

MANAGING EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is the correct version of the article, "Islamic Monotheism and the Trinity," by Jon Hoover. A penultimate version of the article, with the same title, was published in the Winter 2009 issue of The Conrad Grebel Review, pages 57 – 82. We apologize to the author and to our readers for the error.

Islamic Monotheism and the Trinity

Jon Hoover

Christians and Muslims both believe that there is only one God, and, as I hope to show in this article, their doctrines of God share some important structural similarities. However, Muslims and Christians also find themselves differing over how this God is one, with Muslims rejecting the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The first part of this essay surveys Islamic criticisms of the Trinity, and the subsequent parts seek to widen the scope of the discussion so as to find bridges between the Islamic and Christian doctrines of God. I outline the basics of the Islamic doctrine of God, examine how Christians affirm the unity of God by means of Trinitarian doctrine, and note parallels in order to enhance mutual understanding. As will become apparent, my aim is also apologetic: that is, I seek to clarify the sense of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in view of typical Muslim concerns.

This essay began as a presentation at the Mennonite-Shi'i dialogue held in Qom, Iran in February 2004.¹ That paper was published with minor revisions in a Catholic journal the same year.² It was also to appear in a volume containing the 2004 Qom dialogue papers, but plans for that volume were eventually abandoned. In the meantime, I became aware of difficulties with my 2004 presentation, and the present essay is thus a thorough revision of that work.³ However, due to the wide scope of my discussion, I do not explain and justify all of my claims as fully as some might wish or engage the entire range of potential objections to my arguments, from both Christians and Muslims.⁴ This remains a work in process – or rather part of a dialogue in process – and it is in the spirit of the shared and ongoing Muslim-Christian search for truth that I submit this contribution to further conversation.

Islamic Criticism of the Trinity

The Qur'an asserts that God is one in several places (e.g., Q. 16:51, 44:8, 47:19, 112:1-4), and monotheism or *tawhid* is the foundational doctrine of Islam. Muslim criticism of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity then flows from the conviction that the Trinity compromises God's unity and entails tri-theism. Once it is established that the Christian doctrine is not monotheistic, it is but a short step to censuring Christians for committing the unforgivable sin of associating partners with God (*shirk*). Christians wrongly give Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit a share in God's exclusive rule of the world, and they devote worship to Jesus that is due only to God.⁵ Muslims justify their conviction that the Trinity violates God's unity in a number of ways. Here, I will survey three major lines of argument: Qur'anic criticism, Trinitarian doctrinal development as corruption of the message of Jesus, and rational deficiencies in the classical Trinitarian formulations.

The Qur'an includes several verses often used to criticize the doctrine of the Trinity. The Qur'an rejects a triad that consists of God, Jesus, and his mother Mary: "O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to the people, 'Worship

me and my mother as two gods besides God?” (Q. 5:116). The Qur’an also denies that Jesus is God’s Son and that God is “three,” as in the verse, “The Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, was only a messenger of God....Do not say ‘Three’....God is only one God. Glory be to him. [He is above] having a son” (Q. 4:171). Another text implies that calling Christ God’s son is unbelief and that worshiping Christ as a lord is associationism (Q. 9:30-31, see also Q. 2:116, 5:73, 5:75).⁶

In response to this Qur’anic reproach, Christians readily note that the doctrine of the Trinity speaks not of God, Jesus, and Mary, but of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Additionally, Christians do not understand Jesus’ sonship in the carnal way that Muslims often presume. Rather, as Anglican Bishop Kenneth Cragg puts it, sonship points to the obedience of Jesus the Incarnate Son to his Father and the depth of relationship within the one God.⁷ Moreover, Christians concur with the fundamental Qur’anic rejection of polytheism, and they agree that we should not talk of three gods. It has also been suggested that the Qur’an is not even speaking to classical Christian doctrine but to something else, perhaps some kind of aberrant Christianity present in Arabia at the time of the Prophet Muhammad.⁸

These responses remind Muslims inclined to look to the Qur’an for their knowledge of Christianity that they need to examine what Christians themselves say about the Trinity before rejecting it. However, it remains possible that the Qur’an did address classical Trinitarian doctrine. British historian Gerald Hawting has suggested that even the Qur’anic polemic against idolatry and polytheism was aimed in reality at the allegedly defective monotheism of mainstream Jews and Christians.⁹ Whatever be the case, Christian attempts to blunt the Qur’anic critique cannot negate the fact that Trinitarian doctrine does differ from the positive Qur’anic and Islamic teaching about God. To explain how Christianity and Islam came to different views, a second line of Muslim anti-Trinitarian criticism alleges historical corruption of the Christian religion.

Islamic narratives of Christianity’s historical corruption are rooted in the conviction that all of God’s prophets and messengers brought the same message of God’s unity. Jesus was no different. His religion was pure monotheism, but it was corrupted by the Apostle Paul and again later at the Council of Nicea in 325. The eleventh-century Muslim theologian ‘Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025) elaborates this narrative in lurid detail. He underlines Paul’s wickedness and cunning in adopting numerous Roman religious practices into Christianity to endear himself to Roman power. Likewise, Constantine manipulated church leaders to adopt the Nicene Creed, imposed it on the people, and killed those who opposed it.¹⁰

Modern Muslim versions of the historical corruption narrative sometimes borrow from the liberal wing of modern western scholarship on the Bible and early church history to enhance their apologetic credibility. This is evident, for example, in the recent book by Faruk Zein entitled *Christianity, Islam and Orientalism*.¹¹ Zein draws on such figures as the founder of the Jesus Seminar Robert Funk,¹² the Jewish Pauline scholar Hyam Maccoby,¹³ and the British popular writer A.N. Wilson¹⁴ to argue that Paul invented Christianity by transforming the human Jesus into a Hellenistic myth about a dying and rising god. This myth was then formalized in the doctrine of the Trinity adopted by the Council of Nicea. Zein also explains that the true followers of Jesus were “Nazarenes” who adhered to Jesus’ moral religion but did not worship him as a god. Zein applauds the western scholars who have brought all of this to our attention. However, he chides them for not investigating Islam, which, he argues, has long taught these very same things.¹⁵

I have not been able to find lengthy rebuttals of Muslim arguments for historical corruption of the Christian faith, nor will I attempt to provide one myself. Rejoinders to the Jesus Seminar and other defenses of continuity between Jesus, Paul, and classical Christian doctrine may be seen to stand in for this lack.¹⁶ However, I will sketch below how Trinitarian doctrine follows from the soteriological impulse that I take to be central to the Biblical witness.

A third strand of Muslim argument impugns the rationality of the Trinity. Many Muslim polemicists through history have been well acquainted with the essentials of classical Trinitarian doctrine.¹⁷ God is one substance (*ousia* in Greek, *jawhar* in Arabic) in three persons (*hypostasis* in Greek, *uqnûm* in Arabic): Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The persons are equal and coeternal, and they are distinguished one from another by their origins: the Father is ingenerate; the Son is generated from the Father; and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. The western church tradition eventually linked the Holy Spirit to the Son as well, such that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*).

