

Islam and the Trinity

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Introduction

Whenever one interacts with Muslims, regardless of which part of the world they are from, a discussion of the nature of God ensues. If they discover that the opposite speaker is not a submitter like them, let alone a Christian, Muslims often bring to the table the unity of Allah. While they agree and, in many cases, assert that all previous religious Prophets were predecessors of the final one, Muslims often object to the idea that these religions are as accurate as Islamic perspective, for Islam¹ is the ultimate and correct religion. Muhammad (Muslims often add the words: ‘*Peace Be Upon Him*’ or *PBUH* as a sign of respect for any prophet) brought the final corrected view about God not the corrupted versions found in the Torah (*Tawrat*) or gospel (*Ingil*)². Muslims, therefore, inflexibly assert that God is one, a unit, indivisible, eternal, possessing 99 beautiful names, merciful, transcendent, without associates or parts and prescribes how humans should live, in harmony, equity and care for each other. In short, in Islam, the concept of God is strict monotheism termed *Tawhid*.

On the other hand, Muslims often demonstrate a great degree of social concern³ that often sweeps the unsuspecting making them believe that, for sure, Islam must be the only true religion of God. From another perspective, it is hardly surprising to hear adherents claim that Christians and Muslims are sister religions⁴ and serve the same God. Muslims claim that Islam venerates the same deity Christians worship, except that they merely use the Arabic rendering for God.⁵ They further assert that Islam highly esteems Mary⁶ and Jesus⁷ as a Prophet, Apostle, perhaps more than Christians do in their Bible practice.

In the highly religious context of Zambia, Islam has been for a long time a minority religion, commanding less than 1% of its total population. In recent

¹ ‘Islam’ means ‘to submit’ to the will of Allah. A Muslim, therefore, is one who submits.

² Abdullah Saeed, “The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures” *The Muslim World* Vol 92 issue 3–4 (Sept 2002): 419–436; see also Muhammet Tarakci and Suleyman Sayar “The Qur’anic View of the Corruption of the Torah and the Gospels” *The Islamic Quarterly*, Vol 49, Issue 3 (2005): 227–245.

³ Even often eclipsing that of Christians! 104

⁴ That is, they are both from a family that has come to be known as ‘Abrahamic faiths’ consisting of Judaism, Islam and Christianity given their apparent sharing the patriarch Abraham.

⁵ Others claim “Allah” is the actual proper name of God: ‘Allah’ literally means ‘The God.’

⁶ Mary the mother of Jesus called Maryam.

⁷ Isa Ibn Maryam

times, however, things seem to be rapidly changing; Islam appears to be expanding globally. One wonders how this could be so, especially in Zambia, where the Christian faith has reigned supreme for over a century now. Suddenly, Islam seems to be undercutting Christianity and other faiths. Many reasons could be adduced for this phenomenon, but it suffices to say that Islam is a religion on the march.

Islam has used a number of strategies to carve inroads into Christian turf, one of which is to oppose the doctrine of the Trinity on the grounds that it makes Christianity guilty of polytheism, or at least tri-theism, for worshiping three deities, namely, Father, Isa (Jesus) and Mary (Q5:116; see also 4:171). Christians on the other hand are blissfully slumbering assuming all is well with absolutely nothing to ever rock the boat. Most saints rarely wrestle with the mysterious doctrine of the Holy Trinity, but instead uncritically accept the orthodox dogmas passed down without any personal biblical examination. How is the Christian to effectively respond to this scenario? How will the Christian potently push back against the onslaughts of Islam on the Trinity? What should the Christian know in order to intelligently engage with Islamic theological combatants? What apparatus will they deploy to advance the cause of Christ? These and many others are key questions worth addressing but the study addresses only aspects of them in some minor detail.

The scope of this study therefore revolves around and explores what Islam is, its nature, tenets and the Qur'an's view of the nature of God, in relation to the Trinity. To achieve these ends, this article gives a brief background to the religion and its worldview before highlighting its errors concluding with a correct Christian view of the Trinity. The enquiry concludes with some helpful remarks for effective cordial Christian- Muslim engagement.

Rationale, Necessity and Justification of the Study

The first thought that invades the mind is: why should we bother expending time to address the matter of the Trinity? Why should there be any consideration of two views completely worlds apart, those of Christianity and Islam? There are a number of reasons, some of which have already been alluded to in the introduction.

First, we note that Islam claims to be of the same root as Christianity. It is part of the family of religions dubbed the Abrahamic faiths, hailing from the Oriental East. Judaism, Christianity and Islam lay claim to Abraham as their patriarch.

Second, Islam claims to be the successor of Christianity as Christianity does to Judaism.

Third, Islam claims to be the final religion that supersedes all others, meaning

that all religions must bow to its dictates.

Fourth, Islam claims to be monotheistic like the other two except that it asserts that God is a singular being rather than a Tri-unity. Islam is inflexibly dogmatic on this matter.

Fifth, Islam accuses Christians of being polytheists and therefore guilty of the heinous unpardonable sin dubbed shirk. In the Muslim mind, Christians actually do not really espouse one God but a limited pantheon of three deities.

Sixth, Islam is making serious inroads in traditionally Christian contexts like Zambia and seems to be winning in some places though not all. Being a missionary religion and through its Dawah⁸ efforts, Islam is busy undercutting the unquestioned Christian Dogma of the Trinity as espoused by believers.

Seventh, very few Christians seem to understand or are competently able to articulate the doctrine, let alone believe it in the orthodox sense. A survey would probably reveal that many Christians hold defective or unclear views on the Trinity ranging from Sabellianism (Modalism) or Docetism, and in some extreme cases, even pantheism! Gnostic views seem to flow apace where ignorance reigns. For these and other reasons, it is necessary to address this important matter not only for now but for posterity.

Islam: A Basic Background

Islam is a religion⁹ started around AD 610 when Muhammad, a previous orphan but now established Arabian trader received his first revelation in a cave at Hira. Naturally, he was staggered and suspected that some questionable spirit had possessed him, but his wife assured him that what he had received meant that he was a Prophet.¹⁰ Watt gives an interesting narrative on how many years earlier, as a young lad, Muhammad had been identified by a monk to be a mighty man in future, and this turned out to be as from AD 610.¹¹ For the next 23 years, Muhammad received intermittent revelations (i.e. Wahi) to guide him and the emerging 'umma' or Muslim Community.

Despite the changing scenes of life, amidst trouble, challenges, betrayal and triumphs, Islam eventually established itself that by AD 630, Mecca had been conquered. The Arabian movement would then rapidly expand to global

⁸ Or missionary activities aimed at winning converts to Islam. Dawah takes place in different forms across contexts.

