The Trinity—Part 5

Dr. Norman Geisler

Objections to the Trinity (con't)

The Trinity and complexity. Many Muslims complain that the Christian concept of the Trinity is too complex. They forget, however, that truth is not always simple. As C. S. Lewis aptly puts it, "If Christianity was something we were making up, of course we could make it easier. But it is not. We cannot compete, in simplicity, with people who are inventing religions. How could we? We are dealing with fact. Of course anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about" (Lewis, 145).

The fact confronting Christians which led to their formulating this complex truth was, of course, the claims and credentials of Jesus of Nazareth to be God. This led them of necessity to posit a plurality within deity and thus the doctrine of the Trinity, since this Jesus was not the same as the one whom he addressed as Father. So Christians believe and Muslims deny that there are three persons in this one God. At this point the problem gets philosophical.

The Neoplatonic concept of unity. At the heart of the Muslim inability to understand the Trinity is the neoplatonic concept of oneness. The second-century A.D. philosopher Plotinus, who heavily influenced the thinking of the middle ages, viewed God (the Ultimate) as the One, an absolute unity in which is no multiplicity at all. This One was so absolutely simple that it could not even know itself, since self-knowledge implies a distinction between knower and known. It was not until it emanated one level down, in the *Nous* or Mind, that it could reflect back on itself and therefore know itself. For Plotinus, the One itself was beyond knowing, beyond consciousness, and even beyond being. It was so undividedly simple that in itself it had no mind, thoughts, personality, or consciousness. It was void of everything, even being. Thus, it could not be known, except by its effects which, however; did not resemble itself (Plotinus, 1.6; 3.8-9; 5.1, 8; 6.8, 18).

It is not difficult to see strong similarities between the Plotinian and Muslim views of God. Nor is it hard to see the difficulty with this view. It preserves a rigid unity in God at the expense of real personality. It clings to a rigid simplicity by sacrificing relationship. It leaves us with an empty and barren concept of deity. By reducing God to a bare unity, they are left with a barren unity. As Joseph Ratsinger insightfully noted,

The unrelated, unrelatable, absolutely one could not be a person. There is no such thing as a person in the categorical singular. This is already apparent in the words in which the concept of person grew up; the Greek word "*prosopon*" means literally "(a) look towards"; with the prefix 'pros' (toward). It includes the notion of relatedness as an integral part of itself. . . . To this extent the over-stepping of the singular is implicit in the concept of person. [Ratsinger, 128-29]

Confusion Regarding the Trinity.

Confusing unity with singularity. The Muslim God has unity and singularity. But these are not the same. It is possible to have unity without singularity. For there could be plurality within the unity. Indeed, the Trinity is precisely a plurality of persons within the unity of one essence. Human analogies help to illustrate the point in a superficial way. My mind, my thoughts, and my words have a unity, but they are not a singularity, since they are all different. Likewise, Christ can express the same nature as God without being the same person as the Father.

In this connection, Muslim monotheism sacrifices plurality in an attempt to avoid duality. In avoiding the extreme of admitting any partners to God, Islam goes to the other extreme and denies any personal plurality in God. But, as Joseph Ratsinger observed, "belief in the Trinity, which recognizes the plurality in the unity of God, is the only way to the final elimination of dualism as a means of expanding plurality alongside unity; only through this belief is the positive validation of plurality given a definite base. God stands above singular and plural. He bursts both categories" (Ratsinger, 128).

Confusing person (who) and nature (what). That Christ "bursts the categories" explains why Christian and non-Christian alike, have struggled to understand the two natures of Christ. One of the better explanations of what Christians believe, though it doesn't go far toward explaining it, is found in one of the sixteenth-century Reformation statements of faith, the Belgic Confession, chapter 19:

We believe that by this conception [of two natures], the person of the Son is inseparably united and connected with the human nature; so that there are not two Sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single person; yet each nature retains its own distinct properties. As, then, the divine nature has always remained uncreated, without beginning of days or end of life, filling heaven and earth, so also has the human nature not lost its properties but remained a creature, having beginning of days, being a finite nature, and retaining all the properties of a real body. ... But these two natures are so closely united in one person that they were not separated even by his death. . . . Wherefore we confess that he is *very God* and *very man*: very God by His power to conquer death; and very man that He might die for us according to the infirmity of His flesh.

Orthodox Christianity does not believe Jesus Christ was like a milkshake, the two natures blended together in an indistinguishable mass. Neither do Christians believe Jesus had a schizophrenically split identity in which divine and human natures were so distinct they would have had to call one another long-distance. These views and other equally wrong ideas have muddied Christian theology throughout its history. A popular modern theory, which misses the whole point of Philippians 2 and the reason God had to take on a human nature states that Jesus emptied himself of all his divine attributes of power and authority and kept only his moral perfection.

So how is it conceivable? The orthodox view is that God the Son took off nothing of his godhood, but rather added to it the human nature. He accepted limitations. As a human being, Jesus had to grow up and learn. He felt want and sorrow and there were things the human nature of Jesus did not know, such as the date of his return (Matt. 24:36).

One theologian, Charles Hodge, wondered if God did not draw the clearest analogy of the two natures in the design of Israel's temple at Jerusalem. The inner court where the daily work of worship and the sacrifice happened was the court of Israel or the holy place. But within this space was another room that represented the presence of God in the midst of his people. This central room, the "holy of holies" was only entered by the high priest once a year. A curtain separated the two sections of the sanctuary so that the room was hidden. But symbolically it empowered the priests in their daily life in temple worship. The two were unmixed but united and inseparable.

The orthodox view of the two natures of Christ is that one person is both God and human. The two natures commune intimately but do not overlap. Christ possesses two natures united. Hence, when Jesus died on the cross for our sin he died as the God-man. It is not going too far, said John Calvin, to say that at the moment Jesus was hanging on the cross his power as

Creator God was holding together the hill on which the cross stood. Unless Jesus is God and human he cannot reconcile God and humanity. But the Bible says clearly, "there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).

Since Christ is one *Who* (person) with two *Whats* (natures), whenever one question is asked about him it must be separated into two questions, one applying to each nature. For example, did he get tired? As God, no; as human, yes. Did Christ get hungry? In his divine nature, no; in his human nature, yes. Did Christ die? In his human nature, he did die. His divine nature is eternally alive. He died as the God-man, but his Godness did not die.

When this same logic is applied to other theological questions raised by Muslims it yields the same kind of answer. Did Jesus know everything? As God he did, since God is omniscient. But as man Jesus did not know the time of his second coming (Matt. 24:36), and as a child he "increased in wisdom" (Luke 2:52).

Could Jesus sin? The answer is the same: as God, no; as man yes (but he didn't). God cannot sin. For example, the Bible says it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18; cf. Titus 1:2). Yet Jesus was "in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). While he never sinned (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 1:19; 1 John 3:3), he was really tempted and it was possible for him to sin. 0therwise, his temptation would have been a charade. Jesus possessed the power of free choice which means that when he chose not to sin it was a meaningful choice. He could have done otherwise.

Dividing every question of Christ into two and referring them to each nature unlocks a lot of theological puzzles that otherwise remain shrouded in ambiguity. And it makes it possible to avoid logical contradictions which are urged upon Christians by Muslims and by other nonbelievers.

Conclusion. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the great mysteries of the Christian Faith. That is, it transcends reason without being contrary to reason. It is not known by reason but only by special revelation. God is one in essence but three in persons. He is a plurality within unity. God is a triunity, not a rigid singularity.

Once those conceptions are understood, many of the barriers that separate even such radical monotheists as Orthodox Jews and Muslims fall.

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