

**Part 2**  
SOME PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS WITH THE  
ISLAMIC DOCTRINE OF TAWHID AND  
A CONTRAST WITH THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY  
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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 *Tawhid* a central doctrine of Islam**

*Tawhid* — the concept of Allah as a complete, indivisible unity is arguably one of the central doctrines of Islam. Indeed, in Muslim-Christian engagement it often becomes *the* central issue, with Muslims trying to build a polemic upon the issue, one that paints the Christian as believing in three gods. If one accepts the story of its origins that Islam tells about itself, then Islam arose in reaction to and competition with polytheism, and thus the assertion that “Allah is one” is rooted deep in the heart of Islam. It is this assertion of *tawhid* that causes many Muslims to misunderstand what Christians are saying when we talk about God as triune.

### **1.2 Muslims claim that because of it, Islam is ‘simple’**

Furthermore, Muslims often like to claim that the Islamic concept of God’s oneness is *simple*, in contrast to the *complex* doctrine of the Trinity. And, it has to be said, they do have something of a point. The Trinity is not an easy concept to explain and many Christians in trying to do so often end straying into a wide range of potential heresies without realising it. In defence, however, it should be pointed out that:

- Simplicity does not equal truth. If it did, we’d have to reject higher mathematics, quantum physics, etc. etc.
- The Islamic doctrine of *tawhid* is not as simple as Muslims often make out — indeed, claims of simplicity reveal more about the claimants failure to think through Islamic metaphysics than they do about the doctrine itself.

### **1.3 Muslims often attack Christians on the area of the Trinity, perceiving it as our area of weakness and their area of strength**

Nevertheless, two critical observations need to be made here:

- Firstly, Muslims are very fond of attacking Christians on the subject of the Trinity and using it to run rings around them. A common debating technique, for example, is to switch any topic to that of the Trinity and to fire off a quick list of difficult questions. They perceive the Trinity as an area where Christians are weak and so seek to exploit that.
- Secondly, many Christians seem to concur with this view, allowing questions about the Trinity and the nature of God to get them bogged down and on the defensive.

### **1.4 We need to turn this around**

It is my view that we need to turn this around and that we can do so for the simple fact that, once one starts digging a little, it becomes clear that the concept of *tawhid* actually leads to a whole series of metaphysical problems — problems that the concept of God as multi-personal, triune,

actually solves. I hope to demonstrate that in Christian-Muslim discussions, **the concept of the Trinity gives us a position of strength** — this should not surprise us: if it is true, then surely this should be the case.

## 2. THE CENTRALITY OF TAWHID QUESTIONED: IS ALLAH A MONOD?

### 2.1 Absence of the nominal form *tawhid* in the Qur'an

We can begin with an observation here concerning the Arabic word *tawhid*, used to describe the Islamic doctrine of Allah's absolute unity. To dive into Arabic for a moment, *tawhid* is a verbal noun derived from the root form WHD. Kassis' exhaustive concordance of the Qur'an lists every form of WHD in the Qur'an and, lo and behold, *tawhid*, the verbal noun form, is not among them.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of this is twofold. Firstly, it is a neat rebuttal to the popular Muslim polemic that because the word "Trinity" does not occur in the Bible, the doctrine must be false. We can turn that attack right around and fire it back again. But secondly, it forces us in each case to turn to the scriptures. To discover whether *tawhid* is qur'anic or the Trinity biblical, we can't simply look for the word — we need to see what is actually said in each case about the nature of God.

### 2.2 The Qur'an's eternal nature and the Mu'tazilite controversy

The Qur'an firmly emphasises that Allah *alone* is God, this being a theme that reoccurs in verse after verse. The antithesis to Allah's sole rule, namely polytheism, is attacked again and again — and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is, according to Q.4:17; 5:73 lumped into this camp. According to the Qur'an, Christians believe in three gods (e.g. Q.5:116).

So far, things seem straightforward. But where the issue gets a lot more complex and where the straight, neat lines of the concept of *tawhid* begin to strain to hold onto the qur'anic evidence, is when one turns to the question of the Qur'an. For orthodox Islam, the Qur'an is the very word of Allah (it does not *contain* Allah's words, it *is* Allah's word — it is often remarked the Qur'an holds the same metaphysical place for Muslims as Jesus does for Christians). Because the Qur'an is the very Word of Allah, traditionally Islam has claimed that it is uncreated, existing eternally. This is based on the following verse:

*Nay, this is a Glorious Qur'an, (inscribed) in a Tablet Preserved! (Q. 85:21-22)*

When portions of the Qur'an were revealed to Muhammad, they were sent down (Arabic *tanzil*) from heaven where this tablet resides:

*We have, without doubt, sent down the message, and we will assuredly guard it from corruption. (Q. 15:9)*

But this doctrine of the Qur'an's eternal, uncreated nature, raises a huge problem for the doctrine of *tawhid*. How can Allah be an absolute, indivisible unity when, existing alongside him for all eternity, is another entity, namely the Qur'an? Even if you maximize the divine nature of the Qur'an, in order to try to subsume it *into* Allah, you are still left with the fact that one can draw divisions within him, and this is precisely what *tawhid* is supposed to deny.

