

The Children of Abraham

The Person of God

**Sunday, March 11, 2007
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor.**

Everyone is welcome!

St. John in the Wilderness

Primary References

- **Three Faiths, One God: The Formative Faith and Practice of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam**, Jacob Neusner, Bruce Chilton, William Graham. Brill Academic Publishers, 2002
- **Christian Theology. An Introduction. Third Edition**. Alister E. McGrath, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001

Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love: So mightily spread abroad your Spirit, that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace, as children of one Father; to whom be dominion and glory, now and for ever.

- For Peace, Book of Common Prayer, p. 815

The Person of God **in Christianity, Islam and** **Judaism**

Introduction

- All three religions know God through God's self-revelation
 - **Judaism**: in the Written and Oral **Torah**
 - **Christianity**: in the **Bible** and through **Christ Jesus**
 - **Islam**: in the **Qur'an**
- Knowledge of God is “accumulative” for Christianity and Islam:
 - **Christianity**: Written Torah (“Old Testament”) → New Testament
 - **Islam**: Torah of Moses → Bible of Christianity → perfected in the Qur'an

Introduction

- All three religions acknowledge God as:
 - The Creator of the universe
 - Transcendent, All-Knowing (= omniscient), All-Powerful (= omnipotent)
 - Unique, One (“Unitary”)
- Differ in their:
 - emphasis on certain facets of the above characteristics of God
 - views of the relationship of God with humanity

Islam

**One God, Unitary and
Transcendent**

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

Introduction

- Emphasis in Islam is on the God as **Transcendent Lord**
 - God is greater (*Allahu akbar*) [than anything conceivable]
- God alone is worthy of worship and service.
- To attribute human attributes to God is ***shirk*** (mixing something else with God)
 - There is *no* concept of human beings as made in the image of God

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God as Transcendent Lord

- God's **Otherness** to anything in the world of experience strains the limits of human mind
- “the use of multiple names and expressions of praise or submission is finally the only available, albeit limited and approximate, means that a contingent, limited human being has of approaching the Unconditioned and Infinite, the Lord of the universe”

■ William Graham

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God as Transcendent Lord

- The *Takbir* or “**Magnification of God:**” *Allahu akbar* (God is greater [than anything conceivable]) is:
 - the ubiquitous affirmation of the most important fact about reality that we know: God’s majesty, God’s absolute and utter transcendence
 - cried out before every call to ritual worship
 - an ejaculation of praise
 - a formula for meditation
 - a war cry
 - cried out whenever a Muslim wishes to express gratitude, wonder, or pleasure

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God as Transcendent Lord

- Three aspects of God as **Transcendent Lord**:
 - 1. God's omnipotence (All-Powerful), omniscience (All-Knowing), and sovereignty
 - 2. God's oneness, uniqueness, and perfection
 - 3. God as Creator-Sustainer

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As All-Powerful, All-Knowing Lord

- Qur'an* Sura 57:1-6:
- In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy.

Everything in the heavens and the earth glorifies God – He is the Almighty, the Wise. Control of the heavens and earth belongs to Him; He gives life and death; He has power over all things, He is the First and the Last; the Outer and the Inner; He has knowledge of all things. It was He who created the heavens and earth in six days and then established Himself on the throne.

*MAS Abdel Haleem translation, Oxford

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As All-Powerful, All-Knowing Lord

- Qur'an* Sura 57:1-6:
- He knows what enters the earth and what comes out of it; what descends from the sky and what ascends to it. He is with you wherever you are; He sees all that you do; control of the heavens and earth belongs to Him. Everything is brought back to God. He makes night merge into day and day into night. He knows what is in every heart.”

*MAS Abdel Haleen translation, Oxford

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As All-Powerful, All-Knowing Lord

- Qur'an* Throne Verse of Sura 2:255:
 - God: there is no god but Him, the Ever Living, the Ever Watchful. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. All that is in the heavens and in the earth belongs to Him. Who is there that can intercede with Him except by His leave? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, but they do not comprehend any of His knowledge except what He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth; it does not weary Him to preserve them both. He is the Most High, the Tremendous.

