Divine Deception and Monotheism

Dale Tuggy
SUNY Fredonia

Abstract: Is "social" trinitarianism a self-consistent variety of monotheism? Following up discussions of deception arguments against "social" trinitarianism, I argue that it is not. I discuss two early modern treatments of divine deception, monotheism, and the Trinity by Stephen Nye and Noah Worcester, and argue with them that the Bible, contrary to "social" Trinity theories, teaches God to be a self. Finally, I compare contemporary "social" theories to the similar but importantly different theory of early modern philosophical theologian Samuel Clarke.

I. Divine Deception?

Consider the following inconsistent triad of claims:

1. The Christian God is a self.
2. The Christian God is the Trinity.
3. The Trinity is not a self.

"Is" here is unequivocal; it means "is identical to," and "is not" means "is not identical to." A "self" is being which is in principle capable of knowledge, intentional action, and interpersonal relationships.[1]

    Any two of these claims entail the falsity of the remaining claim. Which one should a Christian deny? Denying 1 seems to go against the Bible. And probably the greatest living Christian philosopher habitually characterizes theism (i.e. monotheism) as the view that there is "such a person as God." (Plantinga 1984, 253) Denying 2 is going against a longstanding catholic mainstream. Should one then affirm 1 and 2, while denying 3? Denying 3 is affirming that the Trinity is a self. But,

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[1] I avoid the term "person" here because to many it suggests being human (often "person" means "human being"), and more importantly, because "person" is a technical term in all post-fourth-century trinitarian Christian theologies. The concept my term "self" expresses is *not* technical, and is possessed by all mentally functional adult humans. All of us understand both ourselves and our human fellows to be selves. This concept is compatible with, but doesn't imply: being divine, being human, being physical, being non-physical, being essentially a self, existing contingently, existing necessarily, being very similar to a normal human being. Alleged beings such as gods, spirits, ghosts, gnomes, elves, fairies, leprechauns, intelligent space aliens, angels, and demons would all be, if real, selves, just as are human beings.

arguably, the Bible nowhere portrays the Trinity as a self, and if the Trinity in some sense contains three divine selves, then the Trinity would be a fourth divine self – a conclusion trinitarian tradition does not welcome.

Many current "social" Trinity theories (hereafter ST) deny 1. For them, the Christian God is not a self, but rather some sort of group, collective, or complex whole which somewhat resembles a self (Hasker 2013, 19-25, 258; Hasker 2014; Copan 2009, 206; Craig 2006). Thus, in an important recent monograph, analytic theologian William Hasker argues that the "Persons" of the Trinity are indeed selves, or as he puts it,

> The trinitarian Persons are persons... "distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action." ... the Son has experiences the Father does not have, and there are within the Trinity (at least) two distinct subjects of experience...(Hasker 2013, 193)[2]

As to the one God, the Trinity, Hasker concludes that "in virtue of the closeness of their union, the Trinity is at times referred to *as if* it were a single person." (Hasker 2013, 258) Hasker's Trinity is, in the end, an "it," not a "he." For Cornelius Plantinga too, the Trinity is "one thing." (Hasker 2013, 22; Plantinga 1989, 22)

This is surprising, for is not the God of Christians one and the same as the God of the Jews, YHWH, the God of Abraham, proclaimed by the prophets as the one true god? And isn't this YHWH presented in the Bible as a glorious self, as a being with knowledge and plans, capable of commanding, being argued with, loving and being loved?

Further, wouldn't it have been morally wrong for a collective like the one postulated by ST, more properly speaking, for one or more members of it, to intentionally cause the Jews to falsely believe that the unique provident creator, this one called "YHWH" was a god, and not a group, or at any rate, something other than a god (Tuggy 2004)? This is not to accuse God, but rather to object to ST, that it is inconsistent with the implications of the Bible.

II. Refuting the first deception argument?

William Hasker has replied to this deception argument on behalf of ST (Hasker 2009; 2010; 2011). In my view, Hasker fails to undermine either this or the other two deception-based arguments against ST (Tuggy 2011). But his latest reply has the seed of a somewhat plausible reply to the first argument. (Hasker 2011, 117-8) Recall the analogy on which that argument is based. Three men interact with a young girl, sharing the role of her absentee father. That is, they cause her to believe that she's interacting with one man. This *seems* morally wrong, and it seems relevantly like what the members of the Trinity did to ancient Jews, if ST were true. But no *divine* person does what is wrong. Therefore, ST is false (Tuggy 2004, 270-6).

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2 Hasker's quoted phrase is from Cornelius Plantinga.

This argument assumes that the members of the Trinity, as theologians often repeat, cooperate in all they do with respect to the cosmos.[3] If this is right, then assuming ST, the members of the Trinity would have acted so as to cause belief in a fictional self called "YHWH," the god of Israel and the one true god.

A simple and seemingly well-motivated way for ST to get around this problem is denying this assumption of cooperation in all providential matters. If this assumption is false, then the members of the Trinity according to ST are *not* relevantly like the three men in the story. Hence, premise 1 of the first deception argument would be false (Tuggy 2004, 272). One may argue that on ST the "YHWH" with whom the ancient Jews interacted was no fictional character, but was the Father himself. It was *he* who then went by "God", "the one god," "YHWH," "God Almighty," and so on. Later, these names or titles changed their reference, to refer instead to the Trinity. In sum, in ancient times only one divine self was known. And in these latter days, this divine self has introduced us to his two peers. Where, then, is any deception?

Answer: in the famous monotheistic texts of the biblical book of Isaiah, chapters forty to forty-eight. In these, YHWH asserts that (in some sense) he's *the only* god. And as Hasker would (I think correctly) read these texts, the speaker here is neither the Trinity itself, nor the three members of the Trinity speaking together, but rather the Father alone. In Hasker's view, then, the Father has hereby deceived the hearers and early readers of Isaiah, for in Hasker's view, the Father is not, in any sense, the only god – the only divine self – but rather one of exactly three.

But we must read those chapters very carefully, to understand what they are and are not asserting. Here's an analogy. Imagine a land populated by many tribes or clans, each lead by a chief, and constantly vying with one another for land and resources. After a particularly brutal round of multi-sided warfare, the tribes gather for a peace conference. One of them, chief Biggo, came out particularly well in recent fighting. Making a bid to unite the tribes, he addresses the assembly.

