ANDERS-CHRISTIAN JACOBSEN

MONOTHEISM AS A KEY CONCEPT
IN EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Christianity was born in an environment where many different conceptions of the divine were competing – some worshipped numerous deities, others claimed that there was only one god, and still others operated with a conception of the divine somewhere in between these extremes. Christianity was thus born into a pagan polytheistic context, but also into a philosophical milieu where polytheism was under attack from different pagan philosophical currents arguing stronger and stronger for a philosophical monotheism. Moreover, Christianity had its deepest roots in contemporary Judaism and in old Israelite religion, which were both characterized by strong monotheistic tendencies. Nevertheless, because of its focus on God's incarnation in Jesus from Nazareth Christianity had an intrinsic drive towards ditheism. The questions, which I want to discuss in this paper, are how early Christian theologians coped with this situation and from which strands in the surrounding society it took its most characteristic traits.

There are good reasons for focusing on the question of monotheism in early Greek theology. Firstly, because definitions of God, and more precisely the claim that there was only one god, seem to have played a central role for the development and spread of Christianity in the first centuries of its history – in fact, it might have been crucial. Secondly, during the last decades there has been a strong tendency in modern systematic theology to criticize what is called a theistic and strictly monotheistic concept of God. The critics claim that under the influence of Greek philosophy early Christianity developed an unbiblical monotheistic and theistic concept of God in which God was described as a distant and immovable God who was unable to relate to humanity, and

that this concept of God, therefore, must be deconstructed[1]. The question is if this is really how God was presented in the earliest Christian texts.

For these reasons, I will focus on the question of monotheism in early Christian theology, mainly as it was expressed by the Greek-speaking theologians. I will also present a few remarks about how Christian monotheism contributed to the quick spread of Christianity or how the contemporary systematic theological critique of early Christian monotheism could be answered. These last two topics must, however, be developed further.

WHAT IS MONOTHEISM — A BRIEF DEFINITION

I and many others usually define monotheism in the following way:
1) There is only one God.
2) This one God is often characterized as being almighty, immovable, distant from the world, eternal, etc.

However, this is the definition of strong or « exclusive » theistic monotheism, and many sub-definitions can be added to it. One is the concept of monolatry (meaning that only one god should be worshipped), another is that of « inclusive monotheism », which includes the idea that the one God is superior, but not the only divine being[2]. This is a useful concept, also when it comes to early Christian theology, as we shall see several examples of below. But first, we must try to map the most important backgrounds of Christian monotheism.

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1. See for example J. Moltmann, « Kein Monotheismus gleicht dem anderen. Dekonstruktion eines untauglichen Begriffs », *Evangelische Theologie* 62, 2002, p. 112-122; J. Moltmann, *Der Gekreuzigte Gott. Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie*, Gütersloh, [7]2002, p. 236-239.
2. I took the term « inclusive monotheism » from B.J.L. Peerbolte, « Jewish monotheism and Christian origins », in: A. Houtman et all. (eds.), *Empsychoi Logos. Religious Innovations in Late Antiquity. Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst*, Brill, Leiden, 2008, p. 227-246 (232) : « This designation is used for the view in which YHWH is envisioned as the supreme deity, the only God, surrounded by a heavenly hierarchy of angels and other beings who are subjugated to the power of this one God. »