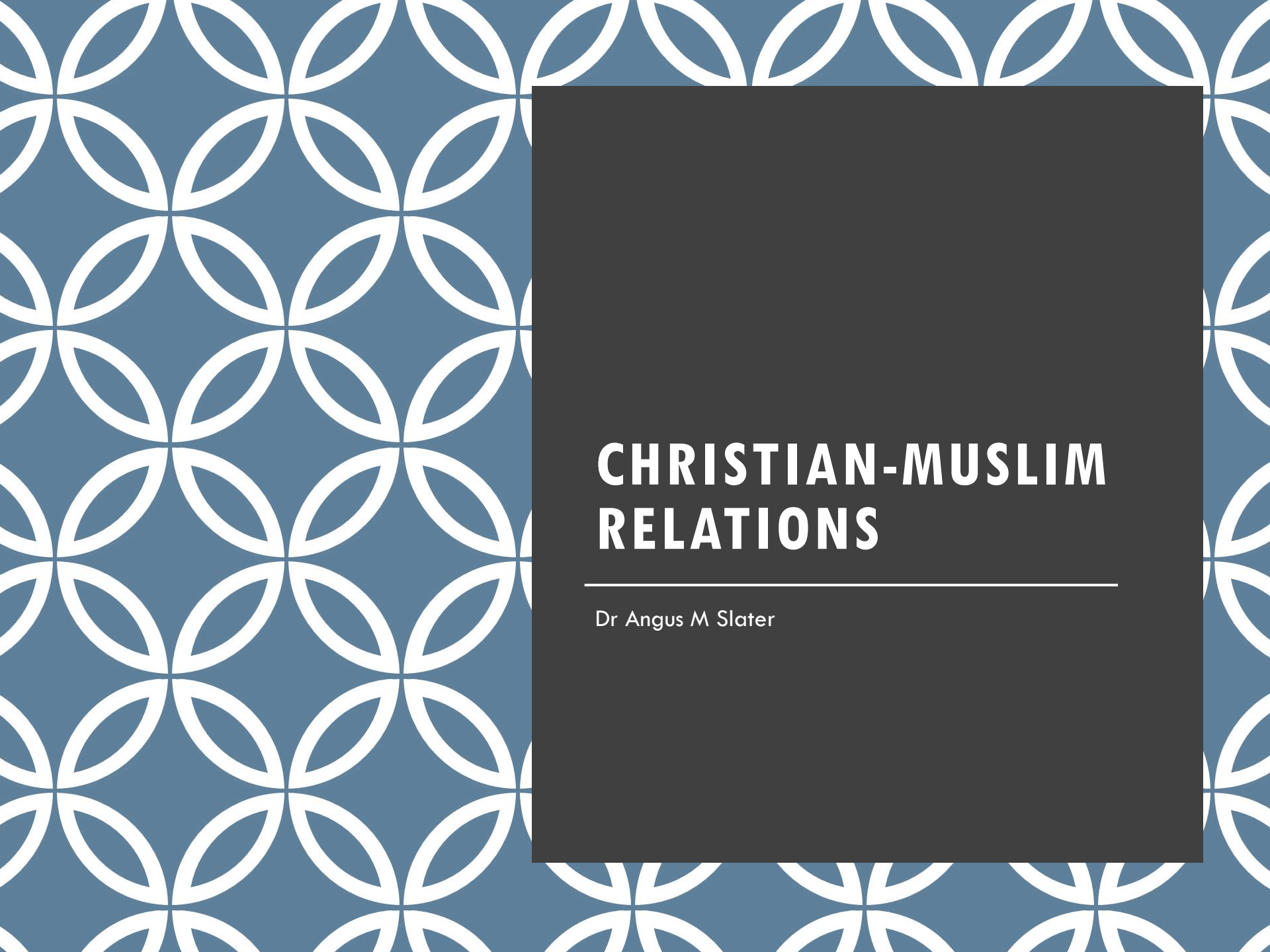




CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Dr Angus M Slater

REVISION

In the previous section, we again moved through an incredibly important section of the joint history between the traditions of Christianity and Islam, examining the changing balance of political and economic power between them and the various ways this worked itself out.

We examined first the changing nature of Europe, with religious divides within Christianity increasingly changing the nature of their relationship with Islam, as well as the broader trends of exploration, colonialism, and centralization that all had a significant impact on the way that the Christian West thought about itself.

We also examined mission as an example of this changing relationship, in various increasingly accessible parts of the Muslim world, and looked at the fates of three significant Muslim empires of the period – the Mughal, the Ottoman, and the Safavid.



