

## POLYTHEISM AND CHRISTIAN BELIEF

### Abstract

Christian philosophers and theologians have long been concerned with the question of how to reconcile their belief in three fully divine Persons with their commitment to monotheism. The most popular strategy for doing this—the Social Trinitarian strategy—argues that, though the divine Persons are in no sense the *same* God, monotheism is secured by certain relations (e.g. familial relations, dependence relations, or compositional relations) that obtain among them. It is argued that if the Social Trinitarian understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is correct, then Christianity is not interestingly different from the polytheistic Amun-Re theology of Egypt's New Kingdom period. Thus, Social Trinitarianism should be classified as a version of polytheism rather than monotheism.

CHRISTIANS are monotheists; but they believe in three fully divine beings—the three Persons of the Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The tension here is obvious and well known. 'Polytheism' is most commonly defined simply and without qualification as 'belief in more than one god', and a *god* is most commonly understood to be any being that is fully divine. Thus, on the most common way of understanding polytheism, orthodox Christian belief is not monotheistic, but quite clearly polytheistic.

Christian philosophers and theologians have long been concerned with the question of how to reconcile their belief in three divine Persons with their commitment to monotheism. One strategy is to insist that, despite being three in some sense, the divine Persons are somehow also the *same* god.<sup>1</sup> By far the most popular strategy, however, involves *denying* that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same god and then arguing that monotheism is secured by the special relationship that obtains among the divine Persons. Proponents of this latter sort of view are typically labelled 'Social Trinitarians' (because they conceive of the divine Trinity on the analogy of a *society* of human persons).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of this strategy, and references, see Rea (2003) and also Brower and Rea (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Defenders of Social Trinitarianism include Davis (1999, 2003), Forrest (1998), Layman (1988), Plantinga (1986, 1988, 1989), Swinburne (1994), and Williams (1994).

One of the basic ideas that Social Trinitarians share in common, then, is that the Christian commitment to monotheism is *not* a commitment to the claim that there is only one divine being, but rather a commitment to the claim that *all divine beings*—all gods, in the ordinary sense of the term—*stand in a particular relation to one or more of the members of the holy Trinity*.

What sort of relation do Social Trinitarians have in mind? Various suggestions have been offered in the literature. Cornelius Plantinga argues that social Trinitarians may ‘cling to respectability as monotheists’ by noting what he takes to be three perfectly good senses in which there is only one God: (a) there is only one font of divinity (the Father), (b) there is ‘only one generic divinity . . . one Godhood or Godhead or Godness’, and (c) there is ‘only one divine family or monarchy or community, namely, the Holy Trinity itself’ (1989, p. 31). The idea, then, seems to be that monotheism is true, no matter how many gods there are, so long as all gods derive their divinity from one source, or share a single divine nature (as we humans share a single human nature), or are joined together as a divine family, monarchy, or community. Richard Swinburne (1994), on the other hand, focuses on the fact that Yahweh is (as most Social Trinitarians have it) a composite individual or society whose parts or members are bound together by perfect love, harmony of will, and necessary mutual interdependence—that is, none can exist without the others or come into conflict with the others. He then asserts that the fact that the Persons of the Trinity stand in these relations is sufficient to secure monotheism. Thus the implication is that monotheism is nothing more than the view that all of the gods that exist are parts or members of a divine individual or community that does not depend for its existence on anything outside the community, and that all are bound together by perfect love, harmony of will and action, and necessary mutual interdependence.<sup>3</sup> J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig (2003) take a similar approach. On their view, Yahweh is composed of the Persons in a way analogous to the way in which Cerberus, guardian of the underworld in Greek mythology, might be thought to be composed of three individual dogs. Here again the idea seems to be that monotheism is secured by the mere fact that the Persons are parts of a single fully divine being. There are other suggestions in the literature; but they tend to run along very similar lines.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Swinburne (1994), p. 181.

