The Misunderstood Trinity in the Quran

Big picture: Muslims often accuse Christians of saying that they believe in three gods. Christians deny such claims, emphasising that they hold to the Bible, which teaches there is only one God, existent in three persons (hypostases), Father, Son and Holy Spirit who share the same divine nature (ousia).

1. Muslims have an incorrect view of what Christians mean by 'Trinity'



Muslims often decry the Trinity, but usually misunderstand what it means. The reason is that the Qur'an presents an incorrect idea of what Christians say on the subject: "O People of the Scripture... The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So... say not "Three". Cease! (it is) better for you! Allah is only One God." Quran 4.171

This text makes it clear that the Qur'an accuses Christians of SAYING that there are three gods. The Qur'an makes a further error when it misidentifies the members of the Trinity:

"They have certainly disbelieved who say, "Allah is the third of three." And there is no god except one God. And if they do not desist from what they are saying, there will surely afflict the disbelievers among them a painful punishment. So will they not repent to Allah and seek His forgiveness? And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful. The Messiah, son of Mary, was not but a messenger; [other] messengers have passed on before him. And his mother was a supporter of truth. They both used to eat food. Look how We make clear to them the signs; then look how they are deluded." Quran 5.73-75

> *"And when Allah saith: O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah?" Quran 5.116 The great Qur'an commentator Ibn Kathir's interpretation of Quran 5.73 affirms the usual understanding of these verses that claim that Christians believe in three gods, Jesus, Mary and God:*
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> > *"(Surely, they have disbelieved who say: 'Allah is the third of three.') Mujahid and several others said that this Ayah was revealed about the Christians in particular. As-Suddi and others said that this Ayah was revealed about taking `Isa and his mother as gods besides Allah, thus making Allah the third in a trinity...1 It can be seen that the Qur'an claims that Christians hold to a triad of gods, consisting of Jesus, Mary and (the third of three) Allah (God), rather than the truth – that Christians believe in One God in Three Persons, Father, Son and Spirit. The problem for Muslims is that Christians say no such thing.*

2. God reveals himself as Triune in the Bible

It is not because of philosophical speculation that Christians believe that God is Triune, but because God has revealed this about Himself. The question is often asked: 'how can God be one yet three?'. Christians are not arguing for three Gods; they believe in one, unique God. Hence, Christians never speak of the 'threeness of Gods', but the 'threeness within God'.

Christianity, like Islam, affirms the incomprehensibility of God. Job 11:7 rhetorically queries 'Can you by searching find out God?' 1 Corinthians 2:11 is adamant that only the Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God. After all, if God is God, then He is infinite and the human mind being finite, cannot fully comprehend the essence or will of God.

There is nothing in Creation which corresponds to the Divine Essence, and therefore our finite minds cannot fathom His Essence. Islam actually holds the same position; Surah Al-Anaam 6:103 states: '...He is above all comprehension...' (Yusuf Ali). So, if a Muslim complains that he cannot understand the doctrine of the Trinity, Christians answer that the Essence of God is above all human understanding. Christians believe that God is Triune because that is how He has revealed Himself. See "Delighting in the Trinity" for a detailed description of the Trinity.

3. ***No Christian group ever held to the Qur'an's Trinity***

Sometimes Muslims, embarrassed by the fact that Christians do not say there are three gods, or that the Trinity consists of Jesus, Mary and God, suggest that there must have been some Christian group stating this. However, there is simply no evidence that any Christian group ever held to what the Qur'an presents about the Trinity.

Often, they suggest the Collyridians, a group mentioned by Epiphanius of Salamis (310-403), a Palestinian bishop of Cyprus, in his work Panarion. The stories Epiphanius presents are somewhat dubious. One scholar notes, "...the work as a whole is tendentious in its use of its sources, citing only what supports his own unbending orthodoxy. This quality... demands extra caution in approaching the facts proffered by Epiphanius."2

It is sometimes held that Epiphanius' comments about the Collyridians presents a possible background for Quran 5.73: "1,1 < Another > sect has come to public notice after this, and I have already mentioned a few things about it in the Sect preceding, in the letter about Mary which I wrote to Arabia. (2) This one, again, was also brought to Arabia from Thrace and upper Scythia, and word of it has reached me..."3

Epiphanius had no direct knowledge of this supposed sect – he simply states that 'word of it has reached me', as the footnote accompanying the report of the group states: 'The sources of this Sect are oral'. No one else has mentioned anything about this supposed group.

