

Trinity or Monotheism A Mystical-Qur'anic Approach

Muhammad Taqi Fa'ali PhD.*¹

Abstract

The most significant doctrinal difference between Islam and Christianity is the issue of trinity versus monotheism. The doctrine of trinity has a variety of interpretations, the most important of which are Arianism, Sabellianism, Orthodox, Deity, epiphany and the mysterious affair. These interpretations date back to the Old and New Testaments, or rather to religions preceding those scriptures. In all its interpretations, the trinity is strongly refuted by the Qur'an and Islam. On the contrary, Islamic monotheism maintains its identical sense however it may be looked into in the light of different accounts. In what follows, the author has taken a comparative look at the issue of trinity versus monotheism. From one side, he has criticized trinity, and he has clarified the deductive bases of monotheism in the light of theology, mysticism, and the Qur'an, from another side.

Keywords: Trinity, Arianism, Sabellianism, Orthodox, epiphany, unity of Essence, unity of the attributes, and mystical unity.

1. The Analysis of Trinity

There are several issues to be dealt with:

a) Conceptual clarification

Trinity is that we consider God having three Essences, Hypostases, or Persons. Hypostasis comes from the Greek language, meaning "origin" and "foundation," as used in Plotinus' works; however, it takes its root from Syriac.² In Christianity, the term "things" (Pragmata, or in Latin "res") were used for "hypostasis" (in

1 - Assistant professor in Azad Islamic University, Science & Research Dept.

2 - Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, trans. by Shahram Pazuki, p. 53

Greek “ὑπόστασις”), and the term “persons” were used to describe the three Persons of Trinity in order to lay emphasis on their reality. Origen, for example, who used to write in Greek described the “Father” and the ‘Son” as two things (Pragmata) as regard to their persons, but Tertullian who used to write in Latin argued that a “word” is not something merely composed of “voice or sound of the mouth,” rather it is a “thing (res) and a person.” He has thus described each one of the three Persons as a “thing of existence.”¹

b) Different interpretations of Trinity

Arianism, the first interpretation of trinity, was offered by Arius (AD 250–336), one of the celebrated theologians of the fourth century AD. He believed in monotheism and argued that God did not have a partner; anything outside God or apart from Him comes into existence *ex nihilo*. Jesus, he said, was between God and the world and was a sublime being through whom angels were created.²

Sabellianism was introduced by Sabellius of the third century AD. He believed that God was unique and one both as an Essence and as a hypostasis. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are merely three names for the same and single entity. One hypostasis may assume different names considering various aspects; that hypostasis, with regard to the creation of the world, is the “Father,” with regard to its union with the essence of human nature is the “Son,” and with regard to its mercy to man is the “Holy Spirit.” Trinity, as a result, means three epiphanies rather than three essences. God did manifest Himself as the Father during the Old Testament period, then as the Son, and at last as the Holy Spirit after the rise of Jesus Christ, just as the case of someone who may be called a father, a son, and a brother through different aspects.³

Orthodox is the term used to describe the theory set forth in the Athanasian Creed or the Nicene Creed;⁴ it is agreed upon by the

1 - Harry Austryn Wolfson, the philosophy of the Kalam, P. 126

2 - Mircea Eliade, a selected entries of the Encyclopedia of Religion, trans. by Bahā' al-Din Khurramshāhi as Dinpajuhi, Vol. 2, P. 57

3- Petros Bustani, *the Encyclopedia of Bustani*, Trans. by Robert Aserian, P. 148

4 - Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, Trans. by Behrooz Haddadi, P. 91

majority of Orthodox Catholic and Protestant Christians. In this strange and unreasonable interpretation, it is frankly stipulated in clear phrasing that Christians worship One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, without confusing the three Persons of trinity or separating the essence of each, for the character of the Father is distinct, that of the Son is distinct, and so is the Holy Spirit. The deity, however, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is unique and one. All three have eternal majesty and magnificence. Whatever the Father is the Son and the Holy Spirit are. All three are not created, but eternal infinite and omnipotent. They insist that although all three are gods, there is only one god. The Father has not come into being from anything else, the Son is born but is not created nor has he come into being. The Holy Spirit, nonetheless, is emanated from the Father and the Son. There is neither priority for these three Persons over one another nor posteriority; none is greater than the other or smaller, but all three are equal and eternal. They hold that they must worship trinity in unity and unity in trinity, which is the only way of salvation.¹

Deity, epiphany, or the mysterious affair, in Christianity, trinity doctrine is prima facie inconsistent with monotheism, thus maintaining both demands for justification. Christians hold that the three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, share deity which nonetheless is unique and one in its essence. As regard to the compatibility of monotheism with trinity, *the Creeds of the Catholic Church* read:

Trinity is one. We do not confess to three gods, rather to one God in three hypostases: “the trinity which is one in essence” (the Constantinopolitan Creed). Thus, the three hypostases do not share one and single deity, rather each of them is perfectly god: “the Father is the Son, and the Son is the Father, and the Father and the Son are the Holy Spirit; i.e. they are one god in their essence and nature.” (The Council of Toledo)²

One Protestant author says that there are eight points concerning the compatibility of trinity with monotheism buried in this statement: first, that God is One and unique; second, that the Father and the Son

1 - Toni Lynn, *the History of Christian Thought*, Trans. by Robert Aserian, P. 148