REVISION

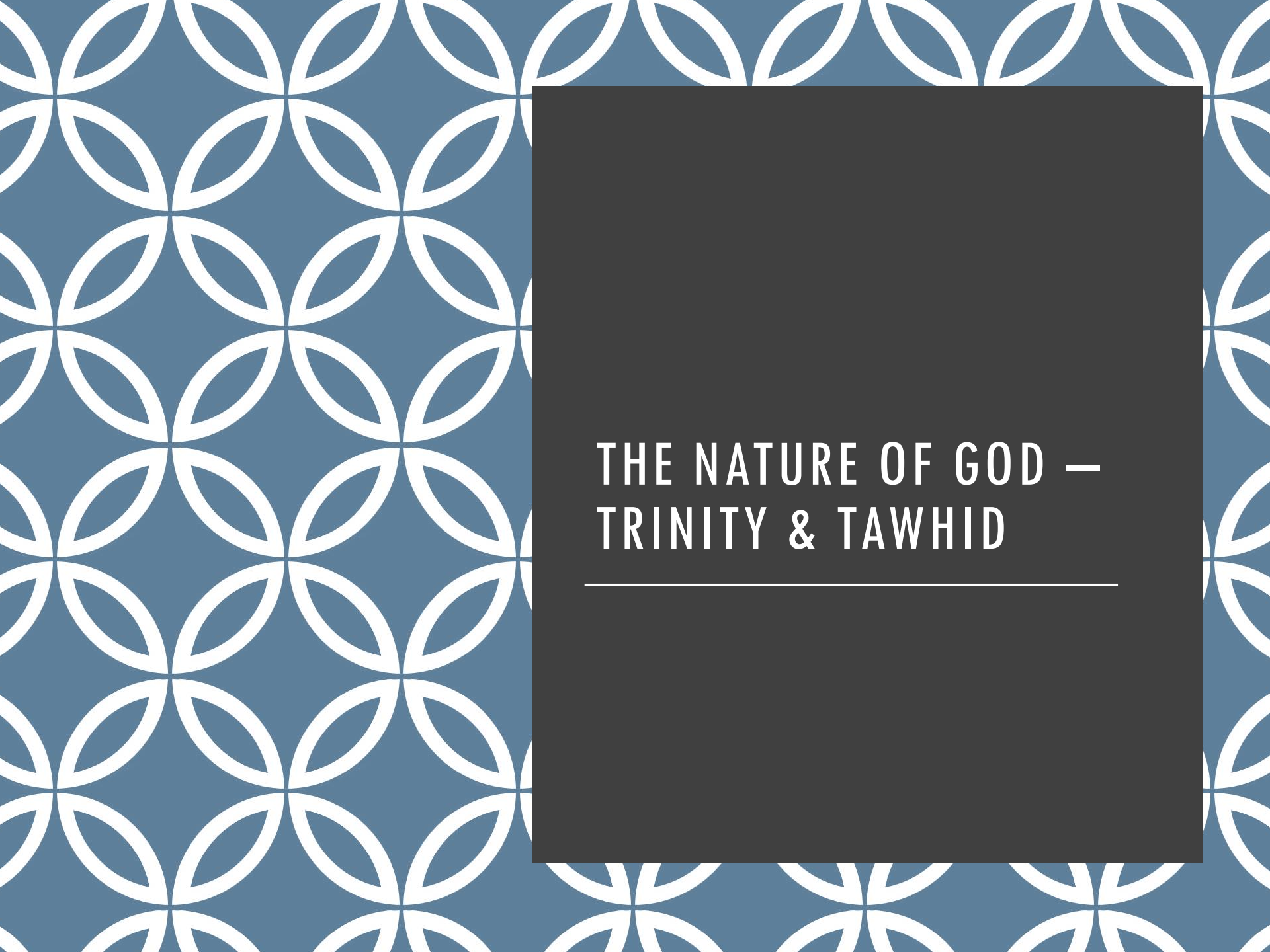
You had four readings to complete as part of the last section which also attempted to provide you with the foundational themes of this historical time period.

The first reading aimed to lay out the general shape of Islam in the European and Christian imagination at the onset of this time period – these descriptions give us a hugely valuable insight into the nature of the Christian-Muslim relation at this time – remember, the most important thing about relationships between difference is that they are not always based in fact, but often haunted by imaginary projections of the other.

The second and third readings explored the topic of mission more fully, both the reasons for its onset in the Christian West and the nature of reactions to it within the Muslim world.

The fourth reading aimed to provide you with a flavour of the works of al-Afghani, one of the most prominent Islamic intellectuals responding to the changing relationship between Islam and Christianity in this time period – his balancing act between attempt to incorporate and reject aspects of western knowledge is one that continues within similar circles to this day.





THE NATURE OF GOD — TRINITY & TAWHID

THE NATURE OF GOD — TRINITY & TAWHID

In this section, we move on from tracing the historical trends in the relationship between the traditions of Christianity and Islam, and turn our attention to the theological and religious differences that often shape and form the nature of that relationship.

We have already seen in the previous sections, that belief, either where it is the same or where it differs, can have a huge influence on the nature of interaction between communities which subscribe to them, and, in turn, that changes in community relations can cause changes in that way that shared beliefs are read and understood.

It is not possible to separate the two out — to have history float free of theology, or theology to inhabit some rarefied space beyond historical interactions. Both aspects of faith are an integral part of the motivations that drive communities or individuals to do the things they do.

It is with this in mind that we turn in this section to theological differences, beginning with perhaps the most significant and least understood — the nature of God.

TRINITY



TRINITY

The word "trinity" is a term used to denote the Christian doctrine that God exists as a unity of three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Each of the persons is distinct from the other yet identical in essence. In other words, each is fully divine in nature, but each is not the totality of the other persons of the Trinity.

Each has a will, loves, and says, "I" and "You" when speaking.

The Father is not the same person as the Son, who is not the same person as the Holy Spirit, and who is not the same person as the Father.

Each is divine, yet there are not three gods but one God.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE TRINITY

As we have seen in the previous historical sections, the Trinity is an early development of Christian theology that is both critically important and controversial in the development of a distinct Christian identity. Yet, where does this theological development come from?

There are hints of the Trinity in the Bible – particularly, of course, in the New Testament, although elements of the Old Testament have been interpreted in the light of Christian faith, in a way that at least shows some consonance with Trinitarian claims.

So, for example, God is said to create the world through his word – the word here being personified in the same way that we find in the gospel of John, and therefore it is identified as being the Son (psalm 147: 15-20).

Equally, the Old Testament speaks of God's Wisdom and his Breath or Spirit in highly personified language – which has later been interpreted as a reference to the Holy Spirit – *pneuma* in greek, *ruach* in Hebrew [Ezekiel 37:1-4], and *sophia* in greek, or *chockma* in Hebrew (Proverbs 1:20-23).



FOUNDATIONS OF THE TRINITY

There is strong evidence also that Jesus Christ is seen to be pre-existent, before the incarnation, and thus an eternal part of God. So the famous prologue to the Gospel of John emphasises in strong terms the role of Christ in creation.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ... And the Word became Flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” John 1:1-3a, 14.

The same idea comes through in the writings of the Apostle Paul in Colossians 1:15-20:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”



FOUNDATIONS OF THE TRINITY

Both the oneness and the separation of the son and the father are present in the gospel of John. The oneness is seen, for example in John 10:30 – *“The Father and I are One.”* This is mirrored in both Matthew 11:27 and Luke 10:22 – both of which read:

“All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

Incidentally, that much over-used phrase in the fourth gospel, John 14:6 relates here too. That is to say – the phrase *“I am the way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me”*, is primarily a way of identifying Christ with the purposes of the Father, and not, in the first instance, about needing to become a Christian in order to get into heaven.

