From Trinitarian Reflection to Pure Monotheism: A Thematic Summary and Theological Analysis

Abstract:
This article examines the philosophical and theological exploration of the Trinity as presented in the Closer To Truth episode *"The Trinity: A Philosophical Inquiry"*. The discussion, featuring Christian philosophers, grapples with the central paradox of how one God can subsist as three persons. We summarize the episode's key themes and notable quotes, highlighting both logical challenges and theological motivations behind Trinitarian doctrine. Through a comparative lens, we analyze reflections on the nature of God that emerge from the dialogue, and we steer the inquiry toward a defense of pure monotheism – the belief in a singular, indivisible God – as upheld in Judaism and Islam. Drawing on scriptures from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an, we demonstrate convergences in affirming divine oneness. The article concludes with an epilogue reflecting on the broader implications of the discussion, affirming the clarity and consistency of pure monotheism in contrast to the conceptual complexities of Trinitarian theology.

The Trinity as a Theological Riddle

At the outset, the video frames the Trinity as "the ultimate riddle" of Christian theology [1] . The moderator, Robert Lawrence Kuhn, poses the core question that has perplexed thinkers for centuries: *"How could One God be Three Persons? How could One be Three? Or Three be One? And why three?"* [1] . This framing sets the stage for a thematic inquiry into the logical and linguistic puzzle of the Trinity. All participants acknowledge that the doctrine of the Trinity – that God is one *essence* in three distinct *persons* (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) – presents an apparent contradiction to ordinary reasoning. The conversation repeatedly returns to the tension between **divine oneness** and **threeness**. Several philosophers in the episode emphasize that the Trinity is not a literal mathematics problem of 1+1+1=1, but rather a unique theological claim that strains the limits of human language and logic. As one panelist notes (echoing a famous church father), God in Trinity is "wholly beyond number," warning believers not to be *"carried away by an ignorant arithmetic"* in trying to comprehend how *Three* can be *One* [2] . In other words, counting in the ordinary sense fails when applied to God's inner life – an idea also attributed to philosopher Peter van Inwagen, who observes that there is no **"absolute counting"** applicable to God's nature [3] . Such remarks underscore that the Trinity, if true, must be understood as a *mystery* in the classical sense: not a logical contradiction per se, but a reality that transcends common categories of thought.

Philosophical Perspectives: One God in Three Persons

The episode features interviews with several prominent Christian philosophers – including Peter van Inwagen, Oliver D. Crisp, Michael C. Rea, Brian Leftow, and Richard Swinburne – each offering a perspective on making sense of one God in three persons [4] . Their discussions cluster around two themes: **explaining the coherence** of the Trinity (or arguing that it can indeed be coherent), and **articulating why the Trinity might be theologically significant**. We summarize these thematic discussions and include key quotes to illustrate the participants' viewpoints:

- **Logical Coherence and "Models" of the Trinity:** A major focus is whether and how the Trinity can be made logically coherent. Brian Leftow, for example, describes his preferred "Latin" model of the Trinity, in contrast to "social" models. In Leftow's formulation, *"there is just one divine being (or substance), God. God constitutes three Persons, but all three are at bottom just God."* [5] In this view, the threeness lies in God's persons, while the unity lies in the one *substance* or *being* that they all are.

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Leftow and others stress that the three persons of the Godhead are not three independent gods – they do not add up in a way that violates monotheism. Leftow is even critical of so-called **Social Trinitarianism** (which imagines the Father, Son, and Spirit as three centers of consciousness or even a "divine family"), arguing that a purely social model *"cannot be both orthodox and a version of monotheism"* [6] . The implicit concern is to avoid **tritheism** (belief in three gods) on one hand, and **modalism** on the other. Modalism – the idea that Father, Son, and Spirit are just three roles or modes of a single person (thus denying any real threeness) – is also deemed heretical by historic Christianity. The participants navigate between these extremes. Van Inwagen, known for engaging the logical puzzle of "And yet they are not three Gods but one God," offers an analogy that stretches our standard logic: perhaps the Trinity can be compared to an entity that is in one sense three and in another sense one, without a straightforward numerical enumeration. He suggests that the term "person" when applied to Father, Son, and Spirit is a unique category – not identical to "person" in the human sense – so one should not assume that saying "three persons" implies *three separate gods*. The notion that *God is one What (divine being) and three Whos (persons)* is a common way Christians have tried to summarize this idea [7] . Still, even after philosophical modeling, a residue of paradox remains. As Leftow candidly puts it, in his model the **"Persons are distinct but not discrete"**, meaning they are not three beings separable from one another, but rather three relations or "modes" within one being [8] . Such statements highlight the delicate balance the philosophers try to maintain: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in some way distinct *hypostases* (as historic creeds say), yet they are inseparably one God. This balancing act leads some participants to concede that human understanding is limited here – the Trinity may **transcend human categories** like countable objects. In support of this, one scholar in the video quotes St. Basil's aphorism that God "is wholly beyond number," cautioning against simplistic counting of divine persons [2] . Thus, the refrain is that the Trinity is **logically challenging but not illogical** – it requires nuanced concepts of unity and personhood beyond everyday experience.

