243142 - What is the concept of the Christian Trinity that the Quran declares to be false?

the question

In various places in the quran the christians are condemned for saying that Allah is the third of three (surat an nisa 4:171 and surat al Maida 5:73 for example). When I read the verses I assumed that they referred to the christian trinity (father, son, holy spirit), but the tafsir of ibn kathir states that what is meant here is that christians claimed that Allah was a third with Isa (alleihi salaam) and Maryam. Is this correct? If so, is this referrring to a specific group/sect? (as is the case with the jews claiming Uzair is the son of Allah) Is the trinity of mainstream christianity dealt with directly in the quran and the sunnah, or is no mention of it made? I know the divinity of Isa (alleihi salaam) is dealt with, but is there anything concerning the supposed holy spirit?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Surely, disbelievers are those who said: ‘Allah is the third of the three (in a Trinity).’ But there is no Ilaah (god) (none who has the right to be worshipped) but One Ilaah (God -Allah). And if they cease not from what they say, verily, a painful torment will befall on the disbelievers among them” [al-Maa’idah 5:73].

Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The correct view is that this was revealed concerning the Christians in particular, as was stated by Mujaahid and others.

Then the scholars differed concerning that. It was said that what is meant by that is their disbelief (kufr) because they say that there are three hypostases (“persons” of the trinity), namely the hypostasis of the Father, the hypostasis of the Son and the hypostasis of the Word that was transmitted from the Father to the Son – exalted be Allah far above what they say.

As-Suddi and others said: This was revealed concerning their making the Messiah and his mother into two gods with Allah, thus making Allah the third of three, according to this concept. As-Suddi said: This is like what Allah, may He be exalted, says at the end of the soorah (interpretation of the meaning):

“And (remember) when Allah will say (on the Day of Resurrection): "O 'Eesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary)! Did you say unto men: 'Worship me and my mother as two gods besides Allah?'" He will say: "Glory be to You! It was not for me to say what I had no right (to say)” [al-Maa’idah 5:116].

This view is the one that is more likely to be correct. And Allah knows best."(Tafseer Ibn Katheer 3/158).

This interpretation which was favoured by Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him) is the one that is more likely to be correct, for the following reasons:

-1- Ibn Katheer quoted, as further evidence, some reports from the righteous early generations, in which they follow the methodology of interpreting some parts of the Quran by means of other parts, which is one of the best and most appropriate ways of interpreting the Holy Quran.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

If someone were to ask: What are the best ways of interpreting the Quran? The answer is: The soundest way is to interpret the Quran by means of the Quran, because what is discussed in general terms in one place is explained elsewhere, and what is mentioned in brief in one place is mentioned in more detail elsewhere."(Majmoo‘ al-Fatawa (13/363).

The early generations thought that the words “Surely, disbelievers are those who said: ‘Allah is the third of the three (in a Trinity)” are explained by the words of Allah, may He be exalted, says

(interpretation of the meaning):

“And (remember) when Allah will say (on the Day of Resurrection): ‘O 'Eesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary)! Did you say unto men: “Worship me and my mother as two gods besides Allah?”’ He will say: ‘Glory be to You! It was not for me to say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, You would surely have known it. You know what is in my inner-self though I do not know what is in Yours, truly, You, only You, are the All-Knower of all that is hidden (and unseen).

‘Never did I say to them aught except what You (Allah) did command me to say: “Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord.” And I was a witness over them while I dwelt amongst them, but when You took me up, You were the Watcher over them, and You are a Witness to all things’” [al-Maa’idah 5:116-117].

-2- This interpretation is supported by what follows the verse, confirming that Maryam (Mary – peace be upon her) is not divine, as Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Surely, disbelievers are those who said: "Allah is the third of the three (in a Trinity)." But there is no Ilaah (god) (none who has the right to be worshipped) but One Ilaah (God -Allah)” [al-Maa’idah 5:73].

Then after that come the words (interpretation of the meaning):

“The Messiah ['Eesa (Jesus)], son of Maryam (Mary), was no more than a Messenger; many were the Messengers that passed away before him. His mother [Maryam (Mary)] was a Siddeeqah [i.e. she believed in the words of Allah and His Books]. They both used to eat food (as any other human being, while Allah does not eat). Look how We make the Ayât (proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, revelations, etc.) clear to them, yet look how they are deluded away (from the truth)” [al-Maa’idah 5:75].

This verse confirms that Maryam (Mary – peace be upon her) is not divine, on two counts:

(i) Her status is that of siddeeqiyyah (being strong and true in faith), which is a status of servitude

to Allah, may He be exalted.

