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How Can I Explain the Trinity to a Muslim?

May 4, 2023



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to explain the Trinity to a Muslim in a way that helps him understand the oneness of God, whether one could say the Trinity is similar to a person who has multiple personalities, and whether God ever demonstrates the virtues of hope and thankfulness.

* How can I explain the Trinity to a Muslim in a way that helps him understand the oneness of God?

* Could one explain the Trinity by saying it's similar to a person who has multiple personalities?

* God both encourages and demonstrates most virtues, but does God ever hope, and is he ever thankful?

Transcript

[MUSIC] This is Amy Hall, and you're listening to Stand to Reason's #STRSQ podcast. >> Here we are. >> Welcome, Greg Cogle.

>> Here we are again. I'm trying to think of a variation on our opening story. It's "STRSQ," hey, party hardy.

>> Welcome listeners. >> Okay, let's start with a question from great young mom. How can I explain the Trinity to a Muslim in a way that helps them understand the oneness of God? >> The reason I'm pausing it is because I don't think explaining the Trinity accurately creates confusion about the oneness of God.

The problem is with Muslims who have a preconceived notion that they maybe don't want to let go of. Now, I'm not sure where I heard this. It might have been from Nabil Kureshi when he was answering a question online because Nabil has been gone for about five years now, or six, and he was answering a question online from a Muslim, or maybe David Wood.

But in my apologies for not giving in enough detail here, maybe look this up. But the approach was to demonstrate that there is unity and diversity in a sense with the Muslim God as well. In a way that if one looked at it with a jaundice eye, they could object that this seems to violate the unity of Allah.

If a Muslim is comfortable with this aspect of Allah, why wouldn't they be comfortable with the inaccurate characterization of the Trinity? Now, that's the strategy that's being used there. And I think it's a good strategy. The problem is I don't remember the particulars, okay? But I have made the claim before, and this is foundational to my approach to the Trinity, but the Trinity is a solution, not a problem, and it's a solution in the sense that for those people who take scripture seriously, we are confronted with a number of scriptural facts that can only be reconciled with some non-unitarian understanding of God.

A Unitarian is one God who is one person. That would be the Muslim view. Jehovah's Witnesses as well, okay? But the problem is that they can't make sense of all the scriptures.

And so, and I have a whole chapter dealing with, that includes dealing with this challenge to Christianity in street smarts coming up in September, coming out in September. And I developed this concept, and then I point out that the scripture says there's only one God, okay? And this is the great Shema from Isaiah chapter 6. And it goes, but it also says that it makes it clear that the one who was the word who took on flesh and became Jesus is distinct from the Father. No, no, no, what's the word I'm looking for? No problem with that from the perspective of a Unitarian, of course Jesus and the Father are different.

That's consistent with Unitarianism because they talk to each other, for example. And there's the Father saying something while the Jesus, while the Son is being baptized, etc. So no controversy there.

But then you have statements that are made in scripture that make it clear that the one who became Jesus of Nazareth incarnate, called the word in John 1, has divine qualities. He's the uncreated creator. This is John 1, 3. This is indisputable from the text.

All things came into being through him and apart from him, nothing came into being that has come into being. John says it twice in a very simple way to make sure there's no confusion. And this one Jesus is also called God.

And Jesus uses the divine name of God from a number of places, especially Exodus chapter 4, the burning bush, the great I.M., Ego E.M., in Greek, to apply to himself, which the Jews understood to be acclaimed to divinity. And that's why they picked up stones, to stone him, to execute him for that capital crime. So there's all these indications.

Jesus was executed as it turned out for the crime of claiming to be God. It was blasphemy. So there is another characteristic, by the way, that Muslims would understand.

Any claim to be divine or anything like that is the sin of shirk. It's the worst of all crimes. And they could identify it with that.

That's essentially what those who heard Jesus thought of Jesus' comments. So when we understand Jesus' comments in the parlance of the time, he was making this claim clearly. Okay.

Now, if there's only one God and the Father and the Son are distinct in some way, but the Father is God and the Son is God, now what? Well, you have the elements, two of them, of the Trinity, that is you have two who's and one what? Now is this odd? Yes. We don't really have any parallels in anywhere in the parallels that people think of as expressions of the Trinity. And they're useful as long as we understand that they're not perfect representations.

