

**TWO PEAS IN A SINGLE POLYTHEISTIC POD:
JOHN HICK AND RICHARD SWINBURNE**

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ABSTRACT: A descriptive polytheist thinks there are at least two gods. John Hick and Richard Swinburne are descriptive polytheists. In this respect, they are like Thomas Aquinas and many other theists. What sets Swinburne and Hick apart from Aquinas, however, is that unlike him they are normative polytheists. That is, Swinburne and Hick think that it is right that we, or at least some of us, worship more than one god. However, the evidence available to me shows that only Swinburne, and not Hick, is a cultic polytheist: he actually worships more than one god. I conclude that only Swinburne is a polytheist *par excellence*.

FOLLOWING Richard Swinburne, let's say that "x is a god," with a little *g*, means, by definition, "x is a very powerful non-embodied rational agent" (Swinburne 1970, 53). And, following Swinburne, let's say that "x is a God," with a big *G*, means, by definition, that "x is a person who is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, and eternal" (Swinburne 2008, 5; 2010, 3–19). So every God is a god, but not every god is a God. Moreover, let's say that "x is a descriptive polytheist" means, by definition, "x thinks there are at least two gods," and let's say that "x is a normative polytheist" means, by definition, "x thinks that it is right for us, or at least some of us, to worship more than one god," where, once again following Swinburne, it is right to worship something if and only if either worship of it is morally obligatory or, if not morally obligatory, then at least morally good (Swinburne 1993, 292). In addition, let's say that "x worships y" means, by definition, "x shows respect toward (what one regards as) a god, y, and x acknowledges that y is x's lord." Of course, we might define "y is x's lord," but I will leave it undefined. Finally, let's say "x is a cultic polytheist" means, by definition, "x worships more than one god" (Cf. Mavrodes 2000).

Swinburne is a descriptive polytheist. For, according to Swinburne, God is "a whole" whose "individual members" are three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, each of whom is *a* God; so, on his view, there are three Gods (Swinburne

1994, 3, 181; Swinburne 2004, 3–19, 43–44; Swinburne 2008, 5–13). Indeed, according to Swinburne, necessarily, there are exactly three Gods (Swinburne 1994, 170–180). For only one God existing is a worse state of affairs than exactly two Gods existing. That’s because the second state of affairs involves two Gods loving each other. A solitary God would, therefore, be constrained by his perfect goodness to prefer it. He therefore would create—eternally, of course, not at some point in time—a second God. Moreover, only two Gods existing is a worse state of affairs than exactly three Gods existing. That’s because the second state of affairs involves two Gods cooperatively loving a third God. Two Gods would, therefore, be constrained by their perfect goodness to prefer it. They therefore would create—again, eternally—a third God. Why not four Gods? Because “[t]here is a qualitative difference between sharing and co-operating in sharing,” but “no similar qualitative difference between co-operating with one in sharing and co-operating with two” (Swinburne 1994, 179).

Swinburne identifies the first God with the Father, the second God with the Son, and the third God with the Holy Spirit. The ontological priority of the Father gives him authority over the Son and the Holy Spirit, with the consequence that, necessarily, they conform their wills to his in matters about which a solitary God would have a free choice. The wills of the three Gods, therefore, can never conflict. Furthermore, as indicated previously, “the three together form a whole”—“together constitute” “the same individual thing” (Swinburne 1994, 3, 182, 185). That “whole” “is such that each of its members is necessarily everlasting, and would not have existed unless it had brought about or been brought about by the others” (Swinburne 1994, 180–181). The proper name “God” applies to this “whole thing”; “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together form one larger individual, God” (Swinburne 1994, 187n20; Swinburne 2008, 35). As for the Athanasian Creed, its claim that there is only one God “is to be read as the claim that the source of being of all other things has to it this kind of indivisible unity”; and the claim of the Nicene Creed that the Father is *homoousia* with the Son is to be read either as the claim that they are both Gods, exemplifying the same divine nature, or as the claim that they are both “members” or “parts” of the “whole thing” named “God.” (Swinburne 1994, 181, 185)

That is Swinburne’s “God,” and those are Swinburne’s gods.

Trinitarians might well worry. For, first of all, the Athanasian Creed states that the Son and the Holy Spirit were neither created nor made. Swinburne denies this. Secondly, the Creed prohibits “dividing the substance,” but Swinburne divides it twice, first by saying that the Persons are distinct parts of a fourth individual that is God and, second, by saying that each Person is a God but God is not a God since, “to speak strictly,” “it” (his word) is neither omnipotent, omniscient, nor perfectly free, etc., in which case God has a nature that is different from the nature of the three Gods (Swinburne 1994, 187n7, 181). However, on trinitarian orthodoxy, that is three too many primary substances and one too many secondary substances in the vicinity of the Trinity. Thirdly, the Creed states that “they are not three Gods, but one God.” Swinburne denies this; he says they are three Gods. Finally, on trinitarian orthodoxy, God is a person or personal being—not a *single* person or a *single* personal being, mind you—but a person or personal being all the same. Swinburne denies this (Swinburne 1994, 181; 2008, 35).