> *To whom will you liken me? To whom will you compare me? I am Biggo, and there is no other. Your chiefs are nothing – no, less than nothing. I predicted the outcome in advance. Can they do that? No! I vanquished all who opposed me on the battlefield. Can they do that? No! I am the only chief – there has never been a chief like me, nor will there ever be another. If they think they're really chiefs, let them do likewise. (Don't hold your breath.) I am Biggo; I am your chief, and other than me, you have no protector. Truly, I am the only chief. Who is with me?*

How can chief Biggo assert that he's *the only* chief, in an assembly where he's disrespecting *several other chiefs* to their faces? Is he asserting these other chiefs to be fictional characters? Plainly not. Biggo is asserting his uniqueness. It is understood all around that he too is a chief, and the chief of one particular clan. But

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3 In Latin the slogan is *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*. While Augustine several times says things similar to this, the earliest source of this idea I'm aware of is Gregory of Nyssa (1954). There's also a more specific medieval claim that the Three are a single source of creatures. (Ott 1974, 82-3)

as he ascends to dominance, he is, as it were, taking the word with him. He's using the word in a new way – when he says "chief" he doesn't mean a common clan-leader. In the older, ordinary sense, it is granted all around that there are many chiefs. But by "chief," Biggo means a clan-leader which is so dominant that he will always win against his rivals, and even knows in advance that he'll win. He truly is the only one of those. He and his followers may now use "Chief" or "the Chief" as a quasi-name, a singular referring term which refers only to Biggo. And they may call him "the one true Chief."

Something like this, I suggest, is going on in the famous monotheistic passages of Isaiah. A distracting element there, with no parallel in my story above, is the repeated mockery of idols, idol worship, and idol worshipers (Isaiah 40:18-24; 41:21-9; 42:8-9, 17; 44:9-20; 45:20; 46:1-7; 48:5). The writer deliberately smudges the difference between the idols and the gods they represent, or who were believed to indwell them. This is because idols appear to be stupid and powerless, and pitifully, must be carried around by others. The gods, by association, are thereby mocked as stupid and powerless in comparison to YHWH. The writer, we must assume, knows the difference between an idol and what its worshipers think dwells in it (or is represented by it); this is common knowledge in and around idol-worshiping cultures, both then and now. The idolater never thinks she worships only (or ultimately) a certain piece of wood or stone, etc.

In these chapters, YHWH is repeatedly asserted to be "the only god." On what grounds? That his knowledge, domain, and power have no spatial or temporal limits. This is shown by his foreknowledge, which is based on his being in control of history, and unopposable - at least, when he wants to be (41:21-3; 43:8-13; 44:6-7, 24; 45:20-2; 46:9-11, 48:2-3). Further, YHWH was the only creator of all else (40, 44-6) One might ask: since when were such glorious attributes required for being a god? But that's the point. He's taking the word with him.

All the prophet's points here could be made by introducing a new, similar word. Let a "god" be the sort of being who populates the mythology of polytheistic cultures, past and present: a self with supernatural powers, who is significantly greater than any normal human being.[4] Let a "GOD" be a god with the greatest compossible sorts of knowledge, moral goodness, and power, who was the sole creator of all else. Any GOD is by definition a god. But at most one god can also be a GOD. There could be at most one GOD, because there could only be one creator of all else. (If there were two such beings, they would be the creators of each other, but this is impossible.)

By means of the prophet here, YHWH is asserting that he's the only GOD. It is assumed by all that he's a certain god. It is also assumed by all that there are many other gods. But none is a peer of YHWH – none of these others is a GOD. Of course, he's not, as in the Chief Biggo story, assuming control for the first time. To the contrary, he's always been the only GOD, and always will be. He's no deified hero or offspring of any previous god, and he could never be demoted; he never began to be,

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4 On other meanings of the Greek *theos*, see Mosser (2011). I'm attempting here to analyze the generic, gender neutral concept of a god, not the concept of a male god, as opposed to a goddess. Compare: the now disfavored usage of "man" to mean a (gender-neutral) human being.

nor will he ever cease being a GOD (40:28, 41:4, 43:10, 44:6).

This is the meaning of "monotheism" - belief in exactly one GOD. It is consistent with "polytheism," if that means belief in the existence of two or more gods. There is a constant pressure here on theorists to confuse belief and practice. True, most people typically called "polytheists" not only believe in, but also worship many gods. But there is no contradiction in the notion of polytheist (who believes in the existence of many gods) who worships one or none, just as there is no contradiction in being a monotheist – a believer in one GOD, who doesn't worship any god (not even the one GOD, God). Thus, we need to separate the question of how many gods a person believes in, from the question of how many she worships.

Defined in the above way, it has always been the case that most Christians are monotheistic polytheists (or polytheistic monotheists) – believers in one GOD and many gods – in this case, angels. It is true that most don't usually speak of many "gods" - for YHWH has long ago taken the word with him, and in Christian contexts, the word "god" *usually* means the one GOD, and not merely a god. Although the old biblical usage of describing these other mighty beings (and people who resemble them) as "gods" (Hebrew: *elohim*) remains (John 10:22-42), in these latter days the gods are usually called, if they are on God's side, "angels," and if they are rebels against God, "demons."[5]

Hasker makes the common mistake of thinking that these texts outright deny the existence of any gods other than YHWH. Addressing the idols and/or the gods they represent, the prophet sneers, "You, indeed, are nothing and your work is nothing at all; whoever chooses you is an abomination." (Isaiah 41:24)[6] But we should note that the same rhetoric is applied to other entities as well: "All the nations are as nothing before him [YHWH]; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness." (40:17) And "All who make idols are nothing…". (44:9) These texts don't deny the existence of the nations or of people who manufacture idols. Rather, they are "nothing," as it were, in comparison to YHWH. They are devoid of value. So too, the gods of the nations. They are assumed to be real, and to be subject to the will of YHWH. Of course, from that fact that the gods of the nations are real, one should not infer that they should be worshiped, or that the myths about them are true, or that they are comparable to YHWH, other than by simply being gods (as defined above). Prudentially, it would be foolish not to abandon worship of these lesser gods in order to exclusively worship the one who truly says "there is no one who can deliver from my hand," and "To me every knee shall bow," and who refuses to share his glory with idols or what they stand for (Is 43:13, 45:23, 42:8). Resistance is futile! And the prophet lays down another basis for worship of YHWH, one which is moral rather than prudential: that he's the one creator, generous and gracious. He forgives sins for his "own sake," and invites all to "Turn to me and be saved." (Is 43:25, 45:22) He *deserves* worship.