(ii) She used to eat food, which is the description of a created being who has needs; it is not the description of God Who is independent of means and has no need of His creation.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

With regard to what the Quran says about what the Christians said, “Allah is the third of the three (in a Trinity)”, the commentators said that it refers to Allah, the Messiah and his mother, as Allah, may He be exalted, tells us that He will say (interpretation of the meaning): “‘O 'Eesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary)! Did you say unto men: “Worship me and my mother as two gods besides Allah?”’” [al-Maa’idah 5:116]. Hence in the context of this passage He says (interpretation of the meaning):

“The Messiah ['Eesa (Jesus)], son of Maryam (Mary), was no more than a Messenger; many were the Messengers that passed away before him. His mother [Maryam (Mary)] was a Siddeeqah [i.e. she believed in the words of Allah and His Books]” [al-Maa’idah 5:75].

The most that the Messiah can be is a Messenger, and the most that his mother can be is a siddeeqah; they could never reach the level of divinity. The one proves the other (that is, the fact that they are no more than that is proof that the Messiah is not God), and this is quite clear."(Majmoo‘ al-Fatawa 2/444).

Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The words “They both used to eat food” mean: they both needed to be nourished by food, and to expel the resulting waste products. So they were two slaves of Allah, like all other people, and they were not gods as the ignorant Christians claim."(Tafseer Ibn Katheer 3/159).

-3- The revelation came to expose misguidance and disbelief, and to explain the way of guidance. It did not come to rectify the terminology used by the disbelievers. The concept of Trinity in which the Christians believe, regardless of their various interpretations thereof, in reality boils down to exaggeration about ‘Eesa (peace be upon him) and his mother. Therefore the Quran dealt with and

refuted this basic concept, and struck at the roots of the idea of Trinity, refuting the blasphemous idea that is common to all of their groups. Therefore we may say that the view that this verse was revealed to criticise their taking the Messiah and his mother as two gods besides Allah, may He be exalted, is not contrary to the reality of the Christians; rather it is highlighting the true essence of their blasphemy, that is common to all of their groups.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said, in the context of discussing the verses that refute the blasphemy of the Christians:

The words of Allah (interpretation of the meaning): “The Messiah ['Eesa (Jesus)], son of Maryam (Mary), was no more than a Messenger; many were the Messengers that passed away before him” [al-Maa’idah 5:75] come after the words “Surely, disbelievers are those who said: ‘Allah is the third of the three (in a Trinity)’” [al-Maa’idah 5:73], which indicates that the trinity that Allah says they believe in involves regarding the Messiah son of Maryam and his mother as two gods.

This is clear, on the basis that what is narrated from the Christians is that they believe that the divine descended upon Mary and was incarnated in the Messiah. This is in accordance with their beliefs.

Based on that, every verse in which Allah mentions their views refers to all of their groups and refers to their belief in the Trinity and the notions of the divine descending upon Mary and being incarnated in the Messiah. Thus it includes all types of Christians and all types of their blasphemy. It is not the case that every verse that speaks of them is speaking of one type, as some have suggested, and there is not one verse that speaks about the Trinity and another that speaks about the descent of the divine and incarnation. Rather Allah, may He be glorified, mentions, in every single verse referred to, the blasphemy this is common to all of them, but He describes their blasphemy is being threefold, each aspect of which implies the other two: they say that the Messiah is God, and they say that he is the son of God, and they say that God is the third of three, as they took their Messiah and his mother as gods besides the true God, one on the basis of the divine descending upon her and the other on the basis of the divine being incarnated in him. Thus it becomes clear that they believe in three gods in one. This covers all the blasphemous concepts

of the Christians."(Al-Fatawa al-Kubra 6/589-590).

Secondly:

Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“The Messiah ‘Eesa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary), was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah and His Word, ("Be!" - and he was) which He bestowed on Maryam (Mary) and a spirit (Rooh)[] created by Him; so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not: ‘Three (trinity)!’ Cease! (it is) better for you. For Allah is (the only) One Ilaah (God), glory be to Him (Far Exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is All-Sufficient as a Disposer of affairs”[an-Nisa’ 4:171].

With regard to the words “Say not: ‘Three (trinity)!’”, the word translated here as three is the subject of a hidden predicate, and any word may be assumed to be the predicate that refers to the Trinity of the Christians. Hence the scholarly views vary in trying to determine what the omitted predicate could be.

Al-Qurtubi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: What is meant is “Say not” that our gods are three. This was narrated from az-Zajjaaj.

Ibn ‘Abbaas said: This refers to the Trinity: Allah, may He be exalted, and His wife and His son.