This doctrine is often quickly dismissed as irrational with the observation that one cannot be three. A quotation by the modern Syrian Qur'an commentator al-Sabuni (b. 1930) is typical:

[The Christians] say: One substance and three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These three are one as the sun consists in its circular shape, rays and warmth. They claim that the Father is divine, the Son is divine, the Spirit is divine, and the whole is one God. It is known to be false by the intuition of reason that three is not one and one is not three.¹⁸

Other polemicists go further in spelling out the doctrine's rational difficulties. In *A Response to the Three Sects of the Christians*, Abu 'Isa al-Warraq (d. ca. 860) provides one of the earliest and most extensive critiques of this kind. His anti-Christian polemic was highly influential even though he was deemed a Muslim heretic. After providing a full and careful description of the Trinitarian teachings of the Melkites, Nestorians, and Jacobites, Abu 'Isa goes on the offensive. He takes the hypostases to be three countable things, which, when added to the substance of the Godhead, make four eternal entities. This is rejected as violating God's unity. Conversely, he shows in diverse ways that Christian efforts to show how the three hypostases are one fail and end up in contradiction.¹⁹

David Thomas, editor and translator of this early text, observes both that Abu 'Isa treats Trinitarian doctrinal statements as propositions making univocal assertions about the reality of God and that this is not how Christians understood them.²⁰ However, Thomas does not explain how Christians do understand them. Here we may turn to the Cappadocian theologians of the fourth century for clarification. To ward off the charge of "tri-theism" in their own time, they excluded the notion of number from the Trinitarian persons – the persons cannot be added up as numbers – and they underlined the indivisibility, simplicity, and incomprehensibility of God's essence. For the Cappadocians, Trinitarian doctrinal statements must be made and interpreted from within the prior framework of God's simplicity and ineffability.²¹ A similar appeal to God's ineffability or essential mystery will be fundamental to my own interpretation of the Trinity below.

To counter the Muslim charge of irrationality, some Arab Christian theologians have sought to ground Trinitarian doctrine in reason itself. An example occurs in a letter to Muslims by Paul of Antioch, the Melkite Bishop of Sidon (d. early 1200s?). He begins with a cosmological argument – created things imply a Creator – to

establish God's existence. Then, Paul argues that God must be living so as not to be dead and speaking so as not to be ignorant, and he identifies God's life with the Holy Spirit and God's speech with the Son.

The one god who is called one Lord and one Creator is a living, speaking thing—that is, essence, speech, and life. The essence we hold to be the Father who is the source of the other two. The speech is the Son who is born from the Father in the manner of speech from the intellect. The life is the Holy Spirit.²²

In response to Paul of Antioch's letter, the fourteenth-century Sunni theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) wrote the fullest Muslim refutation of Christianity in the Islamic tradition, *The Sound Response to Those Who Have Changed the Religion of Christ*.²³ His critique is informed and astute. With respect to the Trinity, he first calls Paul's bluff and explains that Christians draw the language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from their texts. This language does not arise from reason but from what Christians take to be revelation. Moreover, the Trinity is not needed to know that God is living and speaking, and there is no reason to limit the number of God's attributes to three.²⁴

With Paul of Antioch's bit of natural theology out of the way, Ibn Taymiyya turns to a more comprehensive critique. Unlike Abu 'Isa al-Warraq, Ibn Taymiyya demonstrates awareness that Christians generally regard the Trinity as unknowable apart from revelation and somehow beyond rational analysis: "[Christians] claim that the divine Books have revealed these views and that they constitute a matter beyond reason. They hold this belief to be of a degree beyond that of the intellect."²⁵

Like many other Muslim theologians, Ibn Taymiyya maintains that reason knows a great deal about God apart from revelation. Reason knows that God exists, that God is one, and that God has attributes such as power, life, and knowledge. Revelation and the teaching of the prophets then confirm and perfect what is known by reason, but they will never contradict reason. Revelation sometimes does go beyond reason to provide information that the latter cannot access. This includes information that God has revealed about recompense in the hereafter, as well as some of what God would have us to do in this life.²⁶

Ibn Taymiyya recognizes that many Christians would want to include the Trinity under this latter rubric of revelation inaccessible to reason. However, he rejects the possibility and accuses them of not distinguishing "between [1] what the mind imagines and proves false and knows to be impossible and [2] that which the mind is unable to conceive since it knows nothing about it, and has no information on it either by affirmation or denial."²⁷ For him, the Christian doctrine falls under the first of the two categories, not the second. The Trinity is not a matter simply beyond *reason*; it is clearly *opposed* to reason.

To press his point, Ibn Taymiyya maintains that speaking of God begetting a son is even more irrational than positing a wife for God, even if 'begetting' is explained as "intellectual production like Christian scholars hold,"²⁸ or as similar to "the birth of speech from the mind."²⁹ Moreover, he argues that the Trinitarian hypostases resolve to tri-theism and contradiction. If the Son is truly equal to the Father in substance, then the Son must likewise have a substance of his own, making the Son into a second substance. Similar logic applies to the Holy Spirit, turning it into a third substance. Thus, Christians believe in fact in three substances and three gods, and this contradicts their claim that God is one.³⁰

Ibn Taymiyya complements his rational critique of the Trinity with an historical corruption narrative. The Trinity contradicts the consistent teaching of the prophets, and Jesus did not instruct his followers to believe in this

doctrine or use terms such as *uqnûm* (Arabic for *hypostasis*). Trinitarian doctrine is rather the result of errant interpretation, the impositions of the Council of Nicea, and Christian scholars appealing – in the face of sound reason – to what they alleged was written in revealed texts. To correct this, Ibn Taymiyya shows how biblical texts traditionally cited to support the Trinity may be reinterpreted to agree with Islamic monotheism. In a key example, he takes up the command in Matt. 28:19 to baptize “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” and interprets ‘Father’ to mean God the Lord, ‘Son’ to refer to the prophet Christ, and the ‘Holy Spirit’ to be either the angel Gabriel who brings revelation or revelation itself. Thus, the biblical text commands “people to believe in God and His prophet which God sent and in the angel by which God sent down the revelation which he brought.”³¹

To sum up the Islamic criticism, the Trinity has not been revealed by God; it ends in tri-theism; and, according to many Muslims, it is positively irrational. There is of course no way apart from faith to adjudicate whether the Trinity is rooted in revelation from God. It is also not possible, in my view, to come to knowledge of the Triune God on the basis of reason alone. However, one can attempt to explain why Christians hold this doctrine and try to explicate something of its sense in dialogue with the beliefs of others. This is what I aim to do in the remainder of this essay.

