

THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF GOD EXPLAINED AND DEFENDED FOR MUSLIMS

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In recent decades, there have been plenty of theological exchanges between Christians and Muslims in the western world. This means interfaith dialogue has become more common than ever. Unfortunately, this also means that a lot of misinformation gets passed around, and one side will frequently fail to understand what the other believes and why they believe it. Such is the case with the Christian doctrine of God, particularly as it concerns the doctrine of the Trinity. Unfortunately, there are not many Muslims who actually understand what Christians believe regarding the being and nature of God. It does not help that few Christians can accurately present their own beliefs regarding God, or explain why they believe what they believe. Since Christians are commanded by scripture to “give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that [we] have” (1 Pet 3:15),¹³³ and even Islam states that Christians and Muslims are told to “come to common terms” with one another (Sura 3:64),¹³⁴ it is necessary that a proper explanation and defense of the Christian doctrine of God be given.

This article presents an explanation of the Christian view of God which will hopefully be easy enough for Muslims to understand. The format of this article assumes that the reader has little, if any prior knowledge of the contents of the Bible. Also provided are the rational justifications for why Christians believe in God the way we do.

Defining the Trinity

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¹³³ All Biblical citations are from the *New International Version*.

¹³⁴ All Qur’anic quotations are from the *Yusuf Ali translation*.

The doctrine of the Trinity lies at the heart of the Christian confession concerning who God is and how He relates to His creation. It is also the most misunderstood doctrine as far as Christian-Muslim relations go. For this reason, it is of first importance that an accurate definition of the Trinity be provided in order for there to be reasonable dialogue on what Christians believe regarding the nature of God. Perhaps the best and most concise definition of the Trinity is that provided by Christian apologist James White in *The Forgotten Trinity*: “Within the one Being that is God, there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”¹³⁵

It is important to note both what this definition says and what it does not say. First of all, it affirms that there is only one God. This is important to keep in mind because there are many Muslims who will argue that Christians believe in polytheism. It is important to understand what Christians mean when we refer to “The one Being that is God.” As White notes, this phrase provides plenty of information regarding the Trinity because it “not only asserts that there is one God—the historic belief, shared by Christians and Jews known as *monotheism*—but it also insists that God’s ‘Being’ ... is one, unique, undivided, indivisible.”¹³⁶

The other important thing to note regarding this definition is that there is a distinction between in the usages of the terms “Being” and “person.” The reason for this is because Christians believe that Yahweh (the name of God that is revealed in the Old Testament, also sometimes spelled “Jehovah”) is a unity, but that He is a *complex* unity. This distinction is vital in correcting the main misunderstanding that arises among Muslims. For example, popular da’wah booklet distributed by the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) states: “Belief in the trinity clearly contradicts the core principle of the Islamic faith—monotheism.”¹³⁷ The problem with this

¹³⁵ James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1998), p. 26.

¹³⁶ White, *Forgotten Trinity*, pp. 26-27.

claim is that it makes the unwarranted assumption that there is only one valid form of monotheism, which is Unitarianism (the belief that God is only one Being *and* person). This stems from the human mind's inability to think beyond limited physical categories. If God is infinite and transcendent, however, then why should God be limited by the physical categories that our finite minds attempt to impose upon Him? It would make sense that a God who is infinitely higher and more sublime than human beings should have a nature that transcends what finite human beings can comprehend. White warns us that we must avoid thinking of the term "person" as though finite, self-contained human beings were in view.¹³⁸ Christian theologian Wayne Grudem notes that the three persons have no difference at all in their attributes (being all-knowing, all-powerful, unchanging, etc.), and are different only in the way they relate to each other and to the world.¹³⁹

So the question arises as to where this belief in a complex unity is derived from. What Muslims need to understand is that Christians believe this *not* because any human authority has declared it, but because serious and consistent exegesis of the contents of the scriptures (which the Qur'an states is revealed by God, cf. Suras 3:3, 48, 5:46-48, 10:37, 94, 29:41 and 35:31) compel Christians to believe that this is the only proper way to understand what God has revealed about Himself. Now, a Muslim may object that the Bible does not use the word "Trinity," but this is not a valid argument. To make the same point using Islamic sources, the Qur'an does not use the word *tawhid* (the Islamic term for the oneness of God),¹⁴⁰ but nobody denies that the Qur'an teaches the doctrine of *tawhid*. Likewise,

¹³⁷ Islamic Circle of North America, *Islam Is...: Introduction to Islam and its Principles* (Oakville, ON: ICNA Canada), p. 28.