Hasker is correct that the speaker here, YHWH, is supposed to be, according to all the New Testament writers, one and the same as the Father of Jesus, "the one

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[5] Also relevant are theological traditions of understanding Christian salvation as the deification of the saved, that is, as the transformation of humans into gods, though it is not often put that way.

[6] All Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

true God" (i.e. the only GOD).[7] The problem is that given Hasker's "social Trinity" theory, it is false that there is exactly one GOD. And the problem is not only Hasker's; it dooms any ST theory.[8] As Christian, such theories assert the existence of exactly one GOD. But as trinitarian, they assert the ontological equality (and in particular the equal divinity) of the three "persons" of the Trinity. And as "social" trinitarians, they take these "persons" to be selves – three gods, to be sure, but also three GODS. But this, properly understood, is self-refuting – for it is logically impossible for there to be more than one GOD. Also, it is logically impossible for there to eternally be exactly one of any kind, and exactly three of that same kind. Such theories also contradict the Bible, which asserts the uniqueness of YHWH, the one Jesus calls his Father, for he is, according to ST, but one of three equally divine peers, one of three GODS. For the ST proponent then, the god speaking in Isaiah claims, falsely, to be the only GOD. (This is false, because the Father is not the only GOD; the Son too is as much a GOD, and so is the Spirit.)

   Hasker tries to head off deception concerns by appealing to context. He tells us that

> In those passages Yahweh is taking the measure of his rivals, the gods
> and goddesses of the ancient Near East. He denigrates them, asserts
> his superiority over them, and ultimately denies their real existence.
> (Hasker 2011, 117)

Hasker's point is that YHWH *isn't* claiming to be the only god (full stop) but merely the only real god *out of a certain alleged bunch of gods* – the set of YHWH plus Asherah, Baal, Bel, Nebo, and so on. That is, the prophet here is not asserting monotheism, but is only saying that out of a certain group of alleged gods, only one of those is truly a god. Hasker continues,

> But no Trinitarian supposes that the Son and Spirit are rivals, even
> potential rivals, of God the Father. ...It is a long reach exegetically to
> read Isaiah as inveighing against the doctrine of the Trinity. (*Ibid*.)

In reply, it's a red herring that the members of the Trinity aren't rivals or even potential rivals. Whether or not they would be *rival* gods, the worry is whether the Son and Spirit would be *additional* GODS. Nor have I painted Isaiah as an anti-trinitarian.

   But Hasker has an excellent point: normally, when we say that something is the only F, we're assuming a restriction to some relevant domain, some domain narrower than all things whatever. If a child in a classroom asserts that "I'm the only Sally Smith," she doesn't mean that she's the only person named "Sally Smith" in all of time and space, but rather, that she's the only person so named *in that classroom*, or in that school, or family, etc.

   However, some of the language here seems designed to break the reader's mind out of any limited domain of alleged gods. YHWH's domain is asserted to be

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7 See, e.g. John 17:1-3. On this and some related passages, see Tuggy 2012.
8 For a more thorough discussion of Hasker's ST and related theories, see Tuggy 2013a.

unlimited in time and space, and unchallengeable, and it would seem, unique. YHWH is the only creator of the cosmos (Isaiah 44:24; 45:12,18), the provident overseer - and so the only Savior (44:7-8, 25-8; 45:7, 21), the ultimate source of grace (44:22; 45:8, 17, 24), the only GOD in past, present or future (43:10), who shall one day receive universal allegiance (45:6, 20-3). He exclaims: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other." (Isaiah 45:22) This seems addressed to all humans who may receive the message, then and forever after, and not merely to those interested in the evaluating the set of alleged gods including Bel, YHWH, Nebo, and so on. It is no accident that nearly all readers have taken these texts to assert monotheism, and not merely monolatry or henotheism (e.g. Kaminsky and Stewart 2006, 141-3, 155, 162-3).

This monotheism implies Hasker's more limited point that the group of YHWH plus all the ancient near eastern gods contains just one *real* GOD, YHWH. Thus, Isaiah's god is *both* asserting monotheism and asserting his superiority to those would-be rivals. I conclude that for biblical reasons, Hasker's reply to the first deception argument can't be sustained.

III. Why so late?

Hasker asks "why 'the problem of divine deception' in the doctrine of the Trinity has not surfaced earlier in the history of the Church's reflection on this question." (Hasker 2009, 49) Partisans of certain "Latin" views and those sympathetic to fourth century "pro-Nicene" views would answer that virtually no one in the history of the Church has ever held anything like ST as here defined, at least, virtually no important theorist in mainstream catholic Christianity.[9]

This reply is incorrect. There has long been a great divide in the trinitarian camp, often obscured by talk of "the" doctrine, between those who think the "persons" of the Trinity to be selves, and those who think them to be, in some sense, ways the one divine self is. Further, I'm unsure whether some trinitarians, particularly ones I've elsewhere described as negative mysterians, hold the Trinity to involve any selves at all. (Tuggy 2013b) These divisions have been repeatedly pointed out by unitarians seeking to divide and refute the trinitarian camp; they have cataloged the various doctrines which have been put forward as *the* correct interpretation of the orthodox trinitarian formulas, and have pointed out that on some, the "persons" are so many selves, and on others, they are not (James 1780; Nye 1693; Wilson 1864, 257-314). The mere fact that some have rejected Trinity theories as tritheism shows that Hasker is right that there is an important strand in the tradition of holding the "persons" to literally be persons (not humans, but selves).

