

TERTULLIAN THE UNITARIAN

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Abstract. Tertullian is often celebrated as an early trinitarian, or at least a near-trinitarian, proto-trinitarian, or trinitarian with unfortunate ‘subordinationist’ tendencies. In this paper I shall show that Tertullian was a unitarian, and not at all a trinitarian.

I. INTRODUCTION

The pugnacious African controversialist Tertullian was a late second and early third century public champion of catholic Christianity. Despite his reputation as anti-intellectual, based on a popular ‘sound bite’ sized quotation from his works,¹ he is an enormously erudite writer, a philosophical theologian who knows how to argue, and perhaps enjoys it a little more than he should. In his works he asserts Father, Son, and Spirit to be *tres personae* but *una substantia* (three persons and one substance), and he is the first known writer to use the word *trinitas*.² For these reasons, as well as his much read polemic against contemporary ‘monarchians’, he is often celebrated as an early trinitarian, or at least a near-trinitarian, proto-trinitarian, or trinitarian with unfortunate

¹ ‘... the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd.’ (*On the Flesh of Christ* trans. by Holmes in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume III: Latin Christianity*, ed. by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Arthur Coxe (1885), chapter 5, p. 525). I shall hereafter abbreviate this volume as *ANF III*.

² For what may be Tertullian’s earliest extant use of *trinitas*, and some relevant translation difficulties, see my “trinitas” in Tertullian’s *On Modesty* (*De Pudicitia*), available at: <http://trinities.org/blog/trinitas-in-tertullians-on-modesty-de-pudicitia/> [accessed 18/8/2016].

‘subordinationist’ tendencies.³ Against these confusions, I shall show that Tertullian was a unitarian, and not at all a trinitarian.

II. DEFINITIONS

In order to read Tertullian carefully, we must start with clear and uncontroversial definitions. A ‘trinitarian’ Christian theology says that (1) there is one God (2) which or who in some sense contains or consists of three ‘persons’, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, (3) who are equally divine, and (4) (1)-(3) are eternally the case.

In contrast, a ‘unitarian’ Christian theology asserts that the (1) there is one God, (2) who is numerically identical with the one Jesus called ‘Father’, (3) and is not numerically identical with anyone else, (4) and (1)-(3) are eternally the case. On this sort of theology, God is ‘unipersonal’, which is to say that God just is a certain great self. As they are logical contraries, a theologian can’t consistently hold both views, although one may have a theology which is neither.

It is a mistake to think that ‘unitarian Christian theology’ is an oxymoron because Christian theology is *by definition* trinitarian. If that were so, Christian theology wouldn’t have existed until some time in the latter half of the fourth century. Needless to say, there were Christians before then, and a few of them were theologians.

A unitarian Christian theology need not be a modern or post-Reformation theory. It is true that when Christians went ‘back to the sources’ in the 16th century, many of them found no Trinity doctrine there.

³ Partisan interests intrude even on the title page of the most-read English translation of Tertullian’s *Against Praxeas*. The translator supplies the subtitle, ‘In which he defends, in all essential points, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.’ (Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* trans. by Holmes in *ANF III*, p. 597.) To my knowledge, the case that Tertullian’s theology is unitarian and not trinitarian was first cogently argued by John Biddle (1615-1662). (*The Testimonies of Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Novatianus, Theophilus, Origen ...* [1648] in *The Faith of One God* (London, 1691). While one may cite many recent treatments of Tertullian as (near-) trinitarian, a main source of that confusion has surely been George Bull’s *Defensio Fidei Nicaenae* (1688) (English Translation: *Defensio Fidei Nicaenae. A Defense of the Nicene Creed, out of the Extant Writings of the Catholick Doctors, Who Flourished During the First Three Centuries of the Christian Church* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, vol. I (1851), vol. II (1852)) Bull’s work was stimulated in large part by the work of the Jesuit scholar Denis Pétau (1583-1652), a.k.a. Dionysius Petavius, who argued that for Tertullian, the Son was younger and less great than the Father. (Bull, *Defense Vol. I*, pp. 9-10; Bull, *Defense Vol. II*, p. 534)

But they were hardly the first to see the one true God as the Father alone. Nor should a unitarian be understood as an anti-trinitarian. While many unitarians nowadays do define their view in opposition to ecumenical-creed-compliant theologies, a unitarian needn't have ever even heard of any Trinity theory. Nor need a unitarian be a 'rationalist', a deist, or a denier of miracles. Nor need a unitarian belong to any specific group or denomination which names itself by that term.⁴

Is my usage of the term 'unitarian' idiosyncratic? Not at all. Christian thinkers often describe Jewish and Islamic theologies as 'unitarian', though they need not be modern, explicitly anti-trinitarian, or 'rationalistic' (whatever that means). Again, this label has been applied to many Christian thinkers of the last three centuries by both friend and foe. This usage is neither historical nor polemical, but simply descriptive. The terms 'unitarian' and 'trinitarian' are convenient contrary terms; a coherent theology, if it is one, can't also be the other.

III. THE WORD 'TRINITY'

Famously, Tertullian uses the word 'trinity', the Latin *trinitas*. Isn't this a dead giveaway that he's trinitarian? No. The Word 'Trinity' has come to mean the tripersonal God, consisting of the eternal, equally divine Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is used as a singular referring term for the one God, assumed to be tripersonal.

But both now and then, the word 'trinity' can simply refer to these three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here it's used as a plural referring term, and use of it does not imply that the items mentioned are parts of a whole, or that they are in any way equal, or even that they are things of the same kind or category. It refers to a triad, a triple, a group of three. For example, trinitarian theologians sometimes say that 'the Bible from start to finish is all about the trinity.' This is true even though the biblical authors evidently had no concept of a triune God, so long as we understand 'trinity' to be a plural referring term, indicating God, God's Son, and God's spirit, whatever those are, and however they're related.

