

That's the Spirit!

Dinah Livingstone

Near the beginning of Luke's Gospel (4:16-21), after being led by the Spirit for forty days into the wilderness, Jesus returns 'in the power of the Spirit' to his home town of Nazareth, stands up in the synagogue on the Sabbath day and quotes the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
as he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...

Filled with the Spirit, he proclaims his mission to announce an imminent reign of God or kindness descending upon Earth. He rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant and sits down. Then he says: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Of course, the people of Nazareth, who have seen him growing up as the son of Joseph the local carpenter, are appalled at his pretensions and try to throw him over a cliff. But he escapes.

When Jesus has gone away, that same spirit descends at Pentecost like tongues of fire upon the small community of his followers gathered in the upper room. It is a creative spirit and now the body of Christ on Earth becomes a social body, a body of people, *allegro con spirito*. The crowd outside think they are drunk. But Peter answers them: 'Don't be silly. It's only nine o'clock in the morning!' Then Peter, the fisherman, filled with the spirit, makes a terrific speech. Paul will develop that idea of a community with one spirit as 'the body of Christ'. In the New Testament the spirit is *embodied*, as energy, as life, both in individuals, who may receive special 'gifts of the spirit' and embodied in the community, as the spirit of fellowship *κοινωνία*, communion.

I believe that God was created by the human imagination and the natural outcome of Christianity is humanism. The key to that outcome is descent – coming down to Earth – *embodiment*. Jesus, filled with the Spirit, begins his mission by proclaiming the coming of a fair and kind society on Earth, which he calls 'the Reign of God'. Paul speaks of the Christian community as a sharing in the body of Christ: 'We who are many are one body because we all

share the same bread.' (1 Cor 10:16-17). 'In Christ,' he tells the Galatians, 'there is no longer Jew or Greek – you could say no black or white – there is no longer slave or free, no longer male and female' – so non-racist, non-classist, non-sexist – 'for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Gal. 3:28).

The 'body of Christ', sharing the same spirit, *also* becomes a model of a good society, in which *everyone* is of equal moral worth. At the time that was a revolutionary idea. These twin images of a 'reign of kindness' on Earth and the social 'body of Christ' are what made Christianity the mother of humanism. The early Christians expected Jesus to return and bring in this reign of God, which is good news for the poor and excluded. I think Jesus expected that too but it didn't happen. Nevertheless, a fair and kind society remains a good idea, and as God doesn't, hasn't, come to make it happen, it is up to us.

Jesus and Paul and most people at that time believed that God or gods were real and acted in the world. If the natural outcome of Christianity is humanism, how did we get there? I think that process of what we could call de-supernaturalisation developed from the earliest Christian theology. Who or what is Christ? Who or what is the Spirit? Over the next five centuries the Christian community tried to thrash that out. They came up with the doctrines of Incarnation and Trinity. Today those doctrines are often dismissed as gobbledegook, but I think they are powerful imaginative, poetic creations, which also mark the progress – you might say the dialectic – of Christianity towards humanism.

One milestone was the Council of Nicea in 325. Athanasius proposed the idea that Christ, the Son of God who was born as a human baby, was one being – *homoousios* – with God the Father. As he put it: God became human so that humanity might become divine. It was a terrific struggle. At one point the story goes that his opponents, the Arians, chased him down the street and he had to escape at night by boat. But he won. *Homoousios* prevailed.

So there you have the first step. God is human. God, as the Nicea statement puts it: has ‘come down, become embodied, become human’. It sounds thunderous in Greek *katelthonta sarkothenta enanthropesanta*. At the later Council of Chalcedon (451) the language will become even more thunderous. Again and again it repeats the words *the same, the same the same*: ‘the *same* Jesus Christ is wholly God, the *same* Jesus Christ is wholly human. It describes him as ‘one person in two natures, *the same* with the whole divine nature, *the same* with a whole human nature, body and soul. The Greek word for the same *ton auton, ton auton ton auton*, and the Latin *eundem, eundem, eundem* thundered round their world. And what the thunder said was: God is human. And what the lightning – or enlightening – accompanying the thunder said was that for one person to have two minds, one that knows everything and one that has to learn things in an ordinary human way is psychologically impossible. So is this a mythical person? Is this the first tipping point towards the idea that God is imaginary, a human creation?

