

# **STEPS TOWARDS THE TRINITY**

An explanation of the Trinity for  
Christians and Muslims

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Engaging  
with  
**Islam**

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*Steps Towards the Trinity - An explanation of the Trinity for Christians and Muslims*

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June, 2019

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## Introduction

Who is God and what is God like? This is an important question, and when Christians and Muslims discuss this question the subject of the Trinity often arises.

The Christian understanding is that God has both oneness and distinction, that is, the one undivided divine nature of God is shared by the three distinct persons of Father, Son, and Spirit (Trinity). While the common Muslim understanding is that God only has oneness, and that this is absolute oneness (Tawheed). Therefore we have two very different understandings of God.

The Qur'an teaches Muslims to reject the Trinity and so Christians often find themselves being asked by Muslims to defend and explain this teaching. On the other hand, most Christians have never heard about Tawheed and the issues associated with it, and therefore never ask Muslims to defend and explain this teaching. When it comes to the subject of the Trinity and Tawheed, at the popular level, the discussion has been one way with Muslims asking Christians to defend their position.

This booklet seeks to give a Christian defence of the Trinity. While it is possible to give a one sentence answer - *God has both oneness and distinction* - the method of this booklet will be to work through a series of concepts that provide the foundation for understanding how the Trinity makes logical sense, and fits what the scriptures say. In considering these foundations we will take *steps towards the Trinity* and address many of our assumptions and questions along the way.

If you are a Christian, and a Muslim asks you to explain the Trinity, you may like to read this booklet with them and work through the steps together.

If you are a Muslim I ask that you read this booklet with an open mind and do not assume you know what Christians believe.

Finally, discussing the Trinity is discussing the very person, nature, and inner-life of God. This is a profound and testing question for every religion, including Islam, as we shall see. It is the biggest question in the history of the universe, therefore we must not trivialise it but give it the proper respect and effort it is due. Ultimately we do not simply want answers but to grow in our love and knowledge of God.

## **We do not learn about Christianity from the Qur'an.**

If we want to understand Islam we should read the Qur'an, Hadith, and speak with Muslims; if we want to understand Buddhism we should read Buddha's sermons and talk with Buddhists; and if we want to understand Christianity we should read the Bible and talk with Christians. This may sound obvious but many Muslims think they understand Christianity from reading the Qur'an.

The Qur'an speaks about Christians and their beliefs on many occasions. It prepares Muslims to talk to Christians, and as a result Muslim may feel they understand Christianity, and why it is wrong, from reading the Qur'an. However, the Qur'an has an outsider's view of Christianity and does not explain Christian beliefs properly. The doctrine of the Trinity is a case in point. In the Qur'an the Father, Son, Spirit relationship is *never* mentioned, instead, when the Qur'an speaks about *three* it refers to God, Mary, and Jesus:

They are unbelievers who say, "God is the Third of Three". No god is there but One God. ... The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a Messenger; Messengers before him passed away; his mother was a just a woman; they both ate food<sup>1</sup>. (Qur'an 5:73-75, translator: Arberry)

And when God said (to Jesus), "O Jesus son of Mary, did you say to men, 'Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God?'" (Qur'an 5:116, Arberry)

How this understanding of the Trinity arose in the Qur'an is debated by scholars<sup>2</sup>. Whatever the reason may be, the simple fact is the Trinity is not understood as God, Mary, and Jesus, but the Father, Son, and Spirit. This means we do not learn about Christian beliefs by reading the Qur'an. If we wish to understand Christianity and the Trinity properly we must read the Bible and listen to Christians.

This is the first step we need to be clear about: We learn about the Trinity from the Bible and not the Qur'an.

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1. *They both ate food*, that is, they were both mortal.

2. Possibly from the Orthodox reply to *Adoptionism* that Mary is the mother of God; or from the actions of the Collyridians.

## What is the Bible?

In the first step we saw that we do not learn about Christianity from reading the Qur'an but from reading the Bible. But what is the Bible? What is this book that Christians get their beliefs from, and in particular this belief about the Trinity.

It is common for people to assume that the Bible and the Qur'an are basically the same, and that just as Christians get their beliefs from one book, the Bible, so too Muslims get their beliefs from one book, the Qur'an. But this is not the case. The Bible and Qur'an are very different at one major point: what they contain.

The Bible is not one book but a collection of many books from different prophets, from different locations, in different languages, over about a 1500 year period. It contains the Law of Moses (Torah), the Psalms of David, the books of Solomon, the books of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Job, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and others. It has the Gospel of Jesus recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the writings of the Apostles of Jesus.

