

EXPLAINING THE TRINITY TO MUSLIMS

*By n.n.*¹

1 Introduction

Mention the Trinity to a Muslim, and immediately conflict begins. ‘Do not say: “Trinity,”’ warns the Qur’an. “Stop saying that, it is better for you. Allah is only One Deity.”² “If numerous gods ruled over the world,” explains Islamic Scholar, Musavi Lari, “and each of these gods acted and gave commands in accordance with his own will, the order of the universe would dissolve into anarchy.”³

Christians are often tempted to downplay the doctrine of the Trinity when with their Muslim friends. Yet, the task of explaining the Trinity to Muslims cannot be perpetually avoided. Muslims themselves frequently raise the topic in spiritual conversations with Christians. When they do so, it is our duty to give the reason for the hope that we have, with gentleness and respect.⁴

How, then, should we best prepare ourselves for this task? In, appropriately enough, three ways. Firstly, we must be personally convinced of the doctrine of the Trinity, as clearly taught in Scripture. Secondly, we must recognise that the Trinity is foundational to the entire message of Good News that we hope to share. Thirdly, we must familiarise ourselves with practical ways of explaining the Trinity helpfully and accessibly to our Muslim friends.

The three main sections of this paper correspond to these three needs.

¹ Writer prefers not to be acknowledged.

² An-Nisā’ 4:171.

³ Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari, *God and His Attributes: Lessons on Islamic Doctrine* (trans. Hamid Algar; Potomac, Md.: IEC, 1989), p. 116.

⁴ 1 Pet 3:15.

2 What is the Trinity?

Christian: take heart! You almost certainly understand the doctrine of the Trinity far better than you realise. For the doctrine of Trinity is simply the sum of three Biblical “building blocks”.

2.1 *There is only one God*

The Bible is consistently monotheistic. “Hear O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”⁵ “You believe there is only one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.”⁶ “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”⁷

Theologians discuss the exact point at which this Biblical oneness is to be located.⁸ But all agree that, to remain faithful to the Biblical testimony, there must be no denial of oneness.

2.2 *The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God*

The Father is God: “... at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”⁹

The Son is God: “Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have believed.’”¹⁰

The Holy Spirit is God: “... you have lied to the Holy Spirit. [...] You have not lied to men but to God.”¹¹

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4; see also Mark 12:29.

⁶ James 2:19.

⁷ 1 Timothy 2:5.

⁸ See e.g. Ulrich Mauser, “One God Alone: A Pillar of Biblical Theology”, in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 12:3 (1991), pp. 255-265.

⁹ Philippians 2:10-11.

¹⁰ John 20:28-29.

¹¹ Acts 5:3-4.

Philosophers ponder how each Person of the Trinity can be in themselves fully God.¹² But all agree that, to remain faithful to the Biblical testimony, there must be no denial of deity.

2.3 The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father

The Father is not the Son: "... the Father is greater than I."¹³

The Son is not the Spirit: "Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear."¹⁴

The Spirit is not the Father: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth."¹⁵

Scholars debate the precise nature of the relationships between the Persons of the Trinity.¹⁶ But all agree that, to remain faithful to the Biblical testimony, there must be no denial of difference.

2.4 Synthesis

Any Christian who is familiar with the Bible will have little difficulty affirming these three "building blocks" individually. When we begin putting these "building blocks" together in a way that remains faithful to each of them, we are attempting to construct the doctrine of the Trinity.

¹² See e.g. Lewis Ayres, "The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine's Trinitarian Theology," in Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (eds), *Augustine and his Critics* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 51-76.

¹³ John 14:28.

¹⁴ Acts 2:33.

¹⁵ John 14:16-17.

¹⁶ See e.g. Michael Rene Barnes, "Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology", in *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), pp. 237-250.

There is nothing suspicious in such a syntheses. Indeed, the pages of the Bible reveal that this process had already begun within the first century!

The Lord Jesus commanded His disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,”¹⁷ hereby revealing that the three distinct divine Persons share the single divine Name.

The Apostle Paul taught the Corinthians that the divine Persons work inseparably, both in gifting and in blessing the church: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.”¹⁸ “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”¹⁹

The Apostle Peter wrote to those “who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood,” showing that the work of salvation is achieved through the joint activity of the three divine Persons.

