



the empty bell

The Empty Bell: A Trinitarian Vision of Consciousness

© Robert A. Jonas, 2006
(reprint by written permission only)

The Spiritual Vision

The core of the Empty Bell vision of spirituality is drawn from mainstream Christianity and is based on Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the contemplative theological tradition, the writings of many Christian saints, and the ongoing inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We are Trinitarian. We believe that God is a Creator who created and continues to create everything—that is from nothing, and who declares that creation is good. God has created the physical cosmos to develop through the evolutionary process. We believe that God created us to love and serve God, to care for the natural world, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

God created an interdependent cosmos. As embodied creatures, human beings are part of God's creation. The first task that God gave humankind was to protect and care for God's creation. Careful stewardship of the natural world is a way of honoring our Creator. God created human beings with a capacity to empathize and to see the Whole of things. Our ability to think abstractly, compassionately, and creatively is a gift from God who intends for us to participate in divine consciousness.

We believe that God has created us to make free choices and to exercise our capacity for critical analysis and independent thought. At the same time, human beings find their deepest freedom in loving and serving God and in responding to God's longing to be in our lives. Unfortunately, in our freedom we humans have a deep-seated tendency to be self-centered, to live out of a false and shallow self and to do harmful things to ourselves, to others and to creation. We believe that God has set before us an alternative to this "natural" selfish tendency, an alternative most fully embodied in the life, mission and teachings of Jesus Christ, who surrenders himself in love to God, to others and to all creation.

Jesus Christ stands with us as inspiration, leader and friend, and as the Son of God, an abundant source of divine grace. While Jesus, the man, lived and died, the Risen Christ and his Holy Spirit are ever-present to his followers and will never die. We believe in the Gospel imperative that we should seek to have the mind of Christ and to embody Christ's mind, heart and behavior in a suffering world. We believe that Christians around the world are part of the Body of Christ. Authentic Christian community is marked by love, mutual service, and an ever-deepening compassion for the world beyond. Christian community is strengthened when its individual members surrender in love to Christ.

A Trinitarian vision of Consciousness

We believe in the Trinity and we find meaning in St. Augustine's image of the Trinity as the Lover, the Beloved and the Love that flows between. We believe that the Trinity is not only an intellectual doctrine or dogma, not only a proposition that one should believe, but also a symbol that points to each person's True Self. Since we are made in the image of the Trinity, we are meant to embody the Lover, the Beloved and the Love that flows between. We believe that the symbol of the Trinity is rich with meaning, not only as an object of our consciousness, not only as a creedal proposition, but fore-

most as a description of our deepest and truest consciousness.

Interpreting the Trinity from the standpoint of modes of consciousness has not been standard practice in any Christian denomination, although this viewpoint has been glimpsed in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic contemplative traditions. However, we believe that this approach, discussed at length in the work of S. Mark Heim (*The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), is extremely helpful to Christians who want to experience the presence of Christ in their daily awareness. A Trinitarian understanding of human and divine consciousness is grounded firmly in the Bible, and it is also spacious enough to allow for a rich comparative dialogue with other religions.

Here is a brief description of how we might explore a Trinitarian consciousness and relate it to particular ways of prayer and meditation:

God the “Father”: Source & Godhead

The first Person of the Trinity is the Godhead, the Source of all that is. No sensual, psychological or spiritual experience contains all of God or the essence of God. For example, in certain passages of Hebrew Scriptures, God is described as “appearing” in a cloud or in darkness without any particular form: “God made darkness his hiding place and covert, and dark waters in the clouds of the air His tabernacle round about him” (Psalm 17:12). Similarly, in the New Testament we read that “Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals” (Acts 17:29); and that “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1Corinthians 2:9)

We might call the totally transcendent God, the Godhead or the Source of all that is. The Godhead is simultaneously within (immanent) and beyond (transcendent to) all forms of human understanding and experience. No concept, thought or image captures the entirety or the essence of God. Despite the traditional use of masculine imagery for the Godhead, God is as much Mother as Father, as much “feminine” as “masculine.” The analogy to parenthood lends a personal cast to the Source, even though we know that no human categories can exhaust the meaning of the Godhead.

