

Trinity, Creed, and Apologetic Approach in the Context of Pakistan

By

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Historically, the Nicene Creed was declared when the council of Nicaea was called to resolve a religious controversy that started dividing the Christian community. Arius believed that Jesus was a created being, but a supreme creation of the uncreated and “timelessly self-subsistent” God.¹ Arius expressed his belief in his song about Jesus Christ, stating “There was a time when Christ was not...” In 325, Constantine called for a council of the Church where bishops from throughout the Empire assembled to settle the issue. Arianism was denounced as heresy, and the first steps were taken toward an authoritative statement of creed that is regularly repeated by the faithful throughout the world to this day:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried. The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures. He ascended to heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will never end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. He proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified. He spoke through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and to life in the world to come. Amen.²

Understanding the concept of the Trinity posed a significant challenge for early Christian believers. Such a period of creedal reforms (325 and 381) brought much pain and suffering, according to Justo Gonzalez.

The Church that inherits the Nicene tradition must remember that we are heirs of those who came limping to the debate. And their wounds were ones inflicted through real and practical faithfulness. Nicaea is the first great debate of the Church, and it is these wounded bishops that are our Fathers in theological debate. They were strengthened first by costly faithfulness and real theological debate is forever accountable to them.³

¹ “Arius and Nicaea,” retrieved on Sept. 26 2024 from www.fuller.edu/next-faithful-step/resources/arius-and-nicaea/

² “Translation 1988, Faith Alive Christian Resources, Christian Reformed Church in North America.” retrieved on 27 September 2024.

³ “Arius and Nicaea”

The Nicene Creed provided a revolutionary explanation of the Christian faith during this period, addressing the doctrine of God. This debate extended beyond the Christian community to encompass scholars of monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The understanding of the Trinity has been a captivating topic of historical Islamic debate among Muslim and Christian scholars.⁴ In South Asia, Islam has a rich history of *munazrat* (debates) and Christian-Muslim dialogue, both in the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras.⁵ These discussions have seen Muslim and Christian scholars engaging in compelling and persuasive apologetic dialogues. Muslims have raised challenging questions regarding the concept of committing *Shirk* (polytheism by associating anyone with God), the authenticity of the Biblical script (*Tehrif*), and the divinity of Christ. Christian scholars have effectively used diverse contextual examples to explain the unity of God within the Trinity. This paper draws not only from the theological arguments of Western scholars but also from indigenous scholars who have passionately defended the Trinity, as outlined in the Nicene Creed, during apologetic discussions. The history of Pakistan provides engaging examples of understanding, critique, and the persuasive defense of the Creed in an apologetic approach.

In 1973, Molana Kousar Niazi, a prominent Pakistani politician and Islamic scholar, approached with his critique of Christian theology. Niazi's analysis ignited crucial debates on the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. By shedding light on the early confusion in Church history and referencing the case of Arius, Niazi prompted a reexamination of these fundamental theological concepts. Niazi argued that the Christian fathers had declared Jesus Christ as the son of God, attributing God's qualities to him and kept inventing the creed of redemption. He contended that this theological discourse was not originally part of Jesus's teachings and that Christianity had strayed from his authentic message by embracing the philosophy of the Church fathers and reciting creeds. Furthermore, Niazi critiqued the Nicene Creed as a representation of Greek philosophy that failed to address the profound question of how the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are related to each other. He also challenged the traditional view of the divinity of Christ, asserting that Jesus was a prophet, not a son of God.⁶ Molana Niazi handed his research "*Aina-e-Taslees*" (Mirror of Trinity) to Christian scholar Yousuf Jalil, challenging him to engage with its arguments and provide a response.⁷

In response, Yousuf Jalil, a first editor of *al-mushir* (the Counselor) presented a compelling defense, not just as a debate (*Munazra*), but in the form of publishing his research. His response, published over three impactful years - 1981, 1982, and 1983, provided a constructive contribution to the discourse. In his culminating article, Jalil

⁴ Sara Leila Hussein examines the works of early Christian theologians: Theodore Abu Qurra (d.829), Abu Raita (d.835), and Ammar Al-Basri (d.850) who are known to defend their doctrine in Arabic, and were engaged with Islamic theological thought (*kalam*), and the divine attributes of God. For more information see "Early Christians Explanations of the Trinity in Arabic in the Context of Muslim Theology" (Birmingham: PhD Research, 2011).