The Apostle John carefully worded his account of the Gospel, from the very first verse, to clearly communicate to his original Greek readers that, “although the person of Christ is not the person of the Father, their *essence* is identical.”²⁰ “Here, then,” agrees theologian Don Carson, “are some of the crucial constituents of a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity.”²¹

¹⁷ Matthew 28:19.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:4-6.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:14.

²⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 269 (emphasis original).

²¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Nottingham: Apollos, 1991), p. 117.

2.5 Summary

Trinitarian theology originates within, and is shaped by, the Bible itself. The early church councils of Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon, far from attempting anything innovative, merely restated the Scriptural data in a contextualised way.²² This stood against those who, in constructing their own philosophically pleasing syntheses, implicitly or explicitly denied Biblical oneness,²³ deity,²⁴ or difference.²⁵

There is a mystery to the doctrine of the Trinity. How could it be otherwise, when we are considering the very nature of God? Yet this mystery comes at the level of “fitting the building blocks together”, not at the level of identifying the “building blocks” themselves. These three “building blocks” are clearly taught in Scripture.

The doctrine of the Trinity can therefore be used as a helpful tool for spiritual diagnosis. “This is the one I esteem,” declares the LORD: “he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.”²⁶ A genuine believer will accept everything the Bible teaches, confessing that their sinful, finite mind may be unable to comprehend exactly how it all fits together, yet trusting that, in God’s mind, there is no inconsistency.²⁷

3 Why is the Trinity important?

Anecdotally, accepting or rejecting the Trinity has sometimes been the turning point for people who are deciding between Christianity and Islam. I know of one Indonesian Muslim who converted to Christianity through reading the Athanasian Creed! Conversely, a

²² Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), pp. 78-79.

²³ E.g. Tritheism.

²⁴ E.g. Arianism.

²⁵ E.g. Sabellianism.

²⁶ Isaiah 66:2.

²⁷ Deuteronomy 29:29.

friend of mine in Egypt became a Muslim because she found the Trinity confusing. Such stories challenge us to reconsider the theological significance of the Trinity. In doing so, we will discover that the Trinity is not a separate, self-contained theological package, but is integrally related to the entire Biblical worldview, outside of which the Good News is incoherent.

3.1 The Biblical Trinitarian worldview

God, existing from eternity as a relational, Trinitarian being, is thus, by nature, personal.²⁸ Indeed, love is His very essence,²⁹ and love longs to express itself.³⁰ Consequently, it is natural for God to speak,³¹ that others might come to know Him.³²

God therefore spoke to create a world that would disclose something of His character.³³ God displayed His personal nature in creating and relating to men and women made in His image.³⁴ God's unity-in-diversity may also be seen in the development of richly varied cultures around the world.³⁵

God further revealed Himself through His commandments. These are not an end in themselves: love is both the summary,³⁶ and the fulfilment,³⁷ of the law. Obedience is not about legalism, but "seeking God".³⁸

²⁸ See Francis A. Schaeffer, *He is there and He is not silent* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972).

²⁹ 1 John 4:8.

³⁰ Proverbs 27:5.

³¹ Schaeffer, *He is there and He is not silent*, p. 118. Cf. John 1:1.

³² John 1:18.

³³ Romans 1:20.

³⁴ Genesis 1:27.

³⁵ Cf. Acts 17:26-28.

³⁶ Mark 12:29-31.

³⁷ Romans 13:8-10.

³⁸ Psalm 119:10; cf. Joshua 22:5.

Sin, conversely, is no mere breach of an arbitrary and impersonal code. Rather, it is a personal rejection of God Himself,³⁹ defaming His character and tacitly endorsing Satan's slander.⁴⁰ In this respect, then, those who break only a single commandment are as guilty as those who break many: all have personally offended the one divine Lawgiver.⁴¹ The just punishment for sin is appropriately framed relationally: banishment from God's loving presence,⁴² to suffer His personal hostility forever.⁴³

Once sin is understood relationally, the need for reconciliation becomes evident.⁴⁴ It is the prerogative, however, not of the offending party, but of the offended party, to determine the terms for restored fellowship.⁴⁵ The sinner discovers, tragically, that his sin is so offensive to God that the possibility of reconciliation is now beyond his own reach.⁴⁶

The Gospel is the good news that God has revealed His love for the world in a new way: by taking the initiative and acting on our behalf to restore fellowship with sinful man.⁴⁷ In order to save us,⁴⁸ God the Son became a man, the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴⁹ As our human representative, the Son obeyed His Father vicariously in a perfect relationship of love.⁵⁰ On Good Friday, Jesus also suffered the rela-

³⁹ Deuteronomy 28:20; Jeremiah 2:13.