¹³⁸ White, *Forgotten Trinity*, p. 27.

¹³⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 254.

¹⁴⁰ Abdul Saleeb, "Islam," in Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (eds.) *To Everyone An Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), p. 351.

the Bible can teach the concept of the Trinity without using that word.

It is also important to note that the Trinity does not occur exclusively in the New Testament, but can be traced back to the Jewish scriptures (the Old Testament, which came centuries before Christianity). Several times in these scriptures, God speaks in the plural. A prominent example of this is close to the beginning of the Bible, where God says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness..." (Gen 1:26, cf. 3:22, 11:7). It also appears in the book of the Jewish prophet Isaiah. Here, God asks, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us" (Isa 6:8)? The common Muslim argument when faced with these verses is that God is using the plural of majesty, which is a custom in which a royal figure speaks in the plural. Muslims argue that since Allah frequently speaks this way in the Qur'an,¹⁴¹ then the same must be the case in the Old Testament. However, this explanation is anachronistic, because the plural of majesty is not used anywhere in the Old Testament. In fact, the concept did not even exist until after the Old Testament was completed. As biblical scholar Gleason Archer notes:

This first person plural can hardly be a mere editorial or royal plural that refers to the speaker alone, *for no such usage is demonstrable anywhere else in biblical Hebrew*. Therefore, we must face the question of who are included in this "us" and "our." It could hardly include the angels in consultation with God, for nowhere is it ever stated that man was created in the image of angels, only of God. Verse 27 then affirms: "and God [elohim] created man in His own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female He created them" (NASB). God—the same God who spoke of Himself in the plural—now states that He created man in His image. In other words, the plural equals the singular. This can only be understood in terms of the Trinitarian nature of God. The one true God subsists in three Persons, Persons who are able to confer with one another and

¹⁴¹ Islamic Circle of North America, *Islam Is...*, p. 13.

carry their plans into action together—without ceasing to be one God.¹⁴²

On the basis of this information, the only conclusion we can come to is that the passages where God speaks in the first person plural demonstrate a plurality of persons within the being of God.

Another piece of evidence lies in the fact that sometimes God appears as two different persons in the Old Testament. This is shown in the appearance of God to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18:1ff). As He converses with Abraham, He discusses His plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:17ff). In the next chapter, God walks towards Sodom and Gomorrah, and their destruction is described. Interestingly, it is written that “the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens” (Gen 19:24). Here there appear to be two Yahwehs present simultaneously. This shows that even in the Old Testament, there are already hints that God is not uni-personal in His nature.

And what is implicit in the Old Testament becomes much clearer in the New Testament. There are various passages which could be pointed to as showing the tri-personal nature of God. However, one of the clearest examples is towards the end of the Gospel according to Matthew, where Jesus instructs His followers: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). Note that Jesus does not say names (plural) but name (singular). This indicates that the three persons mentioned share one divine name (Yahweh). If the Father alone was God, why would His name be shared with the Son and the Holy Spirit as well? This is particularly striking when one considers that the Son and the Holy Spirit are also identified elsewhere as Yahweh, which will be covered in later portions of this paper.

¹⁴² Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), p. 359.

God the Father

One of the great truths that is taught by both Judaism and Christianity is that God relates to His people as a Father. This can be found in the Law of Moses (*Tawrat*), particularly in the book of Deuteronomy. Here, Moses asks the Israelites: "Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you" (Deu 32:6)? This is also affirmed in the David's Psalms (*Zabur*), wherein it is written: "I will proclaim the LORD's decree: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have become your father'" (Ps 2:7). And finally, in the New Testament (*Injeel*), Jesus instructs His followers to begin their prayers by addressing God as "Our Father in heaven..." (Matt 6:9).