2- CCC, P. 60

and the Holy Spirit share deity; third, that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are the three hypostases and Persons each of whom is separate from the other two from everlasting to everlasting; fourth, that these three Persons share the same essence and substance and have equal power and purity; fifth, that each of the three has a particular function, the Father dispatches the Son and the Father and the Son dispatch the Holy Spirit; sixth, that some divine actions may be ascribed to all the three such as creation and maintaining it; seventh, that some divine actions may specifically be ascribed to each of the three (for example, the Father chooses and invites, while the Son is sacrificed and the Holy Spirit sanctifies and renews); eighth, that some attributes are exclusively confined to each of the three (for example, fatherhood is confined to the Father, while childhood is confined to the Son and emanation is confined to the Holy Spirit).¹

According to this Christian author, the persons of the trinity are indeed the three attributes of the deity. It is, however, possible to infer a different account from one phrase of *the Creeds of the Catholic Church*:

The three hypostases are separate from one another: “God is unique and one but not alone. The Father the Son and the Holy Spirit are not mere names to denote the qualities of the deity, because they are really separate from one another. Neither the Father is the Son, nor is the son the Father, nor is the Holy Spirit the Father or the Son. (The Council of Toledo)²

In order to make the trinity doctrine familiar to the mind, the same author gives an analogy: “Although there is no perfect analogy in the world to explain this matter, human intellect can be a very good example. Human intellect may consult with itself and yet gives its opinions as to its conclusions.”³

According to this analogy and example, we are to take the trinity as an appearance rather than the essence, because the

1- Nizam-u al-Ta’lim fi Ilm al-Lahut al-Qawim (نظام التعليم في علم اللاهوت القويم), Vol.

1, P. 211

2 - CCC, P. 60

3 - Elahiyyat Masihi (الاهيات مسيحي), P.

consultation and conclusions of the intellect do not entail a real distinction in the faculty of the intellect. This is a point highlighted by Christian theologians, including this very author. They say that trinity is not something dealing with the appearance, rather with the essence. This very point makes Christianity's doctrine of trinity different from the issue of theophany sometimes proposed in Islamic mysticism. "Theophany" does not produce any distinction in the deity. Christian trinity, however, assumes the three really separate Persons in the deity. The explanation of the trinity doctrine as theophany has been rejected as a heresy in the history of Christianity.

The followers of Sabellius hold that God has manifested Himself in trinity, but in essence is not of trinity. They believe that God as the Father is the creator and legislator, and as the Son, i.e. the embodied god, has come for the redemption of man, and as the Holy Spirit brings about the acceptance of redemption and sanctification of the faithful. They thus believe in *prima facie* trinity, rather than a real trinity in the Essence of God. As an explanation, we can say that just as one single person can be an artist a teacher and a friend, or be a father, a son, and a brother, God as His theophany can be the Son and the Holy Spirit as a manifestation, rather than a real essence. As if this belief denies the Holy Trinity doctrine, for it regards trinity as an appearance by which God manifested Himself in those forms.¹

What has been said so far is an example of the efforts made by Christian theologians to explain the doctrine of trinity. The significant point, however, is that Christian scholars have confessed that this doctrine is one of the divine mysteries that no human is able to decipher and understand. Some phrases suggest that, as this doctrine is subtle and too complicated to explain, ordinary Christians are required to accept it without explanation.² Other phrases, nevertheless, suggest that the human intellect fails to understand it, and human language is too narrow to express it.³

1 - Ibid., P. 88; and see: Nizam-u al-Ta'lim fi Ilm al-Lahut al-Qawim (نظام التعليم في علم اللاهوت القويم), Vol. 1, P. 216

2 - W. Montgomery Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, P. 4

3 - Nizam-u al-Ta'lim, Vol. 1, PP. 210 and 216; the Exegesis of Gospel of John, P.

The trinity was first proposed as formal doctrine in 325 AD, in the Nicene Creed. Athanasius, a figure who played a major role in its approval, himself said that the human intellect would not accept the trinity, yet, nevertheless, must bow to its mystery.¹ It is thus, at any rate, that Christian authors consider trinity to be an antirational doctrine, contrary to the intellect.²

Therefore, the majority of these scholars confess that the intellect will not naturally come to this conclusion, so that the only source for it is divine revelation.³ *The Creeds of the Catholic Church* reads:

Trinity in its precise meaning is the secret of the faith; one secret concealed in God and cannot be known unless by the revelation from above.⁴

The Christian Protestant writes:

The Holy Trinity doctrine cannot be discovered in natural theology, but rather in the unveiling of God in Jesus. By rational reasoning, we may understand that there is one God, but the presence of trinity in one God can only be understood by the unveiling of God.⁵

It is implied by this paragraph that for the trinity doctrine, supposing its consistency with the intellect, there is no way for the intellect to understand it, and its exclusive source comes from the Holy Scriptures. It is, however, to be asked whether this doctrine has ever been stipulated explicitly in the Holy Bible.

Although Bible does not mention the term “trinity,” and for the first time it was introduced by a man called Theophilus (d. 181 AD),⁶ Christian theologians have tried to find a few evidences from both the Old and New Testaments. Among these are the following:⁷

1 - the History of Civilization, Vol. 3, P. 770

2 - Tabi'at-u al-Sayyid Masih (طبيعة سيد المسيح), P. 18, as quoted by Ahmad Shelbi, Muqaranat-u al-Adyan (مقارنة الأديان), Vol. 2, P. 124

3 - Nizam-u al-Ta'lim, Vol. 2, PP. 209-210; al-Kanz-u al-Tahlil (الكنز التحليل), PP. 9-10

4 - CCC, P. 56

5 - Elahiyyat Masihi (الاهيات مسيحي), P. 88

6 - Ibid.

7 - Ibid., PP. 88-89; Nizam-u al-Ta'lim, Vol. 1, PP. 213-214

A plural pronoun is used for God. (*Genesis* 26:1 and 22:3 and ...)