Deception concerns ought not be dismissed as mere unitarian, anti-

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9 Hasker disagrees, arguing at length that famous "pro-Nicene" theologians such as Augustine and the Cappadocians should be understood as "pro-Social," really if not fully committed to ST. (2013, 19-49) For a contrary view, see Holmes 2012.

trinitarian, or anti-Christian mischief, because they can be raised equally well by a trinitarian who holds a no-self or a one-self Trinity theory. Among the one-self trinitarians would be some currently flying the "Latin" banner, such as Brian Leftow. Another, larger group of one-self trinitarians would be evangelicals such as apologist Abdul Saleeb, who tells us that

> The doctrine of the Trinity... is the feeble human attempt of Christians to explain how... they have encountered the one true God as their loving Creator and Father, as the Redeemer in Jesus Christ and as their Sanctifier in the presence of the Holy Spirit. (2004, 358)[10]

Evidently, *this* triune God *is* a self, one who relates to us in those three ways; Saleeb is no ST theorist. This is slightly obscured, I think, when Saleeb denies that Jesus and God are numerically the same being, which one would think precludes their being the same self (Saleeb 2004, 365). But if I understand Saleeb, his view is that God is a self, but the "persons" of the Trinity are what we could call modes of that self, or ways that self is. Thus, just as angry-Sally is not happy-Sally (these items, whatever their ontological category, qualitatively differ), so angry-Sally is not Sally (the fact that Sally exists and is angry contains more than the fact that Sally exists). Thus, as Saleeb thinks about it, while Jesus is not God - Jesus is the fact of God redeeming, which differs from the bare fact of God existing – Jesus is the same self as God. In other words, those two facts have but one self between them, God.[11] Whatever problems this may face, it is compatible with monotheism and self-consistent, and thus it is no surprise that Saleeb stands in a long line of Christians explaining the Trinity to Muslims as a one-self theory.[12]

But back to Hasker's question, my answer is: it depends. First, in many circles of Christian intellectuals – among these, the "pro-Nicenes" of the fourth century and the mainstream of twentieth century catholic theology, including prominent theologians such as Barth and Rahner - it has been taken for granted that the Trinity is *not* much like a group of three selves.[13] Thus, no story like the one in the first deception argument occurred to them.

Second, there has been, since at least the late second century, an alarming lack of sympathy for the Jews among many catholic (i.e. Catholic, Orthodox,

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10 "Abdul Saleeb" is a pseudonym, adopted for the safety of this author, a former Muslim. Compare with his comment in an online article/letter: "The doctrine of the Trinity is a theological construction that tries to explain and come to grips with the mysterious way that God has revealed himself in history and among his people not only as the Creator but also as Redeemer in the person and work of Jesus Christ and as the Sanctifier of His people by the presence of his Holy Spirit in the Church." ("Trinity: A   Response   to   a   Muslim's   Challenge,"   http://www.answering-islam.org/Trinity/tresp.html.) On the triune God as one self, compare Holmes 2012, 119-20, 194-5, 199-200.

11 This reading comports with Saleeb's earlier, co-authored treatment (Geisler and Saleeb 2002, 273-6).

12 See the various sources cited in the supplement on "Judaic and Islamic Objections" in Tuggy 2013b.

13 On Barth and Rahner see Moltmann 1993, 137-48.

Protestant) intellectuals. To be blunt, the attitude has too often been: who cares what the wicked Jews thought about God? Thus, there has often been no concern about their having been deceived. This contempt, thankfully, has not been universal among Christians, as we'll shortly see.

Third, some modern-era unitarians (Christians who hold the one God to be numerically identical to the Father only) *have* raised deception worries. I'll discuss one here, and another in section V below. The first example comes from Anglican minister Stephen Nye, in the heat of a late seventeenth century controversy in London:

> When God says in the first commandment, "Thou shalt have no other God but Me," he speaks to all men, to the illiterate, to the sincere, and even to children, as well as to those who are practiced in the arts of deceiving and being deceived by a disguise of words, and by captious forms of speaking. If his meaning therefore was, there is an Almighty Father, who is God; he hath an Almighty Son, who also is God; and besides these, there is an Almighty Spirit distinct from the other two, and a God no less than either of them; if (I say) this was his meaning, would he have couched it in such words as these, "There is none other God but one?" or in these, "There is one God, and there is none other but He"? Or would he have said, "Thou shalt have no other God but *me*?" Could the wisdom of God itself find no other words but these, which are so directly contrary to such a meaning, by which to express himself; and that too to those who were utterly incapable of apprehending such a sense in them?
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> ...Our opposers [i.e. the various sorts of trinitarians] themselves grant, that when the Israelites first heard this commandment, they understood it, and could *then* no otherways understand it, as the Unitarians now do, namely thus, "Thou shalt never own any other person as God, but only me who now speak to thee." God Almighty suffered this sense of his words to pass current for upwards of 1500 years. But *then*, say they, he sent our savior and his apostles to give another sense of them; nay, a *contrary* sense. ...But I verily think, had the apostles indeed pretended *this* to be the interpretation of the first commandment, they would not have found a single person who would have believed or received them. ...It would have been told them by all their hearers, that the sense of the words is *unalterable*; and that even the greatest *miracles* cannot authorize an interpretation evidently contrary to the text. (Nye 1693, 4-5)[14]

Thus, the mainstream tradition *has* been confronted with this issue, but has since conveniently forgotten it. And as far as I can see no good answer has been given.

Many have rested content with the gesture at an answer in Gregory

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[14] I have modernized Nye's spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and italics. For an argument similar to Nye's, see James 1780, 57-8.

Nazianzus's "Fifth Theological Oration." Here Gregory asserts that the members of the Trinity had to be revealed just as they were – anything else would have been, for some reason, too fast or too slow for us. (2002, 137-8 [sections 26-7])

Some readers have supposed, based partly on things Gregory says there, that the reason for withholding the (alleged) fact of "God" being a closely united group of three gods is that the Jews, being so prone to polytheism, would have misunderstood the Three to be three *separate or disunited or rival* gods.[15] This suggestion, I think, is undone by Stephen Nye:

> Cardinal Bellarmine... [argues that] the Israelites having long lived in a nation where they owned and worshiped *many* gods, if they had been told of three divine persons (or of God the Father, God his Son, and God the Holy Ghost) they would most certainly have apprehended them to be three gods. This... is the reason why the doctrine of the Trinity was reserved to the times of the New Testament.
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> [Nye replies] ...How came it to be more safe or seasonable, or less liable to misinterpretation, to entrust Christians in the belief of *three* divine persons, than it would have been to teach the same belief to the Jews? ...was not the whole Christian church taken from among such nations, who *all* worshiped and owned *many* gods? The reason alleged by the Cardinal, if it were good for anything, must also have prevented the revelation of that (pretended) mystery to any of the Christian nations... (Nye 1693, 5-6)[16]