*MAS Abdel Haleem translation, Oxford

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As All-Powerful, All-Knowing Lord

- To God belongs the “determining” or “measuring out” (*qadar*) of all things
- Consensus in Islam has affirmed God’s *qadar* over human free will or any natural law
 - The emphasis on God as All-Knowing and All-Powerful brings a strong sense of **Predestination** to Islam
- “...whoever God guides is truly guided, and whoever God allows to stray is a loser.” (Qur’an* 7:178)

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As All-Powerful, All-Knowing Lord

- However, Islam also says individuals are accountable for their actions at the Judgment.
- God will be Judge, the “Master of the Day of Judgment” (Qur’an* 1:4)
- The tension, even contradiction, between:
 - God’s absolute divine sovereignty → predestination of human beings, versus
 - human free will and accountability,
- is considered in Islam a *mystery* for finite human beings

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As All-Powerful, All-Knowing Lord

- **Doctrine of “Acquisition”** attempts to approach an understanding of this mystery:
 - God creates all human acts
 - each human being “acquires” his or her actions by choice
 - Muhammad on God’s absolute divine sovereignty → predestination of human beings, versus human free will and accountability (from the *hadith*):
 - [Muhammad:] “There is no one of you whose place in [either] the fire or Paradise has not been written [for him].”
 - “Then one of the men of the people said, “Can we not [simply] rely on this, O Apostle of God?”
 - “[Muhammad] said: “No, rather act, for everyone is prepared [for that which he has been created].”
- al-Bukhari 82:3:5

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As One, Unique, Perfect

- *Shahadah*: “there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”
 - Said before every call to the five prescribed times of daily prayer (*salat*)
 - The first words to a Muslim newborn
- Signals one’s *islam* (submission to God)
- Underscores the absolute and unique character of God

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As One, Unique, Perfect

- God is a complete and perfect being, *without* partner or need of anyone or anything else
- The greatest sin for a Muslim is *shirk* (mixing something else with God)
 - This includes associating “partners” with the unique, transcendent Lord of heaven and earth

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As One, Unique, Perfect

- Qur'an* 6:100-101
- ...they [nonbelievers] made the jinn⁺ partners with God, though He created them, and without any true knowledge they attribute sons and daughters to Him. Glory be to Him! He is far higher than what they ascribe to him, the Creator of the heavens and the earth! How could He have children when He has no spouse, when He created all things, and has full knowledge of all things?

+unseen beings made with smokeless fire

*MAS Abdel Haleem translation, Oxford

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As One, Unique, Perfect

- A central virtue for Muslims is *Tawhid*
“declaration of [and faith in] divine oneness”
- Muslims repeat Qur’an* Sura 112 five times each day:
 - “... He is God the One, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him.”

*MAS Abdel Haleem translation, Oxford

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As Creator and Sustainer

- God is the ground of Being; nothing has independent existence apart from God's creative and sustaining power
- God not only created the world, but God's sustaining of the world consists of re-creating everything at every moment:
 - "Do they not see that God brings life into being and reproduces it? Truly this is easy for God." (Qur'an 29:19, MAS Abdel Haleem translation, Oxford)
 - "law of cause and effect" appears to be true only because God, at every nanosecond of existence, is deciding once again to allow "cause" to follow "effect"

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As Creator and Sustainer

- As the Sustainer of His Creation, God is thus intimately involved in the world, and “God is closer to us than is our jugular vein” (Qur’an 50:16)

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As Creator and Sustainer

- God does care about the creatures of his creation.
 - God's love is dependent on the believer's faith and practice:
 - "God loves those who keep their pledges and are mindful of Him" (Qur'an 3:76)
 - ... if any of you go back on your faith, God will soon replace you with people He loves and who love Him." (Qur'an 5:54)
 - Of the divine attributes:
 - (1) God's infinite power and majesty
 - (2) God's justice and judgment
 - (3) God's mercy and love
- (1) and (2) are most emphasized in Muslim piety.

Islam: God, Unitary and Transcendent

God As Creator and Sustainer

- “The Lord of the universe is above all a just God, and in the end He will requite human actions as they deserve – tempered always by His endless mercy, but always based on His standards of justice and right. . .” (William Graham)

Judaism: **One God, Many Forms**

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Introduction

- God is:
 - creator of the world
 - giver of Torah (both written and oral)
 - redeemer of Israel
- Certain knowledge of God is found only in the revelation of the Torah
- The encounter with God takes place:
 - at prayer and worship
 - in the study of Torah
- Human beings are made in God's image:
 - Thus God and humanity are comparable in some ways

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

The Many Faces of God

- God appears to humanity in diverse forms and faces:
 - *B. Said R Hinena bar Papa:* “The Holy One, blessed be He, had made his appearance to them with a stern face, with a neutral face, with a friendly face, with a happy face. . . .”
 - *G. Said to them the Holy One, blessed be He:* “Even though you may see all of these diverse faces of mine, nonetheless, I am the Lord your God brought you out of the land of Egypt (Ex. 20:2).”

