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The Unity and Trinity of God

Christian Doctrinal Development in Response to the Challenge of Islam—An Historical Perspective

Sidney H. Griffith

I

THE FIRST AND MOST insistent article of Islamic faith is expressed in the familiar formula of the first phrase of the *shahādah*, the ritual testimony that “there is no god but God,” a phrase that in these exact words appears only twice in the Qurʾān (XXXVII *aṣ-Ṣāffāt* 35 and XLVII *Muḥammad* 19); but it is echoed some forty times in the Islamic scripture’s constant refrain, in various wordings, that “there is no god but He.”¹ Further, the Qurʾān insists that God is one, with no consort, no offspring, no partner, and no

1. See Andrew Rippin, “Witness to Faith,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006) 5:488–91. See also Anton Baumstark, “Zur Herkunft der monotheistischen Bekenntnisformeln im Koran,” *Oriens Christianus* 37 (1953) 6–22, who searches for an ultimately Jewish or Samaritan liturgical formula behind the several Arabic phrases.

associate. The text insists that God is one God (*Allāh al-wāḥid*): “Your God is surely one” (XXXVII *aṣ-Ṣāffāt* 4); “He has no associate” (*lā sharīka lahu*, VI *al-anʿām* 163).

Accordingly, “to acknowledge that God is one” (*at-tawḥīd*) expresses the central doctrine of Islam, and to deny or compromise this acknowledgment is to commit the fundamental sin of *ash-shirk*, that is, to allege that God somehow has an associate; in Islamic terms it is the radical blasphemy, an ungrateful act of disbelief (*al-kufr*).² And so, in a particularly succinct and striking passage, the Qurʾān commands:

Say, He is God, one [*aḥad*], God the everlasting. He does not beget;
He is not begotten; there is not one like Him. (CXII *al-Ikhlāṣ* 1–4)

While it is true that in the milieu in which the Qurʾān most likely made its first appearance this passage may have been intended to rebut the beliefs of those Arabian polytheists who spoke of the sons and daughters of God, on the face of it the wording can just as well be taken to reject the doctrines of the Christians (*an-Nasārā*) who say, according to the Qurʾān, “The Messiah is the son of God; that is what they say with their mouths; they imitate the saying of those who disbelieved earlier, may God fight them, how perverted they are” (IX *at-Tawbah* 30). It seems clear in fact from this verse that in the Qurʾān’s view, what the Christians mistakenly say about Jesus the Messiah is what leads them to speak of “three” in connection with what they say about the “one” God.

There are only two verses in the Qurʾān that explicitly mention what we might call the “Christian three,” and they do so in connection with a strong critique of what Christians say about Jesus. The most comprehensive verse reads as follows:

O People of the Book, do not go beyond the bounds in your religion and do not say about God anything but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, Mary’s son, is only God’s messenger, and His word, which He imparted to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and do not say “three”; stop it, it is better for you. God is only one God [*ilāhun wāḥidun*], praised be He;

2. For a discussion of these matters, with an ample bibliography, see Gerhard Böwering, “God and His Attributes,” in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, 2:316–31. For more on the concept of *ash-shirk*, see G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) esp. 67–87; for more on the concept of *al-kufr*, see Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾān* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966) esp. 119–77.

He has no child, His are what is in the heavens and what is on the earth. God is a sufficient one to trust. (IV *an-Nisā* 171)

On the face of it, the “three” that this verse commands the Christians to stop acknowledging are God, His word, and a spirit from Him, understood by the Christians, according to the Qurʾān, as one God with two “associates.”³ The Qurʾān makes the same point more obliquely in the only other passage in which there is an explicit mention of the “Christian three,” where again the immediate reference is to Jesus the Messiah. The Qurʾān says: “They have disbelieved [*kafara*] who say that God is ‘one of three’/‘third of three’ [*thālith thalāthatin*]. There is no God but one God. If they do not stop saying it, a grievous punishment will certainly befall those who have disbelieved” (V *al-Māʾidah* 73). While there is some discussion about the exact sense of the expression, in the context of the associated verses, the phrase “one of three”/“third of three” is clearly presented as an epithet of Jesus the Messiah;⁴ the previous verse provides almost an exact parallel: “They have disbelieved who say God is the Messiah, the son of Mary. The Messiah said, O Sons of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord; whoever gives God an associate [*man yushrik billāhi*], God has forbidden him the Garden and his abode will be the Fire” (V *al-Māʾidah* 72).