In reply to the first charge, Swinburne contends that “early church theologians and scholastics thought of ‘creates’ as applicable only to the bringing about of something finite by an act of will. . . . ‘Made’ for them meant made out of some pre-existing matter” (Swinburne 1994, 183). If, however, the words ‘create’ and ‘made’ are used in senses that lack these implications, which is how they are used in contemporary English, nothing contrary to orthodoxy is implied by “the Father creates the Son.” As for the second and third charges, Swinburne says that “[t]here is an ambiguity in the Greek and Latin of the creeds, which justifies a different understanding of [*theos*] and *deus* (normally both translated into English as “God”) in different places in the creeds” (Swinburne 1994, 181). Both words can be used to predicate divinity or to pick out “the, in some sense, unique Supreme Being.” Thus, when the Athanasian Creed states that “the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God” and “each person by himself is God,” “is God” is used to predicate divinity of each Person, whereas when the Creed states of the Persons that “they are not three Gods, but one God,” ‘God’ is used to refer to “the, in some sense, unique Supreme Being,” the composite whole of which the Persons are its unique proper parts (Swinburne 1994, 186). If the doctrine of the Trinity is not understood in such a way, says Swinburne, it is “manifestly contradictory” and no authorities “affirming something which they intend to be taken with utter seriousness can be read as affirming an evident contradiction” (Swinburne 1994, 180).

This is not the place to assess Swinburne’s replies to the first three charges, nor is it the place to assess his implication that other non-polytheistic ways of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity are “manifestly contradictory.” Suffice to say that there are alternatives whose authors would demur from his judgment.

As for the fourth charge, Swinburne might reply that even if God is not a person, God is divine. He only denies that “it is divine in exactly the same sense as the [P]ersons are divine” (Swinburne 1994, 187n21).

This reply is unresponsive, however. The charge is that, whereas according to trinitarian orthodoxy, God is a person or a personal being, according to Swinburne, God is neither. To reply by saying that God, on his view, is nevertheless divine “in some sense” does not address that charge. Moreover, nothing can be divine in the only sense that Swinburne has specified—instantiating omnipotence, omniscience, perfect freedom, etc.—unless it is a person or personal being. On Swinburne’s view, God is no such thing, and so God is not divine.

Alternatively, Swinburne might reply with these words:

It is they [the Persons], however, rather than it [God], who, strictly speaking, would have the divine properties of omnipotence, omniscience, etc.; though clearly there is a ready and natural sense in which the collective can be said to have them as well. If all members of a group know something, the group itself, by a very natural extension of use, can be said to know that thing; and so on. (Swinburne 1994, 181)

Three thoughts in response.

First, we will not be fooled by talk of ‘the collective’ or ‘the group.’ Swinburne is clear: “the three together form a whole,” the “individual members” “together constitute” “the same individual thing,” “a whole,” “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

together form one larger individual, God.” This is mereological vocabulary. The Persons are the unique proper parts of the composite object whose name is ‘God,’ according to Swinburne. Moreover, Swinburne quotes favorably the Fourth Lateran Council’s claim that “the unity of the Godhead was not just a collective unity ‘in the way that many human beings are said to make one people, and many believers one church’” (Swinburne 1994, 188). Furthermore, just as you would not get one human from many humans, even if they were related by necessary existence and essential harmony, so you don’t get one God from three Gods related by the same. The unity of the Godhead does not consist in such relations alone. It at least partly consists in this: there is exactly one God. That’s what makes trinitarian orthodox monotheism. On Swinburne’s view, therefore, God is identical with the composite object whose unique proper parts are the Persons and, therefore, on his view, God is not a mere collective or group no matter how tightly unified its members might be.

Second, Swinburne might be read as saying that, since the Persons have divine properties (omnipotence, omniscience, perfect freedom, etc.), the object they compose—God, on his view—has those properties as well. That’s the fallacy of composition, however. More importantly, nothing can instantiate those properties unless it is a person or personal being, “strictly speaking,” to use Swinburne’s phrase. Swinburne’s God, however, is neither, even loosely speaking, much less “strictly speaking.” Even *Ariolimax columbianus* is a better candidate for personhood than Swinburne’s God.