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

The Many Faces of God

- God appears to humanity in diverse forms and faces:
 - *H: Said R. Levi*, “The Holy One, blessed be He, had appeared to them like an icon that has faces in all directions, so that if a thousand people look at it, it appears to look at them as well.
 - *I.* “So too when the Holy One, blessed be He, when He was speaking, each Israelite would say ‘With me in particular the Word speaks’
 - *J.* “What is written here is not, I am the Lord, your [plural] God, but rather, I am the Lord your [singular] God who brought you out of the land of Egypt (Ex. 20:2)

■ from: Midrash, Pesiqta deRab Kahana

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

The Many Faces of God

- The reason for the many faces of God:
 - God must sustain all the diverse images of humanity – for each human being is made in the image of God
- So Torah says:
 - If you want to know God, look into the face of the Other – look into the face of each human being, one by one, one by one

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Portraits of God

- Torah portrays God in several ways:
 - 1. God as the foundation and goal of All
 - 2. God as Presence
 - 3. God as a Person, with a Personality

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Portraits of God: Origin & Goal of All

- God is:
 - one or unitary
 - The one origin, basis, foundation of all things
 - The one goal of all being
 - all things, through an ascending hierarchy, ultimately converge to God

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Portraits of God: Presence

- God forms a living presence in the world
 - The Presence of God is the *Shekhinah* (roughly corresponding to the Holy Spirit)
- The Presence of God, the *Shekhinah*:
 - conveys divine decisions through the operation of “chance” in the world
 - intervenes in history
 - hears the prayers of the people

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Portraits of God: Presence

- When the All-Merciful came forth to redeem Israel from Egypt, He did not send a messenger or an angel, but the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself came forth, as it is said, “For I will pass through the Land of Egypt that night” (Ex. 12:12) – and not only so, but it was He and His entire retinue.
 - Jerusalem Talmud: Sanhedrin 2:1:III.O

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Portraits of God: Presence

- See how high the Holy One, blessed be He, is above the His world. Yet a person can enter a synagogue, stand behind a pillar, and pray in an undertone, and the Holy One, blessed be He, hears his prayers, [for] as it [the Torah] says, “Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard” (1 Sam. 1:13). Yet the Holy One, blessed be He, heard her prayer.
 - Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 9:1.VII.E

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Portraits of God: Personality

- Torah commands: “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.”
- It would be hard to love an abstract entity, an unmoved mover (such as the God of the Greek philosophers)
- The God of Torah however is a person, an individual, active in everyday life, responding to the needs of each individual human being and his or her actions.

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Portraits of God: Personality

- God in the Torah – particularly in the Babylonian Talmud – is a full personality whom humanity can know and love
- As a personality, God is “corporeal” in some ways. That is, God does acts that people do. God “mirrors” humanity:
 - wears phylacteries (= tefillin)
 - studies Torah
 - makes practical decisions
 - sustains the world (has administrative duties)
 - plays with his pet, leviathan
 - God prays to Godself (for example, that God should elicit from Godself forgiveness for Israel)

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Portraits of God: Personality

- In the covenant with God's people, and in God's relationship with humankind, God conforms to the human social rules that govern relationships. God negotiates, persuades, teaches, argues
 - For example, recall Abraham arguing with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:23-33)
- That God's personality includes "human" aspects is one of the most characteristic and important theological ideas in Rabbinic Judaism.

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Portraits of God: Personality

- There is a point however where human beings can relate to God only with attitude of profound humility and obedience. God is God. God does what God likes. God is Other. We must simply accept God's decrees, when:
 - the undeserving receive glory
 - the deserving come to nothing

Judaism: One God, Many Forms

Portraits of God: Personality

- Moses talking to God about the great teacher of the Torah, Rabbi Akiba:
 - “He [Moses] said to Him, ‘Lord of the universe, you have now shown me his mastery of Torah. Now show me his reward.’
 - “He [God] said to him [Moses], ‘Turn around.’
 - “He turned around and saw people weighing out his flesh in the butcher-shop.
 - “He said to Him, ‘Lord of the universe, such is his mastery of Torah, and such is his reward?’
 - “He said to him, ‘Be silent. That is how I have decided matters.’”

