

MONOTHEISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIVINE IN AFRICAN RELIGION, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

The article traces the varied expressions of the conception of the Divine in traditional African religion, Islam and Christianity. The focus in particular is on explaining the idea of monotheism in each of these religious traditions. An argument is advanced here that African religion, however different from Christianity and Islam, ultimately also manifests a form of monotheism. The theological debate on the particular expressions of monotheism in Christianity and Islam also receive attention. Finally, a suggestion is put forward as to the possibility to exploit the commonality of the absolute position of the Divine in the religious traditions as a shared basis for religious tolerance and dialogue.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word *monotheism* has its origin in the Greek language and is simply translated as “the belief in one God”. The conception has developed to encompass the belief in one (and only one) personal, all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving God, who is the Creator and Lord of everyone and everything and yet exists distinctly from and beyond the whole universe. In the formative stages of Israel’s religion, reverence of one deity seemed possible without necessarily denying the existence of other deities. Israel’s prophetic monotheism clearly rejected the reality of any other gods (Is. 41:21-24; 43:10-13; 44:8). The New Testament revelation of a trinitarian God is not opposed to monotheism. Judaism and Islam, however, reject the belief in the Trinity as being incompatible with their monotheistic

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faith. In the field of comparative religion some have argued that monotheism evolved either from an earlier polytheism or a primitive, pure monotheism (often lapsed into later polytheism).

In this article the concept of monotheism is explored in its varied expression in African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam. The results of this investigation are employed as motivation and common ground for religious coexistence, and hence, a dialogue. This paper will argue that monotheism is a view of the Divine common to the mentioned three religions.

2. CONCEPTS OF MONOTHEISM

2.1 African monotheism

To African peoples, man's world experience is ultimately associated with God (Mbiti 1969:8-13). This does not necessarily imply that natural phenomena are taken to be God. These phenomena not only originate from Him, but also bear witness to Him. The understanding of God in the African sense is strongly coloured by the universe of which man himself is part. Man sees in the universe not only the imprint, but the reflection of God in his oneness. Whether that image is marred or clearly focused and defined, it is nevertheless an image of God, the Creator. This is the most significant image known in traditional African societies. He is the controller of the Universe. This is the focal assumption for the reality and uniqueness of God in the African context. God's control of the universe embraces all unique and real perceptions about God by Africans. The reality of God and the uniqueness of God are appreciated in this study as a premise for a monotheistic belief of Africans which does not inevitably deny the existence of other deities.

The appropriate description of African traditional religion is monotheistic, however modified this may be. This modification is, however, inevitable because of the presence of other divine beings within the structure of African religion. These divine "beings" and "powers" occupy a subordinated role for they have no absolute existence within the African perception of a unitary theocratic government. The relationship between the absolute Divine and other

deities or powers requires clarification. The following views render a possible elucidation of this relationship:

Firstly, from the point of view of the theology of African traditional religion, it will not be correct to say that the divinities were created. It will be more correct to say that they were brought into being, or that they came into being as a result of the divine ordering of the universe.

Secondly, the divinities are derivatives (sub-ordinates) from the Divine, as was seen in the first description above. It is necessary, however, to re-emphasise it in this context, as it is not always possible to prove the derivation on linguistic grounds. The linguistic connections between the names of the Divine and the generic names of the divinities are not always clear. It is, however, theologically provable that the divinities have no absolute existence - they are in fact only consequences of the Divine Being. All that has been said about the unitary control of the created order by the Divine applies here. From the African view of Deity and the divinities, their powers and authority are meaningless apart from Him. This corroborates the fact that even though there are references to other divinities, the basic attitude towards the Divine in the African traditional religion is indicative of monotheism. Without the pinnacle authority and position of the Divine all other divinities lose their position and function.

Thirdly, every divinity has his own local name in colloquial languages, which is descriptive of either his allotted function or the natural phenomenon which is believed to be a manifestation or emblem of his being. Among the Yoruba, the divinity who is believed to be the divine representative of "the Wrath" is called Jákuta - one who hurls or fights with stones; and in Nupe he is called Sokogba (=Soko egba) - "God's axe".

