

# **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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## 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 diversity, that is, the one 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 and also to ask some questions of Tawheed. The approach 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 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.

Finally, when a Muslim asks a Christian to explain the Trinity, they are in fact asking them to explain the very heart and nature of God. This is a profound question for any religion, not just Christianity, and when Muslims try to explain the heart and nature of God, as we shall see, they find this difficult. It is in fact the biggest question in the history of the universe, therefore we must not trivialise it, but understand that it requires effort, and give it the proper respect that it is due.

## **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, 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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<sup>1</sup> *They both ate food*, that is, they were both mortal.

<sup>2</sup> 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, 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.

<b>THE BIBLE</b>			
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 of the 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, they are meant to be read together, and 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 other prophets but only 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 Diversity of God

The next step is to deal with the assumptions we have regarding the oneness and diversity 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 diversity, that is, there is the one 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. Thus 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 popular level when Muslim leaders dismiss the Trinity. However, while Muslim leaders at the popular level may say these things, Muslim scholars and philosophers know that it is not that simple. To say that God only has oneness, with no diversity, creates a whole series of logical problems that Muslim scholars have to deal with. To understand why this is the case we need to think about the terms we use to describe God. The key terms for our discussion are:

*Essence.* The essence refers to the nature of God, what God is, his substance. Christians and Muslims agree that God has one essence.

*Attributes.* These refer to the characteristics of God, for example, power, sovereignty, knowledge, speech, life, will, sight, hearing, breath, love, justice, patience, anger, etc. Christians and Muslims agree that there are *many* attributes.

*Person.* That aspect of a being that can consciously relate to others.

These terms are derived from God's revelation of himself in scripture, and it is important to note from them that God does not describe himself in just one way but many: there are different aspects to God. Therefore, limiting a description of God to just the oneness of his essence is completely inadequate, but this is what Islam does, and it creates problems for Muslim scholars.



In Islam<sup>3</sup> the problem to be solved is, how do the many distinct attributes of God coexist in the oneness of God's essence and still maintain his 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 this diversity as the following quote shows:

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 diversity of God. That is, Muslim scholars do not simply believe that God only has oneness; they also acknowledge that God has an aspect of 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 diversity 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 diversity 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).

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

Not only does Islam wrestle to explain the oneness of God's 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. Different Muslim groups answer these questions differently and disagree with each other sharply. That is, Muslim leaders do not agree about Tawheed.

One famous example of this is regarding the nature of the Qur'an: 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. 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 diversity 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 diversity, and has had little success in explaining this to anyone; in fact most Muslims know nothing about this Islamic teaching.

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 diversity, and that this diversity does 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 diversity. The question is, what is the character of this diversity?

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<sup>4</sup> In fact every religion and philosophy does.

## Transcendent and Spatial Existence

The next step is to look at our assumptions regarding personal spatial 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 divine essence? For the Muslim the question is how can a God of absolute oneness be a person at all? I will only consider the Christian question in this chapter.

The Christian claim is that the one divine essence is shared by three distinct persons. In response to this it is quite common for those who reject the Trinity 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?

Firstly, we must not use our own experience of being a person to define what God's experience of being personal must be. Humans are part of creation and three dimensional space and time, but God transcends creation, space, and time. Therefore it is not valid to project our understanding of a person on to God who transcends our experience of creation, space and time. We must not use ourselves as the standard for God. How do transcendent persons exist beyond three dimensional space and time? Why can't three be in one?

Secondly, human personal experience is actually not straight forward. Both the Christian and Muslim scriptures give examples of complex human personal existence. 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. 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, even in our human experience we can be aware of more than one person in us.

Thirdly, 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. Here one or more spirits indwell one human, that is, there are many in one.

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. Therefore we cannot assume that one being can only have one person. Sometimes there are multiple persons in one being.

Therefore, if you are a Muslim you have no logical grounds for rejecting the possibility of the Trinity at this point. This is the fourth step: to understand transcendent and spatial personal existence.

## **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.

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.

Secondly, 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, and you were to display his character, and share in his glory. The nation of Israel and her king, as we would have done, failed to do this. Therefore, God promised that he would send his true son 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>5</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>6</sup>. However, Muhammad denied this message. In the Qur'an, God is not father,

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<sup>5</sup> The reference to *father* here is another way of saying the Son will be a king. See Isaiah 22:20.

