

Trinitarian Faith

Worshipping one God only

"...many who criticize the doctrine of the trinity, often have problems accepting the divinity of Christ as well"

1. Introduction

When 'Christians' convert to Islam, they almost always mention the doctrine of the Trinity as one of the major stumbling blocks of their previous faith. You can find several testimonies on the Web. They feel relieved, that as Muslims they no longer have to believe something illogical. Overall, one of the main objections of Muslims against Christianity is the doctrine of the Trinity. When we as OD try to support the church facing Islam, it is important that we not only understand and respect the nature of these objections to the Christian faith, but also that we are aware of why we believe in a triune God and how we respond to the challenge of Islam.

2. Islamic objections to the Trinity

- a. In order to understand the Muslim objections to the doctrine of the Trinity, it is first of all important to be aware that the core doctrine of Islam is Tawhīd or 'oneness'. From this concept the whole Islamic faith can be understood. Islam underlines that there is no God but God. Because He is the Creator of all things, everything else is dependent upon him. He does not need anyone or anything to complete himself and therefore is utterly distant. According to Islam, God does not reveal himself or his nature. He only makes his will known.
- b. Secondly, when the fundamental doctrine of Islam is Tawhīd, the supreme sin is 'shirk', the sin of associating other beings with God. It is the sin of polytheism, believing that God has coexisting partners. According to Islam – with the exception of Sufism, the mystical tradition – 'shirk' is the only sin that cannot be forgiven. All other sins can – although not necessarily will – be forgiven, when a non-Muslim converts to Islam or when a sinning Muslim repents and counterbalances his sin with good deeds. The sin of 'shirk' according to Islam is what denying Christ is to Evangelical Christianity.
- c. From these two it follows, that for a Muslim faith in the doctrine of the Trinity is an unforgivable sin. It is not an interesting article of faith on which you can have different opinions, but it is a matter of belief and unbelief. Whoever believes in the Trinity cannot be a true Muslim and faces eternal judgment. That helps explain why the resistance in Islam to the belief in a Triune God is so strong. It is a matter of life and death.
- d. It is good to be aware of the misunderstandings concerning the Trinity. Many Muslims think that Christians worship God, Mary and Jesus and that the doctrine of the Trinity describes a physical relationship between God and Mary (cf. Qur'an, Sura 5:116). Needless to say, that this idea is as blasphemous to Christians as it is to Muslims.

3. Why do Christians believe in the Trinity?

It is fair to say, that not just Muslims, but many Christians as well, find it hard to believe in the doctrine of the Trinity; it seems an exercise in illogical triviality. Since the term 'Trinity' can not be found in the Bible, even some Evangelicals wonder why we need the doctrine in the first place. It is important to understand why the Church has come to confess God as a triune God. It is too simple to blame some theologians, who had nothing else to do than invent difficult dogmas.

- a. First of all, Christians do not believe 'in the Trinity' and it is not faith in the Trinity that saves people. We believe in a triune God and this God is our saviour. The doctrine of the Trinity is only meant to express in human words a mystery that in itself is beyond words.
- b. The first Christians, who had encountered Jesus as a prophet, soon realized that He was more than that. In what He said and claimed to be, in what He did and how he approached them, they experienced the presence of God himself. In Christ God had come to the world and revealed himself. They could only speak about him by applying Divine titles and images.
- c. However, these first Christians were also Jews and it was impossible for them to believe in more than one God. That would go against their deepest convictions and would contradict their own Scriptures. The core confession of what we now call the Old Testament is Deut. 6:4:
'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.'
In other words, there is only one God. So when these first Christians accepted Christ as Divine, they also had to rethink their concept of God. The same thing can be said about their experience of the Holy Spirit as God's Spirit.
- d. Soon the first believers started to communicate their God to the world. To the Jewish monotheists and the Greek polytheists they had to explain that God was really one God and yet had revealed himself also in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. This mystery was finally expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity, that God is three in one.
- e. It is true, that the terminology ('trinity') is not found in the Bible. However, the concept of 'trinity' almost naturally flows from the confession that Christ was divine. It is remarkable, that many who criticize the doctrine of the trinity, often have problems accepting the divinity of Christ as well. But once we acknowledge Christ as more than a human being, we have to explain how this is possible, without introducing two Gods. The same applies to our experience of the Holy Spirit. We have to explain that Christ and the Spirit are Divine and that we nevertheless believe there is only one God. If this mystery can be expressed and communicated with different words and in different ways than with the traditional Trinitarian language, there is no biblical objection to it.
- f. Finally therefore, we can say that the doctrine of the Trinity, contrary to what many people think, is not theology for specialists, but an expression of the living faith of believers. It is basically an expression of our personal relationship with the one living God. For we encounter God as our Lord and Father, who has created us; however, since we are rebellious creatures, we also need Him as our saviour, who has reconciled us to Himself; and finally we can only be true followers of Christ, when God is living in us, empowering us through His Holy Spirit. It is precisely *because* God is three in one that we can relate to him at all. If God was not a Trinitarian God, he would be remote and absent; no relation would be possible.

That is exactly the major difference between the way Muslims experience God and the way Christians do. To Christians God is essentially God *with us*, Emmanuel. He is the God of love, who expresses His nature in relationships with mankind.

4. How to express our faith in a triune God

It is absolutely necessary for Christians to communicate that the doctrine of the Trinity does not imply faith in three Gods. That is as blasphemous and repulsive to Christians as it is to Muslims. Christians are monotheists! Our faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit does not violate God's unity, but another way of understanding and expressing that unity (K.Cragg). The concept of unity, however, is not simplistic. In the same way that a human being is of a different kind of 'oneness' than an animal, it can be said that God is of a different kind of oneness, than a human being. Even human beings have different dimensions and layers to their personality; would God not be even more dimensional, beyond comprehension? Oneness does not exclude plurality and the doctrine of the trinity tries to make sense of the plurality in God.

It is important to understand the background of the doctrine of the Trinity and the misunderstandings Muslims have. Practically, however, in conversations with Muslims, we should try to avoid theoretical discussions and argumentations. They cannot be won and usually damage relationships. Besides, we do not have to defend or prove the doctrine of the Trinity, we simply want to confess the one and only God, who has revealed himself to us in more than one way. So communicating our faith starts with sharing Jesus, the full revelation of God/the knowledge of God's mystery. As we saw, it is because of the nature and character of Jesus, that the first Christians had to adjust their image of God. And it is only, when people start to follow Christ, that they will be able to grasp a glimpse of the meaning of the 'Trinity'. They will be surprised by God's greatness.

Therefore, if there other ways to explain the triune character of God to Muslims, without the traditional language of God in one nature and three persons, I think we should use them. We need to be creative and find images and expressions from the local culture where we are and use them to speak to the hearts and minds of the people.

Above all, communicating the truth about the triune God starts with living out the truth of our faith. What does it mean to us that God is triune. For if we are able to live out this faith and show what it means to us in our daily life, we can also try to explain our faith with words.