Fourthly, the divinities were brought into being as functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe. Dahomey manifests the idea of a theocratic universal government (Herskovits 1938:103). Mawu-Lisa (the arch divinity) apportioned the kingdoms of the sky, the sea, and the earth among six of his offspring, and to the seventh, Legba - who is the same as the divine messenger and inspector

general in African pantheons (Idowu 1962:80) - is assigned the office of being the liaison officer between Mawu-Lisa and the other offspring and between the offsprings themselves. Here we have an apt illustration that the divinity system is usually a reflection of the conceptions regarding the sociological pattern of the divine government of the universe. Godfrey Lienhardt (1961:57) makes a discerning observation in connection with the divinities. None of the free-divinities, with the possible exception of Macardt, also called Colwic, is thought to exist independently of the particular name by which the Dinka know it. That is, unlike Divinity, who is thought to be universal and known by various names to different peoples, the free divinities are active only where their specific names are known and where effects in human life can be attributed to them.

Fifthly, the divinities function as "ministers", each with his own definite portfolio in the Divine Monarch's government. Each is in his own sphere an administrative head of a department. They are also intermediaries between the Divine and man, especially with reference to their particular functions. Consequently, in the course of time, they have become conventional channels through which man believes that he should approach the Divine (Lienhardt 1961:57).

Sixthly, the divinities under the various generic names form the pantheon in each locality. The pantheon varies in size according to the sociological context or other factors that may influence the concept of the divine ordering of the government of the universe among each people. Ruling over each pantheon is usually an arch divinity who is closely related to the Divine as far as his attributes are concerned.

Seventhly, we still have to answer an important question: are the divinities real or not? We may get round this question by saying that to those who believe in them and believe that they derive succour from their ministrations or afflictions from their machinations, they are real, and to those who have outgrown them or to whom they have never had significance, they have no real, objective existence. But this is a question so subtle and of such tremendous importance that it cannot be so easily dismissed. First, it is wrong to hold that a certain experience is impossible simply on the ground that certain people have not had such an experience or are incapable of it.

Secondly, it would be sheer presumption to claim that we already know all that there is to know about spiritual powers and the supersensory world (Idowu 1962:62).

It is important to illustrate this by referring to the concept of God among the Bushmen of Southern Africa and the way in which this relates to the concept of monotheism. It should be borne in mind that to the San, as to most primal peoples, the name of God is too charged with sacred power to be articulated. Thus a variety of pseudonyms have been devised for referring to God. The !Kung, for example, have seven divine names, and one human name for the great god. This raises the question as to whether the San recognise a single God (monotheism) (Kruger 1995). In the case of most groups there is a belief in a greater and lesser god, as well as in other supernatural beings (Bisiele 1978:162-165).

Many Africans visualise God as 'Father', both in terms of his position as the universal Creator and 'Provider', and in the sense of his personal availability to them in time of need. The Akamba consider the heavens and the earth to be the Father's 'equal sized bowls': they are his property, both by creation and the right of ownership; and they contain his belongings.

The fatherhood of God also comes out in prayers, indicating that people consider Him to be their personal Father in a monotheistic sense, with whom they can communicate. So, in prayers and invocations He is addressed as 'Father', 'Our Father' 'My Father'. 'Great Father', 'Father God' or 'Farher of our/my fathers' by peoples such as the Lluo, Bukusu, Gikuyu, Nandi, Tugen of Kenya and others in Africa such as the Bambuti; Azande and Nuer, among others. The sense of God's fatherhood strongly points to the monotheistic concepts that are addressed in this paper. This cosmological view of monotheism is African in interpretation and peculiar to them. It is, however, different from the Judeo-Christian monotheism and Muslim monotheism which is also open to different interpretations. It should be understood that African religion, like all other monotheistic religions, has undergone a process of development from "family divinities" to the "Supreme Deity" - a scientific phenomenon of growth from a simple to a complex conception of religion.

