

Social Trinitarianism and the tripartite God

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Abstract: In this article, I consider the most prominent contemporary attempts to reconcile Social Trinitarianism (ST) with monotheism, arguing that within ST, only mereological (part/whole) accounts can ultimately preserve monotheism. A corollary of this is that every other condition (or set of conditions) adduced in defense of a monotheistic ST really entails tritheism, that is, until a part/whole condition is deployed. Such models, I contend, fail necessarily insofar as they attempt to solve a puzzle that is wholly quantitative in nature with purely qualitative considerations. I conclude by remarking that the Social Trinity model propounded by William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland succeeds where the others fail, though this model is itself by no means impervious to weighty objections.

It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the doctrine of the Trinity has been a perennial stumbling block to thinkers both Christian and non-Christian alike. And while one would hope from Christians increasing unity of opinion on the matter, the oft-divisive nature of philosophical discourse has secured precisely the opposite outcome. In recent analytic discussions on the doctrine, the warring Trinitarian models have been divided into three main camps: Latin Trinitarianism (LT), Social Trinitarianism (ST), and Relative Trinitarianism (RT). This article deals primarily with the second of these, though passing reference will be made to the other two periodically. All things considered, my chief aim in this article is relatively modest: I intend to show that, within ST, only mereological (part/whole) accounts of ST can ultimately preserve monotheism, the view that there is only one 'God, Creator, and Lord of everything else in existence'.¹ A corollary of this is that every other condition (or set of conditions) adduced in defence of a monotheistic ST really entails tritheism, that is, until a part/whole condition is deployed. Put a bit more polemically: those models of ST that fail, either implicitly or explicitly, to conceive of the Trinitarian *hypostases* as 'parts' of God make exactly zero headway in rebutting the charge of polytheism. The aim, then, should be clear.²

We now turn to a brief definition of ST so as to avoid any confusion as the argument wears on.

Social Trinitarianism defined

In recent years, two related narratives have customarily been employed in helping to characterize the various factions within Trinitarian thought. The first is the currently popular story of East vs West. The East in general, and the Cappadocian Fathers in particular, it is said, began their theorizing with the *three-ness* of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are real, distinct *hypostases* or persons, and the task is to delineate in just what sense they together constitute one God.³ This, it is said, fostered ‘social’ analogies of the Trinity such as that of Peter, James, and John constituting one human nature found in the opening lines of Gregory of Nyssa’s *Letter to Ablabius*.⁴ Hence the term ‘Social Trinitarianism’. Meanwhile, the Latin West tended rather to ‘begin from the oneness of God, and [tried] to explain just how one God can be three divine Persons’.⁵ Thus we have ‘Latin Trinitarianism’, neatly opposing its Eastern rival. The second narrative, naturally enough, is that the aforementioned just-so story is little more than a hackneyed misconstrual of the historical data, and owes more to contemporary concerns to validate a certain Trinitarian theory than it does to actual historical fact.⁶ Either way, for our present purposes, we can declare the point moot and still come away with a clarified understanding of the nature of ST.

Unsurprisingly, the lynchpin of any ST theory is its inherently *social* configuration: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are a community of persons in much the same way as are Peter, James, and John. The precise attributes of each Trinitarian person will of course vary from account to account, but all seem to agree that at the very least, all are persons ‘robust enough to constitute a genuine “other”’, and as such ‘are three centres of consciousness, will, and action’.⁷ Or, as Cornelius Plantinga will have it, on ST the Trinity is ‘a society or community of three fully personal and fully divine entities’.⁸ This latter characterization of ST highlights an obvious stipulation for any genuine Trinitarian theory: the *hypostases* must be, in a relevant sense, truly divine. This, at any rate, is a non-negotiable for all Social Trinitarians who weigh their orthodoxy against the Nicene and Athanasian creeds. Very well then. As a working definition, we shall say that ST is a family of Trinitarian views that maintains the conjunction of: (1) each person in the Trinity is his own agent or irreducible centre of consciousness, (2) each person is truly divine, and (3) there is exactly one God who *is*, in some sense, the three Trinitarian persons. This all-too-brief discussion of the contours of ST should suffice as a sort of map for the remainder of this article. Simply put, the challenge for ST is to show how (1) and (2) can be consistent with (3). In time, if my argument is correct, we will see that only the mereological accounts of ST can even possibly do the trick. But prior to consideration of the latter, we must first see why the other proposed models fail, and necessarily so.

Some usual strategies . . .