Understandably, it took longer for the early church to come up with a definition of the Holy Spirit as a divine person. It was more than 50 years after the Council of Nicea, at the Council of Constantinople in 381, that the Spirit was defined as God, ‘the Lord and life-giver, who together with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified’. It is not surprising that there were doubts about the personality of the Spirit. The Spirit is never actually represented as a person but as wind, breath, tongues of fire, a dove.

There is a story of a Japanese convert who says: ‘I get the idea of the honourable Father and of the honourable Son. But I am puzzled about the honourable bird!’ I remember when we were small children my brother putting a sheet over his head and flapping around saying, ‘I’m the Holy Ghost!’ and cackling with laughter. But when finally the Spirit is defined as a distinct divine person, is it perhaps that vagueness, that uncertainty about his personality, that becomes the second tipping point towards humanism? If the Spirit personifies divine energy, divine love and is wholly God, maybe God is a *personification* of forces in the universe and actually or potentially in ourselves? Could God be a metaphor? Personification and metaphor are poetic tropes.

When we come to Augustine’s monumental work *On the Trinity*, begun around the year 400, he is clear the Holy Spirit is equal and *homoousion* – of one being – with the Father and Son (but he said it in Latin, not Greek – his word was ‘consubstantial’). For Augustine there is one God who is three distinct persons – Father, Son and Spirit – who all share one and the same divine being or substance. What makes the persons distinct is their relationship to one another. The Father knows himself perfectly and the Word, in which he expresses himself, contains the whole of himself, and so is a distinct person, the Second person of the Trinity, God the Son, divine Word. (For if he was less than personal he would be less than God.)

The third person of the Trinity is the Spirit. The first letter of John in the New Testament says ‘God is Love’. For Augustine the Spirit is mutual love personified. Father and Son-Word love each other and their love is so perfect that they put the whole of themselves into it; it contains everything that they are. So it’s also a distinct person, God the Spirit. (For if *he* was less than personal he would be less than God.)

This is all very ingenious but doesn’t it sound rather like what William Blake called a ‘poetic tale’? Shouldn’t we take Augustine’s description of the relationships between the three persons of the Trinity as a story to be accepted with the ‘willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith’? Perhaps saying God is Love is a poetic way of saying Love is divine.

Augustine says that as humanity is created in the image of God who is Trinity, we find an image of the Trinity in ourselves: our memory, understanding and will. Being, language and love. I think we should look at it the other way round. Instead of God creating us in his own image, *we have created* God in our own image, or as a model of what we could be or aspire to, as individuals and as a species. We are, we have received our being from our parents and through evolution, we can try to know and express ourselves and our world and then, ideally, all our being, knowing and speaking should flow into loving – ‘breathe’ love.

Of course, most of the time that does not happen, our love is partial and our knowledge is partial. An all-knowing, all-loving God is an imagined ideal. But being, knowing and loving – the mutual love with which we love one another