There is only one way out of this impasse and in the 8th-9th century an early sect of Muslims, called the Mu'tazilites, took it. They saw exactly these problems and their response was to deny the

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur'an*, (London: University of California Press, 1983) 1262-1264.

Qur'an's eternal nature.<sup>2</sup> For the Mu'tazilites, the Qur'an was a created thing. The result was that they were branded as heretics and there was much bloodshed. Among the many objections raised to their suggestion was that if the Qur'an were both the Word of Allah *and* created, there must have been a time when Allah was *without* his Word and how could that be?<sup>3</sup>

The Islamic concept of God is much more complex than its surface appearance would suggest and, since *mainstream orthodox* Islam has always maintained the Qur'an is created, we can rightly ask how the doctrine of *tawhid* can fit with this or whether these are actually two contrary doctrines.

### 3 PROBLEMS WITH TAWHID

#### 3.1 Allah's 99 names: ontological attributes?

We have seen, then, that the Qur'an as traditionally interpreted does indeed stress that Allah alone is god, yet the existence of other eternal entities — the Qur'an, throne, pen and book — show that *tawhid* — Allah as undifferentiated unity — does not accurately represent this traditional view. But there are further problems for the doctrine of *tawhid* when we move from entities to Allah himself.

One of the things that is striking about the Qur'an is the number of different epithets or titles used for Allah. He is often referred to as *the merciful*, *the knowing*, *the forgiving* etc. In the first few centuries of the Muslim era, theologians compiled lists of these names and discussed their number. Eventually orthodoxy settled upon 99. The "99 names of Allah" is a concept well known to Muslims and non-Muslims and lists of these 99 names can be found both in works of Islamic scholarship and popular piety.<sup>4</sup> But the key point is this: because Allah is immutable (unchanging), these names were quite logically taken to be not merely functional but ontological, describing *what* Allah *is*, not just that *which* he *does*. In other words, Allah is *the merciful* not merely because he *acts* mercifully, but also because he *is* merciful. This is a key point.

But some of these names present us with something of a problem. Consider in particular:

- The loving
  - The forgiving
  - The giver
- There is a major problem here, in that the examples we have picked out here — and many others that we could select — require both subject and object. Consider **love** for example. If we are to use that word in any meaningful sense, then we must speak of person X loving person Y. This must also hold true of God, unless we are to descend into meaninglessness. But if these 99 names of Allah are eternal and ontological, then that means part of Allah's nature is contingent upon his creation. In order to be loving, he needed someone to love. In order to be merciful, he needed someone to show mercy to. Allah could not be who he is unless he had created a world.

The Allah of the Qur'an **had** to create because of his eternal attributes. This renders the doctrine of *tawhid* meaningless, for Allah and his creation are **metaphysically symbiotic**. No wonder that some Islamic Sufic sects have ended up in pantheism.

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<sup>2</sup> Another problem for them arose from their stress on free will. If the Qur'an was eternal, then the fate of of Abū Lahab (Q. 111) must have been fixed for all time and thus he was not free. See Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, (London: Routledge, 2001) 76.

<sup>3</sup> For a concise summary of the Mu'tazilites and their theology, see Alfred Guillaume, *Islam*, Rev. Ed. (London: Penguin, 1990) 129-134.

<sup>4</sup> See for example the list in Arthur Jeffery, ed., *Islam: Muhammad and His Religion*, (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), 93-98.

The whole cosmos is the locus of manifestation for the divine names ... in reality there is nothing in existence but His names ... All are he.<sup>5</sup>

- And this is where we can contrast the Christian conception of the Trinity to show an important contrast. Because the God of the Bible is multi-personal, i.e. one God but existing eternally in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, this tension does not exist. We, too, believe that **God is love** (1 Jn 4:8) but this does not mean he is contingent upon his creation. From eternity, love could exist within the three persons of the Trinity. The God of the Bible did not **need** to create in order to be who he is, rather he **chose** to create.

Interestingly, the 12th century Scottish theologian, Richard of St. Victor argued that perfect love *demands* three persons. This was his argument:

Shared love is properly said to exist when a third person is loved by two persons harmoniously and in community, and the affection of the two persons is fused into one affection by the flame of love for the third. From these things it is evident that shared love would have no place in Divinity itself if a third person were lacking to the other two persons.<sup>6</sup>

To put things in slightly more philosophical terms:

- God is love and as a perfect being, his love must also be perfect.
- Love is inherently relational, it requires both object and subject.
- There are three meaningful relationships to love: I-self, I-thou, I-them.
- The I-self relationship requires one person (self-love); the I-thou relationship, two persons (mutual love) and the I-them relationship, three persons (communal love).
- Since God is perfect love, there must exist three persons in the Godhead.
- A fourth person in the Godhead is not necessary for the fullness of love. (Ockham's razor indicates you cannot multiply entities beyond necessity).