⁹ Some scholars like Dr Shabbir Ahmed and Dr Syed Abdul Wadud object to Islam being dubbed a 'religion' per se.

¹⁰ Some writers claim that a Christian prophet and relation to Khadijah assured Muhammad that he was in fact a Prophet of Allah, given his unusual experience.

¹¹ Montgomery Watt, Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

proportions literary spanning the world. John of Damascus¹² considered it as a Christian heretical cult from Arabia and engaged it attempting to prove that Christianity was true while Islam was false. His efforts are definitely outstanding but Islam none the less transitioned on to become the global movement we have today, practically not ignorable!

As the religion was gaining traction, certain core tenets emerged, including the claim that Allah was 'The God' or the supreme, unique and above all others. Prior to the advent of Islam, Arabs are said to have lived in ignorance¹³ and darkness, worshipping a multiplicity and pantheon of deities. Paganism was rife and unchecked. Among these idols were Manat, al-Lat and al-Uzza, deities which Surah 53 alludes to (Ayahs 19-20).¹⁴ Islam dogmatically asserted that there was only one single deity.¹⁵ This was the chief and central revolutionary doctrine Muhammad promoted. If anyone did not submit, sanctions followed, although some claim that Islam never used the sword to convert. Mark Shaw suggests that this story line has been exaggerated though carries some grain of truth in some cases.¹⁶ He and others, however, claim that Muslims have been far more tolerant in comparison to the Christian Byzantine Empire.

But then there were other doctrines that emerged out of the revelations, the Tanzil as encapsulated in the Qur'an. In our brief discourse, we summarize these doctrines (in addition to *Tawhid*) as held in common by Muslims:

1. Angels (*Malaikah*)
2. Divine Predestination (*Al-qadr*)
3. Prophets and their scriptures (*Risalah*)
4. Judgment and afterlife (*Akhirah*)

It must be mentioned that in Islam, orthopraxy is relatively more critical than orthodoxy. This means that Muslims emphasise right practice over correct belief. Orthopraxy relates to the five pillars, namely Declaration of faith (Shahadah), Prayer (Salat), Fasting (Saum), Alms giving (Zakat) and Pilgrimage (Hajj). Shii Muslims adopt a few additional tenets including Jihad.

Appreciating the Significance of Islamic Worldview

Whenever we seek to effectively engage people with the gospel, it is necessary to first know how they think and process matters. Muslims are no exceptions. Many state that in order to adequately address the issue of Islam and the Trinity,

¹² See Daniel Janosik's insightful book *John of Damascus: First Apologist to Muslims* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

¹³ Or jahiliyyah.

¹⁴ Chapter divisions in the Qur'an are called Surahs and verse divisions Ayahs.

¹⁵ Those believing in only one deity were often called Hanifs.

¹⁶ Mark Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa* (Katungayake, Sri Lanka: New Life Literature [Pvt.] Ltd., 2006).

it is critical for one to have an appreciation of the Muslim worldview.¹⁷ Muslim thought process is best appreciated if one knows the grids through which they perceive and interpret the world. They think differently from others and thus react in ways that may at times startle onlookers. That is not to suggest that they are irrational or unrealistic, not at all! Rather, Muslims come to conclusions about matters based on certain firm principles regulating all their thinking, decision making and interactions. If anything is perceived not to find a place in their framework of thinking, it is swiftly rejected or treated with extreme caution. Although some argue that Islam does not have a specific world view per se, given that it often adapts to the surrounding culture,¹⁸ Islam does indeed have a unique world view as Abdullah & Nadvi among others have well demonstrated.¹⁹

Before addressing the Muslim world view, it is prudent to lay the ground. One key definition needs to be in place and that is 'worldview'. The word 'worldview' or 'Weltanschauung' has German roots and carries the idea of the comprehensive attributes or traits that one uses to interpret reality. In other words, a worldview is simply how an individual looks at, responds to and interacts with the world. Every person, regardless, has a worldview that has been shaped by various factors including past experiences, socialization, training or enculturation. A worldview may have many layers to it but at the core of it is the guiding and interpretive principles that eventually influences how one behaves. The definition of the word can be fluid, but we select a few definitions as a sample. Nadvi and Abdullah define 'worldview' as:

...the term...is often used to emphasize a personal and historical point of view...a set of beliefs about fundamental aspects of reality and ground, and influence all one's perceiving, thinking, knowing, and doing. It is a study of the world; a view of life; literally, a perception of the world; a particular philosophy of life; concept of the world held by an individual or a group.²⁰

Charles Craft writes:

¹⁷ E.g., Phil Parshall, "The Muslim Worldview" Encountering Islam, Caleb Project (2004); Patrick Sookhdeo, Understanding Islamic Theology (McLean, VA: Isaac Publishing, 2013); Amar Djaballah, "Jesus in Islam" SBJT 8/1 (Spring 2004): 14–30; Rick Brown "Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers" Part 1. International Journal of Frontier Missions 23:1 (Spring 2006): 5–12; Colin Chapman, "Christian Responses to Islam, Islamism, and 'Islamic Terrorism'" Cambridge Papers Vol 16, no 2 (June 2007): 1–6 (2007); Sproul & Saleeb, The Darkside of Islam (Crossway Books 2003); Geisler, Norman L. "Jesus and Muhammad in the Qur'an: A Comparison and Contrast" The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology 8/1 (Spring 2004): 50–59; Esposito John L. Ten Things Everyone Needs to Know About Islam. (Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁸ A reading of Phil Parshall in 'The Muslim world view' or Rick Brown in 'Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers' are immensely helpful.

¹⁹ Muhammad Abdullah and Muhammad J. Nadvi, "Understanding the Principles of Islamic World-View" The Dialogue. Vol VI, no. 3 (2011): 268–289.

²⁰ Abdullah, Muhammad & Muhammad J. Nadvi. "Understanding the Principles of Islamic World-View" The Dialogue. Vol VI, no. 3 (2011): 268–289.

...perceptions of reality are patterned by societies into conceptualizations of what reality can or should be, what is to be regarded as actual, probable, possible and impossible. These conceptualizations form what is termed the worldview of the culture...²¹

Parshall cites the definition of Eugene Nida as simply a “systems of values.”²² From these different definitions, a common feature is that they all allude to the fact of one’s reaction to reality.

This is also true of Muslims; they too have a worldview that affects their interpretation of reality. According to Abdullah & Nadvi, Parshall, and Djaballah, the Muslim life radiates around a three-pronged hub. Adherents strongly hold on to the following: Tawhid, viceregency, and justice.