⁵ Christine Schirrmacher, "The Influence of Higher Bible Criticism on Muslim Apologetics in the Nineteenth Century" *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions* (1999:2), 270-279; also see Schirrmacher, "Muslim Apologetics and The Agra Debates of 1854: A Nineteenth Century Turning Point" *The Bulletin: Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 13. No.1&2. (1994).

⁶ Kousar Niazi, *Aina-e-Taslees* (Mirror of Trinity) (Lahore: Shakh Ghulam and Sons, 1975), 125-126.

⁷ Yousuf Jalil, "Shikast-e-Aina-e-Taslees" (Breaking the Mirror of Trinity) *al-mushir* Vol. 23 No 4 (1981), 164.

eloquently addressed the Trinity and clarified the divinity of Christ as the eternal Word of God (*Kalama Tullah*), leaving a positive impact on theological discussions.⁸ Yousuf Jalil's research was sent not only to Molana Kauser Niazi but to indigenous scholars, both Christians and Muslims. Jalil also published his research on Jesus as the Word of God (*Kalama Tullah*) to share the Christian belief of the Word of God and Spirit of God, including in the different references of the Quran. Jalil argued that the Word of God (*Kalama Tullah*), Existence of God (*Wajud Allah*), and Life of God (*Hayat Allah*) cannot be separated from each other. He also gave various Quranic references stating Jesus as the Spirit of God and Son of Virgin Mary. He also included that the divinity of Christ cannot be approved from external examples but from the teaching of Jesus and careful study of the New Testament.⁹

To Yousaf Jalil, the Urdu translation of the word "*Kalm*" means "coming out like a tender shoot." Therefore, the word "*Kalma*" means a tender shoot coming out from the highest deity (Isaiah 53:2). Since God is not a physical body, Jesus has come out of the divine God; therefore, He is fully divine. The word of God is an image of God. The "*Kalama Tullah*" (word of God) means the light of God that enlightens others and gives life. The word of God has an internal relation with God.¹⁰ Yousuf Jalil said that Christians do not seek salvation through Creed, but they find the procedure of Salvation by understanding what Jesus has accomplished in suffering and resurrection as declared in the Nicene Creed.¹¹

The ancient *Shema* creed proclaims: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord." In Islam, a believer testifies, "I bear witness that there is no God but the One God and Muhammad is a Messenger of God." This confession of faith in the unseen but the one and only God (*Tawhid*) is fundamental to Islamic worship of Allah.¹² It is emphasized that no one can share any aspect of Allah's divinity, power, and authority, and no one can be associated with Allah.¹³ While the majority of Islamic scholars rejected the Trinity, some also recognized that the status of the Trinity in Christianity is similar to the Islamic proclamation "*la ilaha illallah*" (There is one God).¹⁴

The English translation of the Nicene Creed starts with "we" believe, while the word "Creed" comes from the Latin "Credo," meaning "I believe," representing an individual confession of Christian faith. The Church in Pakistan was founded on the profound declaration of a person reciting, remembering, and proclaiming the powerful phrase of faith: "*Mien Eman Rakhta/Rakhti Hoon*" (I believe...). This connection mirrors the early church's use of the Christian Creed and its significance in the history

⁸ Yousuf Jalil publisher the answers to the critique of Kausar Niazi entitled "Shikat-e-Aina-e-Taslees" (Breaking the Mirror of Trinity) in *al-mushir* Vol. 24 in 1981. He Published four research papers in *al-mushir* Vol. 25 in 1982 and the last research in *al-mushir* Vol. 25 in 1983.

⁹ Yousuf Jalil published research on *Kalama Tullah* in various various articles to share the divinity of Christ. *Kalama Tullah ki twjihat awr aqwan-e-alam* (Word of God & nations of the World) Vol 21 No 4 (1979): 41-49; More articles were published in Vol 22 No 1 (1980): 5-21; Vol 22: No 2 (1980) :53-76; Vol 22: No 3 (1980): 114-147; Vol 22: No 4 (1980) 198-218; *Qalama Tullah awr Rooh mnah* (The Word of God and Spirit of God) *al-mushir* 1981 Vol. 23 (1981): 8-28.

¹⁰ Yousuf Jalil, "The Word of God and World Religions," *al-mushir*, Vol. 21, No 1 (1979): 41-49.