Al-Farraa’ and Abu ‘Ubayd said: This means: do not say they are three…

Abu ‘Ali said: The meaning implies: Do not say that He is the third of three… The Christians of all sects are unanimously agreed on the Trinity."(Tafseer al-Qurtubi 7/233).

Therefore this verse refers to all types of Christian belief in the Trinity.

At-Taahir Ibn ‘Ashoor (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The audience addressed by the words “Say not” is the Christians in particular.

The word “three” is the subject of a hidden predicate. The reason why it was omitted is so that the phrase will be fit to refer to all the ideas that they have of the Trinity, for the Christians varied with regard to the concept of the divine trinity, as we shall see below. Therefore we could figure out what the hidden predicate is, according to their various views regarding the nature of the Trinity, which could be described by the number three.

The Trinity is fundamental to the belief of all Christians, but they differ concerning its precise nature."(At-Tahreer wa’t-Tanweer 6/54)

If you interpret it on the basis of the report that al-Qurtubi narrated from Ibn ‘Abbaas (may Allah be pleased with him), that what is meant by the Trinity is Allah, may He be exalted, and His wife and His son, then this interpretation is supported by the verses mentioned above in the first point.

According to this view, this verse forbids the Christians to exaggerate about ‘Eesa (peace be upon him) and his mother, which is the basis of the belief in Trinity that is common among them. Declaring their exaggeration to be false is declaring their belief in the Trinity to be false too.

Thirdly:

Although what is well-known about the Christians is that they do not regard Mary (peace be upon her as one of the three hypostases (persons of the trinity) in which they believe, this does not rule out the fact that they regard her as a sort of god (or goddess).

Taking Mary as a goddess means either clearly stating that she is divine, which was a belief attributed to some ancient Christian groups, or what we see of the Christian practice that is widespread among them of devoting some acts of worship to her, such as praying to her, seeking her help, and prostrating to her image. Whoever worships a thing has taken it as a god, even if he does not clearly state that.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Mary is mentioned alongside the Messiah, because some Christians took her as another god and worshipped her as they worshipped the Messiah. As for those who do not believe in that, they still

ask of her what should be asked of God, to the extent that they say to her: Forgive me, have mercy on me, and so on, based on a belief that she will intercede with her son concerning that.

Sometimes they say: O mother of God, intercede for us with God. And sometimes they ask her for their needs, which should be sought from God, and they do not mention intercession. Others worship her as they worshipped the Messiah.

Sa‘eed ibn al-Batreeq spoke of them doing this, when he mentioned the Councils of Constantinople and Nicaea. He said:

They held different views and different beliefs. Some of them said that the Messiah and his mother were two gods besides Allah; they were the Marianists."(Al-Jawaab as-Saheeh 4/255-256).

Fourthly:

The phrase “Holy Spirit” (Rooh al-Qudus) appears in the texts of revelation; what it refers to is Jibreel (Gabriel – peace be upon him).

For example, it is seen in the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Say (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) Ruh-ul-Qudus [Jibreel (Gabriel)] has brought it (the Qur'an) down from your Lord with truth, that it may make firm and strengthen (the Faith of) those who believe and as a guidance and glad tidings to those who have submitted (to Allah as Muslims)” [an-Nahl 16:102].

Shaykh Muhammad al-Ameen ash-Shinqeeti (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The Holy Spirit is Jibreel. What is meant is a spirit that is sanctified, i.e., pure and free of anything that is not befitting.

This meaning is referred to in many verses, such as (interpretation of the meaning): “Say (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)): ‘Whoever is an enemy to Jibreel (Gabriel) (let him die in his fury), for indeed he has brought it (this Qur'an) down to your heart by Allah's

Permission'" [al-Baqarah 2:97]."(Adwa' al-Bayaan 3/442).

At-Tabari (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Allah called Jibreel a "spirit" and described him as "holy" because Allah gave him a spirit created by Him, without needing a father to father him. Because of that, He called him a spirit and described him as holy. Holy means pure. By the same token, 'Eesa ibn Maryam (Jesus son of Mary) was called "a spirit created by Allah", because Allah gave him a spirit created by Him, without needing a father to father him. We have explained previously in this book of ours that what is meant by being holy is being pure, so the one who is holy is pure and free of that."(Tafseer at-Tabari 2/224)

In the books of the Christians, concerning the story of Maryam's conception of 'Eesa (peace be upon him), it says that it happened by means of the Holy Spirit. This is in accordance with what our religion teaches, that Allah sent an angel to her, namely Jibreel, and he breathed into her and she conceived 'Eesa (peace be upon him).

Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

"And mention in the Book (the Quran, O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)), the story of) Maryam (Mary), when she withdrew in seclusion from her family to a place facing east.

She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; then We sent to her Our Rooh [angel Jibreel (Gabriel)], and he appeared before her in the form of a man in all respects.

