



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 10 • Number 3 • Summer 2001

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

REGINALD HEBER

*T*he doctrine of the Trinity is the differentiating doctrine of the Christian faith.

D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

*I*t needs to be stressed that the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son in no way suggests that one is senior and the other junior.

STUART OLYOTT

THE TRINITY AND CHRISTIAN MISSIONS TO MUSLIMS

Bassam M. Madany

*I*slam has engaged the attention of Christians ever since its rise in Arabia in the seventh century. One obvious reason is the fact that most early Muslim conquests took place within Christian lands. "The People of the Book," as Jews and Christians were called, faced the choice of adopting the faith of their conquerors, or of remaining in their particular religion. Those who persisted in their Christian commitment gave a reason for this decision. They could not, and would not forsake the biblical Messiah, their Lord and Savior. By implication, they refused to believe in the "heavenly" mission of Muhammad who claimed to be God's final messenger commissioned to call the world to Islam. From the beginning of the Christian-Muslim encounter, the main debate centered on these fundamental teachings: the authenticity of the Christian Scriptures, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

The *Qur'an* makes several references to Jesus Christ, calling him the son of Mary and regarding him as a prophet sent by God to the people of Israel. The details of the birth of Christ, his teachings, as well as his miracles, as recorded in the *Qur'an*, are apocryphal when compared with the Biblical narrative. What were then Muhammad's sources for his accounts of the person and mission of the Messiah? In dealing with this subject, Professor Neal Robinson, a British scholar, wrote in his book, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*.

Despite our extensive knowledge of Byzantine Orthodoxy and of the principal forms of Christianity which flourished in Syria and Persia, we know all too little about Christianity as practised in Najran* and Abyssinia** in the seventh century and even less about Arab tribal Christianity. The external evidence and the evidence of the *Qur'an* itself both point to a predominantly heterodox influence on the early environment of Islam. Although the external evidence would favour Nestorianism and Monophysitism, the internal evidence is equally indicative of some form of Jewish Christianity. We should probably think in terms of a variety of rival sects some of which may have vanished without trace.¹

As Islam developed across the centuries, it manifested a tremendously anti-Christian attitude. Its polemics were directed against the distinctively Christian doctrine of God. Muslim theologians ridiculed the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, claiming that it was irrational, and had no basis in God's true revelation in the *Qur'an*. Their doctrinal weapons were equally directed against Jesus the Messiah as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and as confessed by the church in the *Nicene Creed*. The basis for the vehemence of this attack against the fundamentals of the Christian faith, is found in the *Qur'an* itself. These words of the *Nicene Creed* are abhorrent to the ears of Muslims:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through him all things were made. And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. He proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.

Against this affirmation of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the Fatherhood of God, the deity of Jesus Christ, and the personality of the Holy Spirit, the *Qur'an* responds:

Qol hua Allah ahad***, Allah assamad, lam yalid, wa-lam youlad, wa-lam yakon lahu kuf'on ahad. (Say: Allah is one, Allah the Eternal One, he begot none, nor was he begotten, and no one is equal to him" [translation is mine].)²

It was the denials of the deity of Christ that inevitably led to the rejection of the Trinity. Muslims charge Christians with the unforgivable sin of "shirk," i.e., associating mere creatures with their Creator. For them, this is the unforgivable sin.

When we take this historical and theological context into account, we can understand the tremendous obstacles that have faced Christian missionaries laboring in Muslim lands. How can they bring the saving message of the gospel to the followers of a faith that has judged Christianity as flawed on account of its "erroneous" doctrine of God? When preaching the Word of God to Muslims, should missionaries then downplay the importance of the Trinity, or the deity of Jesus Christ?

Lately, some Western experts on world religions, having adopted theological pluralism, minimize the great gulf that separates Christianity from Islam. Not long ago, I was struck by this fact when I reviewed for *Calvin Theological Journal*, a book titled *Jesus in the Qur'an*. The author, Geoffrey Parrinder, is professor emeritus of the comparative study of religions at the University of London.

In his introduction, Professor Parrinder states that "the encounter of the world religions is a major fact of our times and it demands a restatement of traditional theological expression. This restatement must take account of all the new knowledge available."³

His "restatement" of the Christian religion illustrates how some modern Western scholars have downplayed the stark differences between Christianity and Islam. Should their views achieve a wide acceptance among Western Christians, that would mark the end of their missions among Muslims, and the followers of the other world religions.