¹¹ Yousuf Jalil, "Shikast-e-Aina-e-Taslees" (Breaking the Mirror of Trinity) Vol. 25 No.1, (1983), 55.

¹² Alhaj Ajijola, *The Essence of Faith in Islam* (Lahore: Islamic Publications Ltd., 1978), 5-15.

¹³ Badru D. Kateregga, David W. Shenk, *Islam and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. 1981), 2-4.

¹⁴ Rahmatullah quoted in Kamil, *The Great Munazara*, 120.

of the Church Mission. Tertullian referred to the creed as “A pledge of all allegiance to the banner of Christ.” The Creed was also known as a “Symbol,” signifying a “password” for entry into the Church or the community of Christian faith.¹⁵ While in English, faith means ‘trust’, the Arabic and Urdu term for faith holds a different meaning. The Arabic word for faith, “Eman” originates from the root “amn” which means safety. In the Quran, God says, “Allah is the Protector of those who have faith: from the depths of darkness He will lead them forth into light” (2:257). According to Hamza Yusuf, faith is directly linked to feeling secure, serving as an anchoring element in the human experience.¹⁶ In the early Church Mission, a Christian belief in God was the first step in securing safety. In the context of Christianity in Pakistan, the word “Eman” implies that placing trust in God will lead to finding safety and security, including spiritual safety.

The Nicene Creed serves as a powerful encapsulation of the transformative message brought by Jesus Christ. It eloquently presents the concept of the triune God and the profound purpose of living a Christian life, igniting hope and inspiration in the hearts of believers. Emphasizing the shared substance of the Father and the Son, the Creed instills unwavering confidence in the ability to truly know God through Jesus Christ. Drawing from Hebrews 1:3, which declares, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being,” the Creed vividly illustrates that gazing upon Jesus is akin to beholding God Himself. By virtue of being united in substance with the Father, believers are assured that Jesus can authentically represent God, extend forgiveness, proclaim righteousness, and welcome the believers as cherished children of the Father.

The question of the divinity of Jesus provided an incredible opportunity for indigenous Christian scholars to bridge the gap with Muslims by interpreting Jesus as the Word of God (*Kalama Tulla*). They emphasized that Jesus Christ is a revelation that unveils the image of God and that he was the Word of God (*Kalama Tullah*) that enabled people to perceive the creator in God’s creation.¹⁷ Imad-ud-din, an early Muslim convert and scholar, passionately argued that the *kalima* was not just a simple *lafz*, word or a *jumla*, sentence in writing, but rather a “title” of the second person of the Trinity that reveals the meaning of God in His nature, attributes, and speech (John 1:18). Imad ud-din also asserted that the same *kalima* was with God in the beginning and after His incarnation is called Jesus. Both God the Father and the *kalima* have *tashakhkhush* “personhood,” but their nature is the same.¹⁸ According to Yousuf Jalil, Jesus is a captivating historical figure just as the *Kalama Tullah* Word of God is. Jesus is born, and the Messiah is eternal, as mentioned in the Qur’an.

¹⁵ J. T. Woers,a amd J. W. Schulte Nordholt, *The Apostles' Creed interpreted in words* (Philediphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), 19.

¹⁶ Hamza Yusuf quoted by Lamy Hamad, “Belief in the Unseen” retrieved from www.whyislam.org on 27 September 2024

¹⁷ C. G Pfander’s book *Balance of Truth* was used by foreign and indigenous scholars to argue on the authenticity of the Bible, and the Word of God (*Kalam-e-Allah*). For more information see Carl G. Pfander, *Mizan-ul-Haq* (Balance of Truth) (Lahore: Punjab Religious Book Society, 1962). chapter 5.

¹⁸ Maqsood P. Kamil has done a research based on the historical contribution of Imad-ud-Din. For more information see “The Unfinished Agenda: The Great Munazara of 1854 and Imad-ud-Din’s Contribution to the Muslim-Christian Debates in Nineteenth-Century India” (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies/University of Middlesex, 2019).

