

A COMPARISON OF CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM MONOTHEISM
FROM A TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVE

DOUG BEAUMONT

The complex God of the Athanasian Creed may be an enigma for the intellect; but He is far less likely to gather the mystery and cruelty of a Sultan than the lonely God of Omar or Mahomet.

- GK Chesterton

Introduction - Methodology of Comparison

When comparing two religions, it is tempting to first seek out their similarities and discover how much of a synthesis is possible between them. It not only seems to be the opinion of the “man on the street,” but also of many university professors that the great world religions all teach basically the same things but only differ in peripheral issues. Robert Ballou, editor of *The Portable World Bible*, states that, “this [Christian idealism] is only a small part of the truth, for these ideals of world brotherhood and international human morality were uttered in many places long before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.” He goes on to state that, “the similarity of the fundamental principles of all these creeds (which, with Christianity, one might well call “the good-will religions,” for this phrase designates their greatest distinguishing quality) may be seen by examining a few statements from several of them.”¹ He goes on to quote several religious texts that admonish men to good deeds and moral behavior. This alleged similitude, at first glance, seems a logical induction from the comparable moral precepts that are indeed found in most of the world’s religions. There is, however, a large flaw in this reasoning, for those who hold to this syncretistic ideal are confusing cause and effect.

John Ruskin is quoted as saying, “There are many religions, but there is only one morality.”² If this is so, then one would expect all successful world religions to reflect that

¹Robert Ballou, *The Portable World Bible* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1976), 3-8.

²William Neil, *Concise Dictionary of Religious Quotations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 120.

morality or else fail due to their existentially impossible guidelines. While many people may deny an objective moral foundation with their lips, their reaction to unethical cruelty toward themselves (if not also others) is adequate proof of their true moral knowledge, for when they are injured by another they will say they are “wronged” and not merely “hurt.” The apostle Paul gives the ground for this universal morality in his letter to the Romans in chapter two, stating that it is God’s law impressed upon all men that guides them in their morality. It can be seen then that if the same cause (*viz.* God) is responsible for fundamental moral law, then one would expect to find the same effect (similar moral principles) taught by all men. This is evidenced by the fact that even those who eschew “organized religion” follow basic moral codes that are similar across cultural and national boundaries. It can therefore be concluded that the reflection of universal moral precepts between two religions is not sufficient evidence of comparable doctrine. Thus, an adequate comparison of religions must be sought through other means.

When seeking a satisfactory comparison between two things the differences are often more important than the similarities. If two things are exactly the same then they are the same thing; what makes them two is their differences. Consider the following comparison between an airplane and a bicycle:

Bicycle	Airplane
Rolls on rubber tires Made up of metal tubes Used for transportation Has steering controls Passengers generally sit while in motion Can travel faster than a man alone Travels mostly on ground	Rolls on rubber tires Made up of metal tubes Used for transportation Has steering controls Passengers generally sit while in motion Can travel faster than a man alone Travels mostly in the air

In the above comparison the uneducated person might think that an airplane and a bicycle are almost exactly the same thing, after all they only appear to differ at one point. That one point, however, is crucial. The foundational purpose of an airplane is radically different from that of a bicycle although they do share many attributes. Some of the foundational tenets of a religion are its teachings on God, the World, Mankind, and Morality. Once these primary beliefs are compared the true distinctions will arise. Of these doctrines, the most notable and important is a religion's teachings on God. The reason for this is that the theology of a given belief system will determine its views on everything else.

All religions can first be placed within one of several broad categories of "theism." Polytheistic religions teach that there are many gods in the universe. Pantheistic religions teach that God is the universe. Finally, Atheistic religions teach that there is no god, but *only* the universe. All of these suffer from their philosophical inability to account for the necessary, infinite, cause of the existing universe.³ Only three religions fall into the final category of Monotheism (belief in one creator God who is separate from the universe): Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Within this category Judaism and Islam both differ from Christianity in that they deny the doctrine of the Trinity (one God existing as three distinct persons). It is the purpose of this paper to compare the doctrine of God between Christianity and Islam, specifically regarding the Trinity.

Islamic Monotheism

"La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasul Allah." It is with these words that over one billion Muslims begin and end their day. Islamic scholar Abdul Saleeb states that, "the whole

³See Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 173-235.

system of Muslim theology, philosophy, and religious life is summed up in [these] seven words.”⁴ To say that it is a simple creed is an understatement, one would find it difficult if not impossible to find an entire religion whose theology and very foundation rest upon a single sentence. In English it reads: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is Allah’s prophet (apostle / messenger).” This is the *Shahada*, and to recite it with sincerity of belief is all that one must do to become a Muslim.⁵ Belief in Allah as the one true God is the first of the five *Imam*, the articles of faith for a Muslim. The absolute unity and oneness of Allah is so critical to Muslim belief that the only unpardonable sin, called *Shirk*, is to associate any other god with Allah.⁶ This message is summarized in the word “*tawhid*.” Mutahhari states, “The Islamic world view is the world view of *tauhid*,” [emphasis in original].⁷ *Tawhid* was not only a revolution in Muhammad’s polytheistic culture of 600 A.D., but it remains the binding force of Islam today.

There is nothing more important to the Muslim than the absolute unity of Allah. This unity, in the Muslim world view, would be broken if any kind of plurality were introduced into the concept of God. Accordingly, the Islamic view of God is distinctly anti-Trinitarian. Below will be presented the Muslim understanding of monotheism as found in the Quran, the Hadith, and the writings of Islamic theologians.

⁴Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Understanding Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 13.

⁵Anis Shorrosh, *Islam Revealed* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), 27-28.

⁶Ibid, 29.

⁷Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari, *Fundamentals of Islamic Thought*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkley, CA: Mizan Press, 1985), 75.

Monotheism in the Quran

Allah is the personal name of the One true God. Nothing else can be called Allah.⁸ He is simple (indivisible) and absolutely transcendent. Allah and His creation are completely distinct. Allah is not part of His creation nor is it a part of Him. Muhammad's definition of Allah is found in Surah 112 in the Quran. It reads, "Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him." Note the specific negative reference to Allah's "begetting," a clear denial of Jesus as God's "only-begotten" Son. This is also reflected in Surah 2:116: "They say: '(Allah) hath begotten a son:' Glory be to Him – Nay, to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth: everything renders worship to Him." The reason for this denial of sonship revolves around the idea that if there were any plurality in Allah then he alone would not be God. Surah 21:22 reads, "If there were, in the heavens and the earth, other gods besides Allah, there would have been confusion in both! but glory to Allah, the Lord of the Throne: (High is He) above what they attribute to Him!" To deny this absolute sense of monotheism is the contrary to *tawhid*: the unpardonable sin of *shirk*.⁹

Surah 4:48

Allah forgiveth not that partners should be set up with Him; but He forgiveth anything else, to whom He pleaseth; to set up partners with Allah is to devise a sin Most heinous indeed.

Surah 4:116

Allah forgiveth not (The sin of) joining other gods with Him; but He forgiveth whom He pleaseth other sins than this: one who joins other gods with Allah, Hath

⁸In this paper "Allah" will refer only to the Islamic concept of deity, while "God" will be used in the generic sense of a title of a monotheistic deity (as opposed to "gods" in polytheism), and not a proper name (i.e. Yahweh).

⁹Mutahhari, *Fundamentals*, 84.

strayed far, far away (from the right).

The Quran presents both positive and negative statements regarding the Trinity. Some, as above, exclude the Trinity by the Muslim definition of Allah. That is, they define Allah in such a way that no plurality within a godhead could exist. In fact, there is no “godhead” in which plurality could exist. Other verses, however, positively state that the Trinity is false. Below are presented several Quranic verses that explicitly deny the Trinity:¹⁰

Surah 3:59

This similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam: He created him from dust then said to him: "Be" and he was.

Surah 3:67/67

Say: "O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah. that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah." If then they turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah.s Will). . . . Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in Faith, and bowed his will to Allah's (Which is Islam), and he joined not gods with Allah.

Surah 4:36

Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him.

Surah 4:171

O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) an apostle of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His apostles. Say not "Trinity" : desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah. Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son.