1. Tawhid

Muslims believe that God is one unit, never separated, without division or parts. All things begin and end with God. All activities must reflect this fact, and this principle extends to all aspects of life, including politics, dress, family relations others. Thus, because Allah is one unit, there are no dichotomies in Islam such as the “secular” and “spiritual” life. All things are enmeshed together, and no one dares rip these apart. Being strict monotheists, a Muslim is taught from infancy that Allah is transcendent, uncreated, eternal, unique, wholly other, pure, without body parts, never interacts with his creation, creator of the world and, in a sense, impersonal.²³ Thus, a Muslim must fashion their lives around Allah and his will. Failure to do so attracts sanctions, both in this life and the next.

Further, this view of Allah excludes all other views such as polytheism or even the Trinity. No one dares associate any created thing or person with Allah because he stands alone. He does not have a son, consort, wife or anything outside himself. Any such associations are deemed shirk, the unpardonable sin (Q4:48; 4:116, 171). To suggest that Allah has a son evokes violent reactions in the Muslim mind because that sounds illogically blasphemous, for how could Allah have a son or wife? This suggests the pagan thought and practice common in Arabia before Islam came around to correct things. In the Muslim mind, not even Christians were spared from the influence of polytheism, for how could they embrace a Trinitarian God?

2. Viceregency

The Muslim believes in structure and order in society radiating from the Tawhid

²¹ Cite in Parshall, Phil. “The Muslim Worldview” Encountering Islam. Caleb Project (2004), 1.

²² Ibid., 1

²³ Although some argue that Allah is nearer to people than their own jugular vein, they claim that Allah is merciful, caring, forgiving and therefore personal in some sense. This view is held by some sects within Islam such as the Sufi.

view posited earlier. When Allah created the world, he placed order in nature and somewhat retreated away from direct interaction with his world, though he remains active through his angels. In the created order, Allah has placed human beings as Khaliffahs, caretakers of the world and its inhabitants.²⁴ Thus, in every homestead, there is structure with the male as leaders. Not only is there structure at the domestic level, but it cascades upwards to the clan, tribe or nation. Thus, Muslims talk about Caliphates where the Khalifs reign. In short, there should be order and way of doing things in Allah's world.

It must be mentioned here that an additional facet is the place of angels, prophets and apostles. Each of these have a very special place in Islam and one trivializes them at their own peril. These Nabi and Rasuls brought a word from Allah, called people back to right living and, in some cases, bequeathed a scripture (Q 2:87). This scripture is critically important to the Muslim to receive direction in the straight path—prescriptions necessary to obey Allah. Thus, the Qur'an is cardinal in the life of the Muslim (Q2:23; 4:80). Anything that the Qur'an declares must be accepted without question as it completes or confirms all previous revelations (Q2:89). All other scriptures, including the Bible are subservient to it. If at all they differ from it, then they must have been corrupted while the correct view is retained by the Qur'an (Q2:75).²⁵

3. Justice (Q4:135)

Again, arising from Tawhid, Allah created all human beings equal, and as such, they should treat each other with equity, civility and due consideration. If this equity is not forthcoming, Muslims are restless with some sections demanding for the removal of the leader. Allah is just demanding that all his subjects follow his prescriptions on justice.²⁶ That partly explains why Muslims find the individualistic laws or standards in other parts of the world, especially the West, as unjust. At times, onlookers will be startled when Muslims bitterly complain of injustice in other contexts. This is soon explained if one understands the lenses through which they interpret the world. Thus, Muslims do not spare any efforts unless and until things change to fit into their thought framework.

Parshall and Brown cite additional aspects relating to the Muslim worldview.²⁷ According to them, Muslims have certain cultural and contextual perspectives that drive their reaction to the world among them being:

²⁴ See Parshall, "The Muslim Worldview" and Abdullah & Nadvi "Principles of Islamic World-view."

²⁵ See Abdullah Saeed "The Charge of distortion of Jewish and Christian scriptures" as well as Muhammet Tarakci & Suleyman Sayar, "The Qur'anic view of the corruption of the Torah and the Gospels"

²⁶ Some think he is arbitrary in his dispensing of justice. However, all the shariah law are derived from his revelation the Qur'an and the Hadith which is a record of what the prophet Muhammad is reported to have approved according to his early followers. In the Muslim mind, these laws are beyond comparison or question.

²⁷ Parshall, "The Muslim Worldview" and Rick Brown, "Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers" Part 1. International Journal of Frontier Missions 23:1 (Spring 2006): 5–12.

1. Collective rather than individualistic thought, including decision making
2. A worshipping community that meets for prayer (salat) five times a day
3. Strong family bonds and values
4. Honour and shame cultures
5. Paternalistic families where all aspects of life are regulated including marriage, divorce, dwelling among others. Polygamy or arranged marriages are common in Islam, though there have been push backs in recent years by the Reformist Movement.

It is thus evident that as the Muslim encounters the Trinity, they have layers of prior understandings to clear prior to grasping or accepting the Trinity. Before then, the Trinity is pure tri-theism!

Key Figures in Islamic Thought

The following figures have come to be viewed as influential voices in Islam:

- Al-Tammiyyah
- Al-Tabari
- Al-Ghazali (d. 1111)
- Fuzlur Rahman
- Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025)
- Al-Sabuni (b. 1930)
- Abu 'Isa-alwarraq (d. ca 860)
- Muhammad ibn 'al-Wahhab (d. 1791 or 92)
- Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna d. 1037)

The Nature of God in Islamic Thought

In Islam, Allah is the supreme, the only deity, owning and knowing all things (Q 3:5,7, 29, 109). All others are idols and thus never to be venerated at all. Allah alone is the uncreated, eternal, self-existent, indescribable, unimaginable, without associates, creator and sustainer of the world, transcendent and wholly other. He has ninety-nine beautiful names that describe him through his attributes but he himself is unknowable and never interacts with His creation. Allah stands alone and does as he pleases being absolutely sovereign (Q3:189). He has a will, and none can deviate from it because he has predestined all things. This presupposes that human beings have no will eventually ending up as Allah has decreed, although some sects within Islam argue for some degree of

free will.²⁸

Allah is pure, majestic, a being controlling all things. He has no beginning or end and dispenses justice as he wills. He knows all things and thus can guide into the straight path or even mislead by the same token. Who can question Allah? For he is from everlasting, has his eternal word, the Qur'an in Paradise and draws or hates whom he will. Those who obey his will take care of creation, animals, plants etc. and are pleasing in his sight; they will be rewarded in paradise with fruits and gardens with streams flowing underneath (Q3:148, 160, 169, 195; 4:122). Although separate from his, Allah is merciful, forgiving, near to his creation (Q4:125), pardoning the repenting (Q3:135). Allah is the self-sufficient one (Q2:267; 3:2), not needing anything outside himself, whether humans or anything else. He does not beget, marry, have sons, daughters, or wives for that would suggest he were dependent, and that cannot be. Allah is Spirit and should never be described with human properties.

