

Allah and the Trinity: A Christian response to Muslims

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [March 8, 2011](#) issue



In the fall of 2008, I got a chance to ask one of the Muslim world's most prominent clerics, Sheikh Habib Ali al-Jifri, founder and director of the Tabah Foundation, a question of great interest to me. "Do you think that Muslims and Christians worship the same God?" Sheikh al-Jifri answered without hesitation: "Yes, they do. In the Qur'an it is written: 'Our God and your God is One.'"

"But Christians believe that God is the Holy Trinity, and Muslims disagree. How do you then still affirm that the two worship the same God?" I pressed him.

He smiled enigmatically and said, "What the archbishop of Canterbury wrote about the Trinity in his response to the 'Common Word' was very helpful."

Only a few months previously, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams had responded to "A Common Word Between Us and You," an open letter sent by 138 Muslim scholars to Pope Benedict XVI and Protestant leaders. In a letter titled "A

Common Word for the Common Good," the archbishop had written, referring to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, that "God exists in a threefold pattern of interdependent action." But Christians, he insisted, uncompromisingly affirm that "there is only one divine nature and reality."

"The archbishop is a great and creative theologian," I responded to Sheikh al-Jifri, "but he said nothing new in his comments on God as the Holy Trinity."

"Yes?" he inquired. There was a note of mild surprise and curiosity in his voice. In his lecture at Yale University some six months earlier, Sheikh al-Jifri had stressed that Muslims "do not believe that God—mighty and majestic is He—can be divided." He implied, of course, that Christians do. I wanted to reassure him that Christians and Muslims agree on this point.

"After the early centuries of intense debates, Christians have come to affirm what some theologians have described as 'the numerical identity of the divine substance,'" I continued, knowing well that the phrase is inexact, but wishing to underscore an important point. "For us, the divine 'three' are one single and undivided divine essence, not three divine essences next to each other comprising some kind of divine troika."

I could not read his expression, but I sensed gravity in his manner as he slowly turned to face me. "Miroslav," he asked, "do you have time after the dinner to discuss this matter with me and my collaborators at the Tabah Foundation?" An immensely learned scholar of Islam and a spiritually attuned man, he knew that we had touched the heart of the matter. Was a way opening up toward convergence about one of the main issues dividing Muslims and Christians?

The oneness of God (*tawhid*) is the principle at the very heart of Islam. This is *the* central issue for Muslims disputing Christian claims about God. The reason is simple: if the Father, Son and Holy Spirit cannot be understood as one, according to Muslim interpretations of God's unity, then Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God. With the word *God* they may be referring, in a general way, to the same divine reality—one entity, which is not the world but which created the world—but they would not be worshipping the same God. Christians would be worshipping three gods or, at best, one true God and two idols in addition to God. This would be what Muslims call *shirk*, the unforgivable, blasphemous sin of associating other beings with God. Let's look more closely at this Muslim unease about the Trinity and use it

as an occasion to elucidate how Christians understand God's trinitarian nature.

Many sophisticated Muslim religious scholars, even those who are familiar with Christianity and friendly to Christians, suspect that Christians aren't true monotheists. Christians affirm one God, while at the same time insisting that there are three divine persons, each worthy of worship. Consider the Athanasian Creed, one of the most robust Christian statements about God as the Holy Trinity, approved by the great majority of Christian churches and read in many congregations in public worship on Trinity Sunday. At the very beginning it states plainly: "We worship one God." But it does not leave it at that. The full first line of the creed's section about God reads: "We worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither blending the persons nor dividing the essence."

Who are the persons whom Christians ought not blend? They are the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And how are they related? The "person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another." Each of the three is uncreated, each immeasurable, each eternal, each almighty; in a word, "each is God." Does the creed speak of three gods then? It does not. Clearly and repeatedly it states what Christians have affirmed throughout the ages:

There are not three eternal beings, there is but one eternal being; so too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings; there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being. . . . There are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being. . . . And there are not three gods; there is but one God.

So the creed says two things at once: "each is God" and "there is but one God." To a Muslim (or Jewish) ear this sounds like asserting that there are in fact three gods but calling them one. Except for the opening assertion, "We worship one God," it would seem, to quote Aref Nayed, director of Kalam Research and Media in Dubai, that a Muslim "cannot accept and must actually reject the entire Creed."

Just why must a Muslim reject what the Athanasian Creed says about God? The creed, the response goes, seems incompatible with the central Muslim claim that there is "no god but God." Moreover, the Qur'an seems to condemn directly the kinds of beliefs the creed advocates. Consider the following texts from the Qur'an:

1) "They say: 'God hath begotten a son.' Glory be to Him—to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth: everything renders worship to Him. To Him is due the primal origin. Of the heavens and the earth: When He decreeth a matter, He saith to

it: 'Be,' and it is" (*Al Baqarah*, 2:116-117).

2) "Say: 'O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God.' If then they turn back, say ye: 'Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to God's Will)'" (*al 'Imran*, 3:64).

