



Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Muslim-Christian Theological Controversies about the Trinity during the First Centuries of the Hegira

Vali Abdi *

Assistant Professor, Department of Comparative Religions and Mysticism, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran.
Email: v_abdi@ferdowsi.um.ac.ir

Mohammad Ilkhani

Professor Emeritus, Department of Philosophy, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. Email: ilkhani@sbu.ac.ir

Fatemeh Lajevardi

Assistant Professor, Department of Religions and Mysticism, Faculty of Law, Theology, and Political Science, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. Email: flajevardi@srbiau.ac.ir

* Correspondence

Abstract

The doctrine of the Trinity has long been a source of controversy within the Christian world. Over time, this belief also became one of the central topics in theological debates between Christians and Muslims. During the first five centuries of the Islamic era, Christian theologians living in the Muslim world, such as the Melkite Theodore Abū Qūrrāh (d. ca. 829), the Nestorian ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī (d. ca. 850), and the Jacobite Abū Raīṭah al-Takrītī (755–835), wrote numerous works in defense of the Trinity. Through various methods and arguments, they sought to present themselves as monotheists. To this end, they attempted to explain the Trinity using Islamic theological methods and concepts. In response, Muslim Mu‘tazilite theologians such as Abū Īsā al-Warrāq (d. 247/861) and ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024), along with many other heresiographers and apologists, composed treatises refuting the doctrine of the Trinity. They rejected and refuted all the arguments advanced by Christian writers in its defense, striving to demonstrate that Christians were, in fact, tritheists. This thesis first explains the evolution of the concept of the Trinity within mainstream Christianity up to the Council of Chalcedon. It then turns to the idea of the Trinity among the so-called heretical Christian sects and apocryphal gospels. The study also examines how the Qur’an, Muslim exegetes, historians, and heresiographers viewed the Trinity and related concepts. Throughout this work, we have sought to analyze Muslim understandings of the Trinity and other Christian doctrines as objectively as possible, employing a phenomenological approach combined with critical analysis.

Keywords: Trinity; Theological Controversies; Union; Incarnation; Arab Christians; Muslim Polemists.

Background and Research Context

The theological relations between Christianity and Islam have long attracted scholarly attention, and numerous studies have been written on this subject (e.g., Sweetman 1942; Accad 2003; Beaumont 2000; Goddard 2000; Griffith 1994; Husseini 2011; Keating 2003; Mikhail 2013; Swanson 2007; Thomas 2002). In this study, however, we aim both to present the understanding of the Trinity held by Christians within the Islamic world and to analyze the interpretations of this doctrine offered by Muslim thinkers. We seek to demonstrate, first, the methods and arguments employed by Christians to defend the doctrine of the Trinity against Muslim critiques, and the conceptual frameworks through which they sought to communicate this belief to Muslim audiences. Second, we endeavor to examine the challenges posed by Muslim theologians, whether Mu'tazilite, Ash'arite, or Zaydī, to the doctrine of the Trinity during the first five centuries of the Islamic era.

Objectives and Research Questions

- Did the interpretation of the Trinity advanced by Christian apologists in the Islamic world contribute to the development of Christian theology?
- What sources and arguments did Muslim theologians employ to refute and invalidate the doctrine of the Trinity, and what was the meaning of the Trinity from their perspective?
- What were the outcomes of the Trinitarian debates between early Islamic and Christian theologians during the first centuries of the Hijra? Did those theological disputes represent a form of religious dialogue or rather a religious confrontation?

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

In this research, we first sought to meticulously study the sources of both Christian and Muslim theologians in Arabic and ancient Greek. Subsequently, we reviewed and examined the works written by other scholars in this field. Finally, relying on a phenomenological approach and devoid of any prejudice, we analyzed the perspective and understanding of the theologians of both religions as documented in their respective works.

Findings and Main Arguments

The Christian theologians in the Muslim world predominantly belonged to the Melkite, Nestorian, and Jacobite denominations, and these Christians had been living in the Arab world for several centuries prior to the advent of Islam. However, following the rise of Islam, they found themselves in a minority position, compelling them, when confronted

with the theological challenges posed by Muslims, to both defend the Trinity and demonstrate that, contrary to Muslim accusations, they were monotheists, not tritheists. To achieve this aim, these apologists appealed to various arguments, the majority of which had a precedent in mainstream Christian theology. Their innovation and creativity, however, lay in their attempt to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity within the theological framework of the Muʿtazilites. Conversely, Muslims, drawing upon the Qurʾan, oral traditions, and the written works of the Christians themselves, were determined to challenge the Christian arguments regarding the Trinity, including their allegories, traditional proofs, and rational arguments, and to demonstrate that the Trinity is incompatible with Tawḥīd (monotheism).