Christianity

God Triune and Incarnate

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

Introduction

- Distinctive beliefs of Christianity:
 - **The Incarnation:** The Transcendent God, the Creator of the Universe, emptied God's self (*kenosis*) and became a human being – Jesus
 - **The Incarnation** has far-reaching implications for God's relationship with humanity
 - **The Trinity:** The mystery of the God as One Being, yet a Trinity – a “community of being”, consisting of three “personas” mutually interpenetrating each other, bonded by love

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

Incarnation

- From the Gospel of John:
 - 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 the Word became flesh and lived among us, ...”
(John 1:1-3, 14 NRSV)
 - “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16 NRSV)

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

Incarnation

- The Angel Gabriel appearing to Mary:
 - ... you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:30-31 NRSV)

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

Incarnation

- Paul, speaking of Jesus in Colossians 1:15-20 (NRSV):
 - 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, He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

Incarnation

- Jesus is **fully God**, the second person of the Trinity, the “Son of God,” the *logos* or Word of God
 - Jesus as God has always existed. “There was never a time in which he was not.”
- Jesus was **fully Human**

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

Incarnation

- In God's outgoing love, God *united* God's self to God's creation – the closest of all possible unions
 - God became that which God had created
- God emptied God's self (*kenosis*) and took on our humanity as:
 - an act of restoration of human beings to God following the sin of Adam and Eve
 - an act of love, an expression of God's limitless, outgoing love for human beings, to meet us in our humanity
- Jesus as God shows us who God is

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

Incarnation

- The **Incarnation** marks a new stage in the history of humanity, raising humankind to a new level, closer to the world of God, in whose image we are made. Jesus is the “new Adam,” the “man from heaven:”
 - “The first man [Adam] was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man [Jesus] is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.” (1 Corinthians 15:47-49 NRSV)

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

The Trinity

- The problem of the **Trinity** (from St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*):
 - 1. The Father is God
 - 2. The Son is God
 - 3. The Holy Spirit is God
 - 4. The Father is not the Son
 - 5. The Son is not the Holy Spirit
 - 6. The Holy Spirit is not the Father
 - 7. There is only one God

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

The Trinity

- The numbers do not add up: three individual beings are named as God but they do not add up to three Gods, but rather to One God:
- $3 = 1, 1 = 3$

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

The Trinity

- St. Gregory of Nazianzus* (330-389 AD):
 - “No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One. . . . When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light.”

*present day Bekar, Turkey

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

The Trinity

- St. Gregory of Nazianzus* (330-389 AD):
 - “When I speak of God you must be illumined at once by one flash of light and by three. Three in Properties, or Hypostases, or Persons, if any prefer so to call them, for we will not quarrel about names so long as the syllables amount to the same meaning; but One in respect of ... the Godhead. For they are divided indivisibly. . . and they are conjoined dividedly. For the Godhead is one in three, and the three are one. . .”

*present day Bekar, Turkey

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

The Trinity

- The doctrine of the Trinity is:
 - ultimately irrational: “beyond rational understanding,” a “mystery”
 - something revealed to us by God, not demonstrated to us by our own reason
 - something in which, in the end, our “argumentation and analysis must give place to wordless prayer, ‘Let all mortal flesh keep silent, and stand with fear and trembling.’” (Bishop Kallistos Ware)

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

The Trinity

- Two theological concepts used to try to approach an understanding of the Trinity:
 - 1. **Perichoresis**
 - 2. **Appropriation**

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

The Trinity: Perichoresis

- **Perichoresis** (Greek) = *circumincessio* (Latin)
= “mutual interpenetration”
 - Each person of the Trinity, maintaining a distinctive identity, interpenetrates the others and is interpenetrated by them, to the point that they all have one will

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

The Trinity: Perichoresis

- **“I-You” Relation** (opposed to an “I-It” relation)
 - The “You” can never be objectified, or “boxed” into our understanding. The “You” has no borders, cannot be measured or “turned into content.” The “You” “fills the sky” of our mind's eye. The “You” is a Presence, is Presence as power.
 - For humans, this is an encounter, a transitory event (the “event of relation”) which is mutual and reciprocal
 - Can be called love
 - Comes to us by grace

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

The Trinity: Perichoresis

- The “mutual interpenetration” of the three persons of the Trinity can be thought of as involving a **continuous** (rather than a transitory) **“I – You” relationship** of each person of the Trinity with the other persons

Christianity: God Triune and Incarnate

The Trinity: Appropriation

- *All three persons of the Trinity are involved in every action of God*
- Nonetheless, it is **appropriate** to think of some actions as the distinctive actions of one person of the Trinity. For example:
 - **creation** is the work of the **Father**
 - **redemption** is the work of the **Son**

Primary References

- **Three Faiths, One God: The Formative Faith and Practice of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam**, Jacob Neusner, Bruce Chilton, William Graham. Brill Academic Publishers, 2002
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