A standard criticism of Social Trinitarianism is that these (re)characterizations of monotheism are implausible. Those lodging the criticism typically do so in one of two ways. Some try to argue that statements in the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds that are commonly taken to rule out polytheism also speak against Social Trinitarianism.<sup>4</sup> But credal exegesis is controversial, especially insofar as there is good reason to think that it is sometimes driven in part by precisely those considerations that fuel the controversy between Social Trinitarianism and its opponents. As a means of settling this latter controversy, therefore, it is hard to see matters of credal exegesis as decisive. Others object to Social Trinitarianism on the grounds that it is not plausible to think that (say) Greek polytheism would become monotheistic if only we added that Zeus and the other gods enjoyed perfect love, harmony, and mutual interdependence with one another.<sup>5</sup> This objection probably *is* decisive against the suggestion that the perfect love, harmony, and mutual interdependence of the Persons is what makes them one rather than three in the sense relevant to monotheism. But it has no implications for the more popular suggestion that Christianity is monotheistic because the Persons are *parts* of the one and only fully divine being. Thus, on the whole, the case currently available in the literature for the conclusion that Social Trinitarianism is polytheistic is, at best, incomplete. It would be nice if a stronger, more compelling case could be made; and I think that one can.

In what follows I will argue that, if the Social Trinitarian understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is correct, then Christianity is not interestingly different from the polytheistic Amun-Re theology of Egypt's 'New Kingdom' period.<sup>6</sup> In short, my argument is this: (a) Christianity as understood by the Social Trinitarian (henceforth ST-Christianity) resembles Amun-Re theology in the relations it takes to obtain among its gods; (b) Amun-Re theology was polytheistic; therefore, (c) ST-Christianity is polytheistic as well. Since the relations mentioned in premiss (a) are both familial and mereological, the conclusion of my argument will apply equally to both versions of Social Trinitarianism described above.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Feser (1997), Clark (1996), and Leftow (1999).

<sup>5</sup> See Leftow (1999) and Merricks (2005).

<sup>6</sup> The New Kingdom period spans Egypt's 18th–20th Dynasties, 1550–1070 BC. For detailed discussion of Egyptian religion during that period, see especially Assmann (1995).

As we shall see, there is some controversy about whether the religion of ancient Egypt (during any dynasty) was genuinely polytheistic. However, as we shall also see, the considerations invoked by those who think that Egyptian religion was monotheistic cut as much against premiss (a) as against premiss (b). Moreover, those who urge a monotheistic interpretation of Egyptian religion seem actually to agree that *if* premiss (a) of my argument is true, premiss (b) would be as well. Thus, I will argue, the light shed on the nature of polytheism by the controversy over the polytheistic character of Egyptian religion in fact strengthens rather than weakens my case for the conclusion that Social Trinitarianism is not a form of monotheism.

### I. NEW KINGDOM AMUN-RE THEOLOGY

Egyptian religion was constantly evolving. New gods were periodically added to the pantheon; attributes of the gods and the relations among gods were continually changing; and several conflicting creation myths were developed with different stories about the origins of the gods and the creation of the world. The present discussion will focus primarily on the Amun-Re theology that dominated Egypt's 18th–20th Dynasties (outside the Amarna period),<sup>7</sup> and on the features of Egypt's supreme god during those dynasties, Amun-Re. Before turning to Amun-Re, however, it will be useful first to say a few words about some of the Egyptian deities that will occupy centre stage in our discussion and about some of the conflicting creation myths that serve as background for it.

Egyptians worshipped at least four different sun gods: Khepri, god of the morning sun; Re, god of the noonday sun; Atum, god of the setting sun; and Aten, the solar disk. All of these gods were recognized at some point or other as self-created creator deities. Ptah and Amun were also among the gods who were sometimes said to be self-created creators. Ptah was primarily associated with arts and crafts and was the chief god of Memphis. Amun was known as the 'hidden god'. He began his

<sup>7</sup> The Amarna period was the period during Egypt's 18th Dynasty when Amenhotep IV came to power, changed his name to 'Akhenaten', moved the nation's capital to Amarna, and sought to promote the worship of Aten to the exclusion of other deities in the pantheon. After Akhenaten's reign, Egyptians quickly sought to undo the religious changes he had tried to institute. For brief and useful discussion, see Baines (1991 and 2000), as well as Assmann (1995).

career as a relatively minor deity—not even the chief deity of Thebes, the city in which he was primarily worshipped. As Thebes rose to power, however, so too did Amun's stature. During Egypt's 12th Dynasty, Amun replaced Montu (a minor sun god) as the chief deity of Thebes.

