

EXPLAINING THE TRINITY TO A MUSLIM

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The “mathematics” of the Trinity seems to baffle Muslims! How can $1+1+1=1$? This point is illustrated by reviewing the words of Mish'al ibn Abdullah, a Muslim author. Abdullah defines the Trinity as:

the merging of three entities into one similar entity while remaining three distinct entities. In other words: Three bodies fold, blend, or merge into one body so that they become one entity while at the same time exhibiting the characteristics of three distinct and separate entities.¹

He then goes on to give a caricature of the way the Trinity inter-relates by wondering how “one” can be “three.” He quotes Isa. 43:10-11 which states that there is only one God, and then says that this is inconsistent with the Christian belief that Jesus died on the cross. As he reasons, if Jesus is God and He died on the cross, then God died on the cross. But since God cannot die and it was only Jesus who died, then Jesus must be separate from God. In other words, how can God be both one and three at the same time? Another example he

uses is “when God is described as having ‘begotten’ a son it is not the ‘Trinity’ nor Jesus (*pbuh*) which has begotten, but a distinctly *separate* being from the other two.”²

Abdullah is a reflection of the manner in which Muslims approach the Trinity. From his writings it becomes very apparent that he does not comprehend what Christians mean by the Trinity. In a way, Christians can relate, for to them the doctrine of the Trinity is very much a mystery and beyond our comprehension. However, it is also a truth revealed by God and a **reasonable** doctrine. The Trinity **can** be explained in an understandable way and the thrust of this article is, therefore, to present an approach to explaining the Trinity to a Muslim.

In order to clearly understand the Muslim apologetic, this article reviews the works of two Muslim apologists who have had a tremendous amount of influence on the thinking of Muslims today, especially in relation to Jesus Christ. They are Ahmed Deedat³ and Jamal Badawi. Deedat is very forthright in his contempt for Christianity since it espouses what he believes to be the “greatest sin,” to equate Jesus with God. He cannot accept Jesus Christ as deity and says boldly that “to say that Jesus is God or Son of God is not only a mockery of Godhood, but blasphemy of the lowest order and an insult to the intelligence of man.”⁴ He then goes on to list a number of claims Christians make about the deity of Christ and presents them in a way that he hopes will show the “absurdity” of their assertions. In his examples he talks about the “birth of ‘God’” (How can God give birth to God?), the “family of ‘God’” (How can God have brothers and sisters?), the “development of ‘God’” (How can God improve?), the “tempting of ‘God’” (How can God be tempted?), the “capture of ‘God’” (How can God be humiliated and defenseless?), and the “death of ‘God’” (How can God die?). His conclusion is that Jesus could not be God because, primarily, He could not **share** the same nature as God. Deedat’s argument totally misses the point and completely misrepresents the nature and inter-working of the Trinity as stated in the Athanasian Creed: “one essence and three persons.”

Jamal Badawi makes many of the same assertions and the same basic mistake in his assessment of the claims of Christ’s divinity. In his booklet, *Jesus in the Qur’an and the Bible*, Dr. Badawi cites verses from the Qur’an which reject Jesus’ claims of divinity, such as

“They do blaspheme who say; ‘God is Christ the son of Mary’” (5:75);
 “They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity” (5:76); and
 Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) an apostle of God, and His Word. . . . Say not “Trinity”[actually “three”] (4:171).

Regarding the deity of Christ, Badawi states sweepingly that “many were deified without claim on their part,” and there were insufficient grounds for such a claim. Indeed, he says, many of the claims were simply the allegorical use of spiritual language or simply of allegory itself.⁵ Some of his examples and comments are as follows:

- “the Way, the Truth” (John 14:6): applies to every prophet in his time
- “I and the Father are One” (John 10:30): oneness in purpose, not in essence (John 17:11, 20-23)
- “Before Abraham I Am” (John 8:58): All existed in the foreknowledge of Allah
- “Was called Son of God”: so was Adam, Jacob, David, Solomon. Others were called “Sons of God” (Gen. 6:2), Deut. 14:1, Hos. 1:10).
- Called Messiah: Means anointed. So was David (Ps. 2:2)
- Said that all authority was given to him: He who gave authority is Greater (i.e., His God)
- Jews tried to stone him for blasphemy (John 10:29-33): Jews were to indict him. “by hook or by crook” regardless of what he said. They may have considered him a “false Messiah.”⁶