2.2 Monótheism in Christian belief

2.2.1 Biblical references to one God

The religion of the ancient Hebrews, (especially after the Deuteronomistic reform) was a rigorously monotheistic faith, as indeed the Jewish religion is to this day. Christianity is an offshoot of the Jewish religion, hence highly occupied with the concept of monotheism. The unity of God was revealed to Israel at several different times and in various ways. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21), for example, begin with the statement:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me (or beside me) (Exod. 20:2-3).

The Hebrew translated here as “before me” or “besides me” is *'al panay*, which literally means “to my face”. God had demonstrated his unique reality by what He had done, and was thus entitled to Israel’s exclusive worship, devotion and obedience. There were no others who had so proven their claim to deity.

The prohibition of idolatry, the second commandment (Ex. 20:4), also rests on the uniqueness of Yahweh: He will not tolerate any worship of man-made objects, for He alone is God. He is the only member of a unique class. The rejection of polytheism runs throughout prophetic and priestly documents of the Old Testament. God repeatedly demonstrates his superiority to other claimants to deity. It could, of course, be maintained that this does not conclusively prove that the Old Testament required monotheism. It might simply be the case that it was the other gods (i.e. the gods of other nations) who were rejected by the Old Testament, in favour of the one true God of the Israelites. In answer it needs to be pointed out only that it is clearly assumed in Deuteronomistic and post-exilic literature of the Old Testament that there is but one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not many (e.g. Exod. 3:13-15).

A clear indication of the oneness of God is the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6, the great truths which the people of Israel were commanded to absorb themselves and to inculcate in their children: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord” (v. 4). While there are

various legitimate translations of the Hebrew in this verse, all alike emphasise the unique, unmatched deity of Yahweh. The second great truth God wanted Israel to learn and teach is a command based on his uniqueness: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (v.5). Because He is one, there was to be no division of Israel's commitment. After the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-5), the commandments of Exodus 20 are virtually repeated. In positive terms God's people are told: "You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him, and swear by his name" (Deut. 6:13). In negative terms they are told: "You shall not go after other gods or the gods of the peoples who are round about you" (v.14). God is clearly one God, precluding the possibility that any of the gods of the surrounding peoples could be real and thus worthy of service and devotion (Exod. 15:11). In the messianic vision of Zech. 14:9 it is said of the Royal King:

The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name.

The New Testament takes the same monotheistic concepts as follows: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in you all" (Eph. 4:5-6). The teaching regarding the oneness of God is not restricted to the Old Testament. James 2:19 commends belief in one God, while noting its insufficiency for justification. Paul also underscores the uniqueness of God. In discussing the eating of meat which had been offered to idols the apostle writes:

We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is ... but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things come and through whom we live (1 Cor. 8:4,6).

Here Paul, like the Mosaic law, excludes idolatry, on the grounds that there is only one God. Similarly Paul writes to Timothy:

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

While on the surface these verses seem to distinguish Jesus from the only God, the Father, the primary thrust of the former reference is that God alone is truly God (idols are nothing); and the primary thrust of the latter is that there is but one God and there is only one mediator between God and men.

2.2.2 The Trinity and monotheism in Christianity

A theological study on the teaching of the Christian view of the Trinity to an indigenous African finds that analogies tend to be confusing (Mugambi 1989:36-38). It has already been pointed out that an African can easily understand concepts when they are presented to him concretely. Analogies taught to an African in Sunday schools and primary schools about the Trinity become useless and confusing on the perceptual level. It seems difficult to use learning resources to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity. The analogies of the Christian concept of God are too analytical. Any artificial learning resource and teaching aid could be a model, and models represent only some aspects of the object they are meant to explain. Models of God cannot adequately describe what the word represents. Therefore another approach has to be found, an approach which would start from the traditional African experience, then proceed to Christian theology. The authors consider that such an approach would reduce conceptual incoherence.