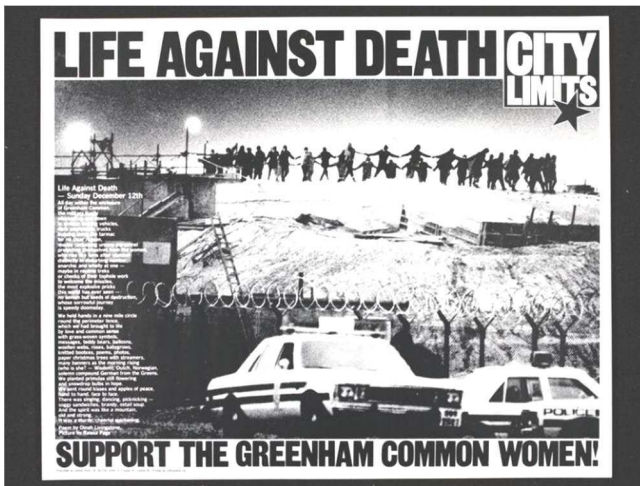


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– is not a bad model to aspire to. And for that we need the right spirit. Love is a form of self-giving, self-outpouring. When the Spirit is given, it is both to the community as a spirit of love and fellowship, and to individuals, who may receive special ‘gifts of the spirit’.

We could give many examples of people being filled with spirit and speaking out with conviction. Quakers have a proud history of doing that, perhaps most famously in the campaign to abolish the British slave trade, which was won in 1807. The picture on the back cover of this *Sofia* shows the medallion of that campaign with its watchword: ‘Am I not a man and a brother?’. The other backcover picture shows the England football team taking the knee at the Euro 2021 tournament. By taking the knee and by their brilliant team spirit, our England team assumed and transformed the image of the kneeling black slave on the Anti-slavery campaign medallion, answering the question: ‘Am I not a man and a brother?’ with a resounding YES! That’s the spirit!

I am quite wary of the word ‘spirituality’. You sometimes hear it being used as though spirituality were a sort of consumer product like a course in yoga or massage or a subscription to the gym, which you can buy. I prefer to say we need to have a good spirit. We shouldn’t forget that in the past, at the time of Jesus, people thought the world was thronged with both good and evil spirits, who were conscious and personal. When Jesus casts out devils, they sometimes have conversations with him! It is interesting that today it is the bad spirits who are now not usually regarded as actual persons. We don’t, for example, think that someone with

epilepsy is possessed by a devil who is tormenting the sufferer on purpose. We think of epilepsy as an illness with a different cause. So if the bad spirits are now regarded as personifications, created by our imagination, why not the good spirits, why not God?

However, both bad and good spirits are personifications of *real* forces in our world. In that sense today there are still both bad and good spirits abroad. Not long ago we saw how half of England was possessed by the spirit of Brexit, which was strong enough to blow down the Red Wall of the North. I think that was a deceitful and destructive – self-destructive – spirit of populist nationalism. There was a very strong spirit at the Nazi Nuremberg rallies. It was an evil spirit. We need discernment of spirits. We need to seek a good spirit and for it to spread.

‘You can’t kill the spirit. She’s like a mountain. Old and strong. She goes on and on and on.’ We used to sing that at Greenham Common where the spirit was feminine. And of course one flaw in the traditional doctrine of the Trinity is that the three persons are now usually all thought of as male. However, in the very first paragraph of the Bible, the spirit is feminine. *Ruach*, the Hebrew word for wind, breath, spirit is feminine.

‘In the beginning God created heaven and Earth. The Earth was shapeless and empty (*tohu* and *bohu*) and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God – *ruach* – moved upon the face of the water, (or we could say brooded over the chaos). God said: ‘Let there be light’. And there was light.’

This first chapter of Genesis is a brilliant imaginative description of creation, both the creation of heaven and earth and of creating a poem. And it is itself a poem. The poet begins by brooding over the chaos. Then: Let there be light! There follows the shaping of the poem into six verses – or days in Genesis – with a rest on the seventh day. The creator sees that it is good and can rest. This first story of the Bible describing God’s creation of the world is not, of course, a scientific account. For one thing, he says, ‘Let there be light’ at the very beginning but only creates the sun and moon on the fourth day, after he has created all the plants and trees, which would be ridiculous. On the sixth day God says: ‘Let *us* make humanity in our own image’. So does ‘us’ mean many gods? Or is it just a royal ‘we’, a plural of majesty? No, says Augustine. It

was the Trinity! Father, Son and Spirit conferring together!