Surah 5:72-73

They do blaspheme who say: "(Allah) is Christ the son of Mary." But said Christ: "O Children of Israel! worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord." Whoever joins other gods with Allah,- Allah will forbid him the garden, and the Fire will be his abode. There will for the wrong-doers be no one to help. They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One Allah. If they

¹⁰In these and other Quranic citations words in parenthesis are the translator's and are not in the original.

desist not from their word (of blasphemy), verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them.

Surah 5:116-117

And behold! Allah will say "O Jesus the son of Mary! didst thou say unto men 'worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allah"? He will say: "Glory to Thee! never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing Thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart though I know not what is in Thine. For Thou knowest in full all that is hidden. "Never said I to them aught except what Thou didst command me to say to wit 'Worship Allah my Lord and your Lord'

Surah 19:34-35

Such (was) Jesus the son of Mary: (it is) a statement of truth about which they (vainly) dispute. It is not befitting to (the majesty of) Allah that He should beget a son.

Surah 19:88-93

They say: '(Allah) Most Gracious has begotten a son!' Indeed ye have put forth a thing most monstrous! As if the skies are ready to burst the earth to split asunder and the mountains to fall down in utter ruin. That they should invoke a son for (Allah) Most Gracious. For it is not consonant with the majesty of (Allah) Most Gracious that He should beget a son.

These verses should serve to show that the Quran unequivocally denies the truth of the Trinity. While the Quran is the highest source of doctrine for the Muslim, the *Hadith* or "traditions" are also considered authoritative.

Monotheism in the Hadith

The *Hadith* is a collection of writings that, according to tradition, record the words and deeds of Muhammad according to those who were near him during his life. They are not considered to be inspired in the same sense that the Quran is (*viz.* handed down from heaven), but it is considered authoritative and correct.¹¹ Muhammad Hamidullah records that, "the

¹¹Robert Morey, *The Islamic Invasion* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1992), 177.

teachings of Islam are based primarily on the Quran and the Hadith . . . both are based on divine inspiration.”¹² That the *Hadith* echoes the sentiments of the Quran with respect to the unity of Allah will be shown below.¹³

Volume 1, Book 12, Number 805

None has the right to be worshipped but Allah and He has no partner in Lordship or in worship or in the Names and the Qualities, and for Him is the Kingdom and all the praises are for Him and He is omnipotent.

Volume 2, Book 26, Number 621

I respond to Your call O Allah, I respond to Your call, and I am obedient to Your orders, You have no partner, I respond to Your call All the praises and blessings are for You, All the sovereignty is for You, And You have no partners with you.

Volume 3, Book 27, Number 23

Whenever Allah's Apostle returned from a Ghazwa, Hajj or 'Umra, he used to say Takbir thrice at every elevation of the ground and then would say, "None has the right to be worshipped but Allah; He is One and has no partner."

Volume 4, Book 52, Number 238

Whenever the Prophet returned from the Hajj or the 'Umra or a Ghazwa, he would say Takbir thrice. Whenever he came upon a mountain path or wasteland, and then he would say, "None has the right to be worshipped but Allah, Alone Who has no partner."

Volume 6, Book 60, Number 105

Christians will be called upon and it will be said to them, 'Who do you use to worship?' They will say, 'We used to worship Jesus, the son of Allah.' It will be said to them, 'You are liars, for Allah has never taken anyone as a wife or a son.'¹⁴

It is clear from these passages that not only is Trinitarianism denounced by Muhammad in the Quran, but that tradition also records and affirms anti-Trinitarian doctrine among Muslims. Finally, the words of some Islamic theologians and philosophers will be presented below.

¹²Muhammad Hamidullah, *Introduction to Islam* (Paris, FR: Centre Culturel Islamique, 1957), 23.

¹³Unless otherwise noted all Hadith quotes from: *Sahih Bukhari, Hadith*, trans. M. Muhsin Khan (<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/>: MSA-USC Hadith Database).

¹⁴Abu Said Al-Khudri, *Hadith Volume 6*, Book 60, Number 105. www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/.

Monotheism in Islamic Philosophy / Theology

Mutahhari writes in *Fundamentals of Islamic Philosophy*, “God most high has no likeness or associate. . . . because to be multiple, twofold or more, is among the special properties of limited, relative beings. For an unlimited, absolute being, manifoldness and multiplicity have no meaning.” He goes on to state, “If there were two (or more) gods, two (or more) intents and wills would necessarily be involved.”¹⁵ Mutahhari believes that this would necessitate confusion in actions between God and the universe. Commenting on Surah 21:22 he writes, “Such belief [in gods other than God] occasions departure from the circle of the people of *tauhid* and from the pale of Islam.”¹⁶ Thus, the Islamic world view rests on the absolute unity of God and to depart from that unity is to remove oneself from Islam.

Ahmed Deedat, one of the top Islamic apologists of the 20th Century stated, “This is the only real difference between the Muslim and the Christian – the divinity of Christ.”¹⁷ He ridicules the beliefs of Christians when he states, “The Christian says, ‘In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,’ I say you have three distinct mental pictures in your mind . . . They will be forever three in your mind unless the mind is diseased.”¹⁸ He goes on, asking rhetorically, “Is there a single Christian who can give me a verse that says Jesus and God are the same thing?”¹⁹ Deedat finishes his message by stating simply, “Jesus is dead. Why can’t He be

¹⁵Mutahhari, *Fundamentals*, 80-81.

¹⁶Ibid., 103.

¹⁷Shorrosh, *Islam Revealed*, 251.

¹⁸Ibid. 253.

¹⁹Ibid 260.

what He claimed to be? He is the messenger of God.”²⁰ These are all typical of Deedat’s writings, having spent most of his skill attempting to debunk Christian beliefs in Jesus’ deity, His resurrection, and the veracity of the Bible. Here is what Deedat claims in an article entitled *The God That Never Was*:

Islam is the only religion which teaches the existence of a PERFECT God. A perfect God means that there is no sharer in His Nature and His Attributes . . . that Jesus was also a God [is] a belief that is abhorrent to us, because it is an antithesis of the Absolute perfection of Allah [emphasis in original].²¹

He proceeds to list several verses inserting the word ‘God’ for ‘Christ’ in order to show the “absurdity” of believing that Christ is God (these will be dealt with below). He finishes with:

According to the quotations of the Bible given above, we find that Jesus did neither SHARE THE NATURE OF GOD nor is he IN EVERY WAY LIKE GOD. He is, therefore, definitely NOT God! The onus to prove that Jesus is God now rests with this Christian. Either he must prove that Jesus is God, or he must admit that he is a polytheist, i.e., a believer in more than one God [emphasis in original].²²

While Shaikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab, in an essay entitled *Four Rules of Pure Monotheism* condemned Trinitarians harshly when he wrote,

The people who associate partners with Almighty God, in both belief and worship, in our own day are worse and hence more guilty than those of pre-Islamic times. For, the ancient ones used to only worship others besides God in prosperity and return to genuine faith in adversity, whereas the present day associationists are constant in their unbelief, regardless of prosperity or adversity. Evidence for this is in the Qur'anic verse: "And when they ride in barks [in stormy seas] they address their prayers to Almighty God in complete sincerity, but relapse into shirk (i.e. associating partners with Him) when they reach the shore”

²⁰Ibid 268.

²¹Ahmad Deedat, *The God That Never Was* (<http://www.islamworld.net/neverwas.html>, 2002).

²²Ibid., Epilogue

[Surah29:65].²³

Others have been more charitable in their evaluation of Christian belief:

according to Islam, "monotheism" is much more than simply believing in the existence of "only One God" - as seemingly opposed to two, three or more. . . . Islam's criticism of the other religions that claim to be "monotheistic" is not because they are "polytheistic" in the classic sense, but because they direct various forms of worship to other than Almighty God [emphasis in original].²⁴

The above statement, while certainly more politically correct than most, is still essentially a denial of Christian belief, for if the doctrine of the Trinity is correct then Christians can in no way be considered polytheists (this will be made more plain below).

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that the Holy Book of Islam, its traditions, and its theologians are in agreement as to strict unity of Allah. Were the Islamic view of the Christian Trinity in question at all it might be necessary to provide more evidence, but this is not the case. Only an extraordinarily liberal Muslim could even consider accepting the Christian view of God and remain (in his mind) a Muslim. It is proper at this point to succinctly and correctly describe the orthodox Christian position on the nature of God, for as will be shown below, one's view of Trinitarian doctrine will determine one's acceptance of it.