The Trinitarian doctrine of God in Christianity which was developed under the influence of Neo-Platonism (Richardson 1941), has to be re-interpreted in terms of traditional African monotheism. African Christians have been doing this subconsciously. This is not syncretism because the objective of such a re-interpretation is to clarify the classical Christian doctrine of God to African Christians, rather than to distort it. When African Christians use traditional African names of God to refer to the God worshipped in Christianity, they inevitably carry over into their Christian theology the concepts that are associated with those traditional African names. When African Christians use traditional names to refer to God they also inevitably carry over into their Christian world view and theology the concepts that are associated with the traditional African names. Epistemologically, the acquisition of new concepts (theological or

otherwise) comes about through direct acquaintance with an object or a situation, and also through reflection in which old concepts are related to new ones in an endeavour to acquire new knowledge. In terms of Bertrand Russell's epistemology all knowledge falls into two categories: knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description (Russell 1945:Ch. 5). According to this theory, the doctrine of the Trinity should be introduced to an African from the situation familiar to him. One should proceed from the concrete and from there to the discussion of the abstract theological concept of the Trinity.

The salient elements of Christian doctrine of the Trinity are the following:

1. We begin with the *unity of God*. Monotheism is deeply implanted within the Hebrew-Christian tradition. God is one, not several. The unity of God may be compared to the unity of husband and wife, but we must keep in mind that we are dealing with one God, not a joining of separate entities.
2. *The deity of each of the three persons*, Father, Son and Holy Spirit must be affirmed. Each is qualitatively the same. The Son is divine in the same way and to the same extent as is the Father, and this is also true of the Holy Spirit (cf. The first article of testimony of Nicea).
3. *The threeness and oneness of God are not in the same respect*. Although the orthodox interpretation of the Trinity seems contradictory (God is one and yet three), the contradiction is not real, but only apparent. A contradiction exists if something is A and not A at the same time and in the same respect. Modalism attempted to deal with the apparent contradiction by stating that the three modes of manifestation of God are not simultaneous; at any given time, only one is being revealed. Orthodoxy, however, insisted that God is three persons at every moment of time. Maintaining his unity as well, orthodoxy deals with the problem by suggesting that the way in which God is three is in some respect different from the way in which He is one. The fourth-century thinkers spoke of one *ousia* and of three *hypostases*. Now comes the problem of determining what these two terms mean, or more broadly, what the difference is between the nature or locus of God's oneness and that of his threeness.

4. *The Trinity is eternal.* There have always been three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and all three of them have always been divine. One or more of them did not come into being at some point in time, or became divine at some point. There has never been any alteration in the nature of the triune God. He is and will be what He has always been.
5. *The function of one member of the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both of the other members, but that does not mean He is in any way inferior in essence.* Each of the three persons of the Trinity has had, for a period of time, a particular function unique to Himself. This is to be understood as a temporary role for the purpose of accomplishing a given end, not as a change in his status of essence. In human experience, there is functional subordination as well. Several equals in business or enterprise may choose one of their numbers to serve as the leader of a task force or the chairperson of a committee for a given time, but without any change in rank. In like fashion, the Son did not become less than the Father during his earthly incarnation, but He did subordinate Himself functionally to the Father's will. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is now subordinated to the ministry of the Son (John 14-16) as well as to the will of the Father, but this does not imply that He is less than they are.
6. *The trinity is incomprehensible.* We cannot fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. Because He is unlimited God, and we are limited in our capacity to know and understand, He will always exceed our knowledge and understanding. We shall always be human beings, even though perfected human beings. We shall never become God. Those aspects of God that we shall never fully comprehend should be regarded as mysteries that go beyond our reason rather than as paradoxes that conflict with reason.

The problem in constructing a statement on the doctrine of the Trinity is not merely one of understanding the terminology. That is in itself hard enough. For example, it is difficult to know what "person" means in this context. More difficult yet is to understand the interrelationship among the members of the Trinity. The human

mind occasionally seeks analogies that will help in this effort as we saw above in African cosmology.

One of the most creative minds in the history of Christian theology was Augustine. In *De trinitate* (14,3) he turned his prodigious intellect to the problem of the nature of the Trinity. He reflected upon this doctrine throughout his Christian life and wrote his treatise on the subject over a twenty-year period (AD 399-419). In keeping with the Western or Latin tradition, his view emphasises the unity of God more than the threeness. The three members of the Trinity are not separate individuals in the way in which three members of the human race are separate individuals. Each member of the Trinity is in his essence identical with the others or with the substance itself. They are distinguished in terms of their relations within the Godhead.

