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CAN SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM BE MONOTHEIST? A REPLY TO DALE TUGGY

William Hasker

Dale Tuggy has criticized my proposal for the doctrine of the Trinity, claiming that social trinitarianism cannot be monotheistic. I present a counter-argument, and consider the ways in which Tuggy might respond to it.

According to Brian Leftow, a “hard task for ST [social trinitarianism] is providing an account of what monotheism is which both is intuitively acceptable and lets ST count as monotheist.”¹ Dale Tuggy agrees, and he is convinced that the task cannot be accomplished.² Tuggy’s criticisms of my view of the Trinity are numerous and complex, and a full response would require more space than is available here. (For additional detail, readers are referred to my book, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*.³) It is possible, however, to give a brief response to the central challenge concerning monotheism.

The fundamental premise in Tuggy’s critique is that a god, or a God, is and must be a single divine person, a single “center of knowledge, will, love, and action.”⁴ If there is more than one divine person, there is more than one God—hence, polytheism. The social trinitarian conception of God as a Trinity of closely related persons cannot, then, qualify as monotheistic. If this premise is granted, all the rest of the criticisms become unnecessary. Now, I have never been able to understand why unitarians like Tuggy should be entitled to fix the definition of monotheism, so as to rule out trinitarians as being monotheists. (At least, those trinitarians who recognize Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as distinct persons—and as Tuggy

¹Brian Leftow, “Anti Social Trinitarianism,” in *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Thomas McCall and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 52–88; the quoted passage is on 55.

²See Dale Tuggy, “Hasker’s Quests for a Viable Social Theory,” *Faith and Philosophy* 30:2 (2013).

³William Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴I borrow this phrasing from Cornelius Plantinga; also following Plantinga, I understand social trinitarianism to be the view that the Persons of the Trinity are distinct persons in this sense. See Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 22.



admits, there have been many such trinitarians.⁵) Historically, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have been recognized as the three great monotheistic religions, and Christianity has been trinitarian at least since the third century—and before that binitarian almost from the very beginning. In any case, there is a concise argument which I, at least, find convincing, to the effect that social trinitarianism should indeed be recognized as a version of monotheism. Here is the argument:

1. The beliefs and worship practices of the early Christian communities, as depicted in the writings of the New Testament, constitute a valid and acceptable form of monotheism.
2. The early Christians perceived God the Father and Jesus Christ as distinct persons—as “distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action.”
3. The early Christians exhibit a pattern of “binitarian” belief and worship, in which Jesus is honored, praised, and worshiped along with God the Father.
4. No non-divine person can properly be the recipient of divine worship. *Therefore,*
5. There is a valid and acceptable version of monotheism in which there is more than one divine person.

If this argument is accepted, we have a definitive answer to Leftow’s challenge to provide “an account of what monotheism is which both is intuitively acceptable and lets ST count as monotheist.” The argument does not, to be sure, provide an analytic definition of monotheism in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions; this is often difficult when we are dealing with broad-ranging and complex historical phenomena such as monotheism. (Compare “revolution.”) Rather, it points to a concrete historical exemplar, a “paradigm case” against which other claims concerning the phenomenon can be measured.

I don’t expect the argument to be convincing to Tuggy; I am less certain about Leftow. Leftow, I think, would be willing to accept (1), and (2) is a simple matter of reading the New Testament; objections at that point are most unpromising. Nor will he, as a trinitarian, deny premise (4); this, after all, was what the Arian controversy was about. So if Leftow is going

⁵Consider the following from Gregory of Nyssa, one of the leaders among the fourth-century “pro-Nicene” fathers:

The Jewish dogma is destroyed by the acceptance of the Word, and the belief in the Spirit; while the polytheistic error of the Greek school is made to vanish by the unity of the Nature abrogating this imagination of plurality. While yet again, of the Jewish conception, let the unity of the Nature stand; and of the Hellenistic, only the distinction as to persons; the remedy against a profane view being thus applied, as required, on either side. (*The Great Catechism*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 6, 477)

Gregory approves here of the Greek doctrine of “the distinction as to persons”; assuredly, the many gods of the Greeks were quite distinct personalities.

to reject the argument, his point of attack will have to be premise (3)—and that premise, in any case, calls for a bit of discussion. The premise alludes to New Testament scholarship which finds in the texts the phenomenon of “Christological monotheism”—a practice of Christian belief and worship in which Jesus is placed alongside the God of Israel as a focus of worship and devotion.⁶ My brief discussion of this topic here draws on the massive, and highly respected, work by Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*.⁷ Hurtado shows, through the examination of New Testament texts in their historical context, that what we have in the life of the early Church is a pattern of devotion to Jesus such that “when this constellation of devotional actions is set in the general first-century religious context, it is properly understood as constituting the cultic worship of Jesus.”⁸ What we have here, in fact, is a pattern of “binitarian worship”—worship of Jesus along with the Father—and one that originated surprisingly early in the newborn Christian movement. This pattern is evident in the earliest Christian writings we have, the letters of Paul, and is most plausibly seen as having originated in the very earliest days of the Christian movement. It is noteworthy, furthermore, that Paul, no shrinking violet when it came to controversy, *felt no need to justify or defend* his exalted view of Jesus—as seen, for instance, in Philippians 2:5–11. Rather, he presents this understanding of Jesus as something his readers will already be familiar with and will readily accept, something which he therefore can use as a basis for his appeal to them for Christlike attitudes and conduct.