⁴ Many unitarians have belonged to mainstream, catholic Christian groups. It was only in the late eighteenth century that there began to be churches calling themselves 'Unitarian', though the term had been coined about a hundred years before, as an alternative to the less descriptive, polemical terms 'Socinian' and 'Arian'. I don't capitalize 'unitarian' because here it is used as a description, not as the name of any denomination or group.

Tertullian uses the word in this latter way; for him ‘the trinity’ is a triad, a group, a plurality, consisting of those three selves. This plurality is not a god, although it is intimately related to, and includes the one god (i.e. the Father). Confusion would be greatly reduced if all Christians did what some translators of Tertullian do: they use the all lower case ‘trinity’ for the plural referring term, reserving the capitalized ‘Trinity’ for the triune God of later catholic orthodoxy. If this is our rule, we should not use the capitalized word ‘Trinity’ anywhere in translating Tertullian.

Does his use of *trinitas* as a plural referring term imply that he’s *not* a trinitarian? No, for trinitarians can and do use the word in that way. So, of course, do unitarians.⁵ Does this cause confusion? Yes. Capital letters are a good and useful invention. Used here, they help one to see that Tertullian’s use of *trinitas* is not, by itself, evidence that he’s a trinitarian. I’ll now argue that we know from carefully reading all his relevant extant works that he is not.

IV. TERTULLIAN’S THEOLOGY

Although Tertullian is a unitarian, he’s an aggressively speculative one who, unlike some latter-day unitarians, does not hesitate to add to the simple creeds of his day a fairly developed metaphysical theory about how God is related to his Son and his Holy Spirit.

For Tertullian, the one eternal God isn’t the Trinity, but rather the Father himself. He never describes, mentions, or implies the existence of a tripersonal God. Throughout his works Tertullian assumes the identity of the one God and the Father. In his *An Answer to the Jews*, he says that Christians have ‘been converted to the same God from whom Israel ... had departed’.⁶ In his *Apology* he says that Christians are those ‘who

⁵ This can be seen, for example, in the book titles of some famous early modern unitarians: Samuel Clarke’s magnum opus is entitled *The Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* (1st. ed. 1712), and John Biddle published *A Confession of Faith Touching the Holy Trinity, According to the Scripture* (1648).

⁶ *An Answer to the Jews* in *ANF III*, ch. 1, p. 152. (See also ch. 14, p. 173.) In his *Prescriptions Against the Heretics*, he presents us with a rule of faith, seemingly a commonly used creed in the catholic churches he knew. It says, in part, ‘...we believe that there is but one God, who is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced everything from nothing through his Word, sent forth before all things ... this Word is called his Son, and in the Name of God was seen in divers ways by the patriarchs ... and finally was brought down by the Spirit and Power of God the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, was born of her and lived as Jesus Christ ...’ (*Prescriptions*

have been led to the knowledge of God as their common Father.⁷ He exhorts the Romans to ‘give up all worship of, and belief in, any other being as divine’, sticking with the ‘one true Lord, the God omnipotent and eternal.’⁸ As we’ll see momentarily, this can only be the Father.

But don’t Christians worship the man Jesus? Tertullian clarifies that ‘We worship God through Christ. Count Christ a man, if you please; by Him and in Him God would be known and adored.’⁹ Like many a later unitarian, Tertullian argues that the ultimate, *indirect* object of Christian worship of Jesus is the Father; he is worshiped by means of our *directly* worshipping Christ.¹⁰

Not that Tertullian grants that Jesus was a ‘mere man’. He argues that if a mere man like Moses could reveal God, all the more so ‘Christ ... had a right to reveal Deity, which was in fact His own essential possession.’¹¹ We’ll see what he means by this shortly.

Tertullian, like other second and third century logos theologians, teaches that Christ is rightly called ‘God’, and that he is in some sense ‘divine’. But so do many later unitarians, such as Samuel Clarke, or John Biddle. In that same chapter of his *Apology*, Tertullian lays out his christology:

... nor do we differ from the Jews concerning God. We must make, therefore, a remark or two as to Christ’s divinity.

... He [Christ] proceeds forth from God, and in that procession He is generated; so that He is the Son of God, and is called God from unity of substance with God. For God, too, is a Spirit. Even when the ray is shot from the sun, it is still part of the parent mass; the sun will still be in the ray, because it is a ray of the sun – there is no division of substance,

Against the Heretics, trans. by S. L. Greenslade, in *Early Latin Theology*, ed. by S. L. Greenslade (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 31–64 (p. 40).) For another such short rule see *On the Veiling of Virgins in ANF III*, ch. 1, p. 27, and *Against Praxeas* translated by Holmes, *ANF III*, ch. 2, p. 598a–b. On the point that the god preached by Jesus and Paul was none other than the god of the Old Testament, see *Against Marcion in ANF III*, I.21, p. 286, III.1, p. 321.

⁷ *Apology*, translated by S. Thelwall in *ANF III*, ch. 39, p. 46.

⁸ *Apology* ch. 34, p. 43.

⁹ *Apology* ch. 21, p. 36. The idea of worshipping God through Christ is also mentioned in *An Answer to the Jews*, ch. 4, p. 155.

¹⁰ For this idea and discussion of New Testament passages that presuppose it, see my ‘Who Should Christians Worship?’, available at: <<http://trinities.org/blog/who-should-christians-worship/>> [accessed 18/8/2016].

¹¹ *Apology* ch. 21, p. 36.

but merely an extension. Thus Christ is Spirit of Spirit, and God of God, as light of light is kindled. The material matrix remains entire and unimpaired, though you derive from it any number of shoots possessed of its qualities; so, too, that which has come forth out of God is at once God and the Son of God, and the two are one. In this way He is made a second in manner of existence – in position, not in nature; and He did not withdraw from the original source, but went forth. This ray of God... descending into a certain virgin, and made flesh in her womb, is in His birth God and man united.¹²

For Tertullian, Jesus is in divine in the sense that his matter is also God's matter. But does he share *all* of God's matter, or only some of it? And is this derivation of Jesus from God eternal, or did it happen a finite time ago?