THE BIBLE			
Law of Moses (Torah)	The Books of the Prophets	The Psalms	The Gospel
<----- c. 1500 years ----->			

Why do Christians have all these books in the Bible? The answer is simple: Christians accept all the prophets and make no distinction between them, therefore, they have all these books in the Bible so they can read them. What Christians believe about God comes from reading all these books of the prophets.

When God reveals himself to us it is not a matter of dumping data as fast as possible, rather, to reveal a person requires time, and because it requires time it is progressive. We see this in the Torah where God revealed more of himself to Moses than he did to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob:

God also said to Moses, “I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD (Yahweh) I did not make myself known to them.” (Exodus 6:2-3)

Over a long period of time God has spoken through the prophets and progressively explained his name, his actions in history, provided us with concepts to understand him, given us laws to live by, given us ways to approach him, made promises for the future, and the promise to reveal more of himself to us. The Torah, Prophets, Psalms, and Gospel, are the word of God through which God has progressively revealed himself to us over this period of time.

These books build on each other and are meant to be read together. Together they give us God’s complete message. What Christians believe about God comes from reading all of the books of the prophets.

Islam is very different at this point because the Qur’an only contains what Muhammad recited. Thus, what Muslims believe about God comes from one man and not from reading all the books of the prophets. Muslims may say that Muhammad recited the word of God, but the point remains, Islam is still based on one man and what he says to believe about the other prophets. Muslims do not read the books of the prophets but only listen to Muhammad.

<b>THE QUR’AN</b>
Muhammad
<----- 23 years ----->

In this way Islam is identical to the Bahai religion, which likewise is based on *one* man who recited to his followers what they are to believe about God, the prophets and their message.

This is the second step we need to be clear about. The Christian understanding of the Trinity, like other Christian beliefs, does not come from *one* man but from the progressive revelation God has given through *all* the prophets.

## The Oneness and Distinctions of God

The next step is to deal with the assumptions we have regarding the oneness and distinctions of God. For many Christians and Muslims this is the hardest step because it is the one we have had the least experience thinking about.

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God has both oneness and distinctions, that is, there is the one undivided divine nature/essence of God, with a distinction of persons. When Christians explain this oneness and distinction, with various illustrations and scriptural references, the normal Muslim response is to reject these explanations for two reasons:

1. Muslims believe that the oneness of God makes *any* distinction or diversity impossible, therefore the Trinity compromises God's oneness.
2. The Christian description of the Trinity is too complicated to understand whereas Tawheed is simple and easy to understand.

These two reasons are regularly heard at the public level when Muslim leaders dismiss the Trinity. However, while Muslim leaders may say these things publicly, Muslim scholars and philosophers know that it is not that simple. To say that God only has oneness, with no distinctions, creates a significant logical problem that Muslim scholars have to deal with. The problem is that the Qur'an (and Bible) describe God not only in terms of oneness but also with distinctions.

Yes, there is the *one* uncreated nature or essence of God, but there are also *many* distinct attributes of God like power, sovereignty, knowledge, speech, life, will, sight, hearing, breath, love, justice, patience, anger, etc. The question for Islam<sup>3</sup> is how do the many distinct attributes of God coexist in the oneness of God's essence and still maintain his absolute oneness? Islam maintains that each of God's attributes that are seen in the Qur'an (his power, knowledge, speech, life, will, sight, hearing, hand, breath, etc.) are a *distinct* attribute, yet each one shares fully in the one divine essence. How is this oneness and diversity to be understood? The Islamic doctrine of Tawheed, with its focus on the oneness and singularity of God, finds it difficult to explain these distinctions as the following quote shows:

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3. Christianity examines this question too in the doctrine of God's *simplicity*.

The Ash`aris maintain that the attributes of God are not the essence [dhat] nor are they other than His essence. If it is said that the attributes are the very essence of God (*as the Mu`tazilah and philosophers claim*), then it means that the essence of God is without attributes since they would be one and the same as the essence (*whereas the attributes and essence are understood to be two different things*). However, it is also problematic to say that the attributes of God are totally other than His essence, since it would mean that the attributes may exist separately and die away - whereas this is certainly not the case given that his attributes are eternal. The reality is that there is a special connection between His essence and attributes. His attributes exist in His essence, are eternal in His eternalness, and everlasting with His everlastingness. They have always been with Him and will be that way for eternity. (Muhammad Salih Farfur, *The Beneficial Message & The Definitive Proof in the Study of Theology*, (Trans: Wesam Charkawi) 2010, p. 119, underline added.)

This quote is an example of Muslim scholars trying to coherently describe the oneness and distinctions of God. That is, Muslim scholars do not simply believe that God only has oneness; they also acknowledge that God has an aspect of distinction and diversity. This is very important to realise because Christians and Muslims often assume that it is only Christians who have to explain God's oneness and distinctions when in fact Muslims have to explain it too.

