

Union

The Trinity

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Contents

Series Preface 7

1 Back to the Beginnings 11

2 The Beginning of Everything 15

3 “Before” the Beginning 29

4 The Beginning of the Gospel 47

5 The Beginning of Life 63

6 The Beginning at the End 77

Scripture Index 87

Back to the Beginnings

Please do something for me. When you get to the line just below, close your eyes before reading any further, and think about Christianity. Make a mental note of the things that come into your mind. Then open your eyes again.

So, what did you think of?

Jesus?

Forgiveness of sins?

Personal relationship with Christ?

The church?

The Bible?

Loving one another?

These are all very good things. In fact, the Essentials series contains little books that discuss all of these. But what about this one?

The Trinity

Maybe you did think of this, especially since it's the title of this book. But it probably didn't spring to mind as easily or as pleasantly as the others, did it? The very phrase has a strange feel about it. You may know that the word "Trinity" doesn't even turn up in the Bible, and that makes you suspicious. Or maybe it just sounds so ... well ... *theological*, and thus surely out of reach.

You may not be the type to worry about questions like "How did God get a son?" or "Is the Holy Spirit Jesus' brother?" or "How many persons could there be? Do there have to be three?" Or maybe you *do* wonder about questions like these, but you have a sneaking suspicion that the Trinity is nonsense. Maybe you even wonder whether it is *meant* to be nonsense.

I once had a student tell me that we aren't supposed to understand the Trinity; we're just

supposed to believe it. That student even said that the whole time I had spent on the Trinity in class (which was a lot: at least ten hours in that particular module) had been worthless. Maybe you feel the same way.

If you think the Trinity is too theological to bother with, or out of reach, or nonsense, or if you simply wish you could explain it better to your friends, then I ask you to come with me on a journey. We're going back to the beginning. In fact, we're not just going back to one beginning. We're going back to several beginnings. Why? Because Christianity has several different beginnings—several crucial beginning-points for understanding God, ourselves, and the world.

And all these beginnings begin with the Trinity.

REFLECT or DISCUSS

1. Do you identify with those who think that the Trinity is:
 - Too “theological” to bother with?
 - Not relevant today?
 - Nonsense?
 - Confusing?
 - Something else?
2. How does your response to that question affect the way you anticipate this book? Are you hopeful that it will help you understand? Suspicious?

The Beginning of Everything

The thing about playing gods, whether you're playing Thor and Loki or Greco Roman gods or Indian gods or characters in any mythology, the reason that gods were invented was because they were basically larger versions of ourselves.

– Tom Hiddleston, on the gods of the Marvel Universe¹

The Force ... is an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together.

– Obi-Wan Kenobi, in
*Star Wars: A New Hope*²

1 Todd Gilchrist, "Interview: Tom Hiddleston Talks 'Avengers' Humor, Drama, and Where Loki May Go in 'Thor 2,'" May 2, 2012. Fandango.

2 George Lucas, *Star Wars: Episode IV: A New Hope*, Lucasfilm, Ltd., January 15, 1976.

There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made.

– J. R. R. Tolkien, in *The Silmarillion*³

When it comes to ideas of God, we human beings tend to think of one of three broad options. First, there's the idea of many gods and goddesses—whole families of them bickering and trying to outdo each other, just like human families but much stronger. For example, Norse mythology portrays the warring brother gods Thor and Loki and their father Odin—popularized by the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Throughout history, most of the world's cultures have imagined—have invented—these kinds of gods.

Then there's the idea of a vast impersonal force that fills everything, a force that we try to capture and use. This is the kind of divine you have in the *Star Wars* films, but you find

³ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, 2nd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 3.

it also in Buddhism, Hinduism, and other major religions of the world.

The third is the idea of one single God, stronger than everyone else and ruling over the entire universe, like the ever-present “One” looming over the *Lord of the Rings* saga, whom Tolkien never names in the main books but calls “Eru” in *The Silmarillion*.

When we go back to the beginning of everything, as the Christian Bible describes it, you might think we will find the third idea of God—all-powerful, creator and ruler over everything, alone in his splendour and majesty. And in a sense, we will.

But there’s a surprise coming.

A surprising beginning

The first book of the Bible is about the beginning. In fact, its name, “Genesis,” actually means “beginning.” We’re going to look at the very first thing the Bible says, but it is a passage so familiar to us that we tend not to realize just how radical it was when it was first penned. So, let’s take a minute to put this

passage in its original context before we look at it in more detail.

God, not “gods”

The Old Testament was written for God’s people, the Jews, who lived in what we now call the Middle East in the millennia before the birth of Christ. Surrounding the Jews were many other cultures, all of whom had their own beliefs about “gods” and about “the beginning.” Not only did the people around the Jews invent stories about gods (which is what Tom Hiddleston surely means when he talks about people inventing gods); they actually made gods. They crafted statues and images of gods, called idols, and they then worshipped what they had made.

In response, the Bible declares, “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see” (Ps. 115:4–5). Those idols weren’t real gods; they couldn’t speak to their people or see the needs of their people. They were “gods” only in the sense that people