The Islamic Doctrine of God’s Unity

The following presentation of the Islamic doctrine of God’s unity (*tawhîd*) draws upon and extends an analysis outlined by Murtada Mutahhari (d. 1979), a prominent and sophisticated theologian in the Shi‘i clerical tradition of modern Iran.³² He identifies four levels or aspects of *tawhîd* with an analytical clarity that will prove useful later in my comparison with Trinitarian doctrine. The choice of the Shi‘i Mutahhari as my primary interlocutor also derives from the fact that I first presented this material at a dialogue with Shi‘i clerics in 2004. Sunni Muslims may find my choice unfortunate. However, similar doctrinal positions are found among a good number of Sunnis. The influential and renowned theologian al-Ghazali (d. 1111) treats the doctrine of God following a similar fourfold structure in his creed, even if not explicitly.³³ Also, the doctrines of *tawhîd* found in Ibn Taymiyya, the Arabian reformer Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1791 or 1792), and their modern heirs bear some resemblance to Mutahhari’s presentation.³⁴ What ties Mutahhari together with these otherwise dissimilar figures is a certain debt to the philosophy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037).

Mutahhari identifies the first aspect or level of *tawhîd* as *al-tawhîd al-dhâtî*, the oneness of God’s essence (*dhât*): God’s essence is simple, non-composite, and without division. The classical argument for this is that God cannot be composed of parts lest God need a cause to bring those parts together.³⁵ The oneness of God’s essence also indicates that God’s essence and his attributes are incomparable and bear no likeness to the essences and attributes of creatures. In addition to arguments from reason, this is supported by the Qur’anic verse, “There is nothing like him” (Q. 42:11). Mutahhari observes that all Muslims agree at the level of *al-tawhîd al-dhâtî*.

In treating the next two levels of *tawhîd*, Mutahhari contrasts his views with those of the Mu‘tazili and the Ash‘ari theological traditions. The Mu‘tazili tradition, which strongly emphasizes God’s unity and justice, emerged in the eighth century and died out among Sunnis in the thirteenth. However, some Shi‘is up to the present hold views similar to many of the Mu‘tazili doctrines. The Ash‘ari tradition takes its name from the early tenth-century

theologian al-Ash‘ari (d. 935), who broke with his Mu‘tazili teachers to give more weight to God’s power. Ash‘ari theology continues strong among Sunnis today.³⁶

The second level of *tawhîd* according to Mutahhari is *al-tawhîd al-sifâtî*, the unity of God’s attributes (*sifât*), such as God’s life, knowledge, power, speech, and hearing. The character of these attributes has been controversial. Mu‘tazili theologians maintain God’s simplicity and numerical unity by identifying God’s attributes with his essence. Thus, God’s attributes and God’s essence are one and the same. While this seems to solve the problem of how many may be one, the Mu‘tazilis were accused of denying the reality of the attributes because each attribute is nothing but God’s essence.

On the other hand, the Ash‘ari tradition affirms that God’s essential attributes such as knowledge, speech, and power are real and eternal. However, this introduces a certain ontological multiplicity into the being of God. How do God’s real, eternal attributes fit with the simplicity of God’s essence? The traditional Ash‘ari response is that God’s attributes are not identical with God and yet not other than God. So, for example, God’s attribute of power is not identical to God himself; yet, God’s power is not other than God. This does not provide a rational solution to the problem. Rather, it simply sets linguistic boundaries for what may be said of God, and it leaves unanswered the question of how God’s many attributes subsist in God’s single essence.

The Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina presents a slightly different approach, although it comes close to the Mu‘tazili view. For Ibn Sina, God’s attributes are necessarily concomitant with God’s essence, such that God’s essence manifests diverse attributes without compromising God’s absolute simplicity. In speaking about God, we simply cannot have God without God’s attributes or vice versa. God and God’s attributes are inseparable.³⁷

Mutahhari accuses the Ash‘aris of violating *al-tawhîd al-sifâtî* with their doctrine of God’s real attributes, and he charges the Mu‘tazilis with making God’s essence devoid of attributes altogether. He seeks a *via media* that comes close to the position of Ibn Sina. He states that [“The Divine Attributes] are identical with the Essence, in the sense that the Divine Essence is such that the Attributes are true of It, or is such that It manifests these Attributes.”³⁸

The third level of *tawhîd* is *al-tawhîd al-af‘âlî*, the uniqueness of God’s acts (*af‘âl*). In the Ash‘ari view, this *tawhîd* means that God is the only Creator in the universe. God has no associates in his creation, and God creates and determines everything, including human acts. There is no free will. The Ash‘aris try to affirm human responsibility by speaking of the human acquisition (*kasb*) of acts, but humans still have no role in bringing their acts into existence. In contrast, the Mu‘tazilis maintain that humans are indeed the creators of their acts, because God may only call humans to account and justly punish their bad deeds if he does not create them. The Ash‘aris counter that God is not obliged to follow such human notions of retributive justice. Moreover, they reject the Mu‘tazili doctrine as a violation of God’s sole prerogative to create.

Mutahhari sides initially with the Ash‘aris against the Mu‘tazilis. God’s will is all-pervasive and human beings are fully dependent on God for their existence and activity. Nonetheless, Mutahhari also affirms the reality of human action and responsibility by introducing secondary or proximate causality: “The system of causes and effects is real, and every effect, while being dependent on its proximate cause, is also dependent on God.”³⁹ He identifies this as an intermediate position between the two views. Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya adopt similar views, drawing on the resources of Ibn Sina.⁴⁰

The fourth level is *al-tawhîd al-'ibâdî*, the exclusive worship of God. Nothing else is served and worshiped but the one and only Creator. Worship of other beings is the sin of giving associates to God (*shirk*). Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, and the Wahhabis who followed after them, as well as various modern Muslim reformers, have strongly emphasized this level of *tawhîd* and sometimes interpreted it in highly puritanical fashion.⁴¹ Mutahhari observes that Muslims are in agreement at this level, but he censures the Wahhabis for rejecting many common Islamic devotional practices such as seeking the intercessory aid of prophets and saints. That is, all Muslims agree that worship must be devoted only to God, but they disagree over whether certain practices violate or fulfill this obligation. Mutahhari sums up, "The debate is about whether invoking of intercession and assistance may be considered a form of worship or not."⁴²

The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity

With both Islamic criticism of the Trinity and the Islamic doctrine of *tawhîd* now in view, we are in a position to interpret trinitarian doctrine so as to highlight structural similarities with the Islamic doctrine and to explain how Christians confess God to be one. In accord with the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, I give priority to the Biblical witness in theological reflection. As comparative theologian David Burrell notes, however, one must employ philosophical tools or strategies in seeking to communicate across religious traditions.⁴³ Different Christian theologians do this in different ways and draw on different resources. My own approach leans, both implicitly and explicitly, on various strategies employed in systematic theology, and, as will become apparent below, I rely in the first instance on the work of Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash to articulate what I take to be the proper beginning point for Trinitarian theology: God's incomprehensibility and mystery.