In his important *Against Praxeas*, against the 'monarchian' claim that Father and Son are one being and one person, Tertullian asserts many differences between the two. One of these is that '... the Father is all being, but the Son is a tributary of the whole and a portion, as He Himself declares: "Because the Father is greater than I."¹³ Tertullian is thinking in terms of what metaphysicians now call the material constitution relation. His point is that the Father is constituted by all of the divine matter (that is, spirit), whereas the Son is constituted by only a portion of that same batch of matter.

In his *Against Hermogenes*, Tertullian makes clear that like all the other logos theologians before Origen, he believes the Son to have been caused to exist by God a finite time ago. He tells us that God was not always a Father, for there was a time when the Son did not exist.¹⁴

¹² *Apology* ch. 21, pp. 34-5.

¹³ *Tertullian Against Praxeas*, translated by A. Souter (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920), ch. 9, pp. 46-7. Further citations from *Against Praxeas*, unless otherwise noted, are from this translation. On 'portion' also see ch. 26. Elsewhere he says that 'we should not suppose that there is any other being than God [i.e. the Father] alone who is unbegotten and uncreated... His wisdom [=the logos of John 1 and the Wisdom of Proverbs 8] ...was then born and created, when in the thought of God It began to assume motion for the arrangement of his created works... how can it be that anything, except the Father, should be older, and on this account indeed nobler, than the Son of God, the only-begotten and first-begotten Word?' (*Against Hermogenes*, trans. by Peter Holmes, in *ANF III*, pp. 477-502, ch. 18, p. 487.)

¹⁴ ch. 3, p. 478 (compare: ch. 45, p. 502). Insisting that only 'one God the Father' is eternal (ch. 4), he argues against Hermogenes's theory that matter too is eternal. Citing

These are not mis-statements or slips; they represent Tertullian's settled view, and all these points appear in *Against Praxeas*. There he adds that

... even 'before the foundation of the universe' God was not alone, having in Himself alike reason and word in reason, which (word) He had made second to Himself by exercising it within Himself.¹⁵

This word 'under the name "wisdom"' was 'also created as the second person'.¹⁶ After quoting Proverbs 8:22-5, Tertullian expounds this.

Then, as soon as God had willed to put forth into His own matter and form that which He had in company with the reason and word of wisdom arranged within Himself, he first brought forth the word itself, having in itself its own inseparable reason and wisdom, that everything might be made through the very (word) by which all had been planned and arranged, or rather already made, so far as God's thought was concerned. For this they [things in the created cosmos] still lacked: they had yet to become known and remembered before the eyes of each person in their appearances and substances.

It is then, therefore, that even the word itself takes its own appearance and vesture, namely sound and expression; when God says: 'Let there be made light.' This is the complete birth of the word, since it proceeds out of God. Having been first created by Him as far as thought is concerned, under the name wisdom - 'the Lord created me as a beginning of ways,' [Proverbs 8:22] - then begotten to actuality - 'when he was preparing heaven I was with Him,' [Pr. 8:27] - thereafter, making as Father for Himself Him from whom He proceeds and thus becomes His Son, He was made 'first-begotten,' as having been begotten before everything, and 'only-begotten,' as having been alone begotten from God, in a real sense

Proverbs 8, he scolds, 'Let Hermogenes then confess that the very Wisdom of God [i.e. the Son of God] is declared to be born and created, for the especial reason that we should not suppose that there is any other being than God alone who is unbegotten and uncreated. For if that, which from its being inherent in the Lord was of Him and in Him, was yet not without a beginning, - I mean His wisdom, which was then born and created, when in the thought of God It began to assume motion for the arrangement of His creative works, - how much more impossible is it that anything should have been without a beginning which was extrinsic to the Lord! [such as an eternal Matter]... how can it be that anything, except the Father, should be older, and on this account indeed nobler, than the Son of God, the only-begotten and first-begotten Word?' (ch. 18, p. 487)

¹⁵ *Against Praxeas*, ch. 5, p. 38.

¹⁶ ch. 6, p. 38.

from the womb of his own mind ... Rejoicing, He thereupon addresses Him ... 'Thou art my Son, this day I have begotten thee'... [Psalm 2:7]¹⁷

It is easy to miss the significance of this passage. Just as all created things first exist in God's mind, so too does the Word, the pre-human Jesus. It has, Tertullian seems to assume, some kind or degree of reality, but it can't yet, any more than the still merely mental objects of the later cosmos, such as you and me, enter into causal relations with the things in the created realm. But then, as it were, this merely mentally existing thing puts on its proper garment. In *our* language, this is when the Word comes to exist – not as a mere idea, intention, or representation in God's mind, but rather as an intelligent being, like God, 'having in itself its own inseparable reason and wisdom'.¹⁸ Like God himself, the Word is now a body (a substance constituted by matter, namely spirit).¹⁹ In short, the Father 'made His word a son for Himself'.²⁰

And this Son is, he says, appropriating Gnostic terminology, a 'projection' from the Father, though he is neither separated from him nor composed of different stuff. The Son is a shrub to the Father's root, a river to the Father's source, and a ray to the Father's sun.²¹ Tertullian emphatically embraces the implication that they are two things (beings, entities) not one.²² He emphasizes, though, that these two are not

¹⁷ ch. 6-7, pp. 39-40.

¹⁸ ch. 6, p. 39. 'For whatsoever the being of the Word was, I call it a person and I claim the name 'Son' for Him, and in recognising Him as Son, I claim that He is second to the Father.' (ch. 7, p. 42)

¹⁹ Tertullian's view that God is composed of a special sort of matter (spirit) is not unique to him. See David L. Paulsen, 'Divine Embodiment: The Earliest Christian Understanding of God', available at: <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1100&index=10> [accessed 18/8/2016].