Equally, John has Jesus somewhat distinct from the Father when he prays the so-called high-priestly prayer in John 17:11:

“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”



FOUNDATIONS OF THE TRINITY

But it isn't just the relationship of the Father and the Son that must be present if we are to get to the Trinity, it is also the role of the Spirit. Certainly the prevailing view is that the Virgin Mary conceives by the action of the Holy Spirit – Luke 1:35 has the Angel say:

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy.”

This same spirit is the agent of God's anointing of Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan. Luke 3:21-22:

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved’ with you I am well pleased.”



FOUNDATIONS OF THE TRINITY

The Spirit is the presence of God in the Church –it is revelatory and providential – e.g. it guides, sustains and protects the apostles in their mission – Acts 16:6-7, Acts 20:23 – and intercedes with God on our behalf – Romans 8:26-7.

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

This mélange of scripture is the groundwork of the doctrine of the Trinity. The foundation upon which the early church was to build in order to explain and explore the claims of the Christian faith. However, it isn't long before that challenge throws up some difficult questions, and some rather problematic answers. The basic questions are probably – ‘what is it we have three of, and what is there only one of?’, and ‘how are the three related to the one?’

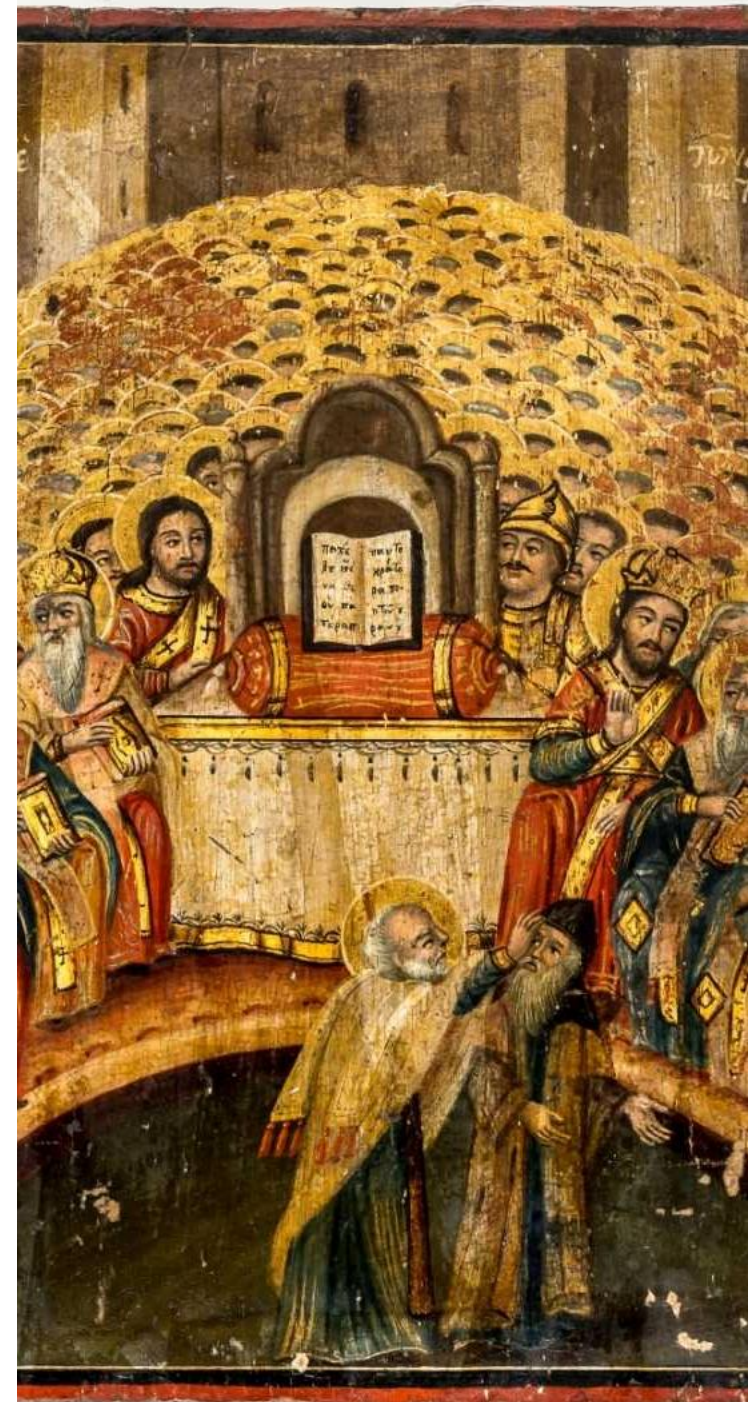


AUGUSTINE AND THE TRINITY

These questions and their dogmatic difficulties can be seen throughout early Christian history, with significant differences being debated at Church Councils - such as those at Nicaea in 325AD, Constantinople in 381AD, Ephesus in 431AD, Chalcedon at 451AD, and later – during which the early Church struggled to clearly and effectively produce the limits of orthodox Christian belief.

Perhaps one of the most important, and relatively early, systematic treatments of the Trinity and its dogmatic importance for Christian faith can be found in the work of St Augustine of Hippo (in North Africa), who you may have come across before. It can be found in his magisterial *De Trinitate*, written in around 419AD - after the Church had established the particular formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity and were now seeking to defend the doctrine against heretical formulations.

Besides the common charge of tri-theism, that we often see in contemporaneous Islamic responses, the greatest internal challenge came from the formulation of the trinity as presented by Arius (256AD-336AD), a church figure from North Africa. His position was concerned with the unique authority of the Father, and the necessary subordination of the Son to it.



AUGUSTINE AND THE TRINITY

The position of Arius is simple:

After all the Son was begotten; since He was begotten, He must have been created. As something created, there was a time before He was created, and therefore, he could not have the same ontological primacy as the Father.

