

## **The Trouble With The Trinity**

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John 14:25-27; Matthew 28:18-20; Genesis 1:1-2:4; Colossians 1:15-20

Trinity Sunday is an odd thing: a holy day, a feast day to honor a doctrine rather than a person or an event – the only such doctrinal feast day observed ecumenically, to my knowledge. Imagine, a “salvation by grace” feast day. I mean what would push people to want to institutionalize such a thing? Trinity Sunday is a late addition to the church calendar, too, with origins in 12<sup>th</sup> century England, and not given the status of first class feast day in the Catholic church until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I tried in vain to find out this week what prompted Thomas Becket to push for this celebration in 1162 or what made Pope Pius X upgrade it to a major feast in 1911. I couldn’t find any historical record of the reasoning. But my hunch is that it’s got to be, somehow, about “protecting the faith” from heresy.

Explicitly celebrating the Trinity in worship, not on a particular Sunday, but every Sunday, is an ancient church tradition with a similar purpose – defending truth against heresy. Many of the trinitarian hymns we still sing in translation date back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century when the doctrine as stated in the Nicene Creed was being formalized in opposition to the “Arian Heresy”, claiming that Jesus was partly God, partly human. The church fought a century-long battle to define the relationship between the eternal God, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, and the Spirit of God, sent by Christ, living in us, finally choosing the wording we all know: one God, three persons.

I know that wording is ever so helpful for you when you try to explain the Trinity to your Muslim friends. Or to your children, for that matter. NOT. One God, three persons – what the heck does that mean? Augustine, a Berber theologian, by the way, wrote volumes trying to answer that question. Well, I could unpack the Greek words for a while and explain what the historical debate was all about and why this particular phrasing was chosen over others, but honestly, I'm not going to bother. For me it kinda boils down to this: "Them was fightin' words", and 1600 years later we can't even remember what the fight was about. But you know, people died in that linguistic battle of Christian against Christian: Indeed years after his party had lost, Arius himself (from whom Arianism gets its name), another Berber theologian, by the way, died, likely of poisoning, on his way to be un-excommunicated.

More significantly for us in this place, since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Trinitarian language has been "fightin' words" between Muslims and Christians. The Trinity is, of course, our great blasphemy in their eyes – a thinly veiled polytheism that promotes Jesus to divine status in an assault on the primal doctrine of the unique oneness of God. It might seem wise, then, as a Christian community in a Muslim context, to skip over Trinity Sunday, as it's such an offensive idea in our neighbor's minds. However, my inclination is actually to do the opposite: because it is so problematic for us, it behooves us as Christians in a Muslim context to be intentional in thinking about the Trinity, to consider why it is, or isn't, important to us now; that's an opportunity this Sunday offers us.

This week, I read a fascinating article on the Trinity from a Muslim perspective by Sheikh Abdal-Hakim Murad, born Tim Winter, a British convert to Islam who lectures at Cambridge. He begins this article by noting that Muslims feel like the Trinity has been used historically by Christians as a weapon against them. Let me quote him:

*It is recalled even today among Muslims in Russia that when Ivan the Terrible captured Kazan, capital of the Volga Muslims, he told its people that they could escape the sword by 'praising with us the Most Blessed Trinity for generation unto generation.' (So their choice was Trinity or death-kts) Even today in Bosnia, Serb irregulars use the three-fingered Trinity salute as a gesture of defiance against their Muslim enemies. And so on. Much Muslim theologizing about the Trinity has hence been set in a bitterly polemical context of fear and often outright hatred: the Trinity as the very symbol of the unknown but violent Other lurking on the barbarous northern shores of the Mediterranean, scene of every kind of demonic wickedness and cruelty.*

Does this surprise you? Murad's observations on how the Trinity is linked to violence brought to my mind the tragic irony in the name Robert Oppenheimer, himself a Jew, chose for the testing of his nuclear weapon in the New Mexico desert: Trinity. Oppenheimer said it was John Donne's poetry that had drawn him to the name, and he cited two specific poems: one that speaks of death touching resurrection, the other offering up the simple phrase, "batter my heart, three-personed God". Yet, when the bomb was detonated, Oppenheimer said it was words from the Hindu Bhagavad Gita which came to his mind: "If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendor of the Mighty One..." Is that what God's might looks like – blinding flash of light and mushroom cloud?