IV. Progressive Revelation and Christian Scholarship

None of this involves rejecting all appeals to progressive revelation, for not all progressive revelation involves having actively caused what looks like a wrongful deception. Nor do all suggested cases involve a later revelation *contradicting* what was earlier revealed (be it implicitly or explicitly). The term is usually understood as ruling out such contradiction; as evangelical theologian Millard Erickson explains, "The idea... is that later revelation builds upon earlier revelation. It is complementary to it, not contradictory." (1985, 197) Given this, ST theorists must deny that the Old Testament reveals God to be a self. This seems a hopeless case, since the Old Testament always portrays YHWH as a self – a super and unique one to be sure, and not limited in the way human selves are, but a self nonetheless.[17]

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15 Gregory says, "[Jesus said in John 14:16-7] "I will ask the Father... and He will send you another Comforter, the Spirit of Truth" – intending that the Spirit should not appear to be a rival God and spokesman of another power." (2002, 137-8) This suggests that Gregory supposes that too fast a revelation would have resulted in our believing polytheism, or the wrong sort of polytheism.

16 I have modernized Nye's spelling, punctuation, capitalization and italics.

17 It has been argued that some anomalous plurals (the Hebrew *elohim* is plural in form, and God occasionally speaks as "We") hint at something like ST, but the case for this is very weak – see section V below.

This will also cause the ST theorist trouble in other areas. Some of the philosophical arguments used to support belief in God specifically support belief in a great self as the unique source of the cosmos. Thus, J.P. Moreland, driving home the final step of a *kalam* cosmological argument:

> The only way for the first event to arise spontaneously from a timeless, changeless, spaceless state of affairs, and at the same time be caused, is this – the event resulted from the free act of a person or agent... the first event came about when an agent freely chose to bring it about... (1987, 42)[18]

Only a self freely chooses.

Again, it is a common theme of Christian apologetics to contrast the Christian conception of God with non-Christian conceptions of some Ultimate (which may be called "God'). Thus, philosopher Paul Copan:

> ...various Greek philosophers tried to improve on the concept "God"... these... tended to be *impersonal, lifeless, inactive,* and *abstract.* ...[They] were far removed from the biblical understanding of God... a far cry from the *inherently personal, vibrant, willing, acting,* and *history-engaging* triune God. (Copan 2007, 28)

Here Copan uses the unclear term "personal". (Does this imply *being* a self, or only being *somehow related to* one or more selves?) But his point seems to require the falsity of ST; a collective of three divine persons, it seems, is *not* literally alive, nor does it literally know or intentionally act. Hence, the Christian God, which does those things, is no mere collective of selves.

Systematic theologians insist on similar points. After mentioning impersonal ultimate beings posited by some Eastern religions, Millard Erickson observes that

> The biblical view is quite different. Here God is personal. He is an individual being, with self-consciousness and will, capable of feeling, choosing, and having a reciprocal relationship with other personal and social beings. ...God has a name... [which is] used to address him. ...He is depicted... as knowing and communing with human persons. ...he is a person who related [sic] to persons as such. ...he knows, he feels, he wills, he acts. (1985, 269-70)[19]

Erickson here is simply describing the character every Bible reader comes to know. He is a self, not the "one God" of ST, which is merely similar to a self, being a collection or composite of selves, and so neither a god nor a GOD.

V. Pronouns: Worcester vs. Jones

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18 Compare: Moreland and Craig 2003, 480; Geivett 2004, 74-5; Craig 2004, 5-6.
19 Compare: Grudem 1994, 152, 167.

But, one may object:

> *Doesn't the Old Testament* hint *that God is more than one person? Whatever the Jews may have wrongly inferred from divine revelation, the fact is that this revelation contained clear hints of multiple selves within in God, later revealed not to be a self but rather a perfect community of three perfect selves. Specifically, God occasionally refers to himself using "we" and "us," and the Hebrew word we translate as "God" is plural. Ought not the Jews have taken note of these facts, and refrained from jumping to the conclusion that God is a self?*

One can reply, I think, on two levels. First, there's grammar. Yes, *elohim* is plural in form, but it is *normally* singular in meaning (compare: the English word "pants"), and so is usually translated as "God" or "god" rather than "gods." Still, one might suspect this ambiguity of being a hint or clue. About the plural pronouns,[20] it is well known that these may have been meant as either a plural of majesty, or as God referring to his heavenly council (of gods/angels). Still, a determined hint-hunter may see these as hinting at the multiple divine selves within God. While I have nothing to add to these textual-grammatical debates, I can add a consideration of such texts as evidence.

For this, I turn to an insightful discussion by early modern philosophical theologian Noah Worcester (1854), responding to the work of popular trinitarian apologist William Jones (1801).[21]

> Let it now be supposed, that instead of *five* or *six* plural *pronouns* of doubtful relation, [Jones] had found *five* or *six thousand* plural *pronouns* which *obviously* stand as *substitutes* for the names of *God, Lord, or Jehovah*; would not his argument have been at least a thousand times more forcible than it is on the ground that he has produced? Yea, let it be supposed that... he had found in the Bible only *five* or *six pronouns* for God of the *singular number*, and those, too, of doubtful import; and that, on the other hand, he had found ALL the pronouns for God, of the *plural number*, excepting the five or six doubtful instances; would not his argument have been invincible in favor of a plurality of Persons in the Godhead? ...such an argument would have more weight in my mind that all the arguments I have seen or heard in favor of that doctrine. (Worcester 1854, 30-1)[22]

If in that hypothetical scenario you agree that Jews could only have reasonably

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20 Most famously: "...God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.'" (Gen 1:26)

21 For an earlier unitarian who cites the Bible's use of pronouns, see Haynes 1797, ch. 6.

22 All quotations from Worcester are unmodified, and so feature his original capitalization and italics.

believed in multiple selves within God, then in the actual situation, you must agree that they can only have reasonably believed that God is a self. For, those six or so anomalies aside,

> When God speaks of himself in the first Person, he uses the pronouns *I, My* or *Mine, Me*. When he is addressed in the second Person, the pronouns are *Thou, Thy* or *Thine, Thee*. When he is spoken of in the third Person, the pronouns are *He, His, Him*. ...It may be added, that *Myself, Thyself,* and *Himself*, are also used as pronouns for God. (31)

Worcester goes on to drive his point home, considering God's self-revelation in giving commands, how God is uniformly addressed as a self in prayer, and so on.

