

Christian Monotheism: Reality or Illusion?

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Historically, three great world religions have laid claim to monotheism as a central tenet of faith—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three of them hold in reverence the Biblical patriarch Abraham, to whom the One God of heaven and earth revealed Himself. To the Jews, Abraham is the ancestor from whom the Hebrew people sprang. They look back to him as “Father Abraham,” the first Hebrew, the man whose dealings with the Lord God were the foundation of Israel’s intense monotheism in the midst of pagan nations serving a multitude of idols.

To the Muslims, followers of Mohammed, Abraham is remembered and revered as the father of Ishmael and grandfather of Esau, ancestors of the Arabian people from whom Mohammed sprang and in whose land Islam began and is yet centered. Islam, too, with its worship of Allah alone, has always been strictly monotheistic. Christians also, with the Old Testament as an integral part of their Bible, regard Abraham with affection and respect, remembering that the very first verse of the New Testament speaks of Jesus Christ as “the son of Abraham.” Christians, too, claim to worship only one God—the God of Abraham—the Lord God of heaven and earth.

Abraham, thus, is seen as the physical or spiritual ancestor of peoples who alone in a polytheistic or atheistic world teach the worship of the one and only God, whose name in Hebrew is represented by the Tetragrammaton, often rendered YHWH in English (the correct pronunciation of which is still in dispute). Abraham appears as a great beacon light in the

history of mankind—one of those rare individuals who towers head and shoulders above the common lot, and from whose lifetime a new era can be dated.

At this point, however, a strange anomaly appears in the history of monotheism. Judaism and Islam, though quite different religions, recognize each other as legitimately monotheistic, while at the same time *both* refuse to recognize Christianity as a champion of real monotheism. To them, Christianity is monotheistic in name only. While Christians would claim that “Christian monotheism” is a reality, Jews and Muslims would insist that it is only an illusion.

This insistence, of course, is based on the fact that since the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople (A.D. 325 and 381) the bulk of Christendom has viewed God as being three distinct persons or hypostases united in one substance. This teaching—the doctrine of the trinity—has stood as an offense to both Jews and Muslims, in their eyes a denial or a perversion of pure monotheism. Another body of believers—often obscure, derided, reviled, persecuted, and even martyred—have been those Christians unable to accept the trinitarian formulations or to find any justification for them in the Scriptures. These people, sometimes called unitarians, have considered themselves to be the guardians of true monotheism within Christianity.¹

I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRINITARIAN DOGMA

It is interesting that many scholars in recent times, within churches traditionally trinitarian, have been engaged in a lively debate over the legitimacy of the Nicene presuppositions and terminology, drawn as they were from Greek philosophy, and not from Hebraic or Judaic modes of thought.² It is at least worthy of note that the Apostle Paul felt it essential

¹Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and Its Antecedents*, Harvard University Press, 1945, and *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1952. The modern Unitarian Church, though historically a development from earlier unitarian believers, has rejected supernaturalism in religion and the Bible as an authoritative, inspired revelation. There is, therefore, an important difference between unitarianism (with a lower-case “u”) and Unitarianism.

²For example: John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate*, SCM Press, Ltd., 1977; Michael Green, ed., *The Truth of God Incarnate*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1977; Michael Goulder, ed., *The Debate Continued*, Eerdmans, 1979; John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, SCM Press, Ltd., 1973; John A.T. Robinson, *The Priority*

to warn the young church to "beware . . . [of] philosophy" (Col. 2:8) and to avoid letting their minds be "corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). Trinitarianism, with all its subtle terminology and hairsplitting distinctions, is anything but simple!

Although admitting that the trinity is not explicitly taught in the New Testament, theologians have sought to justify this doctrine by an appeal to the growing consciousness of the church, led by the Holy Spirit, enabling it to declare and define truth by means of so-called Ecumenical Councils long after the apostles had died. This is sometimes called the "catholic tradition," and it is quite distinct from basing doctrine on Scripture alone. Though *sola scriptura* was a watchword of the Reformation, it is clear that in many respects the Reformation churches were still highly indebted to the so-called Church Fathers and subsequent Greek and Latin theologians for their doctrinal understandings, rather than to the explicit statements of Scripture.

It is our thesis that the doctrine of God underwent major modification during the second, third, and fourth centuries. Jesus' view of who and what God is, and the view of the apostles, retains the clear monotheism of the Old Testament, as we will try to show.