The invisible Godhead points our understanding and awareness toward emptiness and silence, to the desert of consciousness in which we must be still and can only watch and listen without words, concepts or images. To seek the Godhead who is empty of all form, we need a discipline of prayer that helps us to empty our minds of image and thought. Traditionally, this pole of awareness in Trinitarian consciousness has been called “negative theology” or *via negativa*, for it describes what God is **not**, rather than what God **is**. It is also called the *apophatic* path (Greek: without images, as distinct from *kataphatic*: with images). The first Person of the Trinity is the pole of surrender. To enter this dimension of God, we must surrender everything, including our images, beliefs and thoughts, for the sake of

God. Awareness enters a desert wilderness of not-knowing.

Mystical theologians who emphasized the *apophatic* path include such 4th century Desert Fathers as Evagrius, Cassian, and the Orthodox priest and writer, St. Basil the Great, who wrote, “We say that we know the greatness of God, His power, His wisdom, His goodness, His providence over us, and the justness of His judgment; but not His very essence.” In these early centuries of Christian formation, Pseudo-Dionysius (5th c.) was also well-known for his *apophatic* emphasis. He wrote, for example, that “pre-eminent darkness is both concealed by every light and is hidden from every knowledge. And, if any one, having seen God, understood what he saw, he did not see Him, but some of His creatures [sensual and understandable attributes] that are existing and known.”

In the Middle Ages, the German Dominican friar, Meister Eckhart became both beloved and vilified for his radical emphasis on the unknowability of God. For Eckhart, the Godhead is both far beyond and deep within our thoughts and images. This emphasis did not make him an atheist, but rather a radical Christian who experienced God’s dark, unknowable presence in every moment of ordinary time and experience. For Eckhart, our awareness is like an empty table that must be wiped clean so that only God can write on it. He wrote: “If a heart is to be ready for [God], it must be emptied out to nothingness, the condition of its maximum capacity. So, too, a disinterested heart, reduced to nothingness, is the optimum, the condition of maximum sensitivity.”

Thus, Eckhart’s emphasis leads him to a very particular type of prayer or meditation, one in which each person becomes “disinterested” in the sense that he or she comes to expect God in all things evenly. We must empty ourselves of all personal opinions, preferences, and judgments – even of our notions of God – so that we can be fully open to God’s presence. Eckhart is famous for his invitation to “let go of God for God’s sake.”

By linking a particular view of God’s unknowability with a particular kind of spiritual method—the practice of “emptying,” the hallmark of Christian contemplative prayer--Eckhart sets the stage for other great *apophatic* writers such as the anonymous 14th century Christian mystic who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the great poet and writer, St. John of the Cross (1542-1591).

St. John of the Cross was a Spanish Carmelite monk who wrote books such as *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* that describe an optimum Christian developmental path of prayer. The mystical journey is an ascent to the top of Mount Carmel where our souls are at last united with God through Christ. For St. John, one must empty oneself of every concept and thought about God, so that God in God’s Self can show up. He writes: “God commanded that the altar of the ark of the Covenant be empty and hollow (Ex. 27:8) to remind the soul how void of all things God wished it to be.”

In the first Person or pole of Trinitarian awareness, as our opinions about God flow out, the real God flows in.

God the “Son”:

A Personal Incarnation & An Interpersonal Archetype

The second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, is the appearance in the flesh (the *kataphatic* dimension) of the invisible Creator who is beyond all appearances (the *apophatic* dimension). As Christians we believe with St. John that the eternal Christ was in God from the beginning of time and that all things have come into being through Christ, the Word (John 1).