In practice even orthodox Christians have difficulty clinging simultaneously to the several components of the doctrine. Our use of these several analogies suggests that perhaps in practice or in our unofficial theology none of us is really fully trinitarian. We tend to alternate between tritheon, a belief in three equal, closely related Gods, and modalism, a belief in one God who plays three different roles or reveals Himself in three different fashions.

Augustine's suggestion that analogies can be drawn between the Trinity and the realm of human personality is a helpful one. In seeking for the thought forms which can provide a conceptual basis on which to develop the doctrine of the Trinity, we have found the realm of individual and social relationships to be a more fruitful source than the realm of physical objects. This is true for two reasons. The first is that God Himself is spirit; the social and personal domain is, then, closer to God's basic nature than is the realm of material objects. The second is that there is greater interest today in human and social subjects than in the physical universe.

These two analogies emphasise different aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. The former lays major emphasis on the oneness. The latter illustrates more clearly the threeness. A few years ago we tended to the former analogy, which reflects a modal (but not modalistic) view. More recently, however, theology has come to the

conclusion that both must be equally emphasised (Wainwright 1962:257). The Greek (Cappadocian) stress on the three persons and Latin (Western) stress on God's unity are equally vital. Each group had seized upon an indispensable facet of the truth. And yet, from a logical standpoint, both cannot be true simultaneously, at least as far as we can understand (Hendry 1956:31). May it not be that what we have here is a mystery? We must cling to both, even though we cannot see the exact relationship between the two.

2.2.3 Conclusion

The doctrine of the Trinity is a crucial ingredient of the Christian faith. Each of the three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is to be worshipped, as is the Triune God. And, keeping in mind their distinctive work, it is appropriate to direct prayers of thanks and of petition to each of the members of the Trinity, as well as to all of them collectively. Furthermore, the perfect love and unity within the Godhead model for us the oneness and affection that should characterise our relationships within the body of Christ.

The essentials of Christian monotheism can be understood as Erickson (1983:142) described it: "Try to explain it and you'll lose your mind; But try to deny it, and you'll lose your soul."

The Christian monotheism is based on the understanding that the Godhead exists "undivided in divided persons". There is an "identity of nature" in the three hypostases. Basil says:

For all things that are the Father's are held in the Son, and all things that are the Son's are the Father's; because the whole Son is in the Father and has all the Father in Himself. Thus the hypostasis of the Son becomes as it were form and face of the knowledge of the Father, and the hypostasis of the Father is known in the form of the Son, while the proper quality which is contemplated therein remains for the plain distinction of the hypostases (*Letters* 38:8).

3. MONOTHEISM IN ISLAM

When we turn our attention to Islam, it is important to note that the name and concept of Allah is not an invention introduced by Mohammed. The concept of monotheism in Islam pervades the Muslim conception of Allah as the Only God. In pre-Islamic Arabia this name was in general use and seemingly the pre-Islamic Christian Bibles already used that name for God. Our interest here is to look at the concept of monotheism in Islam.

"*There is no God but Allah*" Islam is one of the three great monotheistic religions in the Middle East. Along with the other two, Judaism and Christianity, it stresses the oneness and unity of God, *Tawhid*, literally "making one" or "asserting oneness". In consequence, it applies theologically to the oneness (*wahdāniya*, *tawahhud*) of Allah in all its meanings. The word does not occur in the Qur'an. Technically "the science of *tawhid* and of the qualities (*'ilmal-tawhid wa 'l-sifat*) is a synonym for the science of *kalam*" and is the basis of all the articles of the belief of Islam (Introduction by Taftazani to the 'Akaid of Nasafi, ed. Cairo 1321, p 4). In this definition the Muctazilities would exclude the qualities and make the basis *tawhid* alone. But unity is far from being a simple idea. It may be internal or external; it may mean that there is no other god except Allah, who has no partner (*sharik*); it may mean that Allah is a oneness in Himself; it may mean that He is the only being with a real or absolute existence (*al-hakk*), all other beings having merely contingent existence, it may even be developed into a pantheistic assertion that Allah is All-Again. Knowledge of this unity may be reached by the methods of systematic theology (*ilm*) or by religious experience (*ma'rifa*, *mushāhada*); and the latter, again, may be pure contemplation or philosophical speculation. In consequence, *tawhid* (monotheism) may mean simply "There is no god but Allah" or it may cover a pantheistic position, where "Allah is for all".