Parrinder sums up the results of his research in the last chapter. His desire to re-write the tenets of Christianity in order to make interfaith dialogue a fruitful enterprise is quite evident. Any forthright statement, which is part of the accepted Christian tradition regarding the substitutionary nature of Christ's death on the cross, is deplored. "There is no doubt that Christians hold firmly to the Cross as a historical fact, but they are not bound to accept theories that would interpret it in terms of legal satisfaction or sacrificial substitution."⁴

Then, at the end of his last chapter, he challenges us to engage in a radical reappraisal of the fundamentals of the Christian faith:

It is too easily assumed that all traditional doctrines are firmly based on the Bible. The Semitic view of God may need to be cleared of some Greek theories that have overlaid it. . . . Terms like Son of God, Trinity and Salvation need to be reshaped and given new point. Concepts of prophecy, inspiration and revelation must be re-examined in view of the undoubted revelation of God in Muhammad and in the *Qur'an*.⁵

I have cited the above example to underline the fact that the *consensus* that had prevailed among Western Christian missionaries from the days of William Carey (1792) to around the early years of the twentieth century, no longer exists today. In those days, regardless of some doctrinal dif-

ferences among Protestant churches, there was among them and their missionaries, an agreement about the fundamentals of the faith. They affirmed *the supreme and final authority of the Bible, the Trinity*, as well as the *uniqueness, finality, and superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ*. Nowadays, we live within a milieu dominated by *multiculturalism, political correctness, and theological pluralism*. Some Western political and cultural leaders deplore the fact that Christians, by insisting on believing and propagating such distinctive teachings as the Trinity, are going against the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect that should mark the relations among members of the various faith communities.

At the beginning of the Third Millennium, where do we stand regarding these developments? Should we say that, since our Western societies have become more pluralistic than ever, it follows that we should welcome and practice theological pluralism? It is my firm conviction that the tenets of the historic Christian faith must not be watered down, regardless of the demographic changes that have taken place in the Western world. The doctrine of the ontological Trinity is an integral part of Christianity, and should not be downplayed or ignored. A belief in the triune God impacts the entire edifice of the Christian faith, both in the West, as well as in the mission fields. In the remaining part of this article, I would like to share with the readers of the *Journal*, how I dealt with this doctrine in my radio and literature ministry among the Arabic-speaking people over a period that spanned several decades in the second half of the twentieth century.

I began proclaiming the gospel in Arabic in 1958 over radio station ELWA, of Monrovia, Liberia. Later, the Lord enabled me to use additional missionary radio stations in Europe, and in the Middle East. My pre-theological studies had taken place in Syria prior to its independence from France in 1946. The languages of my education were Arabic,

French, and English. My father was a Presbyterian pastor. His roots were in Eastern Orthodoxy, while my mother came from an Eastern church (the Maronite Church) that had affiliated with Rome in the aftermath of the Crusader wars. Father was extremely fond of books. His library was full of Arabic and English materials, both theological and cultural. In my teens, I spent hours reading some of that literature. When I received the call to the ministry, I came to the United States of America in 1950, and studied at the Reformed Presbyterian Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In following years, I took more courses at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Even though I spent most of my active ministerial life in Canada and the United States, I kept in touch with my field through short wave radio, Arabic language publications, and frequent visits to the Arab world. Broadcasting the Word of God in Arabic is not like radio work in the English-speaking world. Since the potential audience is predominantly Islamic, how was I to do the work of an evangelist proclaiming the message of the biblical gospel?

Upon hearing a Christian radio program, most of my listeners would not be sympathetic to its contents. Sooner or later, they would discover that the purpose of my messages was to call them to faith in the biblical Messiah, who was not only the son of Mary, but also equally the Son of God. And this God was a triune God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It meant that I was asking them to change their loyalty from Islam to Christianity. That was tantamount to a call for apostasy. In their tradition, apostasy is a sin punishable by death. By what authority did I call people to make such a radical decision? From an ecclesiastical point of view, I was commissioned by the Christian Reformed Church, a branch of the universal church, to engage in radio missions. However, that fact in itself conferred no legitimacy on my work as far as the Arabic-speaking audience was concerned. Ulti-

mately, it was the Bible that gave me as well as my sending church the authority, the credentials, and the boldness to herald the Good News of Jesus the Messiah. As a member of the community known to Muslims as "The People of the Book," I proclaimed the contents of the Book to those whose mother tongue was Arabic.