Augustine sought to dispel these claims and to show how each member of the trinity have the same essential natures. He begins by stating some simple postulates of the Trinity at the beginning of Book 8 of De Trinitate:

the greatness of the father + the greatness of the son = **the greatness of the holy spirit.**

the greatness of the son + the greatness of the holy spirit = **the greatness of the father**

the greatness of the father + the greatness of the holy spirit = **the greatness of the son**

God is the greatest **Love**

God is the greatest **Word**

God is the greatest **Knowledge**



AUGUSTINE AND THE TRINITY

It is at first odd that two parts of the trinity are not greater than the remaining part. To put it in mathematical terms Augustine maintains the following:

$$2p = 1p.$$

How can this be the case?

While I don't think he explicitly says this, but if we take p to equal ∞ , or infinity then it can work:

$$2\infty = 1\infty$$

Each aspect of God is infinite.

But wait, if they are each infinite, then would they not be equal to each other?

Yes.

That is were Augustine demonstrates the idea that each member of the trinity shares the same nature.



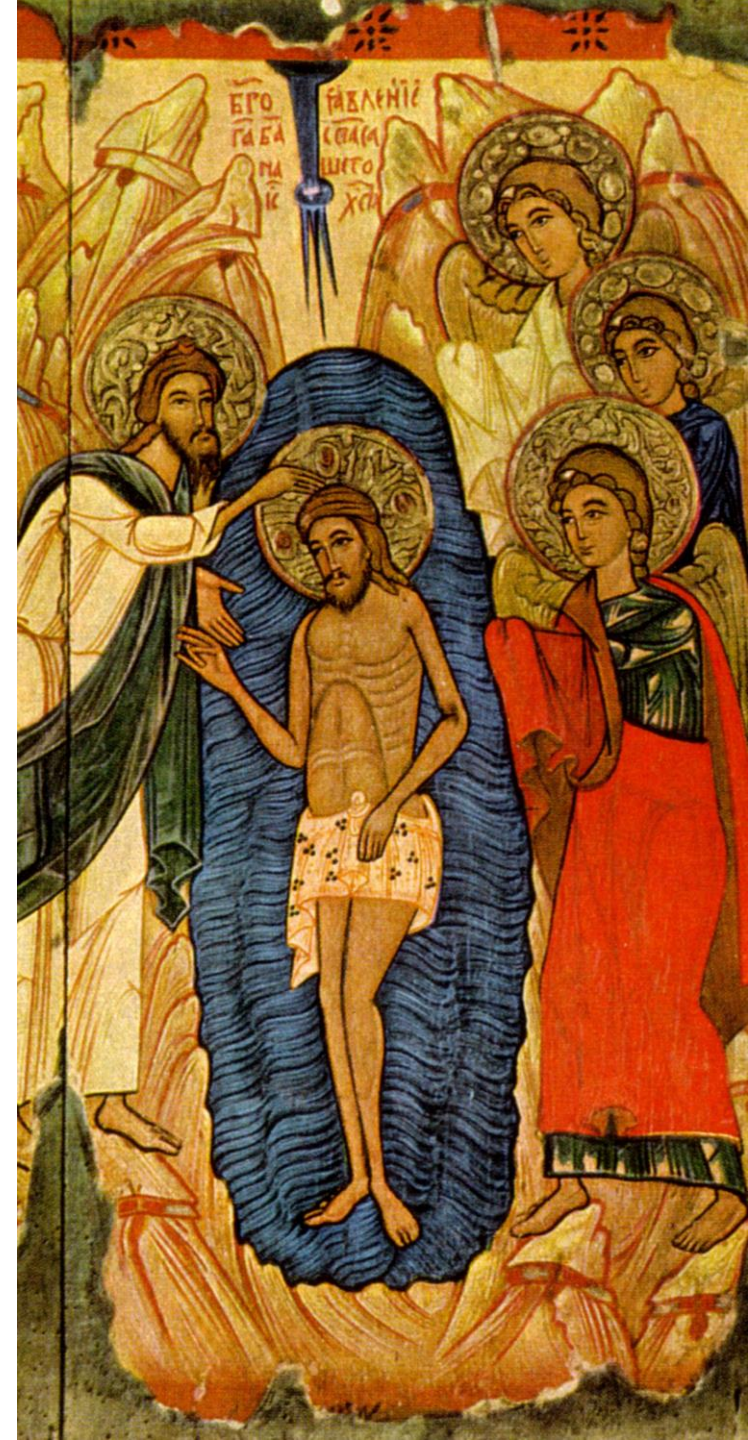
AUGUSTINE AND THE TRINITY

Augustine then uses an argument from grammar to prove that God must have a tripartite nature.

He examines Love. In order to have love, there must be a lover, a loved, and the action of love. Since God is the very embodiment of love, and he loved himself, he must have the three natures. In order to be love, God must at the same time be the object, the subject and the verb.

Restated:

1. God is the highest love
2. Love has three parts
3. $\therefore$ God must have three parts



AUGUSTINE AND THE TRINITY

Augustine repeats this basic line of reasoning for the ideas of Word and Knowledge. Since each part of the equation is dependent on the other parts of the equation, no combination is greater than the remaining part and vice versa. Likewise, the distinctions between the parts are imbued in the very nature of Love, Word, Knowledge and God.

In order for there to be the word (Jesus), there must be the speaking of the word (the Spirit) and the Speaker (the father). There is no before and after here. There is no speaker until there is the speaking and there is no word until the speech and or the speaker. In this sense, we can consider the word to be begotten from the speaker and at the same time co-eternal with it. This is how Augustine by-passed Arius' charge that the son was created and therefore was lesser than the father.



AUGUSTINE AND THE TRINITY

Of course, the most important factor in all of this answering the question of why all of this is such a big deal for the Christian tradition. Why does one have to have a correct view of God and therefore the Trinity?

Augustine thought that in order to love something, one must know it. Likewise, if one does not know what God is really like, then one's love is misplaced.

Augustine says in Chapter 4 of Book Eight:

"But indisputably we must take care, lest the mind believing that which it does not see, feign to itself something which is not, and hope for and love that which is false."

In other words, if your view of God does not match the reality of God, you do not really love God and your faith is a false faith – that is what makes this question, and the Christian attachment to the Trinity, so central to theological discussions of Christian-Muslim relations.



TAWHID

TAWHID

The word 'tawhid' occupies a similar central place in the conceptualisation of the nature of the divine in Islam as the Trinity does within the Christian tradition. It attempts to describe something of the *nature* of Allah, both internally, the interior nature of the divine, and externally, in the divine's interactions with us.