The word Allah means "the God", the same God confessed and worshipped in the other monotheistic traditions. In the call to prayer, in the *Shahada*, and in everyday discourse, the name Allah is constantly heard. The name also appears in Arabic writing and calligraphy in books, on mosques and buildings and on wall hangings in homes and offices in the Islamic religion and culture.

The affirmation of God's oneness and unity is comprehended in the important Arabic word discussed above - *tawhid* (Miller 1976: 43-45). The early Muslim community in Arabia, where pagan polytheism had been widely practised, regarded the association (*Shirk*) of other gods with Allah as a serious threat to God's unity. *Shirk* was the earliest and most repugnant form of heresy. Pagan gods were familiar and pliable beings, made of stone and easily "possessed". The concept of Allah stood above such associations. As Islam spread to all lands and cultures outside Arabia, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the Zoroastrian dualistic conceptions of good and evil divine powers were also seen by Muslims as aberrations of God's unity or *Tawhid* (Haeri 1997:8,45). Muslim theologians sought arguments, both from scripture and reason, to make persuasive the fundamental oneness and unity of Allah to the exclusion of other "lesser" gods or plural implications of a "godhead" that threatened that unity. Muslim mystics practised special meditations or modes of remembrance, *dhikr*, which focused the consciousness upon God, for in their view God was the only reality. The average Muslim, even without special theological knowledge or spiritual techniques, nonetheless thinks of God in the way of *tawhid* (monotheism). It is best expressed in the well-known creed:

La ilaha illa 'Llah

Muhammadun rasulu 'Llah

(There is no deity but Allah and Muhammed is the messenger of Allah).

The first clause "There is no deity" is known as the *Nafi*, or that which is rejected, and the second clause, "But Allah", is the *Isbat*, or that which is established. The term *Nafiwa-Isbat* is applied to the first two clauses of the Muslim's *Kalima* or creed.

The doctrine of *tawhid* or monotheism is the essence of Islamic faith. To outsiders, *tawhid* may appear to be a statement of the obvious, but to a Muslim from any part of the world, Africa included, it represents the alpha and the omega of the faith.

It is the addition to a metaphysical assertion about the nature of the Absolute, a method of integration, a means of becoming whole and realising the profound oneness of all existence. Every aspect of Islam rotates about the doctrine of unity which Islam seeks to realise first of all in the human being in his inner and outward life (Nasr 1971:29).

A world view based on *tawhid* considers God to be the normative criterion of religious experience, in other words, God is the Being who commands. Every command of God becomes an ought-to-be or an ought-to-do; in short, a value.

This emphasis on the oneness of God, or *tawhid*, recognises that nature is well knit and operates on the basis of laws of natural causation. But this does not mean that God and nature are rivals that function at the expense of one another; or that God operates in addition to the activities of man and nature.

According to Fazlur Rahman (1980: 45), "things and humans are, indeed, directly related to each other". In other words, God is *with* everything in so far as the divine constitutes the integrity of everything. Since everything is related directly to the Divine, so everything, through and in relation to other things, is related to God as well. God then is the very meaning of reality, a meaning manifested, clarified and brought home by the universe. Without God's activity, both nature and humanity become derelict, purposeless and self-wasting. The role of human beings is to further God's meaningful and purposeful activity through creative moral action.

Muslim theologians thus replaced the philosophical explanations of causality with the doctrine of "occasionalism". This means that at every moment God recreates the world and is directly responsible for what takes place. The upshot of this theory was the establishment of a causality of divine presence. This is what is meant by the expression that God is with everything, which is different from the immanentist belief that God is everything or is in everything.

The significance of *tawhid* is described by Al-Faruqi (1982) a leading Islamic scholar of the twentieth century, as five self-evident truths: duality, ideationality, theology, human capacity/the malleability of nature, and responsibility/judgement.