Realizing therefore the absolute necessity of proclaiming a biblical message every time I recorded a radio program, what specific approach did I use? Both my Christian heritage and my knowledge of Islam led me to adopt the evangelistic system of Paul as given in his letter to the Romans. Theologically speaking, it meant that I would begin with an emphasis on biblical anthropology, then follow that by an exposition of biblical Christology and soteriology. Then, I would go on to explain that our salvation proceeded from the plan and unmerited love of the triune God. By way of further explanation, I would add that the existence of this God, i.e., of the Holy Trinity, pre-dated the formulation of this doctrine at Nicea (A.D. 325). The Trinity was a living reality, before the creation of the cosmos. At this point, it is very helpful to refer to Ephesians 1, which expounds the role of the three persons of the Trinity in planning, procuring, and securing our redemption.

I should add that my study of Islamic doctrine reinforced my decision to follow the above-mentioned course. For notwithstanding the strong criticisms that have been leveled by Muslims against the Bible's authenticity, the Trinity, and the deity of Jesus Christ; actually their biggest objection is to biblical anthropology. Whereas the Christian view of man's predicament is marked by recognition of the drastic results of the Fall, the Muslim view of man's present condition is very optimistic. It may be described as thoroughly Pelagian. In this connection, I am reminded of an article that appeared in *The Muslim World*, a quarterly journal that was founded by Samuel Zwemer in 1910. It dealt with the

subject of the Islamic doctrine of man and contained a quotation from a paper read by a Muslim professor in 1957, at a gathering of some Christian and Muslim scholars in Morocco. The Muslim professor said:

The possibility of man's deliverance and the way to follow have been indicated by the *Qur'an* in its address to sinners, fathers of the human race: "Go forth all of you from hence and if there comes to you guidance from Me then he who follows my guidance shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they know distress" (Surah 2:38). By this solemn affirmation God himself takes action for the salvation of man in the path of right. Islamic tradition then has the means to lead man to final perfection, the effect of which is liberation from the fear and from the sadness which prevent man from attaining the eternal blessedness which is life in God and for God.

In commenting on the paper, the then editor of *The Muslim World* wrote:

[This] exposition of Muslim theology and its concepts of man and his salvation raises several deep questions. The Christian must always be perplexed about its ready confidence that "to know is to do," that man's salvation happens under purely revelatory auspices and that through the law given in the Divine communication is the path that man will follow once he knows and sees it. The whole mystery of human recalcitrance and 'hardness of heart' seems to be overlooked.⁶

Muslim anthropology has no need for a divine Savior. *Man needs only to know in order to do the will of Allah.* By performing the requirements of Allah's *Shari'a* (Law), man achieves the goal of his existence.

The following is a brief description of the approach I

used in my radio messages beamed to the Arabic-speaking Muslim world. My starting point, following the order of the letter to the Romans, was to expound the biblical anthropology showing the lost condition of man, and his inability to please God by his own efforts. Actually, the *Qur'an* follows Rabbinical Judaism in teaching that humans, by their own efforts, can achieve their righteousness. The critique of Judaism in Romans 9-11 supplies us, in an indirect way, with a similar critique of Muslim "soteriology." Please read Romans 10:1-4 and imagine Paul also dealing with the Muslim's attempt, and failure, to obtain God's righteousness.

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

The earlier chapters of this epistle are filled with helpful instructions. The purpose of Paul in chapter 2, for example, is to prove that a mere knowledge of the revealed will of God is not sufficient to bring about our reconciliation with him. But Muslims do regard themselves as enlightened because they possess God's final revelation of his Law. They look at the followers of other religions as living in ignorance. The strong words of Paul in unmasking the superficiality of Rabbinical Judaism, fit Islam as well. But lest the bearer of the Good News be perceived as exhibiting racial arrogance or superiority, Paul announces the fact that *none is righteous*.

What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the

power of sin. . . . Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:19-20).

It must be a shattering experience for a Muslim to hear such words that proclaim man's inability to justify himself by the "deeds prescribed" in his sacred law. When the Holy Spirit opens his heart to receive the Pauline instruction found in Romans (1-3:20), then he is ready to welcome the proclamation of the gospel and its exposition in chapter 3:21-8.