Tawhid arises from the Arabic root stem 'ahad' which relates to unification or the bringing together of things.

In this sense, tawhid is the descriptor of the ultimate unity of the divine – both in the sense of the oneness of Allah and as an expression of the, and the uniqueness of Allah

The oneness of the divine reflects the pure indissolubility of the divine, without divergent wills or persons, and without internal contradiction.

The uniqueness of the divine reflects both Allah's surpassing of any other gods, but also the impossibility of comparison between the true divine, Allah, and our created order.



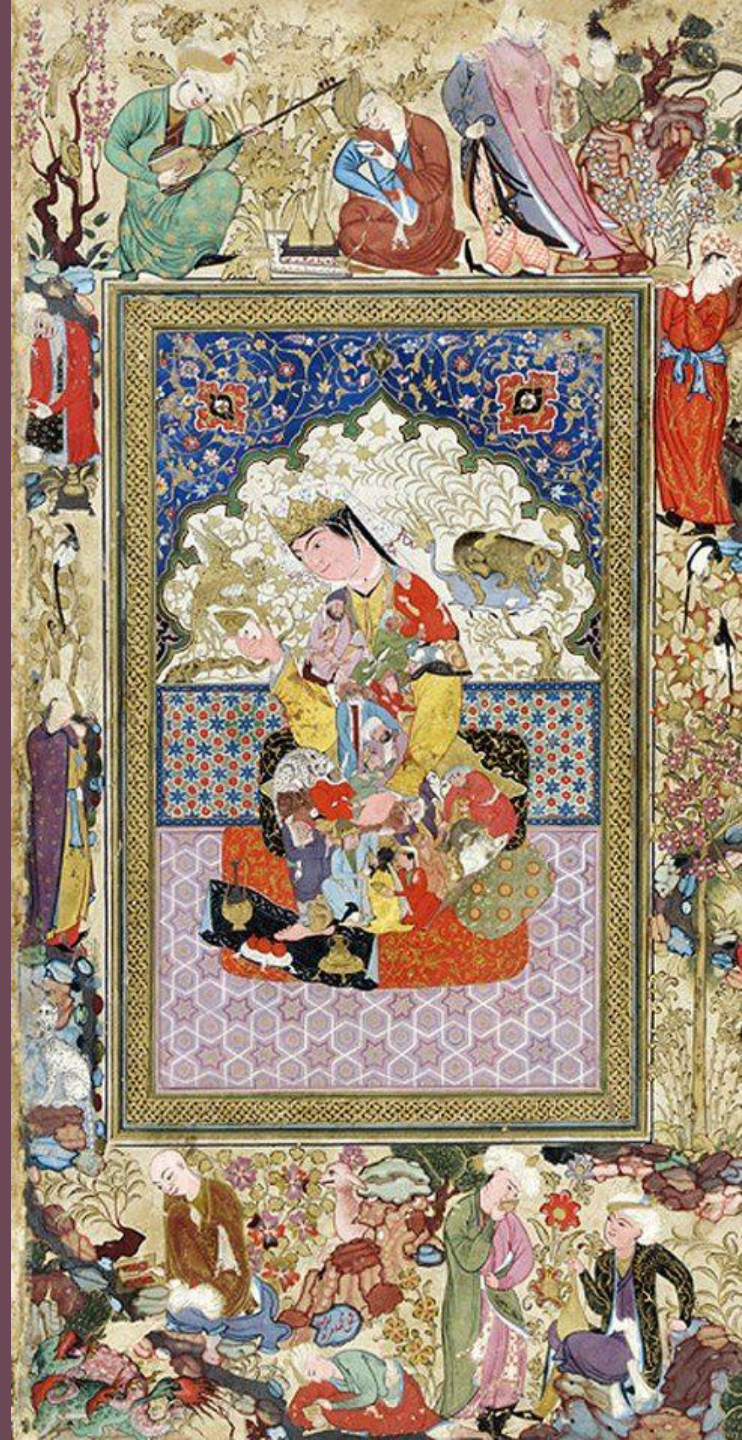
TAWHID

This conception of the *nature* of the divine, has obvious repercussions on the nature of the Islamic tradition as a whole and the way in which this conception of the divine influences the way that Islam presents itself as a religious tradition.

The most prominent example of this is the absolute stress given to monotheism within Islam, stemming from aspects like the uniqueness of the divine found in the concept of tawhid, but also as we have seen, relating to distinctive positioning relative to trinitarian forms of Christianity earlier in history.

This can be seen in common definitions of tawhid, which push this linkage into prominence:

'Tawhid: The Divine Unity, unity in its most profound sense. Allah is One in His Essence and His Attributes and His Acts. The whole universe and what it contains is one unified event which in itself has no lasting reality. Allah is real, Al-Haqq [the Truth]' – Zanaty, 2006

