

## **The Leader's Way Podcast**

### **Episode 4: Contemplative Practice and the Trinity with Robert Jonas**

**Robert:** The second person is the "I love you in a personal relationship that Jesus brings to our lives." That "I see you as the beloved, you see me as the beloved." There's a very concrete focusing of the mystery of creation.

**Brandon:** Welcome to The Leader's Way, Yale, the podcast at the intersection of spiritual leadership, innovation, and transformation from Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. I'm your host, Brandon Nappi. I'm really, really thankful to have this opportunity to speak with Dr. Robert Jonas.

Trained as a psychotherapist, Jonas is author, a father, a grandfather, a musician, an environmental activist, a retreat leader. He's a Christian in the Carmelite contemplative tradition, and he's also received formidable spiritual training with Buddhist teachers.

He's the director of the Empty Bell, a beautiful contemplative sanctuary in Northampton, Massachusetts. He's also a student of Suizen, the Japanese bamboo flute, Shaka Hachi. He's recorded many albums, which are really powerful and beautiful. His recent book, *My Dear Far Nearness: The Holy Trinity as Spiritual Practice* has been particularly moving for me. It's the winner of an award from Illumination Books, just announced in 2022.

In this book on the Trinity, he's gleaned insights from almost 20 Christian mystics from the fourth century, right on through the present day. What we think of the Trinity is something that Christians believe in, yet has very little practical relevance in daily life. I think what this book and Jonas' research does for me and for so many is to show just how practical and powerful Trinitarian belief is and can be. Robert Jonas has a doctorate in education from Harvard, a master's degree from Weston Jesuit School of Theology. He's the author of many books, two books on Henry Nouwen and Jonas and his wife were actually very, very dear friends of Henry Nouwen and actually spent quite some time living with Robert Jonas. So I think you'll hear in this conversation a very deep well of contemplative experience of compassion and peace. So I hope you enjoy this conversation with Robert Jonas.

**B:** Dr. Robert Jonas, welcome to the Leaders Way podcast. We're so thankful to have you here today.

**R:** Thank you, thank you, great to be here.

**B:** And what a gift your book on the Trinity has been to me in the last couple of weeks. I've been making my way through. In fact, my daughter discovered the book over the weekend, and she's been reading as well, not by any prompting from me, so I was delighted. So your book, *My Dear Far Nearness: The Holy Trinity as Spiritual Practice* is already blessing my life and my family's life and what I've noticed about it is that it's poetic and yet practical, it's deeply theological, but it's not overly technical. And so in honor of your book on the Trinity, I thought I'd ask you three questions simultaneously as a way of beginning to reflect. And so I'm wondering what led you to write a book about the Trinity, who is it for, and why did it take 15 years?

**R:** Right, right. Okay, thank you so much. I'm very excited to be here, I have to say that first. And I really look forward to getting to know you better, Brandon, and your work at Yale and the Berkeley Divinity School. So it's wonderful to be together and I know we both have an interest in East-West dialogue, Buddhist Christian dialogue. So this is a fantastic opportunity for me. So where did this begin? My grandmother was German Lutheran. I grew up in Wisconsin. Working class families, farmers, house painters. My grandmother, when I began to learn to speak, would come up to the bedroom in their little two-story house in Wassell, Wisconsin, and she would teach me to pray. Her prayer to me was, "Ich bin klein mein Herz ist reine, nie man im vonen aus Jesus sein." "I'm small, my heart is pure, and no one lives in my heart but Jesus alone." That prayer really sustained me through the years.

My parents were good people but also could fall into alcoholism and domestic violence. There were many traumatic moments in my childhood. My father left the family, moved to California, just left us three kids. So my childhood nest was

complicated and traumatic, but Jesus was there. It was the most amazing blessing to me that I could feel this presence of Jesus. So when I felt overwhelmed and when I felt anxious as a kid, I could lash out. I was arrested for breaking and entering when I was 11. I was so angry, and I didn't know I was angry. I just thought, "This is normal."