²³Shaikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab, *Four Rules of Pure Monotheism* (thetruereligion.org/4rules.htm, 2002).

²⁴Abu Iman Abd ar-Rahman Robert Squires, *Who is Allah?* (: <http://thetruereligion.com/allah.htm>, 2002).

Trinitarian Monotheism

In his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis astutely noted that “if Christianity was something we were making up, of course we could make it easier. But it is not. We cannot compete, in simplicity, with people who are inventing religions. . . . anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about.”²⁵ This comes, not surprisingly, at the end of his chapter on the Trinity. James White in *The Forgotten Trinity* notes that “the Trinity is a truth that tests our dedication to the principle that God is smarter than we are.”²⁶ That the Trinity is difficult to explain, and impossible for mankind to fully understand, should not be surprising. In *Understanding the Trinity* Alister McGrath answers Wittgenstein’s question, “if words are inadequate to describe the aroma of coffee, how much more difficulty will one have describing God with them?” with,

When we consider what the word ‘God’ really means, it is absurd to suppose that we can ever fully describe or define him. . . . For the human mind to capture God in His fullness is about as probable as being able to pour the entire Atlantic Ocean into a bucket!²⁷

While it may seem to be a hopeless cause to some (as most theology does to many today), the Trinity’s importance is extraordinary. Gordon Clark introduces his book *The Trinity* with these words, “This doctrine was the first the early church had to work out, and it is the indispensable basis for the doctrine of the Atonement and all that follows.”²⁸ Indeed, one’s view of God will in

²⁵C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 145.

²⁶James White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1998), 20.

²⁷Alister McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 46-49.

²⁸Gordon Clark, *The Trinity* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1990), vii.

a large part determine their view on all other doctrine.

Defining The Trinity

Gordon Clark records that, “the nemesis of Trinitarian discussion is the lack of precise definitions.”²⁹ Before an exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity is given, a word must be said regarding the title of the doctrine itself. Much has been made of the fact that the term “trinity” is not a Biblical word. It should be obvious that any body of teaching can be summarized by a term that is not found within that body of teaching. It has been said many times that the word “bible” is not itself found in the Bible, neither is “theocracy,” “Calvinism,” or, “pre-millennial.” The fact that these titles are not found in the Bible alone does not make the teachings to which they refer unbiblical.³⁰ Athanasius might be surprised to find this same sort of argumentation going on in our day as in his, he wrote in *De Decretis*: “However, if a person is interested in the question, let him know, that, even if the expressions are not in so many words in the Scriptures, yet, as was said before, they contain the sense of the Scriptures, and expressing it, they convey it to those who have their hearing unimpaired for religious doctrine.”³¹ Aquinas noted that, “If we could speak of God only in the very terms themselves of Scripture, it would follow that no one could speak about God in any but the original language of the Old or New Testament. The urgency of confuting heretics made it necessary to find new words to express the ancient faith about God.”³² It is important, therefore, to remember that the word “trinity” is not the issue, but what it teaches.

²⁹Ibid., 59.

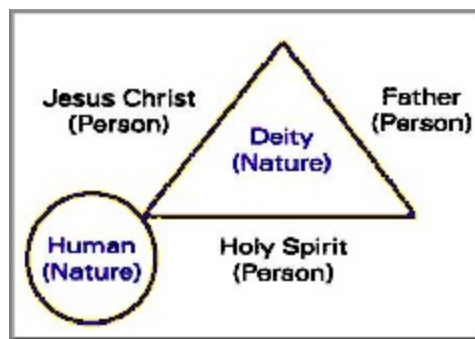
³⁰While rhetorically useful it should be noted that the word “bible” is in fact found in the Bible - the word is from the Greek term **biblos** (biblos) which in English is translated “book” and is found over 40 times from Mt. 1:1 to Rev. 22:19.

³¹Saint Athanasius:, *Select Works and Letters*, Ed. Philip Schaff (Albany, Or: Ages Software, 1997), 525.

³²Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica P(1)-Q(29)-A(3)-RO(1)]*, v1.0 (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997).

Dr. H. Wayne House writes, “The word ‘Trinity’ is never used, nor is the doctrine of Trinitarianism ever explicitly taught in the Scriptures, but Trinitarianism is the best explication of the biblical evidence.”³³ Before moving on to the more subtle and complex issues surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity, a basic definition will suffice: “Within one Being that is God, there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”³⁴

Several key ideas must be understood before the full impact of this statement will be grasped, and this will be done below. For now, the essential elements of Trinitarianism will be summarized: (1) There is only one God. (2) There are three persons who are God. (3) Each person in the godhead is fully deity, and is therefore eternal, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and has all other attributes of deity. (4) The persons are distinct in that they are not each other, but are one in that they share the same singular, infinite nature. (5) The person of the Son took on an additional, fully human, nature during the incarnation. This is



illustrated (Figure 1) below.³⁵

³³H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 48.

³⁴White, *The Forgotten Trinity*, 26.

³⁵Illustration from Dr. Norman Geisler in *Systematic Theology 2* notes, Southern Evangelical Seminary.

Fig. 1: Trinitarianism

Aquinas wrote concerning the Trinity that, “we must beware of two opposite errors, and proceed cautiously between them — namely, the error of Arius, who placed a Trinity of substance with the Trinity of persons; and the error of Sabellius, who placed unity of person with the unity of essence.”³⁶ Before the terms are inspected it will serve at this point to carefully note what the doctrine of the Trinity does *not* teach. By way of negation many errors concerning the doctrine can be put to rest at once, for oftentimes the very objections to the Trinity are not directed at what it actually teaches. Although multiple variables have been suggested within each of the categories below, the three main errors made when dealing with the Trinity *per se* are as follows:³⁷

Sabellianism (Modalism): This view teaches that God is one and the three persons of God are merely names applied to particular modes or actions of God. Thus, when God creates He is “Father,” when He incarnates He is “Son,” and when He moves in people’s lives he is “Holy Spirit.” Modalism, then, confuses the persons of God (see figure 2).

³⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, [P(1)-Q(31)-A(2)].

³⁷Clark writes that, “The doctrine of the Trinity chiefly concerns the deity of the Son and the personality of the Spirit.” [*The Trinity*, 9-10.] Most variables in Trinitarian heresies revolve around the nature(s) of the Son, while only a few concern the nature of the Holy Spirit. Space does not permit an evaluation of all of these, and Islamic misunderstanding usually falls into one of the two main categories of error dealt with below.

Fig. 2: Modalism**Fig. 3 Tritheism**

Tritheism: This view teaches that each of the persons is a god, thus dividing the substance of God into three. This violates the foremost statement of Trinitarian belief in one God (see figure 3 above).

Neither of the above two views express the true teaching of Trinitarianism which neither confuses the persons (seeing three as one), nor divides the substance (seeing one as three). Recognizing these two errors will be extremely helpful when dealing with upcoming objections.

Terms

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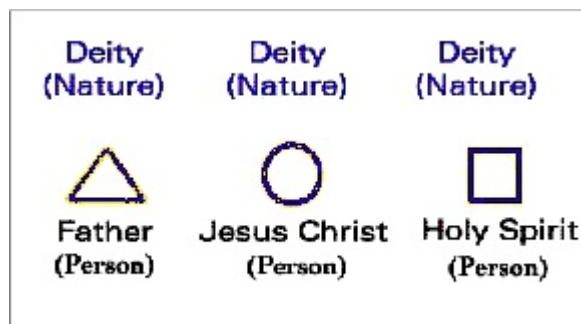
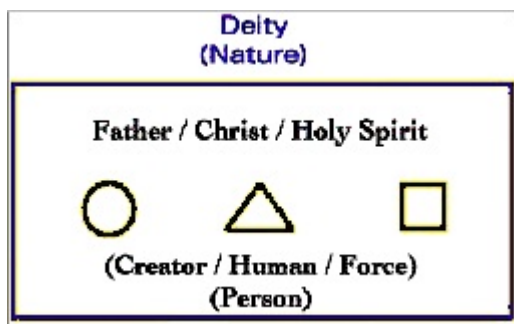
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miss lead to heresy'; hence with us and heretics the very words ought not to be in common, lest we seem to countenance their error."³⁸ In any discussion both parties must agree on the terms being used. When dealing with the Trinity this is especially true: "Since as Jerome remarks . . . a

³⁸Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* P(3)-Q(16)-A(8).

heresy arises from words wrongly used, when we speak of the Trinity we must proceed with care and with befitting modesty; because, as Augustine says, ‘nowhere is error more harmful, the quest more toilsome, the finding more fruitful.’”³⁹ One of the difficulties in dealing with Trinitarian doctrine is that it was formulated by Latin speakers dealing with Greek philosophical terms. Dr. Gordon Clark notes that “the Latin theologians, who lacked the philosophic acumen of the Greeks, or who did not understand their language, made two incredible blunders. They translated *upostasis* as *persona*, and *ousia* as *substantia*. Hence orthodoxy in English has said that God is one substance and three Persons, whereas the literal Greek is one reality and three substances.”⁴⁰ He goes on to show that the terms “substance,” “essence,” “person,” and “nature” are often used synonymously.⁴¹ This obviously can cause much confusion.

