



The Trinity

WJEC A level R.S. Unit 1A Christianity Theme 2B

Key Concepts:

- Judaism is a **monotheistic** (literally, 'One God') religion and Christians affirm the **Shema** of Deuteronomy 6:4: God is One.
- The followers of Jesus experienced him as more than a rabbi or a prophet: he forgave sins and spoke with authority. They reconciled these convictions, along with the practice of praying to the Father through 'the Son', by viewing Jesus as one person of God. The Holy Spirit came to also be viewed similarly.
- The monotheism of Christians, then, includes a mystery that oneness also includes 'three-ness'.
- Christians found evidence in the Hebrew Bible: the plural for 'God' is used in Genesis 1:26 and the plural term '**Elohim**' is used for God in Genesis 1:1. Accounts of the virgin birth and resurrection affirmed this approach.
- The term 'Trinity' is not in the Bible; it was coined by **Tertullian** in the 3rd Century.
- Three heresies ruled out by the Church were:
 - (i) **Adoptionism** - Jesus was a human being who became a member of the Trinity at baptism
 - (ii) **Modalism** - that there is one God in three modes (this ignores how each of the three persons is distinct) and
 - (iii) **Arianism** - that the Son is created and **subordinate** to the Father- this ignores the equality of the Godhead.
- There are three interlocking beliefs considered orthodox by Christians:
 - (i) there is one God
 - (ii) The Father the Son and the Holy Spirit are each fully God and
 - (iii) each person of the Trinity is not the same.
- Jesus, for example, is both fully God and fully human; a member of the Trinity whilst also incarnate as the human Jesus.
- The **Nicene Creed** (325 CE) formalised the doctrine of the Trinity; it declared Jesus to be of the same **substance (homoousios)** as the Father.
- Each person of the Trinity is co-equal and co-eternal; this is expressed in the liturgy by prayers and blessings made using the **Trinitarian formula**: 'in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'
- In 381 CE it was agreed by the Church to amend the Nicene Creed with a detail about the Holy Spirit: he 'proceeds from the Father'. This was confirmed at another **ecumenical (worldwide) creed**, the Council of **Chalcedon** (451 CE).
- However, it became popular in some churches (both eastern and western) to refer to the Spirit 'proceeding from the Father and the Son' ('and the Son' = '**filioque**'). **Augustine** made the case that God is a relationship in which the Spirit acts as the **bond of love** between the Father and the Son.
- Augustine used as a proof text **John 20:22**: Jesus 'breathes' the Holy Spirit onto the disciples.
- Many in the East believed this threatened the role of the Father as the sole source of divinity in the Trinity and weakened the distinction between the Son and the Spirit. When the creed was eventually changed to accept filioque, this was seen as unacceptable by the East, since this no longer rendered the creeds as '**ecumenical**'.

Key quotes:

'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' (Deuteronomy 6:4)

'Thomas answered him [Jesus], "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)

'...the doctrine of the Trinity stems directly from the early Christians' experiences of God.' (S. Bullivant)

Key arguments/ debates:

Many Christians do not view three-ness in oneness as contradictory; it is a part of a mystery revealing a complex view on the nature of God. Others accuse Christians of tri-theism, hiding from rationalism by appealing to 'mystery' or playing a word game. Many Christians are unknowingly modalists.

Is the Trinity necessary to Christianity? It is, after all, what makes the Christian view of God unique amongst the world's religions and provides a coherent way to view the God of the Old and New Testaments. It also appeals for picturing God as a kind of equal and loving 'family'. However, some say that the Trinity is an intellectual abstraction which prevents the simple following of the way of Jesus.

Key questions:

- Is Christianity monotheistic? Was the baptism of Jesus a kind of adoption?
- Is the evidence for the Trinity in the Bible coherent, consistent and pervasive?
- What common ground on the nature of God is shared between Christians, Muslims and Jews? Where is the divergence?

Key words:

Monotheism | Shema | Elohim | Tertullian | Adoptionism | Modalism | Arianism | subordinate | Nicene Creed | Chalcedonian Creed | substance | homoousios | Trinitarian formula | filioque | Augustine | bond of love | John 20:22 | ecumenical creed