These verses from the Qurʾān, especially IV *an-Nisā* 171, suggest in so many words that the Qurʾān commands the Christians not to speak of the one God as God/Father, Word/Son, and Spirit. While over the centuries some scholars, both Muslim and Christian, citing yet another verse, have suggested that the Qurʾān envisions a Christian Trinity of God/Father, God/Mother/Mary, and Jesus/Son, the present writer has proposed elsewhere that this interpretation is wrong and that in the Islamic exegetical tradition it actually rests on a misunderstanding of the significance of the Qurʾānic epithet “one of three”/“third of three” quoted above.⁵ Here is not the place to pursue the matter further; suffice it to say that in early Islamic times both Christian and Muslim scholars alike understood the Qurʾān’s constant

3. See Matthias Radscheit, “Word of God,” in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, 5:541–48; Sidney H. Griffith, “Holy Spirit,” in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, 2:442–44.

4. See the discussion in Sidney H. Griffith, “Syriacisms in the Arabic Qurʾān: Who Were ‘Those Who Said ‘Allāh Is Third of Three’ according to *al-Māʾidah* 73?” in *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qurʾān Presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai*, ed. Meir M. Bar-Asher et al. (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2007) 83–110.

5. See Griffith, “Syriacisms in the Arabic Qurʾān.”

affirmation that God is one (*at-tawhīd*)⁶ to be directed against the contrary Christian affirmation that the one God is also three (*at-tathlīth*):⁷ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For this reason, the earliest Muslim anti-Christian polemicists accused the Christians of effectively professing tritheism, while the earliest Christian apologists and anti-Islamic polemicists who lived in the Islamic world and wrote in Arabic accused the Muslims of missing the point of the Christian confession and of not following the logic of their own Islamic scripture, which, according to these Christian writers, clearly speaks of God, of God's Word, and of a Spirit from Him (IV *an-Nisā* 171).

Outside of the Qurʾān, the oldest surviving Islamic challenge to the propriety and veracity of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is doubtless to be found in the long Arabic inscription placed just above the arches, on both sides of the inner octagonal arcade of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.⁸ Modern scholars have accepted the opinion that this inscription actually dates from the time of the original construction of the dome, at the behest and with the patronage of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (685–705); the inscription itself mentions the year 691.⁹ While the text on the outer face of the arcade is composed of brief phrases from the Qurʾān attesting that God is one and Muḥammad is God's prophet, the more accessible and easier to read text on the inner face of the arcade, facing the rock below, addresses the "People of the Book," that is, the Christians, in a clear polemical tone. Christel Kessler says of it:

6. See D. Gimaret, "Tawhīd," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed., 10:389.

7. See D. Thomas, "Tathlīth," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed., 10:373–75. It is difficult accurately and felicitously to translate the Arabic infinitive (*maṣdar*) *tathlīth* into English; the most literal rendering might be "to trine" or "trining," "to treble" or "trebling," "to triplicate" or "triplicating," all of them awkward or misleading. So, one uses a phrase like "acknowledging" or "affirming" three.

8. On this monumental structure and its extraordinary significance, see Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and, more popularly, Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

9. See the detailed study and careful transcription of Christel Kessler, "Abd al-Malik's Inscription in the Dome of the Rock: A Reconstruction," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1970) 2–14. A revisionist reading of the inscription that has so far found few supporters is proposed by Christoph Luxenberg, "Neudeutung der arabischen Inschrift im Felsendom zu Jerusalem," in *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-Rüdiger Puin (Berlin: Schiler, 2005) 124–47.

Here the proclamation of God's unity and Muḥammad's mission is followed by Qur'ānic verses, which address the "People of the Book," admonish them to make no mistake in their religion, denounce the idea of the Trinity (always understood as a kind of deviation from monotheism), and expound the proper view of Jesus as spirit of God, His word conveyed into Mary, and as nothing else than a true servant of God and His messenger. Therefore, what distinguishes the text on the interior from the text on the exterior is evidently the particular polemic intention.¹⁰

And in Jerusalem, on a seventh-century sight line extending from the Dome of the Rock westward to the Church of the Resurrection (the Church of the Holy Sepulcher), the inscription's Islamic proclamation makes explicit the dome's monumental counterclaim to the church's announcement of Christian faith, at the same time as it claims the authority of the public space of the Holy City for Islam.¹¹