While linguistic choices are not the focus of this paper, critical terms must be defined if any communication is to take place. Thus, for the purposes of this paper a distinction will be made between the terms “person,” and “nature” as follows:

Person: “Person” answers the question, “Who is it?” This is the term applied to the individuation between the members of the godhead, it refers specifically to the center of emotion, intellect, and will. This should not be confused with *human* persons, for while all humans are persons, not all persons are humans (*viz.* angels). Aquinas gave this definition of a person and showed how the word “person” is used of God:

I answer that, “Person” signifies what is most perfect in all nature — that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature. Hence, since everything that is perfect must be attributed to God, forasmuch as His essence contains every perfection, this name “person” is fittingly applied to God; not, however, as it is applied to creatures, but in a more excellent way; . . . what the word signifies is found to be affirmed of God in many places of Scripture; as that He is the supreme

³⁹Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, P(1)-Q(31)-A(2).

⁴⁰Clark, *The Trinity*, 43.

⁴¹Ibid., 50.

self-subsisting being, and the most perfectly intelligent being.⁴²

Nature: By “nature” is meant the definition of a thing. It answers the question, “What is it?” Nature is what makes one thing not another thing, it is what a thing “is.” Again, Aquinas’ comments are helpful:

‘nature is the specific difference giving its form to each thing,’ for the specific difference completes the definition, and is derived from the special form of a thing. So in the definition of “person,” which means the singular in a determined “genus,” it is more correct to use the term “nature” than “essence”⁴³

So then, in terms of the definition of the Trinity each of these terms play a significant role. The question, “How many gods are there?” is answered according to God’s nature: one. The question, “Who is God?” is answered according to the Personhood of God (three): The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When speaking of God there are three “who’s” and one “what.” There are not three gods (Tritheism), there is not only one person (Modalism). Further, the person of Christ has two natures (one divine, one human), so any statement or question related to His person must be specified as to its object which (nature) to avoid equivocation.

This doctrine is clearly not simple. It is much easier to imagine a single God, Who is a single person, possessing a single nature. According to God’s revelation, however, this would indeed be only a god of the imagination. If worship of God is to be found acceptable it must be directed to the God Who exists *as He exists*, and not as one might like Him to be.

Trinity in Scripture

Aquinas wrote concerning our knowledge of the Trinity that “by natural reason we can know what belongs to the unity of the essence, but not what belongs to the distinction of the persons.”⁴⁴ While philosophical considerations and general revelation may be sufficient to show that God exists, it is only through special revelation (Scripture) that the Trinity is made known.

⁴²Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, P(1)-Q(29)-A(3).

⁴³Ibid., P(1)-Q(29)-A(1)-RO(4).

⁴⁴Ibid., P(1)-Q(32)-A(1).

That the Trinity doctrine is revealed in the Bible will be shown below.

For the Trinity to be the best explanation for God's revelation of Himself in Scripture only two things must be the case: (1) there must be only one God, (2) there must be three distinct persons who are each said to be that God. If these criteria are found to be present in Scripture then no other explanation can better account for all the evidence. That the Bible teaches this can be seen in the following sample of verses:

(1) There is only one God:

Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"

Isaiah 44:6 "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me.'"

Ephesians 4:6 "one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

1 Timothy 2:5 "For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men"

These verses are fairly self explanatory and not in need of commentary, further they fit the Islamic conception of monotheism. It is the second truth of the Trinity that they reject, namely:

(2) There are three persons that are each God:

The Father:

1 Corinthians 8:6 "there is *but* one God, the Father"

John 6:27 "the Father, *even* God, has set His seal."

Romans 1:7 "Grace to you and peace from God our Father"

Galatians 1:1 "through Jesus Christ, and God the Father"

The Son:

Mark 14:61-64 "But He kept silent, and made no answer. Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed *One*?" And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN." And tearing his clothes, the high priest said, "What further need do we have of witnesses? "You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?"

John 1:1-3, 14-17 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,

and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness of Him, and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" For of His fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

John 8:58 "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.'"

Colossians 1:15-17 "And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together."

Hebrews 1:1-14 (cf. Psalm 45:6, 110:1) "God, . . . in these last days has spoken to us in *His* Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. . . . to which of the angels did He ever say, 'THOU ART MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN THEE' ? . . . but of the son *he says*, 'THY THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER,' . . . And, 'THOU, LORD, IN THE BEGINNING DIDST LAY THE FOUNDATION OF THE EARTH, AND THE HEAVENS ARE THE WORKS OF THY HANDS'"

Revelation 1:17 "And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last,"
The Holy Spirit

Psalm 139:7 "Where can I go from Thy Spirit? Or where can I flee from Thy presence?"

Acts 5:3-4 "But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back *some* of the price of the land? While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God.'"

Further, each of the above named are separate persons:

Psalm 110:1 "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand, Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.'"

Isaiah 63:7-10 "I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, According to all that the LORD has granted us, And the great goodness toward the house of Israel, Which He has granted them according to His compassion, And according to the multitude of His lovingkindnesses. For He said, "Surely, they are My people, Sons who will not deal falsely." So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, And the angel of His presence saved them; In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them; And He lifted them

and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled And grieved His Holy Spirit; Therefore, He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.

Matthew 3:16-17 “And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, *and* coming upon Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’”

Matthew 28:19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”

Luke 22:41-42 “He knelt down and *began* to pray, saying, ‘Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done.’”

Luke 23:46 “And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, INTO THY HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.’ And having said this, He breathed His last.”

No Muslim would argue with the first premise, that God is one, so no further comment is necessary other than to reaffirm that this is exactly what Scripture teaches and also what all Trinitarians believe. As to the second premise, this is where difficulties usually arise. It has been said that when dealing with most objections to the Trinity it is necessary to prove the deity of Christ and the personality of the Holy spirit.⁴⁵

That Christ was a person is not denied by Muslims. In the verses presented above and others it can be seen that Jesus Christ is fully man: He had a human body. (Jn. 8:40), He had a human soul (Matt 26:38) and spirit (Luke 23:46), He exhibited human traits: hunger (Mt. 4:2), thirst (Jn. 19:28), testing (Heb. 4:15), growth (Lk. 2:52), weariness (Jn. 4:6), etc.

Yet Christ was also fully God: He possessed attributes that only God has: eternity (Jn. 8:58), omnipresence (Mt. 18:20, 28:20), omniscience (Mt. 16:21), omnipotence (Jn. 11:38-44), creation (Col. 3:16), ability to forgive sins (Mk. 2:1-12), to raise the dead (Jn. 11:43), and the right to judge all people (Jn. 5:22-27). Further, He is referred to as God by Himself and others (Jn. 10:30; Mt. 26:63-64; Lk. 1:72 cf. Mal. 3:1; Jn. 1:1; Heb. 1:8 etc.). The dual natures of the

⁴⁵Clark, *The Trinity*, 131.

person of the Son necessarily involve some interesting paradoxes.⁴⁶

GOD	CHRIST	CHRIST
is not a man (Num 23:19)	is a man (1 Tim 2:5)	is God (John 20:28)
cannot be tempted (Js 1:3)	was tempted (Heb 4:15)	could not sin (John 5:19)
knows all things (Isa 41:22-23)	did not know some things (Mark 13:32)	knew all things (John 16:30)
cannot be seen (Jn 1:18)	was seen (1 Jn 1:1-2)	was not, and cannot be seen (1 Tim 6:16)
cannot die (1 Tim 1:17)	died (Phil 2:8)	could not be dead (John 10:18; Acts 2:24)
never changes (Ps 102:26-27)	learned and grew (Luke 2:52)	never changes (Heb 1:10-12, 13:8)
is eternal (Ps 90:2)	was born (Matt 1:18)	has always existed (John 1:1, 8:58)
is everywhere present (Ps 139)	occupied only one place (Mark 14:32-40)	fills all things (Eph. 3:17, 4:10)
is all powerful (Jer 32:17)	was weakened (John 4:6)	is all powerful (Heb 1:3)

But all of these paradoxes are answered by the fact that the person of Christ possessed two different natures, and that each truth is predicated of one of them.