Jones had argued that the noun "God" should be seen as having "plural comprehension" - i.e. is what we now call a "collective noun." (Jones 1801, 87-109; Worcester 1854, 28.) But again, natural language grammar undermines Jones's argument. Again, Worcester:

> Speaking of a council, we either say, *It* adjourned, or *They* adjourned –
> Of a senate, *It* passed an act, or *They* passed an act. We do not say of a council, *He* adjourned; nor of a senate, *He* passed an act – Nor does a senate or a council, speaking in the first person, say *I* will. (34)

Thus on Jones's theory, we'd expect the Genesis passage to read,

> "And *the God* said, Let *us* make in *our* image, and after *our* likeness. So *the God* created man in *their* own image, and after *their* likeness; in the image of *the God* created *they* him." (35)

And the first commandment should read,

> "Thou shalt have no other gods before" US. (*Ibid*.)

And "God" would have declared his own uniqueness thusly,

> WE ARE THE GOD, and there is none like US.... "There is but one God, and there is none other but THEM," or but IT. (*Ibid*.)

In sum

> If the doctrine of three self-existent Persons in one God were true, and of such infinite importance as seems to be supposed by our good brethren, how can it be accounted for, that God himself, and all the sacred writers, should so uniformly adopt such forms of speech as would *naturally* lead to the conclusion, that the one self-existent God is but one self-existent Person. ...Had it been a truth that there is but ONE God, and that this term is of "plural comprehension," comprising

three co-eternal Persons, it would certainly have been a very easy thing with God to have adopted language conformable to both parts of the proposition. The suggestion of Mr. Jones amounts to nothing less than this, that God made use of language which was calculated to *lead us into one error*, lest we should *fall into another*. (36-7)

Thus again, we see concerns about divine deception, raised by a fairly well known early American (at various times: soldier, Congregationalist minister, legislator, journal editor), in a book published in a major city, that went through five editions over a course of forty-four years. The mainstream theological tradition, it seems, has conveniently forgotten these arguments.[23]

Worcester continues, asking a question which every ST theorist should seriously weigh - simply substitute "ST" for "Athanasian":

> Would it not, sir, shock the feelings of a Christian audience, if a minister, in his prayers and preaching, should conform his language to the Athanasian theory, and the established rules of grammar? But if the theory be true, ought you not to adapt your current language, in prayer and preaching, to your theory? You cannot be insensible, that to use pronouns and verbs of the singular number, in relation to God, has a direct tendency to impress the minds of your hearers with the idea that God is but one Person. And if you believe the contrary, ought you not to avoid such forms of speech as naturally tend to mislead the minds of your hearers? (Worcester 1854, 37)

Worcester points out a kind of intellectual bad faith which is distressingly common among believers in a "social" Trinity. They know their theory to be controversial, so they habitually hide it, by almost always speaking of the Christian God as if it were a self. Not only for the peoples of the ancient near east, but for most of our contemporaries, a god or "God" *is* a self. This is why when "God" appears in movies, he's portrayed as a human self, just as with the gods of ancient Greece. (Compare, e.g. the movies Bruce Almighty and Clash of the Titans.) And this is why people assume it makes sense to complain to God, to get mad at him, or to love him. To be clear, ST theorists should shout it from the rooftops that in their view the one "God" isn't literally a god. They should also plainly say what sort of non-self they take "God" to be, and consistently adjust their pronouns accordingly.

Given the state of the evidence and the newness of ST, the burden is on ST proponents to say when, how, and why the ancient Jewish and Christian doctrine of one GOD was replaced by another, so that "God" was no longer a self, but only something somewhat self-like. They must concede that in the Bible, a "god" is nearly

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23 Unitarian Christians continue to press these points. Thus, Anthony Buzzard: "What if you picked up a book in which the father of a family was described by the singular pronouns 'I,' 'me,' and 'him' hundreds of times? If that same father then said, 'Let us take a vacation' would you immediately think that the father was really *more than one person*? Or would you think that the father was inviting others to join him, a single individual, in an activity?" (Buzzard 2007, 350)

always a self, and "God" always refers to something which *in their view* is a self (i.e. to the Father, to the Son, or to the Holy Spirit).[24] Never in the Bible does "God" refer to some collective or group of divine persons, or to something like a "soul" which underlies or supports three selves, or to something which isn't a self but which consists of or contains divine selves.

New Testament god-talk shows that those writers assume that the Father is one and the same as the one GOD YHWH (Tuggy 2004; 2012). Since the Father is a self, so is YHWH, the one GOD. In sum, the foundational sources of the Christian tradition push one firmly towards the view that God is a self, and this explains the constant pressure on trinitarians to understand that doctrine as teaching two or three of the "Persons" to be mere modes of a self (either the Father and/or God), ways a self is, leaving "the one true God" to be just one true self.

Longstanding traditions of Christian philosophy also assume God to be a self. Consider the concept of a greatest possible being, the foundation of Anselmian reasoning about God, "perfect being theology."[25] This concept is understood by friend and foe alike to imply being a self, for among the great-making features a perfect being must have are the greatest compossible sorts of knowledge, power to intentionally act, and moral goodness.[26] Again, both friends and foes of monotheism discuss whether or not God, were he to exist, would be to blame for evil. And whether he's convicted or exonerated, as it were, he's supposed to be a self, capable in principle of being praiseworthy or blameworthy for his actions.

VI. ST, Monotheism, and Samuel Clarke

Christian theology always asserts monotheism. Is it then self-refuting, asserting that there's exactly one perfect self, and also that there's more than one? Not necessarily, because Christian theology isn't obviously committed to ST. Many professed trinitarians hold a one-self view of the Trinity, while others refuse to say whether the "Persons" in the Trinity are selves or not. There are weighty reasons, in my view, for a thinking Christian to avoid both alternates, though we can't pursue the matters here.