Through the second Person of the Trinity, God the Creator addresses us personally and is available to us personally as the Beloved. This mode of consciousness, what we might term the “I-Thou” (to adopt the phrase of Jewish theologian Martin Buber), is common in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. As soon as God creates human beings, described in the book of Genesis, God addresses us personally with the pronoun, “you”:

“See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.” (Genesis 1:29)

The first time that humans speak in personal terms in Hebrew scriptures, we speak directly to God with the personal pronoun, “You”:

“I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” (Genesis 3:10)

The conversation between humans and God in the mythical Garden of Eden is remarkable for its frank interpersonal nature. The intimate I-Thou nature of the encounter reflects a depth of mutual concern and responsibility between God and humans that cannot be ignored or evaded. In the rest of the Bible there are many hundreds of occurrences where the personal pronoun “you” is used as a mode of address from humans to God or God to humans, clearly reflecting the importance and sacredness of the I-Thou relationship.

In Hebrew scripture, the I-Thou dimension of consciousness is most beautifully articulated in the poetic prayers of the Psalms. In his suffering and in his great longing for God, the psalmist prayerfully addresses God as Thou; and in God’s great love for and empathy with the humans that God has created, God addresses the psalmist as a thou. For example, God tells the psalmist,

*You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.* (Psalm 2:7-2:8)

Later the psalmist responds,

*I will sing of loyalty and of justice;
to you, O LORD, I will sing.*

*Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry come to you. (Psalm 101:1 and 102:1)*

And still later, in one of the most powerful and intimate confessions of sacred interpersonal love, Psalm 139,

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely. . . .
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.
You hold me, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. . . .*

Sometimes, as in the book of Isaiah, the covenantal language of a personal “call” from God to humans is used. Isaiah writes that “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:1).

This covenantal I-Thou language radiates from Jesus and the Gospel writers throughout the New Testament. It’s as if all the depth of interpersonal contact between humans and God has now been made real in the most intimate way, with God’s appearance as a person who is totally like other persons. Because this person, Jesus, is now understood to be God with us (Emmanuel), the I-Thou speech that was once directed only to the transcendent God, the Creator, can now be addressed to God in the flesh. Because Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, sacred titles of interpersonal address such as “The Lord” that were once only used for God the Creator can now be directed to Jesus Christ.

Still, it is important to keep in mind the paradoxical nature of the Trinity in which God is both One and Three, and in which each Person of the Trinity is somehow integrated with (or included in?) the other Persons of the Trinity. So, we cannot say that the I-Thou or Second Person of the Trinity has been transferred from God or the Godhead to Jesus. The Second Person of the Trinity has never been completely separate from the First Person. Even though we believe that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, we also honor the fact that Jesus spoke to the Godhead as a son speaks to his father. So, Jesus uses familial language for his I-Thou relationship with the Godhead. In Matthew Jesus declares,

All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matthew 11:27)

This sacred father-son, I-Thou relationship is characterized most deeply by unconditional love, which we glimpse most vividly in Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist:

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. (Matthew 3:16-17)

We cannot underestimate the importance of interpersonal love as the very ground of Jesus's ministry. He prays with and for individual people and communities. He calls people personally to friendship or to a sacred vocation. He heals people by his personal touch or word. Jesus does call people to be with God in solitude and in the depths of their own minds and hearts, but he also calls them to connect with others in interpersonal and communal relationships. For Jesus, there is something holy about the sacred *Between*. Private prayer is necessary, and it can certainly be healing, but it is equally clear that Jesus's spirituality is a relational one, grounded in I-Thou dynamics.

Jesus's relational spirituality comes forward most powerfully and completely in the prayerful farewell address that highlights the Gospel of John. Here he speaks directly to his friends and to God:

You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you (John 15:3). . . Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me (15:4). . . As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love (15:9). . . I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete (15:11). . . I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father (15:15). . . I am not alone because the Father is with me (16:32). . .

Clearly, the I-Thou language of personal relationship that is manifested in the Incarnation is fundamental to Christian spirituality--to its prayer, its ethical imperatives, its liturgies, its art forms and its music. In fact, as Christians we believe that to some extent our direct, personal relationship with Jesus Christ underlies every human experience of intimate encounter, be it with another person or through an epiphany in the natural world.