When one reads this description, surely, are we not describing the very attributes of Yahweh, the Ancient of Days? A cursory view may suggest this but on further scrutiny, some distinctions emerge which will be discussed in another section.

What the Qur'an Asserts About the Trinity

Does the Qur'an ever refer to the Trinity? We have briefly surveyed what the Muslim view of God is, but have not succinctly stated what the Qur'an actually says. It will interest the reader that the Qur'an actually does say a number of things about polytheism, tri-theism and indeed the Trinity itself. We commence our brief survey by making a number of preliminary observations:

1. The Qur'an mentions both the Trinity and polytheism directly.
2. The Qur'an condemns in the strongest terms any pagan worship of other deities.
3. As far as the Qur'an is concerned, the doctrine of the Trinity is tri-theism or classic polytheism.
4. The Qur'an seems to view the Trinity in mathematical terms (i.e. $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$).
5. As far as the Qur'an is concerned, all other explanations of the Trinity are mere smokescreens and attempts to justify shirk.
6. According to the Qur'an, the people of the book changed the original

²⁸ Jon Hoover, "Islamic Monotheism and the Trinity" Corrected Version. The Conrad Grebel Review (Winter 2009): 57–82.

scriptures to develop the doctrine of the Trinity and sternly warns Christians about this.

7. Evidently, the Qur'ans' view of the Trinity is that it is composed of three beings namely Father, Mary and Jesus.

Using the grids we earlier highlighted on worldview, the Muslim cannot help but arrive at the conclusions above. Tawhid dictates that any associations to Allah must be rejected forth with. In the Muslim mind, the Trinity is a terrible hazard badly wounding their consciences; the sooner it is eradicated, the better so that mortals speedily revert to Islam, for all are supposed to be Muslims, as all the previous 124,000 Prophets were.²⁹

What exactly does the Qur'an say about The Trinity? What Surahs or Ayahs can be adduced? We will focus on a few select passages that should be representative.

The Qur'an teaches that Allah alone in one unit must be worshipped; anything deviating from this norm is sin. All other sins may be forgiven but if one persists in polytheism, they will never receive mercy or pardon in the next life and to some extent, the present (Q4:48). A number of Surahs are very clear on who Allah is in contradistinction to other idols. Surah 112 states the following:

*“Say, ‘He is Allah, One,
Allah, the eternal Refuge.
He neither begets nor is born,
Nor is there to Him any Equivalent’”*

This is a very short but pointed Surah summarizing the Muslim conception of Allah. We observe that Allah is One unit (see Q4:36), he is eternal and does not have a Son nor is he created or born. This entirely knocks out the divinity of Christ and the Trinity as a whole. As far as the Qur'an is concerned, Isa (Jesus) was created in time, akin to Adam and thus cannot be divine (Q3:59; 5:116).³⁰

The Qur'an also makes a number of specific statements about Christ, denying that he is divine. In Surah 4:171, the Qur'an says the following:

O people of the scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah Jesus son of Mary, was but a messenger of Allah and His word which He directed to Mary and a soul from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers. And do not say, “Three”; desist-it is better for you. Indeed, Allah is but one God. Exalted above having a son...

²⁹ Patrick Sookhdeo, Understanding Islamic Theology. 118

³⁰ Additional passages: Q2:163; Q6:1, 56, 101–2, 106, 136, 161, 163; 10:28; 15:94–96; 16:20, 22, 49, 51, 56, 57, 120; 17:22; 18:38, 110; 20:8, 98; 21:25; 23:91–2; 38:65; 40:42; 47:19.

From this Surah, it is evident that the Qur'an asserts two major things of interest namely 1.) Isa is a mere messenger, a mere man, 2.) The Trinity is rejected because Allah is one unit not numerical three.

Surah 5:17 directly rejects Jesus' divinity, in effect attacking the very idea of the Trinity; it says: "They certainly disbelieved who say that Allah is Christ, son of Mary. Say 'then who could prevent Allah at all if He intended to destroy Christ, son of Mary, or his mother or everyone on the earth?...'"³¹ Surah 5:18 says:

"But the Jews and the Christians say, 'We are the Children of Allah and His beloved.' Say, 'Then why does he punish you for your sins?'"

Allah does not have a personal relationship with people. Calling people his children, or indeed using human terms such as 'Father' have no place. Islam finds the Christian claim and practice offensive, if not blasphemous. Muslims fail to get the logic that a loving Father would punish his children, much like the claim that Jesus was the Son of God and yet allowed to perish on the cross!

Errors of Islamic Teaching & View on the Trinity³²

Islam's perspective of the Trinity is evidently in error on several points. As highlighted earlier, Muslims hold certain views which they inaccurately read into what Christians are saying. At other times, they impute meanings which were clearly not meant. In this section, we highlight what we consider clear errors, which we will seek to correct in the ensuing section entitled "The Christian view of the Trinity."

In an attempt to demonstrate that Christianity is flawed, the Qur'an makes general statements in relation to the Trinity stating that people of the book should not say 'Trinity' or associate others to God. In other places, it alludes to the Godhead being a unit without associates, sons, daughters or consorts. The closest it gets to mentioning the members of this Trinity is when it mentions Jesus, God and Mary as part of God (Q5.116; see also 4:171; 5:73), although some recent scholars have denied that the Qur'an was in fact referring to the members of the Trinity.³³ Whatever the case, this view is erroneous; biblical Christianity has never believed in a Trinity where Mary is part of the Godhead.

Again, Muslims believe that Jesus cannot be the Son of God, and this for a good reason. In their mind, they conceive a physical sonship where God had sexual relations with a woman namely Mary to conceive Isa. For any rational thinking

³¹ Additional passages: Surah 4:48; 5:72, 73, 75; 6:103; 9:30, 31; 10:68; 18:4; 19:35, 36; 21:26; 32:4; 39:4, 66; 42:51.

³² See appendix for a further argument around these errors.

³³ See Jon Hoover in "Islamic Monotheism and the Trinity", 58.

person, this cannot be! As much as this is shirk in Islam, this is equally blasphemous even in Christianity. Partly, they argue that the doctrine of 'Theotokos' by the Nestorians suggests that Mary is the mother of God in the physical and may we say spiritual sense. This physical understanding of the sonship of Jesus by Muslims is incorrect. Rather, Jesus is the eternal son of God, of the same essence, substance and attributes. As long as the Father has been Father, so has the Son been. He is not a son by creation but generation, the uncreated one and creator of the world. Eternal generation of the son is what Christians mean. More than that, Christians mean to say that Jesus is both God and man in his hypostatic nature and yet remains God (Phil 2:5f). At no point did Christ cease to be divine.