Christian affirmation of God's unity begins with the Jewish monotheistic confession, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" (Deut. 6:4, cf. Isa. 44:6, Mark 12:29, 1 Cor. 8:4-5). The Christian tradition also inherits the concomitant Jewish aversion to idolatry (Ex. 20:4, Deut. 5:8, Isa. 44:7-20). This is expressed theologically with the doctrines of God's simplicity and ineffability, and has solid foundations not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in the NT: "It is [God] alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16, cf. Rom. 11:33-34). God is fundamentally incomprehensible, and this parallels God's simplicity and incomparability entailed in the Muslim confession of *al-tawhîd al-dhâtî* and affirmed in the Qur'anic verse "There is nothing like him" (Q. 42:11).

The doctrines of God's simplicity, ineffability, and incomprehensibility establish at the outset that the one God is distinct from his creatures (cf. Isa. 46:5). Thus, as Nicholas Lash puts it, God is mystery, not in the sense of whatever obscurity might be left when talk of God seems to break down, but as profound and inexhaustible simplicity over against all the complexities of our world.⁴⁵ Lash stresses that Christian theology should not aspire to explain God in the sense of grasping God and draining the mystery out of him by reducing him to philosophically precise propositions. That would miss the point of relating to God himself. Rather, Lash finds the proper sense of mystery pertaining to God in the metaphor of human interpersonal relations:

Persons are not problems to be solved. Indeed, the *closer* we are to people, and the better we understand them, the more they evade our cognitive "grasp" and the greater the difficulty that we experience in giving

adequate expression to our understanding. Other people become, in their measure, “mysterious,” not insofar as we *fail* to understand them, but rather in so far as, in lovingly relating to them, we succeed in doing so.⁴⁶

That God is mysterious and incomprehensible, yet is in some way known, constitutes the beginning point for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The mystery that is God is not a mystery completely hidden, but a mystery that seeks encounter with humankind. There is a tradition beloved to Muslim mystics in which God says, “I was a Hidden Treasure, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures that I might be known.”⁴⁷ In a similar way, the God of Christian confession is the Mystery who chooses to communicate and reveal himself to the world, most fully in Jesus Christ.

The Bible is basic for Christians in seeking to ascertain who God has revealed himself to be. As Muslim critics accurately note, the word “Trinity” and its attendant technical terminology are not found in the Bible. However, the Bible does bear witness to God’s saving works in history in such a way that leads to recognition of God as triune. The NT in particular speaks of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all together engaged in a great mission to save, redeem, and reconcile humankind and all creation (e.g., Mark 1:9-15, Mark 14:32-36, John 16:1-15, John 17:20-24, Rom. 8:9-27, 1 Cor. 15:20-28). Under the inspiration of this Biblical witness and the ongoing Christian experience of God’s saving work, the church in the course of time discovered the three-fold pattern of God’s activity and being and formalized it with the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Trinity is thus founded in soteriology, that is, in salvation in Jesus Christ, and the Christological question at the heart of Trinitarian doctrine is the degree to which Jesus, the Savior and Liberator of the world, is divine. The Arians of the fourth century argued that Jesus was in some sense divine but not fully the eternal God. However, Athanasius, the defender of Nicene orthodoxy, claimed more. For Athanasius, Jesus must be fully God because only the Creator can save creatures. Creatures cannot save themselves. Salvation is not simply induction into Paradise but participation in the life of God, and this is something that only God himself can render. Thus, Athanasius rejects the Christ of the Arians who, although a “divine” savior and firstborn of all creatures, is nevertheless still a creature and so lacks the ability to save fellow creatures. Rather, Jesus Christ is the eternal Word and Son incarnate for our salvation. With the identity of Christ clarified, early Christian theologians applied similar reasoning to the Holy Spirit: the Holy Spirit is eternally divine because the Spirit does what only God can do.⁴⁸ Comparable arguments for the deity of Christ and Holy Spirit have been rehearsed throughout the Christian tradition, including the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Menno Simons (d. 1561), for example, explains that the Son and the Holy Spirit are divine because the Bible shows them sharing the same attributes with God the Father.⁴⁹ With the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each established as equally and eternally divine, the doctrine of the Trinity asserts that these three are one God. In the classical Christian formulation developed in the fourth and fifth centuries, God is one substance in three persons, or, in Greek, one *ousia* in three *hypostases*: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Muslims typically object to the Christian claim that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word incarnate because, in Islamic theology, God himself cannot come into history and assume human form and flesh. The perfection and majesty of God renders the Incarnation impossible. To Christians, this is an unnecessarily limitation of God. Kenneth Cragg asks, “Are we right in forbidding anything to God which he does not forbid to himself?” He

maintains that God is in fact greater for his coming into this world in Christ: “To believe that God stooped to our need and weakness is not to make God less, but more, the God of all power and glory.”⁵⁰

Also, as noted earlier, Muslims accuse Christians of *shirk* or associating partners with God for ascribing divinity to Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. From another perspective, however, Trinitarian doctrine was formulated precisely to deny this. Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson observes that it is Arianism that was guilty of *shirk* because it posited the Son as a creature next to God undertaking the world’s creation and salvation. Trinitarian doctrine establishes that Jesus the Son is not merely God’s associate. Rather, as the Nicene Creed affirms, the Son is of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father. The Father and the Son are the same God. The doctrine of the Trinity is thus essential for Christians to avoid the *shirk* of regarding the Savior of the world as anyone less than the eternal God.⁵¹

Christian theology often distinguishes between the “eternal” or “immanent” Trinity and the “economic” Trinity. The immanent Trinity is God in himself, and the economic Trinity is God in relationship to creatures in his “economy” or plan of salvation. This distinction is useful for clarifying that God in himself – in the immanent Trinity – is free and self-sufficient apart from the world, but that God for us – in the economic Trinity – has nonetheless chosen out of grace to create the world and reconcile it to himself.⁵² Even though this distinction is required for theological clarification, it does not divide God into two. The God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in his economy of salvation is also in himself Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from eternity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not simply names given to manifestations of God in the world; they are constitutive of who God is in himself. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (d. 1984) expresses this identity succinctly in his famous axiom: “The Trinity of the economy of salvation *is* the immanent Trinity and vice versa.”⁵⁴

The immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity may also be seen to indicate God’s unity in two different ways, and these have certain parallels with two of the levels of *tawhîd* described earlier. Parallel to the economic Trinity is the Islamic confession of *al-tawhîd al-af’âlî*. The Trinity in its economic aspect affirms that the acts of God toward us, whether those of the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit, are all acts of the one and only God. This means that the God who creates is the same God who saves in Jesus Christ and also the same God who will bring this world to fullness in the Holy Spirit. The creation and redemption history of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with humankind and the world is a single, unique history whose source and end are exclusively the one and only God. Much as Christians confess that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the sole actor in creation, redemption and consummation, Muslims assert with *al-tawhîd al-af’âlî* that God is the sole Creator of the universe and the One to whom all things are returning (cf. Q. 10:56). As well, Muslims confess that it was the same God who revealed the Torah to Moses, the Zabûr (Psalms) to David, the Injîl (Gospel) to Jesus, and the Qur’an to Muhammad. While they allow that there were some differences between these revealed books, with the Qur’ân confessed to be the final and abrogating revelation, all these books come from the same God. Thus, the Islamic narrative of history finds its unity under one God, and, though this narrative differs from the Christian story of God’s Incarnation in Christ, both Christians and Muslims confess that only one God is Lord of all history.