Third, perhaps Swinburne is best read as saying that, since the Persons have divine properties, the object they compose—God, on his view—“can be *said* to have them as well” (my emphasis). But surely the question is not whether “it” can be *said* to instantiate omnipotence, omniscience, perfect freedom, etc. Saying is cheap; instantiating is not. And the question is whether “it” *instantiates* them. And, on his view, “it” does not.

The upshot is that, although Swinburne’s credentials as a trinitarian seem thin to non-existent, his credentials as a descriptive polytheist are as thick as can be.

Naturally, Swinburne will take exception to all this. After all, on his view, there is *exactly one* composite object that has the Persons as its unique proper parts and these distinct persons are as closely related to each other as any three distinct persons could possibly be. With that in mind, he might insist, as he in fact does, that “[t]he claim that ‘there is only one God’ is to be read as the claim that the source of being of all other things has to it this kind of indivisible unity” (Swinburne 1994, 181).

What should we make of this attempt to paint polytheism monotheistically? I suggest that we regard it as so much polytheistic double-speak. Swinburne subscribes to classical identity and resists any other way to count gods but by it (1994, 187–188). In that case, in its perfectly natural sense in English, ‘There is only one God’ is to be read like this: there is an x such that x is a God, and for every y , if y is a God, then y is absolutely identical with x . Given Swinburne’s theology, that statement is false. Apparently, therefore, Swinburne thinks that ‘There is only one God’ is not to be read in its perfectly natural sense in English. Rather, it is to be paraphrased as ‘the source of being of all other things has to it this kind of indivisible unity.’ As a paraphrase, this is a failure. For a paraphrase of ‘There is only one God’ is successful only if it attributes number to something and either it is about

something that instantiates the divine nature or it is about something that bears at least some relevant resemblance to something that instantiates the divine nature. But Swinburne's composite object of the Persons—which is the referent of 'the source of being of all things'—is none of these things. Furthermore, Swinburne's paraphrase seems inconsistent with his own theology. For, on his theology, the composite object that has the Persons as its unique proper parts is not the source of being of all other things. It is not the source of being of the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, each of which is distinct from it. Rather, as we have seen, on his theology, the Father is the source of being of the Son, and the Father and the Son together are the source of being of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Swinburne's attempt to paint his polytheism monotheistically is a failure; moreover, it is inconsistent with his own theology.

Of course, there are other attempts to paint polytheism monotheistically. For example, one might say that the claim that "there is only one God" is to be read as the claim that there is only one divine nature. But, although it is true, and a part of Trinitarian orthodoxy, that there is only one divine nature, it is a failure as a paraphrase of 'there is only one God.' For, although it attributes number to something, it is neither about something that instantiates the divine nature (it *is* the divine nature!) nor about something that bears at least some relevant resemblance to something that instantiates the divine nature (only a concrete particular could do that and the divine nature is not a concrete particular).

I conclude that Swinburne is a descriptive polytheist.

Now let's turn to John Hick, the progenitor of modern religious pluralism. According to Hick, God is neither a person nor a personal being (Hick 2010a, 22; Hick 2010c, 27; cf. Howard-Snyder forthcoming). Rather, according to Hick, "there is an ultimate reality"—which he calls "the Real"—"which is in itself transcategorical (ineffable), beyond the range of our human conceptual systems, but whose universal presence is humanly experienced in the various forms made possible by our conceptual-linguistic systems and spiritual practices" (Hick 1997, 279; Hick 1989, 236; Hick 2004a, 9; Hick 2004b, xix; Hick 2009, xx; Hick 2007, 220–221). Hick suggests that "we use something analogous to Kant's distinction between noumenal reality and its phenomenal appearance(s) to human consciousness. . . . [T]he noumenal Real is thought and experienced by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae* [the "personal gods" and "non-personal absolutes"], which the phenomenology of religion reports (Hick 2004b, xix). (Hick seems to use 'mentalities' in its historiographical sense, as in "*histoire des mentalités*," i.e., "mindsets" or "worldviews," complexes of conceptual, cultural, historical, linguistic and other conditions that form a way of understanding and experiencing the world.) To spell this out a bit, Hick says that "when we are open to the universal presence of the Real," it sometimes "impacts us," "impinges" on us, "affects us," "transmitting information" "that the human mind/brain is capable of transforming into what we call religious experience" (Hick 2010a, 70–72; 2010b 69–72; 1989, 243–244). The human mind/brain transforms this "information," however, only through different mentalities that "particularize" or "schematize" the "universal presence" of the Real into the diversity of kinds of religious experience reported by the variety of