Another area that gives Badawi difficulty is the way that Jesus expressed his subordination to the Father. For Badawi this reveals that Jesus could not be God himself because it shows that Jesus is separate from the Father. Some of the examples he uses to show Christ’s subordination are as follows:

- Jesus did nothing on his own authority (John. 5:30, 14:31, Matt. 20:23).
- Jesus spoke not on his own authority (John. 14:10, 8:28-29).
- Jesus said that the Father is greater than he (John. 14:28).
- Jesus was tempted (Matt. 4:1-11): but God cannot be tempted (James 1:13).
- He denied knowledge of the unseen (Mark 13:32, Matt. 24:36).

- He prayed to God (Mark 14:32, Luke 5:16).
- Made a distinction between himself and the Father (Matt. 23:8-10).⁷

Badawi's approach begins with an improper understanding of the unique relationship that Jesus has with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

For a Muslim, this discussion of "one essence and three persons" is thought to be merely "gibberish," or the suggestion that God can be linked with a mere human may be enough to incite a riot! Phil Parshall states, "If you mention the subject of the Trinity to a Muslim you are assured of a most emotional response."⁸ As many Muslims argue,

How can God have a Son? God is one. You Christians worship three gods. You have perverted the pure monotheism of the Jews into a corrupt polytheism. The wrath of Allah be upon you and all your generations!⁹

If there is such a volatile and confused response in regard to the Trinity, how can we make much progress in explaining this concept to Muslims? This is especially important as we see in the works of Deedat and Badawi the Muslim misconceptions about Jesus often stem from an inadequate understanding of how Jesus relates to the Father and how they both then relate to the Holy Spirit.

THE CHALLENGE

In his book, *Facing the Muslim Challenge*, John Gilchrist states:

In witness with Muslims you will soon find that, on the one hand, Muslims will strenuously deny any possibility of God being Triune while, on the other, they will vociferously attack the doctrine which they presume to be the weakest point of Christian belief. After all, how can three persons exist in one God? When Christ died, did God die? Did all three persons expire on the cross? They must have if they were one, Muslims will argue. They will also . . . claim in any event that the Trinity is not found in the Bible.¹⁰

In another place Gilchrist advises that it is essential when witnessing to Muslims in regard to the Trinity to obtain your arguments "directly from the teaching of its original scripture, the Bible."¹¹ In this challenge we will follow this advice and derive our defense of

the Trinity from the Bible. The challenge is as follows: If the Bible states that there is **only One God**, and yet at the same time also affirms that this **One God** is manifest as three different persons, would you then agree that the Bible teaches a **Three-in-one God**? (Notice that the Muslim does not have to affirm that he believes that the Bible had not been corrupted; he only has to affirm that this doctrine is clearly stated in the Bible. The verification process can come later).

Before discussing the reasonableness of the Trinity, it is important that we understand how the Muslim misinterprets the doctrine. From the criticisms outlined above, we see that Dr. Badawi's viewpoints reveal a deep misunderstanding as to the uniqueness that Jesus Christ was claiming. For example, He was not just **another** "anointed one," but rather He was **the** "Messiah" prophesied throughout the Old Testament and the one for whom all the other "anointed ones" were a shadow. The same would be true in the use of "Son of God." Adam, Jacob, David, Solomon, and others (including Christians today who are "heirs" through Christ) are "sons" because of adoption, but Jesus is **the** Son because of His **nature**. He is the only human who could share the **same** nature as God, and this is what made Him the **unique** Son of God (John 3:16). In placing Jesus on the same level as mere humans, it is as if Badawi has what he knows to be a handful of glass gems. What he cannot appreciate is that one of those "gems" is the true diamond that stands apart from all the others not only in luster, but also by its very nature.

Another area of difficulty for Badawi was in regard to the subordination of Christ, the Son, to His Father. Jesus made a point of revealing a very important distinction in this relationship. Jesus never claimed to be the Father. In fact, for one who understands the dynamics of the Trinity, it would be absurd for Jesus to claim to **be** the Father. But Jesus did claim to be **one** with the Father. How can this be? The real essence of the struggle that Muslims face when they try to make sense out of the Trinity is "how can Jesus be **One with** the Father and not **be** the Father?"