In later times, certainly from the ninth century onward, in their discussions of *at-tawḥīd*, Muslim theologians and philosophers regularly criticized the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, with greater or lesser understanding of the doctrine as the Christians actually professed it, depending on the level of awareness of the particular scholar.¹² Some were reasonably well informed about Christian teachings—scholars such as Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq (d. c. 860),¹³ or the Mu'tazilite 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamdḥānī (d. 1025)¹⁴—but others, like Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad al-Māturīdī (d. 944),

10. Kessler, "Abd al-Malik's Inscription," 11.

11. See Heribert Busse, "Die arabischen Inschriften im und am Felsendom," *Deutscher Verein vom Heiligen Land, Das Heilige Land* 118 (1977) 8–24. See also the unconvincing counterclaims of Luxenberg, "Der arabischen Inschrift," 140–46, who interprets the inscription as expressing not an Islamic critique of Christian doctrine, but a non-Trinitarian, pre-Nicene, Syro-Aramaic Christian faith, and who proposes that the dome was originally a Christian, not an Islamic shrine.

12. For Muslim, anti-Christian texts in the early Islamic period, see Ali Bouamama, *La littérature polémique musulmane contre le christianisme depuis ses origines jusqu'au XIIIe siècle* (Algiers: Enterprise Nationale du Livre, 1988); Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History*, 2 vols., rev. ed. (Rome: PISAI, 2000).

13. See David Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity,"* University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 45 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also the discussion of Abū 'Isā in Dominique Urvoy, *Les penseurs libres dans l'Islam classique: L'interrogation sur la religion chez les penseurs arabes indépendants* (Paris: Michel, 1996) 102–17.

14. See, for example, Abū al-Hasan 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Al-Mughnī fī abwāb at-tawḥīd wa l-'adl*, 14 vols. in 16 (Cairo: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa l-Irshād al-Qawmī, al-Idārah

construed Christian doctrine entirely in Islamic terms that would scarcely have been intelligible to contemporary Christians.¹⁵ But for the most part, the earliest surviving texts in evidence of Christian/Muslim controversy about the Trinity during the formative period of Islamic thought were written by Christians.

II

The systematic defense of the credibility of the doctrine of the Trinity against the objections of Muslims was a staple in the theological treatises written by Christians in Syriac and Arabic in the heady era of the burgeoning of classical Islamic intellectual culture, the period roughly contemporary with the famed Graeco-Arabic translation movement in Abbasid times, from the middle of the eighth century to the middle of the eleventh century.¹⁶ During this time, Christian thinkers elaborated what would become the standard articulation of Trinitarian theology in Arabic, scarcely to be surpassed in later centuries, albeit that many later writers would contribute refinements to the traditional modes of discourse.

Arabic-speaking Christian writers employed a number of genres in their apologetic efforts in the Islamic milieu to commend the reasonableness of the basic articles of the Christian creed; some were addressed to a popular audience and some were intended for more philosophically or theologically inclined readers. In both instances, the writers took their cues from the critiques of Christian doctrines and practices that circulated in the common parlance of the Islamic world.¹⁷ One supposes that the intended audiences were primarily Christians who, in the face of the

al-‘Ammah lil-Thaqāfah, 1960–) 5:80–151. See also Gabriel Said Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in a Sectarian Milieu: ‘Abd al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins*, Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts 56 (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

15. See Sidney H. Griffith, “Al-Māturīdī on the Views of the Christians: Readings in the *Kitāb at-Tawhīd*,” to appear in the Festschrift für Stefan Gerö.

16. See Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbasid Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998).

17. See Georg Graf, “Christliche Polemik gegen den Islam,” *Gelbe Hefte* 2 (1926) 825–42, reprinted in Georg Graf, *Christlicher Orient und schwäbische Heimat: Kleine Schriften*, ed. Hubert Kaufhold, 2 vols., Beirut Texts and Studies 107 a & b (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, Ergon Verlag Würzburg in Kommission, 2005) 2:587–602; Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 75–105.

