

# The Trinity in the Three Monotheisms

## Judaism - Christianity - Islam

by Anne Julienne

The Trinity or religious idea of a triune deity is central to Christianity but it is reasonable to suppose, on the one hand, that it might have roots in the Hebrew biblical tradition and, on the other hand, that there might be continuing echoes or resonances of it in the Islamic tradition. It is the purpose of this essay to explore some of these trinitarian links.

Regarding the number Three, the Jewish Encyclopedia has this to say:

The sacredness of this number is probably due to the fact that primitive man divided the universe into three regions - heaven, earth, and water, respectively represented in Babylonian mythology by the divinities Anu, Bel, and Ea.

In the depiction of Ea below, he and his three attendants all wear a headdress bearing a curious resemblance to the menorah, the candelabra sacred to the Jewish people and used in the coat of arms of Israel. In Shemot or Exodus 25, it is the supreme Lord Himself who gives the Jews

detailed instructions for creating this most ancient symbol. The number three turns up often in these while the six branches resemble three crescents or semi-circles enveloping a central stem.

In the opening ten verses of the opening chapter Genesis, it is narrated that Night and Day, Above and Below, and Wet and Dry were separated out in the first three days. This would indeed create three realms of heaven, earth and water, as ruled over by the earlier Babylonian deities.

These foundational trinitarian themes are intriguing. However, they have not captured the Christian imagination so much as a curious detail in an apparently simple story related in Genesis 18 in which Abraham is visited by the Lord.



Israel coat of arms  
with menorah



Ea (seated) and attendant deities, Sumerian cylinder seal, c. 2300 BC



Second Temple menorah as  
depicted by the Romans

In the image below, the three angels that visited Abraham (Genesis 18) are depicted. Though three in number, they are also referred to as a visitation from "the Lord", implicitly The One. The unity of the threesome is conveyed by the artist through the bowl or cup at the centre as well as through the containing circular form of the composition. What contains the three (the envelope) is also the centre (the nub) that holds them all together.

An early alchemist, Maria Prophetissa, is famous for this saying, which seems to sum up the elements here very nicely:

**One becomes Two,  
Two becomes Three,  
and out of the Third comes  
the One as the Fourth.**

There is, in this trinity, a fourth and unifying entity that is both the source and the end point of unity. If one were to use a

computer programmer's array counting system one would recite:

**0 - 1 - 2 - 3 => 4 elements in One array**

This Old Testament trinity is seen, of course, by Christians as a foretaste of the later trinity, clarified now as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost (or Spirit). In some images of this trinity the focal cup turns up as a receptacle for Christ's blood and in the "vierge ouvrante" statues, it is the Great Mother as Virgin Mary that contains or envelops the Divine Trinity.

Trinities so far:

- ❖ 3 persons in One Lord
- ❖ father ~ son ~ spirit

*trinity icon by Russian artist,  
Andrei Rublev c. 1360-1430*

And **the LORD appeared unto him** in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day;

And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, **three men stood by him:** and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground,

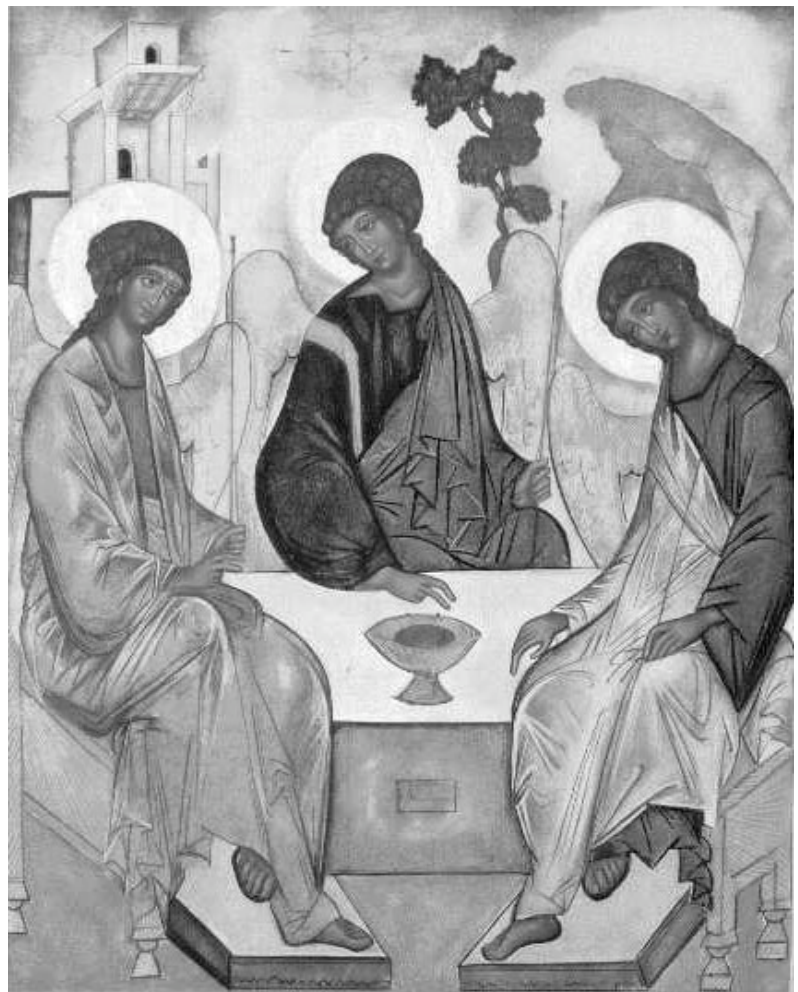
And said, My LORD, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant:

Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree:

And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said.

And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly **three measures of fine meal,** knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth.

*Genesis 18 1:6*



Coming now to the Islamic tradition, it must first be acknowledged that the Koran specifically denies the Christian trinity:

5:73 They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One Allah. If they desist not from their word (of blasphemy), verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them.

However, in the saintly or esoteric Sufi traditions of Islam, a trinity is often evoked if only to proclaim its underlying unity. An early form was expressed by the saint Bastami within two centuries of the beginnings of Islam.

*I am the wine-drinker and the wine and the cup-bearer.*

I came forth from Bayazid-ness as a snake from its skin. Then I looked and saw that *lover, beloved, and love are one*, for in the world of Unity all can be one.

sayings of Bayazid Bastami (804-874 CE)

This triune theme was to be taken up four centuries later by the great mystic poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273 CE) in his masterpiece, the *Masnawi* ("rhyming couplets"). Where Bastami refers to wine, Rumi refers to the water of life and, elsewhere in the *Masnawi*, Rumi completes the eucharistic elements by adding bread to the list as yet another element that passes from subject to object.

The beauty of the heart  
is the lasting beauty:  
its lips give to drink of the water of life.

*Truly it is the water, that which pours,  
and the one who drinks— all three*

become one when your talisman is shattered.  
That oneness you can't know by reasoning.

Rumi: *Mathnawi II*: 716-718

*Bread-giver and bread-eater and bread itself*  
Are purified of their forms and turn to dust.

Rumi: *Mathnawi Book VI, Prologue*



saqi or cupbearer  
detail from Persian miniature

Sufi trinities so far:

- ❖ beloved - love - lover
- ❖ flask - water - drinker
- ❖ saqi - wine - drinker
- ❖ baker - bread - eater

John Shelby Spong in *This Hebrew Lord* describes a transition from the archaic Hebrew vision of God enveloping the World, through a Hellenized split into God versus World, until the Middle Ages when God was almost All and the World was almost vanquished. Gradually, with the Copernican then Darwinian then Freudian revolutions, a reversal occurred until the World became All and God was finally declared dead.

Today, many Christians pretend these revolutions have not occurred and they try to live inside a pre-Darwinian worldview. However, some bolder souls have tried to rejuvenate some of the more weird elements of Christianity by finding new interpretations for a new age.

One such thinker was playwright and crime novelist Dorothy L. Sayers, in a fascinating and highly original study of the trinity as an underlying framework of artistic creativity. Her book *The Mind of the Maker* was published in 1941 but has not since received the attention it merits.

A key passage from this work is shown to the right and, below it, some further lines from Rumi's *Masnavi*. Does this triune deity that runs through the three monotheisms come down, in the end, to an acknowledgement of the sacred quality in human expression?

Trinities in human expression:

- ❖ speaker - words - hearer
- ❖ idea - energy - power
- ❖ artist - art work - art lover

***For every work [or act] of creation is threefold, an earthly trinity to match the heavenly.***

First, [not in time, but merely in order of enumeration] there is the Creative Idea, passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning: and this is the image of the Father.

Second, there is the Creative Energy [or Activity] begotten of that idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion, being incarnate in the bonds of matter: and this is the image of the Word.

Third, there is the Creative Power, the meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul: and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit.

***And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without other: and this is the image of the Trinity.***

*Dorothy L. Sayers: The Mind of the Maker*

Art thou thirsting for the Ocean of spirituality?  
Disport thyself on this island of the Masnavi!  
  
Disport thyself so long as thou seest every moment  
Spiritual verities revealed in this Masnavi.  
  
When the wind blows the grass off the water,  
The water then shows forth its own purity.  
  
Behold the bright and fresh sprays of coral,  
And the princely fruits growing in the water of life!  
  
So, when the Masnavi is purged of letters and words,  
It drops all these, and appears as the sea of Unity.  
  
*Then speaker and hearer and spoken words  
All three give up the ghost in that consummation.*

*Rumi - Mathnawi Book VI Prologue*

To be further explored:

- ❖ knower - gnosis - known