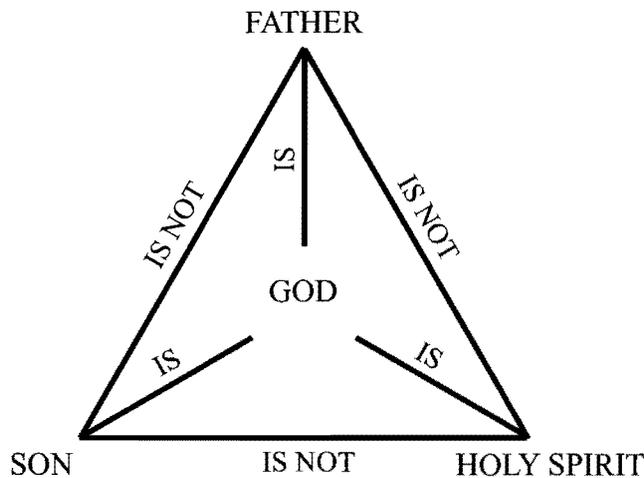
In his book, *Studies in Doctrine*, Alister McGrath explores the way that Jesus is not *identical* with God (the Father) and yet is *identified* with God throughout the New Testament.

In one sense, Jesus is God; in another, he isn't. Thus Jesus

is God incarnate – but he still prays to God, without giving the slightest indication that he is talking to himself! Jesus is not *identical* with God in that it is obvious that God continued to be in heaven during Jesus' lifetime, and yet Jesus may be *identified* with God in that the New Testament has no hesitation in ascribing functions to Jesus which, properly speaking, only God could do. One way of dealing with the problem was to refer to God as "Father" and Jesus as "Son" or "Son of God" (Rom. 1:3; 8:32; Heb. 4:14; 1 John 4:15), thus indicating that they had the common stock of divinity, but that they could be distinguished, with the Father being thought of as being in some way prior to the Son.¹²

As Dr. McGrath indicates with this statement, it is very important to make the proper distinctions between God the Son and God the Father. Otherwise we will fall into confusion or even heresy. As we deal with Muslims, we need to make the doctrine of the Trinity understood in a rational way without alienating them, and we also need to remain faithful to the doctrine of "Three-in-One." How can we maintain this balance? There is an approach that can be used that will be able to do this. It is based on analogies as well as a biblical challenge that explains how there can be One God and yet Three distinct persons involved in that One nature.

The main thrust of this challenge is to show that it is not only reasonable to believe in a Trinitarian God, but that the Bible actually demands it. Hopefully as the challenge unfolds, and the concept of the Three-in-One makes more sense, then at least the Muslim listener will gain a more accurate picture of what a Christian means when he says that Jesus is God. The first thing to do is draw a triangle to represent what Christians believe about the triune God. As the illustration demonstrates,¹³ the three ends of the triangle are represented by God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. These separate points represent the separate persons of God. Placing the term "God" in the center represents the essential nature of the Godhead—there is ONE God. The corners are separate, but they are also simultaneous. Otherwise there would not be a triangle. Notice how the lines connecting the three corners have the phrase "is not" on each line. Also notice how there are three lines pointing into the center with the word "is" on each line. This is trying to illustrate how each of the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all are God, as in God the Father, God the



Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Yet, it is very important to note that the Son is not the Father, nor is the Holy Spirit the Son. They are distinct persons. Thus we have **one** God, and we have at the same time **three persons** who are all called God.

The Biblical Basis for the Trinity

The next step is to show various Scriptures that would verify this construct. Start with a verse that demonstrates the oneness of God since the Muslims would heartily agree with this. (It may be the only thing they agree with, at least at first). A good verse to use is Deut. 6:4 (“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord”). Since Muslims would readily affirm the existence of only one God, stress that Christians also believe in only one God. Remind them that if they want to try to understand why Christians believe in a Trinity when they affirm that there is only one God, then they need to listen carefully to the next part. A verse such as Matt. 6:9 (The Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. . . .”) demonstrates that the Bible refers to God as Father. They may not accept this since they do not ascribe the role of fatherhood to Allah, but remind them that the same revelation that affirms that there is one God also calls Him Father.