⁴⁰ Genesis 3:1-5.

⁴¹ James 2:10-11.

⁴² Matthew 25:11-12.

⁴³ 2 Thessalonians 1:8-10; Revelation 14:10-11.

⁴⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:18-19.

⁴⁵ Proverbs 18:19.

⁴⁶ Romans 5:6; cf. Genesis 3:24.

⁴⁷ John 3:16; Romans 5:10.

⁴⁸ Matthew 1:21-24.

⁴⁹ John 1:14.

⁵⁰ John 10:17.

tional exclusion and death due to sinners.⁵¹ Then, on Easter Sunday, He was raised to life again, victorious over sin and death.⁵²

The way back to God is now open for all who will believe.⁵³ The Holy Spirit sovereignly regenerates our sin-hardened hearts that we might put our trust in Jesus,⁵⁴ with the result that there is now no condemnation for those in faith-union with Christ Jesus.⁵⁵ Baptism symbolises how Christ has died our death,⁵⁶ and in relationship with Him we are now risen to newness of life, clothed in His perfect righteousness.⁵⁷ We eagerly await the regenerated creation, in which we have been promised the blessing of unhindered relationship with God Himself,⁵⁸ to know and love Him perfectly forever.⁵⁹

3.2 The Qur'anic anti-Trinitarian worldview

By contrast, consider a worldview where the Trinity is vehemently denied. Allah exists from eternity as an undifferentiated monad.⁶⁰ It follows, therefore, that his eternal nature is impersonal and unrelational. He cannot be known personally.⁶¹ Surprisingly, Allah speaks.⁶² Yet when he does so, he reveals not himself, but his law,⁶³ through prophets whom he sends only to explain and to model it.⁶⁴

⁵¹ Matthew 27:46.

⁵² 1 Corinthians 15.

⁵³ Mark 15:38.

⁵⁴ John 3:6-8.

⁵⁵ Romans 8:1.

⁵⁶ Romans 6:4.

⁵⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:21.

⁵⁸ Revelation 21:3-4.

⁵⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

⁶⁰ Al-Mā'idah 5:73.

⁶¹ Al-An'ām 6:103. Cf. Lari, *God and His Attributes*, p. 114: "[mental] concepts cannot, therefore, be used to gain knowledge of that Most Transcendent Reality. He is exalted above the possibility of being known by description, and whoever limits God with a given attribute has failed to gain any knowledge of Him."

⁶² www.answering-islam.org/authors/khoury/quran_impossible.html [11-04-2010].

These commandments, never intended to give any insight into an unchangeable divine nature, are not themselves of eternal significance. Allah may annul them at any time,⁶⁵ and when humans disobey them Allah is not personally offended: sin is simply weakness, and we are weak because Allah created us weak.⁶⁶

It follows that forgiveness and atonement are of minimal importance: there never was a loving relationship between Allah and humankind in the first place, so it is meaningless to speak of a costly reconciliation.

Humans appear to be of little consequence to Allah: he misleads whom he wills and guides whom he wills.⁶⁷ He may choose to punish humans for their weakness, or he may choose not to:⁶⁸ to him, it seems to matter little either way.

However, those who do enough good deeds might be able to win his favour and rescue themselves from damnation,⁶⁹ for the ultimate human goal: a paradise of carnal pleasures.⁷⁰ Either way, the impersonal god remains eternally distant and unknowable.

In practice, many Muslims would disagree at varying points with the description of the Qur'anic faith as just presented. Such a response would evidence the work of God's gracious hand that, in common grace, restrains our friends from the full logic of their position, and mercifully preserves in their hearts some knowledge of the true worldview.⁷¹ Those elements of truth not yet extinguished by sin will find their fulfilment only in the Gospel of Christ.

⁶³ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), p. 24: "The Qur'an does not reveal God, but God's will or law for all creation."

⁶⁴ Al-Ahzāb 33:21.

⁶⁵ Al-Baqarah 2:106.

⁶⁶ An-Nisā' 4:28.