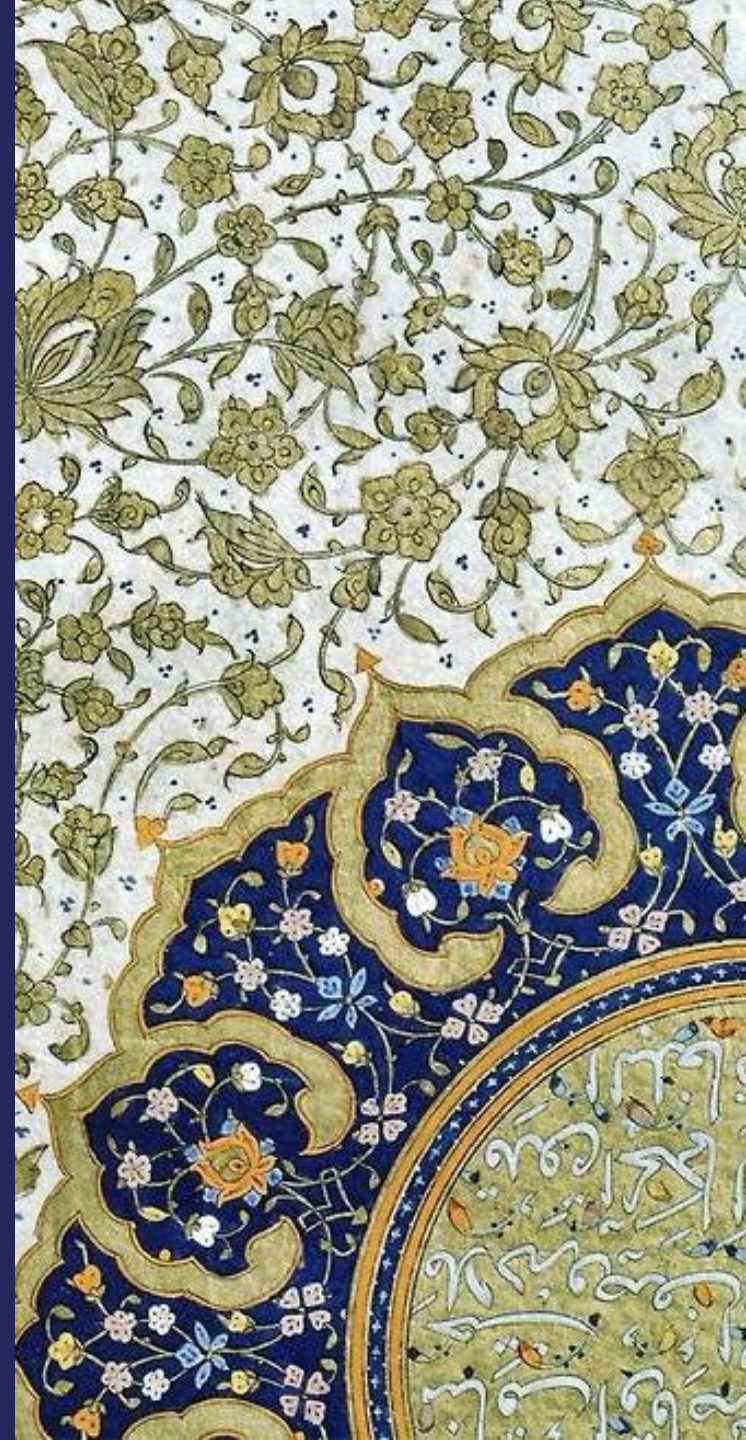


TAWHID

As with the doctrine of the Trinity, this conceptualisation of the nature of the divine did not spring fully formed from a theologian's mind, but is grounded in scriptural accounts in the Qur'an, in Hadith recitations, and in the historical narrative of the Prophet Muhammad.

We have covered aspects of the initial prophetic narrative of Muhammad, including the various travails of the early Muslim community when struggling against polytheistic tribes in Arabia, and the early contact between the Islamic community and Christian and Jewish tribes – we see a strong desire to overcome the polytheistic practices of pre-Islamic Arabia, initial friendly contact with other monotheistic peoples, and a gradual push towards further differentiation and distinction from them as Muslim power is secured.

This narrative builds on aspects of Islamic scriptural belief, but its prominence also serves a distinct and useful political and social role in the building of the initial Muslim community.



TAWHID

This prominence of monotheism and the notion of tawhid within Islam can be clearly seen in a number of scriptural passages:

He is God, the one, God is He on whom all depend, He does not beget, nor is He begotten, and (there is) none like Him
Quran (112:1-4)

Your Lord has decreed that you shall serve none but Him, and show kindness to your parents
Quran (17:23)

And to every people We sent a prophet to convey to them that they ought to serve Allah and avoid at-taghut [idolatry]
Quran (16:36)

Serve Allah and do not associate aught with Him
Quran (4:36)

The contrast between Christian Christological and Trinitarian formulations regarding the divine can also be clearly seen – the references to begetting and mention of associations with the divine are clear references to ongoing discussions occurring within the contemporary Christian community over matters of the Trinity, the nature of Christ, and various other matters determined by Church Councils at this time.



TAWHID

We also see similar references emerge within the Hadith literature, the recorded sayings of the Prophet.

When the Prophet sent Muadh to Yemen, he said to him, “You are going to a nation from the people of the Scripture, so let first thing to which you will invite them, be the Tawhid of Allah”.

Once Prophet said “What is due to Allah from His creatures is to serve Him alone and never to associate any other being with Him. What is due them is not to punish any person who does not associate aught with Him”

Note the connection we can see between the reference to scripture, the previously explored connections between the early Muslim community and Christian communities in Yemen and Africa, as well as the prominence of tawhid as the central concept for conversion to Islam.

Islamic monotheism then, in contrast to, and perhaps in reaction to Christian trinitarianism, develops and evolves into *the* central qualifier of Islamic belief – as with the Christian Trinity, correct belief on this matter is the foundation stone of religious orthodoxy.



TAWHID

As well as these scriptural foundations for the notion of Tawhid, we also see, in a similar fashion to Augustine's work on the Trinity, a theo-logical argument for the necessity of tawhid. This is the argument of the conflict of true intentions:

1. Only a true god can have complete control and power over everything.
2. If there were two or more gods, each would try to overpower the other to assert their dominance, leading to chaos and disorder.
3. The stability in the world is a sign of one god.
4. Allah is *al-Qadir*; the All-Powerful. If there were two or more gods, each would claim to be All-Powerful causing a 'conflict in intentions'.