Scripture also affirms the person of the Holy Spirit. The Bible reveals that the Holy Spirit is called God and is referred to as a “person,” not just some mystical force from God. In Acts 5:3-4 the Holy Spirit is called God and in Eph. 4:30 the Holy Spirit is said to grieve. A thing

cannot grieve, only a person can do that. The Bible, then, is affirming that the Holy Spirit is one with God in essence but different in person. In other words, the Bible calls the Holy Spirit God, but it also is clear that the Holy Spirit is not the Father. Jesus says that the Father will send the Holy Spirit after He ascends from the earth. So they have to be two, distinct persons.

Then proceed to show how the Bible also reveals that there is a third person who is also called God, and this, of course, is Jesus. They may object and say that Jesus never uses the words "I am God" in the Bible, but point out that equivalent statements are used throughout his ministry from the "I am" claims in John 8:58 where Jesus claims equality with the "I am" in Exodus 3:14, through the time where he states unequivocally "I and the Father are one," (John 10:30), and finally to his trial before the Sanhedrin where he is asked whether he is the "Messiah, the Son of the Most High" and he answers "yes, I am" (Matt. 26:64). At this point they may object that the Bible has been corrupted and Jesus really did not claim these things. Have them turn to the book of Revelation. In the first chapter, verse 8, the Lord God (Jehovah or Yahweh in some translations) states that "I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." Whether they believe the Bible to be corrupted or not, point out here that at least the author of Revelation is referring to the Almighty God of the universe as the Alpha and the Omega. These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and signify that God is the beginning and end of the universe. Once the statement is understood, turn to Rev. 22:12 which states "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done." The Muslim should readily accept these words as referring to Jesus because even they believe that Jesus is coming back one day. After they affirm that the verse is referring to Jesus, read the following verse, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." Here the words are the same as in verse 12, and "Alpha and Omega" identify the speaker as the same person who states in Revelation 1:8 that he is the Lord God! Linking these two passages reveals what Christians have said all along—that Jesus is God, the Almighty One. They may object again that the Bible has been corrupted, but re-affirm that if the Bible is trustworthy. Then they would have to at least accept that the same Bible that unequivocally

states throughout the Old and New Testaments that there is only one God, also states that this one God is identified as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They may not like that, but the evidence is clear.

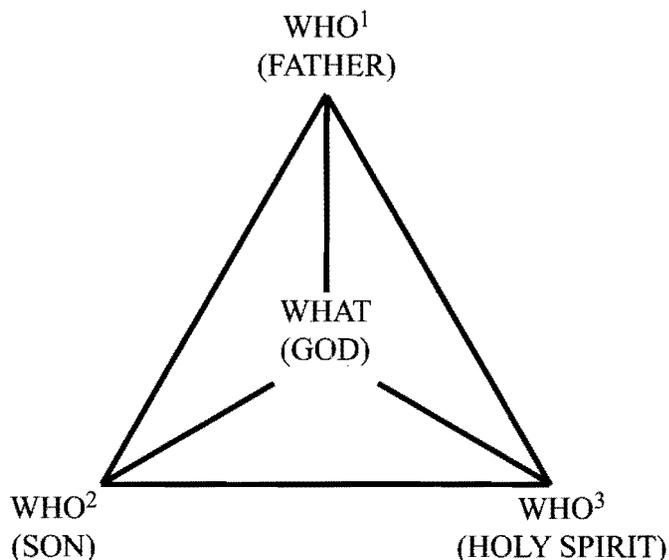
The Rationality of the Trinity

The word “Trinity” may not be used in the Bible, but the concept of one God in three Persons is definitely there from the first to the last. They may then object that the concept of the Trinity does not make logical sense. Refer them to an illustration put together by Norman Geisler who also says that “the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be proven by human reason; it is only known because it is revealed by special revelation (in the Bible). However, just because it is beyond reason does not mean that it goes against reason. It is not irrational or contradictory, as Muslim scholars believe.”¹⁴

Geisler then refers to the law of noncontradiction to demonstrate how the concept of the Trinity is not irrational. The law of noncontradiction basically stipulates that something cannot be both true and false at the same time. For example, in regard to the truth of Islam and Christianity, there can only be three possibilities: either (1) Islam is true and Christianity is false, or (2) Christianity is true and Islam is false, or (3) they are both false. The one possibility that cannot be entertained is to say that both of them are true since they make contradictory statements in reference to Jesus being God.