⁶⁷ Fātir 35:8; Az-Zumar 39:23.

⁶⁸ Al-Mā'idah 5:18.

⁶⁹ Al-Mu'minūn 23:102-103.

⁷⁰ Ar-Rahmān 55:56, 70, 74; Al Wāqi'ah 56:17-38.

⁷¹ Romans 1:20-28.

3.3 Summary

Christianity and Islam are fundamentally different religious systems, rising out of antithetical perceptions of God. A helpful analogy might be that of two trees growing side-by-side in a forest. In some places, the leaves of one tree may overlap those of the other, giving the impression to an observer from above that the two trees are really one. But, on closer inspection, every leaf will be found to stem from one or the other of two entirely separate structures. As Bavinck says: “There is no direct uninterrupted path from the darkness of paganism to the light of the gospel.”⁷² Apart from the “infinite-personal”⁷³ Trinitarian God, there is no Gospel.

This is exactly what the Bible would lead us to expect. The heart of false religions is the substitution of man-made idols in God’s place.⁷⁴ Thereafter, we progressively suppress the truth and become like the gods we serve.⁷⁵

The importance of explaining the Trinity to our Muslim friends is clear. The Gospel calls all people to turn “to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”⁷⁶ “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”⁷⁷

⁷² J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (trans. David H. Freeman; Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1960), p. 136.

⁷³ See Schaeffer, *He is there and He is not silent*.

⁷⁴ Romans 1:18-32.

⁷⁵ Cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18.

⁷⁶ 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10.

⁷⁷ Romans 10:14.

4 How should we explain the trinity?

As mentioned in the introduction, Muslims are often more willing than Christians to initiate discussions about the Trinity. In this section, then, we shall adopt the perspective of a Christian responding to questions raised by a Muslim friend. Obviously, the broad range of possible questions, combined with the fact that every person is different, rules out any “one-size-fits-all” approach to explaining the Trinity. However, the Bible does give us general principles that will be of relevance in every case.

Firstly, then, we shall consider the general Biblical principles that should guide the way a Christian answers *any* question. Then, we shall offer practical examples of how these principles may be applied in specifically Trinity-related conversations with “insincere” and “sincere” questioners.

4.1 *The Christian approach to answering questions*

The moment we are asked a difficult question, we feel the pressure to defend ourselves. Immediately, we have entered a dangerous spiritual position. Our sinful nature will tell us that the questioner is an opponent to be crushed: if we have a good answer ready, we will be tempted to exalt in our superior knowledge; if we don't, we will be tempted to lash out in anger, or to belittle our opponent. Both responses dishonour God,⁷⁸ and also our Muslim friend – especially so if operating in an honour-shame culture.

The passage, then, we must have ringing in our ears as we answer any question, is Eph 4:29: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” We who are righteous in God's eyes have no business defending ourselves before men. Rather, we shall resolve to answer for the sole benefit of the person to whom we are speaking.

⁷⁸ Proverbs 25:28.

But what will most benefit our non-Christian friend? 1 Cor 2 reminds us of the futility of mere “eloquence” and “superior wisdom.”⁷⁹ “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”⁸⁰ It is pointless to pursue our friend down philosophical rabbit-holes. Even if we could answer their questions perfectly, they would still remain spiritually blind.⁸¹ Their greatest need is faith. And “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”⁸²

The best way, then, to help our friend, is to prayerfully and graciously keep relating the conversation back to the Gospel. Given the centrality of the Trinity to the entire Biblical worldview, as outlined above, this will prove easier than might have been expected. On the one hand, we may answer our friend “according to folly,”⁸³ highlighting how particular beliefs or actions of theirs are inconsistent with the Qur’anic anti-Trinitarian worldview they profess to hold; on the other, we may answer “according to wisdom,”⁸⁴ showing how these same inconsistencies find their rightful place only within the Biblical, Trinitarian worldview, fulfilled in the Gospel.

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”⁸⁵ Keep a smile on your face, and remember that sometimes the prudent answer will be an indirect answer or an illustration.⁸⁶ But

⁷⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:1.

⁸⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:14.

⁸¹ Mark 8:18.

⁸² Romans 10:17.

⁸³ Proverbs 26:5. See also www.germanreformationproject.org/apologetics.html (11-04-2010)

⁸⁴ Proverbs 26:4.

⁸⁵ Colossians 4:5-6.

