

Deception and the Trinity: a rejoinder to Tuggy

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Abstract: Dale Tuggy argues that his divine-deception argument against Social Trinitarianism remains unscathed, in spite of my recent objections. I maintain that his argument is question-begging and exegetically weak, and does not succeed in refuting Social Trinitarianism.

I want to thank Dale Tuggy for his spirited defence of his divine-deception argument against Social Trinitarianism.¹ My thanks also to the Editor for permitting me a brief response. I am surprised, however, at Tuggy's failure to recognize the importance of the point that the terms 'Yahweh' and 'God' in the Bible should normally be taken as referring to the Father. This disposes at once of the notion of Yahweh as a fictional character, a notion which plays a prominent role in Tuggy's presentation of the deception argument. Tuggy will remind us, of course, that 'this god ... thunders through various prophets that he is the *only* god' (113), (thereby apparently denying the existence of the Son and the Holy Spirit as co-equal Trinitarian Persons).

In saying this Tuggy is in effect treating those prophetic pronouncements as sources of context-free propositional information, while ignoring the situation and purpose of their original utterance. 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. But no Trinitarian supposes that the Son and the Spirit are rivals, even potential rivals, of God the Father. Their lordship and authority are one with that of the Father, even as the very being of Son and Spirit is derived, through the relations of origin, from that of the Father. (For this reason the Eastern Church speaks of the *monarchia* of the Father.) It is a long reach exegetically to read Isaiah as inveighing against the doctrine of the Trinity.

Another benefit of the insight that in the Bible ‘God’, ‘Yahweh’, and ‘the Father’ are used more or less interchangeably is that it completely defuses Tuggy’s ‘third argument’ on which he sets so much store (see his n. 23, 115). The conclusion of that argument states merely that ‘God’ – that is, the Father – is not identical with the entire Trinity, and that this is not a problem for any non-modalist Trinitarian. Steps (1)–(3) are problematic only if one assumes (as I think Tuggy does assume) that they render illegitimate the usage in which ‘God’ refers to the Trinity rather than to the Father alone.

Tuggy faults me for proposing merely verbal solutions to various problems. In my view, however, some of the problems (not all of them!) really *are* verbal; they arise from the need to make sense of the things Christians find themselves saying, and feel justified in saying, in talking about the Trinity. Tuggy, however, has little interest in this project; for him, what is at stake is simply monotheism, which he defines in such a way that Trinitarians need not apply.² It is far from clear, though, why unitarians should be the ones to decide what counts as monotheism. Historically, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are regarded as the three great monotheistic religions. But Christianity has been Trinitarian at least since the third century CE so, by Tuggy’s lights, it ceased being monotheistic pretty early on. Going back even farther, do the fourth Gospel, the Pauline letters, and the letter to the Hebrews not count as monotheistic? Yet each of these assigns to the Son divine titles (including ‘God’), divine attributes, and divine activities such as creation.³ If Tuggy is going to deny that these writings, as traditionally understood, are monotheistic, that only reveals the biased and tendentious character of his definition.

Tuggy correctly points out that Trinitarians, including me, sometimes refer to ‘God’ in non-Trinitarian contexts in ways that ignore the doctrine of the Trinity and may even seem to be in conflict with it. This practice actually goes back a long way; Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa* speaks first of ‘the One God’ and only later of God as Trinity. One can certainly question whether the practice is justified. It is true that error concerning the Trinity is a serious matter, and one should not lightly write or speak in a way that seems to encourage such error. On the other hand, there are many issues in philosophical theology that do not directly involve the doctrine of the Trinity, and bringing the Trinity into the discussions of those issues might easily lead to confusion and misunderstanding about topics that are already complex and difficult. Perhaps what is needed is an occasional caveat reminding the reader that the doctrine of the Trinity is presupposed even if it is not a central concern in a particular context.⁴ But however this may be, there is no deliberate deception here, and certainly no *divine* deception. It is unfortunately not unexpected that philosophers and theologians sometimes speak in ways that are confused and/or misleading. That this happens is regrettable, but it does not constitute any sort of difficulty for the doctrine of the Trinity.

There is a lot more that needs to be said here but can't be because of space limitations. (In particular, I can't discuss further the thorny issue of analogical language.) But Tuggy is correct that my 'story' about the progressive revelation of the Trinity plays an important role in my overall position. My intention in crafting this story was not to announce some new discovery, but simply to give an account of the process by which the Church in fact came to have its doctrine of the Trinity. The story is told very briefly, and is made even shorter in Tuggy's retelling of it. Without doubt, in order to be adequate it would need to be expanded, and it is likely that some corrections would be needed as well. But my differences with Tuggy don't focus on these details. Our main difference is simply this: I think the process overall was appropriate and justified, and Tuggy does not.

In my view, the Holy Spirit, who was given to guide Christ's disciples into all the truth (John 16.13), did in fact succeed in leading the Church to substantial truth, and enabled it to avoid serious and destructive errors, concerning the nature of the Redeemer and the Trinitarian nature of God. On Tuggy's view, in contrast, the Spirit did not lead the Church into the truth on these matters; either the Spirit's guidance was unsuccessful, or perhaps these topics were not of special concern to God. Very early on, the Church moved in a fundamentally wrong direction concerning the nature of Christ, and it has never recovered from this mistake. (It is perhaps surprising, in view of this, that the Spirit was, in Tuggy's view, entirely successful in guiding the Church to accept precisely the correct list of books as the canon of the New Testament.) Readers must decide for themselves which of these views is more plausible; the Church, I believe, has long since made up its mind about that.

Notes

1. Dale Tuggy 'Divine deception and monotheism: a reply to Hasker', *Religious Studies*, 47 (2011), 109–115. In-text references are to this paper.
2. Readers who have seen only the present exchange might suppose that Tuggy's opposition is only to Social Trinitarianism, and that he is open to other versions of Trinitarian doctrine. That would be a mistake. He is equally opposed to all the other versions of Trinitarianism on offer, and I doubt that any of them (other than explicitly modalist views) would qualify as monotheistic by his lights. Tuggy now considers himself a unitarian (private communication).
3. Among other texts, see John 1.1–3, 14, 18; 5.17–18; 20.28–29; Romans 9.5 (cf. Acts 20.28); Philippians 2.5–10; Colossians 1.15–17; Titus 2.13; Hebrews 1.1–3, 8–12. It should be stated that Tuggy would not agree with the traditional reading of these passages that I am assuming here. I believe, however, that he faces a monumental exegetical task if he is to render these passages consistent with his unitarian Christology. (I am not at this point debating with those who would see the high Christology of these texts as a questionable late elaboration; Tuggy, as we have noted, claims to be a unitarian for biblical reasons.)
4. Tuggy refers to the philosophy of religion text, *Reason and Religious Belief*, of which I am a co-author: Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, & David Basinger *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 4th edn (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2009). So I would call to his attention the following note, which occurs in every edition of that volume: 'Note that we say God is "personal," not that God is *a person*. The latter assertion would be a controversial one, accepted by some theists but not by all. According to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, there are

three persons in God, designated as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: these persons are capable of personal relationships *between themselves* as well as with created persons. Nevertheless, it is common in Christian discourse to refer to 'God' – that is, to the Trinity – as to a single person. Jews and Muslims, on the other hand, emphatically reject the doctrine of the Trinity'; 87, n. 13. One may hope that this is sufficient to avoid the 'deception' of which Tuggy complains.