What makes ST theorists different from other trinitarians? I suggest they differ mainly in (1) their clear assertion that the "Persons" of the Trinity are literally selves, (2) their general clarity (unwillingness to obfuscate), and (3) their clear assertion of the non-identity (numerical distinctness) of the three. A major downside is that by positing three perfect selves, they imply the falsity of monotheism, even while intending to uphold it.

But there is a way to consistently maintain monotheism while upholding the

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24 Rare exceptions include the Hebrew *elohim* used for idols rather than the beings in or represented by them, as in Exodus 32:1, and a few metaphorical uses of *elohim* or *theos*, such as Philippians 3:13, "their god is their belly."

25 This tradition actually far pre-dates Anselm (Leftow 2011).

26 I rebut arguments that divine perfection somehow requires multiple persons, in other words, that it is impossible for there to be exactly one divine self, in Tuggy 2014.

three commitments just listed, along with the view that all three of those selves are literally divine. This sort of view was common among catholics before the mid-fourth century (Lamson 1875), but it is perhaps most fully developed by the important early modern philosophical theologian Samuel Clarke, in his book *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity*, and in a number of controversial follow up writings answering its critics (Clarke 1738a-h; Lawrence 1738).

Clarke argues convincingly that the Bible identifies the one God (YHWH) with the Father of Jesus (Clarke 1738a, 1-41, 123-36).[27] As with ST, the Persons of his Trinity are divine selves. However, for Clarke the Son and Spirit are divine *because of* the Father, and thus are not divine *a se*.[28] The Father is divine in a primary and higher sense, as he's not divine because of any other; he has his existence and perfections *a se*. In some mysterious way, the Father eternally originates the other two. (136-49) While derided in his day as an "Arian," Clarke was no such thing; he expressly denies that the Son and Spirit were created, and that there was ever a time when they didn't exist. In this, Clarke's theory is like the present-day ST theories of Swinburne and Hasker, which also accept the traditional "generation" and "procession" claims, and so too must accept their implication that the Father, but not the Son or Spirit, exists and is divine *a se* - solely through or because of himself, and not because of any other.

In response to objections that his view isn't monotheistic, Clarke emphasizes, like pre-Nicene catholic theologians, the unique status of the Father.[29] In a sense of "divine" which implies aseity, the Father is the only divine being. In a weaker sense of "divine" which doesn't imply aseity, the Father is one of three divine beings, but is the source of the other two. Clarke argues that both concepts of divinity are found in the Bible, as reflected in the usages of "god" and related terms.[30] Here's one of his replies to the objection that his theory is tritheistic.

> But why must three divine beings, of necessity be conceived as three Gods? ...they are no more three Gods, than they are three almighty fathers, which is (according to the Creed) the definition of "God." ...Three perfectly co-ordinate, and equally supreme persons or agents (whatever distinctness, or whatever unity of nature be supposed between them) must of necessity be conceived to be three Gods, that is, three supreme independent governors of the universe; because the proper notion of God in scripture, and in natural reason also, as to all moral and religious regards, is his being absolutely *ho pantocrator*, supreme ruler over all, and *ho pater panton*, (Eph. 4:6) the Father and

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27 This is not the vague claim many theologians make, that the Bible *closely associates* ("identifies") the Father and Son, but rather that the texts assume and assert them to be numerically one, to be related in the way that any entity is and can only be related to itself.

28 Clarke holds that the Son and Spirit enjoy all the communicable divine attributes. (1738a, 151-3)

29 For how a number of second and third century catholic "fathers" emphasized the uniqueness of the Father, see Tuggy 2013c.

30 See Samuel Clarke 1738d, 328-9; 1738g, 468-71. Compare: James 1780, 14, 24-34.

author of all things... (Clarke 1738d, 329)[31]

In short, Clarke's theory is much like ST, minus the claim that the unique God of the Bible is a non-self. Against this Clarke would point out that

> The word "God," being expressive not of bare substance or being, but of a living agent, does therefore necessarily, in the nature of language, and in fact through the whole of scripture, always "signify one Person." (Clarke 1720, 469)[32]

And this view is arguably consistent with the original Nicene creed of 325, which asserts the qualitative similarity of Father and Son, while assuming the numerical identity of the one God and the Father ("We believe in one God the Father...") and the numerical distinctness of Father and Son (both are "true God" but only the Son is "from true God').[33] Does it fit all the later creeds endorsed by the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches? No - but no Protestant accepts all of those, and in this, many ST proponents and Clarke would agree.[34]

About the concept of divinity relevant to monotheism, Clarke argues that

> The notion which both scripture and reason give us of God is... that he is of himself, by his own original, underived, self-sufficient, independent power, the alone author and governor of the universe, the Father (or first cause) of whom are all things (1 Cor. 8:6), the Father of all, who is above all (Eph. 4:6). (Clarke 1738g, 455)

> So the word "God" is not indeed a name of mere abstract dominion, but necessarily supposes living substance; and yet 'tis supreme and independent dominion in that living substance, which makes God to be

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31 In all quotations in this paper I have modernized Clarke's spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and italics, and transliterated his Greek quotations.

32 Compare: "The wisest gentiles were by nature, and the Jews by the Law, taught to believe in one God. By which, both of them always meant one supreme perfect person or intelligent agent, the maker and governor of all things." (1738f, 448f)

33 Clarke, 1738a, 137, 192-205; Lawrence 1738, 548; Clarke 1738b, 239; Clarke 1738c, 263; Clarke 1738e, 375. Thus, Clarke argues that his view is orthodox by the standard of the original Nicene creed (325 CE). In his view, things began to get too speculative and obscure not too long after that. (Clarke 1738a, xii-xiv.)