In the earliest and best-known creation myths, it is usually Atum who is listed as the self-made creator of the world and of the other gods and goddesses.<sup>8</sup> For example, according to the so-called Heliopolitan cosmogony, Atum appeared out of the primeval waters of Nun and brought forth a son and a daughter, Shu and Tefnut. One version of the story has it that Shu and Tefnut are the products of Atum's act of masturbation; another claims that they sprang forth from his eyes and mouth. Shu and Tefnut later gave birth to Geb and Nut, who in turn gave birth to Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. These nine gods and goddesses together constitute the Heliopolitan Ennead; and (importantly, for our purposes), the members of the Ennead comprise a divine family with a single father who is the source of being and of divinity. But it is not always Atum who is taken to be the father of the gods. In some cases, composite deities like Atum-Re, or other solar deities like Re or Khepri, are said to play Atum's role in the basic Heliopolitan story.

But we also find dramatically different stories. For example, the cosmogonic tradition associated with Hermopolis maintains that the creator of the world and of the other gods emerged from an egg brought forth by eight primordial divinities (the Hermopolitan Ogdoad): Amun and Amaunet (hiddenness), Huh and Hauhet (formlessness), Kuk and Kauket (darkness), and Nun and Naunet (the watery abyss). Often Atum is listed as the creator who emerged from the egg; but, again, sometimes other deities are placed in that role. Alternatively, the cosmogonic tradition associated with Memphis lists Ptah as the uncreated creator, bringing forth all of the members of the Heliopolitan Ennead by an act of speech.<sup>9</sup>

As I have already indicated, the god Amun grew in significance as Thebes rose to power at the end of Egypt's 11th Dynasty. Later, he came to be worshipped in conjunction with Re as Amun-Re. Amun-Re was eventually recognized as

<sup>8</sup> For the most part, I have followed rather closely Lesko (1991) in my descriptions of the various creation stories and in my claims about the functions of the gods and goddesses mentioned therein.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lichtheim (1973).

king of the gods and worshipped as the chief national deity. By the time of Egypt's 18th Dynasty, we find a new creation story according to which it is Amun-Re who plays the role of uncreated creator and source of being for the world and all of the gods. The following is a passage from the Khonsu Cosmogony, which expresses a Theban version of the creation story:

Words spoken by Amun-Re, King of the Gods, august being, chief of all the gods, the Great God, lord of the sky, earth, the other world, water and mountains, the august soul of Kem-atef serpent, father of the semen, mother of the egg, who engendered everything living, the hidden soul who made the gods, who formed the land with his semen, father of the fathers of the Ogdoad in the tomb chamber in the necropolis in the place Djeme, who created this place in Nun, overflowing seed the first time . . . Amun in that name of his called Ptah created the egg that came forth from Nun . . . as Ptah of the Heh gods and the Nenu goddesses who created heaven and earth . . .<sup>10</sup>

Here, we see an assimilation of the three basic creation traditions described above (Heliopolitan, Hermopolitan, and Memphite), with Amun-Re being identified in the roles of Atum and Ptah.

The assimilation with Atum, Ptah, and other creator gods, and the elevation of Amun-Re to a position of supreme authority, is explicit elsewhere as well. Thus, for example, in one of the 18th-Dynasty Cairo Hymns to Amun-Re we find the following:

This splendid God, Lord of all gods, Amun-Re  
 Lord of the thrones of the two Lands, Foremost in Ipet-Sut  
 Splendid Soul who came to be in the Beginning,  
 great God who dwells in Truth,  
 Primordial God who engendered the first gods,  
 through whom every god came to be,  
 Most unique of the unique, who made all that is,  
 who began the world back in the First Time;  
 Whose features are hidden, yet frequent his appearances,  
 and there is no knowing how he flowed forth;  
 Gloriously powerful, beloved, majestic,  
 Mighty in his theophanies, magnificent;  
 Powerful Being through whose Being each Being came to be,  
 Who began Becoming with none but himself.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Parker and Lesko (1988), pp. 169–70; quoted in Lesko (1991), pp. 105–6.

