No Other Gods Before Me? A dialogue with St Thomas on the possibility of a Christian Polytheism

Peter Kevern

The Problem

Is monotheism inherently oppressive? There is a recurring argument that says that it is. To believe that there is only one God, so the argument goes, is to believe that there is ultimately only one form of truth, one right answer to every question and one proper way to organise the human world. To disagree with this truth (in practice, to disagree with me) is to be, quite simply, wrong.

Some loose empirical evidence supporting this thesis can be gained from comparative religions. The history of the fiercely monotheistic Middle-Eastern religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) shows them all, in their separate ways, as intolerant of disagreement. Whether the mechanism is the doctrine of the Chosen People, the imposition of orthodoxy on heretics or the violent suppression of unbelievers, all divide the world into the Right and the Wrong, the people of God and the remainder. So One God yields One Truth and, inevitably, that One Truth is known through One Revelation – whether Jesus, the Qur'an or the state of Israel. There is no need for any more, and if there is any disagreement between revelations then one of them is clearly false.

For Christians, this belief naturally expresses itself politically and ecclesiologically in One Church. The Church is the body of people who are Right, typically under the control of One Head who is Truly Right.[1] It follows that those who disagree are Wrong and, as such, are by definition outside the Church. They have nothing to contribute because, as the Jesuits used to say, Error has No Rights. By contrast, polytheist[2] Hinduism lacks any agreed body of truth to be 'Right' about, and non-theist Theravada Buddhism (which professes

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[1] For examples of this view (expressed in a less exaggerated form) see especially J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM 1981) 129–148; and G.D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery* (Harvard: University Press 1993) Chapter 6.

[2] There is continuing debate about whether there is such a thing as 'Hinduism' and, if so, whether it can be termed 'polytheist'. However, the claim is a reasonable generalisation for the limited purposes of this paper.

to be uninterested in the notion of a suprahuman truth) deliberately avoids making judgements about others. These 'softer' notions of the structure and significance of truth-claims appear to allow for a softer and more open religious practice, as evidenced by the generally less exclusivist beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of adherents of these religions.

Although historical evidence is always difficult to interpret, the suggestion that these differing attitudes and actions may reflect differing beliefs about the number of Gods/Truths seems to commend itself quite naturally. One of the most obvious applications of this perspective is in the area of interreligious dialogue. If the Christian assertion of One God makes it inevitable that those who disagree are wrong, then it is clearly impossible to treat adherents of other religions as possessing some vital truth about the Divine. If 'Christian Truth' is One, it seems inevitable that 'Divine Truth' should be One also.

Nevertheless, many if not most Christians are uncomfortable with this assertion of Christian uniqueness in the face of their experience of interreligious encounter. Both theologically and empirically, the implication that the whole of God's self-revelation is found within the Church, exclusively and without remainder, is repugnant. What alternatives are there to the bald assertion of the One Christian Truth as the basis for Christians' encounter with other religions?

Responses

A reconstructed doctrine of the Trinity is sometimes presented as an alternative to simple monotheism, preserving the Christian confession of Truth while opening it to difference.[3] For many, this doctrine provides a means by which they may say more about Truth than polytheism or non-theism encourages, but less violently than a strict monotheism seems to require – and this provides a partial explanation for the recovery of interest in the theme in recent decades.[4] On this understanding, belief in a God who is neither one nor many but three-in-one offers the possibility that fidelity to One Truth can still celebrate difference; that churches can be unified yet diverse; that Christians can meet with representatives of other faiths without passing judgement on them; that societies can be culturally and religiously plural without losing their central values.

[3] So e.g. G. D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark 2000).
[4] So, most clearly, Colin Gunton's lectures on *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge: University Press 1993); L. Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates 1988).

But setting aside for the moment the serious question of whether this application of the Trinity is valid and faithful to the Tradition,[5] this approach is of limited value in the encounter with those of other faiths. In the first place, talk of religious truth as a reconciliation of unity and diversity along Trinitarian lines still wraps difference within sameness, i.e. unity *overcomes* diversity. It is a variation *within* monotheism: and specifically within Christian monotheism. Other religions' divine truths are organised within an overarching schema of One Christian Truth: it is Christians who have the hermeneutic key by means of which these competing truth-statements may be reconciled. Secondly, talk of Trinity in no way facilitates dialogue with members of other faiths. When in interfaith dialogue Christians assert that they believe in God, three-in-one, it offends Muslims, because it seems to undermine God's oneness; it perplexes Hindus, who may not understand why this differs from their own position; and it seems irrelevant to Theravada Buddhists, for whom speculation about God is largely a distraction. In summary, the Trinity has great value *within* Christian discourse and may make intrachristian diversity possible, but it needs to be left there. It can only function as a paradigm for dialogue *between* faiths if one adopts an inclusivist insistence on the primacy of a Christian frame of reference.