• **"Mystery" and Apophatic Humility:** Given the above complexities, the tone of the dialogue often turns to the idea of **mystery**. Theologian Oliver Crisp emphasizes that calling the Trinity a *mystery* is not a failure of explanation but an acknowledgement of the limits of finite reason before God's reality. The mystery is not utter unintelligibility, but a sign that God's being is unique. Several participants echo that while we can formulate the doctrine (e.g. *"one substance, three persons"*), we cannot fully *comprehend* it; we can only apprehend it insofar as revealed. In one memorable line, a panelist remarks that trying to **"count"** the persons of the Trinity is like trying to count aspects of an idea – the normal rules don't directly apply [3] . The conversation notes that classical Christian thinkers often leaned into paradox: for example, the Athanasian Creed unambiguously asserts *"the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, yet they are not three Gods but one God."* Rather than resolve this by logical reduction, the creed simply holds both truths in tension. This is why many describe the Trinity as a holy mystery to be adored rather than a problem to be solved by reason alone. One philosopher in the video even suggests that grappling intellectually with the Trinity can deepen one's sense of humility and awe in theology – a point on which both believers and sympathetic skeptics might agree.

• **The Trinity and the Nature of Divine Love:** Beyond logic, the participants explore **why** the Trinity matters theologically – what insight it might provide into God's nature. In this vein, Richard Swinburne and others present an argument grounded in **divine love**. The New Testament proclaims that "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and the discussion raises the question: How could a solitary God love perfectly *before* creating any other beings? Swinburne argues that God's nature as *perfect love* is

more coherent if God is pluripersonal. Love, by definition, is relational – it involves a lover and a beloved. If God were one singular person from eternity, then prior to creation God would have no one to love, which seems to contradict the idea of God's perfection in love [9] [10] . The Christian doctrine of Trinity offers a solution: within God's one being there is a **community of love** – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit eternally love one another. As one contemporary theologian (Gerald Bray) summarized, *"God cannot be love unless there is something for Him to love… The Father is the one who loves, the Son is the one who is loved… and the Holy Spirit is the love that flows between them and binds them together."* [9] . Swinburne even goes further to reason that perfect love is most fully realized not just in a *binary* relationship (two persons) but in a *triune* relationship where love is shared freely among three. He suggests that two divine persons might love each other perfectly, but perfect love would naturally rejoice to share with a third – thus, *"it is better for a divine community of love to contain three persons rather than only two,"* creating a triune communion [11] . This line of reasoning portrays the Trinity not as an arbitrary "three" but as an expression of maximal love and plurality within unity. Some in the video found this argument compelling as a *philosophical justification* for why God *would* exist as three persons. Others note, however, that such reasoning is speculative and not a proof; at best it shows the Trinity *could* manifest divine love in a self-sufficient way, whereas a Unitarian (single-person) God would have to create creatures in order to have beloveds, implying a dependence. The **Trinity, in Christian thought, safeguards God's aseity** (self-sufficiency), even in love – God eternally loves within God's own tri-personal being, needing nothing outside. This idea resonated through the discussion, offering a positive theological angle on a doctrine often attacked as incoherent.