<sup>11</sup> Foster (1995), p. 65.

In the Leiden Hymn to Amun Re, we find the following startling passage:

All gods are three:  
 Amun, Re, Ptah, they have no equal.  
 His name is hidden as Amun,  
 he is Re in the face,  
 and his body is Ptah.<sup>12</sup>

But now various questions arise: what is the relation, according to the New Kingdom Amun-Re theology, between deities like Amun-Re, Amun, Re, Atum, and Ptah? Is Amun-Re simply absorbing the functions of the others? Is the religion of Amun-Re, in effect, treating Atum, Ptah, Amun, and Re as alternative manifestations of a single unified being called by the name 'Amun-Re'? Or do at least some of these deities stand in part-whole relations with one another, as the Leiden Hymn seems to suggest?

As it turns out, *syncretism* (the combination of two or more gods into an apparent composite like Amun-Re) was not an uncommon phenomenon in Egyptian religion. Thus we find, in addition to Amun-Re, other combinations like Atum-Re, Amun-Re-Atum, Amun-Re-Montu, Min-Amun, and so on. But Egyptologists are divided on the question of what to make of this phenomenon. The view that seems generally to be taken for granted in semi-popular works on Egyptian mythology as well as in some scholarly works is that the composite names represent the identification of one deity with another, or the absorption of one deity by another, or the unification of powers previously ascribed to separate deities in a single divine reality.<sup>13</sup> According to this view, in coming to worship Amun-Re as a fusion of Amun and Re, and in identifying him in roles played by Amun, Re, Atum, and Ptah, the Egyptians were, in effect, *replacing* these other deities in their pantheon with a single deity who possessed in himself the (salient) attributes of all of them.

Despite its popularity, however, this view is typically rejected by experts on Egyptian syncretism. Instead, scholars like John Baines (1991, 1998, 1999, 2000), Hans Bonnet (1939/1999), Erik Hornung (1982), and Siegfried Morenz (1960) argue that syncretistic combinations represented not the absorption of one god by another or the identification of one god with another,

<sup>12</sup> Baines (2000), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Tobin (2002).

but rather the introduction of a new *composite deity* who had the others as parts.<sup>14</sup> Thus, for example, Erik Hornung, writes:

Quite often not just two but three or four gods form a new unit that is the object of a cult. Besides tripartite forms such as Ptah-Sokar-Osiris there are quadripartite ones like Amon-Re-Harakhte-Atum or Harmachis-Khepry-Re-Atum ... In such cases one is reminded of chemical compounds; like them, syncretistic combinations can be dissolved at any time into their constituent elements, which can also form part of other combinations without sacrificing their individuality.

Is the purpose of these combinations a clever priestly 'equalization' of conflicting religious claims ... ? Must gods be 'equated' with one another until one finishes with a vague, solar-tinged pantheism? Such an interchange of attributes, which leads towards uniformity, is un-Egyptian; if anything it is Hellenistic. The Egyptians place the tensions and contradictions of the world beside one another and then live with them. Amon-Re is not the synthesis of Amon and Re but a new form that exists along with the two older gods.<sup>15</sup>

Hornung goes on to make the point that composite deities like Amun-Re are, like their individual parts, objects of worship and cultic devotion. Thus there is good reason to think that Amun-Re is no less divine than either Amun or Re individually.

In sum, then, it seems not far off the mark to say that, according to the Amun-Re theology of the New Kingdom, one god (Amun-Re) is the creator, the king of heaven, and the font of divinity; there are multiple divine beings but a single divine family; and at least some of the members of the divine family stand in genuine part-whole relations to the creator and ultimate source of being.<sup>16</sup> In these respects, the Amun-Re theology is very much like ST-Christianity (in both its familial and mereological varieties). And yet it seems quite clear that the Amun-Re theology falls squarely in the category of polytheism. Worshipers of Amun-Re *cannot* 'cling to respectability as monotheists' simply by affirming that there is but one divine family, one 'Godhead' or 'Godness', one font of divinity.