TAWHID

While the concept of Tawhid is conceptually simple, in providing the cornerstone of the theological foundations of Islam, it has complicated and complex influences on the religious tradition. This can be seen in the various ways in which, while maintaining the unity of tawhid, Islamic scholars have attempted to tease out the different forms that tawhid can take:

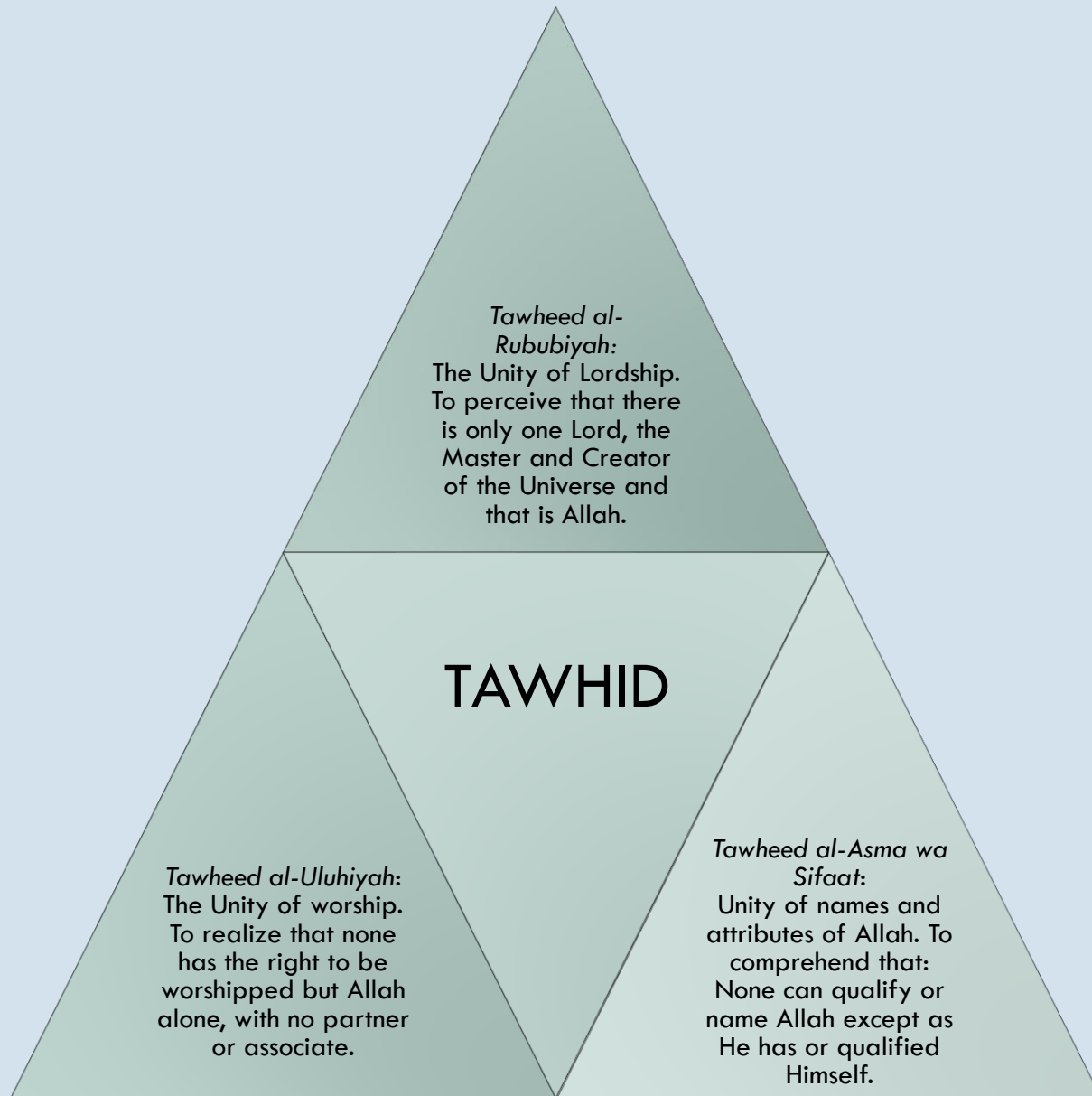
Tawheed al-Rububiyah

Tawheed al-Uluhiyah

Tawheed al-Asma wa Sifaat

Each of these fleshes out the various ways in which the central belief in the unity of the divine has an impact on the formation of Islamic belief and practice – a classic case of the theological project, its necessity, and its methodology – and names the foundational theological concepts within the structure of the Islamic tradition.





