

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Trinity Sunday – May 31, 2015
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

John 3:1-17

FOR REFLECTION

Deity: Many Hindus recognize a vast diversity of gods and goddesses; others believe in a **Hindu "trinity" (trimurti)**: Brahman, Vishnu, Shiva; yet others claim an essential monotheism, believing that all the gods are manifestations of one.

<http://www.patheos.com/Library/Hinduism.html>

Unitarian Trinity Talk

Like Nicodemus, I have many questions.

So, today, let's talk about The Trinity.

Father – Son – Holy Ghost

G-d – Christ – Spirit

Creator – Redeemer – Sustainer

By whatever names you call G-d-The-Three-in-One – tell me what you think and feel about the concept of The Trinity.

Being a Unitarian at heart – I struggle with the concept of the The Trinity as it has been traditionally defined and taught in Sunday School and then Seminary. I don't know if anyone outside the Choir noticed – but after a few months here I took the Gloria and then the Doxology out of the worship service. Did anyone in or out of the Choir have something to share about that?

Being an English Major – I truly appreciate the concept of METAPHOR and the idea that G-d – Higher Power – That-Which-Created-The-Universe – can be described in a zillion ways. So rather than being put off by “many names for the divine” – I might say that having only three (official) metaphors can be limiting.

Being curious – I turned to a religion that DOES have a zillion names/descriptions/faces for the divine – and took a look at Hinduism. Here is some of what I found:

Hinduism is a collective term applied to the many philosophical and religious traditions native to India. Hinduism has neither a specific moment of origin nor a specific founder, [since [it] evolved as time and culture impacted the religious ideas of early India]... The tradition understands itself to be **timeless**, having always existed...*[although some scholars trace origins to at least 2000 bce].*

It is... a complex tradition that encompasses numerous interrelated religious doctrines and practices that have **some common characteristics but which lack any unified system of beliefs and practices**. Hinduism encompasses a number of major sects, as well as countless subsects with local or regional variations. On one level, it is possible to view these sects as distinct religious traditions, with often very specific theologies and ritual traditions; on another level, however, **they often understand themselves to be different means to reach a common end**.

[This is an understanding we might strive for among Christian Denominations...]

The Hindu worldview is grounded in the doctrines of samsara (the cycle of rebirth) and karma (the universal law of cause and effect), and fundamentally holds that one's actions (including one's thoughts) directly determine one's life, both one's current life and one's future lives. **Many, but not all, Hindus hold that the cosmos is populated by numerous deities and spiritual beings — gods and goddesses, or devas — who actively influence the world and who interact with humans.** ... [Others believe in a Hindu "trinity" (trimurti): Brahman, Vishnu, Shiva; yet **others claim an essential monotheism, believing that all the gods are manifestations of one.**]

The tradition is typically divided into four major sects:

Shaiva (devotees of the god Shiva),
Vaishnava (devotees of the god Vishnu),
Shakta (devotees of the goddess), and
Smarta (those who understand the ultimate form of the divine to be abstract and all encompassing, Brahman).

<http://www.patheos.com/Library/Hinduism.html>

Most Hindus believe there is only **one true god, Brahman**. But this supreme spirit takes many shapes; millions, in fact.

http://interfaithradio.org/Archive/2011-August/The_Hindu_Divine__One_God__Many_Faces

Check out this description of the one true god:

Brahmā is traditionally depicted with four heads, four faces, and four arms. With each head, He continually recites one of the four Vedas. **He is often depicted with a white beard** (especially in North India), **indicating the nearly eternal nature of his existence.** Unlike most other Hindu gods, **Brahmā holds no weapons.** One of his hands holds a scepter. Another of his hands holds a book. Brahmā also holds a string of prayer beads called the 'akṣamālā' (literally "garland of eyes"), which He uses to keep track of the Universe's time.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahma>

Does this call to mind any depictions of appearances of our own biblical G-d?
Let's look at:

Ezekiel 1

1...the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.

4 As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it...5 In the middle of it was something like four living creatures. ...they were of human form. 6 **Each had four faces**, and each of them had four wings... 8 Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. ... The four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle...

15 As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them... 17 When they moved, they moved in any of the four directions without veering as they moved. 18 Their rims were tall and awesome, for **the rims of all four were full of eyes all round.**

As for the white hair/beard, let's look at:

Revelation 1

13...I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. 14 **His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow...**

Jesus is usually depicted with a beard because Jewish men of the time usually had beards. It would be an easy leap for religious people over the ages to picture G-d as Father with a beard – white with age. But seeing both of these prophetic visions (Ezekiel and John of Patmos) – written down maybe 600 years apart – with imagery so close to the imagery of the G-d Brahma – I take the leap and wonder if Hinduism was yet another influence in the unfolding of our Judeo-Christian tradition? Jesus' core message of compassion and mitigation of life's suffering has been connected to Buddhism – with some even speculating he spent some time in the "east" between the

ages of 12 and 30. If the ancient religions spread by mutual influence through trade and word of mouth – like ripples on the water – perhaps Jesus (let alone Ezekiel or John) never had to travel that far to incorporate such imagery and ideas.

And, I leap again – perhaps the foundation of the idea for The Trinity is rooted in Hinduism after all.

...[some Hindus] believe in a **Hindu "trinity" (trimurti):** Brahman, Vishnu, Shiva; yet **others claim an essential monotheism, believing that all the gods are manifestations of one.**

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Just as Pentecost, the “birthday of the Christian church” – was also a Jewish festival celebrating the revelation of sacred texts to Moses – which was also an ancient Harvest festival – it is likely that our Trinity comes from the roots of ancient religions – a fragment of very old metaphorical truth that got buried in dogma and delimited by many a generation of re-made-Christians.

The John who wrote the Nicodemus story (not the same John of Revelation) – was part of this tradition of placing Christological constructs on the lips of a working class Jewish rabble rouser – deifying yet another face among faces of G-d’s Creation. It is an astonishing, mystifying layering of metaphors. We don’t even have to imagine the look of astonishment of the face of Nicodemus:

Jesus answered...7 Do not be **astonished** that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

I am not a Hindu. But learning about their ancient metaphors actually helps me be on better terms with our Trinity and claim it in some different ways. And as a UCCer – believing that “G-d is still speaking” – I wonder how we might describe our Trinity – or multitude – today. Have you got some ideas?

Lover – Peacemaker – Communicator
Governor – Legislator – Judge ☺
Maker – Teacher – Nurturer
Head – Heart – Hand
Universe – Galaxy – Solar System – Planet
Genus – Species – DNA

John 3:1-17

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." 17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."