INSIDE OUT

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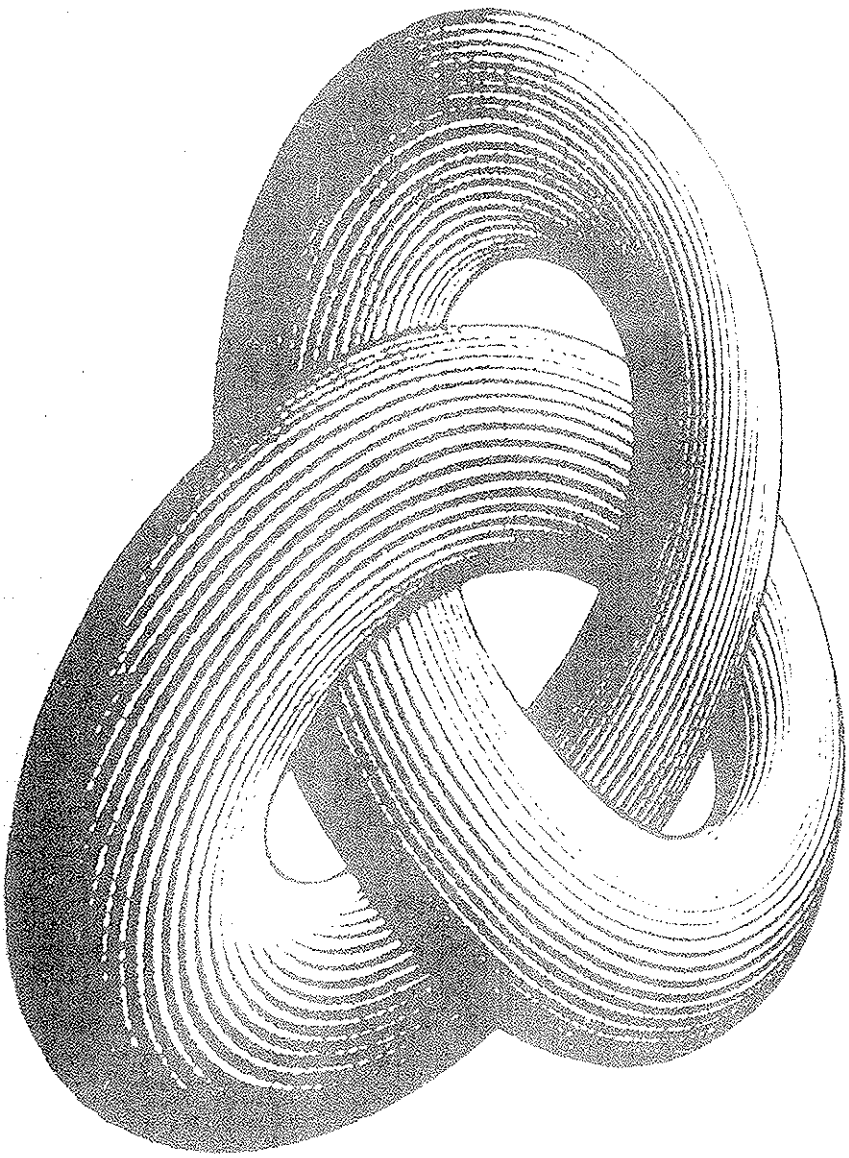

OPENING UP INSIDE OUT

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A Modest Proposal to Replace the Priesthood with the Practice of Threeing

by Paul Ryan

Jerry waved his hand.
"What is it, Jerry?" Sister Agnes said.
Jerry stood. "Sister, I think I can explain the Trinity."
Jerry was sincere and Jerry was arrogant.
Sister Agnes heard only the arrogance.
"Sit down, Jerry."
"But Sister...
"Sit down."

In Catholic High School in the fifties, The Blessed Trinity was a mystery to be worshipped, not a riddle to be explained. There were Three Persons in One God. But how was three-in-one possible? Don't ask. The infallible Pope said it was so. That was all you needed to know.