Muslims repeatedly make the claim that Jesus never claimed to be God and was made to be so by others. They use at least two arguments. The first, is that Jesus nowhere made this claim in Scripture. The second, is the historical argument that Jesus progressively came to be viewed as God through ecclesiastical formulations, debates and discussions until a particular viewpoint won the argument expressed in the church's confessions and creeds. The argument goes something like this: "You see, as you read the Bible, Jesus never claimed to be God. Instead, he consistently claimed to be a mere Prophet of Allah in keeping with the Old Testament...Jesus kept reminding people that he was a mere human being with limitations, unable to know certain things before hand or at all, got tired, expressed emotion, dreaded suffering, ate food, slept and could not clearly know or foretell the father's mind or will. In fact, he made certain assertions that he was the son of man who was to go away when another, Ahmed would come to replace him. So you can see that it is people that made the conclusion and added to his nature what he vehemently denied. In the Holy Quran, Jesus will be asked at the last day if he claimed to be God and he will clearly refuse..."

Responding to Islamic Arguments Against the Trinity

Muslims keep drumming their line of thought without carefully examining the Bible with an objective, clear mind, applying the correct hermeneutical principles, let alone, establishing the authorial intent as to what the Bible says in its context and entirety. In the gospel of John, Jesus makes several claims that he is divine and in fact states that he is the Son of God. John 5:17–24 has succinct statements demonstrating that Jesus had a unique relationship with the Father, one of eternal generation. In the John 17:24 Jesus speaks of have pre-existed³⁴ before the world was and of returning to his glory after accomplishing the work of redemption (cf. John 1:1).

³⁴ See John 16:28; Interestingly though, Muslims are more and more claiming that Muhammad equally pre-existed as all the other previous prophets. This appears to be a departure from orthodoxy, in my view, because the Qur'an is generally silent on this matter suggesting that this concept or idea never existed in the original Muslim mind. Be that as it may, Muslims use one Qur'anic Ayah in Surah 26 to make this claim.

But the fact of Jesus being divine is not limited to the book of John. In Philippians 2:6–8, Paul makes a statement that Jesus was God but took on flesh to redeem man, a baffling thing human beyond comprehension. Scholars tell us that the apostle inserted here a stanza in an ancient first-century hymn which highlights the view that the early Christians had about Jesus.³⁵ Elsewhere, in say 1 Timothy 6:14–16 Jesus is said to be the potentate, God and saviour of the world. Then we have Hebrews that articulates a Christology proving that only God could save another, hence the need of Jesus.

What about the other gospels and indeed the Old Testament? Without delving into much detail, we need to state that Jesus claims to be the son of man (Matt 9:6; 10:23) proving to be a full human being not a phantom or imaginary docetic being. By this, he qualified to be the saviour of the world. Having passively and actively obeyed God's law, Jesus has become a fit sacrifice that saves the world. Again, in Matthew's narrative, Jesus states that he is the son of Man³⁶ and yet in some instances exhibits traits of being divine; for instance, he calms the wind, feeds the four or five thousand (Matt 14:13–21 & 15:29–39), heals the sick, forgives sinners and claims that he is the saviour of the world. At end of His ministry in Matt 28, Jesus claims that all authority has been given to Him; thus he can decree things as well as be worthy of worship. The Scriptures are replete with instances of people worshipping him and he never stops them. Why? Evidently, it is because he knew who he was, God in flesh.³⁷ This is not an idea borrowed from Greek mythology but a reality.

In the Old Testament, Jesus appears in theophanies or is revealed as the 'son of man', Emmanuel, mighty God, everlasting Father or some such ideas. For instance, in Daniel 7:13–14, the Son of man comes before the ancient of Days and is granted all authority as well as worshipped, which worship is only due to Yahweh. In other passages (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6), his virgin birth is foretold and called Emmanuel meaning "God with us." Note that this is over five hundred years before his birth and yet certain titles are given to him. We could say more but for now, we rest our case here on this point having demonstrated that Muslims are mistaken when they claim that Jesus never claimed to be God.

But then there is the historical argument that claims that originally, the Jewish Christians never considered Jesus to be God nor worshipped him, though this later became so over several centuries until the fourth or fifth centuries. This argument, at face value, seems to make sense especially that the ecumenical councils hammered out the matter of Trinity in which they addressed the nature of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. However, when one critically analyses the Scripture

³⁵ See Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1987), 99.

³⁶ E.g., Matt 11:15, 27; 8:20; 12:8, 32, 40; 16:27; 17:9; Luke 24:7.

³⁷ Refer to other passages including: Matt 11:25; 8:29; 4:3, 6; 12:25; 14:13–21; 14:22–36; 15:29–39; 16:16–17; 16:21–28; 17:5, 27; 28:9; Luke 24:7, 52; John 20:28; John 20:31.

and external sources to the Bible, it soon becomes apparent that in fact, the early Christians had a certain view of Jesus which is consistent with the present perspectives, although not as clear in some cases. Both Pliny and Josephus make statements that Jesus was worshipped as divine.

We commence our brief excursion into history within the pages of the gospels and Acts and the Epistles. Towards the end of John, Thomas comes across the risen Lord in the upper room and upon seeing him exclaims 'my Lord and my God!' (John 20:28). Then, we see that the early Christians sticking together in the upper room after Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:13), whom they had worshipped. Reading through Acts, one cannot help noticing that the Jewish Church knew who Jesus was, his mission and what he had accomplished, satisfying the demands of God. He propitiated as well as expiated for humanity (1 John 2:1–3), and thus, Peter declares that Jesus is the saviour of the World and salvation is found in Him only to the exclusion of all others (Acts 4:12). The Philippians 2 hymn is a window into what early Christians believed when persecution was rife.

In the midst of these challenges and accusations of cannibalism, ritualism, incest and all sorts of imputed vices, the Church emerges as the dominant force in the Roman Empire. Obviously now that Jesus has ascended to Heaven, the Apostles now deceased and apostolic fathers about to exit the centre stage giving way to the Church fathers, error begins to creep in generating trouble for the Church. Of course we have Marcion the Heretic claiming that the God of the Old Testament is different from the one in the New Testament, as much as we have Arius, a Deacon at Alexandria claiming that Jesus was of a similar substance, rather than same substance (i.e. homoousios) with the Father.

These doctrinal battles rage on as the church is forced to refine matters into crystal clear statements commencing with the Apostle's creed, the Nicene, Athanasius, Chalcedon and then finally Toledo where in which the Holy Spirit is most explicitly stated as God proceeding both from the Father and Son (filioque; Latin: "and from the Son"). By end of the fifth century, based on scriptural evidence, the Church has a clear doctrinal stance in dogmatic form, the opposing view not fully vanquished only to emerge in later centuries, albeit in a modified form. So can we honestly conclude that Jesus was made God across the centuries? Was the Trinity idea hatched by men? Absolutely not! What the Church merely did, of course with the facilitatory instrumentality of mortals like Constantine was hammer out, think through, refine and express what they felt was the Biblical view which this has stood the test of time. Jesus is God, the God- man.

