

A Christian friend recently told the old trinitarian joke, “1 plus 1 plus 1 equals 1.” Maybe it’s better to call it a parable than a joke. Calling it a joke makes it sound like he didn’t believe it or was making fun. He does, and he wasn’t.

What might surprise him is that we don’t necessarily disagree about the equation’s expression. Although we will almost inevitably have to confront some differences when exploring details of its symbolism—for example, what do those ones represent?—this aspiring Muslim doesn’t see anything objectionable on the face of $1+1+1=1$ as a doctrinal representation.

The fundamental doctrinal statement of Islam is called the Shahada. The Shahada is when one bears witness to the acceptance of two truths: (i) the singularity of God and (ii) Muhammad’s (peace be upon him) faithful delivery of God’s message. When testifying to the first pillar, one says, *Lā ilāha illā Llāh.* This is known as the testimony of tawhīd, or the Islamic expression of the Oneness of God, and is often translated into English as, “There’s no god but God.” Another way of saying it is that there is nothing in existence, there is no existence, but God. Or more simply, “Nothing.....Only God.” Those who say *Lā ilāha illā Llāh* do so over and over and over; whether alone or in a group; whether audibly or silently; whether standing or sitting or lying down; over and over, conditioning and polishing the heart so that, God willing, what is said becomes lived.

A shaikh once explained tawhīd by telling a story. He said a teacher and several of his students joined some friends in dhikr, the remembrance of God. When it came time for them to make 100 recitations of *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*, the friends were amazed. With every, “*Lā ilāha*,” the teacher and his students disappeared, not even leaving indentations in their cushions. And with every, “*illā Llāh*,” they reappeared.

Jalaladdin Muhammad bin Muhammad bin al-Husayn al-Khatibi al-Balkhi al-Bakri (more commonly called Rumi), wrote about tawhīd in a different way. He wrote that there once was a man who came and knocked on his friend’s door. The friend asked, “Who’s there?” The man answered, “It’s me.” The friend said, “Go away. Only the fire of absence can cook the raw.” The man went away. For a year he wandered, heartbroken, praying, and repenting. When he came back, he knocked again, this time with mindful shyness. “Who’s there?” asked the friend. “It’s you,” he answered. And with that, the friend said, “Oh. Well then. Since you are I, come in, come in. You see, there was never room in this house for two I’s.”

These two stories help illustrate how we start...and end...with One. “To God we perpetually belong. And to God we ultimately return.” Quran 2:156. All is One, as nothing can exist in and of itself, except God. Everything manifest is God’s imagination articulated. There is nothing real, no real truth, except the One. There is nothing inherent to $1+1+1=1$ in conflict with that.

Still, if given the choice, my preference would be to tell the parable a slightly different way. One reason is that, from this aspirant’s perspective, $1+1+1=1$ can and often does

risk conflating the One's imagination as articulated with the One who imagines and articulates. Another reason is that the parable's equation requires a suspension of foundational order. This isn't to imply that the numbers themselves have intrinsic value. It's also not to imply that the order is somehow complete, consistent, and decidable in its own right. In fact, if one thoroughly tests it, one can even see how the order will eventually and logically expose its description's necessary shortcomings. Even so, it is a universally agreed upon order underlying the numbers, and through it all, this order can represent a rudimentary description of the signs God has given us about who God is. It is foundational in that it has, in certain ways, allowed us as humans to unify across generations and cultures, to build societies and civilizations, and to begin unlocking codes into everything from the microscopic to the galactic and beyond.

In telling the parable differently then, the first hope would be to express it in a way that keeps intact such a foundational, universal order, considering it a signpost to help point us toward God. The intent would be to nod toward mercy, signaling acceptance of us as who we are, where we are: beings who relate to what we don't know through that which we do know. There is a story about a great mathematician who walked into the Dome of the Rock and started weeping. He said he had lived *with* math his whole life, but on that day, he had seen it. Suddenly, math had lived. So again, even if the numbers themselves could be arbitrarily assigned in infinite ways, and even if the order described proves itself deficient at some point, the language to be used here would be an attempt to preserve the primordial harmony that surrounds us.