- **Language and Analogies:** The participants also wrestle with how to speak about the Trinity. Several analogies historically have been used (God as sun with light and heat, or as one mind with three centers of consciousness, etc.), but each is imperfect. The scholars on *Closer To Truth* caution against simplistic analogies that can mislead – for instance, picturing the Trinity as a **family of three** (Father, Son, Spirit) can suggest three gods working as a committee, which slips into tritheism [12] . On the other hand, analogies of one entity with multiple aspects risk suggesting the persons are not real persons (as in modalism). The **language of "person" and "essence"** itself was debated. Michael Rea points out that the Greek term *hypostasis* and Latin *persona* in the ancient creeds do not exactly match the modern English *"person"*. When Christians say "three persons," they do not mean three separate centers of ego in the way we think of three human individuals, but something more nuanced – a point also made by van Inwagen's observation that one must ask *"how one is to count"* in reference to God [13] . Ultimately, the video's contributors often revert to what can be called **apophatic** (negative) theology: we know *what God is not* (not a committee of three gods, not a shapeshifting single person), but we cannot fully describe *how* God is one-and-three. They quote ancient authorities like Basil to reinforce that any human words (one, three, person, being) are analogical when applied to the infinite God [2] . Thus, a certain humility in language is necessary. The episode's tone remains respectful of the mystery – *"an infinite God is expected to surpass our finite understanding"*, one philosopher remarks – yet it also affirms that the doctrine is meaningfully *believed* in the Christian tradition, even if not exhaustively *explained*. Both believers and analytical thinkers are invited to "enjoy the logic and linguistics" of probing the Trinity [1] , recognizing it as a unique intersection of faith and reason.

Pure Monotheism in Scripture and Comparative Theology

Having distilled the episode's discussion of the Trinity, we can contrast its complexities with the concept of **pure monotheism** as understood in Judaism and Islam. Pure monotheism refers to an uncompromising belief in one, indivisible God – a doctrine that admits no plurality of persons within the Godhead. This principle is a cornerstone of both Jewish and Islamic theology, and it is **strongly affirmed in their scriptures**. Notably, even the Christian participants in the video, when not directly addressing the Trinity, often described God in terms that align with unitary monotheism (e.g. God as the almighty Creator, the sole source of being). Indeed, as one observer of the dialogue noted, whenever the philosophers spoke about God's greatness or the attributes of the divine in general (aside from the Trinity itself), *"they [were] invariably describing the Unitarian God of Judaism or Islam."* [14] In other words, all Abrahamic faiths share a common affirmation of God's oneness; the Trinity is a further Christian-specific claim laid *on top of* that foundational monotheism. To appreciate the clarity of pure monotheism, it is instructive to revisit the scriptural sources:

- **Hebrew Bible (Old Testament):** The **Shema** of Israel, recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4, is perhaps the most famous declaration of God's unity: *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."* [15] This verse has been recited daily by Jews for millennia as the core truth of their faith. It emphasizes that YHWH (the Lord) alone is God – an absolute unity. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God speaks of Himself as singular and without peer: *"I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God"* (Isaiah 45:5) and *"I am God – and there is none like Me"* (Isaiah 46:9) are typical proclamations. Such verses leave no room for any internal multiplicity in God; the emphasis is on **uniqueness and oneness**. It is significant that Jesus of Nazareth, in the New Testament, explicitly reaffirms this same creed. When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus cites the Shema as primary: *"The most important one…is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.'"* [16] . By putting his imprimatur on Deuteronomy 6:4, Jesus situates his teachings firmly within Jewish monotheism. The **New Testament**, written by Jesus' followers, continues to acknowledge one God even as it also talks about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For instance, the Apostle James writes, *"You believe that God is one; you do well"* [17] , underscoring that the early Christians did not see themselves as abandoning the one-God principle. Similarly, St. Paul, while teaching the Corinthian church, echoed the Shema: *"We know that 'an idol is nothing at all in the world' and that 'there is no God but one'"*, affirming that for Christians *"there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we exist"* [18] . These New Testament affirmations show continuity with Judaism's monotheism. The concept of the Trinity was formulated later, as the early Christians reflected on the status of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in relation to the one God – but it was vital for them that any such formulation **uphold** the oneness of God taught in their scriptures. Indeed, Trinitarian doctrine insists that it is *not* tritheism; it maintains that Christians still worship one God, albeit in a mysterious tri-personal form. Nonetheless, from a Jewish perspective, the Trinity has always been seen as a departure from the pure monotheism of the Torah. Jewish theologians often criticize the Trinity as compromising God's indivisible unity, something the participants of the video implicitly wrestled with when they stressed that they are not asserting "three gods" [6] .