Discussion and Significance

Although the use of kalām methods and concepts by Christians to prove the Trinity did not yield significantly important achievements for them, it nevertheless provided a common basis for discourse. The adoption of the Arabic language, citation of the Qurʾan, and reference to kalām were the three principal and essential factors in bringing the adherents of the two religions closer together. The Christians' action in explaining the Aqānīm of the Trinity within the framework of Muʿtazilite kalām led the Muʿtazilite theologians to feel a certain conceptual commonality between themselves and the Christians. As a result, they were able to engage in the transmission and refutation of Christian Trinitarian doctrines within the structure of their own rational theology. And this, in turn, led to a kind of religious dialogue during the said centuries.

Conclusion

Although various Christian sects were present in pre-Islamic and even post-Islamic Arabia, the surviving literature primarily originates from the great figures of the Melkite, Jacobite, and Nestorian churches. Among these three groups, the Melkites were the first to adopt Arabic as their second language, enabling them to defend their doctrines in this tongue and even to utilize the Qurʾan in support of their teachings. Subsequently, the leading figures of the Jacobite and Nestorian traditions also adopted Arabic as a second language. It is highly probable that the Muslim understanding of Christian beliefs during the first two centuries of the Hijra was based on the Qurʾan and oral sources. However, in the third century AH, Christian theologians authored numerous works, which led Muslims to acquire information about Christian doctrines directly from Christian sources. Beyond language, all Christian theologians also adopted Muslim concepts and methodologies. This approach is evident in the *Risālah fī Taṭlīṭ Allāh al-Wāḥid* (Treatise on triune of God), the most pioneering work from the Melkites. Theodore Abu Qurrah,

another prominent Melkite figure, referenced the Qur'an over sixty times in his disputations with Muslim theologians to demonstrate that core Christian teachings, such as Sonhood, the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the divinity of Christ, were affirmed by the Qur'an. The reliance on textual evidence, or referencing the Qur'an, to prove the Trinity is also found in the works of Abū Ra'īṭah al-Tikrītī, a Jacobite theologian, as well as Timothy the Nestorian (who even interpreted the disconnected letters of the Qur'an as indicative of the Trinity) and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī of Nestorian disposition. In a sense, therefore, Christian theologians functioned as biblical scholars who utilized not only the Old and New Testaments but also the Qur'an to advance their theological objectives. A crucial point in the theological considerations of the theologians of all three Christian sects is their thorough awareness of the kalām discussions of Muslim theologians, especially the Mu'tazilites, concerning the divine Essence (dhāt) and Attributes (ṣifāt). In an attempt to explain the Trinity to Muslims in any possible way, they endeavored to frame it within the structure of Islamic kalām. Furthermore, by citing numerous analogies, they sought to demonstrate that natural phenomena also contain triune entities that constitute a single being (such as the sun, heat, and light, for instance). The primary representatives of the three sects, namely, Abu Qurrah, Abu Ra'īṭah, and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, interpreted the aqānīm (Persons) of the Word (the Son) and the Spirit as corresponding to the divine attributes of Knowledge (Speech/Logos) and Life, respectively, by employing Muslim theological concepts. In other words, they believed that just as God possesses an Essence and Attributes in Islam, according to Christianity, He also possesses a Substance (jawhar) and Aqānīm (persons). Among these three theologians, Abu Qurrah utilized biblical testimonies more extensively than Abu Ra'īṭah and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī. Moreover, 'Ammār made the greatest effort to explain the Trinity within the framework of Islamic kalām. At times, he was determined to challenge the Mu'tazilite understanding of God's Essence and Attributes, thereby affirming the Christian reading of God's Substance and Aqānīm.

Consequently, the Mu'tazilite theologians were the most frequent audience for the Christian writers in the first centuries of the Hijra. Nevertheless, a point that should not be overlooked is that the Christians' appeal to Mu'tazilite kalām discussions in explaining the Trinity ignited further questions and challenges for which the Christian theologians could never provide definitive answers. They were aware that the Aqānīm could not be precisely equated with the divine Attributes in the technical sense of kalām. Therefore, they declared that the Aqānīm are similar to the Attributes but are not the Attributes themselves. This, in turn, led Muslims to accuse them of contradiction. The differing conceptions of God held by Christians and Muslims meant that the arguments put forth

by the Christian theologians failed to persuade their Muslim audience. Christians used the term *jawhar* (substance) in reference to God, considering it to be immaterial, spiritual, and simple in their Trinitarian discussions, while simultaneously affirming its shared existence among the *Aqānīm*. In contrast, all Muslim theologians believed that if *jawhar* was divisible or capable of receiving something, it must, by definition, be material. Consequently, they viewed the Christian understanding of *jawhar* as implying corporeality and susceptibility to accidents, and they rejected the application of the term *jawhar* to God in this sense. Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq, and subsequently Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī and ʿAbd al-Jabbār, directed the most significant criticisms toward the concept of *jawhar*, concluding that the Christian conception of God presented Him as a “corporeal being.” Underlying the proofs offered by al-Warrāq and the theologians who followed him was the idea that the Christian concept of God implied four distinct entities: the Essence (*jawhar*) and the three *Aqānīm*. On the other hand, although the Christians’ attempt to explain the Trinity within the framework of Islamic *kalām* can be considered a form of “creative reaction,” their endeavor in this area ultimately proved unsuccessful. Their goal was to present themselves as monotheists, similar to Muslims, but not only did they fail to achieve this, but they were also met with serious criticisms and objections from the Muslim theologians.