As to the Holy Spirit, although many believers mistakenly refer to Him as “it,” that He is a person is seen from the fact that: He has insight (1 Cor. 2:10-11), He knows things, which requires an intellect (Rom. 8:27), He has feelings (Eph. 4:30), and He has will (1 Cor. 12:11). This is all that is required to demonstrate personhood, yet there is more: He intercedes (Rom. 8:26), He is to be obeyed (Acts 10:19-20), He can be lied to (Acts 5:3), resisted (Acts 7:51), grieved (Eph. 4:30), blasphemed (Mt. 12:31), even insulted (Heb. 10:29). He relates to the apostles (Acts 15:28), Jesus (John 16:14), and to the other members of the Trinity (Matt 28:19;

⁴⁶Chart adapted from: Robert Bowman, *Why You Should Believe in the Trinity* (Grand rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 75.

2 Cor 13:14). These things cannot be true of a mere “force” or “power.”

As to His deity: He performs miracles (Acts 8:39), He has His own power derived from Himself (Lk. 4:14; Acts 10:38; 1 Cor. 2:4), and is equated with God and His actions (Gen. 1:1-2; Ps. 33:6; Job 27:3; Mt. 28:19; Lk. 1:35; Acts 5:3; 2 Cor. 13:14; 2 Pet. 1:21). Further, He has the essential attributes of God: Omniscience (Is. 40:13; 1 Cor. 2:10-12), Omnipresence (Ps. 139:7), Omnipotence (Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30). He is also called God (Acts 28:25 cf. Is. 6:1-13; Heb. 10:15-17 cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Mt. 12:31-32; Jn. 16:7-15; Acts 5:3-4).

Thus it has been shown from the Bible that both necessary truths of the Trinity are Scripturally correct: God is one, and there are three persons in that God. What the Scripture says and how it is interpreted are separate issues, however, and must be evaluated separately. In the next section the views of the church throughout history on the subject of the Trinity will be given through its early teachers and creeds.

Trinity in Tradition - Two Creeds

The Athanasian Creed

The doctrine of the Trinity is best conveyed in the Athanasian Creed, and this will be the template used to show the different aspects of Trinitarian doctrine along with the teachings of the Church Fathers and other theologians.

We worship One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of

*the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is One . . .*⁴⁷

It is at this point, the very first of many, that the two great truths of the doctrine are expressed. The two truths are these: (1) There is only one God in substance (essence, ‘what-ness’, definition). (2) There are three distinct persons (centers of will, relations) that fully share this substance.

Further, it is important to understand that the persons are three in that they do not share all predicable truths: The Father did not die on the cross, the Son is not the father of The Father, Jesus did not send Himself, nor pray to Himself, etc.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man. He is God of the substance of the Father begotten before the worlds, and He is man of the substance of His mother born in the world; perfect God, perfect man subsisting of a reasoning soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, inferior to the Father as touching His Manhood.

We see in this that The Son has two natures (substances), one human, one divine. What is true of man is true of Christ as pertaining to His humanity, but not according to His deity (Jesus could die, move, learn, etc.) Aquinas writes,

those things that belong to the Divine Nature are predicated of Christ in His Divine nature, and those that belong to the human nature are predicated of Christ in His human nature. Hence Augustine says (De Trin. i, 11): ‘We must distinguish what is said by Scripture in reference to the form of God, wherein He is equal to the Father, and what in reference to the form of a servant, wherein He is less than the Father’: and further on he says (De Trin. i, 13): ‘The prudent, careful, and devout reader will discern the reason and point of view of what is said.’⁴⁸

What is true of God is true of The Son as pertaining to deity, but not to humanity (i.e. Jesus could die, move, and learn, while God cannot do any of those). Here it should also be noted that while

⁴⁷ Philip Schaff, ed., *History of The Christian Church Vol. 3*, v1.0 (Albany, OR: AGES software, 1997), 524-527. For full text see Appendix 1.

⁴⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, P(3)-Q(16)-A(4).

Jesus is fully God, God is not fully Jesus. Augustine writes, “Whatever therefore is spoken of God in respect to himself, is both spoken singly of each person . . . and together of the Trinity itself, not plurally, but in the singular.”⁴⁹ McGrath notes,

it is also clear that God is not *identified* with Jesus: for example, Jesus refers to God as someone other than himself; . . . At no point does the New Testament even hint that the word ‘God’ ceases to refer to the one who is in heaven, and refers solely to Jesus Christ during the period of his earthly existence.⁵⁰

Aquinas answers an objection to the Trinity in this way:

This word “Father” is predicated of this word “God,” inasmuch as this word “God” stands for the Person of the Father. And in this way it is not predicated of the Person of the Son, because the Person of the Son is not the Person of the Father. And, consequently, it is not necessary that this word “Father” be predicated of this word “Man,” of which the Word “God” is predicated, inasmuch as “Man” stands for the Person of the Son.⁵¹

So that what is spoken of “God” is always true of each person in the godhead, but what is spoken of each person is not necessarily true of “God” if by that term one is naming the Trinity, (viz. all three persons). “God” (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) did not take on the nature of humanity, only the Son.

Who although He be God and Man yet He is not two but one Christ; one however not by conversion of the God-Head in the flesh, but by taking of the Manhood in God; one altogether not by confusion of substance but by unity of Person. For as the reasoning soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ.

Here we are told that Christ did not “become” a man. The incarnation is not God becoming man (which is impossible), but rather that the person of Christ took on an additional

⁴⁹Augustine, *De Trinitate* (V-8), as quoted in Clark, *The Trinity*, 49.

⁵⁰McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity*, 121.

⁵¹Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, P(3)-Q(16)-A(2)-RO(2).

nature. Aquinas writes, “by the union of the soul and body in Christ neither a new person is made nor a new hypostasis, but one human nature is assumed to the Divine Person,”⁵² and, “the union of the two natures in the Person of Christ took place in such a way that the properties of both natures remained unconfused, i.e. ‘the uncreated remained uncreated, and the created remained within the limits of the creature,’ as Damascene says (De Fide Orth. iii, 3,4).”⁵³ Thus, Jesus’ incarnation is not a mixture of deity and humanity into a single nature, but He is both God and man because the two distinct natures meet at the point of the His person.

The Nicene Creed

The Athanasian Creed was formulated specifically to deal with matters pertaining to the Son. This is not surprising as once plurality within the Godhead is established for the Son, the same principles can apply to the inclusion of the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed echoes the beliefs set forth in the Athanasian Creed regarding the Son, but includes information concerning the Holy Spirit:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.

*And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion - all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes*⁵⁴

Thus in both creeds the Trinity is expounded and upheld. A common objection to the Trinity is

⁵²Ibid., P(3)-Q(3)-A(6).

⁵³Ibid., P(3)-Q(10)-A(1).

⁵⁴Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. 14*, v2.0 (Albany, OR: AGES software, 1997), 54.

that these late creeds were the basis for the doctrine itself. It has already been shown that the primary affirmations of the teaching are necessitated by Scripture. As well, it can be shown that the early church did indeed understand these verses to teach Trinitarian doctrine.