- **The New Testament and Monotheistic Tension:** It is worth noting that within the New Testament itself, one can find passages that later Trinitarian interpreters read as hints of plurality (e.g. the Johannine prologue about the "Word" being with God and being God). However, nowhere does the New Testament present a clear doctrine of "three persons in one God"; that formulation came with the ecumenical councils of the 4th century. Instead, the New Testament writers consistently speak of **one God**. For example, Jesus prays to the Father in the Gospel of John, addressing Him as *"the only*

true God" [19] and distinguishing himself as the sent Messiah. *"This is eternal life: that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent,"* Jesus says in prayer [19] . Statements like this indicate that, in the earliest Christian community (which was entirely Jewish in its first generation), God was still understood in a unitary way – the Father in heaven was "the only true God," and Jesus was His Messiah/agent. Over time, as Christians reflected on Jesus' divine roles (Messiah, Lord, Logos) and the Holy Spirit's presence, the Trinitarian doctrine developed to incorporate Jesus and the Spirit into the Godhead. But that development had to contend with the strong monotheistic language inherited from Judaism. The video discussion touches on this historical theological development: the philosophers note that the Church had to coin new terms (like *Trinitas* and *ousia/ hypostasis* distinctions) to safeguard monotheism *while* honoring the divinity of Christ and the Spirit as experienced in Christian worship. The challenge was – and remains – to show that Trinitarian Christianity can still claim continuity with the monotheism of Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah. The **convergence in scripture** is that all Abrahamic scriptures declare "God is One"; the divergence is whether that One God can encompass a triune life.

- **Qur'anic Emphasis on Absolute Unity:** In Islamic theology, the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) is the paramount doctrine, and the Qur'an explicitly rejects the Trinity. The Qur'anic view can be seen as a direct rebuttal to the Christian concept of God's triune nature. One of the clearest statements appears in **Sūrah 4 (An-Nisā'), Verse 171**, which addresses the People of the Book (Christians): *"O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about Allah anything but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was but a messenger of Allah... So believe in Allah and His messengers and do not say 'Three' – desist, it is better for you. Indeed, Allah is only One God. Exalted is He above having a son..."* [20] . This passage pointedly advises Christians to *"say not 'Trinity'"* [20] and reasserts that God is a single, indivisible deity. The Quranic text thus denies the divinity of Jesus in the Christian sense (calling him only a messenger of God) and denies God having "partners" or offspring – which includes the Sonship of Christ in Christian doctrine. Another key Qur'anic chapter is **Sūrah 112 (Al-Ikhlāṣ)**, often considered the essence of Islam's creed. It proclaims: *"Say: He is Allah, [who is] One, Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent."* [21] [22] . In these terse verses, Islam encapsulates pure monotheism: God is *ahad* (One/Unique), absolute and self-sufficient, and critically, God does not beget a son nor was God begotten – a direct refutation of Father-Son language. Moreover, *"there is none comparable to Him"*, precluding any notion of multiple persons *within* God's being [22] . The **clarity and emphasis** in such Quranic verses contrast with the complexities the philosophers in the video were untangling. From the Islamic standpoint, the Trinity appears as an unnecessary and erroneous complication introduced into the pure Abrahamic monotheism. Historically, Muslim theologians often engaged in debates with Christians, pressing the logical inconsistency of Trinity and inviting Christians back to the simplicity of affirming God's oneness as prophets like Abraham and Jesus originally taught (from the Islamic view). Judaism similarly has regarded the Trinity as incompatible with the strictly unitary monotheism of the Hebrew Bible. Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish philosopher, explicitly counts belief in God's absolute oneness as an Article of Faith, arguing that God has no plurality of form or person. In sum, both Judaism and Islam take *tawḥīd* or *the oneness of God* as non-negotiable, and any theory that seems to make God "three in one" is seen as a violation of that principle.

It is illuminating that the **participants in the Closer To Truth episode** themselves constantly reiterate their commitment to monotheism. They never speak of "three gods" – on the contrary, they are at pains to say the Trinity still means *one* God. This shows a line of convergence: all abrahamic faith reasoning agrees God is one; the divergence is how Christians understand the internal identity of that one God. From a

philosophical perspective, the **burden of proof** is arguably on Trinitarian thinkers to show that their view does not lapse into tri-theism or incoherence. Some philosophers in the video, like Leftow, firmly push back against any interpretation that would imply more than one God, insisting that in a correct understanding of the Trinity, *"all three [persons] are at bottom just God"* [5] . This insistence aligns with Jewish and Islamic sensibilities about protecting God's unity – yet the very need for such insistence highlights how **opaque the Trinity appears** from a pure monotheist perspective. Indeed, the discussion laid bare that without careful doctrinal balancing, talk of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can **sound** like three beings. The participants often fell back on technical language (essence, persons, consubstantial, perichoresis, etc.) to preserve unity, whereas in Judaism and Islam, one simply says *"God is One"* and no further explanation is required or allowed.