Islam, however, denies the fatherhood of God.¹⁴³ According to the Qur'an, it is improper for Allah to be a father to anybody. For example, Surah al-ma'idah responds to the Jewish and Christian claim that we are children of God in this manner:

(Both) the Jews and the Christians say: "We are sons of Allah, and His beloved." Say: "Why then does He punish you for your sins? Nay you are but men,— of the men He has created: He forgives whom He pleases, and He punishes whom He pleases: and to Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and all that is between: and to Him is the final goal (of all)" (Sura 5:18)

From a biblical standpoint, it is rather odd that the Qur'an makes this argument, since the Bible states that God chastises us *because* we are His children. In the Old Testament, it states that "Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them" (Prov 13:24). It is stated more explicitly in the New Testament that God's chastising of Christians is evidence that they are His children:

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their

¹⁴³ Abdul Saleeb, "Islam," in *To Everyone An Answer*, p. 354.

father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! (Heb 12:7-9)

Another objection that some Muslims raise is that the concept of God having children implies that He procreates, which is unthinkable. However, it can be recognized that we are His children in a spiritual sense rather than a physical one. To prove this point, remember that Muslims refer to Muhammad's favourite wife Aisha as the "Mother of the Believers." Obviously, Muslims do not mean by this that Aisha procreated all of them, but that she is their mother in a spiritual sense. It is the same with Christians who refer to God as "Father." In addition, the Bible states that we are His children by adoption, rather than by begetting:

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. (Rom 8:15-16)

This is a promise that is given to those who believe upon Jesus as God's only-begotten Son, who gives Christians the privilege of becoming children of God (cf. John 1:12).

God the Son

Christians and Muslims both recognize Jesus Christ to be a great man, Christians affirm that Jesus was a true flesh and blood human being, who ate, drank and slept just like the rest of humankind. Yet Christians have identified from God's revelation that there is more to the nature of Jesus than that of an ordinary human prophet. Writing seven centuries before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah predicted this regarding the coming Messiah: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,

Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). Some have suggested that “Mighty God” is simply a title for a godlike warrior, yet this interpretation is inadmissible because of one fact: The phrase “Mighty God” appears only twice in the entire Bible, both times in the book of Isaiah, and in the one other instance of the phrase, the title is used to explicitly refer to Yahweh (Isa 10:20-21). What this indicates is that the Messiah would be God Himself, come in the flesh.

Furthermore, when we look at the New Testament, one can find many lines of evidence that demonstrate that Jesus was divine. He claimed to be able to do things that only God can do, such as forgive sins and read people’s hearts (Mark 2:7,8). He accepted worship from His followers (Matt 2:11, 8:2, 14:33, Mark 5:6 and Luke 24:52, to name a few examples) and was identified by several of them as God (John 20:28, Rom 9:5, Col 2:9, Titus 2:13 and 2 Pet 1:1). When one of them named Stephen was about to be killed by stoning, his last words were a prayer to Him: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit ... Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:59, 60).

Jesus is also Word of God (a title also given to Him by the Qur’an in Sura 4:170). This is significant when one considers the opening to the Gospel according to John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The Word is of the same Being as God Himself. Not only that, but He has existed from all eternity, as shown by the fact that He “was” in the beginning. This means that the Word preceded the creation of time itself. As White put it, “as far as you wish to push ‘the beginning,’ the Word is already in existence.”¹⁴⁴ It then goes on to say that Jesus as the Word was the one through whom all things were created: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3). This is reaffirmed by the apostle Paul, who wrote “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all

¹⁴⁴ White, *Forgotten Trinity*, p. 51.

things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:15-16).