Jerry's explanation of the Trinity after class didn't make sense, but his struggle to understand did. Jerry and James were fraternal twins who had recently moved to my neighborhood. I was a friend to both of them. Balancing friendship with twins fascinated me. Somehow, we were a working trinity. Our families were not. Each family was plagued by alcoholism.

My father was split in two. Sober he was terrific. Drunk he was terrible. My mother stayed with him, torn between the despair of hiding liquor bottles and the hope of Sunday Mass. The priest framed my father's alcoholism in moral terms. To a fifteen-year-old boy this meant my father was bad; my mother was good. I was split in two.

After high school, I joined the army of the good. I joined a monastic order of the Catholic Church. Perhaps if I became a full time worshipper of the Triune Mystery, God would redeem my father from drink and stop the suffering of my mother. Perhaps I could be made whole. It did not happen. I loved the monastic life, but in the 1960's the Second Vatican Council threw my monastic order into chaos. After four and a half years with the order, I left.

Three years later I married the daughter of my mother's best friend. While I had been in a monastery, she had been in a convent. A match made in heaven? Not quite. Before our daughter was a year old, what God had joined together came asunder. If my relation to God was flawed by a young man's hubris, I couldn't

The Rival Male and the Relational Dilemma

The priest is an institutionalized rival male. His Roman collar certifies that, like a eunuch, this celibate male can be trusted to spend time alone with a married woman. She can confide in him, even confess her sins to him, without fear of betraying her husband. Her husband does not have to worry that the priest will usurp the husband's role. All three roles are fixed in a hierarchy. The woman is subordinate to the husband, the celibate rival, ranked above the husband, uses his authority to reinforce the marriage of the husband and wife.

The Roman Catholic clergy now admit they have covered up the activities of pedophile priests who prey on the children of marriages which they themselves sanctified. Children who are taught to call priests 'father'. Accordingly, any statement by the clergy designed to reestablish sacred trust in the fixed hierarchy of relationships should be met with the virtue of distrust, especially by the mothers of the violated.

As anthropologist Roy Rappaport argues convincingly, the 'sacred' dimension of any statement is a transformation of the experience of the child-mother bond (Rappaport 1999). An infant experiences complete trust in the numinous presence of the mother. As the child grows, this trust gets transferred to a set of unquestioned fundamental propositions. For a religion based on fundamental propositions, there must be keepers of these articles of faith who maintain the viability of belief by respecting the continuity of trust that begins with the numinous bond between the child and the mother. In Catholicism, these keepers of the belief system are the rival males, the priests. In effect, they take their 'infallible' verbal power from the numinous non-verbal experience of security provide by the mothers of the faithful. When they abuse their power by covering up pedophilia, they abuse both mother and child. To abuse mother and child is also to violate the unspoken understanding that an institutionalized rival male has with the father of the child.

Threeing offers an alternative to the re-sanctification of the rival male as a priest with verbal authority in a fixed hierarchy of relationships. Threeing offers an alternative resolution to the problem of what I can the 'relational dilemma'. Let me explain.

The Latin root of the word 'relationships' is a verb that means *to bear* or *to carry* a child. The word 'difference' comes from another part of the same verb. This shared root makes sense. We *differentiate* ourselves from our *relatives* by referencing the experience of childbearing. For example, my cousin on my mother's side was carried by a woman (my aunt) who was carried by the

woman (my grandmother) who also carried my mother. The very word 'relate' suggests that the question of relationships is really a question of how we organize the differences among us.

In traditional families, differences are organized in fixed roles. The father plays his role. The mother plays her role. The children have their roles. When you play your role, you play your part in the whole. The whole family depends on each person playing his or her part. Grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins also have roles, and there are rules for maintaining these roles. For example, a Korean once explained to me that although his uncle is younger than he is, and a boyhood friend, he must nonetheless address his uncle in a formal family term that indicates the respect required in that relationship. Such rules of address keep the overall organization of differences in the family system clear and balanced.