²⁰ *Against Praxeas*, ch. 11, p. 50. Compare: *Against Marcion* II.27, p. 318. The idea that there was a time before the pre-human Jesus existed was not invented by fourth century 'Arians', as some suppose. Rather, the view was common to many early logos theorists, those holding to what Wolfson calls 'two-stage' logos theories. On these see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers: Faith, Trinity, Incarnation, Third Edition, Revised* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), ch. 12.

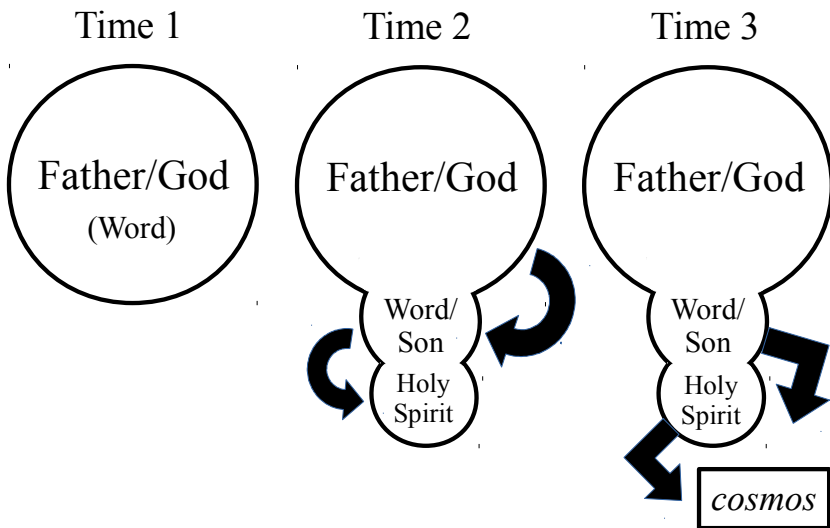
²¹ ch. 8, p. 44.

²² 'Everything that proceeds from something, must be second to that from which it proceeds, but it is not therefore separated. Where, however, there is a second, there are two, and where there is a third, there are three. The Spirit is third with respect to God and the Son, even as the fruit from the shrub is third from the root, and the channel from the river is third from the source, and the point where the ray strikes something is third from the sun. ... Thus the Trinity running down from the Father through stages linked and

‘separated,’ in that the portion of matter constituting the Son is still a portion of the Father’s matter; that portion didn’t break off when God extended it out to bring his Son into existence.

In sum, the Son of God is literally younger than and lesser than God. Also, in contrast to many later catholic interpreters, Tertullian holds that that the Son is ‘ignorant of the last day and hour, which are known to the Father only.’²³ Thus, the Son of God knows less than God.

Here is a graphic illustration of Tertullian’s trinity.



There is one eternal God, but three temporal stages in the career of his divine matter. At first (Time 1), God alone is composed of that matter. At this time ‘Word’ (*logos*) can only refer to his attribute of wisdom or reason. When it is time to create (Time 2), God extends or stretches himself out so that some of his spiritual matter comes to serve also as the matter of two other beings. In this there is no separation – seemingly, no *spatial* separation of any portion of God’s matter from the rest – it remains a contiguous mass. He uses, but does not lose a portion of it, in bringing into existence two other beings. These are literally younger

united together, offers no obstacle to monarchy and conserves the established position of the economy.’ (ch. 8, p. 45)

²³ *Against Praxeas* 26, p. 103; Matthew 24:36; contrast with *Against Marcion* II.24, p. 315.

and less great than God. Still, both may, like God, be called 'God'.²⁴ At Time 3, God creates and governs the cosmos by means of these second and third beings. From this time one, we have 'the Trinity of the one Divinity', which is to say, the trinity of beings sharing (various portions of) the divine matter.²⁵

This scheme is what Tertullian calls God's 'economy', his way of creating and managing the cosmos (i.e. all that resulted from the Genesis creation). God is the founding member, as it were, of the group he calls the 'trinity', following, it would seem, the second and third century philosophical fashion for positing transcendent triads.²⁶

My chart might make you think this whole portion of matter is one thing with three parts at Time 3; but no, it is not a thing, but merely a quantity of matter. The Father is one entity, the Son is a second, and the Spirit is a third. Nor are they parts of any whole; they simply share some of the divine stuff. The three together are not one God. They are three beings constituted by different portions of the divine matter: all (Father), less (Son), and still less (Spirit).

Tertullian's discussion of the Genesis creation in *Against Praxeas* ch. 12 is instructive. There are, he argues, only four possible explanations for why God says 'Let us make man in our image'.²⁷ First, perhaps God is really alone but is 'either deceiving or making fun of us'.²⁸ Tertullian doesn't take this seriously. Second, perhaps God (the Father) is speaking to his angels. This Tertullian derides as Jewish. Both of these explanations are less than Christian, he thinks. The third explanation is: 'Or was it because He was Himself Father, Son, Spirit, for that reason, showing Himself to be plural, He spoke in a plural way to Himself?'²⁹ The trinitarian reader may jump at this as the best answer, but to Tertullian it can only be a heretical, 'monarchian' mis-reading. (In ch. 10-11 he's at length refuted the 'monarchian' idea that God made himself his

²⁴ The reader must also be aware that Tertullian sometimes calls the pre-incarnate Son God's 'Spirit', 'Substance', or 'Reason.' (*Against Marcion* III.6, 326; *On Prayer*, translated by Thelwall in *ANF*, ch. 1, p. 681.)

²⁵ *On Modesty*, translated by S. Thelwall in *ANF*, ch. 21, p. 99.

²⁶ See the discussion and sources cited in my 'History of Trinity Doctrines (Supplement to "Trinity")' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/trinity-history.html> [accessed 18/8/2016].

²⁷ Genesis 1:26.

²⁸ ch. 12, p. 54.