The Second Person of the Trinity announces the irreducible sacredness of interpersonal relationships and the various covenants and commitments that we create with others. Friendship, partnership, marriage, family, neighborhood, town and city, nation and planet--all levels of relationships can be the location of the sacred *Between*. It takes courage to reveal oneself to God in an I-Thou way. It is not easy to open ourselves to a direct encounter with another person or with God. It is not easy to tell the truth or to share one's honest feelings with another; not easy to eschew formalities, posturing, denial, self-inflation, self-rejection or false piety; not easy to trust another, especially if we've been hurt in "the between" of human relationship.

The Second Person of the Trinity calls us into honest, truthful relationship with God and with others. God's ultimate trustworthiness and unconditional love are the sacred ground of every *between*, and this ground shows us that it is always possible to act in right relationship with the ultimate I-Thou that we glimpse in Jesus Christ. The eternal archetype or resonance of our relationship with Jesus can be inwardly present to us as we relate to others--Christian or not--guiding us and helping us to discern how to act in that relationship.

God the “Holy Spirit”: Counselor & Advocate

The third Person of the Trinity is the manifesting, inspiring, guiding presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit moves in both the *apophatic* and *kataphatic* dimensions. As we read in John 3:8, “The wind [of the Spirit] blows where it chooses; you can hear the sound of it, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with all who are born of the Spirit.”

In the nano-second after there was Nothing, God's Spirit swept creatively over the void and the darkness, over the formless “waters.” This same invisible, divine Spirit was at work throughout the millennia in the evolutionary process and throughout the historical time of the Hebrew scriptures. For Christians, this Holy Spirit is sent out by the Risen Christ to bring to human beings and to all of creation the message of God's unconditional love, justice and mercy. The Holy Spirit is where God is--anywhere and anytime--and can manifest to us individually in prayer or collectively when we are gathered in community.

In the presence of the Holy Spirit, our individual consciousness becomes One in Christ without losing its distinctness. As we develop “in the spirit,” we experience our union with God and one another without losing our unique and particular selves. This simultaneity of oneness and distinction reflects the inner life of the Triune God and therefore the mind or consciousness of Christ. The simultaneity of oneness and distinction reflects the deepest dynamics of our God-created consciousness. When we are rooted in this consciousness we quite naturally exhibit the qualities of Christ, seeking justice, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation in everything we do. Our inclination to create beauty and our longing to act in ways that are useful and helpful is fed inwardly by the same Spirit who hovered creatively over the face of the Deep in the beginning of time. The Holy Spirit is our divinely created longing to create loving, empathetic and respectful relationships with others.

One of the most vivid New Testament accounts of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit is the story in the Book of Acts of what happened to Jesus' followers at Pentecost, fifty days after the Resurrection:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in

other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.
(Acts 2:1-2:11)

The Holy Spirit is the divine Person who inspires and empowers people who may be very different from each other to form a community in which each person is inwardly united with God and also drawn to connect with others in truthful and loving ways. The "wind" of the Spirit inspires us and gives us the courage and wisdom to create community--even with people who are very different from ourselves. When we surrender our ego concerns to the Holy Spirit we become less afraid, more fruitful and so creative in our love that it seems that we have been "born again" in the Spirit (John 3:8).

Triune Christian Consciousness: A Summary

The inner dynamics of the Trinity and the architecture of Triune consciousness were sketched out during the great Councils (especially Nicean and Chalcedon) of the fourth and fifth centuries. Of course, the participants knew that in speaking about God, they spoke about an ultimate Mystery. Still, they felt that the Scriptures, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the collective wisdom of the growing Christian community had given them enough clues to draw some comparisons between human experience and God's identity. They felt strongly that some interpretations of Jesus, God or the Holy Spirit were distorted and could lead to serious spiritual suffering. Accordingly, much of the talk at these councils was concerned--wisely or not--with identifying certain heresies.

Some current scholars and commentators (e.g. Elaine Pagels) accuse these Councils of being concerned primarily with consolidating their political power and with establishing clear lines of authority in the Roman Catholic hierarchy. No doubt, some of these charges are true. But the historical documents also reveal that some sincere, prayerful and wise participants contributed to the formulation of doctrines such as the nature of the Trinity. One particular strength of the Councils is the beautiful and paradoxical vision of the Trinity that they have bequeathed to us.