Islamic critique, wanted reassurances about the credibility of their faith, and occasional Muslim readers, for whom the texts in Arabic would by the nature of the case be easily accessible. Some Muslims are even on record as having actually written refutations of the works of several Christian writers.¹⁸ But the Christians in the Islamic world were not themselves a single community; they professed different ecclesial allegiances largely based on differing Christologies inherited from the church-dividing controversies of the immediately preceding, pre-Islamic times.¹⁹ Indeed the several Christian communities carried these controversies with them into Islamic times, and their “denominations,” if we may so call their divided communities, came into the full articulation of their distinctive identities only in Islamic times; the Muslims regularly called them “Melkites,” “Jacobites,” and “Nestorians,” including under these names a number of other communities such as the Copts, the Armenians, and even the Maronites.²⁰ Nevertheless, while their theologies, and especially their Christologies, were in conflict with one another, these same Christians often insisted that they shared the same faith, albeit that they expressed it in differing and opposing confessional formulae.²¹ However, in the matter of the doctrine of the Trinity and its defense in Arabic, the Christian apologists of all three communities were for the most part on the same page; all of them were faced with the task of convincingly commending the credibility of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan doctrine of one God, one divine being or substance (*ousia*), in three divine *hypostases* (*qnômê* in Syriac) or three divine “persons.”²²

18. See Griffith, *Church in the Shadow*, 99–103.

19. Currently the best single reference source for these communities, their doctrines, and their histories is Wolfgang Hage, *Das orientalische Christentum*, Religionen der Menschheit 29,2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007). See also Jean-Pierre Valognes, *Vie et mort des chrétiens d'Orient: Des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

20. See Griffith, *Church in the Shadow*, 129–40. See also Martin Tamcke, *Christen in der islamischen Welt: Von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Beck, 2008).

21. See Griffith, *Church in the Shadow*, 140–42.

22. For an overview of the topic in Arab Christian texts, see Rachid Haddad, *La trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes (750–1050)*, Beauchesne Religions 15 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985); Paul Khoury, *Matériaux pour servir à l'étude de la controverse théologique de langue arabe du VIII^e au XII^e siècle*, Religionswissenschaftliche Studien 11,1–4 (Würzburg & Altenberge: Echter Verlag & Oros Verlag, 1989–1999) vol. 4, ch. 4, “Dieu un et trine.” See also David Thomas, “The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Abbasid Era,” in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: St. Martin's, 2001) 78–98; Mark N. Swanson, “The Trinity in Christian-Muslim Conversation,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44 (2005) 256–63.

For the present purpose, namely, the effort to present the general lines along which developments in Trinitarian theology took place at the hands of Arabic-speaking theologians living in the early Islamic milieu, while almost every apologetic or polemical text in every genre addressed the topic, the most fruitful works to study would be a selection of those treatises intended for the more philosophically and theologically inclined readers. In them we may discern the lines of theological development most clearly. In general, the writers followed apologetic trajectories designed to respond to challenges coming from three particular sets of Islamic discourse: scriptural testimony; the burgeoning *‘ilm al-kalām*, what we might call Islamic “systematic theology”; and philosophical logic. Needless to say, all three trajectories were intertwined in the works of most writers, but here, for the sake of greater clarity, we shall discuss the approach to the defense of the credibility of the doctrine of the Trinity as it appears in the treatises of three particular writers, each of whose treatises may be taken to exemplify a particular apologetic trajectory. The writers are an anonymous “Melkite” apologist of the second half of the eighth century; an early Christian *Mu-takallim* who flourished in the mid-ninth century, the “Nestorian” ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī (fl. 850); and the “Jacobite” logician and theologian Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī (893–974).

A. Scriptural Testimony

As it happens, the earliest known apology for Christianity originally written in Arabic is an anonymous work by a “Melkite” writer to which its first modern editor gave the title, *On the Triune Nature of God*.²³ Subsequent studies have expanded our knowledge of this important work, allowing one the opportunity now to review it more accurately from the point of view of its interface with the challenge of Islam, and particularly with the Qur’ān.²⁴

23. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles, with a Treatise on the Triune Nature of God*, *Studia Sinaitica* 7 (London: Clay, 1899) 74–107 (Arabic), 2–36 (English trans.).