At this point, Muslims may object that this concept of Jesus as the Creator of all things was invented by Paul. However, this argument cannot be the case because the passage in question does not come from Paul, but pre-existed the writing of this epistle. New Testament scholar Peter O’Brien writes that “[t]he weight of NT scholarly opinion today considers that Colossians 1:15-20 is a pre-Pauline ‘hymn’ inserted into the letter’s train of thought by the author.”¹⁴⁵ What this means is that this concept was not invented by Paul, but was already extant in the Christian community even before his conversion. Also, if one looks at this hymn, it can be seen that it refers to Jesus as the “image [eikōn] of the invisible God.” The word indicates that “[t]he very nature and character of God have been perfectly revealed in him; in him the invisible has become visible.”¹⁴⁶

Later on in John, we find written: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). What does it mean for an eternally existent word to take on a human nature? It would make sense to take an example from Islamic beliefs: According to Islamic theology, it is taught that the Qur’an existed eternally in the form of a tablet in heaven, and only became a book when it was written down after being revealed. This is analogous to the Christian belief that the Word existed eternally as part of the Triune God, and became flesh in the incarnation. Also, it is to be noted that in doing so, the divine nature of Christ does not change anymore than water changes when placed in a container. The water remains water, and does not become glass. The same is true of the Christ in His divinity.

Finally, Jesus states at one point: “Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad Very

¹⁴⁵ Peter T. O’Brien. *Word Biblical Commentary – Vol. 44: Colossians, Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982), p. 32.

¹⁴⁶ O’ Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 43.

truly I tell you ... before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:56, 58). Remember that it was mentioned before that God appeared before Abraham in the Oaks of Mamre. By saying that Abraham saw His day, Jesus implied that it was Him who appeared to Abraham on that day. Furthermore, by saying "I am," He is referring back to Yahweh's self-revelation to Moses in the burning bush, where He said to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exo 3:14). This was so profound that the Jews immediately thought He was blaspheming. It is written that "they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds" (John 8:59). The reaction that is given by the Jews to Jesus' proclamation indicates that they understood His statement to be a claim to be eternally pre-existent and one with Yahweh Himself.

At this point, Muslims may ask what Christians mean when we say that the Son is "begotten." It must be emphasized that this does *not* indicate that physical procreation took place, or that the Son was created at some point in time and is less than divine. We are not using "begotten" not in human terms, but rather in divine terms; it is used spiritually to refer to the eternal, timeless relation between the Father and the Son. Christian writer C. S. Lewis used the analogy of a book lying on top of another book.¹⁴⁷ The top book derives its position from the bottom book. Now, supposing those two books were in that position from all eternity, there was never a time when the top book was not where it was, nor was there a time when the bottom book was by itself.

Before concluding this section, it is worth answering a couple of objections that Muslims make against the divinity of Christ. One common objection is phrased by the question: "How can God die?" The problem with this question is that it assumes two things. First, it assumes that Christ is all of God, yet it has already been made abundantly clear that God is tri-personal, and the Father and the Holy Spirit are not *directly* affected by Jesus' death. Also, remember that death is not the

¹⁴⁷ White, *Forgotten Trinity*, p. 51.

end of existence: Jesus' human body died temporarily, whereas His divine soul went to the spiritual realm (cf. 1 Pet 3:19) until the body was resurrected.

The other objection is based upon certain biblical texts that *seem* to conflict with the belief that Jesus is divine. Though many such proof-texts abound, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address every single one of them. It will suffice to address two common examples. First is John 14:28, where Jesus is saying “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). Unfortunately, this small phrase is completely divorced from its context. In this passage, Jesus was talking about His coming ascension, when He will return to the position He once held prior to His incarnation. In the meanwhile, since He was on the earth, He had lowered Himself from His pre-incarnate position. In the words of Phil. 2:7, “he made himself nothing.” However, as soon as He ascends into Heaven, He will once again share the glory of the Father which He held even before the foundation of the world (cf. John 17:5). Hence, what the verse merely teaches is that Son had temporarily lowered in *position* when He was on this world, but that does not mean His *nature* is inferior.