II. THE JEWISH THEOLOGY OF JESUS

One of Christ's most famous conversations (John 4:5-26) was held with a Samaritan woman, a member of a religious group that accepted the Pentateuch (with minor alterations) and that claimed to serve the God of Israel. They insisted, however, that His true worship was centered in Mount Gerizim instead of Jerusalem, in opposition to the Jews. The woman proceeded to raise this controversial issue with Jesus.

In His reply the Lord declared, "You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22, NIV). The contrast here is clearly between the unauthorized worship of the Samaritans and the true service of God rendered by the Jews. To Israel "were committed the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2). Theirs were "the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the

of John, SCM Press, Ltd., 1985; Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, Collins, 1976; James Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, Westminster Press, 1980; Geoffrey Lampe, *God As Spirit*, SCM Press, Ltd., 1977; Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus, God and Man*, MacMillan and Co., 1967. See also William Temple, "The Divinity of Christ," in *Foundations*, MacMillan and Co., 1913.

law, and the *service of God*, and the promises" (Rom. 9:4). Before the gospel age, all outsiders were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and *without God* in the world" (Eph. 2:12). The Samaritans might claim to worship Israel's God correctly, but Jesus refuted their claim by charging, "You Samaritans worship what you do not know."

As a member of the Jewish people, our Lord declared that "we [Jews] know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews." This puts Jesus squarely on the side of the Jews in regard to their doctrine of God. Whatever failings Israel may have had, their knowledge of *what God is* was not defective.³ The Old Testament had revealed in clear terms the supremacy and absolute oneness of YHWH, the God of Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD" (Deut. 6:4; cf. Ex. 20:2, 3; 2 Sam. 7:22; Mal. 2:10; 2 Kings 19:15; Psa. 86:9, 10; Isa. 43:10, 11; 44:6, 8, 24; 45:5, 6, 18-22). Has any historian had the audacity to contend that Israel's doctrine of God in Jesus' day or afterwards was anything but the strictest monotheism? In historic Judaism no trace is found of either polytheism (a plurality of gods) or trinitarianism (a plurality of persons in the Deity). Indeed, a basic controversy between the Jews and the Christians has been over the doctrine of the trinity.⁴

If, then, as we have seen, Jesus insisted that the Jews knew what they worshiped, and also gave His approval to that knowledge, it becomes certain that He championed this central tenet of Israel's faith—as opposed to the superstitions earlier taught in polytheism and also, necessarily, the conjectures later embraced in trinitarianism.⁵ It is natural, therefore, to find Him addressing His Father as "the only true God" (John 17:3), thereby excluding all others—and even Himself—from being the one and only true God; and He distinguishes Himself from this "only true God" as the one sent by Him. There is a clear demarcation between the Sender and the Sent. Any straightforward evaluation of this verse must yield the conclusion, it seems to this writer, that Jesus viewed His Father, and His Father *alone*, as being the Deity. He could say, therefore, "My Father is

³"Whatever its shortcomings, Judaism was stoutly monotheistic" (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, IX, 1066, art. "Monotheism").

⁴"Though Christian theologians normally interpret the trinity as a doctrine of one God in three persons, Jewish thinkers rejected it categorically as a denial of the divine unity" *Encyclopedia Judaica*, VII 671, art. "God".

⁵The unfortunate misuse of texts in John's Gospel by the church Fathers is discussed by J. A. T. Robinson in "The Fourth Gospel and the Church's Doctrine of the Trinity" (*Twelve More New Testament Studies*, SCM Press, Ltd., 1984).

greater than I" (John 14:28). To one who would flatter Him with the title "Good Teacher" Jesus countered, "Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone" (Mark 10:18, NIV).⁶ Such utterances of Jesus, and others like them, seem to establish the fact that He maintained complete solidarity with Israel's faith in one God—the Father—and that therefore true Christian doctrine must reject decisively all views of God that are foreign to that faith.

III. THE JEWISH THEOLOGY OF THE APOSTLES

Some have claimed, however, that the apostles laid the foundation for modifying this strict monotheism toward the direction of trinitarianism. This claim suggests that trinitarianism is at least implicit in the New Testament. We believe, on the contrary, that it cannot be proved that Jesus' apostles ever departed from their Master's and their nation's faith in one supreme person as God. Paul, for example, reminded the Corinthian church, "We know that 'an idol has no real existence,' and that 'there is no God but one.' For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:4-6, RSV; cf. Eph. 4:4-6). It seems passing strange for Paul to word this confession of the Christians' faith in this way, if he believed that Jesus Christ is also the "one God." Elsewhere Paul affirms, "There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). The mediator, however exalted and precious, is a *man*. God Himself is clearly distinguished from this man, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Father is truly seen as the one and only God, distinct and unequalled, forever supreme (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-28). This is Paul's Christian monotheism, as strict and pure as any monotheism could be.