A plural verb is used for God. (*Genesis* 26:1 and 7:11 and ...)

A collective noun “Elohim” is used for God.

The phrase “the angel of God” is used repeatedly in the Old Testament and it is regarded identical with God or a work done by the angel is ascribed to God too.

These scholars agree that the above phrases are not explicit in trinity; in the first three cases for example, the plural may be used in respect for God.¹ Besides, the more obvious argument is that before Christianity the Children of Israel did not have such an understanding of those phrases, a truth testified by the Christian scholars themselves.² It is taken for granted, however, that in the epistles of Paul and John of the New Testament, the story of trinity suggests that the son (i.e. Jesus Christ) has deity. These sections, nonetheless, never talk of the deity of the Holy Spirit, and Christian theologians have referred to phrases that are not explicit in order to prove that. Sometimes, for example, the name of the Father has come in line with the Son and the Holy Spirit or some actions and attributes are ascribed both to God and the Holy Spirit.³ As it is evident, such interpretations are ambiguous. In the entry of “trinity” in Eliade’s *Encyclopedia of Religion*, it is mentioned that modern exegetes and theologians all agree that there is no trinity in the Old Testament, nor is there an explicit reference to it in the New Testament, and the so-called claimed references fail to prove such a meaning.⁴ Similar observations exist in Hasting’s *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. It suggests that the Christian doctrine of trinity cannot be found in the Old Testament, nor can the later developments of trinity be found in the New Testament, even in the writings of Paul and John.⁵

c) Trinity in the Two Testaments

The term “trinity” never appears in the Bible; its first known

1 - Elahiyyat Masihi, P. 88

2 - CCC. P. 56

3 - Elahiyyat Masihi, P. 95; Nizam-u al-Ta’lim, Vol. 1, P. 212

4 - ER-ME. V. 15, P. 54

5 - ERE. V. 12, P. 458

introduction in the history of Christianity dates back to Theophilus of Antioch in 180 AD. The roots of the trinity concept can be felt in the New Testament; it has been stipulated by for example the phrase “gifting the right of baptism” at the end of John’s Gospel: “Let him be baptized by the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Moreover, the Christian greeting and salutation have come in trinal form: “From Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the chosen ones in the knowledge of God, the Father, to the sanctification of the spirit, for the obedience and sprinkling the blood of Jesus, may peace and blessing be multiplied upon you.”¹

When referring to God, the New Testament has used the Greek word “Hephaestus?” which means the Eternal Creator Living Almighty Lord God. The term may signify God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and other prophets, too. Thomas Michel claims that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are never called “Hephaestus?” in the New Testament, nonetheless in John’s Gospel 20:28, Jesus is called “Hephaestus?”

The consideration of the four gospels proves that Jesus has never been explicitly called a “god” by the identical gospels, and it is possible to interpret the existing phrases of the three gospels otherwise. Even the phrase “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” in Matthew’s gospel fails to evoke the trinity for a mind not preconditioned to discern it. On the contrary, some phrases of John’s gospel explicitly prove the deity of Jesus, which cannot be interpreted otherwise. It is noteworthy, nonetheless, that John’s gospel was written a hundred years after Christ, namely more than thirty years after the death of Paul. It thus may easily be understood how the author of this Gospel was influenced by the ideas of Paul who introduced the idea of Jesus’ deity in Christianity. Furthermore, it is likely to interpret some phrases of this gospel in a way compatible with the denial of Jesus’ deity.

The character of the Holy Spirit is not well-defined in the New Testament. The reported phrases claiming the deity of the Holy Spirit convey no explicit meaning as to the issue. It is seemingly because of

1 - The first epistle of Peter, 2/1:1

the ambiguous character of the third Person that after proving the deity of the second Person, the Council of Nicaea went first to explain the deity of the Holy Spirit¹.

d) Trinity in the Glorious Qur'an

- I. From among the clear teachings of the Qur'an is the Qur'anic emphasis on monotheism and the denial of God as being a son or having a son. This truth is openly stipulated in the chapter of al-Ikhlās:

Say, 'He is Allah, the One. Allah is *Samad* (All-rich and Impermeable). He neither begat, nor was He begotten, nor has He any equal.²

Accordingly, Allah begat none, nor has He a child, nor has He an equal.³

- II. Allah has explicitly and frankly denied trinity considering the believers in trinity as infidels:

They are certainly faithless who say: "Allah is the third [Person] of a trinity," while there is no god except the One God. If they do not relinquish what they say, there shall befall the faithless among them a painful punishment.⁴

Another verse reads:

O People of the Book! Do not exceed the bounds in your religion, and do not attribute anything to Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only an apostle of Allah, and His Word that He cast toward Mary and a spirit from Him. So have faith in Allah and His apostles, and do not say, "[God is] a trinity." Relinquish [such a creed]! That is better for you. Allah is but the One God. He is far too immaculate to have any son. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth, and Allah suffices as trustee.⁵

1 - Muhammad Reza Zibai Nejad, *Masihiyat Shenasiye Muqayesei* (مسیحیت شناسی مقایسه ای), P. 356

2 - al-Ikhlās: 1-4

3 - Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Tabatabai, *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Vol. 20, P. 387

4 - al-Ma'ida: 73

5 - al-Nisa': 171

III. Many verses of the Qur'an deny any son or child for God. For example:

They say: "The All-beneficent has taken offspring." Immaculate is He! Rather they are [His] honored servants.¹

And they say: "Allah has taken a son." Immaculate is He! Rather to Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth. All are obedient to Him.²

It is not for Allah to take a son. Immaculate is He!³

IV. Many verses deny the deity of Jesus. For example:

They are certainly faithless who say: "Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary."⁴