34 Many Protestants will agree with Clarke that "...in process of time, as men grew less pious, and more contentious, so in the several churches they enlarged their creeds and confessions of faith, and grew more minute, in determining unnecessary controversies, and made more and more things explicitly necessary to be understood, and (under pretense of explaining authoritatively) imposed things much harder to be understand than the scripture itself, and became more uncharitable in their censures, and the farther they departed from the fountain of catholic unity, the apostolical form of sound words, the more uncertain and unintelligible their definitions grew, and good men found nowhere to rest the sole of their foot, but in having recourse to the original words of Christ himself and of the Spirit of truth, in which the wisdom of God thought to express itself." (1738a, iii)

> "God," to be our god, the supreme god, or the god of the universe. (1738h, 500)

> ...the word "God," in all scripture, and in all moral or theological writings... in the religious sense, does not signify that perfect being considered as a substance or essence, which is the business of metaphysics, but as the living person whose that infinite essence is, and who governs all things by his supreme power. So that though He who is the God of the universe was indeed, before the creation of things, the same perfect being he now is, yet he had not then that relative character, which is the signification of the word "god" in the theological sense, or "our god," or "the God and Father of all." Just as a king is the same man, or has the same substance and essence, and the same natural powers and faculties of a man, whether his subjects be supposed to exist or not to exist; but his relative title of "King" is always with regard to his government of subjects. (1738e, 366)

Consistent with this, Clarke applies the terms "god" and "God" to other things with narrower and derived (rather than universal and underived) dominions – to Satan, to human leaders, and of course to the unique Son of God (1738h, 499-502). Thus, for him there are not only two meanings of "god," but there are also, corresponding to these, two ways to *be divine* (derivedly and underivedly or *a se*). The Son, Clarke says

> ...is really, and truly God (which no false gods are), by deriving real and true divinity from the ineffable power of him, who alone has an unoriginated being and godhead. (1738c, 269; compare: 272-3, 294)

Clarke defends the monotheistic credentials of his theory in the same sort way that many early catholic "fathers" defend theirs – namely, by emphasizing the ontological uniqueness and priority of the Father, and asserting that while he's the one true God, there are other gods or Gods in a lesser sense. In my terms, Clarke believes in many gods but in exactly one GOD (the Father, YHWH).

In contrast, contemporary ST theorists Craig and Moreland, eager to preserve the ontological equality of the Three, and acknowledging (contra Clarke, though I think correctly) that patristic theologians had basically no textual support for their doctrine of the eternal "generation" of Son by Father (and later, the eternal "procession" of Spirit from either the Father or the Father plus the Son), deny these mysterious origination claims. For them, each divine person/god is *underivedly* divine (Moreland and Craig 2003, 594). In claiming this, they cut off any possibility of this type of defense of their theory as monotheistic. They could say that there are three ways to be divine, but none of these ways would be primary, and thus there would be no grounds for holding one of the Three to be divine in a more fundamental way. Thus, *if* each Person is the sort of self Isaiah describes, then it looks like we inescapably have three GODS. It matters not that each is mysteriously supported by some soul-like entity, or that they want to refer to this supporting

entity as "God."[35]

Is Clarke's understanding of the Father's unique brand of deity the same as either the framers of the Nicene creed or of Isaiah? No – Clarke's is more specific. He is a metaphysician and natural theologian, holding that reason reveals that there must be a "necessary" being – one which we would say exists in all possible worlds, and this not because of another. (By "necessary," Clarke means a being which can't not exist and which is self-existent, i.e. exists *a se.*) While we can't grasp the essence of this being, Clarke claims to demonstrate that this being must also be the source of any cosmos, eternal, infinite, omnipresent, simple, unchangeable, incorruptible, unique, intelligent, free, all-powerful, non-physical, all-knowing, provident, and morally perfect (1998). Not all of these arguments convince. But I've argued here that Clarke's Trinity theory is monotheistic by the Bible's standard. Whether it is all things considered the best theory is a further question.

In conclusion, Clarke would give the most reasonable response, and the one which many ancient catholic Christians would give, to the inconsistent triad in section I above. We must affirm 1, which is a central and obvious implication of the Bible, and moreover something which every Christian is committed. In contrast, we have no biblical support for 2. And 3 seems true, if "the Trinity" refers to God, his Son, and his Spirit. Thus, we should deny 2.

The price? Clarke is not a trinitarian, but rather a unitarian.[36] Although he has three divine persons, as a unitarian he identifies the one true God of the Bible, YHWH, with only the Father of Jesus. And he denies the trinitarian claims that the three persons are equally divine, and that they in some sense compose the one God. If he's right, then a Christian must choose between truth and tradition, between the message of the Bible and the traditional catholic commitment to some trinitarian theory or other.

For complex biblical reasons, I don't wholly endorse Clarke's subordinationist unitarianism. But he argues powerfully for it, addressing all the relevant New Testament texts, and marshaling considerable support from pre-Nicene catholic theologians. He shows how to believe something like ST while being a self-consistent monotheist. Unlike ST theorists, Clarke has no need to ignore or misconstrue the evidence of biblical pronouns, to deny the plain implication of numerous biblical texts that that God is a self, or to make the false claim that

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35 In fact, it isn't clear that they want each Person of the Trinity to be a self, for they refer to them as God's minds or centers of consciousness, which would seem to make them mere faculties or properties. For a more complete discussion of the Craig and Moreland version of ST, see Tuggy 2013a, 179-82.

36 The term is mine, not Clarke's, although he was widely (and accurately) called a "unitarian" in the 18th and 19th centuries. He would say that his is just the pre-Nicene patristic and biblical view, which is why he calls it *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity*. Like many present day trinitarians, he uses the term "Trinity" ambiguously, to mean not only a triune deity of equally divine persons, but also just the threesome or plurality of the Father, Son, and Spirit (with no implication that this is a god, a GOD, or even a single entity). Of course, in this latter sense, any unitarian holds to "a doctrine of the Trinity" as much as any trinitarian (properly so called). But the trinitarian affirms, while the unitarian denies the existence of a deity in some sense containing or being composed of three equally divine persons.
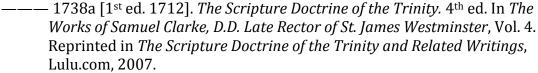
trinitarians have always or even usually asserted ST. Nor does his theology raise concerns about any divine person wrongly deceiving us. In claiming to be the one GOD, God neither said nor implied that he was the only god, nor would the prophet's hearers and early readers have inferred such.

Like divine deception concerns, Clarke's well-motivated, comprehensive, highly developed, carefully argued case has been conveniently forgotten. If trinitarian theology is so obviously better than its unitarian rivals, it should have no fear of carefully, fully, and fairly interacting with their best arguments. This task remains to be accomplished.[37]

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