be rather inadequate.”

Pause...

May it be with you all according to God's word...Amen