With the immanent Trinity, the difficulty is how God is eternally one and yet three as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christians have devoted much energy to this problem and have offered a variety of proposals. This is

also the problem that Muslim rationalist criticism of Trinitarian doctrine says cannot be solved coherently, which then renders the doctrine false. It goes beyond the scope of this essay to detail the rich Christian doctrinal and theological discussion of how God is three in one. Instead, I want merely to show that Muslims face a similar dilemma on at least a linguistic level, and then I will make a few remarks on the character of Christian responses to this problem.

Medieval Arab Christian theologians, like Paul of Antioch noted above, were fond of identifying the Trinitarian persons with specific attributes of God such as God's life (Holy Spirit) and speech (Word and Son). In this light, the Christian problem of how to speak of the three as one and the one as three is akin to the Islamic theological problem of conceiving the unity of the many divine attributes in *al-tawhîd al-sifâtî*. Much as Islamic doctrine distinguishes God's essence from God's attributes, the classical doctrine of the Trinity distinguishes God's essence or substance (*ousia*) from God's persons (*hypostases*). In Islamic perspective, God's essence is one and God's attributes are many, while in Christian perspective God's essence is one and God's persons are three. According to Islamic doctrine, God has many eternal attributes that are distinguished in at least name by the Mu'tazilis and in reality by the Ash'aris. In classical Trinitarian doctrine, God's three persons are equal and co-eternal but distinguished in their names and origins: the Father is ingenerate; the Son is generated from the Father; and the Spirit proceeds from the Father (in Eastern Christianity) or from the Father and the Son (in Western Christianity).

This parallel between the Islamic and Christian doctrines is not exact and even misleading. If the Trinitarian persons were equivalent to attributes of God, Muslims could ask why Christians stop at three.⁵⁵ In fact Christian theology speaks of God's attributes apart from the Trinitarian persons and there too faces the question of how the many are one. Additionally, Christian doctrine affirms the full and essential divinity of the Trinitarian persons, whereas Islamic theology does not speak of God's attributes as fully divine in themselves. Despite these qualifications, setting the two doctrines in parallel can help Muslims and Christians see that they share challenges at the linguistic level conceiving how God is both one and many.

As noted earlier, the Muslim rationalist critique of the Trinity derives its power from reading the doctrinal language univocally, expecting it to withstand the full rigors of logical analysis. However, this is not in keeping with the Christian sense of God's mystery and essential distinction from us and the world. Because God is different, human discourse about God will not correspond exactly to the way God is in himself. This is not to say that there is no correspondence whatsoever. The opposite error is to deny the possibility of any knowledge of God in himself and to treat theological language as equivocal. In this view, Trinitarian doctrine at best speaks only of how God happens to appear to us. It makes no claim to know anything about God in himself. This is theologically inadequate, because it denies that God has revealed himself to us, leaving traces of his nature in his works of creation, reconciliation and empowerment. Christian theological language thus falls somewhere between the univocal and the equivocal. The technical term for this is "analogical"; that is, our theological language corresponds to God in himself in certain oblique and ambiguous ways, but not in all respects.⁵⁶

What this means may be illustrated by examining two rival Trinitarian conceptual models in contemporary Christian theology. The social Trinitarian model of Jürgen Moltmann takes the intra-trinitarian relations observed in

the Bible as the clue to conceiving God in himself as a community of mutual love (see, e.g., Mark 1:9-15, John 16:1-15, 1 Cor.15:20-28). The eternal intra-trinitarian life is dynamic and consists in a history of love circulating between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Moltmann underlines the mutuality and egalitarianism in God and submits these as patterns for the way we should live out our lives in the church and human society.⁵⁷ While his model highlights the intensely relational and loving character of God's inner life, it risks turning God into a community of three divine subjects with separate centers of will and consciousness. It is for this reason that Moltmann and others working within a social trinitarian framework have been accused of "tri-theism."⁵⁸

Karl Barth (d. 1968) represents a second major way of conceiving God in contemporary Christian theology. For him, the classical language of the trinitarian persons so readily implies three separate centers of consciousness and will – and thus tri-theism – that it should be abandoned. He proposes instead to speak of three ways or modes that God is God.⁵⁹ Barth underlines God's freedom and sovereignty, and he argues that the one God in his lordship is free "to differentiate Himself from Himself, to become unlike Himself and yet to remain the same."⁶⁰ Thus, the Father, who is ever veiled, is nonetheless the Revealer who unveils himself as Lord in the Revelation of the Son in Jesus Christ. God as Spirit enables human beings to recognize the Revelation as revelation and not just another secular event. This is God as Being Revealed. For Barth, the Trinity is God in the three modes of Revealer, Revelation, and Being Revealed. He affirms that these distinctions in God's acts toward us apply equally to God in himself, and he maintains fellowship in God with "a definite participation of each mode of being in the other modes of being."⁶¹ However, Barth is reticent to spell out these distinctions in Moltmann's fashion. In fact Moltmann criticizes him for privileging God's freedom and lordship to the detriment of the intra-trinitarian relations. This, Moltmann says, reduces God to one absolute divine subject such that "the personal God in eternity corresponds to the bourgeois culture of personality."⁶²

This contrast between Moltmann and Barth could be read as an intractable disagreement about how best to conceive God as triune. I suggest that it is more helpful to see these models as complementary ways of indicating different aspects of the truth about God. Barth's modal understanding of the Trinity underlines God's unity and sovereign freedom, while Moltmann's social Trinity emphasizes God's threeness and his love. Both are true in the analogical sense described above. If, however, God's distinction from the world is not respected, and these models are read as univocal descriptions of how God is both one and three, the models break down and become false. What decides which models or analogies should be used in speaking of God in himself as one and three? I propose that this is ultimately a matter of pastoral wisdom and apologetic concern. Working in dialogue with the Bible, the tradition of the church, the contemporary context, and the dynamics of worship and service, the Christian community seeks to employ various theological models and concepts that will most aptly convey the truth of the triune God for the situation at hand.

The Trinity in Christian Devotion

Thus far, my discussion of the Trinity has focused on God and his acts toward us, and I have noted the relevant parallels with the Islamic doctrines of *al-tawhîd al-dhâtî*, *al-tawhîd al-sifâtî*, and *al-tawhîd al-af'âlî*. On the Islamic side, the fourth level of *tawhîd* – *al-tawhîd al-'ibâdî* – shifts our attention from God in himself and his acts toward us

to our response of worshiping and serving God alone. Christians readily join with Muslims in affirming this *tawhîd*, but they differ over how it is rightly enacted. Much as Muslims themselves differ over whether *al-tawhîd al-'ibâdî* permits seeking the intercession of saints and prophets, Christians differ with Muslims over whether the one God is to be worshipped in Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word. Yet, even if Muslims reject worship of Christ as *shirk*, they may perhaps come to appreciate how Trinitarian theology contributes to balanced Christian devotion to the one God. How so?