Trinity in Tradition - The Church Fathers and Later Theologians

While the creedal form of the Trinity was centuries after the completion of the canon of Scripture, it is instructive to note that the doctrine of the Trinity was not merely the creation of the creeds. The doctrine, or elements necessary to it, were propounded in an unbroken line of Church Fathers from the time of the apostles. The following citations will show that this is the case.⁵⁵

Irenaeus (115-190 A.D.), disciple of Polycarp (70-155 A.D.) who himself learned under the apostle John, affirmed the incarnation of Christ when he wrote, “Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate.” Ignatius (98-117 A.D.) affirmed Christ’s eternal existence when he wrote, “Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son and Word, before time began.” Justin Martyr included all three divine names under the title “God” as he wrote, “For, in the name of God, the Father . . . and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.” The first to use the term “trinity” was Tertullian (160-215 A.D.) who wrote, “We define that there are two, The Father and the Son and three with the Holy Spirit . . . [which brings about unity in Trinity . . . They are three, not in dignity, but in degree, not in substance but in form, not in power, but in kind. They are of one substance and power, because there is on God.” Origen (185-254 A.D.) wrote concerning the Holy Spirit’s relation to the other two persons of the Godhead, “the Holy Spirit would never have been reckoned in the unity of the trinity, i.e., along with the unchangeable

⁵⁵Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology Two* (Charlotte: Southern Evangelical Seminary, 2002), ch. 12, 13-14.

Father and His Son, unless He has always been the Holy Spirit.” By 250 A.D. Novatian of Rome had written an entire book on the subject of the Trinity. It is clear, then, that the notion of the Trinity was developed over time, but was not created *ex nihilo* at any one council.

The greatest theologians of the Church have also affirmed the teachings of the Trinity. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) wrote, “when any One of the Three is named in connection with some divine action, the whole Trinity is to be understood as involved in that action.”⁵⁶ He also writes in *On Christian Doctrine*, “the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Who are at the same time the Trinity, one Being, supreme above all.”⁵⁷

Aquinas wrote concerning Christ’s natures that, “Because in Christ there are two natures and one hypostasis, it follows that things belonging to the nature in Christ must be two; and that those belonging to the hypostasis in Christ must be only one.”⁵⁸ And concerning the Trinity, “there are several persons in God. For it was shown above that this word “person” signifies in God a relation as subsisting in the divine nature. It was also established that there are several real relations in God; and hence it follows that there are also several realities subsistent in the divine nature; which means that there are several persons in God.”⁵⁹

Philip Melanchthon, in The Ausberg Confession (1530 A.D.), states that:

the Unity of the Divine Essence and concerning the Three Persons, is true and to be believed without any doubting; that is to say, there is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite

⁵⁶Saint Augustine, *Enchiridion - on faith, and love*, v1.0 (Albany, OR: AGES software, 1997), Ch.12, pg 38.

⁵⁷Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Great Books, trans. J. F. Shaw (Chicago, IL: William Benton, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 625.

⁵⁸Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, P(3)-Q(17)-A(2).

⁵⁹Ibid. P(1)-Q(30)-A(1)

power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible; and yet there are three Persons, of the same essence and power, who also are co-eternal, the Father the Son, and the Holy Ghost. And the term “person” they use as the Fathers have used it, to signify, not a part or quality in another, but that which subsists of itself.⁶⁰

James Arminius (1610) writes,

We call the Son “a person in the Sacred Trinity,” that is, a Divine person and God. And, with orthodox antiquity, we prove our affirmation by four distinct classes or arguments: (1) From the names by which he is called in the Scriptures. (2) From the divine attributes which the Scriptures ascribe to him. (3) From the works which the Scriptures relate to have been produced by him. (4) From a collation of those passages of Scripture, which, having been uttered in the Old Testament concerning the Father, are in the New are appropriated to the Son.⁶¹

The Westminster Confession (1646) also affirms the Trinity:

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; . . . In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

Calvin, Luther, and all the other Reformation theologians taught the above views of the Trinity, as do all orthodox Roman Catholic theologians today. While examples of these could be further multiplied it is enough for now to state that from the apostle’s time to today the central tenets of the Trinity, whether referred to by that title or not, have been taught and accepted as orthodox.

It has been shown up to this point that there is not only Scriptural warrant for the assertions of the Trinitarian doctrine, but also that those verses used to support the teaching have

⁶⁰Philip Melancthon, *The Augsburg Confession*, v1.0 (Albany, OR: AGES software, 1997), 8.

⁶¹James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius Vol. 2* (Albany, OR: AGES software, 1997), 413.

been understood in a Trinitarian manner from the times of the Church Fathers up to and including today. This will become important as Islamic objections are discussed. A third area of importance to this issue concerns whether or not the very idea of the Trinity is philosophically sound.

Trinity in Philosophy / Theology

It is often argued that the Trinity is a logical impossibility.⁶² Obviously there cannot be a thing which is both one and three simultaneously. Yet there is no contradiction in stating that an infinite being can be one in essence, yet three in person. The law of non-contradiction states that a thing cannot be and not be at the same time and in the same manner.⁶³ This point is so crucial to the debate it must be made perfectly clear.

In symbolic logic the form of the rule is: $\sim (P \sim P)$ That is, for any statement (P) it cannot be said that it is both true and not true at the same time and in the same manner. If the doctrine of the Trinity proclaimed a God that was both one person and three persons that would be a contradiction, for “one” is not “three.” Again, the law of non-contradiction is not violated, for anything said of Jesus is really saying one thing about two different things - one human, one deity. Aquinas’ statements on this matter are revealing:

The supreme unity and simplicity of God exclude every kind of plurality of absolute things, but not pluralities are predicated relatively, and thus the relations do not import composition in that of which they

⁶²See Deedat’s comments in Shorrosh, *Islam Revealed*, 252.

⁶³ Irving Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 6th (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co. 1982), 319-320.

are predicated.⁶⁴

With regard to the idea of persons versus nature Aquinas says,

In the divine Trinity is to be understood both number and the persons numbered. So when we say, “Trinity in Unity,” we do not place number in the unity of the essence, as if we meant three times one; but we place the Persons numbered in the unity of nature; as the “supposita” of a nature are said to exist in that nature.⁶⁵

Augustine clearly stated that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three different things:

“There is one essence of the Father and Son and Holy Ghost, in which the Father is not one thing, the Son another, and the Holy Ghost another; although the Father is one person, the Son another, and the Holy Ghost another.”⁶⁶

Indeed, Aquinas does not allow for words like “difference” when speaking of the Trinity:

Thus, to avoid the error of Arius we must shun the use of the terms diversity and difference in God, lest we take away the unity of essence: we may, however, use the term “distinction” on account of the relative opposition. Hence whenever we find terms of “diversity” or “difference” of Persons used in an authentic work, these terms of “diversity” or “difference” are taken to mean “distinction.” But lest the simplicity and singleness of the divine essence be taken away, the terms “separation” and “division,” . . . are to be avoided.⁶⁷

Thus, Aquinas clearly taught that there was only one God, yet that does not mean that the three persons of the Godhead are not God, nor does it mean that any one person of the Trinity alone is God:

This proposition “The Father alone is God” includes two assertions — namely, that the Father is God, and that no other besides the Father is God. But this second proposition is false, for the Son is another from the Father, and He is God.

⁶⁴Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, P(1)-Q(30)-A(1)-RO(3).

⁶⁵Ibid., P(1)-Q(31)-A(1)-RO(4).

⁶⁶Ibid., P(1)-Q(31)-A(2).

⁶⁷Ibid., P(1)-Q(31)-A(2).

Therefore this is false, The Father alone is God; and the same of the like sayings.⁶⁸

The conclusion to this matter of logical possibility, then, is that while it is true that no thing can be both three and one at the same time and in the same sense, this is no argument against the Trinity. Logical objections leveled at the philosophical possibility of a Trinity are in reality missing what is actually being affirmed.

Conclusion

Considering the necessity of this doctrine in Scripture and clear exposition of it by Scripture's interpreters over the last 1,900 years it is somewhat astonishing that in many cases both the Christian and Non-Christian alike continue to suffer from misunderstanding. What is worse, these two feed one another in a vicious cycle of confusion and ignorance. As will be shown below, a high percentage of the objections leveled against the Trinity are not actually referring to what the doctrine actually teaches, but are rather attacking the very heresies that the doctrine avoids.

Islamic Objections to the Trinity

Dr. James White writes, "It is *very* rare that anyone actually argues or debates about the *real* doctrine of the Trinity." (Emphasis in original)⁶⁹ Robert Bowman picks out several attacks in his *20 Errors Common to Antitrinitarian Heresies* that are used by Muslim apologists as well as heretical "Christian" cults:

- They accuse the doctrine of the Trinity of teaching three Gods.
- They assume that one being must be one and only person, even in God.