It is hard to deny that ST *prima facie* looks a lot like polytheism. After all, as Brian Leftow points out, we would rightly be mystified if we were told that Zeus, Hera, and Venus were really just one God by virtue of certain individual attributes or communal properties they share.⁹ Even if we were unable to put a finger on just where the argument went wrong, I suspect that our intuitions alone would strongly militate against such a monotheistic conclusion. Of course the objective of this article is precisely to indicate the reason our intuitions on this matter are so compelling. In so doing, I here discuss six of the most recurrent conditions marshalled in hopes of securing a monotheistic ST. According to many of its proponents, ST counts as monotheism just in case one, several, or all of the following conditions are met:

- (a) The Trinity is an ‘indivisible unity’¹⁰ such that it is metaphysically impossible for any Trinitarian person to exist without the other two.¹¹
- (b) Each person possesses the same divine essence.¹²
- (c) The persons individually, and the Trinity as a whole, exist necessarily.¹³
- (d) The persons possess complete ‘unity of purpose, will and action’¹⁴ such that ‘it is logically impossible that [one] will what is not willed by the others’,¹⁵ or that any action carried out by one be not carried out by the others.¹⁶
- (e) The Trinitarian members exist in *perichoresis*.¹⁷
- (f) The persons are parts of the same whole.¹⁸

In what follows, I will argue that conditions (a)–(e) fail utterly to justify a monotheistic ST before demonstrating why (f) uniquely succeeds.

In *The Christian God*, Swinburne advances a theory of ST which William Alston, in an otherwise sympathetic critique, deems ‘a fairly straightforward form of tritheism’.¹⁹ Perhaps this accusation stems from Swinburne’s glib insistence that the ecumenical councils, in ruling out tritheism, *really* were only ‘denying that there were three, *independent* divine beings, any of which could exist without the other’.²⁰ Or perchance it arises from an assertion he makes in the succeeding paragraph, to the effect that by ‘monotheism’ he just means that the ‘source of all being’ exists as an ‘indivisible unity’ – ostensibly irrespective of the number of members therein.²¹ In any event, we see that Swinburne is here appealing to condition (a) above in order to provide a monotheistic account of ST. But he does not stop here; he proceeds to enlist (b) and (c) as well. On Swinburne’s account, then, the three Trinitarian persons – each omnipotent, omniscient centres of consciousness – are one God because they all exist together of necessity ((a) and (c)) and share the divine essence (b). To my mind, how this is supposed to secure monotheism is baffling. Condition (b) alone clearly entails tritheism: typically when we say that X possesses the nature Y, we mean that X is an individual instantiation of

Y. And if there are three such instantiations of the divine nature – that is, three individual beings possessing all the divine attributes – what we really mean to say, in homespun, is that there are three gods. Neither will postulates (a) or (c) be of any use. For in the present case, they would serve only to emphasize the utter dependence of each person on the others, and further assert that the three could not have failed to exist. How these might do anything to reduce the number of gods from three to one is a complete mystery. It seems, then, that we are stuck with three gods on Swinburne’s view, a supposition he seems strangely happy to endorse.²²

To circumvent this unwelcome conclusion, it would seem that the proponent of ST has only three options. First, he might deny that each person really is a rational, self-conscious agent in his or her own right. That is, he might posit, along with LT defenders, that God is only one centre of consciousness, and that ‘*hypostasis*’ means something other than ‘person’ in the way we use it today.²³ This, of course, would be to abandon ST altogether. So perhaps he would rather drop postulate (b) for the time being and seek another means of safeguarding monotheism. The third option, needless to say, would be to endorse (f) as well. But I am getting ahead of myself; perhaps the second of these options will prove more promising.

What of the ‘perichoretic’ account of ST adopted by Stephen T. Davis? While (a), (b), and (c) certainly do feature, they play a more minor role in his overall Trinitarian model.²⁴ According to Davis, what really indemnifies ST against polytheism is the conjunction of (d) and (e). Interestingly, Davis is himself wary of certain formulations of ST which, in his estimation, push the social analogy too far. A genuine ‘society’ of divine individuals, he agrees, *would* amount to tritheism; rather, ‘God is *like* a community, but because of *perichoresis* cannot be said to *be* a community.’²⁵ He explains:

[*perichoresis*] reaches towards the truth that the core of God’s inner being is the highest degree of self-giving love. The Persons are fully open to each other, their actions *ad extra* are actions in common, they ‘see with each other’s eyes’, the boundaries between them are transparent to each other, and each ontologically embraces the others.²⁶