Many things happened and to make a long story short, we moved. My mother found a good man to marry. The three of us, I had two siblings, went to high school and fell in love with the preacher's daughter and started learning about Christian experience and liturgy in more depth. I became a respected person in high school and the head of the Luther League at the Lutheran Church and the captain of the football team and got a scholarship and went to Luther College. That's the beginning of the Holy Trinity. But I have to say right away there, it was Jesus that was the key portal to a spiritual life in the midst of trauma. I didn't think much about the Trinity. The Trinity sort of circulated through the language of the Lutheran Church, but it was Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It was something to believe in, but it wasn't an actual experience.

I went to Dartmouth College after Luther College. I discovered Taekwondo Karate and I learned Chan meditation. Suddenly I'm wondering, "Well, what does Jesus have to do with Taoist experience or with Chan?" Did Jesus have an experience of chi, the sacred body energies of the Taoist and Zen folks? And then I discovered Thomas Merton that he wondered about this too. Is there any connection between Christ and Zen and Shunyata emptiness? So that started my Buddhist Christian journey. I still never thought about the Trinity very much except that I was very attracted to Thomas Merton talking about things like "le point vierge," the virgin point. I began to understand as I meditated in the 70s that "le point vierge" is the empty place out of which everything comes. I started to get interested in the relationship between spirituality and astronomy and physics.

I was navigating through all that territory when I realized that I had had a traumatic childhood, and by now, I was getting a doctorate at Harvard. So I switched my studies from peace studies to psychodynamic psychotherapy and started to integrate psychodynamic psychology and my personal experience of recovering from trauma in an alcoholic family, integrating those experiences with Jesus'

presence. Not Werner Salomon's Jesus, but Jesus who I didn't know and for whom there's no image. So then I met Henry Nouwen at Harvard and ended up being friends with Henry and writing two books about Henry.

Henry introduced me to the essence of the Jesus experience, which is the "I Thou Belovedness" that I am loved. I am the beloved. And Henry went so far as a Roman Catholic priest to say, "You're as beloved as Jesus. What is said of Jesus is said of you." Wow, that was pretty incredible. So I started trying to integrate the "le point vierge," the emptiness, the spatial awareness that is limitless and can see linear time passing through but not be attached to anything. So I began to see there's a relationship between being the beloved and being empty, in a sense. And then I made the connection between Zen, Shunyata, and Christian kenosis, the self-emptying of Christ.

I joined the Society for Buddhist Christian Dialogue in the early 90s. It was so wonderful to have years and years of conversations with scholars about the relationship between Shunya, the Buddhist emptiness and Christ emptiness. Is it the same? Is it different? And how are they related? So those are the first and the second persons of the Trinity, which was articulated in the Nicene Creed and the Creed of Chalcedon. And there were lots of really important historical discussions about who is God that began with Genesis, that we are created in the image and likeness of God. But there was this experience for Christians that was a little different than for Jews, even though Jesus was a Jew, a devoted Jew. So if I am created in the image and likeness of God for Christians, ultimately where it gets is that I'm created in the image and likeness of the Trinity. Who is the Trinity?

So the Trinity, that's why it took 15 years. I did tons of research into Scripture and the creeds about who is God and who am I. They end up being the same question. As Christ said, "I am in you and you are in me." Who is the "I" is a really important question. So when Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life," that was not an ego project for him. It was not an ego "I." "I" was completely integrated with the mystery of the Creator. So when he said "I," he meant both his small "S" self and his large "S" self, which is the Creator self. Jesus had this realization. When you see me, you see the Creator. And who is the Creator? There's no image for the Creator. We know this from the, well, the Hindu tradition, but the Jewish tradition. There is no image. In fact, to have an image of God for some is heresy.