It is essential to Trinitarian doctrine that the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit work together in each of the divine acts of creation, redemption, and sustaining empowerment. With respect to creation, for example, both the Son and the Spirit are integrally involved with God the Father in creating the world (Gen. 1:2, Col. 1:16). Yet, Christians also allow speaking of creation as distinctively the work of the Father, redemption as distinctively that of the Son, and empowerment as distinctively that of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, but at a greater level of abstraction, the Father may be linked in Christian experience to God's transcendence over the world, the Spirit with God's immanence in the world, and the Incarnate Son with God's intervention and revelation in history. With these linkages in mind, I will review an old article by H. Richard Niebuhr and then turn to further insights from Nicholas Lash in order to illustrate how the Trinity may shape a balanced Christian piety.

In a 1946 article entitled "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," Niebuhr outlines three commonly occurring Christian "unitarianisms" that focus on one of the Father, the Son, or the Spirit to the exclusion of the other two.⁶³ He notes that the unitarianism of the Father or Creator disapproves of polytheism, idolatry, and religious enthusiasm and puts great stock in reason and natural theology. However, it has difficulty interpreting the Biblical narrative and making sense of inner religious experience. The unitarianism of Jesus Christ protests against the excesses of reason and naturalistic religion, and gives preeminence to Jesus as the supreme ethical or salvific figure over against the less honorable or less exemplary creator God of the OT. This unitarianism can make some sense of history and the Bible, but has difficulty accounting for the source of Jesus' power in something beyond himself. The unitarianism of the Spirit locates the source of reality in inner religious experience and feeling while neglecting the transcendent Creator and God's work of redemption in history. Thus, this unitarianism struggles to make sense of the origin of the world and the need for some kind of objective ethical standard.

Niebuhr's point is that an exclusive focus on only one of transcendence (Father), history (Son), or immanence (Spirit) constitutes an unstable belief system that must eventually acknowledge a need for the two missing dimensions. This observation allows Niebuhr to find an implicit trinitarianism even in Christian heresies. However, the aim of his analysis is not normative but pragmatic. Niebuhr is trying to use the doctrine of the Trinity to bring Christians of diverse tendencies into one ecumenical fold. Nevertheless, his scheme leaves open the possibility that the Trinity could also function normatively to guard Christians against the excesses of any one unitarian tendency.⁶⁴

This dovetails nicely with Lash's suggestion that the doctrine of the Trinity can function as a set of rules guiding Christian prayer and devotion.⁶⁵ First, God as Spirit indicates that God is immanent and involved in all of life and vitality in this world. Yet, it is the error of pantheism to identify God with the world completely. Thus there is need for a second rule which states that God is absolutely different from the world. God is the transcendent

Creator who differs fundamentally from the creation. Yet, too much emphasis on a God who is different and incomprehensible ushers in agnosticism and even atheism. Here, God is absent, and other lesser gods – products of our own labor – rush in to fill the gap.

Lash observes that much nineteenth-century thought in the West seems to oscillate between pantheism and atheism, or between absolute identity of the world with God and absolute distinction of God from the world. This leads to the third rule, the need for revelation in history and the tradition of reference to God that grows out from it. This is God the Word, which links the Creator and the Spirit. Lash points out that even here Christians face the danger of idolatry if they fix too firmly on the tradition of language referring to the Word incarnate, thinking it provides full knowledge of God. This then requires the corrective of God's transcendence. For in Jesus "is the image of the Imageless One."⁶⁶ Lash understands the Christian doctrine of God to provide a set of self-correcting rules that enable us to live and pray in balanced reference to God.⁶⁷

I believe that we may extend Niebuhr's and Lash's insights further to speak of an aesthetic quality in Christian devotion to God and perhaps even in God himself. From this perspective, the doctrine of the Trinity draws together God's transcendence over the world, God's immanence in the world, and God's involvement in history through Christ and points to the single, comprehensive, and all-encompassing beauty that is God. This beauty then invites Christians to live out a balanced, harmonious piety that mirrors the elegance found in the unity of the triune God. Mystically inclined Muslims may appreciate what I am trying to say here. The Islamic mystic, the Sufi, seeks to become one in whose very being the range and fullness of God's names and character traits are brought together in balanced harmony. Similarly, Christians in their worship and service seek to reflect the harmony and grace of the triune God.

Conclusion

Both Muslims and Christians affirm that there is only one God who is fundamentally simple, mysterious, and incomprehensible. Yet, this God creates the world, seeks to communicate with humankind, and desires a human response of undivided worship and service. God's communication and interaction with humankind has taken place most decisively in Jesus Christ for Christians and in the Qur'an for Muslims. Following on from the soteriological dynamic of the Bible, Christians affirm that God's Word incarnate in Christ is true God himself and that the Holy Spirit is God as well. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity maintains that these three – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are all one God. Muslims affirm that the Qur'an is God's word spoken into history, but they do not affirm that the Qur'an is God himself. The one God in his very self does not enter into history. These respective doctrines of God are rooted in two different authoritative texts which portray God in two different ways. While these differences must be respected, they should not blind us to similarities where they occur. And, more important, they should not prevent Muslims and Christians from wrestling with these differences, seeking to understand their significance more deeply, and asking how they can refine our faith in the one God. The comparative framework that I have outlined is meant to stimulate critical dialogue to these ends.

Notes

¹ For an overview of this dialogue, see A. James Reimer, "Introduction: Revelation and Authority: Shi'ah Muslim-Mennonite Christian Dialogue II," *CGR* 24.1 (Winter 2006): 4-11. Four of the dialogue papers, two Mennonite and two Shi'i, were also published in this issue.

² Jon Hoover, "Revelation and the Islamic and Christian Doctrines of God," *Islamochristiana* 30 (2004): 1-14; French translation, "La révélation et les doctrines musulmane et chrétienne sur Dieu," *Chemins de Dialogue: Penser la foi dans l'esprit d'Assise* 28 (2006): 167-90.

³ I would like to thank especially Najeeb Awad for his assistance in Trinitarian theology. I am also grateful to Muammer Iskenderoglu, George Sabra, David Burrell, Giuseppe Scattolin, Bernhard Reitsma, Mark Hoover, dialogue partners in Iran, and an anonymous reviewer for their help along the way.