The Messiah, son of Mary, is but an apostle. Certainly [other] apostles have passed before him, and his mother was a truthful one. Both of them would eat food. Look how we clarify the signs for them, and yet, look how they go astray!⁵

He was just a servant whom we had blessed and made an exemplar for the children of Israel.⁶

They are certainly faithless who say: "Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary." Say: "Who can avail anything against Allah should He wish to destroy the Messiah, son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone upon the earth?"⁷

And the Christians say: "Christ is the son of Allah." That is an opinion they mouth, imitating the opinions of the faithless of former times. May Allah assail them, where do they stray?! They have taken their scribes and their monks as lords besides Allah, and also Christ, Mary's son; though they were commanded to worship only the One God, there is no god except Him; He is far too immaculate to have any partners they ascribe [to Him].⁸

And when Allah will say: "O Jesus son of Mary! Were it you who said to the people: 'Take me and my mother for gods besides Allah?' He will say: "Immaculate are you! It does not behoove me

1 - al-Anbiya': 26

2- Al-Baqara: 116

3 - Maryam: 35

4 - al-Ma'ida: 72

5 - al-Ma'ida: 75

6 - al-Zukhruf: 59

7 - al-Ma'ida: 17

8 - al-Tawba: 30-31

to say what I have no right to [say]. Had I said it, you would certainly have known it. You know whatever is in me myself, and I do not know what is in Your Self.¹

- V. The Qur'an has denied the deity of all angels, regarding them as the servants of Allah. For example:

The Messiah would never disdain being a servant of Allah, nor would the angels brought near [to Him].²

It does not behoove any human that Allah should give him the Book, judgment and prophethood, and then he should say to the people: "Be my servant instead of Allah." Rather [he should say], "Be godly people, because of your teaching the Book and because of your studying it." And he should not command you to take the angels and the prophets for lords. Would he call you to unfaith after you have been *muslims*?³

- VI. The Qur'an narrates from Jesus that he considers himself as the servant of Allah:

He [Jesus] said: "I am a servant of Allah."⁴

Indeed Allah is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him.⁵

But the Messiah had said: "O Children of Israel, Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord." Indeed whoever ascribes partners to Allah, Allah shall forbid him [entry into] paradise, and his refuge shall be the Fire, and the wrongdoers will not have any helpers.⁶

I did not say to them [anything] except what you had commanded me [to say]: "Worship Allah, My Lord and your Lord." And I was a witness to them so long as I was among them. But when you had taken me away, you yourself were watchful over them, and you are witness to all things.⁷

e) The roots of trinity in the preceding religions

Christianity, Will Durant says, was a monotheistic religion

1 - al-Ma'ida: 116
2 - al-Nisa': 172
3 - Al Imran: 79-80
4 - Maryam: 30
5 - al-Zukhruf: 64
6 - al-Ma'ida: 72
7 - al-Ma'ida: 117

observing the divine law, but later was diverted to the deity of Jesus and trinity. Paul had played the major and most important role in those diversions and alterations. Being familiar with Judaism and Greek philosophy, Paul was able to mingle some elements of the Greek culture with Christianity in order to draw the attention of the Greeks to the new religion. Furthermore, Palestine was a junction of ideas at that time, one which admitted the polytheistic thoughts from Egypt, Iran, India, and Rome. Admitting alien ideas, both Paul and the first fathers of the church could easily change the new religion making it acceptable for the Gentiles. The ideas of trinity, the Day of Judgment, and the worship of mother and infant coming from Egypt to Christianity, and the Theosophy religion which brought about the Gnostic and Neo-Platonic schools all gave rise to the obscurity of Christianity. From Syria the story of the Resurrection of Adonis, from Turkey the worship of Dionysius, giver of death and salvation, from Iran the belief in the millennium government era, and many others, all penetrated into Christianity.¹

“Kurios?”, a term used to be applied to Jesus by Paul, was the same title given by the Syrian and Greek priests to “Dionysus?” who would give death and salvation. Gentiles of Antioch and other cities who never knew Jesus in his life could appreciate him but as the savior gods. Paul would say: “Truly, I will tell you a secret.” He added some mystical ideas, already common in Philon’s philosophy, to that popular theology. Paul would say: “Jesus is the wisdom of Allah. He is prior to all. Everything is subsisting on him through whom everything is created. He is not the Messiah of the Jews to deliver Israel from the bondage of the chains; rather he is the Logos (word) whose death would save all.” Having overlooked the real life and teachings of Jesus unfamiliar to him and proposing such unfounded interpretations, Paul was able to oppose the intimate disciples of Jesus whose heavenly unveilings nobody could challenge.²

These matters are confirmed by another historian who holds that Paul used to deal with the Gentile peoples who were influenced by some mysterious schools in which the quest for the eternal life and the

1 - Will Durant, *the History of Civilization*, Vol. 3, P. 697

2 - Ibid. Vol. 3, P. 698

union of human soul with the souls of gods are deeply rooted. Paul did thus interpret the issue of death and resurrection of Jesus harmonious with those ideas¹.

In *Rig Veda*, there is a hymn as regard to the creation which suggests that the world has come into being *ex nihilo*. Waters are the primary matter for the world from which a great being, unique god happy and all-magnificent, creates himself by the help of the warmth (of asceticism). This hymn is the beginning of the cosmological theory which later changed into the school of Sankhya?. There are three principles in this hymn as the following: 1) The principle of the agent who is the first mover; 2) the primary matter of the world which is water; 3) the first being of creation. The above three principles can be compared to the mystery of Christian trinity. The Father is reckoned as the first principle; Holy Mary is as the primary matter from which a being, Jesus who is "Logos" or "Nous," comes into being; and the Holy Spirit is the tie between Jesus and the origin namely the Father².