## 4 THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF GOD AS TRI-PERSONAL

### 4.1 The relational God

Not only does the doctrine of *tawhid* result in a god who is contingent upon his creation if he is to fulfill his attributes, but it also suggests that Allah **fundamentally changed in nature** when he created the world; because he went from being a **non-relational entity** to a **relational** one.

And, yet again, this is an area in which we see the depth and profundity of the biblical view of God as multi-personal, for the God of the Bible did not have to experience a fundamental change in his nature — for before the moment of creation, the three persons of the Godhead were interrelating,

<sup>5</sup> William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000) 76.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Graham McFarlane, *Why Do You Believe What You Believe About the Holy Spirit*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998) 92.

post-creation, the sphere of personal relationships was extended to include not simply horizontal relationships between Father, Son and Spirit, but vertical relationships between them and human beings.

Related to this is a point that Francis Schaeffer once made, namely that it is hard to see how that which is **personal** can come from that which is **impersonal**. The Christian concept of the *imago dei*, the idea that we are created **in the image of God** (Gen 1:26-27), suggests that our being personal, relational entities, is derived from this image. Islam has an echo of the idea of image — the Qur'an does talk about humans being Allah's vicegerents on earth (Q. 2:30; — but where relationality comes from on an Islamic framework is not a question Islamic theology has considered.

#### 4.2 The problem of the one and the many solved

I want to end by briefly considering some of the work that has been done on the doctrine of the Trinity in systematic Christian theology in recent years, especially in the work of Professor Colin Gunton, late of King's College, London.<sup>7</sup>

Gunton begins with the age old **problem of the “one and the many”**, a question that can be asked at a number of levels. For example, is reality one or pluriform — a question that has troubled philosophers from the pre-Socratics onwards. But Gunton's particular interest is how this problem affects the question of human society, a construct in which there are also these two polarities: the many (the individual) and the one (larger community structures). The tendency is for one polarity to be collapsed into the other.

For example, in **individualism**, the many are elevated at the expense of the one. Historically, Gunton says one can trace this back through Descartes (who defined a person in terms of the mind: highly individual) back to Augustine, who thanks not least to the influences of Neoplatonism, argued that the image of God in us means our mind, our reason.

The antithesis to individualism is **totalitarianism**. Here the many are collapsed into the one, the individual suppressed for the needs of the greater whole. It is no accident that Islam, with its monolithic conception of God, has spawned Islamic states on just this model. In the secular arena, one could also look at Marx.

Gunton's particular genius is to make the point that whereas traditionally theists have been accused of deriving their concept of God from human structures projected skywards, the influence historically is actually the other way around. **Theology precedes anthropology**. What you think about God will determine what you think about humankind and society.

And this is why a biblically-rooted, Trinitarian theology is so important, because it has implications not just for what one thinks about God but the kind of society you will build. Drawing on the Cappadocians and Basil of Caesarea, who argued that the triune God is a 'continuous and indivisible community', Gunton suggests that we need to develop this model of God as community, three persons in relation. Once one grasps this, then one can unpack it in terms of image theology. The God who is persons-in-community has created us, his creation, as persons-in-relation. And, thinking back to Richard of St. Victor for a moment, just as Father, Son and Holy Spirit are defined

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<sup>7</sup> See especially Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2d Ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) esp. 83-117 and Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and The Many*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

in terms of their personal relationships to each other, so too are human beings, since we are made in that image.

To be made in the image of God is to be endowed with a particular kind of personal reality. To be a person is to be made in the image of God: that is the heart of the matter. If God is a communion of persons inseparably related, then ... it is in our relatedness to others that our being human consists.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, in the Trinity, we have a model solution to the problem of the one and the many. The Father is not the Son who is not the Spirit — they are individual persons. Yet is it their indivisible community that God is defined. One cannot separate the person from the community, because a person is defined by their relationships within community.

In short, the Islamic concept of *tawhid* is philosophically bound to produce communities in which the individual is swallowed up in the whole, the *Ummah*. Western post-Christian culture is, conversely, highly individualistic. But in the doctrine of the Trinity, Christians have a strong model to rebut both of these errors — if we truly reflect the God whose image we bear, we should be able to build and model communities in which neither the parts nor the whole are stressed at the expense of the other: but rather in which persons thrive in relation.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

In our engagement with Islam, we need to move beyond seeing the Trinity as our weak point, something we need to struggle to defend. Since the God of the Bible is indeed three-persons-in-community, then we should expect reality to reflect this; and indeed, it is far easier to explain the nature of the world that God has made on this basis than on the basis of *tawhid*, a doctrine that is highly flawed and arguably, unsustainable on the basis of the Islamic texts and tradition. The Christian concept of God needs to be seen as our fundamental strength and something we should be prepared to stand proudly and firmly upon.

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<sup>8</sup> Gunton, *Promise*, 113.

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