Duality insists that reality is of two generic kinds. God and non-God, or Creator and creature. These are separate realms, both in terms of being (ontology) and of existence. One is infinite and the other is finite. Hence, it is impossible for the finite to transcend its finitude and pass into infinity or for these two orders of reality to be united, confused or diffused into each other.

This relationship between the Creator and creature is *ideational* in nature. The ideational faculties, such as the intellect, reason, imagination, intuition and observation enable humankind to understand the will of God when it is expressed through revelation or the laws of nature or both.

Because of *tawhid* human endeavour is purposive, with a *telos* (goal) in sight. While human actions do have a utilitarian aspect, it is the *teleological* character of actions that provides them with the distinctive quality of being moral.

Human beings also possess the capacity and potentiality to realise the divine *raison d'être* of creation. Without potentialities *per se*, human beings would be unable to fulfil the divine will. The actualisation of these potentialities results in moral action. Nature and the entire universe is *Muslim* (that which submits or surrenders). It conforms to the laws of nature ingrained in it, in other words, it is automatically *Muslim*.

Human beings are designated as the Creator's vice-regents on earth and are therefore required to 'surrender' to God's law by choice, in other words, to be 'Muslim' by choice. This indicates the uniqueness of humans in that they possess a free will. By following divine commands, in terms of which they ought to act, they fulfil a *responsibility* placed on them by God. Effective responsibility requires that one has the ability to make a judgement, and to be decisive in such decision-making (Al-Peruqi 1982).

It is this very confession which, once uttered in sincerity and followed completely, makes one a real Muslim. It is this *Shabada* which leads a Muslim through his life (Geisler and Saleeb 1994:303).

Islam is strictly a monotheistic religion. The key *Sura* (chapter) in the Qur'an testifies to Islam's monotheism (Haeri 1997:57):

Say: He is Allah, the One!
 Allah, the eternally besought by all.
 He begetteth not nor was begotten.
 And there is none comparable unto Him (Qur'an 112).

The essence of Muslim belief is therefore that God is One (Keene 1993:134), and this belief is known as *Tawhid*. By this a Muslim believes that God is beyond all human understanding, beyond time

and space, the Truth before all other truths. Nothing can be compared to Him. Nor is Allah like a human being in any way. He is, quite simply, unique and incomparable.

3.1 The Trinity from the perspective of Islamic cosmology

The most heinous form of sin is *Shirk* or obedience to laws and injunctions other than those of God. Islam does not permit obedience to any laws other than those laid down by God. Obedience to any other god other than Allah is, in the view of Islam, considered to be idol worship.

The Islamic faith is characterised by a belief that 'Allah is *Tawhid* - meaning Allah is One, as stated under the preceding sub-topic. This concept was intended to differentiate Allah from the pre-Islamic concept in which He was extended, and to reject the obviously misunderstood concepts of the sonship of Jesus and the Trinity:

They do blaspheme who say: 'Allah is one of three in a Trinity' (S. 5:76).

Say not 'Trinity', desist: it will be better, for Allah is one Allah (S. 4:171).

It is then consistent with the Islamic view to reject the sonship and with that the deity of Jesus Christ:

The Christians call Christ the Son of Allah. That is a saying of their mouths; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say: Allah's curse be on them: How they are deluded away from the Truth (S. 9:30).

It is not befitting to (the majesty of) Allah that He should beget a son (S. 19:35).

Christ the son of Mary was no more than an apostle. Many were the apostles that passed away before him. His mother was a woman of truth, they had both to eat their (daily) food (S. 5:78).

These passages from the Qur'an have taken a very prominent place in Muslim thinking. We must therefore take cognisance of what every Muslim firmly believes, and what necessarily pre-determines his perception of Jesus, the crucified Saviour:

They (i.e. the Jews) said (in boast) 'we have killed Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah; But they killed him not so it was made to appear to them. And those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no certain knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety, they killed him not; Nay, Allah raised him up to Himself; and Allah is exalted in power and wise (S.4: 157-158).