And some actually are representations of false views of the Trinity. Their heretical views, like modalism, would be a heretical characterization that's characterized by some of these metaphors, like water can be ice or steam or liquid in three different phases. So, but they can't be all at the same time, like God is Father, Son of the Spirit at the same time.

So, these are inadequate. And so, if we consider the definition, there is one God with three centers of consciousness that are by nature the one God. Well, that's not a contradiction because the way God is three is different from the way he's one.

Okay? If we said there's one God and three gods and left it at that, well, that would be a contradiction. If we said there's one person and there's three persons, that would be a contradiction. But when we say there's one God who subsists in three distinct persons, that's not a contradiction.

It doesn't make it true, obviously, but at least there's a careful way of characterizing it so it's not disqualified in virtue of contradiction. And that's, I think, the problem the Muslims have. They say, well, you know, there's some other confusion too.

They think if Jesus is God's Son conceived by the Spirit, that means that God had sex with Mary to produce the baby Jesus. Well, that isn't what happened, but that is a confusion. Okay? And so, sometimes maybe asking the question, when your Muslim friend objects to the Trinity, what are the precise concerns that he has with the Trinity? I'm going to let him talk.

I can pretty much guarantee you that the concerns he has are going to be examples of misunderstandings of the doctrine. And clarity is really important here. Maybe not

agreement, but clarity is critical and clarity can be gained by being careful that we as Christians characterize the Trinity accurately.

And sometimes that's a problem because Christians don't understand it. When I wrote Street Smarts, a big part of my goal here was not the ability to take what people learned there and do evangelism. It was really the ability of strengthening and stabilizing Christians in the confidence in their own convictions and properly understanding their own convictions.

I wrote this as much for the Christian as I did for the Christian's ability to address the non-Christian. Okay? And so, this is an area that's not well understood, the Trinity, and therefore, it's easy to mischaracterize to people who then take exception with it based on the mischaracterization. So I would ask the question of the Muslim, what exactly precisely is your concern about the Trinity and then try to rectify any confusion he has? Even after that's done, he still may not accept it, but at least he's rejecting the real thing and not a mischaracterization of it.

So that's a good answer to their specific question, but I'm going to add something because I think the answer with Muslims is not necessarily to help them understand the oneness. I think what you need to do is show them the beauty of the Trinity, show them the desirability of the Trinity, because right now they're thinking it's something, it's a negative thing that you have maybe competing gods or whatever their view is of this. But in reality, the Trinity is what is so beautiful about God.

First of all, love it can only be in a being with more than one person. So it can be only a central quality of a being. An essential quality.

Right. The Muslim God had no one else with him in eternity. It was him alone, but with the Christian God, love characterized God from all eternity.

Also there was a father and a son. So you have the father as a part of who he is, a central, essential part of who he is, rather than merely a law giver or a judge. This means when we come to him, we're adopted by him and we are his children.

We're not his slaves, we're his children. There are all sorts of aspects of this, of the love of God that is so beautiful and Christianity that can't be sustained by another conception of God. Which by the way is true in Mormonism that they do not have a conception of God as father.

That would be a diminishment of God. So the relationship concept is just not part of their whole enterprise. Well, they do have father, but they think God is like the same species as us.

So they do have fathers and sons, but they, God's go all the way back. You're talking about Mormons? No, I meant Muslims. Oh, okay.

Right. I might have said the wrong. I might have misheard you.

Okay. Whatever it is. I'm talking about Muslims.

Muslims do not have a sense of the relationship with God that is characteristic of a father child relationship that would be diminishing God and in their eyes. And even calling him father, I don't think that's part of it because that suggests the relationship they don't think they can actually have with him. And this is part of the appeal of Christianity.

We yearn for relationship. In the Augustus and famously you have made us for yourselves and our hearts are restless until they find you or find the rest in you. And this is something that a Muslim does not have access to in their faith system.

So this doesn't mean that ours is true and there's this false. But what Amy is pointing out is that there's an inability for them to conceptualize some of the beauty of this. We explained to them here, like I did, here's how you can make sense of it.