religions. Those mentalities can be divided into two groups: first, those that deploy “the concept of God, or of the Real as personal, which presides over the various theistic forms of religious experience,” and second, those that deploy “the concept of the Absolute, or of the Real as non-personal, which presides over its various non-theistic forms” (Hick 1989, 245; Hick 2007, 220). So the Zen disciple, after years of tutelage and meditation, may “finally attain *satori* and become vividly aware of ultimate reality as immediately present in the flow of ordinary life”; or, the advaitic Hindu, upon a different regimen, “may in due course attain the awareness of oneness with Brahman and become *jivanmukti*”; or, the Christian, in times of prayer, may sense the presence of the loving Father, Abba, forgiving, guiding, and strengthening her (Hick 1989, 294).

Hick intends for his pluralistic theory to explain various alleged facts about the history and phenomenology of religion. What is important for my purposes here, however, is not whether his explanation is adequate but rather that, by his own lights, those facts can be explained only by way of the aforementioned *personae* and *impersonae* of the Real. (For critical discussion of Hick’s pluralism, see Byrne 1995; Eddy 1994; 2015; Heim 2001; Howard-Snyder forthcoming; Netland 1986; 2012; 2015; Plantinga 2000; 2010; Quinn 2000; Rose 2013; Rowe 1999; Smart 1993a; 1993b; Sugirtharajah 2012; Twiss 2000; van Inwagen 2010; Ward 1990; 1994; Yandell 1993; 1999; and other works cited in the bibliographies of these works.) And here an important question arises. For what, exactly, is the ontological status of the *personae* and *impersonae* of the Real? To answer that question, Hick proposes “two models” patterned after “two different understandings of the ontological status of the [heavenly] Buddhas” in the *trikaya* doctrine of the Buddhas (Hick 1989, 269–275).

According to the first understanding, Amida, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, and the other heavenly Buddhas, are “mental creations,” “ideations of the Bodhisattvas: to the Bodhisattva his ideal becomes so vivid and alive that it takes shape as a subjective reality” (Hick 1989, 272–273). Amida, etc. are thus, “projections of the religious imagination,” but not *mere* projections: “they are modes in which the limitless Dharmakaya affects our human consciousness” (Hick 1989, 273). As such, although these modes of human consciousness may seem to the Bodhisattva as though they are “real persons,” they are not; nevertheless, the Dharmakaya “transmits” “authentic information” to the Bodhisattva in whose consciousness such modes are produced (*ibid.*). Using this understanding to model the ontological status of the *personae* of the Real, Hick says that “Jahweh, the heavenly Father, Allah, Shiva, Vishnu and so on are not objectively existent personal individuals with their own distinctive powers and characteristics,” but rather ways (“modes”) in which human consciousness is modified by “the universal presence” of the Real, shaped by the category of deity, resulting in “a powerful and deeply resonant sense of personal presence,” further schematized by distinctive aspects of the mentalities of specific theistic traditions. “In worshipping this divine Thou”—this “mode of human consciousness,” this “mental creation,” this “projection of the religious imagination”—“we are accordingly relating ourselves to the Real—whether or not we are aware of the complex way in which the relationship is being mediated” (*ibid.*). And something similar goes for the *impersonae* of the Real. Each of them

is a way in which human consciousness is modified by “the universal presence” of the Real, shaped by the category of the Absolute, resulting in a sense of a non-personal ultimate reality, sometimes further schematized by distinctive aspects of the mentalities of specific nontheistic traditions, resulting in experiences distinctive of Zen Buddhism, Advaitic Hinduism, etc. On the first model, then, the noumenal the Real manifests itself through these phenomenal projections, which, for the *personae* of the Real, are identical with Jahweh, etc. and, for its *impersonae*, are identical with Brahman, etc. On the first model, then, the noumenal Real manifests itself through our experience of these phenomenal projections, which, for the *personae* of the Real, are identical with Jahweh, etc. and, for the *impersonae* of the Real, are identical with Brahman, Dharmakaya, the Tao, Sunyata, etc. (Hick 2010b, 69)

According to the second understanding of the ontological status of the heavenly Buddhas, they are “objectively existing, supramundane and subtle beings” (Hick 1989, 274). Furthermore, “Amida, [etc.] are real persons, of immense but not limitless proportions” (ibid.). Using this understanding to model the *personae* of the Real, Hick says that “Jahweh, [etc.] . . . are real personal beings, independent centres of consciousness, will, thought and emotion” (ibid.). He continues:

each of them is finite; for each exists alongside and is limited by the others with their own particular natures and capacities. Although the power of any one of this plurality cannot therefore be infinite it may nevertheless be so great as to be virtually infinite from our human point of view, as the gods exercise their powers in response to prayer and in the providential ordering of nature and history. (Hick 1989, 274–275)

On the second model, therefore, the Real manifests itself to us through our experience of these “objectively existing,” “real personal beings, independent centres of consciousness, will, thought and emotion, realities” which, for the *personae*, are identical with Jahweh, etc., and, for the *impersonae*, are identical with Brahman, etc.