Responding to the Teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328)

A further error that Muslims express, especially in the thought of the venerable Ibn Taymiyyah, the Mujtahid titled Sheikh ul-Islam (AD 1263–1328), the Trinity is said to be illogical and classic tri-theism because the idea clearly posits three

eternals and deities, which of course, is contrary to what Christians claim.³⁸ Taymiyyah asserts that the Christian formulation of the Triune God is a forced understanding on the Hebrew Scripture because the Bible, whether Hebrew or Christian never claims that God is composed of three persons. In his view, the idea of Trinity is not only absurd and blasphemous but a clear demonstration that Christians have departed from the straight path and must repent or else face the sword, Allah's judgement or both. In his view, using both mathematical and philosophical argumentation, if one adds 1 to 1 to 1, what do we get? 3! How then could Christians claim that three divine persons could be one? As far as Taymiyyah was concerned, that was a logical impossibility, a foolish thought worth trashing. In responding to John of Damascus' letter, Taymiyyah expends much energy in several volumes to both objectively state and then debunk the expressed Christian trinitarian view of God. In his view, Trinity is pure shirk that must never be condoned.

Given that Taymiyyah was a great mental powerhouse, his arguments apparently carried weight and made logical sense. He also seems to have studied meticulously, like to Qadi abd al- jabbar (d. 1025), and he correctly represented the extant surrounding Christian view³⁹ before proceeding to argue strongly against it. However, when one carefully reviews his work on the Trinity, it eventually becomes evident that his perspectives about the meaning of the Christian Trinity are not entirely correct.⁴⁰ For instance, he argues that $1 + 1 + 1$ is equal to 3. Logically this is correct. At another time, he questions why Christians limit themselves to only three persons in the God- head and not four, five or a thousand?⁴¹ Regardless, the Christians cannot defend their polytheism according to him. Such reasoning betrays a lack of understanding of the nature of the Christian conception of God. The Trinity is a mystery that the human mind cannot fully comprehend. All we use is what God has made known. He reveals truth and we believe it. Despite Taymiyyah's rejection of the Biblical evidence or even the Bible's use of anthropomorphic language in allusion to God, the evidence is there for all to see. Though the Trinity a high truth beyond full human comprehension, it can be investigated and understood by faith in some sense. God is a Trinity in unity, one God subsisting in three persons—three co-equal, co-eternal persons of the same substance, power and will. How God is three and yet one or one and yet three persons is beyond our explanation. Our finite minds fail at some point.

³⁸ Abdullah Ismail. "Tawhid and Trinity: A Study of Ibn Taymiyyah's al-Jawāb al Şaḥīḥ" Intellectual Discourse, Vol 14 no. 1 (2006): 89–106.

³⁹ That is of the Melkites, Nestorians and Jacobites. Sabri Yilmaz does an outstanding job analyzing these various Christian sects as he analyses Qadi Abd al-Jabbar's view of the Trinity. It is a paper worth reading. Another, Jon Hoover, equally does a great work on these groups in addition to his analysis of the various schools of thought within Islam in relation to the nature of Allah.

⁴⁰ Admittedly, one needs a very good and trained eye to detect his deficiencies and wrong understanding

⁴¹ Qadi Abd al-Jabbar long before him used this argument. Perhaps Taymiyyah borrowed that heifer from him

One thing we know is that the Biblical evidence points to the fact of the Trinity. Further, it may be said that when we are considering God, we are not to view Him in human terms such as numerical additions of numbers as Taymiyyah attempts to do. Granted, we may use those same numbers and flip the argument on its head. Instead of using addition, why not use multiplication instead? That may not necessarily be a firm argument because it is human but attempts to show that human logical argumentation at some point fails to bring out the reality of God.

As to the argument against the use of anthropomorphic language in relation to God, assuming we are talking about the same deity, the Bible freely uses such language to demonstrate to his creatures the aspects of his nature. We must further insert a qualifier here that although the Bible uses such language at times, it is for our human understanding. References to the “arm of God,” the “ear” or “eye” use human language to connect with humans. Does that necessarily mean God has those physical human parts? The Bible is clear that God is Spirit (John 4:24) and has a nature distinct from humans. But then, the Bible is not alone in using anthropomorphic language in relation to God, for even the Qur’an does the same, though in relatively fewer instances. So Taymiyyah’s argumentation may not fully hold though they give the Christian serious food for thought.

Problems in the Islamic View of God

Muslims claim that Christians have more than one God whilst they themselves, perhaps closer to Judaism, are closer to the original Shema assertion in the Torah and Qur’an. They claim that Islam is strictly monotheistic as is Judaism. This looks impressive at face value but on serious scrutiny, it turns out that even Islam has some challenges. For one thing, some scholars have argued that Judaism is binitarian rather than unitarian.⁴² For another thing, Islam equally has inherent challenges with the nature of God. Jon Hoover highlights the fact that Islam grapples with at least four connected views on the nature of God.⁴³ He mentions them as follows:

1. Tawhid al-tawhid al-dhati: “the oneness of God’s essence”
2. Al-tawhid al-sifati: “the unity of God’s attributes”
3. Al-tawhid al-af’ali: “the uniqueness of God’s acts”
4. Al-tawhid al-ibadi: this posits that Allah is one, the only one to be worshipped and there is no other. Here, all Muslims perfectly agreed.

⁴² E.g., Daniel Boyarin “The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John” *The Harvard Theological Review* Vol 94 no. 3 (July 2001): 243–84.

⁴³ Hoover “Islamic Monotheism and the Trinity.” 129

From the forgoing, it is evident that even within Muslim scholarship, the nature of God is not as straight forward as often portrayed. Granted, all are agreed at the fourth level al-ibadi, but what about at the other levels? The Mu'tazili and Ash'ari schools of thought are often at odds as to the exact nature of God. Is he one being to the exclusion of all other attributes? Is Allah eternal as his attributes are or do all these co-exist? Are the attributes real? These are deep questions which divide the house of Islam if not well handled.

Hoover has done an excellent job demonstrating that, in fact, Muslims face similar challenges that Christians face in relation to expressing the nature and understanding of God. For instance, if God's attributes are eternal, uncreated and real, then this breed room for one to claim that there exists more than one God besides Allah. We may freely add here another secondary thought which is not directly resulting from Hoover's analysis, that of the Qur'an. Is the Qur'an eternal and uncreated? Or is it a mere record of the writings of men? Muslims are often in dilemma here because if they say that the Qur'an is eternal and uncreated, then their house of cards goes up in flames with shirk! If on the other hand they downgrade the Qur'an to a writing of men, this evaporates its inherent authority, appeal or thrust for then the charge of error, corruption, contradiction and inconsistency creeps in.