<sup>14</sup> Though Bonnet speaks more of one god *inhabiting* another—a locution that, in the relevant contexts, suggests but does not clearly imply part/whole relations.

<sup>15</sup> Hornung (1982), pp. 96–7.

<sup>16</sup> As discussed below, and as indicated above, this interpretation of the Amun-Re theology is not uncontroversial. But what matters most for my analogical argument is simply the fact that this is one *available* interpretation, and if it is correct, then the Amun-Re theology was polytheistic.

Nor would the claim that several gods are parts of Amun-Re and that all others are manifestations either of Amun-Re or his parts (as suggested in the quoted passage from the Leiden Hymn) make the religion monotheistic. But, if that is so, then it seems that ST-Christianity should be viewed as polytheistic as well.

## II. MONOTHEISM OR POLYTHEISM?

Of course, many superficial differences between the Amun-Re theology and ST-Christianity remain. Most notably, there are these three: (a) the Theban creation myth seems to recognize primordial divinities (like Nun) apart from Amun-Re; (b) the divine beings of ST-Christianity, but not (obviously) of Amun-Re theology, stand in relations of necessary mutual interdependence; and (c) the pantheon apparently still includes various divinities (e.g. Osiris, Isis, etc.) who seem not to be among the proper parts of Amun-Re.<sup>17</sup>

But it is not clear that these differences are at all critical to the assessment of the Amun-Re theology as polytheistic. Regarding the first two differences, it would not be much of a departure to suppose that Amun stands with Re and Ptah in relations of necessary mutual interdependence, to suppose that Amun-Re created rather than emerged from Nun, and to posit an 'initial' state exactly parallel to that described in the opening lines of the book of *Genesis*:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (NIV)

As to the third difference, it is actually not at all clear how much of a difference it really amounts to. After all, Christians both early and modern have believed in a vast array of superhuman and supernatural beings in addition to the Persons of the Trinity, most notably angels and demons. By comparison with Egyptian religion, relatively fewer of these sorts of beings are given names

<sup>17</sup> Here is a fourth difference: Amun-Re theology arose out of a polytheistic background, but ST-Christianity did not. I grant that this difference may partly explain some of our initial intuitions about the Amun-Re theology; but, at least in my own case, the intuitions about the polytheistic nature of Amun-Re theology remain strong even after attending to this difference. Moreover, the monotheistic background of ST-Christianity does not make me even the least bit inclined to see it as a version of monotheism. Thus, I am inclined to think that this difference is not a relevant one.

in the books of the Old and New Testaments; but they are there nonetheless. But nobody thinks that the recognition of such beings is a threat to the monotheistic character of Christianity. The reason is that, though the term 'god' in its ordinary sense might reasonably apply to such beings, none of them are taken to be gods on a par with *God*. But, arguably, the same is true of the Amun-Re theology. Granted, there *are* such beings as the members of the Heliopolitan Ennead; but, according to the theology, they are not on a par with their creator, the king of the gods, Amun-Re.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge here that there is controversy about whether and to what extent ancient Egyptian religion was polytheistic. Most commonly, the focus of these discussions is on the Amarna period, during which time Amenhotep IV changed his name to Akhenaton and undertook a campaign to focus all worship on Aten alone. But there is also considerable discussion of the question whether Egyptian religion at times outside the Amarna period might properly be construed as monotheistic. In the opening chapter of *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, Erik Hornung devotes several pages to documenting the widespread nineteenth-century belief that Egyptian religion was, in the words of Champillion-Figeac, 'a pure monotheism, which manifested itself externally by a symbolic polytheism'.<sup>18</sup> And some texts do seem strongly to suggest that sort of view. For example, in one myth we find Re declaring 'At dawn, I am called Khepri; at midday, Re; and in the evening, Atum'.<sup>19</sup> But Hornung also argues that by the early twentieth century, most scholars were inclined to reject the view that Egyptian religion was monotheistic.<sup>20</sup> Still, the controversy remains unsettled.<sup>21</sup>

Obviously I cannot offer here a sustained defence of the claim that Egyptian religion in the period I am considering was polytheistic. But what will be useful for our purposes is a look at what issues the debate turns on. Consider, for example, Hans Bonnet's remarks on the effects of syncretism:

[Syncretism] ... dissolves polytheism. Of course the gods remain; but the individual features that characterize them and distinguish one from

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Tobin (1989), p. 160.

