

Crossing the Boundary between Heaven and Earth

Theodore Abu Qurrah's Philosophical Argument for a
Trinitarian God

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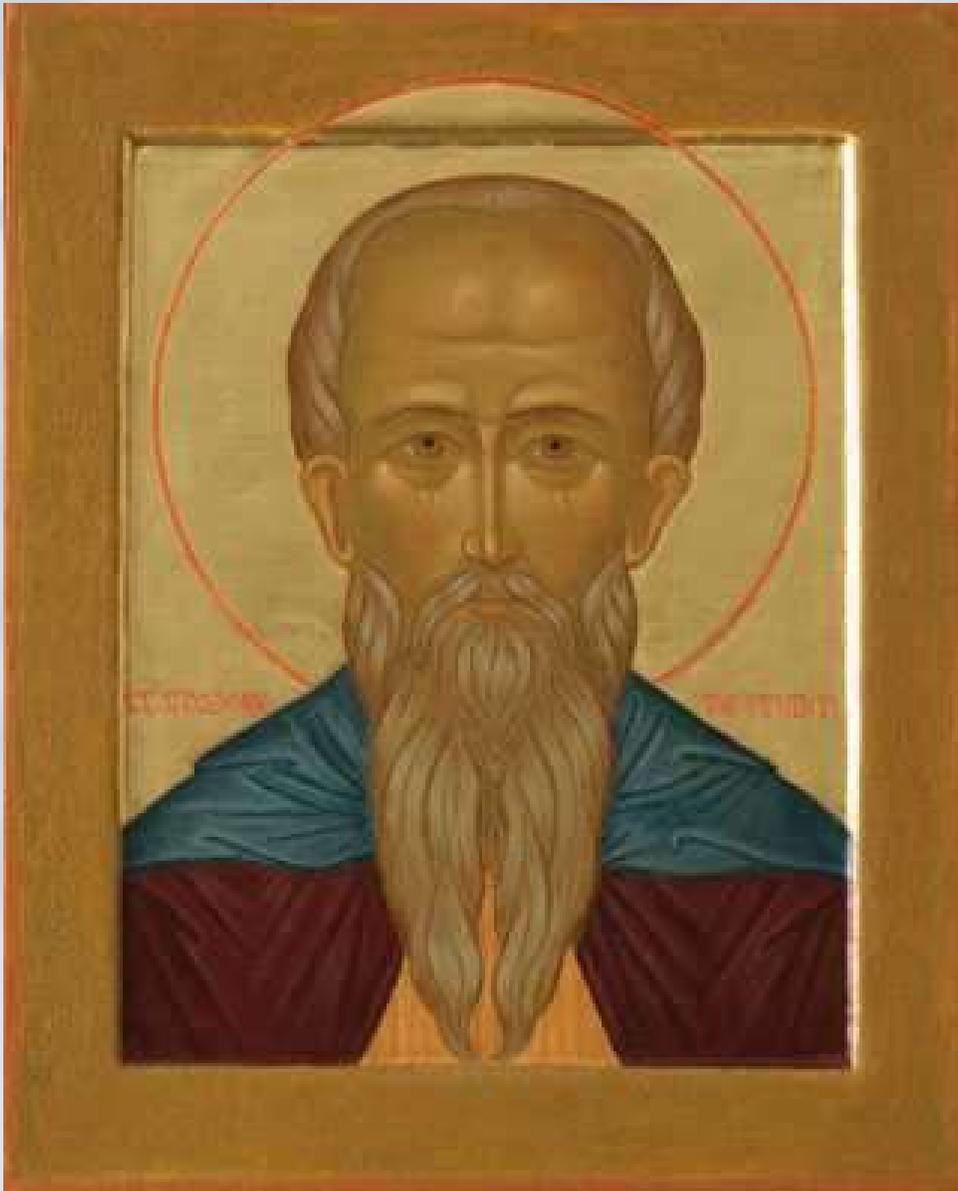
Synthesis

- Early theological exchange and argumentation between Christianity and Islam
- A peculiarly modern and personalistic argument for the Trinity:
 - A communion of persons is more perfect than a lonely Oneness
- Prospects and problems
 - Boundary of heaven and earth - can we cross? In what ways? How will it be interpreted by others?

Context

- Theodore Abu Qurrah (c. 750 – c. 825)
- 8th century Edessa (Turkey: Sanli Urfa)
- Early Arabic Christianity
 - Sidney Griffith
 - John Lamoreaux
 - Najib George Awad
- Syrian “Melkite” Christian (Catholic)
- Minority – new apologetics





Theodore Abu Qurrah

- 8th-9th century
- Venerated as a saint
- Hagiographical biography
- Apologetics
 - Icons
 - Christ
 - Trinity
- Arabic + Greek
- Writing to whom: Christians or Muslims?
 - Sometimes "natural theology" (without Scripture)

Theologus Autodidactus

- “The self-learned theologian”
- ‘Robinson Crusoe’ theology
- representatives of 9 religions
 - Astrologists, Zoroastrians, Samaritans, Jews, Christians, Manicheans, Marcionites, Bardaisan (himself!), Muslims
 - Is any in the truth?
 - Who is right?
- Method: compare content – but how?



Method

- 3 points of agreement
 - God
 - Allowed / prohibited
 - Reward / punishment
- 3 points of contention
- Good God - messengers (prophets)
 - How to identify authentic messenger/message?
- Building an analogy
 - Son of a king - got ill
 - Father sent a message, describing himself, the son's illness, and the remedy
 - King's enemies
 - Consult a doctor
- God. Adam. Sin. Reason.

Imago Dei – made in God's image

- Another analogy: mirror
 - Likeness, not equality
 - *Triplex via* (Pseudo-Dionysius): similar, different, transcending/beyond
- E.g., human weaknesses do *not* mirror
- Virtues/perfections do:
 - Being / existence
 - Living
 - Knowledge
 - Etc. (wisdom, power, goodness, generosity)



Trinity

- "begetting, proceeding, and headship"
- In humanity
 - "We see that something resembling Adam in nature was begotten and proceeded from him."
 - "So too, Eve proceeded from him 'as bone of his bone'"
 - This, too, is a good and a perfection



Via negativa



- “God's begetting of his Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit, however, transcend and are contrary to this.”
 - not through a woman or sex
 - involved neither pregnancy nor development
 - no question of temporal precedence
- “Rather, the two agree with him in nature, will, eternity, and desire.”

Via affirmativa

- What if we deny it?
- God's headship is over creatures only
- Comparison: Adam being head only over animals: "monkeys, pigs, scarabs, and worms..."
 - "His speech, too would be empty and unneeded, for he would have no one to understand or answer him."
- Thus, "begetting ... is most surely in God and not to be denied of him."
- It would denigrate God to say that humans have this perfection, but God has not
- Conclusion: "among the many things the mind can infer from the likeness of Adam's nature is that God is three persons: one who begets, another who is begotten, and another who proceeds."

Evaluation

- **Prospects:**

- Modern 'personalist' philosophy
 - being in-relation as a perfection
- 'Trinitarian ontology'
 - (Influence of Augustine?)
- 'Theology of the body'
 - Image of God reflected not only in human soul, but also the human person as a communion of persons constituted of body and soul

- **Problems:**

- Image of God
 - Too strong assumption (for Muslims)?
 - Not reason alone: to whom does he write?
- Muslim perspective: suspicion that Christians project ideas of humanity into God
- Presupposes an advanced metaphysics of analogy and participation (*triplex via*)