

The Holy Spirit: The God of History

Harold J. Berman

The Holy Spirit is the person of the Trinity who, above all, inspires us to form relationships of community. That is the significance of Pentecost: people who spoke different languages were given by the Holy Spirit a common understanding, each in his or her own language, of the message that was spoken to them. As God the Father is parent and lawgiver, and God the Son is brother and redeemer, so God the Holy Spirit is inspirer and teacher, who enables us, through social formations, to reconcile the dialectical polarity between parental law and brotherly / sisterly love.

Indeed, these social formations – of family, neighborhood, school, workplace, religious association, city, nation, world – are themselves created, as each individual person is created, in the image of the triune God. In the terminology of St. Augustine, we may say that they are formed and held together by will; they regulate their relations and activities by reason; and they are motivated and inspired by what St. Augustine called memory, which he defined as not only recollection of the past but also anticipation of the future – that is, the sense of time, of history. It is these three qualities – will, reason, and memory – that St. Augustine identified with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These are the forms, he wrote, of the image of God implanted in the human psyche.

It is the time sense, the recollection of the past and anticipation of the future, that is identified especially with the Holy Spirit. That the Holy Spirit was working in the history of ancient Israel, and especially in the teaching of the prophets, in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah, and that in the first centuries after the Resurrection the Holy Spirit was working in the history of the Roman Empire to spread Christianity, are familiar themes of Christian sermons. Far less familiar is the recognition that the Holy Spirit was working in the later history of Europe, and later in the history of other parts of the world, ultimately to bring the whole of humanity into a single world economy and an emerging world society, and that she is working now to transform that world society eventually into a world community.

That we have entered a new age, the age of the Holy Spirit, was prophesied after the First World War by a great and greatly neglected Christian philosopher and historian, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (1888-1973). Rosenstock-Huessy divided the Christian era into three historical millennia. In the first the tribal peoples of Europe were progressively converted from belief in many gods to belief in one God, the Father of Jesus Christ. In the second Western Christendom, through its merchants, its military, and its missionaries, carrying the banner of the Son, gradually made an entire world around itself.

Now, as we enter the third millennium of the Christian era, the West is no longer the center and the world's Christians are called on to live in peace and harmony with adherents of other faiths, united with them by the Holy Spirit. "The story of salvation on earth," Rosenstock-Huessy wrote, "is the advance of the singular against the plural. Salvation came into a world of many gods, many lands, many peoples. Over against these, it set up a singular – one God, one world, one humankind."

The greatest challenge of the third millennium of the Christian era is to create out of the many peoples of the world one humankind. In accomplishing that goal, the emphasis of Christian faith should be on the third person of the triune God, the Holy Spirit, who inspires people of diverse languages, diverse cultures, diverse belief systems, diverse loyalties, to listen to each other, to learn each other's languages, to discover what they have in common, and to join in overcoming the forces that divide them.

What they now have in common, above all, is a belief in what Hans Küng has called a “global ethic,” a universal affirmation of the Golden Rule, the assertion of all religions and all cultures of a belief in the supremacy of social responsibility over individual aggrandizement and of lawful over unlawful resolution of conflict – in short, a worldwide belief in the sanctity of spiritual values. This is not, to be sure, the same as a belief in the triune God; yet it is the work of the Holy Spirit, and it gives those who believe in the Holy Spirit an opportunity to help to transform the world economy and the emerging world society gradually into a world community.

Harold J. Berman is Robert W. Woodruff Professor of Law at Emory University School of Law in Atlanta, Georgia.