When we look at the rationality of the concept of the Trinity, it can be seen more easily if we state what it is not. For example, the Trinity is not the belief that God is three persons and only one person at the same time. This would be a contradiction. Nor would it be logical to say that the Trinity is the belief that there are three natures in one nature, or three essences in one essence, for that again would be a contradiction. We could agree with our Muslim friend that either of these conditions would be illogical as a “one in three” formula. However, the belief that God is one *nature* in three *persons* may be a mystery, but it is not a logical contradiction. As Geisler puts it, “While God is one and many at the same time, he is not one and many in the same sense. He is one in the sense of his essence but many in the sense of his persons. So there is no violation of the law of noncontradiction in

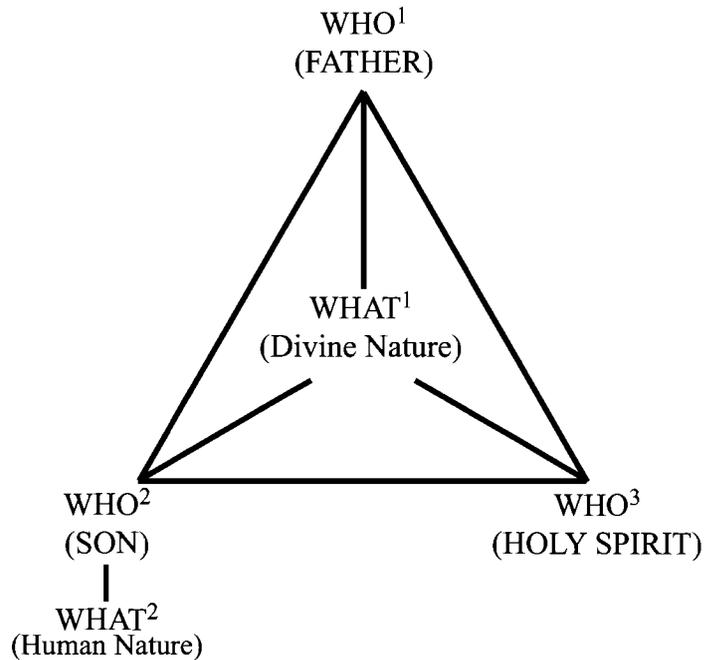
the doctrine of the Trinity.”¹⁵ This can be further illustrated with the diagram below:



In this illustration, there is one “What” (essence) and three “Whos,” the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, when it is said that God is one essence in three persons, it can also be stated that He is one What and three Whos. Each person is distinct with a unique role in the relationship, but they all share the same common nature. Thus, as Geisler puts it, “God is one in his substance but three in his relationships. The unity is in his essence (what God is), and the plurality is in God’s persons (how he relates).¹⁶ In this way the *relationships* can be different (the Father is related to the Son as Father, and the Son is related to the Father as a Son), and their *functions* can be different (the Father sends the Spirit and the Spirit testifies of the Son (John 14:26), and yet they can still share the same essence. There is only one What.