For the author of the previous quote the problem of understanding how God can have both oneness of essence and yet diversity of attributes is solved by saying there is a *special connection* between them. But, saying a special connection is not an explanation; it is just acknowledging that both oneness and distinctions are true, and there must be *some* connection between them. For the Ash`aris the solution was expressed with the famous Arabic saying *bi-la kayfa* (without asking how).

Not only does Islam wrestle to explain the oneness of God's nature/essence with the diversity of his attributes; it also wrestles to explain how a God of absolute unchanging oneness can have diverse personal actions that interact with creation. Or how a God of absolute oneness can have the distinction of his spirit that he breathes out into us.

When your Lord said to the angels, "I shall create mankind from clay. When I have formed him and breathed some of my Spirit into him ... I created (him) with my own hands." (Qur'an 38:71-75, Jones)

Different Muslim groups answer these questions differently and disagree with each other. That is, Muslim leaders do not agree about Tawheed.

One famous example of this is regarding the nature of the Qur'an: Muslims understand the Qur'an to be the speech of God, that is, it is from God. The question is: Is the Qur'an created or uncreated? The Mu'tazilites said it was *created* because they wanted to maintain the oneness of God's uncreated essence/nature and not have it shared with the Qur'an. However, the Ash'aris said the Qur'an is *uncreated* because it is the speech of God and therefore one of his eternal attributes - and God does not create his own attributes. The Ash'aris position is now the orthodox belief in Islam, but consider what this means: The Qur'an is *distinct* from God yet shares in his uncreated, divine, eternal nature; this is oneness and diversity! In practice, Islam believes that God has an aspect of oneness and an aspect of distinction just as Christians do.

The point of this discussion is simply this: Muslims say to Christians that the Trinity compromises God's oneness and is too complicated to understand. But as I have shown, Islam likewise has a belief in both God's oneness and distinctions yet does not consider this a compromise; and Muslims have found it complicated to explain how this oneness and distinction fit together; in fact they disagree about it.

Therefore, if you are a Christian do not be deceived by the Muslim claim that Islam is obvious simple monotheism. It is not.

If you are a Muslim, then understand that you already believe, like Christians, that God has both oneness and distinction, and that these distinctions do not compromise his oneness. You therefore have no logical grounds for rejecting the possibility of the Trinity.

This is the third step: Christianity and Islam both<sup>4</sup> have some understanding of God's oneness and distinctions. The question is, what is the character of God's distinctions? We will consider this question now.

### The Oneness and Distinctions of God in the Prophets before Jesus

For the last section of this chapter I want to return to the scriptures and look at how the prophets before Jesus show that God is not simply oneness but has

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4. In fact every religion and philosophy does.

aspects of both oneness *and* distinction.

*Genesis chapter 1:*

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. (Genesis 1:1-4)

These are the first verses of the Torah, the Law of Moses. What do we see? We see oneness, there is only one God, but we also see distinctions, as this one God sends his Spirit, acts through this word, and has many attributes that he expresses in a variety of ways. God's oneness and distinctions are presented to us in the first verses of the Bible.

*The Spirit of God.* The Spirit is described as the breath of God (Job 33:4, Psalm 33:6), and God breathes his Spirit into Adam to give him life (Genesis 2:7). These are descriptions of oneness and distinction, not of oneness alone.

*The Divine Image.* The scripture says that no one can see the transcendent God.

No one has ever seen God ... (John 1:18)

[God] who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. ... (1 Timothy 6:16 & 1:17)

And yet, these same scriptures record that people do.

And the LORD appeared to him [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. (Genesis 18:1)

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. (Exodus 24:9-10)

And so we see that the transcendent God has another agent into creation - his

divine image or messenger.<sup>5</sup> This divine image is addressed and worshipped as God yet is distinct from the transcendent God who cannot be seen. Again we see God has oneness and distinction.

And so we see that for the people of God, before Jesus, their experience of God was triadic, not unitarian: there was the transcendent God, his Spirit, and his divine messenger/image into creation.

*Let us make ... (Genesis 1:26).* In the first chapter of the Torah we see that God refers to himself in the plural, *us*. If God wants us to understand that he is absolute oneness then this does not make sense. There is something appropriate about God using the plural to speak of himself.

*Humanity Made in the Image of God.* The prophets before Jesus teach that God made us in his image.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

To be made in the image of God means to be God's representative/agent, and as his representative we are to display his character in the way we live.

Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy. (Leviticus 19:2)

Thus, we share in some of God's attributes: We are to be like God in truth, love, mercy, etc. The fact that God made us in his image shows an important aspect of God: God is able to share his attributes and still maintain his oneness. That is, there is a oneness and distinction.

*The Divine Son.* In Isaiah 9:6 the Messiah is called "Mighty God", which is how God is described in Isaiah 10:21, yet Isaiah is clear there is only one God (Isaiah 43:10). Again this shows oneness and distinction.

*The Son of Man.* In Daniel chapter 7 we see the divine man, who comes on the clouds as God does, and receives the worship of all the nations.

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of

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5. The messenger/angel of the LORD.

Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

This again shows the oneness of God on the throne and yet distinction of his person and worship.

To finish this section we will consider Deuteronomy 6:4 because it is often quoted by Muslim leaders to show that the Bible *only* teaches the absolute oneness of God (Tawheed).

Hear, O Israel: The LORD (Yahweh) our God, the LORD is one.  
(Deuteronomy 6:4)

Does this verse teach that God is *only* absolute oneness? No. Deuteronomy 6:4 does not teach the Islamic concept of God (Tawheed) because it refers to Yahweh, not Allah, and Yahweh is the God who sends his Spirit and divine image; he speaks his word and has many different attributes; he uses the plural to refer to himself; and made us in his image and shares some of his attributes with us. He is the Father of the divine Son and shares his rule with the Son of Man. That is, the God Yahweh has both oneness *and* distinctions. Deuteronomy is reminding us of this oneness but it is not denying God's distinctions.

When Jesus referred to Deuteronomy 6:4 he makes this exact point. First, he quotes Deuteronomy 6:4 to show that God is one and then continues by quoting Psalm 110 which shows the divine son ruling with God at God's right hand. (See Mark 12:28-37).

Conclusion: In this chapter we have seen that Islam, along with Christianity, has an understanding of God's oneness and distinctions, and that saying God is only one is an inadequate description of God. Then, we considered the prophets before Jesus and saw that they never describe God as only oneness, but as having oneness and distinctions. As we shall see in the following chapters the Trinity is a further revelation of this oneness and distinctions.

## Personal Existence

The next step is to look at our assumptions regarding personal existence. That is, how do persons exist?

When it comes to the personal nature of God, Christians and Muslims both have questions to answer. For the Christian the question is how do the three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit share the one undivided divine essence/nature? For the Muslim the question is how can a God of absolute oneness be a person at all? I will consider the Christian question first.

The Christian claim is that the one divine essence is shared by three distinct persons. In response to this it is quite common for Muslims to say something like: “How can three be in one? This doesn’t make sense.” Therefore, how can a Christian understand and explain this belief?

The assumption that needs to be dealt with is: *It is obvious that one being can only have one person and therefore saying three in one is irrational.* This is the common assumption that many people have and it stops Muslims in particular from even considering the Trinity. This assumption sounds correct until you think about it; because how beings and persons relate is not obvious. We will consider four aspects of personal existence to understand this subject more clearly and begin with a slightly modified example given by James R. White.<sup>6</sup>

How beings and persons exist varies. Consider a rock: It has existence and substance but no life and no person as far as we know. What about a tree? It exists, is alive, but again as far as we know no person. What about a man? He exists, is alive, and has a person. Therefore, we see that the relationship between things that exist and persons varies within creation. What about God? God is outside of creation. How do beings and persons relate outside of three dimensional time and space? We do not know! Only God can tell us that. Therefore, when we think about how beings and persons relate it is not obvious that one being can only have one person.

Secondly, when the Bible and Qur’an describe human personhood they do not describe it as a singularity but as a unity of body, soul, spirit, mind, and heart. That is, there are different centres of personhood. In fact the Qur’an says that

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6. James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity*, Bethany House Publisher: Minnesota, 1998, pp.170-171.

our soul can speak to us:

We created man, and We know what his soul whispers *to him* ... (Qur'an 50:16, Jones)

Therefore, human personhood has both oneness and distinction.

Thirdly, consider our human personal experience again, but from a different angle. Both the Bible and Qur'an say that human personal existence may include God. For the Christian we see that God personally dwells *in us*:

And I (Jesus) will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be *in you*. (John 14:16-17)

Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (John 14:23)

And in (Jesus) you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesian 2:22)

(T)he one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

God personally dwells in Christians by his Spirit, and this is something Christians rejoice in. We are not simply one; God is personally in us, in our very thoughts, our very being. The Qur'an too seems to have its own idea about the personal presence of God in us, for it does not view God as remote but intimately present and immanent with all humans.