In conclusion, it must be noted that a large number of Christians, including John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah, and Leo III, displayed a highly negative approach toward Islam and Muslims in their writings. John of Damascus, in particular, was the founder of negative attitude toward Islam among Christians throughout the Islamic world. His student, Theodore Abū Qurrah, was able to easily defend his doctrines and question Muslim teachings in the presence of al-Maʾmūn and other theologians. Tīmūti al-Naṣṭūrī presented his arguments in defense of the Trinity before the Caliph al-Mahdi al-ʿAbbāsī without any hindrance and sometimes easily challenged Islamic doctrines. Both the safety of the debating Christian theologians and that of their followers were guaranteed when they engaged in disputation before the Caliph. However, none of the Muslim theologians resorted to vituperation against the Christians in their compositions. All of them endeavored to refute Christian doctrines using argumentation and logic. The Muslim theologians sought first to transmit the doctrine of the Trinity as it truly was and then to refute it. In contrast, the tone and pen of the Christian theologians most often departed from the form of dialogue and adopted a shape of insult and slander. None of the Christian theologians buried their works out of fear. For example, the treatise *The Story of Baḥīrā* was widely circulated among Christians in the Islamic world despite its anti-Islamic content. In contrast, the Gnostics of the Byzantine world were forced to

conceal their writings due to the fear of mainstream Christianity. All these factors point to the “Golden Age” and the peaceful coexistence of adherents of different religions in the history of the Islamic world – an era which, due to the tolerance of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphs and the rationalism of the Mu‘tazilite theologians and thinkers, led to the emergence of the tradition of “Interfaith Dialogue” in its precise sense.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in April 2015 at the Department of Comparative Religions, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

Selected Bibliography

- Abdi, Vali. 2019. "Jacobite Explanation of the Trinity in the Context of Mu'tazilite Theology: Abū Ra'īṭah al-Takrītī." *Religious Inquiries* 8 (16): 5–23. DOI: 10.22034/ri.2019.100711.
- Abdi, Vali, and Eirini Avraam Artemi. 2022. "Al-Ghazālī's Reading of the Fourth Gospel." *Religious Inquiries* 11 (1): 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.22034/ri.2020.247490.1433>.
- Accad, Martin. 2003. "The Ultimate Proof-Text: The Interpretation of John 20:17 in Muslim-Christian Dialogue (2nd/8th Centuries)." In *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule*, edited by David Thomas, 231–246. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047401919_014.
- Beaumont, Mark. 2000. "The Holy Spirit in Early Christian Dialogue with Muslims." In *The Character of Christian-Muslim Encounter: Essays in Honor of David Thomas*, edited by Douglas Pratt et al., 42–59. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004297210_006.
- Goddard, Hugh. 2000. *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. ISBN 9781474466806.
- Griffith, Sidney H. 1994. "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalām: Theodore Abū Qūrrāh on Discerning the True Religion." In *Christian Arab Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750–1285)*, edited by Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen, 9–44. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004378858_002.
- Husseini, Sara Leila. 2011. *Early Christian Explanations of the Trinity in Arabic in the Context of Muslim Theology*. PhD diss., University of Birmingham.
- Keating, Sandra. 2003. "Ḥabīb Ibn Khidma Abū Rā'īṭah al-Takrītī's *The Refutation of the Melkites concerning the Union of the Divinity and Humanity in Christ*." In *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule*, edited by David Thomas, 247–264. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047401919_006.
- Mikhail, Wageeh Y. F. 2013. *'Ammār al-Baṣrī's Kitāb al-Burhān: A Topical and Theological Analysis of Arabic Christian Theology in the Ninth Century*. PhD diss., University of Birmingham.
- Swanson, Mark. 2007. "Beyond Proof-texting (2): The Use of the Bible in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies." In *The Bible in Christianity*, edited by David Thomas, 309–326. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004155589.i-421.19>.
- Sweetman, Windrow. 1942. *Islam and Christian Theology*. London: Lutterworth Press.
- Thomas, David. 1992. *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's Against the Trinity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9780521412445.
- Thomas, David. 2002. *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's Against the Incarnation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9780521811323.