

# The Trinity—Part Three

By Dr. Norman Geisler

**Attacks on the Trinity.** The Trinity is at the heart of orthodox Christianity. But many critics—Jews and Muslims in particular—contend that it is incoherent and contradictory. Orthodox Christians insist that the teaching that God is one in essence but three in personhood is complex, but not contradictory.

The central issue is the deity of Christ, a doctrine inseparable from the Trinity. If one accepts the biblical teaching about the deity of Christ, then a plurality in the Godhead has been acknowledged. Conversely, if the doctrine of the Trinity is received, the deity of Christ is part of the package. Of course, strict monotheists, such as Muslims and Orthodox Jews, reject both the deity of Christ and the Trinity as a denial of the absolute unity of God.

**Muslim Misunderstanding.** Obstacles in the Muslim mind hinder acceptance of the trinity of God. Some are philosophical; some biblical. Islamic scholars often engage in an arbitrary and selective use of the biblical texts as it suits their purposes. However, even the texts they pronounce “authentic” are twisted or misinterpreted to support their teachings.

**Christ as “begotten” of God.** Perhaps no Christian concept draws so violent a reaction among Muslims than that of Jesus as the “only begotten Son of God.” This raises red flags immediately, because Muslims understand the words in a grossly anthropomorphic way. Evangelical Christians likewise would be offended to hear what Muslims think they hear in this term. Clearing away this misunderstanding is necessary.

The King James Version Bible refers to Christ as the “only begotten” Son of God (John 1:18; cf. 3:16). However, Muslim scholars often misconstrue this in a fleshly, carnal sense of someone who literally begets children. To “beget” implies the physical act of sexual intercourse. This they believe, and Christians agree, is absurd. God is a Spirit with no body. As the Islamic scholar Anis Shorrosh contents, “He [God] does not beget because begetting is an animal act. It belongs to the lower animal act of sex. We do not attribute such act to God” (Shorrosh, 254). But only a few cults, notably the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) have a teaching that approaches this view of “begetting.”

Further, to the Islamic mind, *begetting* is “creating.” “God cannot create another God.... He cannot create another uncreated” (ibid., 259). Once again, Christians would agree fully. The foregoing statements reveal the degree to which the biblical concept of Christ’s Sonship is misunderstood by Muslim scholars. For no orthodox Christian equates the King James Version translation of “begat” with “made” or “create.” Arianism taught that and was strenuously fought wherever it has appeared in church history. Its primary adherents today belong to another cult, Jehovah’s Witnesses. No wonder ‘Abdu ‘L-Ahad Dawud concludes that from a “Muslim point of belief the Christian dogma concerning the eternal birth or generation of the Son is blasphemy” (205).

New, more accurate English translations have been more careful to say in English what was originally meant in Greek. *Only begotten* does not refer to any physical generation but to a special relationship between the Son and the Father. It means a unique relationship, or could be translated, as the New International Version, “one and only Son.” It does not imply creation by the Father or any other sort of generation. Just as an earthly father and son have a special filial relationship, so the eternal Father and his eternal Son are uniquely and intimately working in concert with one another. It does not refer to physical generation but to an eternal *procession* from the Father. Just as for Muslims the Word of God (Qur’an) is not identical to God but eternally proceeds from him, even so for Christians, Christ, God’s “Word” (sura 4:171) eternally proceeds from him. Words like *generation*

and *procession* are used of Christ in a filial and relational sense, not in a carnal and physical sense.

Some Muslim scholars confuse Christ's Sonship with his virgin birth. Michael Nazir-Ali noted that "in the Muslim mind the generation of the Son often means his birth of the Virgin Mary" (Nazir-Ali, 29). As Shorrosh notes, many Muslims believe Christians have made Mary a goddess, Jesus her son, and God the Father her husband (114). With such a carnal misrepresentation of a spiritual reality, there is little wonder Muslims reject the Christian concept of eternal Father and Son.

Islamic misunderstanding of the Trinity is encouraged by the misunderstanding of Muhammad, who said, "O Jesus, son of Mary! didst thou say unto mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah?" (sura 5:119). Hundreds of years before Muhammad Christians condemned such a gross misunderstanding of the sonship of Christ. The Christian writer Lactantius (240-320), writing in about 306, said, "He who hears the words 'Son of God' spoken must not conceive in his mind such great wickedness as to fancy that God procreated through marriage and union with any female—a thing which is not done except by an animal possessed of a body and subject to death." Furthermore, "since God is alone, with whom could he unite? or [sic], since He was of such great might as to be able to accomplish whatever He wished, He certainly had no need of the comradeship of another for purpose of creating" (Pfander, 164).

***Distortion of John 1:1.*** If rejection of the eternal Sonship of Christ is based on a serious misunderstanding of the Christian concept of Christ as God's Son, another text proclaiming Christ's deity is often distorted: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Without textual support from even one of the 5300 plus Greek manuscripts, Muslims render the last phrase, "and the Word was *God's*." Dawud declares, without any warrant, "the Greek form of the genitive case '*Theou*,' i.e., 'God's' was corrupted into '*Theos*'; that is, 'God,' in the nominative form of the name!" (16-17).

This translation is not only arbitrary, but it is contrary to the rest of the message of John's Gospel where the claims that Christ is God are made multiple times (cf. John 8:58; 10:30; 12:41; John 20:28).

***Misconstruing Thomas's confession.*** When Jesus challenged Thomas to believe after seeing him in his physical resurrection body, Thomas confessed Jesus' deity, declaring, "My Lord and My God" (John 20:28). Many Muslim writers diminish this proclamation of Christ's deity by reducing it to an ejaculatory exclamation, "My God!" Deedat declares, "What? He was calling Jesus his Lord and his God? No. This is an exclamation people call out. . . . This is a particular expression" (Shorrosh, 278).

Deedat's alternative reading is not viable. First, in an obvious reference to the content of Thomas's confession of Jesus as "my Lord and my God," Jesus blessed him for what he had correctly "seen" and "believed" (John 20:29). Thomas's confession of Christ's deity comes in the context of a miraculous appearance by the risen Christ, not to mention at the climax of the post-resurrection ministry, when Jesus' disciples were gaining increasing belief in Christ, based on his miraculous signs (cf. John 2:11; 12:37). Thomas's confession of Christ's deity fits with the stated theme of the Gospel of John "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his Name" (John 20:31). Even putting all this aside, Thomas was a devout Jew who revered the name of God. He simply would not have used God's name in so profane an ejaculation.

No doubt there was an amazed note in Thomas's voice as he pronounced Christ's deity, but to reduce it to an emotional ejaculation is to claim that Jesus blessed Thomas for breaking the commandment against using God's name in vain.