⁶⁸Ibid., P(1)-Q(31)-A(4).

⁶⁹White, *Trinity*, 23.

- They understand the Trinity to mean that the three persons are three parts of God.
- They object to the use of extrabiblical terms such as Trinity and three persons.
- They fault the doctrine of the Trinity for its late formal development.
- They cite the second-century church fathers in support of their nontrinitarian theology.
- They trace the doctrine of the Trinity historically to pagan triads of gods.
- They blame the Trinitarianism of the early church on Greek philosophy.
- They often regard the Greek New Testament text as having been corrupted.
- They often deny that the Holy Spirit is a distinct divine person.
- They cite liberal biblical scholars in support of their revisionist interpretations.
- They view the doctrine of the Trinity as contradictory or nonsensical.
- They make much of the fact that the Jews knew nothing of the doctrine of the Trinity.
- They infer inequality and inferiority from the submission of the Son to the Father.⁷⁰

While this list may seem formidable at first, each of these objections have been evaluated and answered by believers, most of them quite some time ago. Space does not permit a detailed investigation into every one of them, but most can be placed into three broad categories: (1) the source of the doctrine of the Trinity, (2) the Scriptural interpretations of Trinitarians, and (3) the philosophical or theological problems that Muslims see in the Trinity. Each category will be presented and answered below.

Trinitarian Answers to Islamic Objections

Source Objections Answered

Many who attack the Trinity do so by referencing its alleged pagan sources. Dr. Paul Blackham noted that in debates, “many Muslims contend that early Christian writers merely borrowed their view of the trinity from surrounding pagan beliefs. The two most popular examples which have been suggested are: the ancient Egyptian pantheon, and the Neo-Platonic

⁷⁰Robert Bowman, *20 Errors Common to Antitrinitarian Heresies* (Atlanta, GA: http://www.atlantaapologist.org/20_Errors.html, 2002), .

philosophy.”⁷¹ This reasoning not only commits the genetic fallacy (claiming that a thing is not true due to its source), but is also demonstrably false.

The ancient Egyptians believed in the three gods: Osiris the father, Isis the mother, and Horus their son. Obviously this is not at all like the Christian trinity. Rather, this is simply a polytheistic triad. Athanasius himself uses this very pantheon as an example of men “straining impiety to the utmost, have deified the motive of the invention of these things and of their own wickedness, namely, pleasure and lust, and worship them, . . . among the Egyptians Isis and Osiris and Horus.”⁷² Most of the other “sources” for a Trinity come from either sources that are too early and far removed to have influenced first century theologians (i.e. Babylonian triads), or sources that are too late (i.e. Hindu and Buddhist triads from the seventh and twelfth centuries A.D.).⁷³ In any case, there simply is no such thing as a pagan trinity, every example given refers to a polytheistic grouping of three gods which violates the first principle of Trinitarianism, namely monotheism.

Regarding Platonic philosophy, it should first be noted that this objection is a double-edged sword. Dr. Norman Geisler comments regarding Muslim philosophy that “at the heart of the Muslim inability to understand the Trinity is the Neoplatonic concept of oneness.”⁷⁴ Thus, if prior notions within one’s theology have parallels in pagan thought then the Muslim has just as much of a problem with his conception of God as does the Christian.

⁷¹Paul Blackham and Jay Smith. *Tawhid: Belief in One God*.(<http://debate.org.uk/topics/theo/tawhid.htm>, 1995).

⁷²Saint Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, V1.0, Ed. Philip Schaff (Albany, Or: Ages Software, 1997), 216.

⁷³Robert Bowman, *Why You Should Believe in the Trinity*. (Grand rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 43.

⁷⁴Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 736.

Second, like the first objection, this also commits the genetic fallacy. The fact is that much of art, logic, science, and politics were first systematized by pagan Greeks.⁷⁵ For the Muslim to even state that the Trinity is false rather than true he must use Aristotle's logic and the law of non-contradiction stated above, but this does not mean that Muslims accept Aristotle's view of the (non)immortality of the soul, nor his denial of an afterlife. It is therefore not a question of whether a belief is Greek, but whether it is true.

Third, the "god" of Plato was hardly Trinitarian. Geisler notes that "Plato's triad of the Form, the Former, and the World Soul is by no means the Christian Trinity . . . two of them (the Form and the World Soul) are not even persons . . . [and] they [the Form, Former, and World Soul] do not all share one and the same nature." Geisler goes on to point out that Plato's highest metaphysical principle, the Good, is none of these things, nor is it "god" in Plato's own system.⁷⁶ So in Plato there is a triad of non-gods, two of which are not persons, and none of which share the same nature. How does this triad even approach the doctrine of the Trinity? After sifting through every possible influence of pagan philosophy on Christian writers from the Hellenistic period to the Gnostics, Dr. Ronald Nash offers this conclusion: "Was early Christianity a syncretistic faith? Did it borrow any of its essential beliefs and practices either from Hellenistic philosophy and religion or from Gnosticism? The evidence requires that this question be answered in the negative."⁷⁷

In fact, it is not even necessary to cite modern sources to answer this allegation.

⁷⁵Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven, England: Yale Nota Bene Books, 2002), 1.

⁷⁶Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 597.

⁷⁷Ronald Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Richardson, TX: Probe Books, 1992), 270.

Chrysostom, commenting on the term **logos** (the Word) in John chapter one, writes, “Seest thou true philosophy and divine doctrines? Not like those of the Greeks, who assign times, and say that some indeed of the gods are younger, some elder. There is nothing of this with us. For if God Is, as certainly He Is, then nothing was before Him. If He is Creator of all things, He must be first; if Master and Lord of all, then all, both creatures and ages, are after Him.”⁷⁸ Thus we see that from ancient times to today orthodox Christians have fought Paganism rather than embrace or absorb it.

Scriptural Objections Answered

While Scriptural (Biblical) objections abound with anti-trinitarian teachers, most if not all are based on non-trinitarian presuppositions or misunderstandings. All verses that teach there is only one God, for example, are thought to disprove the Trinity when they only refute Tritheism as noted above. All verses showing that the Father is not the Son or that the Son is not the Holy Spirit, etc. only prove that Modalism is false. For many anti-Trinitarians it is a problem of emphasis. One group will emphasize God’s oneness, another His plurality, yet neither can deal effectively with the verses of the other. It is at this point that some other authority is invoked or the Bible itself is undermined. In the case of Islam, both strategies are used. But if the Biblical manuscript accuracy and its divine authority can be proven then both sets of verses must be accounted for in order to arrive at a true concept of God.⁷⁹ Once the Trinity is properly understood, these objections based on Scripture are easily answered. A short survey will illustrate

⁷⁸St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint*, Ed. Philip Schaff, (Albany, Or: Ages Software, 1997), 37.

⁷⁹Space does not permit a defense of these proofs for the reliability and authority of the Bible, but as Muslims use the Bible to attack the Trinity it can also, in these cases, be used to defend the Trinity. Further, the Quran itself, as late as the 7th century, affirms the truth of the Bible in Surahs 10:37 and 46:12.

this principle.

Most of the verses used will attempt to point out a distinction between God the Father and Jesus Christ. One such example is John 14:28, “the Father is greater than I.” These words, spoken by Jesus, are said to show that he cannot be equal to God. St. Hilary of Potiers answered this objection 1,600 years ago: “The Arians also appeal to the text, *The Father is greater than I*. The Father is, in fact, greater, first as being the Unbegotten, and secondly inasmuch as the Son has condescended to the state of man, yet without forfeiting His Godhead. But He is not greater in nature than the Son, Who is His Image; or rather, the Begetter is the greater, while the Son, as the Begotten, is not less than He, for, although begotten, He had no beginning of existence.”⁸⁰ Thus, it is only when misunderstanding of Christ’s person and nature exists that a problem arises. The same thing could be said for other instances of Jesus’ alleged inferiority (i.e. Mt. 24:36).

Another common misunderstanding regards the word “begotten.” Muslims generally conceive of this term as meaning a literal, physical, sexual act between God and Mary.⁸¹ That the Christian Church has never taught this barely needs mention. A further problem that can arise from this false understanding is that if Christ was begotten in this sense, then he had a beginning. This is something that is not, and cannot, be true of God. The answer lies in the fact that “begotten” here does not concern physical birth. This is more easily seen in the Greek term **monogenes** which means a “single kind” and refers to Jesus’ unique relationship with God (viz. the same nature).⁸² It is therefore not referring to any kind of human act, but is an

⁸⁰Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. 9*, v2.0 (Albany, OR: AGES software, 1997), 216.