<sup>19</sup> Watterson (1984), p. 61; cf. Spence (1915/1990), p. 259.

<sup>20</sup> See esp. the chapter on syncretism and the concluding chapter.

<sup>21</sup> For illuminating discussion and arguments on both sides, see Allen (1999a and b); Assmann (1995, 2001); Baines (1991, 1998, and 2000); Budge (1934/1988); Cerný (1952), Morenz (1960), Tobin (1989); Wilkinson (2003).

another lose their significance ... The conception of god, which syncretism introduced into local cults ... had everywhere the same basic tenor. Everywhere there prevailed the idea of the primeval deity and cosmic ruler who at the beginning created and who continues to influence and sustain everything. The pious encountered this One, in whom all divine efficacy ultimately resides and is based, in forms that varied from place to place. This experience left the way open for the insight that under all names and manifestations only the one, intrinsically identical reality is apprehended and worshipped.<sup>22</sup>

For Bonnet, the 'dissolution of polytheism' consists precisely in the growing view that the various gods and goddesses of the pantheon are all just manifestations of a *single divine reality*.

Erik Hornung disagrees with Bonnet's claim that syncretism dissolves polytheism. But, notably, he does not take issue with the suggestion that polytheism would dissolve if the various gods and goddesses of the pantheon came to be seen as manifestations of a single divine reality. Rather, he takes issue with the suggestion that syncretistic combinations represent the apprehension of multiple gods as manifestations of a single divine reality. Thus he writes:

It is clear that syncretism does not contain any 'monotheistic tendency', but rather forms a strong counter-current to monotheism—so long as it is kept within bounds. Syncretism softens henotheism, the concentration of worship on a single god, and stops it from turning into monotheism, for ultimately syncretism means that a single god is not isolated from the others: in Amun one apprehends and worships also Re, or in Harmachis other forms of the sun god. In this way, the awareness is sharpened that the divine partner of humanity is not one but many.<sup>23</sup>

Here too, then, the question whether syncretistic combinations reflect a monotheistic trend in Egyptian religion is taken to turn on the question whether Egyptians viewed the 'divine partner of humanity' as one or many. Hornung, recall, is one of the champions of the view that syncretistic combinations involve multiple gods coming to be seen as parts of some further composite deity. But nowhere is this fact taken by him to be a consideration in favour of a monotheistic interpretation of the religion. And, indeed, *none* of the parties to the controversy over whether Egyptian religion is properly construed as monotheistic seems to take this fact as relevant. Consistently what matters

<sup>22</sup> Bonnet (1939/1999), p. 194.

<sup>23</sup> Hornung (1982), p. 98.

most is either the simple question of whether the religion recognizes one or many divine beings, or the somewhat more nuanced question addressed by Bonnet and others of whether the multiple gods of the religion were viewed simply as different manifestations of a single divine reality.<sup>24</sup>

This latter question seems clearly to be the right one to focus on. We have already acknowledged that orthodox Christian belief is straightforwardly committed to the existence of multiple divine beings. Thus simply to define polytheism as ‘belief in multiple divine beings’ is, as Social Trinitarians rightly point out, to fail from the outset to take the Christian claim to monotheism seriously. But, at the same time, we must also take seriously the *normal sense* of the term ‘polytheism’; and any answer to the question of what polytheism is must respect that normal sense. Social Trinitarians claim that their reconstructions of polytheism *do* respect the normal sense of the term. But my point here is that experts on religion with no Trinitarian axes to grind seem not to agree. No participant in the debate about whether Egyptian religion is polytheistic seems to think that monotheism would be secured simply by positing the sorts of relations among gods that Social Trinitarians think obtain between Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the Christian God. Indeed, the Egyptologists who argue most strongly in favor of a *polytheistic* interpretation of Egyptian religion are precisely the ones who interpret the religion in the way that I have summarized at the end of section 1—in the way that makes it most strongly analogous to ST-Christianity.