The Counciliar documents describe the three Persons of the Trinity as always dancing in a *perichoresis* (Greek: dance around) of love. The immanent life of the Trinity is always gracefully moving in a continuing incarnation of divine "presencing" within and among all people and the whole of creation.

In this divine *circumcession* (another word coined during the great Councils), each Person of the Trin-

ity is both distinct from, and one with, the others. Thus the Father is and is not the Son, the Son is and is not the Father, the Holy Spirit is and is not the Father, and the Holy Spirit is and is not the Son. The Councils were comfortable with the paradoxes of this view and they rejected any formulation of God that would separate the Persons or make them “different” from one another. They are distinct, but not separate. In a similar, paradoxical fashion, the Councils insisted that Jesus Christ was complete in his humanness and complete in his divinity. They rejected any formulation of Jesus as being more human than divine, or more divine than human. Clearly, they trusted that the Christian Church could somehow understand and hold the most astounding contradictions in its understanding of the Trinity.

In terms of our focus on Trinitarian consciousness, the Conciliar formulations about God allow us to say that the non-conceptual mystery of the First Person is also within the Second and Third Persons, that the I-Thou of the Second Person is also in the First and Third Persons, and that the wise “presencing” of the Third Person is also within the First and Second Persons of the Trinity.

Since we are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), and since, for Christians, God is Trinitarian, the Trinity is a symbol of a one-in-three community of love that is also the symbol of our deepest, truest Self in God. Our true Self is a dynamic co-presencing that is both entirely within us as individual persons and also entirely among and between us as persons in community. A Christian’s spiritual life is fundamentally relational and personal and yet is also open to a horizon of the Unknown. To honor and express the Trinity, we care passionately about personal relationships but also seek an inner spaciousness that is open to the mystery of the invisible Godhead.

The Trinitarian spiritual life can be characterized as a continuous dance (*perichoresis*) between what we can know and experience with our senses and intellect (*kataphatic* or *via positiva* and what we cannot know or sense (*apophatic* or *via negativa*). We who practice Trinitarian consciousness experience life as a dance of awareness in which we are drawn in love to the unknown “I” of the Father, to beloved I-Thou encounter through the “Son,” and to the dynamic “we” experience of the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity and the Empty Bell

In the Empty Bell community, we believe that our gatherings should reflect these Persons of the Trinity.

Thus, in the first Person of the Trinity, we have a period of silent meditation that emphasizes the surrender of our thinking, problem-solving and analyzing. This period of complete silence symbolizes and guides us to the emptiness and nakedness of the first Person--the Godhead--by helping us to become empty and naked in God. When a temple bell is empty, it makes a beautiful sound; analogously, when we are inwardly spacious and letting go into God, then we make a beautiful “sound” as life’s events strike us.

In the second Person of the Trinity, we enter into intimate relationship with the I-Thou of Jesus and of others. We read the Gospel stories aloud to refresh our minds with Jesus’ presence and ministry among

us, and we pray to Jesus, assuming that His presence within and among is living and eternal. From moment to moment we are sensitive to the distinctness and separateness of others with whom we pray and share, and we are simultaneously aware of our oneness with them in God. We pray and sing to Jesus in our unity and in our diversity.

In the third Person of the Trinity we continually open ourselves to the “we” of God’s presence and guidance among us. We believe, as Scripture tells us, that it is the Holy Spirit who prays, reads, speaks and sings within and among us, and who will lead us to all truth. As a sign of this sacred “we,” we sometimes sing in unison or hold hands as we pray. In the sharing time, we assume that the Holy Spirit is listening within us as we listen to others. We listen to one other as attentively as we can, listening for the ways that the Holy Spirit may be at work in each person’s life and heart.

In sum, most Empty Bell gatherings include silent meditation, Scripture reading, chanting and singing, personal sharing, and vocal prayer. Through these practices we seek to notice and to respond to the presence of God in our lives and to support each other in our quest to reflect the Trinitarian image of God who is our true Self.