We are aware that the Qur'an texts totally reject Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. Nabi Issa, "the prophet Jesus" is another Jesus (2 Cor 11:4). If we care to communicate the Biblical Jesus Christ to Muslims even in Kenya, we have to seriously rethink the use of the name Nabi Issa, if we do not want to risk a Muslim keeping his erroneous understanding of the Saviour. Studying the faith of Islam, one learns not only that Christ has no place in the Muslim idea of God, as they deny the Trinity, but that the portrait of Jesus, as given in the Qur'an and in tradition, is a sad caricature in the eyes of Christians. According to Muslim teaching, Jesus was miraculously born of the Virgin Mary; He spoke while still a babe in the cradle; performed many puerile miracles in his youth; healed the sick and raised the dead when He reached manhood. He was specially commissioned to confirm the law and reveal the gospel (*injl*). He was strengthened by the Holy Spirit (Gabriel). He foretold another prophet whose name should be Ahmed (Muhammad). They believe that Jesus was, by deception and substitution, saved from crucifixion and taken to heaven, and that He is now in one of the inferior stages of celestial bliss; that He will come again at the last day. According to Islam, the anti-Christ will kill the swine, break the cross and remove the poll tax from infidels. Muslims believe that Christ, on his return, will reign as a just king for forty-five years, marry and have children, then die and be buried near Muhammad's grave at Medina. The place of his future grave is already marked out between the graves of Omar and Falmah (Zwemer 1907:40). Given the above understanding we can see that the idea of the Trinity as viewed in Christianity does not exist in the Islamic belief.

4. CONCLUSION

In the African tradition religion we have seen, the Divine is understood in terms of his attributes. In most African communities God is described as He appeals to them concretely. For example, the Masai of Kenya would be heard talking of Ngai as all-knowing, "Ngai knows". This is a common saying of the Masai. His universal knowledge is based on universal vision and the organs of this vision are the sun by day and the stars by night, the former his great daytime eye, the latter his numerous night eyes. Africans adhere to a monotheistic belief even though their monotheism is difficult to understand for an outsider, in particular because they do not have their own written records (Pettazzoni 1965:40). Most Africans know God in his divine providence as a "Supreme Being" though He is given different names by different communities. These differences are mainly due to cultural diversity and the languages spoken by the different communities (Radin 1954:28). The African monotheism should be understood in terms of progression from simple to complex.

In Islam the concept of monotheism is, as we have seen, a straightforward issue. It revolves around the word "*tauhid*" which simply means the unity of God. Of the different parties of Islam, the Mu'tazalites would exclude the qualities and make the basis of monotheism *tauhid* alone. But unity is far from being a simple idea: it may be internal or external; it may mean that there is no other god except Allah, who has no partner (*Sharik*); it may mean that Allah is a Oneness in Himself; it may mean that He is the only Being with real or absolute existence (*al-hakk*) and that all other beings have merely a contingent existence. In consequence, *tauhid* may mean simply: "There is no god but Allah" (Gibb & Kramers 1974:586-697) or it may cover a pantheistic position.

The Christian stand has been from the beginning and continues to be that there is one God who reveals Himself in three persons. There are three separate but interrelated types of evidence: evidence for the unity of God - that God is one; evidence that there are three persons who are God; and finally, indications or least intimations of the Three-in-One-ness.

From the discussion it was clear that the ancient Hebrews followed a monotheistic belief rigorously. The *Shemah*-formula of Deuteronomy 6 is the pinnacle expression of this belief.

The understanding and practical expression of the concept of monotheism by African traditional religion, Islam and Christianity differs considerably. Our discussion has shown that the difference is more explicit in Islam and Christianity. In a multi-religious society it is important to avoid emphasising the differences, but instead to stress the concepts that bring these religions together while they still remain different. Monotheism is one example of the concepts held by the religions which should be confined to the limits of different religions for the purpose of dialogical co-existence. To fill the vacuum left by monotheism as a possible basis for togetherness, emphasis should be placed on the concept of the "Divine", which is understood in a similar fashion in these religions and which can indeed serve to bring about a better understanding, an improved relationship and religious togetherness for good neighbourliness of the adherents.

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