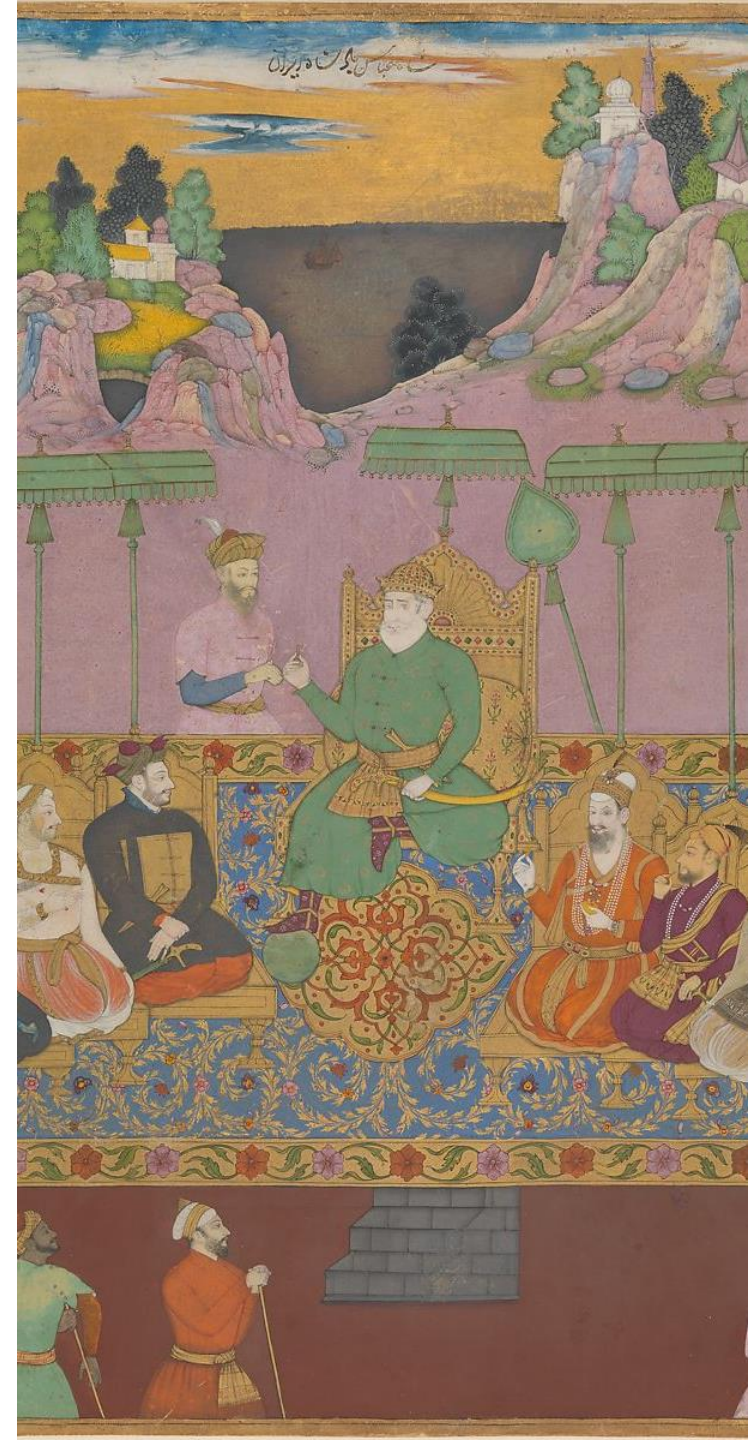
SHIRK

The contrasting aspect of this prominent focus on monotheism, the unity of the divine, and its uniqueness, is division or its Arabic term *shirk*.

Deriving from the Arabic stem S-R-K with the general meaning of 'to share', particularly to share as an equal partner, the term *shirk* is consistently used in the Qur'an as a term for the sharing of worship, whether with Allah and something else, or between multiple deities in the case of polytheism.

Shirk is therefore the opposite of the conception of *tawhid* as requiring sole worship of Allah and, in both Qur'anic and Hadith narratives those who engage in it, the *mushrikun*, are often referred to as enemies of Islam.

As such, *shirk* depends for its definition on the definition of *tawhid*, and represents a severe defect of belief – it is variously described as the worst of sins and most offending conduct in the eyes of Allah.



SHIRK

This seriousness can be seen easily in the Qur'anic and Hadith injunctions regarding it, such as:

Allah will not forgive associating aught with Him; but He will forgive the lesser sins to whomsoever He pleases
Quran 4:48

Verily you and the gods you worshipped beside Allah are the fuel of Hell. All of you are bound to arrive there
Quran 21:98

The Prophet said: *Whoever dies while calling on associates to Allah shall enter Hell.*

It is the association with Allah, and the transgression of his uniqueness / oneness that drives the prohibition on *shirk* within the Islamic tradition – connected to the obligation on believers to recognise the existence, glory, and solitariness of Allah in the created order around them.



SHIRK

Within this broad prohibition on associating anything with Allah and breaching the conception of tawhid, we have also seen the application of shirk to various other forms of association beyond obvious polytheistic practices. This can be seen in the division of shirk into major and minor cases in much scholarly work within Islam, as well as the categorisation of various other forms of association or practice as shirk in nature.

Some examples of this include:

Shirk al-adah: The shirk of custom which includes various customary superstitions and beliefs that impute power to spirits beyond or in opposition to Allah

Shirk al-ibadah: The shirk of worship which includes the reverence and belief in the power of created things, such as the graves of holy figures or idols.

Shirk al-'ilm: The shirk of knowledge which includes the association of anyone with knowledge of the future, such as astrologers, dream interpreters, or later prophets than Muhammad.

Each of these forms offers up an example of the association of something with an aspect or quality that reserved solely to the divine – whether omnipotence, omniscience, or sole worship.



SHIRK

Beyond these differing forms of shirk, we also see applications of shirk which distinguish between major and minor forms.

The major form is the clear association of something or someone as an equal or partner to Allah, or to associate Allah with the characteristics of something created, or to worship something instead of Allah.

This is clearly outlined in the Qu'ran, e.g.:
He is God, the one, God is He on whom all depend, He does not beget, nor is He begotten, and (there is) none like Him
Quran (112:1-4)

Serve Allah and do not associate aught with Him
Quran (4:36)

In committing this sin, which is the only one not forgiven by Allah who is the all-merciful, believers are generally seen to have removed themselves from the Muslim community.



SHIRK

Minor forms of shirk do not have the same consequences as major forms, but are seen as removing the believer from the correct and true relationship with the divine.

These forms include practices and actions that distract or remove the believer from the necessary worship of Allah, such as pride and showing off which places oneself higher in one's estimation, or practicing fortune telling, which even if not a true reflection of foreknowledge, encourages the belief in the possibility of non-divine omniscience, or practicing forms of ritual or magical ceremonies which are not dedicated to Allah, as they impute power over creation onto something other than Allah.

All of these actions are ones which subtly remove the correct focus of belief and worship that the doctrine of tawhid promulgates, engaging in a subtle form of shirk.



READINGS

READINGS

Our readings for this section are split into two halves, with the first two readings offering a deeper and fuller exploration of the two concepts we have examined in this section.

The second two readings attempt to flesh out the connections, overlaps, and tensions that these theological positions inculcate in social, political, and community relations between Christian and Muslim peoples. One takes a contemporary view on a Muslim response to the Trinity, while the other offers further historical detail on Christian responses to Islamic forms of monotheism.

If you are interested in these particular theological tropes, then I can recommend making contact with the tutors for the Christian Theology module *The Doctrine of the Trinity* or the Islamic Studies module *Perspectives on Islamic Sources*.



READINGS

Burge S. Doctrine and Dogma in the Qur'an. *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*. Oxford University Press, 2009

Ayres L. Augustine on the Trinity. *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*. Oxford University Press, 2011

These two readings attempt to offer more fulsome explorations of the concepts discussed in this section of the module, looking at the importance of tawhid for the overall development of Islamic belief, and further exploring the nature and content of Augustine's trinitarian theology.

Kuhn M. Allāh: Internalized Relationality: Awwaḍ Sim'ān on the Trinitarian Nature of God. *Transformation*. 2019;36(3):173-183.

Beaumont, Mark. "Speaking of the Triune God: Christian Defence of the Trinity in the Early Islamic Period." *Transformation*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2012, pp. 111–127.

These two readings offer examples of fruitful and interesting interactions between Christian and Muslim communities over matters like the nature of God, tawhid, and the Trinity, both historically and contemporaneously.