So Jesus was saying, "When you see me, you see the Father, but who is the Father?" Abba, but who is Abba? And pretty soon you're in the cloud of unknowing. So the first person is the great mystery of the Creator.

The second person is the "I love you in a personal relationship that Jesus brings to our lives," that "I see you as the beloved, you see me as the beloved." The very concrete focusing of the mystery of creation. And then the third person is, well, Holy Ghost, I don't particularly care for that term. It can be misunderstood. Holy Spirit is the Spirit that is moving in the world, creating a community of love that Martin Luther King talked about, the beloved community, a movement to create a community that treats each other as the beloved, where all the members of the community treat. That's the third person. So that is a quick summary of how I got here talking to you and writing this book.

**B:** Yeah. Thank you. Who is the book for? And what's your sense of how many people struggle around the Trinity? What is it that people don't understand?

**R:** Yeah, thank you. It's not directed just to theologians. It's not necessarily even directed to Christians because I think Hindu folks and Jewish folks and Buddhist folks can find themselves in this book if they're patient. But it's my comprehensive understanding. Most people understand their Trinity the iconic way, that is, they have an image of three folks who have somehow a relationship with each other. Theologians talk about which one is first and which one's second, which one's more important than all this, as if the Trinity is outside of us. But what I learned from Raimon Panikkar, this great theologian, who's one parent was Catholic and one parent was Hindu, he led me into this understanding that the Trinity is within, the Trinity is without. The Trinity is not just within us, it's not just without us. It's an interplay of presence. The Holy Trinity is actual, as the subtitle of my book says, the Holy Trinity is not an object of our awareness, it's a spiritual practice, it's something to be.

So I say often in the book, we are called as Christians to be Trinitarian awareness, to live Trinitarian awareness. It's not in a heaven somewhere. So this idea that what is inside is outside, folks these days are calling it non-dual consciousness. Richard Rohr talks about it a lot in Cynthia Bourgeault, Ken Wilber. Non-dual consciousness means basically what's inside is outside. We tend to think that

navigating this world is all about coming to terms with what's outside of us, but we miss the crucial standing point, which is our deepest identity is in God. And we see from there.

So Origen, second century after Christ, reflected deeply on this. He wrote, "He who is known is mingled in a certain way with he who knows. Whatever we see in others is also within us." And we know this from projection and psychology. In fact, Jung, I think it was, who said that coming to terms with who we really are requires a withdrawing of all projections onto others. So it means so deeply entering into ourselves that we find others inside of ourselves. And that, for me, releases me from judgment about people. And that practice is the oneness of the Trinity. The Trinity is one, but it's also three. And so you have this navigation of perception. So the three persons, this is difficult, it would require more conversation about what does person mean, hypostasis and all that.

But I want to get back to the main point there. Thomas Aquinas, picking up on Origen and Aristotle both, said, "The truth is that knowledge is caused by the knower containing a likeness of the thing known, for the latter must be in the knower somehow." Unquote. Then I add, spiritual knowing seems to require a consonant mirroring between us and others, between us and the Creator, between us and Christ. William Blake, who many of us love, the 18th century poet, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to us as it is infinite. For we have closed ourselves up till we see things only through the narrow chinks of our cavern." So what is the cavern? The cavern is the ego self, where we think we're separate from the world. Capitalism requires this, that we have to have a job, we have to make good in the world, and so we have to do that by separating ourselves from others. That is not the Trinitarian way. The Trinitarian way, we have this capability of finding the world in ourselves and ourselves in the world, and that's essentially what the approach is of my dear farnearness. I get the name farnearness from Marguerite Porete in the 14th century. She was so smart, and onto this, before many of us realized what was happening, nondual consciousness and all this.

She was so brilliant and so onto the truth that she was burned at the stake by the authorities in 1310. So her name for God is "My dear Farneareness." Think of that. "Dear" connotes belovedness. You're my dear one. Dear Farner. God is not totally

inside me, God is not totally outside. And so that's what the whole book is about.