The second hope would be to express the parable in as simple a form as the original, but also in one that allows for elaboration. The elaboration would rely on the same principles central to the parable, meaning those already accepted under the foundational order. In doing so, the intent would be to imbue the parable with the mercies of accessibility and expandability. Some seekers need faith expressed in the simplest of terms, like simple math. Others need to grapple with complexities, like those that test mathematical limits in ways most of us don't comprehend. The formula should be able to contract or expand to meet those needs.

The third would be to remember that, in the end, a parable is a parable. The parable will break down at some point. Jesus, peace be upon him, often said the kingdom of heaven is "*like...*". A parable can only go so far, just like the order we are analogizing. Even though it may be elaborated, it will and must fail sooner or later to explain that for which it stands as a homely proxy. If it weren't so, then there would not be a need to consider something bigger. This is yet another mercy, as it reminds that we are talking about faith and surrender. While there can be certainty in that faith and certainty in that surrender, we cannot have certainty in the scope or accuracy of our capacity for knowledge. Even the greatest of mathematicians who would perhaps scoff at everything written here will ultimately run out of knowledge and capacity for new knowledge. Knowledge and the capacity for it are in the realm of what Rumi would call the desert plain, a middle space where our passions reign. But if we travel through that plain and meet on the other side, where "we'll prostrate," that is where we are complete.

Put another way, there are questions we can't answer—we just don't need to be too quick to give up trying.

With the three considerations in mind, my suggestion for rewriting the parable would be to make only one change. We would replace the function of addition with that of multiplication. Rather than expressing it as $1+1+1=1$, we would cast it as $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$.

By recasting the function, we can immediately see a similar representation of tawhīd, *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*, to that we could with $1+1+1=1$. But unlike the latter, it is established on familiar, ordered principles, rooted in the ground God provided for us. That one step begins a journey that can take us down a straight path as far as our legs allow. There is no need to meander. For example, if we acknowledge we have 1 and that it can multiply its attributes, we can, in our created capacity, get a glimpse of an expanded meaning of *Lā ilāha*, this way:

$1*1=1$
 $11*11=121$
 $111*111=12321$
 $1111*1111=1234321$
 $11111*11111=123454321$
 $111111*111111=12345654321$
 $1111111*1111111=1234567654321$
 $11111111*11111111=123456787654321$
 $111111111*111111111=12345678987654321$

This elaboration illustrates 1 manifesting through creative action in a material world. The manifested action, or as mentioned above—imagination articulated—has no existence in and of itself. One is at the beginning of all that which is created, and One is at the end of it all. What we perceive as intervening multiplicity derives from One and remains enshrouded in One. That which is articulated can manifest in infinite ways, but it is only some degree of magnitude from, and back to, One. This is how we have an image of *Lā ilāha*. It is the recognition that there is nothing in this world that belongs to itself. There is nothing in this world that brings itself about. It is the numerical representation of “To God we perpetually belong. And to God we ultimately return.”

The next step helps us glimpse *illā Llāh*. Like a blacksmith honing both sides of a blade or a bird using both wings to take flight, we resort to the inverse to true our function:

$12345678987654321 / 12345678987654321 = 1$
 $123456787654321 / 123456787654321 = 1$
 $1234567654321 / 1234567654321 = 1$
 $12345654321 / 12345654321 = 1$
 $123454321 / 123454321 = 1$
 $1234321 / 1234321 = 1$
 $12321 / 12321 = 1$
 $121 / 121 = 1$

11 / 11 = 1
111 / 111 = 1
1111 / 1111 = 1
11111 / 11111 = 1
111111 / 111111 = 1
1111111 / 1111111 = 1
11111111 / 11111111 = 1
111111111 / 111111111 = 1

And finally, and most importantly, $1 / 1 / 1 = 1$.

