

Macro-mystery: Matthew 28:16-20

## **Compared to cosmologists, theologians have the advantage—and disadvantage—of revelation.**

by [Maureen Dallison Kemeza](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

Some time ago the *New York Times* ran this headline in its science section: “Before the Big Bang, There Was . . . What?” The article surveyed cosmologists, those who study the whole physical universe, or, as some of them believe, universes. Cosmologists generate a plethora of theories about how the world came to be, what keeps it going, and what’s going to happen to it in the future.

Their mega-questions, and their cosmologic language, boggle the minds of the rest of us. Quantum gravity, for example, is one of several current theories about how the world began. Imagine: this theory claims that the tiniest, quantum-scale particles exist only as clouds of probability until they are actually observed. So until an observer looks and perceives them, the basic particles of matter have no definite identity or reality, only “possible” reality. The same theory suggests that particles can flit in and out of existence in a kind of formless matter, even in empty space. So a tiny universe could appear seemingly out of nothing. Some cosmologists theorize that the Big Bang was a kind of quantum leap from some formless era of imaginary time, or from nothing at all.

To get to the big picture of the whole universe, these theories have to consider what is known about particles on the tiniest scale. They need to account for “everything.” Microcosm to macrocosm, the cosmologists come up with a theory of the whole and how it all fits together. Even though the rest of us may not be able to get our minds around the science, we find the theories exhilarating because they stretch our thinking and engage our imagination.

We are also struck by how these scientists speculate about how the world came to be, what keeps the world going and where it’s headed. Such speculations come tantalizingly close to being religious; in fact, the cosmologists’ language echoes the Book of Genesis, where God made the world out of nothing at all.

Like contemporary cosmologists, Christian spiritual teachers and theologians have explored the boundaries of such questions from earliest time. But theologians have the advantage—and disadvantage—of revelation. This is an advantage because it provides the transcendent reference for the questions about what there was before the world was made. Revelation is a disadvantage, however, if we let it shut down our wonder. When we take scripture too literally or one-dimensionally, we reduce God to the images we've constructed in our own minds. The images become "mental idols" that distract us from the mystery of the Living God.

Trinity Sunday is a great feast in which to honor that Holy Mystery that Christians call God the Holy Trinity. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus commands his followers to baptize all nations in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We already knew that the Lord our God is one, beside whom there is no other. With the Jews we affirm belief in one holy God. But as Christians we have known the one God in three ways, or three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In Christian faith, God is revealed as triune.

This allows our faith to expand beyond the confinement of commonsense everyday notions of what is real. Faith in the Holy Trinity compels us to open our imaginations and consider what is beyond what we already know or think we know about the mystery we call "God." On this feast of the Trinity, let us pray God to expand our imaginations, to tantalize us with wonder, to urge us to contemplate who and how God was before "the Big Bang." Fathers and Mothers in the Christian tradition wrote long ago about this God: "God was being. But, not being a creature, God was nothing."

God, in other words, was/is the cosmologists' generative "nothing." So, before the Big Bang, what was Nothing doing? Our faith tradition tells us that before the world was made, God was being Father, Son and Spirit, three persons in one being, all equal, all the same, yet distinct and in relation to one another. The Latin church teachers called the relation of the three to each other *circumincession*, a circle in which each dwells in the others continuously, a relation of love. The triune God is no dispassionate unmoved mover, no rugged individualist. Rather, God the Holy Trinity is active love, always outgoing, always receiving.

This love spills over to create heaven and earth, then continues to create and shape the world. When creatures who are gifted as the image and likeness of God misuse love, corrupting what God made good, then the love of God goes to them to heal them. God became human in order to redeem the confusion and destructiveness of human beings. God does this “in time,” in human history, because we live and we die in time. And now that the historical Christ has reentered eternity, ascended into heaven, he sends the Holy Spirit to live within us and among us to sustain the work of redemption and healing until that time—out of time—when God will be all in all.

Father, Son, Holy Spirit: Though we cannot fully get our minds around such incomprehensibles, we know by our faith that the triune God is how the world came to be, the energy that keeps it going, and the future toward which it—and we—move. Let us reach up to God in our prayers, and open our imagination to contemplate God the Holy Trinity, the mystery beyond all telling, the mystery that brings us to our knees.