⁸¹See Deedat’s comments in Shorrosh, *Islam Revealed*, 254-255.

⁸²*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd, s.v. “monogenes,” by Walter Bauer, William Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich.

affirmation of Jesus' deity.

In *Islam Revealed* Ahmed Deedat called into question the phrase "Son of Man." He apparently refers to Job 25:6 and claims that if Jesus was truly the Son of Man that "Jesus was a worm. . . . if you were a nurse and you went to into the stable to deliver the child [Jesus] could you for one moment think that the helpless little creature with all the filth and the mud could be your God?"⁸³ Besides his continued confusion of the single person of Christ with the dual natures of Christ, Deedat here demonstrates that he completely misses the point of the phrase as applied to Jesus. "Son of Man" is found many times in Scripture, sometimes as a title of a regular human (Num. 23:19), sometimes referring to a prophet (Ezk. 2:3-8), and sometimes as a title of deity (Dan. 7:13). As Christ was all three of these the title is apt.

Finally, many verses are marshaled to show that things were true of Jesus that could not be true of God. Deedat lists eating food as an indication that Jesus (and Mary) were not God. Now, no Christian denies that Mary is not God (another Islamic misunderstanding of the Trinity, this one based on Muhammad's own misunderstanding seen in Surah 5:119). However, to deny Christ's deity based on the needs of His humanity is to once again confuse the one person with His two natures. Whatever is true of the human nature is true of Christ in one sense, and whatever is true of the divine nature is true of Christ in another sense. While this leads to several paradoxes (see chart above) it does not lead to contradiction.

Many other examples could be listed, but in every case it is a misunderstanding of the Trinity that drives the misapplication of the verse to the issue. Verses used to deny Tritheism and verses used to deny Modalism do nothing to hurt the doctrine of the Trinity. It is only the lack of clear thinking and understanding on the issue that has allowed these errors, most answered centuries ago, to continue to thrive today. These errors lead to more than just Scriptural misinterpretation, however. Once the doctrine of the Trinity is confused with error, philosophical

⁸³Shorosh, *Islam Revealed*, 257-258.

and theological mistakes are inevitable and these will be the subject of the next section.

Philosophical / Theological Objections Answered

Islam is considered by many to be the purest form of Monotheism. This rigid understanding of God's unity is the bedrock upon which Islam was born. It is with no great surprise then that many objections to the Trinity are really only objections to Tritheism. The philosophical distinctions between nature and person need not be repeated here, but it should be noted that those objections leveled against the Trinity from a philosophical stance largely suffer from the same misunderstandings as do the Scriptural objections. Professor Geoffrey Parrinder in *Jesus in the Quran* begins his chapter on the Trinity with these words:

It has often been thought that the Quran denies the Christian teaching of the Trinity, and commentators have taken its words to be a rejection of orthodox Christian doctrine. However it seems more likely that it is heretical doctrines that are denied in the Quran, and orthodox Christians should agree with most of its statements.⁸⁴

If "Allah" is equated with the term "God" (according to nature), and not to His name only (according to person), and if words and phrases like "begotten," or "son of" are understood according to the Muslim misconceptions then this might be the case in many instances. Truly, apologists like Deedat continually confuse Christ's human and divine nature as when he makes statements like, "God sucked the paps of a woman: (Luke, 11:27)."⁸⁵ Deedat further shows his misunderstanding when he writes, "as far as the Muslim is concerned, one's believing that any human being is God or is imitating God is an act of treason against God. Whether it is a Hindu idea of a God incarnate, or whether it is a Christian idea regarding God incarnate (God becoming

⁸⁴Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Quran* (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 1996), 133.

⁸⁵Deedat, *The God That Never Was*

man) . . .”⁸⁶ With regard to God’s essence Mutahhari notes, “some people have professed belief in two, three, or more independent, eternal, preexistent principles (dualism, trinitarianism, and polytheism respectively).”⁸⁷ From these and most other statements by Muslim apologists on the issue it is clear that misunderstandings have not lessened considerably since Muhammad’s time.

Can this situation be blamed on Trinitarians? It seems that while the laity might remain in confusion over the teaching (due in large part to poor analogies and lack of philosophical sophistication), it is certainly not the fault of the theologians. Augustine specifically addressed the issue of confusion over the Trinity centuries before the rise of Islam when he wrote:

And not, therefore, without cause the Scripture says both the one and the other, both that the Son is equal to the Father, and that the Father is greater than the Son. For there is no confusion when the former is understood as on account of the form of God, and the latter as on account of the form of a servant.⁸⁸

Augustine’s hermeneutical golden rule is that “the Son of God is both understood to be equal to the Father according to the form of God in which He is, and less than the Father according to the form of a servant which He took; . . . yet there are some things in the sacred text so put as to leave it ambiguous to which rule they are rather to be referred;”⁸⁹ He concludes that:

Wherefore, having mastered this rule for interpreting the Scriptures concerning the Son of God, that we are to distinguish in them what relates to the form of God, in which He is equal to the Father, and what to the form of a servant which He took, in which He is less than the Father; we shall not be disquieted by apparently contrary and mutually repugnant sayings of the sacred books. For both the Son and the Holy Spirit, according to the form of God, are equal to the Father, because

⁸⁶Shorosh, *Islam Revealed*, 253.

⁸⁷Mutahhari, *Fundamentals*, 99.

⁸⁸Saint Augustine, *De Trinitate*, v2.0, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Rev. Arthur West Haddan (Albany, OR: AGES software, 1997), 39.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 64.

neither of them is a creature.⁹⁰

Centuries after Muhammad, Thomas Aquinas was quite clear in his denunciation of any composition within God when he wrote, “The first being, therefore, which is God, has no components.”⁹¹ So Aquinas denies composition in God’s being (His one-ness) but not distinction between the persons (His three-ness).⁹² Again, the facts are difficult to miss.

Theologians today offer the same definition of the Trinity, the same explanations of “problem” verses, and hold to the same creeds which themselves are quite explicit in their denial of both Tritheism and Modalism. It is something of a wonder, therefore, that attacks against the Trinity continue to rely on the same poor hermeneutics, fallacious reasoning, and sometimes gross misunderstandings of what the doctrine teaches. It may very well be the case that unless these areas are all cleared up that no dialogue between Muslim and Christian on the issue of the Trinity will ever be possible. Yet the doctrine is not some arcane belief hidden from the world of the uninitiated. Rather, it is quite public and easily accessible to any who care enough to understand it. The burden lies on those who came after the doctrine was already accepted and defined to come to an accurate understanding; if they refuse to do so they should cease their striving.

Conclusion

It has been adequately shown that Islam denies the doctrine of the Trinity as they understand it. There is little question, however, that the Islamic understanding of the Trinity is so

⁹⁰Ibid., 49-50.

⁹¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Charles J. O’Neil (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1957), 103.

⁹²See Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, trans. English Dominican Fathers (London, England: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne Ltd., 1932), 66 .

radically flawed in most instances that it is dubious even to refer to it with that title. While it may be conjectured that the Muslim and Christian views of God might one day be united, in light of the last 1,400 years it appears to be highly unlikely. It is true that most of the Muslim's objections are based on their own misunderstandings of either philosophy or Scripture, but Muslims have little excuse for such ignorance.

Further, it seems too simplistic to state that if only these misunderstandings were cleared away that both the Muslim and Christian would recognize that they follow the same God. While surely the most important, the Trinity is only one of many discrepancies between the Muslim conception of Allah and the Christian conception of Yahweh.⁹³ Further, if the Quran truly supercedes Biblical revelation then what it labels as the doctrine of the Trinity is, to the Muslim mind, what the Trinity really is - despite the denials of Trinitarians themselves. The Monotheism of Islam and that of Christianity is irreconcilably disparate, and this has ramifications for Muslims everywhere, for since "Islam claims that Allah is the same God who was revealed in the Bible. . . . [and] if the Bible and the Quran have differing views of God, then Islam's claim is false."⁹⁴

⁹³Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Understanding Islam*, 13-31 and 131-145.

⁹⁴Robert Morey, *The Islamic Invasion*, 57.