We should also understand what he meant by 'Arabia': '...Arabia, the country lying north of the Dead Sea.'4. Again, 'Petra is the capital city of Arabia, the scriptural Edom'5. Clearly, Epiphanius means Transjordan, and not Hijaz, so it is irrelevant to the Qur'an. Finally, even if such a sect had existed, it was not representative of Christians as a whole.

Other times Muslim will point to Roman Catholic and to a lesser extent, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches veneration of the Virgin Mary. However, this was a later development, and at no time did any of these groups assert that Mary was divine or a member of the Trinity. The two main groups in Arabia were the Miaphysite Jacobite Church in the Hijaz and the Nestorians in Eastern Arabia.

An Arab Nestorian figure is Isaac of Nineveh (c. 613 – c. 700). In 'Profitable Words Full of Spiritual Wisdom', Isaac refers to the Trinity: 'the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost; to whom be glory and dominion. That He make us worthy to fear Him and to love Him. Amen.6 Nothing about three gods or Mary.

As for the Jacobites, Severus of Antioch, who was Patriarch there 512 – 538, in his letter entitled 'LXV. From the Letter of the same Holy Severus to Eupraxius the Chamberlain and about the questions which he addressed to him', he wrote about the Trinity:

> *"When we speak of the divine nature, we mean the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, separating the hypostases, but uniting the Godhead... the three are one, in that they are of the same essence of the Godhead; for the Father is God, and the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God... for its essence is one... we hold that the Trinity is one God."7*
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> *Nobody in seventh century Arabia could have been unaware of the true Christian teaching about the Trinity, and no group held to the triad of gods presented in the Qur'an.*

4. ***There is no pagan equivalent to the Trinity***

Sometimes, Muslims claim that the doctrine of the Trinity was borrowed from Graeco-Roman paganism. In Roman religion, the oldest divine triad was the 'Archaic Triad', which was worshipped on the Roman Capitol, consisted of Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus . Jupiter was the chief god of the Romans and identified with the Greek Zeus. Mars became the god of war alongside Quirinus.9 He was later identified with the Greek Ares, god of war.10 Quirinus was eventually identified as the deified Romulus, legendary founder of Rome.

In no way did the Romans hold that these three deities shared a common Essence of Deity: they were simply the most prominent gods of their time. This was also true of the 'Capitoline Triad' of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. Jupiter remained the chief god, Juno, goddess of motherhood was his sister and wife, identified with the Greek Hera, and Minerva (identified with the Greek Athena), goddess of wisdom, was the daughter of Jupiter – though not of Juno.

The three had a joint temple on Rome's Capitoline Hill. The temple had different cellae (shrine areas) for the distinct cult statues of the three deities. There is no indication that the Romans believed that they constituted a single Triune Being, as is held by Christians when they refer to the Trinity.11

5. The Quran is ignorant of the relational dynamics within the Trinity

Alongside mis-defining the Trinity, The Quran is silent on many key features that form the doctrine. Christians believe that the three persons of the Trinity mutually indwell each other12. This is the idea that all three Persons of the Trinity 'inter-penetrate', mutually sharing in the life of the others. Each person of the Trinity exists within the other in perfect unity and harmony, sharing the same divine essence while maintaining their distinct personal characteristics. The three Persons are therefore, not separable; they 'co-inhere', mutually indwell each other. Jesus declares in John 10:38, "But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."