Alternatives to this approach must necessarily take us outside definitively Christian Truth and draw on a theory of Divine Truth in general. The most well-known of these is to treat different religions as different roads to the same destination, or different facets of the One Divine Truth. Whether or not this is a credible hypothesis in its own terms,[6] it drives Christians to unpalatable conclusions. Chief among these is the fact that, if all religions are partial apprehensions of the One Divine Truth, the revelation through Jesus Christ is similarly flawed and incomplete: many traditional 'orthodox' Christian assertions about the person and work of Christ then become very difficult to maintain. In short, it seems impossible on this model to uphold both the One Divine Truth (as it is encountered in all religions) and the One Christian Truth held by many to be at the core of Christians' understanding of God.

Is it, then, possible, to maintain the One Christian Truth by loosening our assertion of the Oneness of Divine Truth? In other words, if Christian Truth can't be one of a number of imperfect renditions of

[5] It may be asserted a) that the current view of Trinity is a distortion and fiction in that it treats the *hypostases* as self-conscious subjects, and b) that the argument for a 'Social Trinity' is circular, constructing the Trinity on analogy with human society and then back again For a succinct critique, see K. Kilby, 'Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with the Social Doctrines of the Trinity', *New Blackfriars* 81:596 (2000) 432–445.

[6] See e.g. J. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillan 1980). Criticism centres on the way this theory leaves the definition of Divine Truth in the hands of academics, unless it is made subject of a sort of transcendental deduction which empties it of all particularity. So e.g. G. D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology of Religions* (London: University Press of America, 1987).

the One Divine Truth, can it be the perfect rendition of one of a number of divine truths? This is the sort of approach suggested by Mark Heim.[7] He argues that each religion is 'salvific' in its own terms, in that it successfully answers the questions it poses itself about what it means for a human being to be 'saved'. We are free to defer the question of which of the various understandings of 'salvation' takes priority, or answer it in confessionally-orientated ways.[8] The important thing here is that, within the broad assertion that religions share a concern for the 'divine' dimension of being human, they may be talking about quite different things. While Christian Truth is One, divine truths may be plural.[9] We can affirm the uniqueness and the completeness of the Christian revelation without thereby closing our ears and hearts to others.

It is wise at this stage, however, to pause and consider the implications. The statement that there is One Christian Truth among a number of divine truths in effect commits us to a twofold doctrine of God. Within the Christian confession we may be 'doxological monotheists', in the sense that we *worship* only one God. However in interfaith dialogue we must be 'epistemological polytheists', or at least pluralists, in that we affirm the possibility of divine truths that are in the possession of another, and regarding which we have no insight. There is a plurality in the Divine that is not reducible to the three persons of the Christian Trinity. Our assertion of the (three-in-)oneness of God is not definitive here: the question of God's 'number' remains open.[10]

This requires of Christians a certain two-facedness. Their *internal* discourse would affirm a christocentric monotheism, whereas their *external* discourse would affirm a (poly)theocentric pluralism. Such a duality may sound strange, but is a fairly faithful model of how many Christians behave in relation to practitioners of other faiths. It is also represented in common Christian discourse, in the distinction between intrafaith and interfaith perspectives. Is it legitimate and proper for Christians to be pluralist or polytheist in interfaith dialogue: to treat other religions as making true statements, even where they are at odds with Christian statements? In the remainder of this paper I will argue that it is, and that when this occurs more fruitful

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[7] See S.M. Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1995).

[8] Even this may be too 'Christian' an answer, since salvation is a distinctively Christian concern (see J. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), but it is sufficient for the present purposes.