The issue of trinity and the trinal manifestation of the absolute reality is not confined to Hinduism, for its parallel demonstration can be seen in the mythology of the ancient Egypt in the trinal gods of Osiris Isis and Horus. Moreover, trinity can be seen in Plotinus's philosophy as the trinal ancient original truths (Archikai Hypostasis) and in Christianity as the trinity of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. As in Hinduism, Christian trinity concerns the descent of Avatar the Truth from heaven to the sensible world.

In the ancient Chinese Taoism, the trinal reality is introduced in ontology and in the hierarchical beings of the three categories, i.e. the heaven, human beings, and the earth. The perfect man, in Chinese religion, applies to the Emperor or the monarch who has the great course of kingdom (Wang Tao) and is considered as the linking ring between the earth and the heaven; this is the only channel through which the earth and human being may have a connection with the heaven. The human being, however, plays the role of a mediator

1 - John B. Nass, A History of the World's Religion, trans. by Ali Asqhar Hikmat, P. 617

2 - Daryush Shayegan, *Adyan wa Maktabhaye Falsafiye Hind* (ادیان و مکتبهای فلسفی هند) (هند), Vol. 1, P. 81

between the earth and heaven, and the king is an example of the perfect man in a place where the active agent (Yin) and the passive agent (Yang) are unified.

Again in Hinduism, Brahman is the origin of the creation, Vishnu is the origin of the harmony and maintenance of beings, and Shiva is the origin of the destruction or annihilation of creatures and beings. As regards cosmology, they are of the same rank and fundamentally they are one, while Christian trinity puts a particular emphasis on the Person of Jesus¹.

1- The Analysis of Monotheism

The principle of unity (monotheism) is the most significant and fundamental one in the Islamic ideology. There is a long and extensive discussion on monotheism; however, we shall propose the abstract of that here and in the final conclusion it is demonstrated that not only it has reached its climax as an Islamic principle, but also all revealed religions are based on it.

i. Semantics

a) Etymological semantics

In Arabic language, tawhid is constructed on the pattern of taf'īl (تفعيل) as a verbal mode, from the root of (wahada). One of the meanings of this verbal mode is “to consider somebody or something having some feature”. For example, ta'zīm (تعظيم) means to consider somebody or something great, takfīr (تكفير) means to consider somebody an infidel. Accordingly, tawhid means to consider somebody one.

It is noteworthy, nonetheless, although the Qur'an is replete with many monotheistic contents, the infinitive mode of *tawhid* and its derivations are hardly used in the Qur'an, rather it has used other phraseology to express this principle. Instead, the infinitive mode of *tawhid* and its derivations are frequently used in Islamic traditions.

1 - Ibid.

b) Technical semantics

As a technical term, tawhid has a very extensive meaning. It is thus necessary first to set forth all categories of tawhid and then to give its definition. Here, nevertheless, we may offer a general meaning and that is: “An undoubted belief in the oneness of Allah in His Essence attributes and actions and following this belief in practice.”

ii. Different categories of unity in theology

In Islamic ideology, unity has different kinds and categories to be mentioned here in brief.

a) Theoretical and practical unities

Theoretical unity is that we in our mind believe in the absolute oneness of Allah and His affairs. As it were, it is to undoubtedly believe that Allah is absolutely one in His Essence, attributes, and actions. Did this belief put down roots in one’s heart, it gives a divine tone to human deeds and creeds, that is his actions would change into monotheistic ones. At this stage, he would step in the practical sphere of monotheism. Therefore, by practical unity we mean monotheistic practice and behavior; i.e. in one’s dealing with God, one is expected to behave as the monotheistic ideology requires. “Monotheism in worship”, for example, is one of the categories of practical unity.

b) Unity of Essence

Unity of Essence, in the common usage, means¹ that the Essence of Allah is absolutely one, second to none, has no equal, no parallel, no peer or partner. Unity of Essence is still used in a more extensive sense, which in addition to the above meaning, includes the absolute simplicity of the Essence letting no composition in it. In this broad

1 - Ja’far Subhani, al-Ilahiyyat ala Huda al-Kitab-i wa al-Sunna wa al-Aql (الإلهيات على هدى الكتاب و السنة و العقل), PP. 11-32

view, unity of Essence contains two issues:

That the Essence of God is absolutely simple allowing for no composition. This side of unity indeed equals the denial of any multiplicity within the Essence.

That the Essence is unique with no parallel or partner. This side of unity equals the denial of plurality outside the Essence, which means there is no divine essence but the Divine Essence.

As it is seen, it is possible to call the former side as the “denial of composition” and the latter as the “denial of plurality” from God. Referring to some traditions and verses of the Qur’an, Some theologians have called the former side as the “Unity of the One” or “the absolute Unity” (توحيد احدى) and the latter as the “Unity of oneness” or “the numerical unity” (توحيد واحدی). The more precise sense of unity of Essence, of course, is that not only is the Essence not compound or plural, but also it is not possible for the Essence to be compound or plural at all.

The first argument, the denial of composition (Unity-of-the-One argument): if God is a necessary being, then many gods are to be necessary beings for they all share the characteristic of being necessary. Moreover, the assumption of plurality implies some sort of distinction among those gods. When, for example, we talk of two books, besides their being common in the concept of book, one must be distinguishable and different from the other in some aspect (for example, color, space, volume, contents and the like). Accordingly, the plurality of gods implies that besides their being common in the concept of “necessary being”, these gods must be distinguishable and different from one another for they are two or even more. As a result, each one of these gods must have something in common (point of similarity) and a difference (point of distinction). So, it entails the composition of each essence of at least two parts: 1) the common part which is shared by all; and 2) the peculiarity part which is exclusive of each. This leads to the composition of the Essence which we have already proved that it is too immaculate to be compound.