Presumably, Davis means to argue that there is something about being ‘fully open to each other’ or having all actions *ad extra* in common that precludes the possibility of predicating a literal community of God. This move is supposed to preserve monotheism, but unfortunately he is less than clear on how either of these might be the case. To take the former first, even with *perichoresis*, aren’t there still three different agents, regardless of their unity or ‘openness’ to one another? Davis anticipates this objection, and his response is underwhelming: ‘Yes . . . these are the Persons . . . this is the threeness of the Trinity.’²⁷ But we want to know *why* these different persons, distinct as they are, don’t constitute a genuine community. If it is, as I suspect, because the persons relate *too* well to one another, why not suppose instead that the Trinity is community epitomized? The nub of the issue here is unlikely to be resolved: Davis insists on the irreducible agency of the

three persons, and concedes that even the most complete account of *perichoresis* will fail to obliterate them entirely. But the threeness problem is precisely what *perichoresis* was intended to solve in the first place. The goalposts have moved, but the problem remains: how does *perichoresis* make three gods one?

Keith Yandell, like Davis, seeks to defend a monotheistic ST by appealing to (a), (d), and (e). In his account, however, he lays particular emphasis on the idea that each Trinitarian person has ‘omniscience of awareness’, such that if any ‘mental’ state M exists in one person, the other persons are non-inferentially aware of M as well. In Yandell’s own words, the Trinitarian persons ‘are thought of as bearing “psychological relations” to one another, of being non-inferentially acquainted with the thoughts and feelings, etc., of the others. The divine persons “form a perpetual intercommunication.”’²⁸ This peculiar spin on *perichoresis* thus underscores the complete psychological unity of the different persons. But will this strategy work? I think not, and for the following reason. At the beginning of his article, Yandell tells us that, though he is hesitant to accept fully the ST label, his model nevertheless takes for granted that the persons are three different centres of consciousness.²⁹ But if this is so, what can his psychological *perichoresis* ultimately amount to? It seems to me there are only two possible readings here, both of which rule out an essential part of Yandell’s ST theory. On one, if this ‘omniscience of awareness’ is taken to entail that each person knows non-inferentially *every one* of the others’ mental states, it is hard to see how the three persons retain their individuality. For the Father, in addition to experiencing, say, the love the Son feels towards the Holy Spirit, would also have to know, non-inferentially, ‘*this* is what it is like actually to *be* the Son’, and not just ‘this is what it is like to be the Son *as experienced through* the eyes of the Father’. In other words, if the persons are to remain discrete individuals, there will always be certain psychological states that cannot in principle be experienced by others, solely by virtue of each person being himself: awareness that ‘I alone am *truly* the Son’ is one such state. If, however, Yandell means to argue that his psychological *perichoresis* really does demand that all such states be known by each person, then we no longer have three distinct centres of consciousness, but rather one centre who lives three lives at once, each wholly identical, save, arguably, for subsisting relations among the different life-streams. But this is ‘Leftovian’ LT.³⁰ On the other reading, ‘omniscience of awareness’ more fully unifies the three Trinitarian minds, but still falls far short of genuine oneness. Once again, there are still three, however seemingly united they may appear. It therefore seems that all the attempts so far discussed turn out to be mere subterfuge.

... and why they fail

All this raises an important question: if my objections are on target, what exactly is it about postulates (a)–(e) that renders them so impotent in preserving monotheism? My tentative hypothesis is this: (a)–(e) cannot even in principle

entail monotheism, for the simple reason that employing each of them involves a certain kind of category mistake: we are, as it were, looking for the living among the dead. Or, suppose we have before us a regular polygon (any will do). Suppose further we are tasked with finding a way to make the polygon a true circle under one constraint: if we draw, we must use only straight lines. Perhaps those conscripted for the task are originally presented with a dodecagon, and are thus conned into imagining the task is basically half-accomplished from the start. Whatever the case, we can see how one might proceed: within minutes, we would have before us no longer a dodecagon but a chiliagon (a 1,000-sided polygon), to the naked eye indistinguishable from a true circle. This admittedly tendentious-sounding thought experiment should in any case reify my present contention: the monotheistic 'circle' which is the Social Trinitarian's aim can only ever be *approximated* by multiplying the number of 'oneness factors'³¹ which are themselves 'straight lines'. True, the more postulates one adds, the more a given model of ST might *resemble* monotheism. But at bottom we know that no number of straight lines will ever truly make a circle.