3) "They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One God. If they desist not from their word [of blasphemy], verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them" (*al Ma'idah*, 5:73).

4) "They do blaspheme who say: 'God is Christ the son of Mary.' But said Christ: 'O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord: Whoever joins other gods with God, God will forbid him the garden, and the Fire will be his abode. There will for the wrongdoers be no one to help" (*al Ma'idah*, 5:72).

5) "They take their priests and their anchorites to be their lords in derogation of God, and [they take as their Lord] Christ the son of Mary; yet they were commanded to worship but One God: there is no god but He. Praise and glory to Him. [Far is He] from having the partners they associate with Him" (*al Tawbah*, 9:31).

So let's take up the central claims of the Qur'anic passages above and see how each relates to what Christianity's creeds and great teachers mean when they speak about the trinitarian nature of God.

1) Objection: The God who creates the heavens and the earth by the power of the Word cannot be said to have begotten a son or anyone who is strictly like God.

Response: The issue here is the meaning of the word *begotten*, not the substance of our understanding of God. Christians do not think of "begetting," when applied to God, as a physical act between male and female divinity. Speaking for the whole of the Christian tradition, Gregory of Nyssa, one of the most prominent of the Eastern church fathers, wrote: "The divine is neither male nor female (for how could such a thing be contemplated in divinity)?" Moreover, "begetting" in God does not result in an offspring spatially distinct or in any way independent from God, a godlike being or another God. *Begetting* or *eternal generation*, as the technical term goes, is a metaphor used to express the idea that the Word, which was from eternity with God, is neither a creature nor some sort of lesser divinity, but is the very uncreated God.

The exact point of using the term *begotten* is to distinguish the generation of the Son from an act of creation—"begotten, not made," as the Nicene Creed affirms—to insist that the eternal Word or Son is not a being next to God but is of one essence with God.

2) Objection: God cannot have an associate joined to God, any equal or lesser divinity next to God.

Response: Exactly right. When Christians speak of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," writes Archbishop Williams, summarizing traditional Christian convictions, they "do not mean one God with two beings alongside him." There are not three divine beings but one divine being—"the Living and Self-subsistent, associated with no other."

3) Objection: God is not one of three divine beings in the Trinity.

Response: Again, exactly right. When Christians speak of the three in God, they do not mean "three gods of limited power," writes the archbishop. The Athanasian Creed puts the same point this way: the divine essence is "not divided." To divide the divine essence in any way is to slip into polytheism, which Christians reject.

4) Objection: God cannot be "Christ, the son of Mary," because then God would be a creature, in need of food and shelter, not the sovereign creator of heaven and earth, beyond all needs.

Response: Christians generally do not say that God was Christ; I know of no significant classical theologian who makes that claim. Instead, Christians say that "Christ was God"—or, to use New Testament phrases, that "God was in Christ" (see 2 Cor. 5:19) or that the eternal "Word became flesh" (John 1:14). The two claims—that God was Christ, and Christ was God—seem similar but are in fact very different. Christians believe that Christ was fully human and therefore in need of food and shelter, as well as fully divine and therefore of one undivided essence with God.

5) Objection: Christians worship persons they associate with God in denigration of the one true God.

Response: Christians agree that anyone who worships a human being does so in denigration of God; that person is an idolater. Christians reject worship of Christ or anyone else in place of God. In worshipping Christ, whom they consider to be fully divine, they are worshipping the one and undivided divine essence.

From the Christian perspective, affirming the existence of multiple self-subsisting divine essences is polytheism—and "pure unbelief." That is why the Athanasian Creed unambiguously and repeatedly states that "dividing the divine essence" is unacceptable. A basic rule for Christians as they speak about God is this: "Never divide divine essence." It is not allowed to break this rule when talking about God as the Holy Trinity. A positive way to make the same point would be to say that Christians affirm "numerical identity of the divine essence." This is the phrase I used in my conversation with Sheikh al-Jifri, and he immediately recognized it as addressing the crux of the tension between Christian and Muslim conceptions of God's unity.

A Muslim critic might well cry out, "False victory! The agreement you have sketched about God's unity is nothing but mere words. Just listen to the way you talk about how God acts in the world, and the agreement will disappear like dense fog under the sun's warm rays. If you claim that the 'Son' was incarnate but the 'Father' was not, have you not in fact divided the Trinity?"

"At best you are confused: you say you reject dividing the divine essence, but you actually divide it by your belief that Christ was both God and man. You are simultaneously saying two contradictory things, namely, that the divine essence is undivided and that the divine persons are distinct. At worst, you are disingenuous: to soothe your guilty monotheistic conscience (or maybe even to mislead Muslims and Jews), you put up a good front by insisting that God's essence cannot be divided. But behind the scenes, you actually believe in three gods. Come clean! Either give up on God's unity or reject the Trinity. You can't have it both ways."

Clearly, it is one thing to reject division of the divine essence and another thing to actually avoid dividing it (just as it is one thing to condemn sin and another thing not to commit it). So how do Christians keep the divine essence undivided? In addition to stating clearly that there is only one numerically identical divine essence, they note that the persons are tied and intertwined together in a most intimate manner, more intimate than any relation between creatures could ever be.