The Apostle Peter speaks of "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:3), acknowledging the one whom Jesus called "my God" (Matt. 27:46; John 20:17). James also expressed his belief in monotheism: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—

⁶Cf. Joseph Klausner's observation, "That Jesus never regarded Himself as God is most obvious from his reply when hailed as 'Good master'" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, New York: MacMillan, 1945, 377).

and shudder" (2:19, NIV). It is not sufficient to believe that God is one; but that belief is itself *good* and *proper* and *right*. Any other belief for James would be out of the question. James was a Jewish Christian, writing from the strongly Jewish milieu of the Jerusalem church, and it is hard to resist the impression that he speaks here as any pious Jew would do, from his belief in the One God, as in the *Shema*, the watchword of Israel's monotheistic orthodoxy.

IV. DISPUTED TEXTS

This brings us to the final part of our theme, a consideration of texts that are often used to refute our thesis that the New Testament maintains the same strict monotheism as the Old Testament. Trinitarian theologians have seen in such texts a reason to modify that monotheism and to view God as a tripersonal Being—three distinct persons within the Godhead, co-equal, consubstantial, and co-eternal. These are, of course, the classical terms defining the Nicene Orthodoxy.

Jesus said, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). Some exegetes understand Him to mean "are one *God*." If Jesus is allowed to explain the oneness He has in mind, however, it appears, that it is not a oneness of being—or consubstantiality—but a oneness of *purpose* and *action*. He later could pray that His disciples might share the same oneness that exists between Himself and the Father (John 17:21-23)—"that they may be one, just as (*καθώς*) we are one." It is, therefore, questionable exegesis which finds support in John 10:30 for an *ontological* unity of the Son and the Father as God. We conclude that the use of this text for such a purpose is unwarranted.

Christ told His disciple Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9, NIV). A son may be expected to be like his father, and in Jesus' case this was *perfectly* true (Heb. 1:3; 2 Cor. 4:4), but to use this saying to prove consubstantiality goes beyond the evidence. Furthermore, taken literally, it proves more than trinitarianism would allow, making the Father and the Son identical persons.

Thomas called the risen Christ, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). This text is thought to be impregnable support for Christ's being Deity in the ontological sense. Christ did say, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" and "Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor

the Son just as they honor the Father" (John 5:21-23, NIV). But He was pointing out that as He walked the earth throughout His ministry, He was doing the works and saying the words of *God*. That is, He was *functionally* serving as God Himself upon the earth. When men saw Jesus Christ in their midst, it was as if they saw God Himself doing the works. "Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work" (John 14:10; cf. 5:17, 19, 20). These are the words of one who saw God at work in and through Him in a unique way, not one who considered Himself the same Being as the eternal God, now come down to earth. Because the Jews claimed that Jesus was making Himself equal with God (John 5:18; 10:33) does not mean that Christian believers must understand that equality in an ontological sense, whether or not the Jews so understood His claim.

The Old Testament had prepared the way for the use of the term "God" in a secondary sense. Moses is twice called *Elohim*, and that by God Himself. (Ex. 4:16; 7:1). In John 10:34 Jesus Himself quoted Psalm 82, in which the judges of Israel are twice called *Elohim* (verses 1 and 6). He quoted this psalm for the express purpose of refuting the Jews' claim that He was making Himself equal with God in any sense that would violate their monotheism. He insists that He is the *Son* of God, not God (v. 36). And He goes on to reiterate that His identification with His Father is *functional* and *relational*, not ontological (vv. 37, 38). Even this did not satisfy them, however, and they tried once more to arrest Him, since they would not accept His claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God (cf. Mark 14:61-64). This, to them, was blasphemy.