The order shows that when the elaborated comes face to face with itself, there is nothing at its heart but one. Likewise, when our own multiplicity comes face to face with its true self, that divine part of us that the one God breathed into us, the articulated finally sees its multiplicity for the fiction it has always been. It sees there really is only One. It realizes its peculiar existence and identity are only measures, degrees of magnitude—those degrees being the distance from One and back to One. One is always there, underlying and undergirding everything yet always remaining distinct. This is recognition of the True One, the One to which we belong and ultimately return. This is our glimpse into *illā Llāh*.

As beautiful as the images are, they reveal almost immediately that $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ may also be inadequate to represent tawhīd. For those who have internalized *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*, the bifurcation of *Lā ilāha* and *illā Llāh* shows that something has either been explained inaccurately or hasn't been explained yet. We do not say, *Lā ilāha* and *illā Llāh*." We say, "*Lā ilāha illā Llāh*." For those who haven't internalized it or who are skeptical, the potential shortcoming is equally glaring. It is that one is not nothing.

The facial inadequacy is also intentional. That which we see in $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ and its elaborations captures that which we grasp through our rational capacity. But what about that which we don't and can't? Where is it, and how is it accounted?

The meaning of rational here isn't the mathematical distinction between rational and irrational numbers. We're talking in parables after all, where a point is expressed through story or symbol so that we can relate. The key is in its relatability. It's rational in that sense, then; that we can understand by looking for relationship between two similar but not necessarily equal magnitudes. We relate to 200, for example, because it is two hundred ones (200:1). It is 199 equal degrees of magnitude from one (199+1).

There is not a problem per se with rational capacity, relation, or relationship. Indeed, these characteristics provide the ability to acknowledge our origin from God, to grow in our knowledge of God, and to increase in love both for and from God. Surely they are wrapped up in God's intention of oneness in creation. In the hadith of the hidden treasure, it is narrated that God said, "I was a hidden treasure and wished to be known. So I created a creation and then made myself known to them so that they would know me."

Relationship does introduce a conundrum, though. The conundrum derives from the contingent nature of relationship. A contingency is when an outcome is subject to the occurrence or nonoccurrence of a condition or requirement of some sort. For instance, the relationship of friendship requires someone else and a mutual affection. Motherhood requires someone else with whom there is a maternal bond. These relationships are contingent because one cannot be a friend or mother unless the corresponding condition is met.

Everything in the created world is contingent because of the need for a Creator. Even if a person is not religious and refuses to accept the notion of Creator, that person almost always accepts that a bang of some sort was required for our existence to be. The big bang then, is a contingency, as are we to the big bang.

But God isn't contingent. God wasn't required to create. Manifestation of God's creative attribute may be contingent to the extent that, before we could "call" God Creator, God had to create. We can accept this attribution but as attribution only, and acknowledging an attributive trait is different from saying God needed to create to be God. Similarly, manifestation of God's love may be contingent in that, before we could know God as Lover, Lover had to love us. But that's not the same as saying God is required to love us or even saying God can't be Love without us.

God's God-ness is not contingent on our relationship to God. God is Absolute, and by the definition of absolute, it must mean that God, at least in God's essence, isn't subject to the requirements of the way we relate. When God gave Moses God's name, God said, "I Am Who I Am." There is nothing relative or contingent there. Nothing...only Absolute. *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*. (Compare the infusion of relatibility in Jesus's "I am" statements; e.g., "Before Abraham, I am,"; and Muhammad's "Before Adam, I am." Peace and blessings be upon Jesus, Muhammad, Abraham, Adam, and their families and companions.)

