

## RUSSIAN DOLLS

Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."(John 17:20-26)

I once heard a meditation on the Incarnation by a certain Wesleyan philosophy professor named Steve Horst. He described his experience performing an Ignatian exercise in which he imagined himself as a witness to the nativity story in the Gospels. He visualized himself holding the Christ child in his lap. At the same time felt himself to be like a child in Christ's lap. Nothing for me better conveys the Christian idea of a God who gives birth to a world that he himself is born into.

In a sense, we are all born into a world that is also within us. We perceive ourselves as being in the world, and yet the world we perceive is entirely contained within our cerebral cortex. We could be dreaming it, for all we know. There is really no way to tell whether we are actually in the world or the world is in us, unless we awaken. And once our cerebral cortex has returned to dust, what remains of the world we perceived, much less the one who perceived it?

Suppose you are dreaming, and the dream is your life. One day you realize it is all a dream, and you wonder, "Who is dreaming this?" Of course, you're still caught up in your dream, so you set off in search of the dreamer. You search high and low. Your journey takes you to many exotic and faraway places. You encounter many strange characters, and you ask each one to help you find the dreamer. Some act like you are crazy; others react with scorn. "You must be living in a dream world," they scoff. Eventually you come across a wise man who takes pity on you. "When you find what you seek, there will be no more you," the wise man reveals. That's when you wake up and realize the life you thought you were dreaming is real and the one who was caught up in the dream of it is not.

So it is with our search for God. Our spiritual journey may carry us to exotic and faraway places, and there is certainly no lack of strange characters we might encounter on the way. We might be drawn to certain teachings, holy men or sacred places. However, we are living in a dream world if we expect to find God in them, since we are already rooted in the God we seek. "I perceive that in every way you are very religious," St. Paul told the worshippers who flocked to the pagan temples in Athens. But the God who was Lord of heaven and earth and did not live in shrines made by man, Paul informed them, throwing in a line from the Greek poet Epimenides: "In him we live and move and have our being."

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus prays that his disciples "may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us..." I picture a series of Russian dolls, one inside

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the other: the disciples inside Christ who is inside the Father. Except that Jesus seems to be saying that the Father is in him and he in the Father. Admittedly, it is hard to picture a Russian doll with another inside containing the same one that contains it. Such is the mystery of Incarnation.

As it turns out, Paul was particularly fond of locutions featuring the preposition “in.” In his epistle to the Colossians, he wrote, “For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” He wrote this long before church councils had cooked up doctrines about the Trinity. There were no fancy theological formulations about God being both immanent and transcendent – which is to say, both within us and above us. For Paul, our proper relationship to God was simply to be *in* him. He talked a lot about being “in Christ.” He used the phrase no less than 89 times in his epistles; add to that “in the Lord” and “in him” and the total comes to 165.

For the record, we should probably consider whether Paul was some sort of pantheist, particularly since he quoted the pagan poet Epimenides to those gathered at the temples in Athens: “In him we live and move and have our being.” There are, in fact, avowed pantheists who claim St. Paul as one of their own. However, he was not technically a pantheist; the proper term for him is “panentheist.” The difference between the two is this: a pantheist believes that God dwells in rocks and trees and everything else in creation, while a panentheist believes that everything in creation dwells in God. The distinction is small but crucial. Pantheists, of course, are generally derided as tree-worshippers, whereas panentheism is perfectly consistent with a God who is both immanent and transcendent.

To find the God in whom we live and move and have our being is to inhabit him. Does this mean we become God? In a manner of speaking, yes. There is no longer any need to seek him in teachings or holy men or sacred places. But we would do well to consider the wise man's advice to the dreamer: “When you find what you seek, there will be no more you.” To inhabit God is not to fill oneself with him but to be emptied of oneself. We inhabit God only when he inhabits us.

If you truly understand yourself to be rooted in God, it no longer makes much sense to go looking for him elsewhere. Where in creation can you go that will bring you any closer to God than where you are right now? Is there a shrine or cathedral somewhere than is holier than your own abode? You not only don't need to set off in search of God, it is not even necessary to let God come to you. He is closer to you at every moment than your own breathing.

We begin our Christian journey with water sprinkled on our heads in the rite of baptism – a word that means “immersion” in the original Greek of the New Testament. Those who find God may feel like they have suddenly been tossed overboard. Hence, the statement by Mechthild of Magdeburg, a 13th-century German mystic, that she had seen “all things in God and God in all things.” Sources as diverse as the Bhagavad Gita and Meister Eckhart use nearly identical language to express this same sense of a world wholly immersed in the divine.

Since there is no longer an inside and an outside to one's perception of the world, it hardly matters whether God is in all things or all things are in God. However, such things matter a great deal to those whose understanding of God is guided primarily by dogmatic religious belief. Recently, I came across a Christian fundamentalist Web site that accused St. Ignatius of being a pantheist for having exhorted his followers to seek God in all things. As already mentioned, we might just as well label St. Paul a pantheist for referring to God as the one in whom “we live and move and have our being.” Or Jesus, who told his disciples that “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

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The prospect of being immersed in the divine exerts a fatal attraction for seekers in every religious tradition. We may imagine we will be blissfully hobnobbing with God without fully appreciating the consequences. Seeking God in all things leads eventually to the discovery that all things are in God. There is an overwhelming sense at this moment that God is all there is. That's what Paul was gettin at when he said, "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." But when God is all there is, where does that leave you?