She's adding you're adding this additional factor. But then this is a good thing. This is a beautiful thing because what you get out of it is a relationship that you can't have in your system.

And I've heard a Muslim say before that this was actually impactful. The idea of the love of God. It might have been the deal.

I can't remember who it was. But now I am explaining this very poorly. But someone I would recommend is Michael Reeves in his book, *Delighting in the Trinity*.

And he talks about all the beauties of the Trinity. And then also I also recommend he has a podcast called *Delighting in the Trinity*. And he did a series of three podcasts called *Just Jesus*.

And he talks about all these things. So that might be a really simple way to get all these ideas and the differences between the different gods and the different religions and how the Trinity is different from the Muslim God in particular. Yeah, good idea.

So here's another Trinity related question for you, Greg. This one comes from Joy Dumont. Could one explain the Trinity by saying it similar to people with multiple personalities? Well, I characterized the Trinity a few moments ago as one God with three centers of consciousness.

Now, I guess a person with multiple personalities. Well, they wouldn't be simultaneously interacting with each other. Well, they might.

I mean, think of, and this is just a fictional characterization, just think of Gollum. So there's Gollum, he's talking back and forth to himself with himself and his alter ego. There's that fight there in the return of the king.

But that's fictional, but at least there's a characterization there. I think there's another problem with this because I don't strictly think that what you have in a person with split personality or multiple personalities is three different actual centers of consciousness. You have one center of consciousness that's seriously impaired.

So what would be in addition to the liability of using that as an example, using a sick person as an illustration of the Trinity, that's problematic. But I don't think it's accurate because you have one consciousness that is confused, that represents and understands itself in one way. And then that same consciousness represents itself or understands itself in a different way.

So there are this one consciousness. You have one person, one individual by nature who has one person, which person is confused about him or herself. And that's not characteristic of the Trinity.

You actually have distinct and separate persons or consciousnesses in there. And they are interestingly, by contrast, they are cooperating with each other too. But that's not the point I want to make.

They're not fighting each other like in a split personality. But they are ontologically distinct. There's a metaphysical distinction there between them.

They are actually genuinely separate persons. And you don't have that in the case of a person with multiple personalities. Yeah, I think those are both great points.

That was going to be my point is that it's an example of brokenness. It's an example of somebody impaired, as you said. And so I don't think we should use that to represent the Trinity.

I don't think it captures it either. I don't think it's exact. This just makes the point that virtually any illustration that you come up with is not going to be accurate.

The thing that comes to closest to me, and this may seem like a bizarre type of characterization, but I think Bill Craig made a characterization similar to this. And there's no question about his orthodoxy of the Trinity, but he got a lot of trouble for it. And what struck me once is there are conjoined twins, one particular set of conjoined twins that is famous.

And I don't even know what their names are, but their bottom half of their body is completely shared and the upper half is also shared. But there's two heads and actually two very distinct persons. I think both of them got married too.

I mean, this is kind of straight and end, but they work together to walk and to do all kinds of stuff, even though they are distinct personalities and their personalities are different. And so it's quite a story. But here you have, and probably what you have is two

different human natures in the same physical body.

So again, the parallel is not exact. However, it's not theologically precise. However, it does give an understanding of how there can be one, in this case body and two individuals that are completely distinct individuals that inhabit the same body after fashion and cooperate with each other in the operation of that body.

It's just, you know, I'm talking about, do you know the twins? I don't know their names, but I know who you're talking about. But I, yeah, none of these actually work because there is nobody like God. And so we're never going to find the exact thing.

So maybe we can capture one idea with one illustration, but I like your approach, Greg, of just saying, here's what the Bible says. And this is how we make sense of it. That's my standard.

Okay. How about this one from Gary? God obviously both encourages and demonstrates most virtues. My question though is, does God ever hope omnipotence would tell us that he would never have to hope and is God ever thankful if so to whom and for what? Well let me take the last one first.

And I've talked about this around Thanksgiving. When people are thankful for their circumstances, there are things we're thankful for and, and some one or some ones, we are thankful too. The idea of Thanksgiving entails not just the object, but the subject.

The thing that we are thankful for and the subject who provided the thing we're giving thanks for. And so the whole notion of Thanksgiving entails those two factors. And if we're thinking, our thanks is about our life and the circumstance in the world or whatever it is happens to be, this begins to suggest that there's someone beyond those things that provided those things to whom it's appropriate to give thanks.