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith (Romans 3:21-25a).

Having made the biblical point that the law, far from being a means for man's justification, manifests his enslavement to sin, the way is now open to expound the teachings relating to the person and the mission of the Messiah. Patiently and methodically, the Christian messenger must rely on the Scriptures to reveal the fact that Jesus Christ was both the son of David, and the Lord of David. The Messiah's earthly ministry in teaching the masses, healing the sick, and restoring some to life, revealed his primary mission: *he came to seek and to save the lost.*

According to Hebrews 1, our Lord brought about the completion of God's revelation; but he did more than that:

When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my son; today I have begotten you?" But to which of the angels has he ever said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?" (Hebrews 1:3b, 4, 5, 13).

Thus far, I mentioned my approach in teaching the Holy Trinity, the Fatherhood of God, the deity of Jesus Christ, and the personality of the Holy Spirit, in my mission to Muslims. I would like to reiterate, that the Trinity must be proclaimed from the Scriptures, and by following the way it was gradually revealed within the Bible.

At this point, I must also refer to the fact that not only did I preach this distinctively Christian doctrine from behind a microphone to a "captive" audience, but also I dealt with it in my follow-up ministry, which was an integral part of the work of radio missions.

One episode remains fresh in my mind. Early in the 1990s, I received a letter from a Muslim merchant who was residing in London, England. His words manifested an irenic spirit. After commenting on my use of the Arabic language, he wondered how an intelligent person, could believe in the Trinity. The letter did not surprise me, after all, he was sharing with me the classical Islamic critique of the Christian doctrine of God.

The following is roughly a summary of my response to this honest inquirer:

I appreciated very much your letter and its tone. I realize that you, as a Muslim believer, do not accept the Bible's testimony about God. But let me assure you, at the outset, that what I have been broadcasting over the years, is a faithful exposi-

tion of the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. There is nothing in my radio and literature work that is contrary to God's revelation.

I am not surprised that you have a great difficulty in understanding this biblical teaching about the Trinity. The reason I believe in the triune God is the fact it is part and parcel of God's revelation. I trust that you will agree with me that when we deal with such doctrines as the attributes of God, and his nature, we cannot fully comprehend them. As believers in God, we are summoned to receive what his revelation teaches. So, we should not be surprised if in a revealed (Muslims consider Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as heavenly [or revealed] religions) religion, there are mysteries that transcend the human mind.

May I remind you also of a theological controversy that took place in the ninth century in Baghdad regarding the *Qur'an*. There were some Muslim theologians who were supported in their views by the ruling caliphs, who propounded the doctrine that the *Qur'an* was created; that it came into existence at the time of its revelation to Muhammad, (between A.D. 610-632) They believed that it was necessary to safeguard the unity of Allah, by not allowing for the pre-existence of the *Qur'an*. However, an influential theologian and expert in the Law, Imam Hanbal, refused to accept this formulation and declared that the *Qur'an* was eternal. He was persecuted and imprisoned by the caliph. As you well know, that event in your history is known as "The Ordeal of the *Qur'an*." Several years later, it was the Hanbalite view that prevailed. To this day, it continues to be the official teaching of Sunni Islam.

Muslims believe that Allah is eternal, but they confess that the *Qur'an* is also eternal. While I do know that this is your own belief, I do not jump to the conclusion that you confess the existence of two gods. I realize that there are mysteries in all faiths that do transcend our capacity to comprehend. Should you not treat me in the same way, and not charge me with believing in three gods?

I shared with you the above in order to underline the obvious fact that in all theistic religions, there are bound to be doctrines that are beyond our full understanding. What I was pointing to the Muslim listener and correspondent, was his obligation, as a fellow human being, to deal with me "*quid pro quo*." Just as I do not accuse Islam of a dualistic view of God, Muslims should refrain from regarding Christians as propounding a plurality of gods.

