The Rt Rev Dr Bill Musk formerly Assistant Bishop for North Africa in the Anglican Diocese of Egypt with North Africa and the Horn of Africa and also Rector of St George's Church, Tunis

The Ramsden Sermon 2016
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Holy Trinity – tell or smell?

A vignette, to begin with, from the 1990 film Nuns on the Run:

Charlie McManus (played by Robbie Coltrane): You've got the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. But the three are one - like a shamrock, my old priest used to say. "Three leaves, but one leaf." Now, the father sent down the son, who was love, and then when he went away, he sent down the holy spirit, who came down in the form of a ...

Brian Hope (played by Eric Idle): You told me already - a ghost.

Charlie McManus: No, a dove.

Brian Hope: The dove was a ghost?

Charlie McManus: No, the ghost was a dove.

Brian Hope: Let me try and summarize this: God is his son. And his son is God. But his son moonlights as a holy ghost, a holy spirit, and a dove. And they all send each other, even though they're all one and the same thing.

Charlie McManus: You've got it. You really could be a nun!¹

Forgive me, any religious present!

¹ Set up by their boss to be killed following a final heist, soon-to-retire crooks Brian (Eric Idle) and Charles (Robbie Coltrane) get wind of their impending demise and run off with the spoils of their crime. Fleeing their boss, the drug dealers they robbed, the police and Brian's angry girlfriend, the two take refuge in a training convent for nuns. In disguise, they convince Sister Superior (Janet Suzman) that they are nuns, a charade they are forced to maintain as their enemies arrive.
For the past seven years, my wife and I have been living in Tunisia, leading a lovely Anglican church there. Our home and church were a few miles from the site of Carthage, ancient capital of the Roman Province of Africa. Carthage boasts Tertullian as one of its early lay Christian theologians (AD160-225) and Tertullian is famous for authoring the oldest surviving Latin text using the term “Trinity”.

Today, Tunisia is a Muslim country and for any Christian in serious conversation with Muslims there, the idea of Trinity is likely to be raised. Do Christians worship one God or three gods? Muslims are convinced that we believe in three gods. Here is the divine rebuke issued through Prophet Muhammad to contemporary Christians of his own era:

“... Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: It will be better for you: For God is One God: Glory be to Him: (Far Exalted is He) above Having a son ...” (al-Nisa [Sura 4]:171)

My minor response to the quranic rebuke is to allow it its force, for Prophet Muhammad had been led to believe that Christians understood the idea of “Trinity” as God the Father having sexual intercourse with the Virgin Mary, so producing Jesus as son. Sorry that our forebears’ efforts to emphasise the divinity of Jesus Christ through labelling Mary as theotokos (equals “God-bearer” equals “mother of God”) – sorry that that led to such confusion!

My major response to the rebuke is to say: “I find myself helpless as a person of the Book!” As I read my Bible, I discover God revealing himself as “Father”, as “Son” and as “Holy Spirit” – three persons and yet comprising one godhead. I don’t comprehend it. It is a mystery. As a Bible-influenced Christian, I live in the mystery. Actually, thinking Muslims also live in a mystery. Their mystery has to do with the nature of the Qur’an – is it eternal or is it created? Is the Qur’an the pre-existent, pre-eternal, 

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Trinitas is itself a Latinisation of the Greek he trias (the Triad), a term that was used earlier than Tertullian by Theophilus of Antioch in Ad Autolycum 2:15 to refer to God, God’s Logos (Jesus) and God’s Sophia (Holy Spirit).
uncreated speech of Allah\textsuperscript{3} or is it, as other than Allah, a creation of Allah that does not impinge on his Unity?\textsuperscript{4} Muslims also live with mystery.

Mystery is quite unnerving because it disorients us, pulls the rug from under our feet, turns the world on its head. To find myself addressed by a God who claims responsibility for all that we falteringly perceive of the world at macro and micro levels as “the work of his fingers” (Psalm 8:4) can only ultimately issue in a spirit of worship: “O Lord our governor, how glorious is your name in all the world!” (Psalm 8:1, 10). To discover in a dream, as many of our Tunisian friends have done who are today followers of Jesus, that Jesus Christ offers to share with us all that the Father has given him (John 16:15) is an unveiling that undoes mindsets and dogmas. To know in daily experience, in tough daily experience like that of Christian disciples from a Muslim background, that suffering for their faith is a norm that can have positive outcomes, to know that endears them to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit somehow brings us falteringly to recognise that “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:3-5). Anyone here on a journey towards hope? You are in good, divine, company!

In mystery, in holy mystery, we encounter the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The really big question about “trinity” or “tri-unity” or “three-in-one” is not “How do you imagine/conceive/understand them?” but “What are they like? What’s the atmosphere/aroma around them?” Hence Holy Trinity – tell or smell?

Go for the first query – how do you imagine/understand “trinity”? – and Nuns on the Run gobbledygook probably sums up where most of us find ourselves (Professors and Doctors of Divinity present excepted of course!).

Go for the second query – what is the aroma around Father, Son and Holy Spirit? – and you discover yourself being included in an embrace that is sacrificial and non-coercive, unconditional and without limit in its openness. My wife and I have observed many Tunisian friends from a Muslim background being intoxicated by that aroma and

\textsuperscript{3} the major Sunni view.
\textsuperscript{4} the major Shi’a view.
choosing to remain in that embrace despite the cost to them of family and peer disapproval, of diminished job prospects and of likely involvement in harsh spiritual warfare. Here is how an Iranian believer from a Muslim background reflects on his experience of the divine in Islam and in Christianity:

“I believe that an important consideration is that Allah metaphysically cannot be love because he is a Monad God, not a Trinity. For Allah to be self-sufficient and perfect in his love he must have an object of love detached from creation. Because he is a Monad, he had no object of love prior to creation and hence was incapable of loving, which makes him imperfect and unable to love in his nature without humanity. Saint Augustine [also from Carthage before Hippo Regius!] explains how this dilemma is solved in his illustration of the Trinity: The Father is the lover, the Son is the beloved and the Holy Spirit is the spirit of love between the Father and the Son. Hence the Christian God is self-sufficient in His love apart from creation and only in Christianity can it truly be said ‘God is Love’.”

Many, many Iranian Muslims – in dispersion especially – have in recent decades been irresistibly wooed and won by this God who is Love.

This Trinity Sunday, here in Cambridge, I am asking if you can live behind the doctrine, in the mystery, with the aroma all around you of Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Here’s how to tell if you can, or are. Does the bad stuff, the difficult stuff, the evil stuff that periodically falls across your life, paralyse and diminish you or, by the grace of God-given hope within you, are you able you to be an unlikely but willing participant in spreading the aroma of the God of love, of Holy Trinity?

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