The second argument, the denial of plurality (Unity-of-oneness argument): this is an argument known as the “mutual hindrance”. There are a few different accounts of it one of which is as follows:

If we suppose at least two gods, there are three impossible alternatives:

When clash of wills, only one of them is able to hinder the other from doing his will, but the other one is not able to do so. In that case, it is evident that the former is the real God, rather than the

latter one whose will is defeated.
Both are able to hinder the other from doing his will.
None is able to hinder the other from doing his will.

The last two alternatives are in no way compatible with our presupposition in the if-clause, namely, with the supposition of two gods. Because the second alternative implies the defeat of the wills of gods, and the third one implies the inability of each god to defeat the will of the other god; and these two meanings “defeating God’s will” and “inability to defeat god’s will” are not compatible with the “necessity of God’s being”. Hence, these two alternatives are unsound, and because there is no other alternative, then the plurality of gods is totally false.

It is worthy of note that the unity of Essence with its two meanings “Unity of the One” and “Unity of oneness” are both approved by the verse of al-Ikhlās, for “He is Allah, the One” denies the composition; and “nor has He any equal” denies plurality.

c) Unity of attributes

Unity of attributes means that the Essence and divine attributes are different in concept but one identical entity in reality. As a result, the concept of Essence is different from the concept of each attribute, such as omniscient and omnipotent. In reality, however, they all exist in one identical absolute and infinite reality.

It is noteworthy that the unity of attribute discussion is confined to the attributes of the essence (*vis-à-vis* those of action), and to the positive attributes (*vis-à-vis* the negative ones). Accordingly, unity of attributes is reduced to three principles:

That the Essence and divine attributes are different in their concepts;

That the Essence and each of the attributes of essence are one identical single entity in their objective reality.

That all attributes of essence are one identical single entity in their objective reality, however, they differ one from another in their concepts.

A slight attention, of course, would prove that the third principle is implied by the second, for it is evident that were a few things identical with one other thing, they themselves would be identical; i.e. it is impossible for a few things different from one thing to be

identical one with another. Thus, that the Essence is identical with the attributes evidently entails the identity of the attributes one with another. Nonetheless, this third principle is proposed separately for the sake of emphasis.

One argument for the unity of attributes is that, firstly the absolute perfection of God requires Him to have His attributes in the most perfect way; and secondly having attributes in the most perfect way necessitates the essence having its attributes by itself and with no need in an attribute from outside the essence. Consequently, the absolute perfection of God necessitates His Essence having His attributes with no need in an attribute from outside¹.

What was said so far was the Shiite view on the unity of attributes. There are, however, other views on the issue². Asharites, for example, believe that attributes are other than the Essence and that the attributes are eternal. Karramiya school holds that the attributes are other than the essence and the attributes, on the contrary, are temporal. And some Mutazilite theologians believe that the attributes act on behalf of the Essence³.

d) Unity in creation

Unity in creation is one of the subdivisions of unity in action. This unity means that God Almighty is the only independent and real creator of the whole creation. The creation of all agents other than God does but extend from the creation of God, namely their creation is subordinate to and dependent on the will and creation of God.

e) Unity of *Rabb* (Lordship)

First of all, let's take a look at the meaning of the Arabic term "rabb". "Rabb", in Arabic literature, sometimes means the "nurturer". Although the meaning of "rabb" is close to the meaning of "nurturer",

1 - 'Abdurrazzaq Lahiji, *Sarmayeye Iman* (سرمايه ايمان), P. 50

2 - See Ja'jar Subhani, *Buhuth-un fi al-Melal wa al-Nehal* (بحوث في الملل و النحل), Vol. 2, P. 87

3 - Ash'ari, *Maqalat-u al-Islamiyyin* (مقالات الإسلاميين), Vol. 1, P. 224

they do not exactly convey the same sense. In some usages, “rabb” applies to somebody who is the master and owner of something or somebody, so that he can manage the affairs of it or him as he wishes. “Rabb”, however, is not the owner; rather it is a corollary of real ownership. No one may independently and absolutely intervene in the affairs of another, unless one is his real owner. Consequently, “rabb” applies to the owner who cannot leave his servant alone, but intervenes in his affairs in order to manage his life.

Viewing the above meaning of “rabb”, *unity of rabb* is that Allah as the real owner of the whole creation independently manages the affairs of all beings with no ever need in the permission of other beings whatsoever. Some other beings may have the right to manage the affairs of other beings, but this right is subordinate to and extends from the will and permission of Allah Almighty.

It is to be mentioned that unity has other subdivisions such as, unity in legislation or law, unity in sovereignty, unity in obedience, unity in intercession, unity in forgiveness, and unity in action. All these categories are proved by the intellectual and religious demonstrations.

iii. Unity in a mystical point of view

The issue of unity in Islamic mysticism has a long history which dates back to the second century AH., when Islamic theosophy came into being. In the ideas of mystics such as Bayazid, Junaid, Hallaj, and Shebli, unity has been proposed as the “unity of witnessing”. In the course of his mystical journey, Sufis say, the wayfarer reaches the station where he can see nothing but the One. His eyes will change into one eye, gazing at the Real One in the station the Absolute One. In the later centuries, Islamic mysticism has developed into a better and more perfect ideology, until at last with all his scrutiny and inspection Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi came to propose the “personal Oneness of being” theory demonstrating it in his theoretical mysticism. An abstract of this lofty theory is as the following:

Ibn ‘Arabi holds that the reality of existence is prior to and the origin of everything. This truth is absolutely and purely good and personally one. The reality of existence is one but not numerically nor as to its quiddity, rather it is so absolutely one to be even free from

this very should stipulation of absolutism. The reality of existence is of absolute simplicity and is a pure existence. This pure and sheer entity has different affairs grades and manifestations, which in the presence of divine knowledge appear as the permanent archetypes, but in the objective world assume the garment of external existence. Plurality, as a result, is a matter which concerns those manifestations. The plurality of manifestations is not illusions to bring about unbelief or blasphemy. Hence, the reality of pure existence is one, self-subsistent, and the preserver of all; so, it is the Truth and the Truth is God.