We created man, and We know what his souls whispers to him, for we are nearer to him than his jugular vein. (Qur'an 50:16, Jones)

Therefore, in our human experience we can be aware of more than one person in us. This is the Bible and Qur'an's understanding of human personhood. Therefore, again, the assumption that one being can only have one person is not valid.

Finally, consider spirit beings, they have a degree of transcendence and a

different type of spatial existence to humans. We see this in the case of spirit possession. In this case one or more spirits indwell one human, that is, there are many in one. Therefore, again, when we think about personal existence it is not at all obvious that one being can only have one person.

These examples are not presented as illustrations of the Trinity. God is unique; there is nothing like him. His experience of personhood is completely unique. Instead they are meant to show that how persons and life exists can take many forms and therefore the Trinity is logically possible. Understanding this is an important foundation for understanding the Trinity.

This is the third foundation: Persons exist in many forms.

Therefore, if you are a Muslim you have no logical grounds for rejecting the possibility of the Trinity at this point.

## The Father, Son, Spirit Relationship

The fifth step is to understand that the Father, Son, Spirit relationship did not begin with Christianity.

It is understandable if a Muslim thinks that it is only Christians who believe in the Father, Son, and Spirit. Christians certainly speak about them the most, but it is a teaching that predates Christianity. It is a teaching found in the prophets who were before Jesus. The following verses are from the Torah, books of the Prophets, and the Psalms. These are the scriptures that existed *before* Jesus.

First, we see that the nation of Israel is called the son of God, God is their father, and he moves among them by his Spirit.

This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son. (Exodus 4:22)

Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?  
(Deuteronomy 32:6)

I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son. (Jeremiah 31:9)

When Israel was a child, I (God) loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. (Hosea 11:1)

(God) set his Holy Spirit among them. (Isaiah 63:11)

Therefore, in the prophets before Christianity we see that the Father, Son, Spirit relationship is a way of speaking about God's relationship with his people. Calling God father is one of the most beautiful things we can do.

Second, we see that the king of Israel, who was the son of David, the Messiah, is also called the son of God, God is his father, and he is the Spirit filled son.

I (God) will raise up your offspring to succeed you (David) ... I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. (2 Samuel 7:12-14)

Do not cast me (David) from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. (Psalm 51:11)

He (God) said to me (David): Solomon your son is the one who will build

my house and my courts, for I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father. (1 Chronicles 28:6)

I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." (Psalm 2:7)

Therefore in the prophets before Christianity we see that the Father, Son, Spirit relationship is a way of speaking about God's relationship with his Messiah king.

What did it mean to be a son of God? It meant God was your father, you were his agent in the world who represented him, his image, and you were to display his character, and share in his glory. The nation of Israel and her kings failed to do this - as we would. Therefore, God promised that he would send his true son, his true image, who would truly represent him. This is the promise of the coming Messiah.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father<sup>7</sup>, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him - the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. (Isaiah 11:2)

Therefore, when God promises to send the Messiah, we are told he will be the true Spirit filled Son of God.

The point of these examples is to show that the Father, Son, Spirit relationship did not begin with Christianity. It is in fact the message of all the prophets<sup>8</sup>. However, Muhammad denied this message. In the Qur'an, God is not father, and no one in any way can be called the son of God; all you can be is God's

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7. The reference to *father* here is another way of saying the Son will be a king. See Isaiah 22:20.

8. Early in the church's history there were different groups who had different opinions about the person and nature of Jesus, however, they still accepted the Father, Son, and Spirit relationship. Where they differed was how to understand the nature of this relationship.

slave.

(Both) the Jews and the Christians say: "We are sons of God, and his beloved." Say: "Why then does He punish you for your sins? No, you are but men, of the men he has created ..." (Qur'an 5:18, Yusuf Ali)

O People of the Book! ... Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) an apostle of God ... Glory be to God: (far exalted is He) above having a son. (Qur'an 4:171, Yusuf Ali)

It is not fitting for the Merciful (Allah) to take to himself a son. There is none in the heavens and the earth who will not come to the Merciful (except) as a slave. (Qur'an 19:92-93, Jones)

To conclude this chapter, if you are a Christian, be assured that the doctrine of the Trinity has its foundation in the prophets before Jesus.

If you are a Muslim then understand that Christians did not invent the Father, Son, Spirit relationship; nor was it invented at the Council of Nicea. It is the message of all the prophets. You need to ask yourself why does Muhammad deny this basic teaching of all the prophets? Calling God Father is one of the beautiful names of God revealed throughout the prophets, why does Muhammad deny it if he is a true prophet?

## Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity

We saw in the last chapter that the Father, Son, Spirit relationship is central to the message of all the prophets; and that the promise of the coming Messiah is the promise of the true son. We have also seen in chapter 2 that through the prophets God has been progressively revealing himself to us. With the coming of Jesus all of this comes to its fulfilment. Jesus is the promised Messiah, the true son, the true image, and with the coming of Jesus we receive the final revelation of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

### The Divine Son

Jesus taught that he was more than just a normal son of David:

While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, "How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: 'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.' David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?" The large crowd listened to him with delight. (Mark 12:35-37)

And his virgin birth showed he was a unique son:

The angel answered (Mary), "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:35)

The actions of Jesus demonstrate his divinity as he does what only God can do in the same way God does it:

- He forgave people their sin, Mark 2:5-7.
- His presence led to a conviction of sin, Luke 5:8.
- He calmed the storm, Psalm 107:23-30 > Mark 4:35.
- Walked on water, Job 9:8 > Mark 6:45ff.
- Commanded spirits, 1 Kings 22 > Mark 5:7-8.
- Chooses who will be saved, Matthew 11:27.

- He is the husband to God's people as God is (Isaiah 54:5, Jeremiah 3:14; Ezekiel 16:32, Hosea 1-2 (2:19-20) > Mark 2:19, John 3:29.)
- Jesus says he is the divine Son: Matthew 26:63-66, Mark 12:35ff, John 5:16-23, 8:58, 10:29-39, 14:8-9, Isaiah 44:6 > Revelation 1:17 & 22:13.

The Gospel explains the nature of Jesus sonship:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:1&14)

Jesus is described as the *Word of God*. This description shows:

1. It is monotheism: there is God and his word.
2. Jesus does not come from God by way of creation for God does not create his word, instead Jesus comes from God by the way God's word does, that is, by nature. Jesus is of the same nature as God.
3. Jesus is a distinct person.

Another important description of Jesus is the following verse:

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. ... (Hebrews 1:3)

Here Jesus is described as the radiance of God's glory. Again we see the same three points:

1. It is monotheism: God and his glory.
2. Jesus does not come from God by way of creation for God does not create his glory, his glory radiates out from his very nature. Thus, Jesus is of the same nature of God.
3. Jesus is a distinct person.

In the Gospel we have the revelation of the true son of God.

## The Holy Spirit

When we consider the Holy Spirit we likewise see that he is described not as being created by God but as having the same nature as God, for he is described as the very breath of God, and God does not create his own breath:

(T)he LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life. (Job 33:4)

By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. (Psalm 33:6)

As we saw with the verses about Jesus, these verses describing the Holy Spirit teach monotheism, show that the Spirit is of the same nature as God, and is distinct.

But the Holy Spirit is not just a power or force; he is spoken of as a person: He is called a counsellor (John 14:16-17), he speaks and sends (Acts 13:2-4), chooses (Acts 20:28), teaches (John 14:26), works and gives (1 Cor. 12:11), can be lied to and tested (Acts 5:3, 9), grieves (Isaiah 63:10, Eph. 4:30), can be blasphemed (Mat. 12:31), he testifies (John 15:26, Rom. 8:16), intercedes for us (Rom. 8:26-27), envies for holiness (James 4:5), searches and knows (1 Cor. 2:10-11), and is the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18).

Therefore, scripture does not describe the Holy Spirit as only a power or force, but as a distinct person of the same nature as God.

## Putting it All Together - The Trinity

When God reveals himself to us it is the revelation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God with three distinct persons. God's actions to us from the Father through the Son by the Spirit. It is from this revelation in scripture that Christians have understood God to be Trinity. This understanding comes from reading all of the prophets, and is an expression of the oneness and distinctions of God.

## The Trinity, Reason, and the Personal Nature of God

As we consider the doctrine of the Trinity and reason, I do not want to give the impression that we can work out the truth about God by only using our reason and logic. God is transcendent and beyond our senses. We can know something of God from creation but ultimately we need God to reveal himself to us for us to know who he is and what he is like. This being said, when God *does* make himself known we should expect this revelation to be reasonable.

The Trinity is often mocked by Muslim leaders for being illogical and against reason. They say it is illogical because it compromises the oneness of God; but as we saw in chapter 3 both Christianity and Islam hold together God's oneness and distinctions without compromise. They also say it is impossible for three to be in one; but chapter 4 showed that personal existence is complex and three can be in one. Therefore the Trinity has been shown to be reasonable against these charges. I now wish to consider a different issue and show how the Trinity makes good sense of a God who is both personal and self-sufficient.

Throughout the scriptures God is revealed as being personal. He is not just a force or energy or potential, but is personally active and relational. God is also said to be self-sufficient, that is, God does not need creation but is complete within himself. God created everything as an act of grace, not from necessity.