[9] See Gordon D. Kaufman. 'Religious Diversity and Religious Truth' in *God, Mystery, Diversity* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1996) 187–203: '...there is little agreement on questions of religious truth, or on how disagreements in this field should be adjudicated among Buddhists and Moslems, Hindus and Christians. Each tradition seems to have worked out what it will regard as "true", and by what criteria these "truths" can be validated.' (187)

[10] The reader may note that this construction of the relation between confessional and general truth about God has affinities with some elements of Old Testament belief, in which YHWH was seen as the 'One God' in the sense of the one patron of the Israelites, rather than the only form of the Divine.

conversation may be possible. I will argue that this is not apostasy but a proper recognition of the boundaries between intrareligious and interreligious dialogue. It allows for a strong affirmation of the Trinity and the authority of Christ among Christians, without requiring it as a universal article of faith.

The interlocutor I have selected for this unorthodox-sounding exploration is Thomas Aquinas, and specifically that section of the *Summa Theologiae* in which he deals with the number of persons in the Godhead. Apart from Thomas' impeccable orthodoxy and authority for a large sector of the Church and the clarity of his thought, the main advantage of turning to the *Summa* for these purposes is the way in which its structure mirrors the structure of our problem. Thomas' treatment of each sub-question (Article) comprises a set of 'Objections', which are the issues raised by philosophical reflection independent of the Christian confession. This is followed by a short statement from Scripture or an authoritative Patristic source in apparent contradiction to these fruits of the reasoning process (*Sed Contra*) leading to Thomas' 'Reply' in which he refutes or modifies the 'Objections', one by one, in the light of the Christian Truth. We therefore have a public, 'interfaith' discourse and a confessionally Christian one, separated by a short extract from Christian sources. Thus it is easy to distinguish statements that Thomas considers justified on their own terms from those that are the specific 'property' of Christians.

Turning to Thomas

In what follows, I intend to concentrate on Thomas' discussion in *ST* Ia, Questions 27–32, and in particular Q.30, *Of the Plurality of Divine Persons*.[11] Having opened his *Summa* with a discussion of God's unity, this section is where the possibility of any plurality in God is first entertained and discussed in detail. It builds from God's perfect unity towards a discussion of Trinity by careful degrees, beginning with the possibility of different processions in God (27), then of different relations (28) and a definition of the concept of a divine person (29) before broaching the question of in what sense God could be understood as a plurality of divine persons.

The result is that, by the time we arrive at Q.30, we have a clear understanding of just how Thomas intends to define 'person' so that he can argue for the existence of a plurality of persons in God, and specifically the Christian understanding of the Godhead as three persons, one substance, without (in his own terms) compromising

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[11] The English version I am using here is the Blackfriars edition begun in 1963. Quotations from Volume 6 (1a. 27–32), trans. Ceslaus Velecky O.P. (London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, n.d.).

God's unity. The main focus of this discussion will be on the public, philosophical argument in favour of a plurality of divine persons: the one that, in Thomas' understanding, could be accepted by all people on the basis of reason alone. Noting the contribution of revelation in the *Sed Contra*, we will then move on to a consideration of how, for Thomas, revelation modifies the answer to the question. Finally, I will explore whether revelation modifies the answer *universally* (as has usually been assumed) or *contextually* (i.e. for Christians). This will provide the basis, in the conclusion to this paper, for a consideration of practical ways forward on the basis of a 'conditional polytheism'.

Question 30 has four articles:

1. Are there several divine persons?
2. How many are there?
3. What do numerical terms mean when used of God?
4. On the sharing of the word 'person' by all alike.

The main focus of this discussion will be on Article 2. However, this in turn rests on a key move that Thomas makes in 30.1, in response to the question of how there can be a plurality of persons in the Godhead. He maintains that, because each person is defined by its relations with the others rather than by any separation of substance, a plurality of persons does not divide or undermine the unity of God. Consequently (and to my mind the implications of this are radical) when we use numbers to treat of the Godhead, we are not counting discreet objects, but applying a mental construct in the abstract. [12]

What is Thomas saying here? One reading would be that the Trinity (or at least the 'threeness' of it) is a mental construct, epistemologically useful but of no ontological value. But this is to back-project Kantian categories anachronistically, and does not explain Thomas' later insistence on the Trinity being three persons, neither more nor less. When Thomas speaks of 'pure or abstract' number the analogy is closer to geometry: a triangle has three sides, necessarily and truly: what is lost is not the truth of the assertion, but its necessary expression in the physical world. Triangles are true, and exist, whether or not one is referring to any particular triangle of things in the world. The point becomes clear when we think of the Godhead, not as a cake divided into three slices, but a triangle comprising three sides or relationships.[13] We do not need to be able to define the relationships in order to affirm the threeness. It is this

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[12] 'There are two kinds of number, namely pure or abstract (for instance two, three, four) and applied number in things numbered (for instance, two men, two horses). If abstract or absolute number be used of God then there is no reason why there should not be whole and part in him, for this is only in our minds' representation; for number apart from things numbered exists only in the mind.' *Summa* 1a. 30. 1 ad 4.