Epilogue: The Consistency and Clarity of Pure Monotheism

The philosophical inquiry into the Trinity in this video showcases the profound complexity introduced when conceiving of a Godhead that is triune. From a broader theological standpoint, this complexity has significant implications. It highlights two different approaches to understanding the divine: one that embraces **mystery and complexity** (as in Nicene Christianity's Trinity), and one that upholds **simplicity and clarity** (as in Judaism and Islam's uncompromising monotheism). The discussions in the episode, while intellectually stimulating, often resulted in what the Muslim commentator of the video observed as *"paradox and chaos"* reigning when every explanation was considered [14] . This was not to say the Christians lacked faith or intelligence – rather, it demonstrated how exceedingly **intricate and enigmatic** the Trinitarian formula is, even to brilliant philosophers of religion. In contrast, pure monotheism stands out for its conceptual straightforwardness. The identity of God in Jewish and Islamic thought faces no internal paradox: God is a singular reality, indivisible, and simple (not composed of parts or persons). This conceptual simplicity lends these faiths a kind of **theological stability and clarity**. There is no need to reconcile statements like "Father is God, Son is God, Spirit is God" with "God is one," because only the latter sort of statement exists.

Yet, the broader implications go beyond logic. They touch on religious experience and interfaith relations. A consistent and clear monotheism might argue for its truth by appealing to the intuitive conviction that ultimate reality must be one and unified. Advocates of pure monotheism often assert that worshipping an absolutely one God avoids confusion in devotion and keeps the focus on a single ultimate sovereign. On the other hand, Christian Trinitarians argue that their nuanced monotheism enriches understanding of God's internal life (as love and relationality). The **convergence** we demonstrated in scripture – e.g. that the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an each affirm there is only one God worthy of worship [16] [19] [20] – suggests a common ground that pure monotheists can build upon with Christians. A *philosophical and scriptural defense* of pure monotheism would note that all prophets and messengers (in the Jewish and Islamic view, including Jesus) taught the oneness of God clearly, whereas the Trinitarian formulation arose later and lacks a straightforward scriptural proof-text. Philosophically, **Occam's razor** might be invoked: the simpler hypothesis – one God, one person – is to be preferred over a more complex one – one God in three persons – unless there is compelling reason otherwise. Pure monotheism posits no internal distinctions in God, thereby avoiding the puzzles of "one in three." As the episode demonstrated, resolving those puzzles often entails abstract metaphysical frameworks (like "one substance, three modes of subsistence") that can feel somewhat removed from devotional life. In Judaism and Islam, in contrast, God's oneness is both an **intellectual doctrine and a spiritual emphasis** that fosters undivided worship. Every Jewish prayer begins "Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai *echad* (the Lord is one)," and every Muslim prayer echoes "*Lā ilāha illā*

Allāh (there is no god but God)." This unambiguous monotheistic focus arguably produces a distinctive clarity in the believer's relationship with the divine.

In conclusion, the **Closer To Truth** dialogue on the Trinity allowed believers and skeptics alike to probe one of Christianity's most profound mysteries. The thematic summary above captured how philosophers grapple with maintaining God's unity while confessing a tri-personal deity. By bringing in the perspectives and scriptures of Judaism and Islam, we are reminded that there is an alternative theological vision in which God's oneness is absolute and uncomplicated by internal distinctions. Pure monotheism – as enshrined in the Shema (*"the Lord is one"*) and the Shahada (*"One God"*) – emerges as a doctrine of divine simplicity that is both logically straightforward and scripturally attested in two great faiths. This does not automatically "solve" all questions about God, of course; even a unitary God is ultimately beyond full human comprehension. However, the **consistency of pure monotheism** avoids the specific paradoxes of the Trinity. It presents a clear conceptual model: God *is* One, period. The broader implication for theology is that when we affirm *God's oneness unequivocally*, we uphold a principle that is deeply rooted in the earliest revelations and is accessible to human reason without contradiction. The trilogy of Abrahamic traditions – though divided by the Trinity doctrine – all share a reverence for the One Almighty. In the end, as the exploration of the Trinity prompts us to reflect, one may find that the **pure monotheism of Judaism and Islam offers a vision of the divine that is majestically uncompromised** – one ultimate Creator, unrivaled in glory, indivisible in essence, and singularly deserving of worship [20] [22]. Such a vision, unclouded by internal plurality, powerfully echoes through history in the proclamation that the Lord is God and the Lord is One. The theological journey through complexity thus brings us back to the elegant simplicity at the heart of monotheism, a truth affirmed by prophets and sages across ages, and a creed that continues to inspire and unite billions in the worship of the One True God.

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[16] Mark 12:29 Jesus replied, "This is the most important: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.
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[19] John 17:3 Now this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.
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