**B:** This inter-religious exchange and encounter I know has been a big part of your life. What was powerful for me is your reference of Zen and especially of Thich Nhat Hanh, who's the wonderful Zen teacher who just passed away a little over a year ago. And I wonder if you can share how Thich Nhat Hanh's practice, teaching, writing, life, and maybe some other Zen Buddhist teachers have helped you as a Christian understand this core nondual insight that's really at the center of Christianity, though it's often shrouded, certainly at the center of Buddhism, Hinduism, and the mystical tradition that's embedded within many different religious paths. So I wonder if you could speak to that.

**R:** Yeah, wow. Okay. One example, a little story. So in the early 80s, I was at Harvard, and I was working on a dissertation. It was about male and female identity and the interrelationships and about the self-othering that happens in marriage, for example, and in childbearing, childbearing. So I was working on that dissertation and I met Henry Nalen, who was at the Harvard Divinity School. I was really taking with his presencing of Christ in the room when he spoke. So that relationship started to change me, but at the same time, I met Margaret, who I'm married to now for 40 years we've been married. Second marriage, I went through a really painful divorce in the early years at Harvard. And Margaret's mother was a Bipassan, a Buddhist teacher with Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein and Sarah, what's her name?

**B:** Sharon Salzberg.

**R:** Yeah, Sharon Salzberg, thank you. When Margaret and I got together, as we were preparing for the marriage year, it was in 1986, we started doing a lot of Vipassana meditation. So I'm with Henry speaking about "I Thou Belovedness" and I'm in the Vipassana tradition, which really doesn't have that "I Thou" dimension very much. So I would cheat at the Vipassana retreats. I did two 10-day retreats, for example, and then a lot of smaller ones. There's a meditation hall at the IMS, Insight Meditation Society, and that meditation hall, well, the whole building

used to be a monastery, a Christian monastery. So all the Christian symbols are gone except for one, which is a stained-glass window of Jesus in the meditation hall. So I would cheat because we would do walking meditation and I would occasionally get myself over to that side of the room where Jesus was. And I would do my walking meditation with Jesus back and forth. You're here, you're not here, you're far and you're near. I mean, it was all there at the beginning. And I realized gradually that that's what I was missing was the devotional dimension, the presencing of belovedness. I just wasn't finding it.

Vipassana has changed in America. I, you know, acknowledge that. But at that time, that dimension was not there. So I was sitting in the meditation hall and I'm just sitting there in silence with 100 people. And I gradually realized I'm really judging everybody. I don't like how that person looks. I don't like what she wears. I don't like how he constantly adjusts himself on the cushion. I started to realize, oh my God, I'm just such a judgmental person. I couldn't stand it. It was as if I was living in the middle of a merry-go-round and there were 12 horses going around and each horse was one of my judgments about other people. Or each horse was my opinions, political opinions, my spiritual, religious opinions, my opinions about myself, my opinions. Is that all I am? These 12 opinions and judgments, the same ones over and over, it doesn't matter who I'm talking to, where I am. That's who I am. I was disgusted as I'm sitting on the cushion. I'm just like, oh my God, I hate myself, you know? And I'm sitting there and gradually what happened, the hatred started to burn in a fire or something. And I started to cry, and the tears are coming down on my Buddhist Vipassana cushion.

And it was love that was coming. Oh my God, that's why I'm not all my opinions and my judgments. I'm love. I didn't mean an ego love. I mean the eye that transcends ego eye. I just wept on the cushion, you know? And then, I don't know, the next sessions and the next sessions come in and more everyday stuff started to flood in. But I had had that experience and it gave me the message that there is no boundary here. This love is everywhere. You can find it in a Buddhist monastery, in a Christian church, in a Sufi dance. It's everywhere because it's eternal and it has no boundaries.