⁸⁶ Proverbs 26:16. Cf. Mark 11:27-12:12.

always “in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.”⁸⁷ Our goal is to win, not merely an argument, but a hearing for the Gospel: the truth spoken in love.

4.2 The insincere questioner

The insincere questioner is not ready to process detailed answers:⁸⁸ he asks questions only to confirm his prejudices and to excuse himself from having to think. He will not give you time to research your response and get back to him and, if you cannot reply instantly, he will feel vindicated in his own eyes, his heart hardening yet further to the Gospel.

For the sake of the insincere questioner, then, we must be ready with brief responses prepared in advance that will disarm his most common objections and perhaps cause him to stop and think.⁸⁹ Martin Goldsmith wisely observes: “Right at the start of our witness to Muslims we may well find it necessary to show that we are not polytheistic or carnal in our faith, so that the Muslim may feel free to explore Christian truth with an open mind.”⁹⁰

Q: “How can you worship Father, Mother and Son?”⁹¹

A1. Who told you that horrible idea?! No Christian has ever believed such a thing – please, never mention such blasphemies in my presence again!

Q: “How can you believe in the Trinity – do you believe in three gods?”

A1. Not at all – “belief in the unity of God is fundamental to Christianity and the doctrine of the Trinity.”⁹² The Prophet Musa (Deuter-

⁸⁷ 1 Peter 3:15.

⁸⁸ Proverbs 23:9.

⁸⁹ Proverbs 26:4-5.

⁹⁰ Martin Goldsmith, *Islam and Christian Witness* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), p. 64.

⁹¹ Al-Mā'idah 5:116.

onomy 6:4) and the Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 12:29) both taught monotheism long before Muhammad.

Q: “How can you believe in the Trinity – it doesn’t make sense?”

A1. Do you believe all of the Qur’an, or only the parts you understand? When I read the Bible, I believe everything God tells me, whether I understand Him or not.

A2. Do you believe that God is great? Christians believe that God is greater than our minds can comprehend. “We cannot understand our own nature so it is not surprising that we cannot understand God’s.”⁹³

A3. Do you believe that God is all-loving and free from need? This can only be true if God is Himself a community of Persons: if God were just one Person, He would have to depend on created beings in order to be able to express His love!

Q: “How can you believe in the Trinity – the word ‘Trinity’ isn’t even in the Bible?”

A1. The doctrine of the Trinity is clearly taught in the Bible even though the word “Trinity” isn’t used. What do you make of this Bible passage, for example?⁹⁴

A2. How can you believe that Allah is “tawHid” (Islam’s concept of monotheism)? The word “tawHid” is never mentioned in the Qur’an.⁹⁵

Q: “How can you believe in the Trinity – the Qur’an denounces it!”

A1. “What the Qur’an denounces is the worship of three separate gods. The doctrine of the Trinity does not teach that.”⁹⁶

⁹² Carey College, *Christian Replies to Muslim Objections* (2d ed.; Doncaster: Carey College, 1991), p. 32.

⁹³ Carey College, *Christian Replies to Muslim Objections*, p. 32.

⁹⁴ Then turn to a Bible passage that reveals Jesus’ divine identity, e.g. Mark 2:1-12; John 1:1; 10:30.

⁹⁵ William J. Saal, *Reaching Muslims for Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), p. 106.

⁹⁶ Carey College, *Christian Replies to Muslim Objections*, p. 32.

A2. The Qur'an misrepresents the Trinity. Christians do not worship Mary, "and to call Jesus a different god besides God is also heretical."⁹⁷

A3. How can you believe the Qur'an when it misunderstands what Christians believe about the Trinity? The Qur'an's erroneous view of the Trinity merely confirms the conclusion of critical scholars that the Qur'an is a human book, derived substantially from the teachings of unbelievers who had been exiled to Arabia for heresy.⁹⁸

4.3 The sincere questioner

If the questioner sincerely wishes to know the answer to his question, he will be ready to consider a more comprehensive answer. There is no need here to resort to material analogies of the Trinity (ice-water-steam; 3-dimensional space; 3-leafed shamrock, etc). Not only are material analogies always flawed, they are also irrelevant: your Muslim friend is not yet at the stage of synthesising the doctrine of the Trinity. His confusion lies at the more fundamental level of accepting the "building blocks" themselves.