When these two truths are considered together the doctrine of the Trinity is seen to be reasonable, because, if God is truly self-sufficient, and personally active, then it is reasonable to conclude that he is personally active *within himself* since he is self-sufficient and not dependant upon creation. That is, if God is self-sufficient then he does not need creation to start being personally active. This is what the doctrine of the Trinity affirms: that God has related within himself from all eternity: Father, Son, and Spirit. The Trinity affirms the eternal active personal nature of God. It makes sense of our belief that God *is* love (1 John 4:8) because it shows how love has been active in God for all eternity. God is inter-personal.

Tawheed, on the other hand, has difficulty at this point because how can God be personally active from eternity if he is absolute oneness with no distinctions that can interact? A god of absolute oneness may *potentially* be personally active once creation is made and he can relate to it, but this god is not personally active from all eternity. A god who needs creation to be personally active is not self-sufficient. Thus, Tawheed cannot explain the eternal personal nature and self-sufficiency of God whereas the Trinity can.

## The Qur'an and the Trinity

As we have seen earlier, when the Qur'an explains its understanding of the Trinity it is of God, Mary, and Jesus:

They are unbelievers who say, "God is the Third of Three". No god is there but One God. ... The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a Messenger; Messengers before him passed away; his mother was a just a woman; they both ate food. (Qur'an 5:73-75, Arberry)

This is not the Trinity that Christians believe but is still a general denial of the concept. However, while the Qur'an denies the Trinity some remnants of Trinitarian theology remain in the Qur'an.

The first example is the Qur'an's account of Jesus creating birds from clay. One of God's unique attributes is that he is the creator. Being the creator is what defines him and makes him unique to everything else. Yet in the Qur'an we see that Jesus has this unique attribute of God and expresses it in exactly the same way as God.<sup>9</sup> We see this in that God created Adam from clay and breathed into him the breath of life:

When your Lord said to the angels, "I shall create mankind from clay. When I have formed him and breathed some of my Spirit into him ... I created (him) with my own hands." (Qur'an 38:71-75, Jones)

And in exactly the same way Jesus creates:

I (Jesus) have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the permission of God. (Qur'an 3:49, Arberry)

This story of Jesus creating birds comes from an early Christian fable<sup>10</sup> about the childhood of Jesus, and it demonstrates Jesus' divinity by showing him as the creator, that is, it is a Trinitarian story.

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9. Some people have said to me that Moses created when he threw his staff on the ground and it became a snake (Exodus 4), however, Moses ran from the snake in fear of what God had done. This is completely different to the fable of Jesus who creates in precisely the same way as God did when he created Adam.

10. *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*

In the Qur'an the story now says that Jesus only did this by God's permission; however, this does not remove Jesus' divinity from the story because creating is a unique attribute that defines God. If God shares this attribute with Jesus then Jesus shares in what is uniquely God's. If God can share this attribute with anyone then he is no longer unique. Therefore, an element of Trinitarian theology remains in the Qur'an.

The second example is when Jesus is given the title "Word of God".

And the angels called to him (Zechariah), standing in the Sanctuary at worship, "Lo, God gives you good tidings of John, who shall confirm<sup>11</sup> a Word of God (Jesus)." (Qur'an 3:39, Arberry)

The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary (Qur'an 4:171, Arberry)

As we saw in the previous chapter, to call Jesus the Word of God is a Trinitarian statement. It shows that he comes from God not by way of creation, but as the word, having the same nature as God. This is the original meaning of calling Jesus the Word of God (John 1:1). In the Qur'an the meaning is different; when Jesus is called the Word of God it means his creation came as a result of God's word/command to Mary. The problem with this is that every human being, and everything, is created by God's word/command,<sup>12</sup> and so to call Jesus the Word of God is not saying anything special - yet it clearly *is* a special title. The only valid reason to call Jesus the Word of God is the original Trinitarian reason, and so we see another element of Trinitarian theology remaining in the Qur'an.

The last example is with the Holy Spirit. There are different opinions regarding the Holy Spirit in Islam. Most would say he is the angel Gabriel though the Qur'an never makes this connection.

In the Qur'an the Holy Spirit is God's breath through whom he gave Adam life (Q. 15:29). God sends his Spirit with revelation (Q. 16:102), and the Spirit comes as an agent of God to Mary (Q. 19:17) to announce the birth of Jesus. Therefore, in the Qur'an the Holy Spirit is the personal breath of God who is his agent into the world. This is Trinitarian.

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11. John prepared the way for Jesus.

