

Engaging with Islam

THE SON OF GOD AND TRINITY - SESSION 11

PART 1: Preparation and Discussion

The Christian understanding of God is that the one indivisible divine nature of God is shared equally by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Christian teaching this is called the Trinity, and it is beautiful. The Qur'an explicitly teaches Muslims to reject any idea of the Trinity, and because of this, this subject often comes up when talking with Muslims. Therefore, Christians need to prepare themselves by doing some work in this area.

To help Muslims understand this teaching we need to discuss our assumptions and lay a common foundation with them. The following steps can help you do this.

Step 1. The Biggest Question in Life

When a Muslim asks you to explain the Trinity they are in fact asking you to explain the very heart and nature of God. This is a profound question for every religion, not just Christianity, and when Muslim leaders try to explain the nature of God they find it difficult.

When Muslims ask you to explain the Trinity they are asking you the most important question in the universe, therefore it is okay to say you are still learning. We will in fact spend ages everlastingly growing in our knowledge of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Therefore, remind Muslims how big this question is.

Step 2. You do not learn Christianity from the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is one of the first places that Muslims learn about Christianity. The problem is, it does not understand Christianity. In the case of the Trinity the Qur'an's understanding is that the Trinity is God, Mary, and Jesus (Q. 5:73-75, 116). This is an ill informed outsider's view that has led Muslims astray. Therefore, explain to your Muslim friend that if they want to understand Christianity they need to read the Bible and not the Qur'an.

Step 3. Every religion has an understanding of God's oneness and diversity - even Islam.

The Trinity is a description of God's oneness and diversity. Typically, when Christians explain this oneness and diversity the Muslim is critical, saying that the oneness of God makes any diversity impossible: *Allah is one!* That is, Muslims assume that saying God has any diversity compromises his oneness; and they accuse Christians of this compromise. However, Islam actually acknowledges that God has diversity and that this *does not* compromise his oneness.

This is seen in Islamic theology when Muslims discuss how to understand the oneness of God's essence/nature with the diversity of his attributes; the oneness and diversity of God's actions; and the oneness of God yet the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, coming to Mary as an agent of God (Q. 19:17). That is, Islamic theology acknowledges, as Christians do, that God has both oneness and diversity and that neither of these compromise each other.

Q1. What would you say to a Muslim who said that Jesus taught the Islamic concept of God when he said: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Mark 12:29)?

Step 4. What is the nature of personal existence?

The Christian belief is that the one indivisible divine nature of God is shared by three distinct persons. In response to this it is quite common for Muslims to say: "How can three be in one? This doesn't make sense." This rejection is based on the assumption that one being can only have one person. This sounds right until you think about it. Consider the following:

The Bible and Qur'an both describe human personal existence as not something isolated but something that God can be part of, that is, God can be in us, in our very thoughts, in our very being. Thus a human being can have two persons present in them: themselves and God. Or consider spirit possession, something that Islam believes. In this case a human being is personally indwelt by many spirits. That is, there are many in one. Thus the assumption that one being can only have one person is not true.

These examples are not presented as illustrations of the Trinity. God is unique. Instead they are meant to show that in both Christianity and Islam how persons exist is not straight forward. Sometimes there are many in one, and this is something Islam believes too.

Step 5. The Father, Son, Spirit Relationship

The Father, Son, Spirit relationship did not begin with Christianity. It is the central relationship throughout all the prophets: The nation of Israel is called the son of God, God is their father, and he dwells among them by his Spirit (Ex. 4:22-23, Is. 63:11). The king of Israel, the Messiah, is the son of God, God is his father, and he is the Spirit filled son (2 Sam. 7:11-16, Ps. 51:11). And the Old Testament ends with the expectation that God the father will send his true Spirit filled Son (Is. 11:1-2, 63:16). It is Jesus who fulfills this and makes us sons.

Contrary to the unified message of all the prophets, Muhammad said there is no fatherhood or son of God at all (Q. 5:18, 4:171, 19:92-93).