²⁹ ch. 12, p. 55.

own Son.) He rejects this third explanation in favour of a fourth: that God is at this time working together with two others to create the human race, and so he speaks to these two 'as with servants and eyewitnesses'.³⁰

V. WHAT WAS TERTULLIAN'S ANSWER TO THE 'MONARCHIAN' CATHOLICS?

Tertullian tells us that many ordinary Christians in his day worried that this theory implied a denial of monotheism. They objected that if both Father and Son are divine, doesn't this mean there are at least two gods, something contrary to Christian tradition?³¹ This candid admission by Tertullian is evidence that the sort of logos theory which was popular among some of the educated Gentile catholic elite in the late 100s and early 200s, was controversial among common Christians, who wondered if Jesus was being misunderstood as a second god, equal to his Father. This sort of concern about logos theologies was probably a main source of the 'monarchian' theologies of that era. It is exceedingly difficult to characterize these theologies; for present purposes we assume with Tertullian that at least some of these 'monarchians' thought the Father and Son to be numerically identical, and so incapable of differing, with the consequence that the Father was crucified and died.³² Despite its evidently false implications, this theory does prevent the Father and Son from being two gods, since if 'they' are really numerically one being, 'they' can't be different *anythings*. Having secured monotheism in this way, they demand an answer of the logos theologian.

What is Tertullian's answer to his 'monarchian' critics? Does he argue that the Father, Son, and Spirit are really one god? No. It is here that

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ In *Against Praxeas* he observes that 'All simple people, not to say the unwise and unprofessional (who always constitute the majority of believers), since even the rule of faith itself removes them from the plurality of 'the gods' of this world to 'the one true God', become greatly terrified through their failure to understand that, while He must be believed to be one, it is along with His economy, because they judge that economy, implying a number and arrangement of trinity, is really a division of unity, whereas unity, deriving trinity from itself, is not destroyed by it, but made serviceable. Therefore they [i.e. the simple] circulate the statement that two and three are preached by us, while they judge that they are worshippers of one God... 'We hold to monarchy', they say...' (ch. 3, p. 31) But Tertullian too is committed to monotheism; he argues that it is impossible that there be more than one god in his *Against Marcion* 1.3-8, pp. 273-6.

³² *Against Praxeas* ch. 1-2, pp. 28-30.

later interests and commitments obtrude into our reading of Tertullian. We expect him to argue that because the three are ‘one substance’ they are one god. But that’s not what he says. Does he argue, like some latter-day trinitarians, that the term ‘monotheism’ should be redefined, so as to make trinitarianism ‘monotheistic’?³³ No. In *Against Praxeas* ch. 2, Tertullian *agrees* with the ‘monarchians’ about there being exactly one god. What did they believe in one of? They believed, it seems, in exactly one mighty self, then added, incoherently, that this one self was both the Father and the Son of the New Testament. So too does Tertullian believe in one self, the Father, as the one god. But he makes it abundantly clear that the Son and Spirit are not on the Father’s level – they’re not divine in precisely the way that the Father is divine.

Instead of making trinitarian moves, Tertullian replies that he too upholds the monarchy, the single rule of the one god. Just as a ruler administers his single kingdom through many lower subjects, so God, all admit, works through angels. But it’s still God’s unified domain of rule. And if multitudes of angels leave the Father’s monarchy intact, all the more so when it comes to a Son who is composed of some of his own spiritual matter.³⁴

Tertullian is well aware that this won’t satisfy his ‘monarchian’ critics. The monarchians can retort that it is no renunciation of polytheism to claim that the gods cooperate under a chief god, to carry out the chief god’s rule. Conceivably, a pantheon may be orderly, and ruled by a single boss. Tertullian records how they pressed their polytheism objection:

... [the monarchians object that] if God spoke and God acted, if God spoke and another acted, you are proclaiming two gods.³⁵

His reply, citing several biblical texts, is that there is nothing wrong, so far as the Old Testament is concerned, with calling beings other than God ‘God’ or ‘Lord’, in particular Christ. This is an important and often forgotten point.³⁶ To it, Tertullian adds that those in the catholic tradition,

³³ For this sort of move in recent trinitarian theorizing, see my ‘Constitution Trinitarianism: An Appraisal’, *Philosophy and Theology*, 25:1 (2013), 129-62 (pp. 138-41).

³⁴ *Against Praxeas*, ch. 4.

³⁵ ch. 13, p. 57.

³⁶ Jesus makes this point in John 10. (Dale Tuggy, ‘Jesus’s argument in John 10’, available at: <<http://trinitities.org/blog/jesus-argument-in-john-10/>> [accessed 18/8/2016]) In another context Tertullian forcefully makes the point that the fact of beings sharing a name doesn’t imply that they are the same sort of being. ‘If an identity of

although they hold three beings to be 'God', refuse to *say* 'two Gods or two Lords'. In the past, Tertullian thinks,

... two gods and two lords were preached simply in order that when Christ had come, he might be recognized as God and also called Lord, because he was the Son of God and the Lord.³⁷

But now that the pagans are leaving their false gods to worship one God, it is important that Christians should leave off speaking of many gods and lords, even though the words 'God' and 'Lord' may be applied to Father, Son, or Spirit. (In part, this prevents Christians from having an easy escape from martyrdom, by swearing 'by gods and lords'.)³⁸ Therefore, continues Tertullian,

... I will not use at all the expressions 'gods' or 'lords', but I will follow the Apostle [Paul], and if I have to name the Father and Son together, I will call the Father 'God' and name Jesus Christ 'the Lord'.³⁹

But when mentioning Jesus *alone*, he'll follow the same Apostle in calling him 'God'.⁴⁰

For I shall also name a ray of the sun by itself 'sun'; but in naming the sun whose ray it is, I shall not straightway call a ray 'the sun'. For I am not going to make out that there are two suns. Nevertheless, I will just as much count the sun and its ray two things and two aspects⁴¹ of one indivisible material, as I do God and his Word, as I do Father and Son.⁴²

Tertullian's point here is easy to understand. Imagine that a husband calls his wife, his daughter, and his cat 'Honey', but when his wife is near, he only calls her 'Honey'. Or imagine a workplace in which the employees

names affords a presumption in support of equality of condition, how often do worthless menials strut insolently in the name of kings - your Alexanders, Caesars, and Pompeys! This fact, however, does not detract from the real attributes of the royal persons. Nay more, the very idols of the Gentiles are called gods. Yet not one of them is divine because he is called a god. It is not, therefore, for the name of god, for its sound or its written form, that I am claiming the supremacy in the Creator, but for the essence to which the name belongs ... that essence alone is unbegotten and unmade - alone eternal, and the maker of all things ... (*Against Marcion* I.7, pp. 275-6)

³⁷ ch. 13, p. 60.