Be sure, therefore, to explain that your belief in the Trinity rests firmly on what the Bible says. Then, look together at some of the relevant Bible verses. The sincere questioner will be happy to give you time to prepare in advance if necessary.

Another possibility would be to pass this paper on to your Muslim friend and use it as a basis for discussion.

Best of all, you could arrange to meet together regularly to study through an entire Gospel narrative in detail. If your friend is ready for this, and is particularly interested in the Trinity, the Gospel according to John would be an excellent place to begin, for throughout it has much to teach us about the Trinity, even from the very first

⁹⁷ Carey College, *Christian Replies to Muslim Objections*, p. 32.

⁹⁸ See e.g. St Clair-Tisdall, "The Sources of Islam," in Ibn Warraq (ed), *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book* (New York: Prometheus, 1998), p. 258.

verse. John chapter 5 may prove particularly fascinating for your Muslim friend, for there we see Jesus defending His own claims to divine identity from the Jewish blasphemy charge.

The following notes, supplemented by a good commentary,⁹⁹ may aid your study of this complex passage.

5 John 5:17-30¹⁰⁰

The immediate context of this passage is Jesus' healing of a crippled man on the Sabbath, as recorded in 5:1-16. When the religious leaders accuse Jesus of working on the Sabbath, Jesus defends Himself with a claim to divine sonship: "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."¹⁰¹ Jesus' argument is that God works lawfully on the Sabbath, and a son can rightly do what his father does.

The Jews, a fiercely monotheistic people, judge Jesus' claim blasphemous, and accuse Him of "making himself equal with God."¹⁰² More precisely, their charge, echoing the sin of Eden,¹⁰³ is that Jesus is proclaiming Himself a *rival* god, in direct breach of Biblical monotheism.¹⁰⁴

In verses 19-23, however, Jesus corrects their misunderstanding. He is in no way a rival to God, for the very notion of sonship coordinates His relationship to the Father in such a way as to uphold Biblical monotheism.

⁹⁹ I heartily commend Don Carson's commentary in the Pillar New Testament Commentary Series.

¹⁰⁰ These notes are based on lecture material delivered by Michael J. Ovey, *Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (CD 2.2), September-December 2009.

¹⁰¹ John 5:17.

¹⁰² John 5:18.

¹⁰³ Genesis 3:5.

¹⁰⁴ Daniel 4:35. Consider also Ayatullah Musavi Lari's fear of polytheism, as expressed in the quotation in the Introduction to this paper, that polytheism necessarily introduces conflict into the divine will.

Firstly, from Jesus' point of view, the Son *cannot* be a rival, because He is *not* independent from the Father: "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."¹⁰⁵ Notice here, and again in verse 30, that this relationship is both harmonious and asymmetrical – priority always rests with the Father.

Secondly, from the Father's point of view, God loves His Son,¹⁰⁶ and He has therefore entrusted to Him the prerogative powers of life-giving¹⁰⁷ and judgment,¹⁰⁸ desiring that "all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him."¹⁰⁹ Again, Jesus is no rival, but merely performs obediently the functions that His Father has entrusted to Him.

Verses 24-30 outline the salvific implications of this relationship: believing gives eternal life, but this believing is believing in *both* the Father *and* the Son – you cannot believe in one without believing in the other.¹¹⁰ The final judgment is similarly integrated – the Son judges only as He hears.¹¹¹ There can be no "appeal" away from the Son to the Father.

In sum: Jesus, in John 5, outlines an integrated, yet asymmetrical, Father-Son relationship, in which the two Persons are not independent of one another, yet the priority of the Father is upheld. Jesus is no rival God, and Biblical monotheism is maintained. You cannot honour the Father whilst simultaneously dishonouring His Son.

¹⁰⁵ John 5:19, cf. John 5:30.

¹⁰⁶ John 5:20.

¹⁰⁷ John 5:21.

¹⁰⁸ John 5:22.

¹⁰⁹ John 5:23.

¹¹⁰ John 5:24.

¹¹¹ John 5:30.

6 Conclusion

‘Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”’¹¹²

The doctrine of the Trinity, being foundational to the Christian worldview, is essential to Christian discipleship, and so also to Christian mission. May Christ, who sends us to the nations, give us the power of His Spirit to faithfully proclaim His saving Gospel, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

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¹¹² Matthew 28:18-20.

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