The Nicene Creed declares that Jesus is the “very God of very God” He is not made or created, but is the true God. For Muslims exploring the Christian faith, embracing Christ as God and the Son of God can be challenging.¹⁹ Despite the complexity of understanding the Trinity, scholar Michal Nazir Ali notes that the revealed doctrine of *tauḥid* (one God) must be accepted *bila kaif* (without asking how).²⁰ Imad-ud-din passionately accepted and argued that his belief in the Trinity stemmed from Christ's self-revelation to him. As a Muslim, Imad-ud-din opposed the idea of the divinity of Christ. He wrote: “When I was not a Christian, I used to say to my friends: if all the teachings of the law of Christ were to be proved correct, it might be possible; but Christ Jesus is God, how can anyone prove this.” Following his conversion to Christianity, he fervently testified to Christ's divinity, declaring, “now I testify in the presence of God that Jesus Christ is God. And this mystery has been revealed to me when I drew near to him.” For him, the divinity of Jesus Christ became the new ‘*shahada*’ (Witness).²¹

Though understanding the divinity of Christ is difficult the most powerful theological discourse of the Islamic theology of understanding Allah is to understand His attributes and names (Qur'an, 7:180) and believers “cannot (sufficiently) count Him (His Attributes)” (Quran 73:20). A Muslim scholar, Ghamidi notes that “*Tawḥeed* is the most the most important of the attributes of perfection.”²² The debate delves into how Christians and Muslims perceive and interpret the divinity of Christ and the attributes of God. Additionally, the text discusses the difficulty in understanding the divinity of Christ and emphasizes the importance of comprehending the attributes of Allah in Islamic theology (*Towḥid-e-Sifati*).²³ The comparison of Christian and Islamic theological approaches adds depth to the discussion, shedding light on the concept of *Tawḥid* and *Trinity*. This debate challenges the traditional understanding of divinity and encourages a believer exploration of the attributes of God.

For Pakistani Christians, the Nicene Creed stands as a powerful gateway to understanding the Trinitarian Doctrine highlighting the shared belief in the Trinity as a cornerstone of an ecumenical Church. Embracing the equality of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Father is not just a mere element of confession but rather an indispensable tenet of Christianity. Therefore, delving into their divine attributes encourages believers for careful insights and interpretations.

Historically, the Apologetic approach and discussions provided a platform to share theological questions in Pakistan. Not only was publishing and dialogue possible, but the judiciary and courts also aimed to maintain a degree of independence to allow freedom to discuss religious contradictions, the divinity of Jesus, and the life of the

¹⁹ Rick Brown. “Explaining the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim contexts” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Vol. 22 No 3 (2005): 91-96.

²⁰ Michael Nazir-Ali, *Frontiers in Muslim Christian Encounter* (Oxford: Regnum Books.1987),16-17.

²¹ Imad-ud-din became a Christian after comparing Islam and Christianity. For more information see John Webster, *A Social History of Christianity: North-West India Since 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), 101;

²² Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, *Islam: a Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Dr. Shehzad Saleem (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2012), chap. 1.

²³ Yousuf Jalil, “Towḥid” (One God) *al-mushir* Vol. 15 No. 11-12 (1960): 415.

Prophet Muhammad.²⁴ A Muslim writer, Habib, praises Christians as "pioneers" in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the history of Pakistan.²⁵ Kauser Niazi once said about the apologetics discussions in 1973:

The church has the right to praise the freedom of religion as loudly as it can be practiced in the mosque, but it should have respective limitations. Both the church and the mosque have the right to reflect on each other without hurting the feelings of others.²⁶

Christians gradually became strangers and started seeking their identity. To Jalil it's crucial to remember the influence of historical Islamic culture.²⁷ In 1947, Pakistan's creation as a state based on religion sparked high hopes among Christians. However, as Islamization has progressed, these hopes have dwindled, leaving Christians feeling betrayed.²⁸ It's essential for the Church of Pakistan to actively engage in Christian-Muslim dialogue, raise awareness among the laity, and train clergy in Christian-Muslim relations. This is a critical step in preserving the Christian mission in the context of Pakistan's increasing Islamicization.²⁹

Scholars are raising questions on the limited but ongoing research and apologetic in Pakistan. Paul I. Y. Kim in the insightful research "History and Context of Christian-Muslim Relations in Pakistan" argued into the intricate tapestry of Christian-Muslim scholarship on apologetics and dialogue. Beyond theological debates, Christian advocates emphasized pressing social and political issues, including blasphemy laws, unequal minority rights, conversion e.g. The research reveals that Muslim polemics often overshadow Christian-Muslim relations, leaving Christians struggling to defend their faith as a minority. The study compellingly suggests that Christians should embrace the universality of the Church and work together to devise a comprehensive plan for Christian-Muslim relations. Likewise, it urges Muslims to transcend medieval polemics and sectarian doctrinal debates, and instead engage in modern, constructive discussions to help build a more inclusive and progressive society.³⁰