Our images of God and the language we use to describe God seems, so often, so dangerously loaded.

So, honestly, why don't we disavow our Trinitarian language – just chuck it? If it's confusing and complicated and offensive and problematic, let's just consign that language to history and say we believe in the one God. Period. The Lord our God is one. There is no God but God. Full stop. It's tempting, I have to admit. But I have this problem. I believe with all my heart in the profound reality that we have come to call Trinity, a reality that both resists and demands words – that Jesus Christ is the human face of the God of Eternity and that the Spirit of the Eternal God, which is the

Spirit of Christ, has been given to us, and is alive and at work, in, through, and beyond us in our world.

So how do we testify to “Trinitarian reality” without tying ourselves to language that belies God more than it reveals about God, especially in our Muslim context? I would invite us to have a little conversation with Sheikh Abdul Hakim Murad for some clues. And we’ll let him speak first.

Murad notes that most Muslim treatments of the Trinity reveal an underlying impatience. Again I quote him, “One of the virtues of the Semitic type of consciousness is the conviction that ultimate reality must be ultimately simple, and that the *Nicene talk* of a deity with three persons, one of whom has two natures, but who are all somehow reducible to authentic unity, quite apart from being rationally dubious, seems intuitively wrong. God, the final ground of all being, surely does not need to be so complicated.”

I think he’s hit the nail on the head in this commentary: we want God to be simple. But, here’s the rub: We also realize that God’s simplicity, if that’s the right word, is profoundly complex. And if much of our traditional Trinitarian language has complicated God in unhelpful, esoteric ways, which I will grant him, I think it nevertheless testifies to the mystery of the profound and intricate complexity of God.

Now, Islam itself has its own way of witnessing to the complexity of God while insisting on unity – through meditation on the 99 names of God, a tradition rooted in Abrahamic faith (Abraham and Hagar both “name” God, as you recall – “God who provides”, which I learned as *Jehovah Jireh*, but which is in Arabic “Ar-Razaaq”, and “God who sees”, “Al Basir”). Murad himself turns to this

tradition in presenting a viable Muslim alternative to Trinitarianism when he cites the 18<sup>th</sup> century Bosnian mystic, Hasan, Kaimi:

*Should you wish to behold the visage of God,  
Surrender to Him, and invoke His names,  
When your soul is clear a light of true joy shall shine.  
Know the Divine Unity today, through the path of love for Him.*

It's strongly appealing, isn't it? I love this tradition of the names of God and find it one of the easiest ways for me to connect to Islamic spirituality as a Christian. Contemplating the 99 names is like seeing God as a diamond with many, many facets. But, my friends, the Trinity makes a different kind of claim for the complexity of God, a radical, dynamic claim:

In speaking of God as "Father, Son and Spirit", language grounded in the experience of the early church, Christians through the ages have contended that God is essentially, from eternity to eternity, relational. There is no one, self-sufficient God who is not in relationship. This is implied in the New Testament when we say "God is LOVE." Love can only be relational. It doesn't exist in isolation. So Christianity claims that there is a loving "we"-ness about God from the start. And it is a "we"-ness that desires to ever expand the relational circle of love. God IS, in dynamic, loving movement, and out of this dynamic, loving movement comes everything else that is: God's relational love overflows and gives birth to creation, redeems creation, upholds it and brings it to fruition. So while, traditionally, we have tried to apply "job descriptions" to the Trinity – the "Father" as Creator, the "Son/Christ" as Redeemer, the Spirit as Sustainer, we can tell from our scriptures that it's not that easy. Look at what we have just read about creation this evening: the eternal God speaks, the Spirit moves across the face of the earth at creation, everything that God created was created in Christ and through Christ. It is our essentially relational self-giving God that is at work in all of this dynamic, creative, saving activity.