Hick confirms this understanding of the second model fifteen years later in the Introduction to the second edition of *An Interpretation*:

In moments of individual prayer and communal worship there is often, or at least sometimes, an experience of being in the presence of God and of being in an I-Thou (or We-Thou) relationship with God. I do not think that this is illusory, but neither do I think that the Thous with whom people of different faiths are in contact have the infinite attributes—as the omnipotent and omniscient etc., creator of everything other than oneself—that the developed monotheistic theologies have come to ascribe to them. For it is not possible to experience that an encountered being has infinite dimensions—infinite power, infinite knowledge, etc. The omni-properties are the result of philosophical thinking congealed into religious dogma. And the possibility that I am proposing is that in each case the experienced Thou is a being analogous to the devas (gods with a small g) of Indian religion or to the angels and archangels of traditional Jewish, Christian, and Muslim belief, or to the heavenly Buddhas—Amida, Vairiconā, etc.—of some understandings of the *trikaya* doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, each being the object of veneration by their own devotees. These are intermediate beings between ourselves and the transcendental Real. But in our awareness of these beings we tend, at least within the western tradi-

tions, to invest them in our minds with the omni-attributes created by the vast superstructures of theology that have been developed over the centuries. (Hick 2004b, xxix–xxx)

The “experienced Thou” in this passage is “analogous” to the devas, angels, and heavenly Buddhas in that it, like them, are objectively existing beings, independent centers of consciousness, intermediate between the Real and humans. So, once again, Hick identifies the *personae* of the Real, i.e., Jahweh, etc., with objectively existing beings.

William Hasker worries that, so understood, the second model contradicts the central idea of the pluralistic hypothesis that the *personae* exist in virtue of different religious mentalities “schematizing” the “universal presence” of the Real (Hasker 2011, 194–195). But, for my purposes, the notable fact is that, on the second model, Hick’s pluralism is a version of descriptive polytheism. For, on the second model, Jahweh, etc. are very powerful non-embodied rational agents, which is our definition of ‘x is a god.’

Regarding the two models, Hick writes: “the pluralistic hypothesis being propounded here could accommodate either of the models and does not require a decision between them” (Hick 1989, 275). So Hick does not say here that he actually thinks that the second model is correct. However, by his lights, his pluralism requires one of the two models, and he seems to be perfectly happy with the second one, happy enough to be quite willing to think it is true. Moreover, there seems to be a decided list in that direction in the Introduction to the second edition of *An Interpretation* and, as we will see, elsewhere. So it’s not too far-fetched to think of Hick as a descriptive polytheist. At any rate, as George Mavrodes observed, he is most assuredly a “defender of polytheism,” perhaps even one of its most able defenders, right up there with Plato.

When this fact—the fact that Hick is a descriptive polytheist—was pointed out to him, he took exception to it, in the way in which one takes exception to something by summarily dismissing it, giving it the back of the hand. Under pressure from Mavrodes and Hasker, however, Hick finally came to see, albeit at a snail’s pace, that his second model really was polytheistic (Mavrodes 2000; Hick 2004b, xxvii–xxviii; Hick 2010b, 33–35; Mavrodes 2010b, 62–69; Hick 2010b, 69–72; Mavrodes 2010a, 72–75; Hasker 2011; Hick 2011). In his last word on the matter, published when he was 91 years old, he confesses that the second model “was confused and confusing” and he aims to “straighten it out”:

I want to distinguish between the God figures (Yahweh etc.) of the different monotheistic traditions, with their omni-properties, and the personal presence of which we are aware in religious experience. My suggestion is three-fold: (1) The monotheistic God-figures are human projections, existing only in the religious imaginations of a particular faith community. . . . (2) These projections are human responses within a particular cultural situation to the continuous impact upon humanity of the universal presence of the Real. . . . And (3) The thou experienced in prayer and revelation is quite likely an intermediate figure between us and the Real. The Gods, then, are phenomenal appearances of the Real existing, with their omni- and other properties, in the thought of the worshipping community. But in praying to them we may in fact (unknown

to us) be in contact with a real personal presence which is an ‘angel,’ in the sense of an intermediate figure between us and the Real, corresponding to the angels, archangels of the western monotheisms, or devas (gods with a small g) of Indian religion, or the heavenly Buddhas of one interpretation of one strand of Mahayan Buddhism. These are independent centres of consciousness, finite in their qualities. This suggestion is an attempt to make sense of what I take to be the actual situation—on the one hand, the transcendental transcategorical Real and, on the other hand, personal presences known in some forms of religious experience. (Hick 2011, 200; cf. Hick 2010a, 25–26)

Hick concludes: “The God-figures are not independent centres of consciousness, like the angels, and I was wrong when I proposed that the second interpretation of the *triyaka* doctrine was equally compatible as the first with the pluralistic hypothesis” (Hick 2011, 201).