Ibn 'Arabi and his commentators have offered arguments for the above claim some of which are as follows:

The first argument:

There is no parallel for existence nor is there a contrary. Truly existence is but one identical entity and nothing may contradict itself.¹

And anything which has neither a parallel nor a contrary is personally one; therefore, existence is personally one.

The second argument:

Existence is necessary, for were it not so, it would possibly be non-existent. And if non-existence were applied to existence, it would lead to a contradiction which is impossible. Furthermore, arguments of monotheism demonstrate that a necessary being is one; as a result, the existence is one.²

The third argument:

Contrary to existence, a contingent being is able to be non-existent. But existence is not contingent, and anything which is not contingent must be necessary (there is no room for an impossible being to come into being). Then, existence is necessary; and arguments of monotheism demonstrate that a necessary being is one. As a conclusion, existence is one.³

All the above arguments demonstrate the personal unity of existence in the mystical point of view.

In order to more clarify the complicated issue of personal unity

1 - Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam* (فصوص الحكم), Fuss of Isma'il, P. 93

2 - Sa'in-u al-Din Ibn Turke, *Tamhid-u al-Qawa'id* (تمهيد القواعد), P. 61

3 - Ibid.

of existence, some mystics have provided a few analogies¹. One analogy is the reflection of the sunlight on different glasses. When exposed to the sunlight, different colorful glasses reflect different colors, while the sunlight cast on all is one identical light.

Persian poem:

Sunlight is cast on thousands of glasses
So, it has passed through the color of each transparently
They are all one light; but it is different colors that
Have caused differentiation among this and that²

Another analogy is wine and wine glass. Because of the transparency of the glass and the purity of wine, both seem one identical thing; nonetheless, the intellect knows that they are two things.

Persian poem:

From the purity of wine and transparency of glass
The color of glass mingled with that of wine
As if, it is all but glass rather than wine
Or it is all but wine rather than glass³

Another analogy is one face in front of many mirrors. Each mirror reflects the face to the extent of its particularities. Thus different faces can be seen from those mirrors, while there is only one identical face.

Persian poem:

The beloved one is one, but he has set up
More than thousands of mirrors for the sake of looking
He has shown in each of those mirrors
His face to the extent of their transparency and lucidity⁴

Still another analogy is sea water which can be transformed into different matters. When heated by the sunlight, it changes into vapor, which when accumulated changes into clouds, which when gets cold

1 - See: Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futuhat-i al-Makkiyya* (الفتوحات المكية), Vol. 2, P. 543; *al-Janib-u al-Gharbi* (الجانب الغربي), P. 147

2 - Iraqi, *Lama'at* (لمعات), 15th Lum'a, P. 389

3 - Ibid., 2nd Lum'a, P. 379

4 - Mulla Mohsen Feid Kashani, *Kalamat Maknune* (كلمات مكنونة), P. 41

change into drops of rain, which when get together make a flood, which makes streams which flow into the sea again. Nonetheless, it is merely one identical thing, water, transforming into different manifestations in this process.

Persian poem:

Any image evident on the surface of the universe
Is the picture of the one who painted the universe
The ancient sea when surging into new tidal wave
It is called a wave but in fact it is merely the sea¹

There are other analogies such as the presence of line in all letters and words when transcribed, or the presence of *one* in all numbers for a number is but the repletion of one. All these analogies seek to show one deep truth, i.e. one identical entity may appear in different guises. It means that absolute unity belongs to the very truth, but plurality belongs to its manifestations. As a result, existence is but one identical personal truth, but its plurality is made by its different manifestations and shadows.

Now let's take a Qur'anic glance at the issue. The term "Aya" or "Ayat" (sign or signs) is repeated about 380 times in the Qur'an, in some cases of which it means genetic signs. That is, in the light of Qur'an, the whole universe is construed as a sign. "Aya" means sign implying that something is the sign of something else. The best equivalent to convey the meaning of "Aya" is mirror; mirror is called mirror for it shows or reflects some other thing (image or picture). Accordingly, it can be said that the whole universe including human beings have only one function of displaying another being who is but Allah. An interesting conclusion of this argument is that the whole world is of no respect but a sign, thus of no function but displaying God (theophany). It is thus, the Qur'an introduces all other than God as "glorifier" (al-Hadid: 1), "praiser" (Isra': 44), "aware of prayers" (al-Nur: 41), "the messenger of Allah" (al-Ra'd: 13, "of the fear of God" (al-Baqara: 74), "prostrating" (al-Rahman: 6), "servant", "sign", "face of God", and in one word "the all-displaying mirror of God".

As a consequence, *all other than God* is merely a sign or a mirror.

1 - Ibid.

Were this *all other than God* ever to be existence, we must assume an independent perspective towards it, while that *all other than God* has no independence of its own at all. Were one to say that *all other than God* does not exist, one does not really mean to say that they are non-existent or nothing, but rather one intends to remind us of this Qur'anic lofty word that "existence is not to be ascribed to that *all other than God*", for its existence is not of its own, but dependent on and subordinate to God; it is a shadowy being or semi-existent.