[13] See also the Reply to 30.3.

character that makes possible the affirmation of *both* threeness *and* oneness in God: there is room for a plurality of divine persons in the Godhead. In principle, there can be different apprehensions of divine truth – to extend the analogy, God may be an octagon or dodecagon rather than a triangle. But Thomas would not consider these as possibilities, because we remain here within the limits of intra-christian discourse: the three in question are identifiably the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This willingness to be governed by Christian Truth in his discussion of Divine Truth becomes clear in his response to Article 2. The Article raises five points for discussion ('Objections'), all probing the question, 'Are there in God more than three persons?' in different ways. Of these, the first two argue only about whether it is more appropriate to think of four persons rather than three, on the basis of four relations within the Godhead. Thomas' response is an extension of his already-developed theme of the character of the relations within the Godhead: it depends upon distinct characteristics of the Christian understanding of God and is therefore of questionable applicability outside the Christian confession.[14] Hence, Thomas' assertion that there can be only three persons is governed by revelation and need not be treated as binding outside the limits of Christian discourse.

This leaves open the possibility of a wider plurality in interfaith encounters, where the limits of Christian discourse are by definition exceeded. The remaining three Objections advanced under the heading of Article 2 treat of the question of an infinite or indeterminate number of persons in the Godhead, and map out some of the possibilities for a reasoned understanding of divine plurality.

Objection 3 is an argument by analogy from the fullness of creation to the fullness of God. To be perfect is to be interiorly-complex – therefore God, who is most perfect, is most differentiated and comprises an infinite number of persons.[15] Thomas has answered this from a Christian perspective in ad 1: for Christians there are only three distinct relations, and so three persons. However, in terms of natural theology his answer must be by consideration of the analogy itself. In ad 3, Thomas rejects the analogical argument from the increasing complexity encountered in nature. Thomas observes that (according to his doctrines) only the physical order shows increasing complexity: angels are simpler, and so by a further extension of the analogy God may be expected to be simpler still (see 50.2 Reply to

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[14] The gist of the argument is that there are three distinct relations in the Godhead – Fatherhood, Sonship and Procession – and a person is defined by their relations within the Godhead rather than by possession of an independent substance. Two Persons with the same relations (for example, two 'sons') would be the same Person.

[15] 'The more perfect a creature the more interior activities it has . . . Now God infinitely surpasses all creatures . . . Hence the divine persons are infinite.'

Objection 1). On this modified analogy, God is properly a unity, the simplest possible form.

Clearly this answer rests upon the particular metaphysics espoused by Thomas: does it still convince us in the light of the religious pluralism we daily encounter? Is the realm of the spiritual simpler than the realm of the physical? To a certain extent, the argument is circular: if we acknowledge other religions as authentic in their own terms, the answer is no; but our rejection of Thomas' reading of the analogy cannot be used as *a priori* reasoning in favour of such a position. The contribution of this argument is therefore equivocal: it neither opens nor closes the way to a Christian polytheism. There is a judgement to be made: is it appropriate to think of God as infinitely complex?

Objection 4 lays out the argument that, since there is infinite goodness in each of the divine persons, each produces another as the Father does, and so on *ad infinitum*.[16] Is it not appropriate that there should be abundance in the Godhead, against which the assertions of merely three persons appears parsimonious and limiting? Thomas' answer is subtle, and consistent with his reply to Article 1, Objection 2: that the goodness possessed by the Holy Spirit is not different from that possessed by the Father because the substance of the Godhead is not divided up between the persons. Consequently, all production is the Father's production – and following Thomas' principle that there should be no more persons than relations in the Godhead, we are driven back once again to the number three, neither more nor less.