This episode is relevant as an illustration. There were some particular reasons that allowed me to write what I did. Generally speaking, we may allude to some weightier examples taken from the history of Islam, which point to those deficiencies that are inherent in their doctrine of God. For example, Muslims teach that God is the "wholly Other." He is simply a transcendent Being. There is no similarity whatsoever between the Creator and man, the crown of creation. Neither in the *Qur'an*, nor in the Tradition (Hadith), do we find anything close to the fundamental teaching of Genesis 1:26a-27: "Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

The doctrine of the image of God in man is fundamental to all other biblical teachings. Over the air, I used to refer to it time and again, not only when dealing with creation, but equally with the doctrine of redemption. But I would never mention the fact that man is made in the image of God and after his likeness, without saying immediately, that I was actually quoting from the Pentateuch, or as the Muslims call it, "*Tawrat Moussa*."

Since Islam propounds the doctrine of a solitary and transcendent God, it follows that no Muslim claims that he or she can know Allah. They study and learn about God's Law, or will; but they have nothing similar to the Christian uttering with Paul such words as: "I want to know Christ,

and the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:10a).

Most likely, it was this teaching about an impersonal God in Islam that contributed to the rise of the mystical movement known as Sufism. The Sufis played an active role in Islamic history as they tried to fill a spiritual vacuum created by the strict unitarianism of this faith. Differing with the teaching that Allah cannot be approached except through obedience to the Law, they pointed to another way of pleasing the Almighty and thus attaining the bliss of paradise. Sufi leaders taught that through meditation and a strict discipline, a Muslim might arrive at the goal of existence. One such spiritual exercise they advocated was the recitation by a group of assembled men, of *the Beautiful or Ninety-nine names of Allah*.

Eventually, Sufism departed further and further from Orthodox Islam. As one Egyptian Muslim scholar put it, "Sufis tended to be heretical. They taught that intuition was the way to understanding. Some of them advocated monism, while others went as far as pantheism, claiming that there was no difference between good and evil."⁷

In conclusion, it is my firm conviction that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is crucial to the life and health of the church as well as to missions among the followers of world religions. This doctrine does not stand by itself, but forms an integral part of the biblical revelation regarding God and his relationship with mankind. The denial of the doctrine of the supreme and final authority of the Bible leads inevitably to the rejection of the Fall, the person and work of Jesus Christ, redemption, and the coming of the fullness of God's kingdom at the return of Jesus Christ. As our brief study of "The Trinity and Christian Missions to Islam" has shown, their rejection of the Trinity is intimately connected with their denial of the sonship and deity of Jesus Christ. This denial is linked to their unwillingness to consider the true meaning of the Fall, and the necessity of redemption.

Ultimately, the Muslims' denials of the fundamentals of the Christian faith are traceable to their unwillingness to accept the Holy Scriptures as the authentic Word of God. Thus, to preach the doctrine of the Trinity within the context of world missions, requires the proclamation of the "whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27b). The specific method I recommended was to follow the approach of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. And this endeavor must be undertaken in the Pauline conviction that "since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Author

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Notes

1. Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 22.
2. *The Qur'an*, Surah #112.
3. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 14.
4. *Jesus in the Qur'an*, 169.
5. *Jesus in the Qur'an*, 173.
6. *The Muslim World*, 49:1, January 1959.
7. Zaki Naguib Mahmoud, *The Rational and the Irrational in Our Cultural Heritage* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al-Shurouq, n.d. [Most likely it was published in the 1970s]).

* *Najran* was a city in Arabia inhabited by Christian Arabs

** *Abyssinia* is another name for Ethiopia

*** *Ahad* is an Arabic term used in the *Qur'an* signifying an absolute one. When Arabic-speaking Christians confess the words of the *Nicene Creed*, they use another term, *Wahed*. The use of *Ahad* has the connotation of *solitary*, and conveys a definitely *Unitarian* view of the Godhead.

**** Muslims consider Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as heavenly (or revealed) religions.

Come, Thou almighty King, help us Thy name to sing,
Help us to praise: Father, all glorious, o'er all victorious,
Come and reign over us, Ancient of Days.

Come, Thou Incarnate Word, gird on Thy mighty sword,
Our prayer attend: Come, and Thy people bless,
And give Thy Word success; Spirit of holiness, on us
descend.

Come, Holy Comforter, Thy sacred witness bear
In this glad hour: Thou who almighty art,
Now rule in every heart, and n'er from us depart, Spirit of
power.

To Thee, great One in Three, eternal praises be
Hence, evermore! Thy sovereign majesty,
May we in glory see, and to eternity love and adore!

SOURCE UNKNOWN (1757)