Conclusion

When comparing Islamic monotheism with Christian trinity, we may draw a few striking conclusions. First is that as an irrational doctrine, trinity has received many justifications none of which may ever be embraced by the intellect; it was so irrational that some Christians came at last to say that trinity is a secret unintelligible to the intellect. In reply to this, we can say that anything unintelligible to the intellect cannot be proved by the intellect and thus it is to be refuted totally.

Second is that, on the contrary, monotheism in the Islamic pure thought can be approved and proved by different methods, i.e. both by the sound rational arguments and by the revelation or the Glorious Qur'an. The Islamic monotheism has thus assembled the intellect and the revelation, faith and rationality, and religion and philosophy all together.

Third, in Islam monotheism has been looked into through a range of theological, philosophical, mystical, and Qur'anic approaches. This shows that Islamic monotheism is justifiable, from one side, and that it can be surveyed through the above four approaches, from another side.

In a word, trinity can be proved neither by intellectual reasoning nor by revelation, while Islamic monotheism can be proved both by the intellect and revelation.

References

1. The Holy Bible
2. Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, trans. by Shahram

- Pazuki, Tehran, al-Huda Publication, 1371
3. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *the philosophy of the Kalam*, Tehran, al-Huda Publication, 1368
 4. Mircea Eliade, a selected entries of *the Encyclopedia of Religion*, trans. by Bahā' al-Din Khurramshāhi as Dinpajuhi, Tehran, Pazhuheshgah Ulum, 1375
 5. Petros Bustani, *the Encyclopedia of Bustani*, Trans. by Robert Aserian, Tehran, Imir Kabir Publication, 1372
 6. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, Trans. by Behrooz Haddadi, Qum, Markaze Mutale'at wa Tahqiqat Adyan wa Mazaheb, 1384
 7. Toni Lynn, *the History of Christian Thought*, Trans. by Robert Aserian, Tehran, Mu'assasaya farhanqiye tebyan, 1374
 8. Anas al-Amirkani, *Nizam-u al-Ta'lim fi Ilm al-Lahut al-Qawim* (نظام التعليم في علم اللاهوت القويم), Beirut, al-Amirkan Publication, 1890
 9. Henry Tason, *Elahiyyat Masihi* (الاهيات مسيحي), trans. by T. Mickailiyan, Tehran, Hayate Abadi Publication, ?
 10. Miller, *the Exegesis of Gospel of John*, Nur Jahan Publication, 1941
 11. Will Durant, *the History of Civilization*, trans. by Fereidun Badrei and others, Tehran, Entesharat Amuzesh Enqelab Islami, 1371
 12. Ahmad Shelbi, *Muqaranat-u al-Adyan* (مقارنة الأديان), Cairo, Maktabat-u al-Mesriyya, 1993
 13. Salim Salibi, *al-Kanz-u al-Tahlil* (الكنز التحليل), Damascus, al-Tab'at-u al-Batrikiyya, 1912
 14. Thomas Michael, *Christian Theology*, Trans. by Hussein Towfiqi, Qum, Markaze Mutale'at wa Tahqiqat Adyan wa Mazaheb, 1377
 15. Muhammad Reza Zibai Nejad, *Masihiyyat Shenasiye Muqayesei* (مسيحيت شناسی مقایسه ای), Qum, Mu'assasaya Nashr Islami, 1373
 16. Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Tabatabai, *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Qum, Mu'assasaya, A'alami, 1339
 17. John B. Nass, *A History of the World's Religion*, trans. by Ali Asqhar Hikmat, Tehran, Entesharat Amuzesh Enqelab

- Islami, 1372
18. Daryush Shayegan, *Adyan wa Maktabhaye Falsafiye Hind* (اديان و مکتبهای فلسفی هند), Tehran, Amir Kabir Publication, 1356
 19. Ja'far Subhani, *al-Ilahiyyat ala Huda al-Kitab-i wa al-Sunna wa al-Aql* (الإلهيات على هدى الكتاب و السنة و العقل), Qum, Mu'assasaya Imam Sadiq, 1417
 20. 'Abdurrazzaq Lahiji, *Sarmayeye Iman* (سرمایه ایمان), Tehran, al-Zahra Publication, ????
 21. Ja'jar Subhani, *Buhuth-un fi al-Melal wa al-Nehal* (بحوث فی الملل و النحل), Qum, Mu'assasaya al-Nashr, 1417
 22. Ash'ari, *Maqalat-u al-Islamiyyin* (مقالات الإسلاميين), Tehran, Anjuman Mustashreqan Almani, 1980
 23. Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam* (فصوص الحکم), Qum, Bidar, ????
 24. Sa'in-u al-Din Ibn Turke, *Tamhid-u al-Qawa'id* (تمهید القواعد), Tehran, Farhang wa Amuzesh Ali Publication, 1380
 25. Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futuhāt-i al-Makkiyya* (الفتوحات المکیة), Beirut, Dar-u Ihya' al-Turath-i al-Arabi, ???/
 26. Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Janib-u al-Gharbi* (الجانب الغربي), Dar-u Ihya' al-Turath-i al-Arabi, 1361
 27. Mulla Mohsen Feid Kashani, *Kalamat Maknune* (کلمات مکنونة), Tehran, Rarahani Publication, 1360
 28. Watt W. Montgomery, *Islam and Christianity Today*, London, Rutledge, 1983
 29. CCC (=Catechism of the Catholic Church, Veritas, 1994
 30. RG (Hastings, James, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, New York, Charles scri Bner's Sons,