The differences within a two-person relationship cannot really be understood *as differences,* unless there is another relationship available for comparison. This explains why love is blind. The two lovebirds see each other, but neither sees the relationship they are in *as a relationship*. Without a third person, the exhilarating play of differences between two lovers easily goes to extremes. Courtship can be very dramatic. In truth, courting lovers do not want to see the relationship, they want only to see each other. They are jealous of any third person precisely because the very presence of a third person invites scrutiny of their relationship as well as questions about how their isolated two-person relationship fits with other relationships in their community.

Relating to one person with no comparison available, you might say, "You're no fun." With a comparison available, you could say "I have more fun with him than with you." Of course, such a comparison is cruel because it implies that you will soon make a choice and leave the person you are with and go have fun with the third person. Here we have the fundamental relational dilemma. On one hand, it takes three people to understand and balance relationships as relationships; on the other hand, each person within a three-person relationship is constantly faced with a choice between the other two. *Acts of choice cut us off from relationships as relationships*. The choice of one person tends to break off the relationship with the other person. Yet choices that exclude a third person leave the two remaining people without a way to balance their relationship as a relationship. Relationships are subordinated to choice.

This dilemma about choice and relationships generates a cluster of partial solutions to relational balance for two people, among them risking periodic

Regulating Sexual Relationships

We are a bisexual species. Two biological sexes mean two gender roles, variations on those two roles or the generation of anomalies. The function of Threeing is not to eradicate sexual roles or make 'add-ons' possible. The difference between two-person gendered roles and the three roles proper to Threeing is a difference in kind, not degree. A person who moves from a gendered couple to Threeing is moving from one kind of relating to another kind of relating. Different rules apply. Threeing offers three roles outside the terms of our bisexuality. Threeing creates and reinforces triadic relationships as genuine triadic relationships. Neither gender is privileged. Threeing is a relational system that offers both women and men the same range of roles and choices. In a formal sense, Threeing is indifferent to gender and sexual preferences. Were Threeing to become normative, gender would not be marked by a male/female hierarchy and homosexuality would not be 'abnormal'. For Threeing to become normative, we must understand the difference in kind between the practice of Threeing and the practice of sexual intimacy (Ryan 2002).

Even given the practice of Threeing, a sustainable trisexual practice does not seem possible. Biology is not destiny, but the bilateral symmetry of our human bodies does direct us toward two person intimacy. Moreover, humans are bisexual, not trisexual. However, Threeing may be able to make a difference in our sexual practices indirectly. Assuming the art of Threeing, we could design and deploy utopian communities based on Threeing that experimented explicitly with different sexual practices. This would not be without precedent. In the nineteenth century one of the most successful utopian communities, Oneida, survived for thirty-one years without monogamy. According to Spencer Klaw's book *Without Sin* (1993), it was a healthy community. Of course, it included a charismatic leader named John Noyes, a thriving economy, and a rich theology of being guiltless. Interestingly enough, there was a rule of three. No one approached a potential sleeping partner directly. Every proposal for intimacy, every time, had to go through a third party. Evidently, Noyes' sister was a very skillful matchmaker, and very busy.

Yet this is not the nineteenth century. We are beginning the twenty-first. We don't trust charisma and we don't trust the gender arrangements we have. Can Threeing make possible sexual practices beyond monogamy? Only experimentation can answer that question. Consider this scenario for a relevant experiment.

An invitation process might move from female to female to female and then through three males. With six people, each person can enter into ten different

secure formation appears as on the board as two open eyes. This double eye formation prevents any of the pieces from being captured. Similarly, three couples organized to practice Threeing, could secure their relationships without need of an institutionalized rival. The practice would provide the security and stability necessary to raise children, not the words of the priest.