To see why the proponent of ST is fated to this kind of asymptotic fate, it will help to concretize conditions (a)–(e) listed above. Beginning with (a) and (c), would the metaphysically necessary, conjoined existence of three individuals Peter, James, and John give us reason to suppose they made less than three human things? It seems just obvious that the answer is no. One might protest that this is foul play, since, after all, ST does not assert that the three Trinitarian persons are somehow one *person*, but rather one *God*. But this response simply begs the question. What, we might ask, is this 'person'? On ST, as we have seen, it must be at least a *god-like* centre of rational activity, of which it is practically irresistible to predicate divinity.³² But if the Social Trinitarian opts to deny that the person is a god, he must give an account of precisely what it *is*. If it is not a god, or God *simpliciter*, then what else can the divine person be? This goes to show that the question of tritheism then hinges on how we characterize the Trinitarian persons themselves, not on whether they exist of metaphysical necessity. That the persons exist necessarily is a purely *qualitative* consideration, a prerequisite for anything to count as divine in the first place. However, the threeness of the gods, if gods they be, is a question of *quantity*. As a guardian of monotheism, the conjunction of (a) and (c) is thus deeply confused.

In a relatively straightforward manner, (b), too, succumbs to the same critique. As we have said above, the most natural way to interpret the claim that the Trinitarian persons share the divine essence is that each person is an instantiation of the divine nature. In order to moderate this apparently tritheistic reading, Davis prefers to speak of each person '[possessing] the generic divine nature as an attribute',³³ perhaps suggesting that each person in some sense stands 'over and above' the divine nature. If this is so, it still remains opaque just how these three beings are supposed to qualify as one God. But if this is not what he intends – as I suspect to be the case – then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion he really just

means that the persons of the Trinity each instantiate the divine essence as we would commonly take it to mean. They might then be ‘one’ in the same sense that Peter, James, and John are ‘one’ in sharing the human nature. But it does nothing to show they aren’t still three instances of the divine nature, and hence three gods. Once more, this is because possession of the divine essence is something entirely qualitative, and thus cannot possibly impinge on the quantitative, the ‘how many’ question.

By now, I hope, one can clearly see why I have equated conditions (a)–(e) with the straight lines of a polygon that never actually becomes a circle. Each such ‘oneness factor’ serves as exactly that – a ‘oneness factor’ or unifying condition which seeks to secure the tightest of unities between the three discrete Trinitarian persons. But, as Tuggy aptly summarizes Leftow, ‘the issue of monotheism isn’t the issue of *how unified* the divine beings are, but rather of *how many*’.³⁴ Thus, as the postulates are piled on, the three persons resemble more and more a monotheistic God *without ever possessing the necessary conditions to become one*. Hence the *perichoretic* accounts of ST avail themselves of virtually all the postulates (a)–(d), and then add a further unifying factor which, if it doesn’t quite dissolve the intra-Trinitarian distinctions completely, comes very near thereunto, thereby misleading the unwary into believing that by some miraculous theological sleight-of-hand the three have become one and ST finally and decisively vindicated. But there is no good reason to believe this strategy is any better than adding another side to our polygon. For, to repeat, *perichoresis* is an inherently *qualitative* description of the interrelation of the three divine persons, but, confound it, we are concerned with *quantity*. It therefore behoves us to move on from these dead ends and consider, at long last, the promised mereological account of ST.

The tripartite God

I should sincerely hope I have not put the reader on pins and needles in anticipation of an exciting finale; if so, he will be in for something of a disappointment. For I do not mean to expound the following mereological model in any spirit of triumphalism, but only to explain exactly why I think it is the Social Trinitarian’s only hope of attaining an authentic form of monotheism. As I have argued at length, conditions (a)–(e) fail, not just in fact but *in principle*, to do the sort of work the Social Trinitarian has in mind. But (f), the claim that monotheism is preserved just in case the Trinitarian persons are parts of the same whole, I think has the necessary credentials alone, that is, even in the absence of any other ‘oneness factors’, as we have been calling them.