So on the first model, the thous experienced in prayer and revelation are human projections, “so vivid and alive,” they seem to be real persons, although they are not; ‘Yahweh,’ etc. name these projections. On the new-and-revised second model, the thous experienced in prayer and revelation are a plurality of intermediate beings between us and the Real, so that “a Christian in prayer is addressing an angel, or indeed different Christians [are] addressing different angels,” unbeknownst to the Christians. And the same goes for Hindus and their divas, Buddhists and their Buddhas, and so on for other “spiritual beings,” “independent centres of consciousness, finite in their qualities,” each of whom exists independently of any human mentality (Hick 2011, 200).

Although the new-and-improved second model restores the central idea that the *personae* exist in virtue of different mentalities “schematizing” the “universal presence” of the Real, and so avoids Hasker’s worry, it clearly remains polytheistic. To be sure, on the revision, the *personae* of the Real are not gods but, rather, imaginative projections of a human community, and so, as imaginative projections tend to be, they are not “very powerful non-embodied rational agents.” However, the angels, divas, and Buddhas experienced in prayer and revelation are such beings. And so, on both the original and the revised second model, Hick’s pluralism remains polytheistic, although the poly-somethings have shifted from the *personae*, in the original, to the angels, divas, heavenly Buddhas and other “spiritual beings,” in the revision. Furthermore—and most importantly, for our purposes—notice that Hick says of the revised second model that it “is an attempt to make sense of what I take to be the actual situation.” Typically, when you say that thus-and-so is what you “take to be the actual situation,” you mean for your audience to understand that the situation in question is how you think things are. So, it’s difficult not to see Hick’s description of the revised second model as “what I take to be the actual situation” as anything other than an expression of how he thinks things are. We must, therefore, add Hick’s own testimony to our evidence that Hick is a descriptive polytheist.

I conclude that both Swinburne and Hick are descriptive polytheists. In this respect, they are not unlike Thomas Aquinas, and many other theists before and after him. In *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas details his view that there are orders of angels, good and evil, each of whom satisfies Swinburne’s definition of ‘x is a

god.’ Perhaps ‘details’ is an understatement. In *The Treatise on the Angels* (ST Ia, 50–64) and *The Treatise on the Conservation and Government of Creatures* (ST Ia, 106–114), we find 236 pages devoted to various questions about the angels (using the pagination of the online translation from the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*).

In article 3 of question 50, Aquinas addresses the question of whether the angels exist in any great number. He argues that, “since it is the perfection of the universe that God chiefly intends in the creation of things, the more perfect some things are, in so much greater an excess are they created by God.” Moreover, having argued in article 1 that immaterial substances are much better than material substances, he says that “it is reasonable to conclude that the immaterial substances as it were incomparably exceed material substances as to multitude.” “Hence it must be said that the angels, even inasmuch as they are immaterial substances, exist in exceeding great number, far beyond all material multitude.” Although Swinburne doesn’t go this far (he’s content with exactly three gods), Hick is in principle open to it. For, as we’ve seen, he takes himself, perhaps surprisingly to many of us, to be representing a traditional view of angels, divas, and heavenly Buddhas—and Aquinas’s view is as traditional as it gets!

What separates Swinburne and Hick from Aquinas, however, is that they, unlike him, are *normative* polytheists. That is, they think that it is morally right that we—or at least many of us—worship more than one god.

Hick’s normative polytheism, in the specified sense, is a consequence of his view that, in principle, human beings can come into soteriological alignment with the Real via polytheistic religion, not just monotheistic and non-theistic religion. There are, after all, on Hick’s view, peoples who, through their polytheistic mentalities—which involves, among other things, their showing, in ritual and other ways, respect toward what they regard as more than one god and acknowledging them as their lords, perhaps lords of different domains of their lives—relate experientially (unbeknownst to them) to the Real, as evidenced by the moral and spiritual fruits of their lives. Thus, to the extent that their religion is in soteriological alignment with the Real, it is, on Hick’s view, morally good, for them to continue in its polytheistic practices and devotion. As such, on Hick’s view, it is morally right for polytheists to worship their gods. It seems to me, therefore, that Hick is an implicit normative polytheist.