Let me present a scenario with three heterosexual couples: Al and Diane, Bob and Emily, and Carl and Francis. All three couples are far from family and want to set up a mutual support system for raising their own families. Al and Diane invite Bob and Emily to Three, with the understanding that they will maintain their monogamy. Bob and Emily agree. Both couples then invite Carl and Francis to Three with them under the same terms. Carl and Francis agree.

With three couples, eighteen mixed gender combinations are possible. Twelve of the eighteen combinations include monogamous heterosexual partners. The remaining six combinations do not. These six combinations are appropriate for Threeing. If heterosexual partners are included in the same ritual of Threeing, confusion between their dyadic dynamics and the dynamics of Threeing would muddle emotions.

The six partner-free, combinations are:

1. Diane, Emily and Carl
2. Al, Bob, and Emily
3. Bob, Carl, and Diane
4. Emily, Francis, and Al
5. Diane, Francis and Bob
6. Al, Carl, and Emily

If these six people ritualized the practice of Threeing in a crisis-proof setting on a regular basis, they would experience a rich range of emotions in a recurring pattern. This range of emotions would correspond to the complex expressiveness possible in the roles of initiator, respondent and mediator. Given the secure emotional experience of nuanced differences in a ritual setting, each person could translate that emotional richness into the play of differences within his or her heterosexual dyad, outside the practice of Threeing. Grounded in such a recurring emotional experience, couples would be better equipped to raise children. Ultimate trust would not rest with an unquestioned priesthood but with an ongoing network of self balancing relationships among six people.

Were the practice of Threeing to be undertaken seriously, practitioners would have to recognize that relationships between genders are subcircuits of relationships between generations. The prime biological function of our differentiation into two genders is the propagation of our species. Gendered

Waddington began by observing that as a species we transmit information over generations both genetically and through speech and writing. Speech and writing inevitably result in authority structures, someone telling someone else what to do. The child is told, 'No, don't touch, the oven is hot.' His or her perceptual system is stunted and his or her behavior is linked up to the language commands of others. (Witness the 'infallible' pronouncements of the Pope as a classic case.) Based on his examination of how modern painters had sweated blood to see nature without language, Waddington suggested institutionalizing this artistic achievement for the human species as a whole. He thought we could generalize the silent success of painters such as Monet, Cezanne, and van Gogh and evolve an information transmission system based on shared perception of environmental realities rather than language (Waddington 1970).

Because Threeing is a nonverbal practice and because that practice can be linked up to perceiving ecosystems using video, I was able to codify a notational system for creating the sort of information transmission system Waddington described. Based on this notation, called Earthscore (Ryan 1991), I have designed an environmental television channel dedicated to monitoring the ecology of a region for the people that live there so they can develop sustainable policies and practices (Ryan 1992 p 243 ff.). Actually built, such a system would, in effect, provide a canon for sustainability. Unlike canons based on the words of sacred scriptures, this canon would be linked to perception. Blind faith would not be required. People living in a place could verify what they perceived electronically by visiting the ecological sites being monitored.

By reason of the intrinsic link between ritual and liturgy, a formal association that supported the practice of ritual Threeing would need to involve itself in the construction and maintenance of such a canon. In a fully developed association of six people, one would be a member of three different sorts of triads: a ritual triad, an ecological triad and a work triad. The work triad would do what was necessary to support the members of the association. The ecological triad would work on interpreting the constraints in the natural world. The ritual triad would support each member directly. In order to preclude confusion between dyadic gendered intimacy and triadic ritual intimacy, the ritual triad would not include one's monogamous partner. In the work triad and in the ecological triad, the interaction would not be so intense that dyadic patterns would disrupt the process. Just as in the ritual triad the group would rotate through six different combinations of people, so in the work triad and the ecological triad, the group would rotate through the remaining fourteen different combinations of people. Obviously, groups that were multiples of six would have a richer mix of differences to work with.

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