The mereological (or part/whole) account is championed most notably by W. L. Craig and J. P. Moreland. Interestingly, it is also oftentimes suggested or subtly hinted at by writers whose sympathies ultimately lie elsewhere, though it is never developed in full, and certainly never emphatically endorsed.³⁵ In a

nutshell, this model says that ST counts as monotheism because the Trinitarian persons are neither God nor gods, but are rather three component *parts* of the Trinity as a whole, which alone is the true God. On such a scheme, 'the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not *instances* of the divine nature, and that is why there are not three Gods'.³⁶ When asked in what sense the persons are then divine, Craig tells us that 'there are two ways to be divine – by being a case of deity, and by being a Trinity of such cases'.³⁷ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are divine in the same way the skeleton of a cat is feline: not by being properly God, but by being essential parts of God as a whole.³⁸ More tellingly, Craig invites us to imagine God as something akin to Cerberus – the three-headed dog guarding the gates of Hades – as a single soul with three complete sets of rational faculties.³⁹

It is not difficult to see how this qualifies as authentically monotheistic, nor, for that matter, *why*. This view has no trouble rebutting the charge of polytheism, for the simple reason that God is explicitly posited as the lone fusion of his three Trinitarian parts. Analogously, Peter, James, and John remain three very distinct persons. But, on Craig's view, it is the one 'community' the three constitute – and the community alone – that must be one. God, then, is not a person, but the combination of three; rather, God is a single soul with three minds, three separate centres of self-conscious agency. Finally, this mereological account I have briefly outlined succeeds where the other five postulates fail precisely in that it seeks to address directly what I have called the quantitative aspect of the debate. Whereas (a)–(e) focus exclusively on how certain *qualities* might facilitate union among the three persons, (f) alone fixes its gaze on the *quantitative* facets of the tritheistic spectre, and finds a way to 'reduce' the three gods to one.

Again, I do not claim to endorse this Trinitarian theory, and I find it objectionable on several grounds. I state two, notwithstanding my commitment to divine simplicity specifically and classical theism generally. If this theory is true, it seems that, strictly speaking, it is false to say that Jesus, the Father, or the Spirit is God. For only the Trinity is God in the fullest sense. Moreover, Craig's account appears to fly in the face of the better part of the great theological tradition which maintains that 'the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God',⁴⁰ which, as we have seen, is not technically true on this mereological account. All this, however, is an article for another day. Suffice it for the present to say that, despite its obvious appeal, there are considerable difficulties for Craig's brand of Trinitarianism which, I fear, do not admit of an easy solution.

Conclusion

In this article we have explored the ways in which Social Trinitarianism has tried to sidestep the 'polytheism objection'. Unless I have laboured totally in vain, I have shown why the standard appeals necessarily fail, and have presented what appears to be the only remaining live option for the Social Trinitarian who is serious about monotheism. Should this final option prove wanting or inadequate

in any respect, perhaps a fresh consideration of Latin Trinitarianism or Relative Trinitarianism would be in order.⁴¹

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Notes

1. Hasker (2013), 178.
2. I am not here concerned to weigh the merits and demerits of LT or RT, vital a task though it be. The present article is dedicated solely to an exploration of Social Trinitarian strategies for remaining consistently monotheistic.
3. Davis (2006), 63.
4. Gregory of Nyssa (1893). Whether Gregory verily endorsed this analogy is, however, hotly contested.
5. Leftow (2009), 52.
6. Mosser, (2009), 144. See also, for instance, Ayres (2004).
7. Davis, (2006), 65.
8. Plantinga (1989), 27.
9. Leftow (2009), 74.
10. Swinburne (2009), 27.
11. Yandell (2009), 167.
12. Davis (2006), 63.
13. McCall & Rea (2009), 4.
14. Davis (2006), 63.
15. Yandell (2009), 167.
16. Forrest (1998), 287.
17. Davis (2006), 63.

18. Craig (2009), 96.
19. Quoted in Tuggy (2016), sec. 2.3.
20. Swinburne (2009), 27.
21. *Ibid.*
22. As when he says that three divine beings are permissible as long as they are not independent of one another. See n. 20.
23. Holmes (2014), 143.
24. Davis (2006), 70.
25. *Ibid.*, 65.
26. *Ibid.*, 72.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Yandell (2009), 167.
29. *Ibid.*, 155.
30. Hasker (2013), 117.
31. Yandell (2009), 167.
32. As Swinburne and Davis inevitably do.
33. Davis (2006), 63.
34. Tuggy (2016), sec. 2.3. Emphasis mine.
35. So, for instance, Forrest (1998), 283, 288; Swinburne (2009), 31.
36. Craig (2009), 96.
37. *Ibid.*, 94.
38. *Ibid.*, 96.
39. *Ibid.*, 98.
40. Boethius (2004), 8.
41. That is, assuming one is bound to Trinitarianism by dogmatic constraints. A non-Trinitarian option might well be considered, too. I should also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for reading and providing helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.