Genesis chapter 1 is a poem, created with 'the shaping spirit of imagination'. There are 'gifts of the spirit'. Today we may still say that to write a poem you need *inspiration* or it's a gift. That is what sometimes happens when I first wake up in the morning, sit in the garden, or maybe when I wander through the streets of London or over Hampstead Heath. I look at the trees in all their particularity – ash, oak, birch – their shape and colour. Sometimes it is if that shape 'shines'. A medieval definition of beauty was 'the shining of shape'. Sometimes I see a fox. I see all the different birds and listen to them. I see the people and listen to snatches of all sorts of conversations. The Heath is for everyone and it can be entertaining to listen to what people call their dogs. You hear a London Cockney voice calling: 'Rover! Come 'ere!' Or a Hampstead intellectual voice calling: 'No, Plato!' I think of the people as part of the fauna of the Heath and, together with the place, they make the city.

Looking, listening and brooding, I have all sorts of jumbled ideas dancing in my head. Suddenly: ping! Let there be light! I get an inkling, an insight, an 'inspiration'. Sights, sounds and ideas connect, coalesce and the poem begins to take shape. Then follows what T.S. Eliot calls this the intolerable wrestle with words and meaning. When it is over (and it may take more than six days) you can rest at last when you see that it is good.

We create poems and we create stories of a divine realm. Poetry and theology are sister arts. I think the poetic genius, imagination and creativity are a vital part of being human and it is a mistake to reject or discount them. A poem is a body of words that can be spoken with living breath. The spirit is the life of the body. Because the spirit is human and humans are living bodies, it is always *embodied*, in an individual person or in a body of people. When we die we are not going to leave our bodies behind and float up to heaven as disembodied spirits to join other pure spirits somewhere up there. I think when you realise there are no disembodied or, supernatural 'pure spirits', that destroys the rationale of puritanism.

The puritan rationale is that since God is pure disembodied spirit, the way to become more spiritual is to become as disembodied as possible. Spirit is seen as in opposition to body. Spirit is

'higher' and the body is 'lower'. So to become spiritual you must shut down the senses as much as possible. No colour, sombre clothes, plain rooms, no music, singing or dancing, no sweet smells, certainly no incense, close the theatres, ban the Christmas feast – the feast of God come down, embodied, become human.

Puritanism was one of the driving forces of the iconoclasm and destruction wrought by the New Model Army during the English Revolution. For example they rode into Winchester Cathedral, smashed the beautiful stained glass west window and cut off the heads of statues of the saints. The people of Winchester were so distressed that they gathered up the coloured fragments of glass and used them later to mend their great window, turning it into a beautiful abstract composition. I think this destructive puritanism was a great shame, especially since the English Revolution was also promoting such important social advances in freedom, democracy and social justice.

When we see theology as a sister art to poetry, for example, the theology of incarnation and trinity this talk has briefly been considering, then these poetic tales can have a lot to say to us. We are embodied mortal creatures and our timespan is linear, a lifetime from birth to death. Our timespan is also cyclical, day and night and a year of four seasons. The traditional Christian liturgy goes through the hours of the day and round the seasons of the year. In midwinter it goes down into the dark and then celebrates a new birth. In spring it celebrates life bursting forth again, resurrection.

And humanity itself has a history of people living in the past. The liturgy recalls some of them on their feast days. This liturgy and theology have accumulated a mass of glorious words and music, poetry and song, as well as visual art. I don't think we have to silence it all to be more spiritual, or reject it all when we realise the divine is not supernatural and it is all a human creation. In fact, that is marvellous. It's a product of the human poetic genius, the human creator spirit. *That's the spirit!*

This article is a shortened transcript of the talk Dinah gave as a keynote speaker at the 2021 annual conference of the Nontheist Friends Network on the theme 'That's the Spirit!'. For information about the Network contact nontheist-quakers.org.uk