Swinburne, however, is much more explicit about his normative polytheism. For example, he says of the Persons that “each is equally ‘to be worshipped and together glorified,’” quoting from the Nicene Creed (Swinburne 2008, 35). Indeed, he even says that “it [i.e., the composite whole], as well as its individual members, [is] an appropriate object of worship” (Swinburne 1994, 181).

“To worship,” writes Swinburne, “is to show respect towards a person acknowledged as *de facto* and *de jure* lord of all” (Swinburne 1993, 298). As a definition of worship, this strikes me as going a bit too far. After all, one can show the respect definitive of worship to more than one god—but one could not do that if, in order to worship something, one had to acknowledge it as “lord of *all*.” Moreover, Swinburne thinks that it is right to worship four individuals—each of the Persons and the composite which has them as their unique proper parts—which no one could

do if, in order to worship something, one had to acknowledge it as “lord of all.” There can be only one individual that is “lord of all”!

More importantly, each of Swinburne’s Persons satisfies the condition for rightness of worship that he lays down elsewhere. For, according to Swinburne, it is right to worship a person who is “a miniessentially personal ground of being,” where “x is a miniessentially personal ground of being” means, by definition, “x is a God and there is no more basic kind to which x belongs than being a God” (Swinburne 1993, 232, 251, 302; the definition here simplifies Swinburne’s words). As we’ve seen, according to Swinburne, each of the Persons is a “miniessentially personal ground of being,” in this sense. (It’s puzzling to me that Swinburne thinks that it is appropriate to worship the composite object that has the Persons as its unique proper parts. For, as we have seen, by his own lights, it is not a person or a personal being, and, by his own lights, to worship something requires, minimally, that it is a person or personal being or, perhaps, that one take it to be such.)

Furthermore, Swinburne writes:

[P]ersons deserve respect both for what they are and for what they have done. It follows that a person who, by his nature, deserved men’s worship, would deserve it more if he had done certain things for them, in particular he would deserve it if he had done for men any of the things which the great theistic religions claim that he has done—e.g. if in some he came to earth and redeemed men from sin, as Christianity claims. (Swinburne 1993, 302)

That is, to the extent that each of the Persons is involved in the salvation and/or sanctification of sinners, there is additional reason to think that it is right to worship him.

So it is, I submit, that Swinburne is a normative polytheist, in fact quite an explicit one. But are Hick and Swinburne both cultic polytheists? Do each of them actually worship more than one god?

In Hick’s case, I think not. That’s because I doubt that he worshiped even one god. For, although he states, in an obituary that he himself published ten years before his death, that “[h]e practised a form of Buddhist meditation, and was an irregular attender of both URC church services and Quaker meetings for worship,” when he describes what it is for someone who, like himself, a religious pluralist of his own distinctive stripe, to “live consciously within a true myth,” living in that way apparently does not involve worship. For evidence of this fact, see his description of what it is like for him to celebrate Christmas and Easter (Hick 1999, 243–246). At best, Jesus is there regarded as a long-dead Palestinian Jew who, like human beings in general, rotted in his grave, or was eaten by dogs or some such thing—hardly something one can acknowledge as one’s lord. Of course, that’s not to say that Hick can’t, or doesn’t, regard much of Jesus’s moral teaching as exemplary, just as he can, and did, regard much of Ghandi’s moral teaching as exemplary. It’s only to say that, just as he never worshiped Ghandi, he never worshiped Christ, “apart from the interruption of the evangelical years” (Hick 2002, 33). (How two decades count as an “interruption,” I’m not sure, but that’s what he calls them.) Furthermore, outside that “interruption,” there is a notable absence in Hick’s autobiography of any indication of his worshipping anything.

There is good reason, moreover, to think that Hick's pluralism would prevent him from worshipping a god, much less more than one. For on his pluralism, there are exactly three candidates for worship: the Real, *the personae*, and the "intermediate" "spiritual beings." But the Real has no properties in virtue of which it could be acknowledged by anyone to be one's lord. Moreover, unless one is insane, one cannot, on the one hand, consciously acknowledge that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ or the Holy Trinity or what have you is a mental projection of oneself or of one's community while, on the other hand, consciously acknowledge that these projections are one's lord. So, on the assumption that Hick is not insane, I take it that he does not acknowledge any *persona* as his lord. (But sometimes you have to wonder. There is that curious statement in the first-person plural: "In worshipping this divine Thou"—this "mode of human consciousness," this "mental creation," this "projection of the religious imagination"—"we are accordingly relating ourselves to the Real—whether or not we are aware of the complex way in which the relationship is being mediated" [Hick 1989, 273].) That leaves the "intermediate" "spiritual beings," the angels and archangels, or perhaps the heavenly Buddhas. Of course, if Hick does worship Michael, Gabriel, Amida, Vairicon, and the like, then he is a cultic polytheist. But I have no evidence that he does such a thing. Moreover, to the extent that he is somewhat attached to the Christianity of his youth, there would be a strong prohibition lurking in his mentality forbidding idolatry, which is what, on the Christian view of things, worshipping an angel would involve. Finally, I take it that members of the URC and Quakers don't, generally speaking, take themselves to be worshipping angels—if they take themselves to be worshipping anything at all.