A striking portrayal of such binitarian worship can be found in the slightly later book of Revelation. In 5:11–13 we find the heavenly host *worshipping the Lamb along with God*: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! . . . To the one seated on the throne *and to the Lamb* be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (Note by way of contrast that the exalted angels who are instructing the seer specifically forbid his offering worship to them (19:10; 22:8–9).) Without doubt, this description of the heavenly worship provided a template for the worship that was to be offered, and that was in fact offered, in the churches for whom the book was written. The limitations of the present paper prevent me from deploying the evidence at all fully; readers are strongly encouraged to consult Hurtado’s very readable work for the overall picture.

We have, then, the spectacle of the early Christians *offering cultic worship to Jesus along with the Father*, something which Jews had never done to any of the “divine agents” (angels, exalted patriarchs, and so on) that play a

⁶A selection of essays on this topic may be found in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus*, ed. Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

⁷Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁸*Ibid.*, 138.

role in some of their traditions. Given this, along with the other premises, the conclusion of the argument stated above seems to be fully justified: we have monotheistic worship in which Jesus is honored and glorified along with, and in the same way as, God the Father.

How might opponents of social trinitarianism respond to this argument? I doubt that Leftow will want to deny the first premise; to do so would align his views with those of the Jewish authorities who, sometime during the first century, expelled Jewish Christians from the synagogue because of their excessive exaltation of Jesus. As a trinitarian, he will not wish to deny premise (4). If he wishes nevertheless to reject the conclusion, he will have to contest the historical case for premise (3) made by Hurtado and his fellow scholars. I must confess that I am doubtful of the success of such a venture, but anyone is welcome to make the attempt. For Tuggy, on the other hand, the situation is more complex. To be sure, he also could contest the historical evidence for premise (3). (In fact, however, he does not disagree with this premise.) Another option, favored by theological liberals, is to deny (at least implicitly) premise (1). Jesus, it is sometimes said, was by no means the cosmic redeemer featured in some of the later New Testament texts; rather, he was a simple teacher, Cynic sage, or . . . [insert here your own preferred characterization], who would have been shocked at the extravagant claims made about him by later Christians. His more authentic followers were those who gathered around his teachings and honored him without the excesses of later speculation. Proposals such as this are interesting, to be sure, though they are handicapped by the serious lack of historical evidence that anything of the sort actually occurred. But these speculations, if accepted, do free contemporary Christians from the need to acknowledge the high christology of the New Testament as authentically monotheistic.

Having said this, I do not believe Tuggy wishes to avail himself of this option. Tuggy is not a liberal; his views are best described as “biblical unitarianism.”⁹ He accepts the writings of Scripture as genuinely the word of God, and seeks to understand and affirm their teachings. There is, however, another strategy for avoiding the argument given above which he does adopt. That way is to accept the truth of premises (1)–(3) but to deny premise (4). That is to say: he can admit that Jesus was worshiped along with God, as the texts clearly imply, and yet deny that this means that Jesus is a divine person, in the sense affirmed by trinitarians. Here we may think of the Arians and other subordinationists in the ancient Church. They did worship Jesus, and regarded him as in some sense divine, but not in the same sense that the Father was divine. (The Son/Logos was God, but not “true God,” a fact which accounts for the presence of the latter expression in the Nicene Creed.) So the Logos was worshiped, but was not (fully) a divine person.

⁹See www.biblicalunitarian.com (Tuggy, however, has no formal affiliation with the group that sponsors this website).

Tuggy, however, is no Arian. Nor does he think that there are semi-divine beings (God's "near-peers") somehow bridging the gap between God and the created world. Like most modern unitarians,¹⁰ he holds that Jesus is, ontologically, a human being and nothing more—though to be sure, a very special human being, one that was uniquely blessed by God and used by God—and one that, in view of this, is a proper recipient of worship. Tuggy thus denies the claim made by premise (4), which is axiomatic to Nicene trinitarians and to many others, that only God should be worshiped.¹¹ And this brings me to my final conundrum concerning Tuggy's position, something which I am simply at a loss to understand. He believes that this view of Jesus, as ontologically human and nothing more, is the view that is found in the writings of the New Testament, rightly interpreted; such a view is fully compatible with the praises of Jesus and the worship of Jesus that are there recorded. This is what is being said about Jesus in John 1:1–18, and Philippians 2:5–11, and Hebrews 1:1–14, and in many other passages. But how he is able to convince himself of this, I am unable to comprehend.¹²

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¹⁰The qualification is needed because Tuggy classifies as "unitarians" all the ancient writers who thought the Son/Logos was ontologically subordinate to the Father/God, from Tertullian and Origen to the Arians and anti-Nicenes of the fourth century. I think this is a gerrymandered classification that fails to mark the significant divisions in the history of doctrine, but I will not argue that point here.

¹¹For a discussion of this, see Tuggy's article, "Who Should Christians Worship?" in *Journal from the Radical Reformation*, 2013.

¹²My thanks to Dale Tuggy for his comments on an earlier version of this reply. Thanks also to Joseph Jedwab and another (unnamed) referee, and to the editor of *Faith and Philosophy*, for their comments.