The second example is in Mark 13:32 where Jesus professes not to know the day or the hour of His return. Notice first that it is striking that this verse is brought out, since Jesus had just stated previously that “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Mark 13:31). According to the Old Testament, this is a description of God's word (cf. Isa 40:8), so for Jesus to say this is another implicit testimony to His divinity. Also, when this objection is brought out, it must be kept in mind that since Jesus is in the flesh, He has temporarily put aside some of His privileges. Jesus *could* access this knowledge, but chooses not to. This does not mean He lost them; any more than a man who ties his arm behind his back loses his arm. Also, this applies only to this particular point in time, not before the Incarnation or after His resurrection. Thus, it can be legitimately said that after the resurrection, Jesus truly knew all things (cf. John 21:17).

God the Holy Spirit

According to Islam, the Holy Spirit is the angel Gabriel.¹⁴⁸ Christians, however, believe that the Holy Spirit is a coequal and coeternal person within the Triune Godhead. Bruce Milne describes Him as “the ever-blessed object of our worship, love and praise, who shares the same divine nature as the Father and the Son.”¹⁴⁹ The Holy Spirit is the one through Whom divine revelation comes to the prophets: “For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21). Also, the Spirit is the one Who moves people to declare faith in Jesus Christ, since “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3).

But what evidence is there to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is also God? Admittedly, the biblical evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit is more implicit than explicit, but it is nonetheless there. The Trinitarian formula in Matt 28:19 which was quoted earlier, for example, demonstrates that the Holy Spirit is of the same Being as the Father and the Son by virtue of His sharing in the divine name. Also, in the book of Acts, Peter rebukes Ananias for lying to the Holy Spirit, and declares it to be tantamount to lying to God: “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ... You have not lied just to human beings but to God” (Acts 5:3,4).

Also, Paul writes in one of his letters that “the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17). He does not say *a* Spirit but *the* Spirit, with the definite article showing that He taught that the Holy Spirit is the Lord. He also states elsewhere that the Holy Spirit “searches all things, even the deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:10) As Milne notes, “since only through God himself can God be known, the

¹⁴⁸ Islamic Circle of North America, *Islam Is...*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁹ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), p. 246.

Spirit must be divine for he is the one through whom God is revealed to us.”¹⁵⁰ Another similar argument concerns 1 Cor. 3:16, where it states: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” As Grudem has observed, “God’s temple is the place where God himself dwells, which Paul explains by the fact that ‘God’s Spirit’ dwells in it, thus apparently equating God’s Spirit with God himself.”¹⁵¹

In addition, the author of the letter to the Hebrews takes a passage from the Old Testament, and prefaces it by saying “So, as the Holy Spirit says...” (Heb 3:7). If one looks at the Old Testament passage that is quoted (Psa 95:7-8), one will see that it is Yahweh speaking. This establishes that God spoke to the Israelites in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, there is the passage in John where Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you (John 14:16,17).

One thing that must be noted is that the Greek word for “another” literally means “another of the same kind.” Having already established the deity of Christ in the previous section, if the Holy Spirit is of the same kind of advocate as Christ, then this indicates that the Holy Spirit is also divine in nature.

Conclusion

In this paper, the Christian doctrine of God has been carefully outlined, and terms have been carefully defined so that misconceptions regarding what Christians believe would be cleared up. Also, these beliefs are demonstrated to have their origin in the Holy Scriptures which God has revealed to believers through the agency of His prophets and apostles. The

¹⁵⁰ Milne, *Know the Truth*, p. 246.

¹⁵¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 237.

doctrine of the Trinity does not have its origins in human speculation; it is a mystery of such a nature that no human being could ever have dreamed it up, which demonstrates that it could only have come from God.

Hopefully, this article will provide a demonstration for Muslims who are inquiring regarding the Christian faith of what we believe and why we believe these things. Also, may this also provide Muslims with an invitation to examine these things, that they may believe in and hold fast to that which is true and good (cf. 1 Thess 5:21). If this doctrine be true, then surely it will stand whatever scrutiny is placed upon it by critics. After all, as the Qur'an itself states: "Truth stands out clear from Error" (Sura 2:256).