There are two related ways to think about this intimate connection between the divine three who are indivisibly one. First, when God acts "toward the outside"—creating, redeeming, and bringing the world to completion—God's acts are undivided, inseparable. Every act of one person of the Trinity is always caused by all three. If this were not the case, then, as Augustine put it, "the Father [would do]

some things, the Son others and the Holy Spirit yet others." And this would be utterly unacceptable, he explicitly states. It would verge on polytheism.

The second way the divine persons are tied together is their mutual indwelling or, in technical terminology, *perichoresis*. Again, as Augustine put it, "they are always in each other" and never "alone." One divine person is what it is, not simply in virtue of being distinct from others but in virtue of the presence of the other two persons in it. The Father and the Spirit are always "in" the Son; to be the Son is to be indwelled by the Father and the Spirit. Two consequences follow:

1) In terms of the identity of divine persons, you cannot simply say: "to be one is not to be the other" as you can say of creatures, including human beings. When it comes to God, "not to be the same" does not mean "to be other," and "to be other" does not mean "not to be the same," as Nicholas of Cusa has rightly noted.

2) In terms of the activity of divine persons, you cannot say that the act of one is the act of that person alone, as you must say of human beings. When it comes to God, in the act of one person, all three always act because they are always "in" that person. When human beings act together they join forces, each acting separately toward the common goal (as when three persons are pushing a car). It is different with God. The three divine persons never need to join forces, because when one acts, the other two are in that person and act through it.

For the great medieval Muslim commentator Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, the proof that Christians putatively "affirm one [divine] essence" but in reality posit three divine essences is that "they deem it possible for these essences to inhere in the person of Jesus and of Mary." In his view, if Christians truly considered the divine essence to be indivisible, then it could not be that one person, the Word, would have become incarnate in Jesus Christ, but rather all three would have become incarnate. To have the incarnation of just one of the persons, argues al-Razi, you need more than one divine essence. Incarnation is therefore an irrefutable proof of Christian polytheism.

Is his argument valid? Not if we affirm that the three divine persons mutually indwell each other or that God's acts toward all that is outside God are undivided. These affirmations resolve the problem of dividing the divine essence. For it is not that one divine person inheres in Jesus while the other two continue to inhere in God. Rather, the one God, in the person of the Word, becomes incarnate. According to John's Gospel, "the Word became flesh," the Word that is, which both "was God" and was

"with God" (John 1:1-2, 14). And yet it was not the Word alone that dwelled in Jesus. Using metaphorical terminology of fatherhood and sonship, Jesus claims in John's Gospel: "The Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:38). The same is true of the Spirit, who is said to "remain on" (like a "descended dove"), and therefore act in and through, the Incarnate One (see John 1:33-34). Though only one person is incarnate, all three persons are present and act in that one person who became incarnate. This is the consequence of saying that the persons of the Trinity "mutually indwell" one another. Thus the incarnation doesn't require any division of God's essence.

A Muslim critic might respond: "Those are just the kinds of difficulties you get yourself into when you affirm the Trinity; then you have to use words like *begetting*, *Son* or *person*, but can't use them properly like everybody else does."

But now it may be my turn to suggest that this would be a false victory. For our difficulties in speaking of God would not go away if God were not the Holy Trinity. All words we use of God are inadequate. Why? Augustine explains: "Because the total transcendence of the godhead quite surpasses the capacity of ordinary speech." The words paint a picture or tell a story, so to speak, but the picture or the story is always more dissimilar than it is similar to who God truly is. God is uncreated and infinite, therefore inexpressible and beyond our concepts, beyond our language.

The talk of persons captures something about God but is inadequate to express the full reality because God transcends the notion of person. The same is true of essence, goodness, love—all to varying degrees correct and true as referring to God, but all also deeply inadequate. The very reality of God is such that God always remains inconceivable, a mystery that can never be properly named or puzzled out. And yet we speak of God, guided by God's self-revelation. We have true knowledge of God, but we are capable of understanding much better what that Mystery is not than what it is. Important strands in all three Abrahamic faiths agree on this.

I hope that these arguments will be plausible to Muslims and Christians alike. With regard to Muslims, however, my purpose is not to persuade them that God indeed is the Holy Trinity. I have not offered a single argument in favor of this cardinal Christian belief. My purpose is more modest: to demonstrate that the rejections of the Trinity in the Qur'an do not refer to normative Christian understanding of God's threeness, and that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity does not call into question God's oneness as expressed in Muslims' most basic belief that there is "no god but

God." What the Qur'an may be targeting are misconceptions about God's nature held by misguided Christians.

This discussion has been directed not primarily to Muslims but to Christians. My goal is to remind Christians that Muslim objections to the doctrine of the Trinity and the uncompromising affirmation of God's oneness from which these objections stem are not in themselves good enough reasons for Christians to think that they have a radically different understanding of God than Muslims. Unity of God doesn't separate Muslims from Christians; it binds them together.

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