John begins his Gospel by stating that "the Word was God" (1:1) and that "the Word was made flesh" (1:14). Many have seen in this a support for the consubstantiality of the Word with God. But with all that has now been shown regarding the functional and relational status of Christ walking as Deity upon the earth, these texts do not disturb the purest and strictest monotheism. To read into the term *Logos*, as John uses it, the speculations of the philosophers is to ignore the background of the Septuagint usage (as in Psalms 33:6, 9; 107:20; 147:15-19) and to disregard the warnings we have already seen in the New Testament as to the "wisdom of men" (cf. 1 Cor. 1:17-21; 2:1-5).⁷

⁷Cf. John A. T. Robinson's definition of the Word as "God in his self-revelation or expression." This became a person in Jesus (*The Priority of John*, 380).

Paul wrote that Jesus Christ was "in the form of God" (Phil. 2:6). The NIV gratuitously renders this, "being in very nature God." Discussion has raged over the meaning of *morphe*, much of it based on its usage in classical Greek. *Koine* usage, however, should be taken into account. Dr. Kenneth S. Wuest, an acknowledged trinitarian, admits: "The word 'form' is sometimes interpreted here as referring to a station in life, a position one holds, one's rank. And that is an approximation of *morphe* in this context. The word is used in this way when a certain grade in school is spoken of as a form."⁸ Since the subject of this passage is the historical man Christ Jesus (verse 5)—not one who *was to become* Christ Jesus—we must ask ourselves whether Christ walking the earth and doing the things Paul describes in verses 6 through 8 did so in the status of Deity. We have already seen that this is just the way the Gospels, and in particular John, depict the Son of God. It is as though He were God in person walking the earth. And yet, ontologically, He is always kept distinct from God—not consubstantial, not co-equal, not co-eternal. Biblical monotheism, thus, is always preserved.

The Book of Hebrews, in 1:8, 9, quotes from Psalm 45:6, 7 and seems to call Christ "God." We have seen that this need not be taken in an ontological sense, but with abundant precedent can be taken in a functional and relational sense, thereby remaining in harmony with the Bible's consistent monotheism. It is worthy of note that some versions and exegetes understand the Psalmist and the writer of Hebrews to be saying, "Your throne is the throne of God," or else "God is your throne."⁹ The former suggests that God shares His rulership with His Son, a theme developed in greater detail elsewhere.¹⁰ The latter implies that God is the source of His Son's authority, also an important theme.¹¹ It is certain that in verse 9 a distinction is made between the God who does the anointing and the individual who is anointed.

V. THE HOLY SPIRIT

A final problem concerns the nature of the Holy Spirit. Trinitarianism

⁸Kenneth S. Wuest, *The Practical Use of the Greek New Testament*, 84.

⁹RSV margin and NEB margin.

¹⁰Acts 2:33-36; 7:55, 56; Ephesians 1:20; Revelation 3:21.

¹¹A number of texts show that Christ *receives* or *is given* His authority and divine name, suggesting that He did not possess it inherently or innately, as would be the case if He were consubstantial with the Father: Matthew 11:27; 28:18; 1 Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1:22; Philippians 2:9, 10.

sees the Holy Spirit as a distinct person of the Godhead. The Jews, however, whose doctrine of God Jesus espoused, considered the *Ruah ha-Kodesh* as “the Divine spirit; spirit emanating from God. . . . It is more or less synonymous with God (Isa. 63:10) or else signifies His sustaining and inspiring presence (Isa. 63:11; Psa. 51:13).”¹² The New Testament data on the Holy Spirit can certainly be understood in the same manner. It is the trinitarian historian Philip Schaff who reminds us that as late as the Council of Constantinople, in 381, the bishops who came together to decide the nature of the Holy Spirit were quite uncertain and divided about the matter, many of them not believing the Holy Spirit to be a person at all.¹³ It seems strange that as late as 381 the church could hold such diverse views on so basic a doctrine if in fact the apostolic writings had really taught the personality of the Holy Spirit! Rather, it appears that just as in the case of the gradual development of the doctrine that Christ was consubstantial with the Father, so also it came to be felt that the Holy Spirit must be viewed as a person and as the third member of the Godhead.

VI. CONCLUSION

To us, these developments were totally unnecessary and unscriptural and in fact violated Biblical monotheism. We conclude, therefore, that “Christian Monotheism” is a reality when “Christian” is understood on the basis of the explicit teachings of Jesus and His apostles, but that it is an illusion—and only an illusion—when “Christian” is understood as embodying the later creedal definitions of trinitarianism. Christian believers must decide for themselves where the *real* authority is found for the faith they hold: the Scriptures themselves, or else the later developing “tradition.”

¹²R. Werblowsky and G. Wigoder, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, art. “Holy Spirit,” 190.

¹³Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, III, 664.