However, when applied in this instance, Thomas' answer seems rigorous to the point of reductionism. It is one thing to say that there is no *necessity* to recognise more than three persons in the Godhead; quite another to say that more than three cannot be *conceived* in the Godhead. Against the parsimony of formal logic may, perhaps, be placed the playfulness and abundance of God: we may consider ourselves to be *allowed* to conceive of more than three persons even if, within Christian discourse, only three can be defined by their relations. Is it appropriate to conceive of God in this way? It depends in part on our answer to the last, unanswered question: is it appropriate to think of God as infinitely complex?

Finally, Objection 5 takes a different tack in tension with the previous two, since it refutes the applicability of any number with respect to the Godhead. Number equates to measurement, and the divine persons are immeasurable – therefore they cannot be restricted to any determinate figure such as three. There is however a vagueness

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[16] 'From the infinite goodness the Father gives himself infinitely in producing a divine person. But there is infinite goodness also in the Holy Ghost. Therefore the Holy Ghost produces a divine person, who produces another, and so to infinity.'

about this question as formulated. Is the imagined interlocutor arguing that no number may be applied to God at all (which seems to be the burden of the argument that to number is to measure) or that any number is equally valid in relation to the Godhead? Either way, Thomas' answer is the same: there are three and only three in the Godhead.[17]

Against the objection that this is to measure God, he argues that since the three are identical in greatness and no thing is its own measure, there is no measurement: they cannot be placed side by side as members of a set. This however seems to me to strengthen the objector's case: what is the number 'three' being used for, if not to number three things in a set? And if that is illegitimate, how can number be predicated of God at all? We seem to be back in the world of number apart from things numbered (see note 12) that exists only in the mind.

No doubt Thomas' reasons for asserting that God is three-in-one are confessional rather than philosophical and within this frame he is justified both in asserting the value of number and insisting that the proper number is Three. The question is whether all talk of God must be bound by the contents of the Christian revelation. Once again, the answer rests upon one's presuppositions about what is happening in interfaith dialogue. Is it merely a matter of presenting Christian Truth to a pagan world, or is there an exchange of divine truths that eludes reduction to Trinitarian formulae? If the answer is the latter we are outside the Christian dogmatic framework and the philosophical argument is persuasive. Then all numbers and none are applicable to the Godhead: unity, trinity and plurality are equally (in)applicable to the divine.

Summary

There is a disjunction between what must be said in intrachristian discourse, and what may be acceptable and useful in interfaith encounter. In exploring Thomas' discussion of the question of a plurality of persons in the Godhead, we find that the belief in the Trinity remains firmly in the 'intrachristian' category. The question of whether divine truth should be thought of differently in interfaith encounter – as infinitely complex, or eluding the categories of complexity and simplicity altogether – depends on prior assumptions about what is happening during such encounter. In other words, Thomas' arguments leave us free to step out into an unknown territory where the rules are discovered in the action rather than by

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[17] 'Everything that can be limited to a definite number can be measured, for number is a kind of measure. Yet divine persons are immeasurable . . . Therefore they are not restricted to the number of three.'

a theological or philosophical *a priori*, without prejudging what we may find there.

Nevertheless, our consideration of Thomas' arguments has not left us completely in the dark. We have speculated that the increasing complexity we encounter in the hierarchy of creation may reflect, analogically, the complexity of God. We have encountered the notion that God's overflowing goodness may find its first expression in an overflowing of Gods; we have considered how God escapes number altogether, to be described by any, all or none of them. All these point gently towards an understanding of divine truth as irreducibly plural, and of Christian Truth as one particular, perfect and complete divine truth among them. What might arise from this perspective? Two positive assertions, coupled to two acts of resistance, come to mind.

First, they point to the value of an awestruck celebration of the abundance of God(s) in which the richness of human questing, growth and fulfilment finds its diverse homes. It follows that any attempt to universalise what are distinctively Christian intraconfessional themes must be vigorously resisted, even though in accepting this task we are accepting some severe limitations on our understanding.

Second, they point to the duty of openness to difference on its own terms. There is no need to reduce other faiths to variants of Christianity in order to make sense of them; again, this commits us to an openness and incompleteness in our relations to other faiths that resists any attempt to schematise divine truths.

Finally, there is no need to mitigate the assertion of the uniqueness and completeness of Christianity for the sake of openness to other faiths. The Christian tradition tells the One Christian Truth about God: the fact that there may be other divine truths is neither here nor there. It is legitimate and necessary to celebrate that belief without fear that it may set at nought the riches we encounter elsewhere.