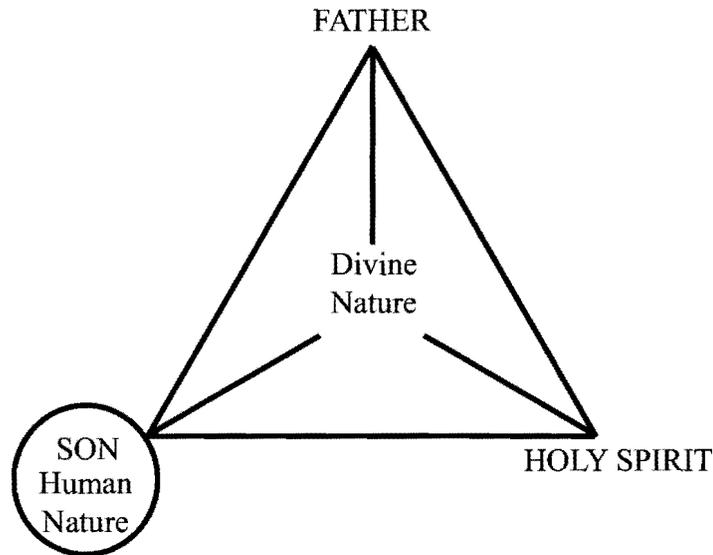
The Two Natures of Christ

The next illustration can be extended to help explain how the two natures of Christ (100% God and 100% man) can relate to his one person. As the Son, Jesus Christ is only one person, yet he has two natures. His divine nature is represented by the triangle, and his human nature is represented by the circle which touches it at only one point.



This point represents the two natures tangently joined without mixture or separation, in one person, or as Geisler says, “in Christ there are two Whats and one Who, whereas, in God there are three Whos and one What.”¹⁷ If we illustrate this diagram in a slightly different way, then many of the so-called contradictions caused by a misunderstanding of the nature of Christ on the part of the Muslims can be cleared up. In the following diagram, we see that Christ is the one Who (person) with the two Whats (natures).

In this way, many of the questions about his nature and relationship to the Father must be separated into two questions, each applying to his different nature. For example, “Did Christ get tired?” In his human nature, yes, but in his divine nature, no. “Did Christ die on the cross?” As a man, yes, but as God, no, for God cannot die. The God-man could die, but his God-nature could not.



This also clears up some theological issues that are often difficult to answer. When a Muslim points out that Jesus says that he does not know the day and the hour of the Second Coming, but only God does, he was speaking the truth. In his human nature he would not know, but in his divine nature he would still be omniscient. Thus, when a Muslim quotes the verse that says that the Father is greater than the Son, it is easy to point to the human nature of Christ and say that is true because in his role as the Son in human form he is submissive to the Father, (and even as his divine role as the Son he is submissive to the Father), but in his sharing of the same nature as the Father he can truthfully say that he and the Father are one (John 10:30).

CONCLUSION

This approach can unlock many of the theological puzzles that involve the Trinitarian nature of God and hopefully will show how logical the Trinity really is. In many ways the doctrine of the Trinity will remain a mystery, but it does not have to remain illogical and unexplainable. For example, the “mathematics” of the Trinity is not $1+1+1 = 1$ as Muslims mockingly put forth, but rather $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ (or 1^3). As with the proper use and understanding of “math,” the proper understanding of the theological implications of the Trinity will help Christians better defend what they believe. Hopefully more people

will take up the “challenge” presented here and demonstrate that it is possible not only to believe in the Trinity but also to defend it and make sense of it.

NOTES

¹Misha'al ibn Abdullah, *What Did Jesus Really Say?* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Islamic Assembly of North America, 1995), 2.

²Ibid., 2.

³Even the author quoted above, Mish'al ibn Abdullah, reveals himself to be a “student” of Deedat by using the characteristic Deedat phrase regarding the RSV Bible, which they are fond of reminding Christians is the “work of thirty two Biblical Christian scholars of the highest eminence backed by fifty cooperating Christian denominations.”

⁴Ahmed Deedat, *Resurrection or Resuscitation : The God that Never Was*, 2nd ed. (Doha, Qatar: Dar El-Ulum Foundation, 1993), 1.

⁵Jamal Badawi, *Jesus in the Qur'an and the Bible* (Halifax, N.S., Canada: nd, Islamic Information Foundation, n.d.) (Brochure: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/6808/Jesus.html>) 3.

⁶Ibid., 3-4.

⁷Ibid., 4.

⁸Phil Parshall, *The Fortress and the Fire* (Bombay: Gospel Literature Service, 1975), 11.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰John Gilchrist, *Facing the Muslim Challenge* (Johannesburg: Muslim Evangelism Resource Center of Southern Africa (MERCESA), 1999), 71.

¹¹Ibid., 73.

¹²Alister McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 202-3.

¹³This illustration and the following ones are found in Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 266-7. I have adapted them for my explanations.

¹⁴Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 265.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 266.

¹⁷Ibid., 267.