⁴ For example, some Mennonites may fault me for not engaging debate over the role classical Christian orthodoxy should play in contemporary Mennonite theology, especially since significant discussion of this has taken place in *CGR*. It will become apparent that I believe Mennonite theology is best situated within a pro-Nicene framework. This is well defended in dialogue with Mennonite voices in A. James Reimer, "Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Radical Protestant Theology," in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001), 247-71. For a specific example of Mennonite debate in this journal that turns on the rejection or acceptance of classical Christian orthodoxy, see J. Denny Weaver, "Reading Sixteenth-century Anabaptism Theologically: Implications for Modern Mennonites as a Peace Church," and the reply by C. Arnold Snyder, "Anabaptist History and Theology: History or Heresy?" *CGR* 16:1 (Winter 1998): 37-51 and 53-59, respectively.

⁵ For these charges, see Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, *The Fundamentals of Tawheed (Islamic Monotheism)* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 1997), 29 and 39. Philips simply assumes that the Trinity is not monotheistic; he makes no effort to explore it. He also censures as *shirk* the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation for making God part of his creation (34).

⁶ For a more extensive review of the Qur'anic material, see David Thomas, "Trinity," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ân*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001-2006), 5:368-72. For an overview of Muslim polemic against the Trinity generally, see David Thomas, "Tathlith," *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (hereafter EI2) (Leiden: Brill, 1954-2004), 10:373-75.

⁷ Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985; reprint Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 29-30.

⁸ Illustrative of these Christian responses are Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 289-95; Chawkat Moucarray, *Faith to Faith: Christianity & Islam in Dialogue* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 184-95; and Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ân* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965; reprint Oxford: Oneworld, 1995), 126-41. Of these three treatments, Parrinder provides the fullest elaboration of the theory that the Qur'anic polemic does not address the classical doctrines of Jesus' divine sonship and the Trinity but various Christian heresies or Arab paganism.

⁹ Gerald Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu: 'Abd al-Jabbâr and the Critique of Christian Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 107-17, 163-76.

¹¹ M. Faruk Zein, *Christianity, Islam and Orientalism* (London: Saqi Books, 2003), 55-68, 73-84, 93-106. Less sophisticated efforts of a similar nature are Muhammad Fazl-ur-Rahman, *Islam and Christianity in the Modern World: Being an Exposition of the Qur'anic View of Christianity in the Light of Modern Research* (Delhi: Noor Publishing House, 1992), 49-112, 135-45; and Muhammad 'Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus: A Prophet of Islam*, 2d ed. (London: MWH London Publishers, 1979). 'Ata ur-Rahim's book is reviewed by Jan Slomp in the *Theological Review of the Near East School of Theology* 3.2 (Nov. 1980), 35-37. Hugh Goddard, *Muslim Perceptions of Christianity* (London: Grey Seal Books, 1996), cites numerous instances of the corruption narrative in twentieth-century Egyptian writing against Christianity (see 'Trinity' in the Index). Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 67-71, analyzes the corruption narrative in English language Muslim polemic against Christianity.

¹² Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), and *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

¹³ Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

¹⁴ A.N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), and *Jesus* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

¹⁵ Zein, *Christianity, Islam and Orientalism*, 91-92, 106-09.

¹⁶ For critique of the Jesus Seminar, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). Tom Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1997), 167-83, counters the thesis of A. N. Wilson that Paul invented Christianity. Lewis Ayers, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), provides a thorough historical apologetic for pro-Nicene theology, and works with the explicit conviction that Nicene doctrinal developments were in essential continuity with God's work in Jesus Christ. For a Mennonite voice of similar conviction, see the article by Reimer, "Trinitarian Orthodoxy," noted above.

¹⁷ See for example the full description of the Trinitarian teachings of the Melkites, Nestorians, and Jacobites provided by Abu 'Isa al-Warraq in David Thomas, ed. and trans., *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abû 'Îsâ al-Warrâq's "Against the Trinity,"* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 67-77.

¹⁸ Muhammad 'Alî al-Sâbûnî, *Safwat al-tafâsîr*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dâr al-Qur'ân al-Karîm, 1981), 1:357 n. 4, in commentary on Q. 5:73. Al-Sabuni is here quoting selectively from Abû Hayyân al-Gharnatî's (d. 1344) commentary on Q. 5:73 in *Al-Bahr al-muhîr*, which is accessible in Arabic at www.altafsir.com.

¹⁹ Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 64, 99-107. Thomas shows that Abu 'Isa's argumentation was taken over to a large degree by the later Muslim theologians al-Baqillani (d. 1013) and 'Abd al-Jabbar in their rationalist critiques of the Trinity (43-50). See also David Thomas, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Abbasid Era," in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2001), 78-98.

²⁰ Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic*, 63-64.

²¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976), 267-69. The more recent work of Ayers, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, emphasizes the centrality of belief in God's simplicity as the backdrop for pre-Nicene Trinitarian reflection in the fourth century: "In pro-Nicene texts the primary function of discussing God's simplicity is to set the conditions for all talk of God as Trinity and of the relations between the divine 'persons', to shape the judgements that we make in speaking analogically, not to offer a description of divine being taken to be fully comprehensible" (287). Ayers draws this out more fully in expositions of the Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa (344-63) and Augustine (364-83).

²² Paul of Antioch's *Letter to a Muslim Friend*, as quoted in Thomas F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's Al-Jawab al-Sahih* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1984), 255.

²³ The following discussion draws on Ibn Taymiyya's treatment of the Trinity in his *Al-Jawâb al-sahîh li-man baddala dîn al-masîh* (The sound response to those who have changed the religion of Christ), as partially translated in Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response*, 255-79, referred to hereafter as "Ibn Taymiyya, Response."

²⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Response*, 255-56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 321, 333-37. For further discussion of Ibn Taymiyya's views on reason and revelation, see Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 29-39, 56-69. Islamic theology (*'ilm al-kalâm*) distinguishes between the *'aqlî* (rational) and the *naqlî* (transmitted or traditional) parts of its content. The *'aqlî* is known by reason apart from revelation, even if revelation also speaks to it. This includes the existence of God, God's unity, many of God's attributes and the human need for prophets. The *naqlî* that is known only through revelation includes details of religious law and knowledge of future events. Muslim theologians often insist that theology must be rationally based. This point is made for example by the Shi'i theologian Murtada Mutahhari (d. 1979), *Understanding Islamic Sciences* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies, 2002): "The *'aqlî* part of *kalâm* consists of the material that is purely rational, and if there is any reference to *naqli* (tradition), it is for the sake of illumination and confirmation of rational judgement. But in problems such as those related to Divine Unity, prophethood and some issues of Resurrection, reference to *naql*—the Book and the Prophet's Sunnah—is not sufficient; the argument must be purely rational" (52-53). Richard M. Frank, "The Science of Kalâm, *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 2 (1992): 7-37, argues, convincingly in my view, that Islamic Kalâm theology presents itself as "strictly philosophical metaphysics" but "is, in fact, essentially a theology" (36). Frank contrasts this with Christian theology, which "begins in the obscurity of faith in quest of rational understanding of clarification within the limits set by the nature of the object" (19).

²⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Response*, 256.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 267-68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 270-71.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 262 (cf. 277).