It might be objected that I have placed undue weight on the opinions of Egyptologists about the nature of polytheism and monotheism. Thus, the Social Trinitarian might simply dig in her heels and insist that Egyptologists are generally using the wrong criteria for determining whether Egyptian religion (in any dynasty) was polytheistic. But I think that this objection would be convincing only if there were a substantial tradition of reflection on the nature of monotheism and polytheism apart from the writings of Social Trinitarians themselves that supported the claim that Egyptologists were using the wrong criteria. Unfortunately, there seems not to be. Indeed, so far as I can tell, what reflection there is on the nature of monotheism and polytheism outside the literature on Social Trinitarianism tends generally to support the thesis that I have been urging—namely,

<sup>24</sup> See especially the references in n. 19.

that mereological relations, familial relations, and relations of necessary mutual interdependence among deities are neither alone nor in conjunction sufficient to secure monotheism.<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that there is anything like consensus on the nature of either monotheism or polytheism. Far from it. But amidst the disagreement there is a remarkable absence of support outside the writings of Social Trinitarians themselves for the conclusion that Social Trinitarianism is monotheistic. And it is largely because of this fact that I take the resemblance between ST-Christianity and Egypt's Amun-Re theology to speak so compellingly in favour of the conclusion that ST-Christianity is not monotheistic.

### III. CONCLUSION

I have argued that, given the interpretation of Egyptian syncretism that is endorsed by scholars like Hornung, Baines, and others, Amun-Re theology is directly analogous to ST-Christianity. Since Amun-Re theology as I have interpreted it is clearly polytheistic, the close analogy with ST-Christianity strongly favours a view according to which ST-Christianity is polytheistic as well. We have also seen that there is controversy about whether Egyptian religion in the New Kingdom and during other periods was polytheistic; but, far from providing resources for a monotheistic understanding of Social Trinitarianism, that controversy seems only to seal the case in favour of the polytheistic nature of ST-Christianity. The reason, again, is that the controversy over the question whether Egyptian religion was polytheistic turns on the question whether the gods of Egypt are best regarded as manifestations of a single divine reality. On the interpretation of the Amun-Re theology that I have favoured, they are not. Likewise, on the Social Trinitarian's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not manifestations of a single

<sup>25</sup> To take just a few examples, see the essays in Athanassiadi and Frede (1999), Davies (1989), and Porter (2000). See also MacDonald (2003), Mavrodes (1995), Miller (1974), Owen (2002), and Smith (2001). I am grateful to Carl Mosser for pressing me to take explicit notice of the great diversity of opinions about the nature of monotheism and polytheism and of the great difficulty involved in providing satisfying characterizations of each. Despite the difficulty and diversity, however, I think that it is possible to discern broad lines of agreement; and, as indicated above, I think that once those lines have been discerned, it is easy to see that Social Trinitarians fall afoul of them.

divine reality either. Thus, again, both theologies seem best understood as polytheistic.

If there were no orthodox understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity according to which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit might meaningfully be said to be manifestations of a single divine reality—if, in other words, there were no viable interpretation of that doctrine according to which they were distinct but still, somehow, *the same God*—then the conclusion of this essay would probably be that Christians should learn to be content regarding themselves as in some sense polytheists. In that event, I would urge that attention be shifted away from defending the Christian claim to monotheism and towards an investigation of the question what *sorts* of polytheism Christianity means to oppose. If, however, there are interpretations of the doctrine of the Trinity which (while avoiding the heresy of modalism) are consistent with monotheism,<sup>26</sup> I say so much the better for those interpretations, and so much the worse for Social Trinitarianism.<sup>27</sup>

MICHAEL C. REA

*University of Notre Dame, Indiana*

mrea@nd.edu

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<sup>26</sup> And I think that there are: see Brower and Rea (2005).

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