So there's a little intuitive element there that suggests theism. And so, but following that pattern, if God is the one who made everything to whom we give thanks, then there's nobody like that for God. God would give thanks for himself.

You know, just like we wouldn't give thanks for ourselves. Thank you, Greg, for saying what you just said. Thank you, Greg, for rubbing your leg right now for, because it is bangerineer, whatever.

I mean, that's silly. And so I don't think God would ever give thanks because it doesn't fit what Thanksgiving amounts to or entails. The other point though was does God ever hope? And this seems also to be inconsistent because you hope for something that, well, it kind of depends on how you characterize the word.

Generally, when we use the word is something we would like to take place, but we're not sure it's going to take place, but it would be great if it did. And that kind of sense that it

would be great for us if it did. And what that it does is what we call hope.

Well, God can't possibly hope in that way because he not only does he know everything that's going to happen, but he has sovereign over everything that happens. So he doesn't hope for something to take place in that sense. I don't see how it makes any sense for an omniscient and sovereign God to hope something to happen.

Even if you take, I mean, different theologies might divide this out differently, but just take Armenian and reform theology with regards to salvation. Armenia might want to say, well, God doesn't secure foundation for people. He just wants them to trust in him and it's up to them.

Okay. And it's fully up to them is what I mean. They are the ultimate decision maker there.

Well, it wouldn't make any sense for God to say, I hope you receive me. We'll see because he knows what's going to happen. He could desire that to happen as a more inappropriate moral end, which as a reform person, I would still acknowledge that to be the case.

Yeah, the God desires that to happen as an appropriate moral and he desires lots of moral things to take place that he is not going to make happen himself, but in fact, don't take place. People do sin. Okay.

So if, but that's not what hope is. Hope isn't just a desire. It's an expectation of something, a desire that you're not sure is going to happen or not.

And you would like it to happen. And that's inconsistent with God's omniscience. So I don't think in either cases, in either of those two cases, you have a circumstance that would apply to God.

I'm not sure I would. Well, I'm not sure we define hope that way because I think about when Paul talks about in, in hope, we look ahead to what, you know, we don't yet see. Maybe this might be in Hebrews.

So I'm not sure if he was our Paul. But I think it happens more than once. And he says, and it's in Romans also when he talks about if we, if we saw it, we wouldn't be hoping for it.

But I, but there is a sense of a confidence of something happening based on God's promises that the Bible connects with hope where I don't think it's so much, we don't know if it's going to happen, but it's a hanging on to a promise, which even in that case, God's not hanging on to a promise. He's the one who made the promise and he's the one who's guaranteeing the promise. So even if you define it as what's not seen and you have total confidence, it's going to happen, it's still not exactly right for what God does.

Right. And part of the reason I put it that way is because the hope, the hope in the New Testament does have this distinctive quality to it, but it needs to be explained to people or also misunderstand it because they're importing what we normally think of hope that is a desire of something taking place for our benefit, but we're not sure it's going to happen. And New Testament hope describing Christ, we are confident it's going to happen because of the promise.

So what I'm trading on here is our Colin Parritz. When people say there's God hope in something, well, he, the way we think of hope, no, not that way. What about the New Testament? Well, that's a little different, but as you pointed out, that still doesn't apply in that way because God isn't confident something is going to take place because of his promise.

It's going to take place because he's decided it will take place and the sovereignty covers that. Now, if you look deeper into the virtue, what does it mean when we hope in God's promises? It means we're trusting God and we're honoring God. And this is something between the persons of the Trinity, they trust each other, they honor each other.

So in a sense, there's that the honor of God and the total trust that hope expresses, that still part of God's virtue, it's just not express the same way as we express it because we're limited creatures. So maybe that's a way you could ground that virtue in something in God. I don't know.

Well, Greg, that's the last question for today. Okay. Thank you, Gary.

It's time actually. Joy and Greg Young, mom. We really appreciate hearing from you.

And we look forward to hearing from you on Twitter with the hashtag #STRS or through our website. This is Amy Hall and Greg Colkel for Stand to Reason.

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