³⁸ ch. 13, p. 61.

³⁹ *Ibid.* Compare: Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 8:6.

⁴⁰ Romans 9:5.

⁴¹ The Latin word here is *species*. Various translators here use 'forms', or 'manifestations'.

⁴² ch. 13, p. 61.

call their supervisor ‘Boss’ and their manager ‘Boss,’ but when the owner of the business comes for a visit, they only address the owner as ‘Boss,’ reverting to ‘Mr. Smith’ and ‘Mr. Jones’ for the manager and supervisor.

VI. IS TERTULLIAN A CONSISTENT MONOTHEIST?

In my view, Tertullian’s theology, whatever its problems, is, *pace* his ‘monarchian’ critics, monotheistic. Monotheism is the thesis that there is one god, not the thesis that there is only one being who may properly be described or addressed as ‘god.’⁴³ Tertullian, like nearly all monotheists, also believes in beings who are greater than humans and ‘divine,’ though not gods in the way that Yahweh, the one true God, is a god.⁴⁴ Above and before all these, there is one being, the Father, who is divine in a way that no other being is; he alone is eternally divine, and he alone possesses *all* the divine matter and all the divine attributes. Thus, Tertullian has strong grounds for claiming to be a self-consistent monotheist.

But in arguing with the ‘monarchians,’ Tertullian muddies the waters. In *Against Praxeas* ch. 18 he argues that when, e.g. in Isaiah 45 God/the Father/Yahweh asserts himself to be the only god, he has in view the idols, the pseudo-gods worshiped by the nations surrounding Israel (and by unfaithful Israelites). As Tertullian reads the passages, the Father, though the prophet, denies the existence of any other gods *not sharing his nature/substance*. (Or is it only ‘gods,’ other beings who can be called ‘god’? Lacking quotation marks, his Latin is ambiguous.) But his own Son, ‘being in the Father’ and sharing part of his substance, would not be ruled out. The right kind of monotheism, Tertullian is insisting, allows multiple gods (that is, multiple beings composed of divine matter), so long as they share a nature (some portion of matter) with the god of Israel.⁴⁵

This would only further rile his ‘monarchian’ critics. They would object that now the theory has two gods (two beings with divine matter). And as Tertullian knows, they will object that in Isaiah God says that

⁴³ There is no good name for this latter thesis; I can only suggest the unlovely ‘mono-“theos”-ism.’ Note that it neither implies nor is implied by monotheism.

⁴⁴ On monotheism and its compatibility with belief in multiple lesser deities, see my ‘On Counting Gods,’ *TheoLogica* (2016), 1-26. Available at <http://revistatheologica.com/index.php/rtl/article/view/9/11> [accessed 20/12/2016].

⁴⁵ In my view Tertullian misreads the book of Isaiah here. For my take on its monotheistic passages see my ‘Divine Deception and Monotheism,’ *Journal of Analytic Theology*, 2 (2014), 186-209.

'I am Yahweh, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth ...'⁴⁶ Doesn't this rule out the logos theologians' contention that God created by means of his Son and Spirit – so, not alone, but through two helpers?

Tertullian insists that the prophet's statements rule out only 'other powers', evidently, beings not composed of divine stuff. He appeals to Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8, with God at the time of creation, as obviously the pre-human Jesus, and as the one called *logos* in John 1, and the 'Word' by which God made the heavens.⁴⁷ In sum, the Father 'alone stretched out the heavens ... namely, alone with his Son, even as He is one with the Son.'⁴⁸ This can convince only those already committed to the logos theologians' readings of those passages.

But more importantly, Tertullian hasn't made clear why, even though there are two who can be addressed or described as 'god', and two who are composed of divine stuff, there is only one god, and not two. Exasperated, he resorts to linguistic fiat. As these two share a portion of matter, we should not *say* 'two Gods' or 'two Lords'.⁴⁹

But this is a *non sequitur*; if two beings share a portion of divine matter, it doesn't seem to follow that we shouldn't call them 'two gods', because it is unclear why two gods couldn't share a portion of matter. Conjoined twins, for instance, share a portion of their matter, yet we consider them two human beings. Their parent will truly say, 'These are my daughters.' We can understand why the 'monarchians' challenged the logos theologians to actually preach 'two gods' and 'two lords' in accordance with their theory.⁵⁰

But Tertullian here fails to draw on his own theological resources employed elsewhere. In his *Against Marcion*, he defines what he means by a 'god' (in the highest sense of the word).

In order ... that you [i.e. Marcion] may know that God is one, ask what God is, and you will find Him to be not otherwise than one. So far as a human being can form a definition of God, I adduce one which the conscience of all men will also acknowledge, – that God is the great Supreme, existing in eternity, unbegotten, unmade, without beginning,

⁴⁶ Isaiah 44:24; *Against Praxeas* ch. 18-19.

⁴⁷ Psalm 33:6.

⁴⁸ ch. 19, p. 78.

⁴⁹ ch. 19, p. 79.