24. See Samir Khalil Samir, “The Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c. 750),” in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750–1258)*, ed. Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 57–114; Maria Gallo (trans.), *Paltestinese anonimo: Omelia arabo-cristiana dell’VIII secolo* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1994); Mark N. Swanson, “Apologetics, Catechesis, and the Question of Audience in ‘On the Triune Nature of God’ (Sinai Arabic 154) and Three Treatises of Theodore Abū Qurrah,” in *Christians and Muslims in Dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the Middle Ages*:

The treatise discusses the following main issues: the doctrine of the Trinity, the Messiah in the history of salvation, the doctrine of the incarnation, and the mission of the apostles to preach the news of the coming of the Messiah, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, to all nations. It closes with a long list of quotations from the books of the prophets that the author interprets as biblical testimonies to the works and teachings of the Messiah manifest in the life and ministry of Jesus. Near the beginning of the treatise, as he begins the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, the author makes a statement of purpose in which the reader will readily recognize the intention to respond to the Qurʾān's critique of Christian doctrine. He writes,

We praise you, O God, and we adore you and we glorify you in your creative Word and your holy, life-giving Spirit, one God, and one Lord, and one Creator. We do not separate God from his Word and his Spirit. God showed his power and his light in the Law and the Prophets, and the Psalms and the Gospel, that God and his Word and his Spirit are one God and one Lord. We will show this, if God will, in these revealed scriptures, to anyone who wants insight, [who] understands things, recognizes the truth and opens his breast to believe in God and His scriptures.²⁵

One notices that the biblical books named in this passage are the very ones that are named in the Qurʾān, and what is more, what the author says about God, his Word, and his Spirit clearly echoes the passage quoted above from the Qurʾān, IV *an-Nisā* 171. But what is truly remarkable is that as the text goes on, the anonymous author includes as proof-texts, passages from the Qurʾān among the scriptures from which he quotes in testimony to the credibility of the doctrine of the Trinity. At one point, as he quotes passages from the scriptures that feature the one God speaking in the first person plural, he includes clear quotations from the Qurʾān. He says:

You will find it also in the Qurʾān that “We created man in misery (XC:4), and We have opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down (LIV:11), and have said, and now you come unto us alone, as We created you at first (VI:94).” It said also, “Believe in God, and in his Word; and also in the Holy Spirit (IV:171),” but the Holy Spirit has brought it down “a mercy and a guidance from thy Lord (XVI:64, 102).” But why should I prove it from this and

Christlich-muslimische Gespräche im Mittelalter, ed. Martin Tamcke, Beirut Texts und Studien 117 (Beirut: Ergon Verlag Würzburg in Kommission, 2007) 113–34..

25. Somewhat adapted and altered from Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 3 (English), 75 (Arabic).

enlighten [you] when we find in the Law, and the Prophets and the Psalms and the Gospel, and you find in the Qurʾān that God and his Word and his Spirit are one God and one Lord? You have said that you believe in God and his Word and the Holy Spirit, so do not reproach us, O men, that we believe in God and his Word and his Spirit: and we worship God in his Word, and his Spirit, one God and one Lord and one Creator.²⁶

In addition to the quotations from the Qurʾān in this passage, it is clear from other parts of the text that the author is thoroughly familiar with the Islamic scripture; indeed at the beginning of his work he even models the language of his introductory paragraphs on the Qurʾān's very distinctive modes of discourse, including echoes and repetitions of its Arabic diction.²⁷ So the question arises, does he consider the Qurʾān a revealed scripture on a par with the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel? While the answer to this question is surely, "No," given the fact that throughout the treatise arguments from the Bible and Christian tradition are adduced expressly to respond to the challenge of Islamic teaching. Nevertheless, the author obviously thought that his quotations from the Qurʾān would have probative value for his apologetic purposes. For the rest, he achieves his aims largely by quoting liberally from the Bible, especially from the books of the Old Testament. He comments on these passages in such a way as to argue that they find their full meaning, and their fulfillment, in what one learns from the Gospel about the triune God and the incarnation of the Word of God. And this apologetic method would continue to be used by Christian apologists writing in Arabic throughout the whole period of our discussion. They very often intertwined testimonies from the scriptures with the other apologetic approaches they adopted to commend the credibility of Christian doctrines, and sometimes they even included long *catenae* of quotations from the Old and New Testaments, with exegetical commentary designed to meet the new challenges.²⁸

26. Gibson, *Arabic Version*, 5–6 (English), 77–78 (Arabic). Note the identification of phrases from the Qurʾān.

27. See Mark N. Swanson, "Beyond Proof-Texting: Approaches to the Qurʾān in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies," *The Muslim World* 88 (1998) esp. 305–8.

28. See Sidney H. Griffith, "Arguing from Scripture: The Bible in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in the Middle Ages," in *Scripture and Pluralism: Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. T. J. Heffernan and T. E. Burman, *Studies in the History of Christian Traditions* 123 (Leiden: Brill, 2006) 29–58.