³² Murtada Mutahhari, *Understanding Islamic Sciences*, 57-84.

- ³³ Al-Ghazali's creed is found in *Ihyâ' 'ulûm al-dîn* (Beirut: Dâr al-ma'rifa, n.d.), 1:89-93 (the first *fasl* of the second *kitâb*, entitled "Kitâb qawâ'id al-'aqâ'id"), with an English translation in W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Creeds: A Selection* (Edinburgh: Univ. of Edinburgh, 1994), 73-79.
- ³⁴ On Ibn Taymiyya, see Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy*, 28-29, 120-22. For Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, see Esther Peskes and W. Ende, "Wahhâbiyya" EI2 11:39-47 (at 40). For a recent and fully elaborated discussion in this tradition, see Philips, *The Fundamentals of Tawheed*, 1-26. The three levels of *tawhîd* outlined by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and Philips correspond closely to the last three of the four given by Mutahhari.
- ³⁵ Ibn Sînâ, *Al-Risâla al-'arshiyya*, (Hyderabad: Matba'at dâ'irat al-ma'ârif al-'uthmâniyya, 1353/1934-5), 3-7, translated in Arthur J. Arberry, *Avicenna on Theology* (London: J. Murray, 1951), 25-32.
- ³⁶ Mutahhari himself elaborates the development of Mu'tazili and Ash'ari theology in some detail, but he does not mention al-Maturidi (d. 944) and the Maturidi theological tradition that has also been widely influential among Sunnis. For general information on Islamic theology, see W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1985).
- ³⁷ Ibn Sînâ, *Al-Ta'liqât*, ed. 'Abd al-Rahmân Badawî (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-misriyya al-'amma li-l-kitâb, 1973), 180-81.
- ³⁸ Mutahhari, *Understanding Islamic Sciences*, 59.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.
- ⁴⁰ See Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy*, 138-41 (Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali) and 146-65 (Ibn Taymiyya).
- ⁴¹ The book by Philips, *The Fundamentals of Tawheed*, noted above, is a case in point.
- ⁴² Mutahhari, *Understanding Islamic Sciences*, 60.
- ⁴³ David B. Burrell, "Trinity in Judaism and Islam," forthcoming in *Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press). I am grateful to the author for sharing this piece with me prior to publication.
- ⁴⁵ Here I follow Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1990), 231-42.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 236.
- ⁴⁷ See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State Univ. of New York, 1989), 391 n. 14, for the translation of this saying and Ibn 'Arabi's comment upon it.
- ⁴⁸ For these arguments, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1971), 172-225. For a detailed historical study of the fourth-century trinitarian controversy in which Athanasius played a key role, see R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988).
- ⁴⁹ Menno Simons, "Confessions of the Triune God," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin and ed. John Christian Wenger (Scottsdale: Herald, 1956), 491-98. See Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 421-64, for a survey of Anabaptist and recent Mennonite thought on the Trinity.
- ⁵⁰ Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 263-64.
- ⁵¹ Robert Jenson, "The Risen Prophet," in a 1985 unpublished report of the American Lutheran Church Board for World Mission and Inter-Church Cooperation Task Force on Christian Witness to Muslims entitled *Christian Witness to Muslims*, as cited in Mark N. Swanson, "The Trinity in Christian-Muslim Conversation," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44.3 (Fall 2005): 256-63 (at 260-61).
- ⁵² Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), argues forcefully for the necessity of distinguishing the immanent Trinity from the economic to counter contemporary Christian theologians (e.g., Moltmann) who make creation necessary to God's perfection and allow human history to impact God's nature.
- ⁵⁴ Karl Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise 'De Trinitate'," *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 77-102 (at 87).
- ⁵⁵ Ibn Taymiyya, *Response*, 255-56, 267, observes that there is no reason for Christians to limit the number of God's names and attributes to three.
- ⁵⁶ My thinking about analogy has been informed by Ayers, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 273-301, 322-24, and various passages in David B. Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). The theological analogy of which I speak here is not identical to the analogy (*qiyâs*) of Islamic jurisprudence, in which there is a univocally shared aspect (a cause or *'illa*) by which the ruling in one legal case is transferred to a new case not yet spoken to by Islamic law. For an exposition of analogy in Islamic law, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1991), 197-219.

⁵⁷ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981). Moltmann's social Trinitarianism is engaged in several of the essays in Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker, eds., *God's Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

⁵⁸ So Molnar, *Divine Freedom*, 227-33.

⁵⁹ Barth develops the doctrine of the Trinity in the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, 2d ed., trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), I.1.295-489; the discussion of 'person' is found at I.1.349-68.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, I.1.320.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, I.1.370.

⁶² Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 139-44 (quote on 139).

⁶³ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today* 3 (October 1946): 371-84.

⁶⁴ According to John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 17-18, Niebuhr also argues in "The Doctrine of the Trinity" that Jesus' nonviolent social ethic should not be taken too seriously because the Father and the Spirit might point in other directions. Niebuhr does not in fact say this in his article, but Yoder is likely reacting to use of Niebuhr's Trinitarian scheme for such ends. Modern Mennonite theology in the Yoderian tradition easily falls afoul of Niebuhr's "Unitarianism of Jesus Christ" by stressing Jesus' nonviolent ethic at the expense of its foundation in God's power and transcendence. Resisting this danger is at the core of many essays in Reimer's *Mennonites and Classical Theology*.

⁶⁵ This discussion is based on Lash, 266-72. Reimer similarly links God's transcendence to the Father, God's immanence to the Spirit, and God's involvement in history to the Son in his *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 229-230, 243-45, 333-34, 368-71, 459, 538-39, and elsewhere. This approach is also found in Karl Rahner, "Oneness and Threefoldness of God in Discussion with Islam," *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 105-21: The incomprehensible Father "is unsurpassably close to man historically in Jesus Christ...and imparts himself to man in the innermost centre of human existence as Holy Spirit" (114).

⁶⁶ Lash, 271.

⁶⁷ David B. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1993), extends Lash's insights beyond Christianity to Judaism and Islam as well. While not attributing any kind of Trinitarian doctrine to Islam, Burrell identifies a threefold structure of transcendence in God the Creator, immanence in God's preservation of the Muslim community, and linkage between the two in God's revealing of the Qur'an. The difference with Christianity is that Muslims do not identify the very revelation of God's Word with God Himself (161-84). Perhaps as well, an imperfect parallel may be made with the threefold structure of Islamic theology's treatment of God. God's essence (*dhât*) indicates transcendence; God's acts (*af'âl*) involve God's immanence in the creation through his activity; and God's names and attributes (*al-asmâ' wa al-sifât*) link the two. God's names and attributes constitute the bridge between the transcendent simplicity of God's essence and the immanent multiplicity of God's acts in the world much as the Word links the Creator and the Spirit on the Christian side. The parallel with Christian theology breaks down in that God's attributes in Islam do not enter directly into the historical process, except in the case of God's Word, which comes into history as the Qur'an.

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