12. Qur'an 2:117, 3:59, 6:73, 16:40, 36:82, 40:68

When Muhammad was asked to explain the Holy Spirit he had no answer as we see from this verse in the Qur'an:

They will ask you about the Spirit. Say, "The Spirit is part of the affair of my Lord; and you have been given only little knowledge (of it)." If We wished, We could take away from you that with which We inspired you.  
... (Qur'an 17:85-86, Jones)

The Qur'an does not give an answer to this important question.

To conclude: In this chapter we have considered the Trinity in the Qur'an. We have seen that the Qur'an's understanding of God, Mary, and Jesus, is not the Christian Trinity; we have seen that elements of Trinitarian theology still remain in the Qur'an; and that the Qur'an does not answer important questions about the nature of God.

## Conclusion

In this booklet we have taken steps towards understanding the doctrine of the Trinity and examined some of our assumptions along the way. We have seen that Islam too has an understanding of God's oneness and distinctions, and therefore Muslims cannot accuse the Trinity of compromising the oneness of God. We have seen that personal existence is complex and that three can be in one. We have seen that the Father, Son, Spirit relationship is the message of all the prophets that comes to its fulfilment with Jesus; and we have seen that elements of Trinitarian theology remain in the Qur'an. I hope this has answered some of your questions.

However, our goal is not simply to answer questions. Our goal is to grow in our love and knowledge of God, to listen to God.

Why should somebody learn about loving God from the Bible? You should read the Bible because it is not one book but many books from many prophets with one unified message. It is God's message to us. And this message is that God has acted in the world through his Son and Spirit so that we may call him father. This is beautiful.

The Next Step: Why not read some of the Bible yourself? Ask a Christian for a copy or search online. I recommend that you start with a book from the Bible called *Matthew*. A good English translation is available here:

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/matthew/>



For other booklets in this series visit

<http://engagingwithislam.org/evangelistic-resources/>



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## Appendix - FAQ

### 1. God and Mathematics

I do not believe that God is subject to mathematics, however, I have often heard Muslims use a mathematical argument against the Trinity.

Muslim:  $1+1+1=3$  not 1, you believe in three gods or are just illogical.

Christian: You have misrepresented what we are saying. We are saying  $1+1+1=3$  *persons* who all share the *one* divine nature. God is inter-personal. But if you want to use mathematics to describe God then why use the number 1? God is infinite, why not use the mathematical concept of infinity  $\infty$  ? This gives us a very different answer.

$$\infty + \infty + \infty = \infty$$

Why only three? Because that is God has revealed about himself.

I am not suggesting that we use mathematics to describe God, but if you insist that we do, then mathematics can support the doctrine of the Trinity.

### 2. The Trinity is based on pagan ideas from other religions.

No, as we have shown in this booklet the doctrine of the Trinity arises from the progressive revelation of God throughout the many books of the prophets, and some of these ideas are even in the Qur'an.

### 3. God has no son!

Muslim: When you call Jesus the son of God you are saying that God had sex with Mary!

Christian: No we are not. The gospel describes the conception of Jesus in the following verse:

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:35)

Do you have a problem with this?

Also, the fatherhood and son of God are spoken about throughout the prophets. Why does Muhammad deny this and say we are only slaves? Why does Muhammad deny the fatherhood of God? (Qur'an 19:92-93). Muhammad does not seem to understand the message of the prophets.

BIBLE				QUR'AN
Old Testament			New Testament	Muhammad
Torah	Prophets	Psalms	Gospel	
<----- c. 1500 years ----->				23 years
Humanity is created in the image of God.				No
The Fatherhood & Son of God				No
God dwells with his people.				No
Priesthood & Sacrifice of Atonement for Sin				No
Covenants of Noah, Abraham, Moses, & David				No
One Story of Redemption				No

#### 4. Where did Jesus ever say I am God worship me?

You have not understood what Jesus said. Jesus called himself the divine Son of God, and demonstrated this by what he did, see page 17. He never describes himself outside of his relationship to his Father. He also does what the Qur'an says only God can do:

- Only God can forgive sin: Qur'an 3:135 > Jesus forgives sin: Mark 2:1-12.
- God is the truth: Qur'an 22:6, 31:30 > Jesus says he is the truth: John 14:6.
- God is life: Qur'an 2:255, 3:2, 25:58, 40:65 > Jesus says he is the life: John 14:6.
- God is the First and the Last: Qur'an 57:3 > Jesus is the First and Last: Revelation 1:17-18, 22:13.
- God claims the storm: Qur'an 42:32-33 > Jesus calms the storm: Mark 4:35.
- God comes with the clouds bringing judgement: Qur'an 2:210, 89:21-23 > Jesus comes with the clouds bringing judgement Mark 8:38, 13:26.