In his critique of the Trinity, Sheikh Murad notes that from his perspective (and most Muslims would agree with him, I think), the doctrine of the Trinity is presumptuous, presuming to know more than one can know about the inner nature of God. If you read the long works Augustine or Aquinas wrote about the Trinity, as Murad has, you'd likely share that opinion. And it's an excellent critique. And while I would gladly reject much of what is presumptuous in our theologizing, I think we have to admit that there IS something scandalously presumptuous about Christianity. We do indeed claim to know the heart of the God of Eternity through Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, in Christ, the relational God -- come to us not one-dimensionally (as through a book) but multi-dimensionally, as a complex person -- we may come to understand God's self-giving, relational nature. And we claim that the mystery of that nature is inextricably and eternally linked to Jesus' life of love, his cross and his empty tomb. Yes, it is a scandalous, presumptuous claim that we make: In Christ, given, crucified and risen, God has defined God's own Self and invited human flesh into the eternal divine dance of self-sharing. And in Christ, we in our humanity begin to catch on to what our part in that movement can look like, feel like, live like.

This is part of what we are saying when we claim that we are a new creation in Christ. In Christ, we are re-formed, again, in God's image. Some theologians have claimed that our being in the image of God refers to our rationality, as God is "ultra-rational". But I am absolutely convinced that it is more true to the Biblical witness and to Christian faith to say that God's image in us is our relationality -- as God is essentially relationally, we were originally created and are now re-created in Christ to be in wholeness of relationship with God, with others, with the world in this movement of self-sharing to which the Trinity witnesses.

Okay, so far this has been heavy on theology, but light on practicality, and maybe nil on application. But understanding the Trinity in this light makes all the difference in the world in practice. Because we know God's relational nature, who God IS, through the image of Christ crucified and risen and through our experience of the Spirit of God in Christ at work in us and our world, to "go ye therefore" in the name of the "Father, Son, and Spirit", is to go forth in a very particular posture or spirit. We can't go forth as Christians in the world from a position of domination and power or an attitude of triumphalism and be, at the same time, acting in the name of this relational God. We can't "go forth to conquer" in the name of a God like this. We may say we're doing it for God, but if it's not done in God's image, it's not done for God. If we are going forth in the world as Jesus has sent us, in the name of God who is "Father, Son, and Spirit", we will move to the rhythm of the dance of self-sharing, self-giving, self-pouring-out that witnesses to God's own loving, relational, redeeming essence.

Do you see, then, that to name a nuclear bomb test "Trinity" is not only to misunderstand God and what God's power looks like, but that it is utter blasphemy against the God of love revealed in Christ as "Father, Son, and Spirit"? To make a Trinitarian salute as a gesture of hatred is to blaspheme and utterly betray the very God one pretends to "defend"? Our failure to understand Trinity isn't just an intellectual problem; it's a spiritual catastrophe which has been devastating for our Christian witness in the world.

The only solution I can offer us is to live our Trinitarian theology instead of just talking about it, praying that we may bear an alternative witness in this context, a witness which comes out of accepting God's invitation in Christ to enter the dance, to follow and not lead, to learn the gracious postures of giving, receiving, and sharing that will reflect this God who is one dynamic, loving

reality ever inviting creation to join in the celebration. Rather than defining the Trinity for Muslims (or Jews or other Christians, for that matter), we must live Trinitarian truth in our relating to all our neighbors in service, in honor, in love.

And so now, brothers and sisters, hear again the great commission of Christ: Go ye therefore into the world, creatively, redemptively, faithfully, trusting God who is Love to take the lead, that the nations may join in and dance with us to the music of the angels of heaven. Now and forever.

Amen.

+ The full essay on the Trinity by Sheikh Abdal-Hakim Murad can be accessed at:

<http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/trinity.htm>