**B:** So you're writing from the depths of Christian contemplative experience which



defies any category which is a kind of invitation to encounter, encounter this mystery that we name as God, as Trinity. And I wonder if you could share a little bit about from your perspective, what is the Christian contemplative path have to offer Christianity today? And why might it be so important as we create the next chapter of the Christian story?

**R:** Oh, wow. As you know, we all know that Christianity is in trouble. My wife is an Episcopal priest. Her bishop hired her 10 years ago to work on climate change full time. So our house is full of this flow of the facts about how we humans are destroying the planet. Every day I think about it, I feel some days really close to despair that we can't say this thing. The human project is a failure. So how do we live it? I fall back into this central place, this La Point Vieirge inside myself. I can't bear this to see human beings destroy the planet and each other. I can't bear it. I've experienced trauma and despair and I don't like it. I don't prefer it.

So I prefer to be in this place of love that is ultimately true. It's ultimate truth. And so that's how I try to live as I do environmental work. I've been board chair of Otsego Land Trust, and I work with two other land trusts working on some big projects here in Western Massachusetts to save as much forest, as much landscape, as much water and clear air as we can. So I'm working on it, but I'm also feeling like there's no guarantee this is going to work. So I throw myself on what's ultimately true and just trust that God will help. And God is not going to come from outside to help. I don't believe that anymore.

God has to come from inside to help. And one place of inside that can help is my dear far nearness, which is the respect and the experience of the great mystery, that we are mystery. We can't understand God's mystery unless we understand that we're a mystery. We don't know who we are. There's a limitless openness about that that we can learn. And then the second person that we can fall in love with people, and I mean in appropriate ways. In Buddhism and Christianity in Judah, it doesn't matter across the traditions. So this is a love that is not self-centered, is not looking for just pleasure, but it's a love that looks for healing for everyone. I have hope in this Trinitarian awareness, even as I experienced despair. It's like, they're both here. My dear far near, this is my dear despair, far and near.

**B:** So you touched on hope. I wonder if you can leave us with what you're most hopeful about. You've named the apocalyptic concern that's in your heart that we all face daily. And what buoys your spirit and brings you hope as you hold that happiness?

**R:** Yeah, thank you. Well, one hope is what gets ignited in my friendship with you. To know someone like you who has also navigated across the boundaries of the great traditions. So anytime I meet someone like you, I feel hopeful that we can do this, that these boundaries that we've created of self and other need to dissolve. Another way that I learned that is in the leadership or the hosting of the empty bell communities. But now I have three empty bell communities, Christians on Sunday morning and interfaith on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. People meet here in this empty bell space. I modeled it after a Zen monastery with the wood and the soji doors and things like that, where we gather for an hour and a half at a session, and we have 20 minutes of silence. And then we share what's coming, how are we working with this despair and this lack of hope and the hope.

And that gives me hope to be with others who can tell the truth. Most people have had some therapeutic experience, which I'm finding really necessary. I've had a lot of therapeutic experience. I've been a therapist and I've also been in therapy. In fact, I'm in therapy right now with you, but also with an actual psychiatrist who's Jewish who can talk to me about myself and the names of God in my actual experience.

So yeah, these things give me hope. Meeting others, being with others, we need each other to get through this.

**B:** Dr. Robert Jonas, thank you for your ministry, your work, your writing. We're so thankful for this book. I look forward to concluding my journey with the book and the days ahead. So thank you so much for all you do.

**R:** Thank you. You can do for me. And that is my wife is a writer too. She said,

make sure you ask friends to write a good review on Amazon. So there it is.

**B:** We'll do. I'll head to Amazon, as I'm sure many others will and already have right after this conversation. Thank you. Be a peace.

**R:** Thank you. And I wish you well in your work there at Yale. Blessings.

**B:** Thank you for listening to the Leaders Way at Yale Podcast. Join us in our work to heal the healers, care for the caregivers, and support the spiritual leaders who are transforming our world in compassion, justice, and love. Online at Berkeley divinity school.yale.edu.