There is now room to claim that the text has been edited here and there and perhaps even been unstable, especially in the early years before Hajjaj made his epic 11 changes to the text making it clearer.⁴⁴ Be that as it may, Muslims need to explain to us how that God's attributes and Qur'an are both eternal and uncreated in relation to Tawhid. Could it be a case of language misunderstanding? If so, would Christians be wrong to argue that God is triune? We rest our case there for now.

The Christian View of Trinity Positively Stated

The entire Bible is about God from start to finish. It gives a metanarrative a covenant-making God that deals with his people and creation from eternity past. As one moves through the pages of Scripture, they cannot help but notice that God reveals himself in various ways including creation or through the names attributed to him. In Genesis 1, he is called Elohim, the almighty one, the creator of the universe. He is the omnipotent one. In Genesis 2 and onwards, he is Yahweh, the self-existent one, needing nothing outside himself. In Genesis 11 and onwards, we see an additional name of Adonai, the master in relation to human slaves. We also encounter compound names in Scripture, all attempting to describe the indescribable one, the great I AM. He is the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:13–14), The Holy one of Israel, the eternal one, the sovereign ruler, the gracious God, the Loving Father, the Shepherd of his people among others. He

⁴⁴ Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

is the eternal and everlasting one, the immutable God among other names and titles attributed to him. He is One, the only wise God, eternally holy and incomparable to any of his creatures. He stands alone, decrees all things, immanently sustains the world, and yet the transcendent One. He can never condone or look at sin and yet in Christ, he draws sinners to himself through the cross, whilst punishing sin, thus remaining just and holy. He is the Sustainer and giver of life, a God who cannot lie, of order and above all, love. He is a relational being, both immanent and transcendent.

He never slumbers nor sleeps and the father of creation, though he has a special love for his own, elected before the foundations of the world. God is Triune and lives in one eternal moment, is outside time, absolutely free, merciful, gracious and treasures his own like the apple of His eye. To describe and reveal himself in scripture, Jehovah has used anthropomorphic language so that we may understand his character, attributes, being and nature. He may use figurative language to describe himself such as his hand, arm, back, foot, eye etc. so that his creatures may have some level of comprehension of who he is. Yet, he is the incomprehensible God, omniscient, omnipresent, pure, intelligent, the only wise God never increasing or diminishing in knowledge or wisdom for to him are all things.

In the language of Thomas Aquinas, he is the first cause of all things, the uncaused, uncreated one. To him all creatures bow in adoration, and yet all that adoration can never approximate to the praise that is due to his name. With God, the past, the present and the future are the same, there is nothing that ever catches him by surprise because he is from eternity and will never die or grow old.

In all these words, we mean to communicate the idea that God is One God. His name is Yahweh and not the Islamic Allah or some such deity. This is what some theologians call the Ontological Trinity, where God is said to be one, in keeping with Deuteronomy 6:4 which reads: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." To both the Christian and the Jew, this rings true with a hearty Amen!

But there is a second aspect of God's nature which ties in very well with his being love. God is love (1 John 4:16; John 17:24). He exists as One and yet is three persons or tri-unity. God, in the economic Trinity is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father plans salvation, the Son saves and the Spirit applies the work of redemption. As we read through Scripture, we observe that God is three persons and yet one. For example, right at the beginning of Genesis 1 we read that "In the beginning God..." This verse presupposes that before verse 1, Elohim eternally exists when he begins to Create. Next, we notice that the Spirit is hovering and then Elohim states the famous "Let us" in verse 26, although some theologians argue that the Bible is here using the majestic plural and thus cannot prove the Trinity from this passage; fair enough. But notice that we clearly see both the Father and the Holy Spirit in this passage (Gen 1:1-3). In John 1:1 and

Col 1:16, we notice that the creator is actually Jesus. Nothing was created without him! Was Jesus merely an agent of creation? Not so, the Scripture makes it plain that he was indeed God! (John 1:1). This same Word became incarnate (John 1:14) and dwelt amongst us that he might be a fit saviour of mankind.

Although he took on flesh, he never ceased to be God (Phil 2:5–8). This was indeed true humiliation and yet in his hypostatic nature Jesus never for a moment ceased to be God. Kenosis (“pouring out”) comes to mind here. Having redeemed his own, Jesus returned to the Father (John 17:12). The Son did not become the Son of God at Incarnation, far from it; he was before the world ever existed. Christ’s sonship is eternal, what theologians call ‘eternal generation’ of the Son. In other words, there was never a time when the Son was not and by the same token, there was never a time the Father was not the begetting one. In time, however, the Father sent the son to redeem a people he had predestined to eternal life. The Son obeyed the Father and was miraculously conceived, born among us to actually redeem a fallen mass of humanity. Only the elect are thus saved by the particular redemption of Christ; not one of them is ever lost. Jesus actually saved his people (Matt 1:18).

The Son is God, of the same (not similar BUT same!) essence and nature with the Father and the Spirit. He is the uncreated eternal one. The Qur’an and the Arians reject this claim, including the Atonement and why God had to incarnate to save his people, so as to remain just.

The Spirit is God as we have demonstrated from all eternity. He is dubbed the Spirit of Holiness, the sanctifier, pure, righteous, the convictor of sin, reminder, revealer of truth, comforter, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, life giver, advocate (John 14:26), regenerating the spiritually dead. The Spirit equips, gifts and empowers believers for service as well as enables them to live a sanctified life. He is a person not a force and proceeds from both the Father and the Son (filioque; Latin: “and from the Son”).

Given the above, we can summarize the following, borrowing from the rich ancient creeds: The Father is God, The Son is God and the Spirit is God, not three Gods but one. The Father, Son and Spirit are co-equal, co-eternal, uncreated of the same substance, without beginning or end. These are not three eternals but one, not three separate persons but distinct.

The Economic Trinity is wrapped around love within the Godhead and only then can we talk about a loving redemption in Christ. In redemption, the Father sends the Son who willingly submits to the Father and incarnates to save the elect. The Spirit cannot come unless the Son sends him (John 15:26; 16:7; 14:15).

He thus proceeds from both the Father and the Son (John 14:26). The Triune God is not a unit but a Trinity, not divisible but of three persons, not changing in

form through the Testaments or epochs but as eternally triune in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, God is Triune as much as he is in the New. God is Spirit, eternal, unchangeable, all powerful and one in nature and essence.⁴⁵ He never changes modes but remains the same. Thus, Docetism, Sabellianism, Modalism and other heresies have no place in Christian theology.