The Father is in the Son, and vice versa (see also, John 14:10, John 14:23, John 17:21, cf. 1 Corinthians 2:10-11; Colossian 2:9). The Spirit is called the 'Spirit of the Father' (Matthew 10:20) and the 'Spirit of the Son', Galatians 4:6. Similarly, he is described as 'the Spirit of God' and 'the Spirit of Christ' in the same passage (see Romans 8:9ff). Likewise, the resurrection of Jesus attributed to the Spirit (1Peter 3:18); the Father (Acts 2:32, Gal. 1:1, Ephesians 1:20); the Son (John 10:17-18)

Yet we look in vain for any treatment of this vital issue in the Qur'an. If the three Persons mutually indwell one another, and are inseparable, then it follows that contrary to what the Qur'an states, Christians have only said there is one God.

6. The Quran ignores what the Bible says about the Trinity

It follows that Muslims have to ignore what the Bible says on the issue, especially what Jesus said in Matthew 28:19

The Bible affirms that God is unique – there is only one Deity. In Deuteronomy 4:35 it states: 'YHWH, He is God; there is no other besides Him', and in Deuteronomy 4:39 'YHWH, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other'. The Shema, the Old Testament declaration of faith in YHWH states: 'Hear, O Israel, YHWH is our God, YHWH is One', Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad. (Deuteronomy 6:4) The reference to God being 'One' is an assertion of His uniqueness.

We find references to God the Father in the epistles, e.g., Romans 1:7; Galatians 1:1; 1 Peter 1:17. When Jesus referred to God simply as 'the Father', there was never any negative reaction. Jesus also effectively claimed to be God: 'But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.. For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He … was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.' John 5:17-18

In Jesus' prayer in John 17:5, He requests the Father 'Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was'. It is significant that Jesus, addresses God as 'Father' and then asks for a restoration of His own pre-existent glory – that is, a glory He possessed before the creation of the world.

The Spirit is God. In the Old Testament possessive forms are used - e.g. 'Your' holy Spirit, Psalms 51:11, 104:30, 'His' Spirit, Psalms 106:33, Isaiah 63:10-11, 'My' Spirit, Joel 2:28, Zechariah 4:6. In particular, Isaiah 63:10-14 refers to the rebelliousness of Israel that grieved God and caused Him to punish them; it was His Spirit that was grieved, v10 cf. Ephesians 4:30 which states "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."

Hebrews 9:14 refers to 'the eternal Spirit' and the quality of being eternal is native only to God. Acts 5:3-4 indicates His deity: 'But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit ... You have not lied to men but to God."' In Mark 3:29, Jesus refers to the unpardonable sin as 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit', and only God can be blasphemed.

There is one essence of deity commonly possessed by Father, Son and Spirit. The Spirit, as a Person, is simultaneously connected to the Father and the Son – the possessive description is used of both - 'the Spirit of the Father'/'the Spirit of the Son'. That the Spirit is commonly linked to the Father and Son is very significant in this respect; to be described as the Spirit of both Father and Son is an indication that all three share the common essence of deity.

Above all, Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19 demonstrate what is meant by the Trinity: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'. The important point here is that the verse does not say 'names' in the plural, but rather 'the name' in the singular (to 'onoma to onoma). So, the three persons have a single essence of identity. This is the meaning of Triunity – one God, eternally existent in three Persons who have the same, single essence of deity. Yet the Qur'an never addresses this.

References

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3. *3 Williams, Frank [trans.] The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II & III, (Leiden & Boston: Brill, second, revised edition, 2013), p. 637.*
4. *4 Ibid., p. 1.*
5. *5 Ibid., p. 52.*
6. *6 Wensinck, A. J., Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh: Translated from Bedjan's Syriac Text with an Introduction and Registers (Amsterdam: Uitgave der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923), p. 212.*
7. *7 Brooks, E. W. [ed. & trans.], Severus of Antioch: A collection of letters from numerous Syriac manuscripts, (Paris: Graffin, 1915), pp. 179-180, 182-183, 183-184.*
8. *8 Wagenvoort, H., Pietas: Selected Studies in Roman Religion, (Leiden: Brill, 1980), p. 242.*
9. *9 Ibid., pp. 148, 237.*
10. *10 Ibid., p. 243.*
11. *11 Beard, Mary, North John, Price, Simon, Religions of Rome: A Sourcebook, Volume 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 100.*
12. *12 Perichoresis or 'co-inherence' or circumincession.*