I conclude that, although Hick is a descriptive and normative polytheist, the available evidence does not support the claim that he is a cultic polytheist.

Swinburne, on the other hand, is clearly a cultic polytheist. That's because he worships at least two of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—at least that's what the evidence available to me strongly suggests.

For, first of all, I know Richard Swinburne to be a morally upright man, at least as upright as any person I know—and it is my good fortune to know several. I may not agree with his outlook on some matters, but I fully expect that he does what he thinks it is right for him to do, for the most part. And there can be little question, to my mind, that given how central his descriptive and normative polytheism are to his own worldview, he does what he thinks it is right to do in this case: he worships the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and perhaps even the composite object which has them as its unique proper parts.

Second, in an autobiographical essay, Swinburne writes:

Worshipping our Creator is the first human duty—to fail to acknowledge publicly and privately the goodness of God is a very deep failing of insensitivity to ultimacy and ingratitude to our supreme benefactor. And I have been pleased to worship, Sunday by Sunday, for the past nearly sixty years in the way in which God has provided, in the Eucharist, in the Anglican Church and now in the Orthodox Church. (Swinburne 2012, 75–76)

This passage suggests that we might find further evidence for whether Swinburne is a cultic polytheist by examining Anglican and Orthodox liturgies and prayers since those are one of the means by which he worships, Sunday by Sunday, as he puts it.

Note well: the liturgies and prayers themselves are not pieces of philosophical theology, and so we must not import into them Swinburne's descriptive and normative polytheism. But we can use his descriptive and normative polytheism to understand how *he* would regard the words and practice of those liturgies and prayers. Specifically, since he thinks each of the Persons is a distinct god, then when, say, the Father is addressed in a way that indicates worship, or when certain sorts of behavior toward the Father indicate worship, we can infer that when Swinburne speaks and behaves in those ways, he means to worship *that god*, the Father. And when he does the same for the Son, he means to worship *a different god*, by his lights, namely the Son. And likewise for the Holy Spirit and, apparently, the composite object he labels "God" and refers to with the impersonal pronoun "it" (Swinburne 1994, 181).

I will not defend the proposition here, but I submit that if one so much as casually reads the liturgies and prayers of Anglicanism and Orthodoxy from the perspective of Swinburne's descriptive and normative polytheism, one will find ample evidence that Swinburne actually shows respect toward (what he regards as) two or more gods, and he acknowledges each of them as lord. Thus, he worships two or more gods, which is our definition of a cultic polytheist.

Aquinas, like many theists, is a descriptive polytheist, although a normative and cultic monotheist. Unlike Aquinas, Hick and Swinburne are also normative polytheists. Let's dwell on this for a moment. Swinburne and Hick are numbered among the most influential philosophers of religion of the twentieth century (Oppy and Trakakis 2014). And they are descriptive *and* normative polytheists. Who has ever heard of such a thing? I have never heard of it. It's just not said, or read for that matter. Why the hush-hush on this score?

What's more, unlike Aquinas and Hick, Swinburne is also a cultic polytheist, in addition to being a descriptive and normative polytheist. One can't be more of polytheist than that! He is, therefore, a polytheist *par excellence*. This is a strange discovery, by my lights, very strange. That the person who is widely regarded as the most able defender of traditional Christian doctrine in the twentieth century and beyond, and so regarded by many Christians over the past three decades, should turn out to be a *descriptive* polytheist, as many Christians have been and still are, is no surprise. But that he should turn out to be a *normative and cultic* polytheist as well? That is very puzzling to me. How could that happen? How could Christians of the twentieth century buy into such a blatantly polytheistic perspective? This strikes me as a fact worthy of serious sociological exploration.

At any rate, if anyone should ever inquire, "Where can I find a contemporary defense of polytheism?" we now know where to direct them: to the writings of John Hick and, especially, Richard Swinburne.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This publication was supported by a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust. The opinions expressed in it are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton Religion Trust.

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