A detailed treatment of the Trinity is handled by other authors in this Journal but suffice to say that the Muslim understanding of the Trinity is seriously faulty.

Is Yahweh the 'Allah' of Islam?

From the foregoing and evidence adduced from internal and external evidence of the Bible. The teaching of the Trinity or indeed the nature of God is different between the two religions.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the two religious scriptures do not refer to the same deity, despite some overlapping traits. The differences are far beyond the mere use of language whether Arabic, Hebrew or Greek. Despite several similarities in some attributes, the nature, essence and immanence of God differ. For one thing, the Trinitarian God is love, personal, redemptive and just. He interacts with his creation despite being transcendent. There is an organic relationship between the Triune God and his people. God in Himself is love, with loving relations within himself, Father, Son and Spirit. For another thing, Yahweh is the same God we read about in the New Testament, a covenant-keeping God, true to his word and never random.

On the other hand, Allah comes across as a totally transcendent and therefore impersonal deity. Though the Qur'an calls Allah merciful, forgiving and all knowing, he has no direct contact with creation and operates through agents such as Angels. Furthermore, Allah cannot have relational interactions with his creation. Additionally, the Muslim concept of the Trinity is faulty and illogical. Christians never worship three gods nor is the Trinity composed of Father, Jesus and Mary. The Prophet had it wrong, perhaps due to the spurious gnostic gospels he was exposed to.

To effectively engage Muslims with the gospel, there are a number of things we should do or not do, say or not say. We do not go into details about that but for now, we give some suggestions and recommendations:

1. The Doctrine of the Trinity is under immense attack from Muslims across the world. From our experience, research and observations, Muslims have targeted this area.

⁴⁵ This rendering is similar to what we have in the Baptist or Westminster confessions of faith. I am indebted to them

⁴⁶ Juhansar A. Latief, "The Concept of God in Christianity: An Islamic Perspective" *Jurnal Al-Ulum*, Vol 11 no. 1 (June 2011): 1–16.

2. Arising from differing interpretations and understanding of God, Muslims and Christians will always differ on this point. Christians should not take offence, but should patiently continue to explain.

3. Many Christians do not have a clear workable and defensible grasp of the doctrine of the Trinity. Many have accepted it as a mystery which they should not explore. This needs to change. There is need to have a meticulously good trained eye. One way is to know exceptionally well what is authentic, akin to a good banker with money. Anything different will be thrown out. Muslims indoctrinate their own on Tawhid thus explaining how strongly they oppose what they perceive to be different.

4. The Qur'an makes statements about Allah claiming that he is Yahweh of the Bible. Christians and Jews need to be clear on this and discern the differences. The two are not the same, much less Isa (Jesus).

5. Churches must be intentional in revisiting and teaching this mysterious but sweet doctrine. They need to examine Scriptures and break it down for their congregants.

6. Creeds and confessions need to be loved again. They are a boundary, a fence, bulwark and protection from error. They also help us to early detect what is spurious, dangerous or undesirable. Several are around, well hammered out for us from ancient times. The Apostles, Nicene, Athanasius and Toledo Creeds are especially useful on the Trinity. In some churches, reciting of the Apostle's creed is mandatory. The Reformed Church of Zambia and the Roman Catholic Church do well on recitations.

A last recommendation is to urge Christians to take an interest into exploring the Qur'an. Its admittedly not an easy read but once one gets the big picture, things just open up.

Conclusion

We can safely conclude that Christians and Muslims have different interpretations of the nature of God. The Trinity is a serious stumbling block for Muslims because their view is different from the Christian worldview. Christians need to master the doctrine of the Trinity as well as the Muslim worldview if they are to effectively engage them with the gospel.

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Appendix: Summary of Problems in Islam's Doctrine of God

A cursory reading of the Qur'an can be quite impressive, if one understands how it functions. Background information and hermeneutical skills come in handy to appreciate the message of the Qur'an especially as relates to Allah, his beautiful descriptive names and attributes. One can scarcely notice the differences between Yahweh and Allah. In fact, one may be tempted to conclude that this is one and the same God being described, though defies description. However, a meticulous examination of the Scripture will reveal some key points of concern. Here, we restrict ourselves to the nature of God in relation to the Trinity.

The first error one observes is that Allah is depicted as one unit or being and yet, through a careful reading of the Qur'an and Muslim theological literature, we notice that the Qur'an is considered eternal and uncreated.⁴⁷ Though Muhammad is only a messenger, yet has assumed the exalted level of a mediator of sorts as recorded in the Hadith. Is Allah alone eternal and uncreated, or the Qur'an also? If so, would we safely conclude that there are two eternal and two uncreated in Islam? The Muslim faces a challenge here.

The second challenge is that the Qur'an does not present a correct picture of the Christian Trinity because it ascribes divinity to Mary as part of the Trinity. Christians do not believe in such a Trinity. It is evident that the Qur'an misunderstands or misrepresents the biblical Trinity.

Third, the Qur'an states that people of the Scripture believe in "three" gods. This is incorrect as Christians do not believe in three separate eternal or gods but one eternal God in three persons.

Fourth, the Qur'an gives a conflicting picture about the people of the Book/Scripture. In one breathe, it applauds them and in the next it speaks of them with contempt. The reader of the Qur'an is at a crossroads; should they despise or accept the Bible?

Fifth, the Qur'an claims to complete and confirm the previous Scriptures but contradicts them at some points. Why would this be so? Tahrif (corruption) is often cited as the cause, hence the arrival of the Qur'an; but what exactly has been corrupted, the text or the interpretation of the text? The contradictions raise questions in the minds of Christians.

A sixth challenge is that the word 'Tawhid' does not exist in the Qur'an and yet Muslims use it. We can argue that the term is foreign to the Qur'an and yet expresses thoughts which are in the Qur'an. Why then should Muslims have problems with a theological concept termed 'Trinity'?

⁴⁷ Cook, The Koran.

The Qur'an's interpretation and understanding of "sonship" or eternal generation is incorrect. It focuses on the physical aspects of a biological Son borne out of sexual union between man and woman. The Biblical thought is not that. Rather, as taught in John 5 and 8, it is that Jesus is the eternal son of God and therefore divine. We agree with Sookhdeo's conclusion when he asserts:

Clearly, Islam misunderstood the Christian Doctrine at this point. It equates the Christian dogma of Jesus being the Son of God with pagan ideas of divine sonship. It is evident that either Muhammad never really understood Christianity or refused to take seriously its protestations of innocence when accused of semi-paganism...⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ Patrick Sookhdeo, *Understanding Islamic Theology*, page 86 139

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