Step 6. Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity

When we read the scriptures we see that Jesus is no ordinary son but the divine Son of God (Mk. 12:35-37, Jn. 1:1-4, Phil. 2:5-11, Heb. 1:1-3). He is described in ways that assert his full divinity yet insist there is only one God. The same is true for the Holy Spirit who is called the breath of God (Ps. 33:6). This revelation of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and that there is only one God, has led Christians to the understanding of the Trinity.

Step 7. The Qur'an still has remnants of the Trinity in it.

Muhammad did not understand the stories and concepts he included in the Qur'an. The result is that remnants of the Trinity are still found in the Qur'an. We see this in that Jesus is called the Word of God (Q. 3:39, 4:171) and he creates life from clay like God does (Q. 38:71-75, 3:49). Regarding the Holy Spirit, he is the breath of God (Q. 15:29) who comes to Mary as God's agent (Q. 19:17).

Conclusion

The Qur'an teaches Muslims to reject our biggest and most beautiful doctrines. Learning how to explain and defend these doctrines requires time and effort, but it is worth it because it makes us learn our own faith better. If a Muslim asks you to explain the Trinity I recommend you start by reading together the booklet, *Steps Towards the*



Trinity <http://engagingwithislam.org/leaflets/Trinity.pdf>



PART 2: Video Presentation (18 minutes) <https://youtu.be/4uxell-deRs>

The Son of God

Trinity

The grounds for the Trinity in the earlier prophets.

- Exodus 6:2-3, God is progressively revealing himself.
- Creation: God, his Spirit and Word. The unity and diversity of God.
- Let “US” make man in our image.
- Image: God can share his attributes and maintain his unity.
- People see the God who cannot be seen. God embodied.
- The Father, Son and Spirit relationship throughout the Torah, Prophets, Psalms.

Jesus and the Trinity

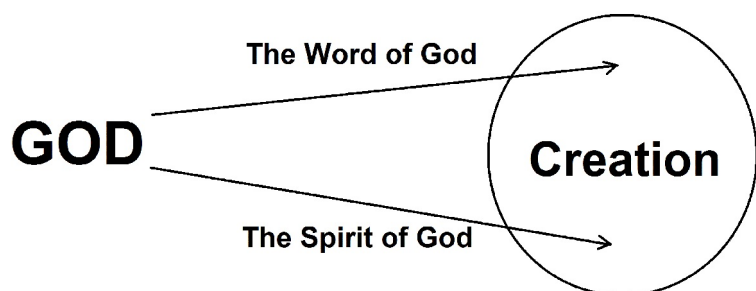
The Spirit and the Trinity

Logic

- God is more complex than us.
- God is personal/relational.
- God is self-sufficient.

The Diversity of Allah. Using the Qur’an to explain the Trinity.

- Jesus is the Word of God Q. 3:45, 4:171.
- God breathes out his Spirit Q. 15:28-29, reveals by his Spirit Q. 16:102, comes to us by his Spirit Q. 58:22 and the Spirit is God’s agent Q. 19:17.



Common Questions

PART 3: Discussion

Q2. Do you have any comments about the video?

Q3. If a Muslim asks you to explain the Trinity what is an easy place to start with your answer?

Answers

Q1. Mark 12:29 is not the Islamic concept of God because when Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:4 he is referring to Yahweh who made us in his image, dwells with his people, is the Father and has a son. This is not the Islamic concept of God. Further, after quoting Deuteronomy 6:4, and saying God is one, Jesus goes on to explain God's divine Son (Mark 12:35-37). Therefore, when Jesus says God is one this oneness includes the divine Son. This is the Trinity.

Q3. Read with them the booklet, *Steps Towards the Trinity*
<http://engagingwithislam.org/leaflets/Trinity.pdf>



PART 4: Activities

Have you done the following? Circle an answer.

- Smile at a Muslim. Greet the Muslims you know. Yes/No.
- Pray privately, and publicly at church, for the Islamic world and the Muslims you know, and for Christians who are suffering under Islam. Yes/No.
- Ask a Muslim if they know what books are in the Bible. Yes/No.
- Ask a Muslim if they believe in the Day of Judgement. If they do ask if they have done enough good deeds. Yes/No.
- Invite a Muslim to read Matthew and then meet with them and talk about it using the Matthew outline presented in session 7. Yes/No.
- Have you done your group activities? Yes/No.