Legal, social, and religious reforms in Pakistan have transformed the approach to apologetics. The defense of the Trinity and faith has been gradually discouraged since the 1980s. Yousuf Jalil, as the first editor of *al-mushir*, played an active role in apologetic research and dialogue. However, due to legal restrictions on Christians in the post-1980 era, their freedom of speech, writing, and publishing has been limited, marking a significant shift in the landscape of apologetics in Pakistan. In response, some scholars have shifted their focus to explore apologetics through the lens of

²⁴ F. Nazir raised fundamental significance for Christians, Muslims, limitations of religious discussion, and stability in the contemporary Pakistan. For details see *The Evolution of Legislation on Religious Offences: A Study of British India and the Implications for Contemporary Pakistan* (UK: Langham, 2019).

²⁵ Muhammad Shahid Habib, *Religious dialogue between Muslims and Christians: Bases, Aims and Needs in Pakistani Context* (A Theological, Historical and Comparative Study) (Saarbrücken: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2007), 137.

²⁶ Yousuf, *Shikast-e-Aina-e-Taslees*, 168-169.

²⁷ Yousuf Jalil, "Christians are Inspired by the Historical Culture" *al-mushir* (1966): 2-15.

²⁸ Patrick Sookhdeo, *A People Betrayed: The Impact of Islamization on the Christian Community in Pakistan* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 17.

²⁹ Nazir-Ali, *Frontiers in Muslim-Christian Encounter*, 103.

³⁰ Paul I. Y. Kim, "Appraisal of Christian Muslim Relations in Pakistan" retrieved on 29 September 2024 from www.academia.edu

social justice and moral values. For example, the Christian Study Center Rawalpindi has revamped its strategy for interfaith dialogue "from theology to sociology" and is now emphasizing "social and cultural dialogue" rather than religious discourse.³¹

This shift in focus presents a compelling opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations and bridge gaps in understanding across different faith traditions. *Masihi Ishat Khana* Lahore (Christian Publishing House) has published a series of apologetic materials aimed at defending the Christian faith in response to misunderstandings and criticisms from the Muslim community.³² Pakistani scholars attempted to engage in Christian-Muslim encounters through theological-missiological discourse. Nazir Ali passionately calls on the Christian Church to embrace the "normative Salvation History" embodied in the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³³ Additionally, Amjad-Ali emphasizes the urgent need for Christians to gain a deeper understanding of Islam and to engage with their Muslim neighbors in a way that goes beyond mere debate.³⁴

Indeed these are powerful calls to action that should not be ignored. However, in Pakistan, when Christian students and scholars return from their interactions with Muslims, they are often met with scrutiny and probing questions about their beliefs. Effectively communicating the Christian faith, especially the concept of the Triune God, becomes a challenging task. However, articulating the Trinity in the context of Pakistan is no small feat. **Despite this, indigenous Christians have steadfastly upheld the Nicene Creed, a testament of faith established by church fathers 1700 years ago.** Their unwavering commitment to this historical declaration is truly remarkable.

³¹ CSC reviewed by Riaz Ahmad Saeed, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue from Pakistani Perspective: Evaluation of the Contribution of Christian Study Center," *Journal of Islamic and Religious Studies*, Vol. 2 No 1 (2017), 15.

³² MIK published various books for apologetics: E. Han, *Ibn-e-Khoda* (The Son of God), Lahore: MIK, 2015; David Shenk, *la tabdil kalam* (unchanged Word). Lahore: MIK, 2018; Barakt A.Khan, *najat dahinda* (the Saviour); Ashgar, *Kalid-e-iman* (The nature of God); Pir Bakhsh, *Taslib aw qiamut-e-Masih* (The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ); Barkat Ullah, *Sehet-e-Qutb Maqdas* (The Authenticity of the Bible). Lahore: MIK, 2018; Wycliffe A. Sing, *Farqlit* (The Parakletos). Lahore: MIK, 2018.

³³ Nazir Ali, *Frontiers in Muslim-Christian Encounter*, 117.

³⁴ Charles Amjad-Ali, "From Dislocation to Dislocation: The Experience of the Christian Community in Pakistan." *International Review of Modern Sociology*, Vol. 41 No.1 (2015), 23.