She said: 'Verily! I seek refuge with the Most Gracious (Allah) from you, if you do fear Allah.'

(The angel) said: 'I am only a messenger from your Lord, (to announce) to you the gift of a righteous son'" [Maryam 19:16-19].

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The Christians say in their creed (profession of faith) that the Messiah "was incarnate by the Holy

Ghost [Spirit] of the Virgin Mary." This is in accordance with what Allah says, that He sent His spirit, namely Jibreel, who is the Holy Spirit; he breathed into Maryam (Mary), and she conceived the Messiah. So the Messiah was a created, incarnate being created from his mother and from that spirit, and that spirit has nothing to do with the attributes of Allah or His life or anything else. Rather the Holy Spirit is mentioned frequently in the words of the Prophets, and what is meant by these words is either the angel or what Allah creates in the hearts of His Prophets and close friends (awliya') of guidance, steadfastness and so on."(Al-Jawaab as-Saheeh 2/186).

But in the process of distorting their religion, the Christians thought that they could not prove that 'Eesa is the son of God, – exalted be He far above that – except by interpreting the Holy Spirit that Allah sent to Maryam as referring to an attribute of God that exists in Him, and is the Giver of life.

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

They had a third council, fifty-eight years after the first Council of Nicaea. The emperor's advisers and courtiers met with him and told him that the people's beliefs had become corrupted and been influenced by the views of Arius and Macedonius, so he should write to all the bishops and patriarchs, instructing them to convene a meeting and explain the religion of Christianity. So the Emperor wrote to all the regions, and one hundred and fifty bishops gathered in Constantinople, where they examined and discussed the views of Arius, and found that his view stated that the Holy Spirit was a created being, not divine.

But the Patriarch of Alexandria said: In our view, the Holy Spirit is nothing but the spirit of God, and the spirit of God is nothing but His life. If we say that the Holy Spirit is created, then we are saying that God's life is created, and if we say that His life is created, then we are implying that He is not alive, and that is blasphemy.

They all cursed whoever holds such a belief… And they stated that the Holy Spirit is a creator and not created, "very God from very God", from the same essence as the Father and the Son, one essence and one nature."(Hidaayat al-Hayaara p. 410).

They covered up this distortion and misguidance of theirs by playing with words that are

mentioned in their Scriptures as being the words of ‘Eesa (peace be upon him).

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

This is how it is according to the People of the Book, that Jesus “was incarnate by the Holy Ghost [Spirit] of the Virgin Mary”, but their misguidance is based on their misunderstanding, when they said that the Holy Spirit was the life of God, and a God that creates, grants provision and is worshipped. But there is nothing in the divinely-revealed Books or in the words of the Prophets to suggest that Allah described an attribute that is part of His Essence as the Holy Spirit, or that He described His word or any of His attributes as a son. This is one of the things that proves that the Christians are misguided and that they distorted the words of the Prophets and interpreted them in a manner different from the meaning intended by the Prophets.

The origin of their concept of the Trinity is based on what is mentioned in one of the Gospels, that the Messiah (peace be upon him) said to them: “Baptise all people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

It may be said to them: If the Messiah really said that, there is nothing in the language of the Messiah or the language of any of the Prophets that they described an attribute of Allah that is part of His Essence – neither His word nor His life – as His son or as the Holy Spirit. They did not call His word His son and they did not describe God Himself as a son or Holy Spirit.

As that is the case, then this may explain that what is meant by son is not the eternal Word of Allah, which they say was begotten of God, even if it is eternal, and what is meant by the Holy Spirit is not the life of God. Rather what is meant by the son is the human Messiah and what is meant by the Holy Spirit is what came down to him of revelation and the angel who brought it down. Thus the Messiah would have enjoined them to believe in Allah and His Messenger, and in what He revealed to His Messenger and in the angel who brought it down. This was enjoined upon all the Prophets."(Al-Jawaab as-Saheeh 2/152-153].

From the above it becomes clear that the Christian belief in the third hypostasis (person of the trinity), the Holy Spirit, is not an independent issue; rather it is an issue that is connected to their

belief in Jesus being the son of God – exalted be He above that. Therefore proving false the belief that he is the son of God will lead to annulling their belief in the third person of the Trinity.

Hence the texts of revelation which state that Allah is One and unique, He begets not nor is He begotten, and all the texts which declare false the belief in Trinity and the divinity of Jesus (peace be upon him) – all of these texts are sufficient to refute the belief in the hypostasis of the Holy Spirit as held by the Christians. Perhaps this is the reason why the revelation did not discuss the issue of the Holy Spirit separately.

And Allah knows best.