⁵⁰ ch. 13, p. 57.

without end. ... nothing is equal to Him ... if He had an equal, He would be no longer the great Supreme. ... That Being... must needs be unique ... God is not, if He is not one. ... Whatever other god, then, you may introduce, you will at least be unable to maintain his divinity under any other guise, than by ascribing to him too the property of Godhead – both eternity and supremacy over all. How, therefore, can two great Supremes co-exist, when this is the attribute of the Supreme Being, to have no equal, – an attribute which belongs to One alone, and can by no means exist in two?⁵¹

Like all monotheists, Tertullian defines the one God as necessarily unique; there is a contradiction in supposing two of them. Note that on his own views, as we explored them above, the Son and Spirit are *not* gods. They are neither eternal (without beginning or end in time), nor unbegotten, nor (arguably) unmade, nor without beginning. Of the divine attributes Tertullian lists here, the one they would presumably have is being *without end*, that is, never ceasing to exist. In contrast, in his view, the Father has all these attributes, because the Father just is the one God himself.

VII. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Those committed to trinitarian theology have always been reluctant to admit Tertullian to be a unitarian, as defined above. Generally, they ignore at least one aspect of his overall theory, and seize on something he explicitly says, arguing that it implies a more Nicene-compliant view. In this section, I'll briefly answer four such objections.

Objection 1: Tertullian says that in eternity God was not alone. But 'how frivolous, how unmeaning ... is this mode of proof: God was not alone before the creation ... because even at that time He was rational!'⁵² Surely, then, his point is that his *logos* was even then, in eternity past, a divine self.

Reply: Tertullian's point is that before the projection of the Son, God was literally alone, but *figuratively* he was not alone, since he was accompanied, as it were, by his own reason or thought. Here's the crucial passage in *Against Praxeas*:

⁵¹ *Against Marcion* I.3, p. 273; compare I.5. On divine eternity see I.8.

⁵² Bull, *Defense Vol. II*, p. 519.

... at first God was alone, He was to Himself both universe and place and everything, alone, moreover, because there was nothing outside but Himself. But even at that time He was not alone; for He had with Him what He had in Himself, namely, His reason. ... This reason is his own thought; this is what the Greeks call 'Logos', which word we translate also by 'speech', and therefore it is now our (Latin) custom by a simple translation to declare that 'the Word was in the beginning with God', although it is more fitting that reason should be regarded as the older, because a God rational even before the beginning is not from the beginning given to speech, and because even speech itself, since it depends on reason, shows that the latter is earlier, as being its foundation. Yet for all that there is no difference. For although God 'had' not yet 'uttered his Word', [Psalm 107:20] all the same He had it both with and in reason itself within Himself, while silently meditating and arranging with Himself what He was afterwards to state in word. For meditating and arranging in company with His reason, He made that into word which He was dealing with by word.⁵³

Tertullian then makes an analogy with human thought; this is how we're to understand what he says above.

See, when you silently meet with yourself in the process of thinking ... By means of reason you think in company with word, and speak, and when you speak through a word, you are thinking. So somehow there is in you a second word, through which you speak when meditating and through which you meditate when speaking: the word itself is different.⁵⁴

We can't read Tertullian here as holding that your thought, your 'word' is literally a second being, a second self, with whom you converse. Rather, you're meeting *with yourself* – this 'second' is only your thought, and potentially something you say. Now, his application:

With how much more completeness, then, does this take place in God, whose 'image and likeness' [Genesis 1:26] you are deemed to be! Since He has reason in Himself even when silent, and in having reason has word also ... even then 'before the foundation of the universe' God was not alone, having in Himself alike reason and word in reason, which (word) He had then made a second to Himself by exercising it within himself.⁵⁵

⁵³ ch. 5, pp. 36-7.

⁵⁴ ch. 5, p. 37.

⁵⁵ ch. 5, pp. 37-8.

Tertullian then proceeds to explain this pre-cosmos creation or emanation of the Son. Is this view of God's eternal reason and thought (word), as the objector says, 'frivolous'? Even if it were, it's clearly what Tertullian is asserting.⁵⁶

Objection 2: Tertullian says that the Word was 'always in the Father' and was 'always with God'. Thus, the Word (the personal, divine being, the pre-Incarnate Jesus) existed from eternity past.⁵⁷

Reply: No, Tertullian's point in that passage is that even though the Son is projected out of the Father (as we've seen, a finite time ago), he never separates from the Father.⁵⁸ The point concerns stages 2 and 3 of the career of the divine matter, and it doesn't follow that the Son/Word exists as a self at stage 1.

Objection 3: Tertullian expressly says that God is eternal, and that the Son is God. He must think, then, that the Son is eternal, and so clearly your interpretation has gone wrong somewhere or other.

Reply: No; as we've seen, Tertullian repeatedly and expressly, in multiple works, says that the Father is older than the Son, who proceeded out from him when it was time to create. Like many a latter Christian apologist, when addressing a general, non-Jewish audience, Tertullian is inclined to leave Jesus out of it. He wants to urge belief in one God, as against the many gods of Roman tradition, and instinctively knows that mentioning the Son as 'God' or 'a god' who distinct from the Father will raise unwelcome objections. (If *you* can have more than one god, why can't *we*?) In an apologetic public letter to a Roman official, he mentions

... the human being next to God who from God has received all his power, and is less than God alone ... as less only than the true God – he is greater than all besides ...⁵⁹

Tertullian is not talking about the Son of God here, but rather the Roman emperor! Another striking example of leaving Jesus out of it is his lengthy *Ad Nationes*, an apology to the citizens of Rome.⁶⁰ Yes, Tertullian clearly

⁵⁶ See also the passage from *Against Hermogenes* in note 14 above.

⁵⁷ Bull, *Defense Vol. II*, pp. 527-8.

⁵⁸ ch 8, p. 44.

⁵⁹ *To Scapula*, translated by S. Thelwall in *ANF III*, p. 106.