<sup>6</sup> Early in the church's history there were different groups who had different opinions about the person and nature of Jesus, but every one of these groups believed in the Father, Son, and Spirit relationship. Where they differed was how to understand the nature of this relationship. No body denied the Father, Son, and Spirit the way Muhammad does.

and no one in any way can be called the son of God; all you can be is God's 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, then 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, 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:

- 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 it: 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 his sonship:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

Jesus is described as the *Word of God*, and there are three observations about this:

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.

## The Trinity

When God is revealed to us it is the revelation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God with three distinct persons. 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 diversity of God.

## The Oneness and Diversity of God

To finish this chapter I want to look a bit more at how the prophets before Jesus show that God is not simply oneness but has aspects of both oneness *and* diversity.

*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 opening verses of the Torah, the Law of Moses. What do we see? We see oneness, there is only one God, but we also see diversity, 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 diversity are presented to us in the first verses of the Bible.

*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 diversity to God.

*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.

*The Spirit of God.* We have already seen earlier in this chapter that the Holy Spirit is described as the breath of God. This is a description of oneness and diversity not oneness alone.

*The Divine Son.* In Isaiah 9:6 the Messiah is called “Might God”, yet Isaiah is clear that there is only one God (Isaiah 43:10). Again this shows oneness and diversity.

*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 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 I 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)

Deuteronomy 6:4 does not teach Islamic Tawheed because it refers to Yahweh, not Allah, and Yahweh is the God who sends his Spirit and speaks his word; who has many different attributes; who uses the plural to refer to himself; who made us in his image and shares some of his attributes with us; who 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* diversity, and Deuteronomy is reminding us of this oneness but is not denying the diversity.

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 and God’s right hand. (See Mark 12:28-37).

To conclude this chapter I wish to state again that the prophets before Jesus never describe God as only oneness, but as having an aspect of oneness and an aspect of diversity. The Trinity is a revelation of this.

## 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 have an understanding of both God's oneness and diversity and that this diversity does not compromise his oneness. 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 and relational, then it is reasonable to conclude he is personally active and relational *within himself*, otherwise he is not self-sufficient; and this is what the doctrine of the Trinity teaches: that God has related within himself from all eternity: Father, Son, and Spirit. The doctrine of 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.

Tawheed, on the other hand, has difficulty at this point. If God is only absolute oneness how can he be personally active and relational since these require some type of distinction, which Tawheed denies. It is reasonable to conclude that a God of absolute oneness is *potentially* personal but not actively personally from all eternity. In this case God is dependent upon creation and not self-sufficient. The doctrine of the Trinity solves this problem while Tawheed does not.

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<sup>7</sup> This is called the *aseity* of God.

## 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 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>8</sup> God created Adam from clay and breathes 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>9</sup> about the childhood of Jesus, and it demonstrates Jesus' divinity by showing him as the creator, that is, it is a Trinitarian story.

In the Qur'an the story now says that Jesus only did this by God's permission;

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*

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 of *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>10</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. 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, and so to call Jesus the Word of God is not saying anything special - but it *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 a man 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. This is Trinitarian.

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

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<sup>10</sup> John prepared the way for Jesus.



my Lord; and you have been given only little knowledge (of it)” (Qur’an 17:85, 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 diversity, and therefore Muslims cannot accuse the Trinity of compromising the oneness of God. We have seen that transcendent and spatial personal existence is complex and that three can be in one; and we have seen that the Father, Son, Spirit relationship is the message of all the prophets that comes to its fulfilment with Jesus. I hope this has helped you to understand the Trinity better.

Finally, I wish to commend the Trinity to Muslims because of the unity of scripture. As was outlined in chapter 2, the Bible is not one book but many books, from many prophets, in different languages, from different times, and different locations. Yet, in spite of this great diversity there is one message.

THE BIBLE			
Torah	Prophets	Psalms	Gospel
← ----- c. 1500 years----- →			
Humanity is created in the image of God.			
The Fatherhood & Son of God			
God dwells with his people.			
The Priesthood & the Sacrifice for Sin			
One Story of Redemption			

In this booklet we have only considered the Trinity but we could have considered any Christian belief. As this table shows, the basic beliefs of Christianity are in fact the teachings of the all the prophets. This unity of scripture testifies to the truthfulness and preservation of the Bible. If you say you believe the prophets then believe what the prophets have written and God has fulfilled.

The Next Step: Why not read about the Father, Son, and Spirit for yourself? Read a Gospel and see what God has done for us. Ask a Christian for a copy or search for it online. I recommend that you start with the book called *Matthew*.

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