⁶⁰ In *ANF III*, pp. 109-47. See also *The Soul's Testimony* in *ANF III*, pp. 175-80. An exception is his *Apology*, addressed to Roman leaders (ch. 21).

asserts that the one God is without either beginning or end in time.⁶¹ In such contexts, he makes various unqualified statements about what a *deus* must be, but he clearly has in mind the Father, and not the others who may be addressed or described using other meanings of *deus*. In such contexts he also says that *deus* is ‘unbegotten’, the great and unique Supreme without equal, and invisible – things which he denies about the ‘God’ who is the Son.⁶²

Objection 4: Look at the capstone of *Against Praxeas*; it is clear that like Nicene-era catholics, Tertullian has moved beyond the mere monotheism of Judaism to a properly trinitarian theology, or nearly so. He says,

But this attitude of yours [you ‘monarchians,’] belongs to the Jewish faith, I mean the belief in one God in such a way as to refuse to count the Son along with Him, and after the Son the Holy Spirit. ...What need is there of the Gospel ... if the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, ‘three’ objects of belief, do not thereafter establish one God? God wished to make the mystery new in such a manner that He should be believed to be One in a new way through the Son and Spirit, that he should now come to be known as God face to face in His own special names and persons, who though preached in the past also through the Son and Spirit, was not understood.⁶³

Reply: The passage poses no problem for the interpretation of Tertullian argued for here. The new way to believe in God is believing in God’s (that is, the Father’s) ‘economy’, by which (Tertullian thinks) he made and has always governed the cosmos. These two ‘special names and persons’ are two other beings, composed of portions of God’s stuff, divine but lesser and younger agents in addition to God who work on behalf of God, even appearing and speaking in God’s place throughout, Tertullian thinks, all of the Old Testament. The problem with the Jews isn’t that they fail to believe in a tripersonal god, stubbornly sticking with a unipersonal one.

⁶¹ *Against Marcion* I.3; *Apology* ch. 30; *Ad Nationes* II.3; *The Soul’s Testimony* ch. 1; *Against Hermogenes* ch. 3-4, 6.

⁶² *Against Marcion* I.3; *Ad Nationes* II.4.

⁶³ ch. 31, pp. 116-7. Some trinitarian translators can’t resist anachronistic mischief here. Thus, Evans, ‘what is the confidence of the New Testament ... unless thereafter Father Son and Spirit, believed in as three, constitute one God?’ (*Against Praxeas*, trans. E. Evans (1948), available at: <http://tertullian.org/articles/evans_praxeas_eng.html> [accessed 18/8/2016]) Another translator has: ‘both believed in as Three, and as making One Only God.’ (*Against Praxeas*, trans. Holmes (1870) in ANF, 597-632, ch. 31, p. 627.)

Rather, they reject God's work through his Son, and in so doing they reject God himself.⁶⁴

VII. CONCLUSION

Let's revisit our definitions in section II above, to be absolutely clear about where Tertullian fits in. Tertullian's theory clearly meets the first condition of both definitions, as there is for him one true God at any time, though at stages 2 and 3 there exist lesser beings which are divine in lesser ways, each of whom may be called 'God'. Just as clearly, his theory fails both the third and fourth conditions for being trinitarian.

Does it meet the second condition for being trinitarian? Arguably it does, at least at stage 3, if 'contains' means that various portions of God's spiritual matter constitute or compose three selves. Here is the kernel of truth in the common misreading of Tertullian as a trinitarian. He does have an idea in common with at least *some* trinitarians, those who hold that the 'persons' of the Trinity share a common stuff or matter, or something analogous to this.⁶⁵ Of course, it puts him at odds with many other trinitarians, particularly those who deny that God is a material object, those who affirm a 'classical' doctrine of divine simplicity, and those who hold to a one-self understanding of the Trinity.⁶⁶

In contrast, Tertullian uncontroversially satisfies all the criteria for having a unitarian Christian theology. He's a unitarian just as much as a number of well-known early modern philosophical theologians, such as Isaac Newton, Samuel Clarke, Thomas Emlyn, and Noah Worcester, as well as most leading pre-Nicene theologians, such as Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, and Novatian.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ See the end of chapter 31, the very end of *Against Praxeas*.

⁶⁵ Jeffrey E. Brower and Michael C. Rea, 'Material Constitution and the Trinity', *Faith and Philosophy* 22:1 (2005), 57-76. Unlike Tertullian, they suggest that the 'nature' or 'essence' shared by the Persons of the Trinity is only *somewhat like* matter, playing a role in the Trinity similar to the role matter plays in a form-matter compound such as a marble statue. Also unlike Tertullian, they suggest this *all* of this nature is shared by the Persons, and that this sharing occurs eternally. They clearly face the objection that their theology isn't monotheistic, but are arguably less successful than Tertullian in answering it. (Tuggy, 'Constitution', pp. 138-41)

⁶⁶ For the classification of some recent Trinity theories as 'one self' theories, see my 'Trinity', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/> [accessed 18/8/2016], section 1.

It is not true that mainstream or catholic Christianity has always taught a trinitarian theology. These second and third century theologians were leading catholic intellectuals in their day, teaching unitarian theologies. It is an interesting question how and why, starting in the latter half of the fourth century, this began to change.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ For discussion of relevant passages by Justin, Irenaeus, and Origen, see my presentation ‘The Lost Early History of Unitarian Christian Theology’, available at: <<http://trinities.org/blog/the-lost-early-history-of-unitarian-christian-theology/>> [accessed 18/8/2016]. On Novatian see his *Treatise Concerning the Trinity*, trans. by Robert Wallis, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume V*, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Arthur Coxe (1886), 605-44, ch. 1-6, 23-31, pp. 611-6, 634-44.

⁶⁸ A previous draft of this paper was presented to an audience at the conference ‘Analytical Theology: Faith, Knowledge and the Trinity’, in Prague, Czech Republic, September 2013, sponsored by the Templeton Foundation. My thanks to that audience for their helpful comments.