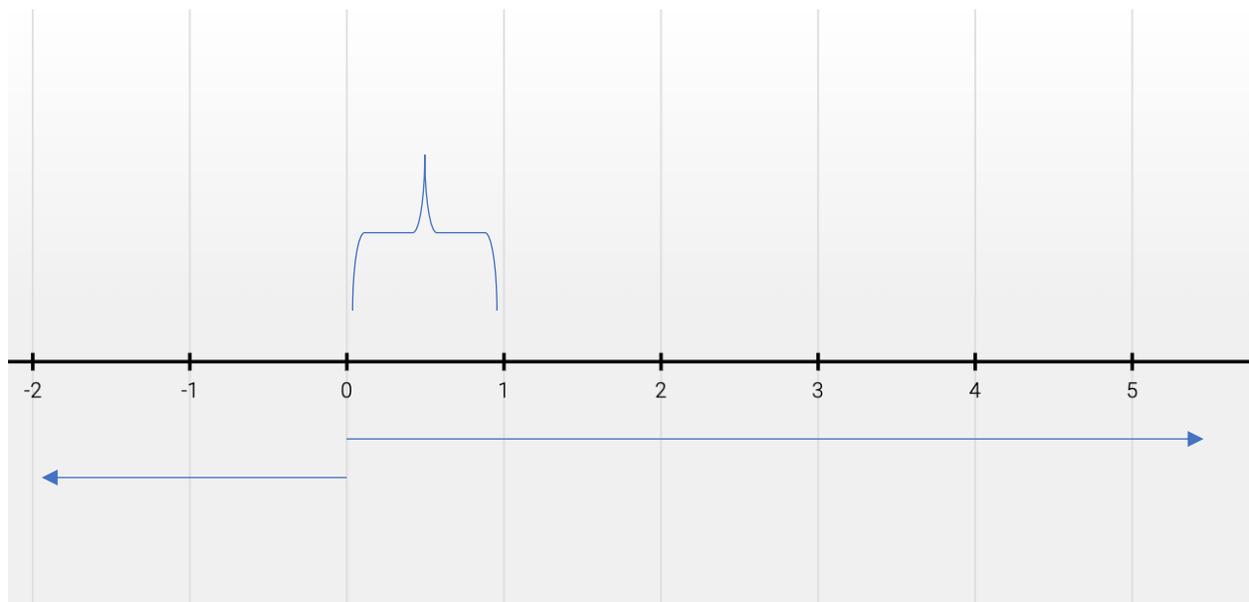
In a way, the mystery of the parable $1+1+1=1$ sidesteps the conundrum. The unexpected outcome jolts us into looking for the force that lies behind the equation, a force beyond what is seen, something so big and separate from our capacity to relate that it turns upside down everything we normally think of as the true order of things. The rational collapses under its weight. And this incredible weight, a weight powerful enough to crush even the most foundational concepts of our reasoning power, requires us to look to the unseen and acknowledge the unrelatable. We acquiesce to mystery.

Full acquiescence to mystery opens a way to the Absolute. We simply say that the whole of $1+1+1=1$ is, by virtue of the mystery, the very expression of the Absolute—no need to look further. Suspension of the order a single time necessitates the acknowledgement of, and submission to, the Absolute, something that stands outside contingencies. It is without precondition or constraints. The Absolute can make any outcome the Absolute wants, including one that confirms Absoluteness, in any way the

Absolute wants. Whether that lies beyond our understanding or expectation is irrelevant or intentional or both. The mystery overcomes everything that seems contrary.

But mystery is also contingent. A mystery ceases to be once it's solved or loses its ability to induce wonder. It needs someone to be perplexed or awed. Its existence depends on another's ignorance or astonishment. It doesn't matter whether the mystery is perpetual. What matters is that mystery is always dependent on the satisfaction of a particular state or circumstance not occurring. If there ceases to be another or that other ceases to remain confused or wonderstruck or both, the mystery can no longer be. So, as a contingency—something in need—it is not Absolute.

Plus, because we are creatures of order with the ability to rationalize, questions don't necessarily go away, even if we believe in and accept the mystery. For instance, the mystery of $1+1+1=1$ starts with one. One is not nothing. In acknowledging nothing, we have to acknowledge, as we did with $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$, that our construct has a beginning (that is, 1). We also notice that, in acknowledging a beginning, we have now introduced two other contingencies: (i) time in magnitude or measure and (ii) space in magnitude or measure. Time in particular poses a problem because it requires us to try to fit existence into terms of past, present, and future. There is also the dilemma of choice. Why 1?; Why the beginning point here, not there?



In a nutshell, we've just created the conditions for asking, is there really a God or is it something we chose to contrive? And if there is a God who created the world, then who created God? And if God died on the cross, where was God for the days God spent in the tomb? Once the questions begin, they're hard to stop.

For those who accept $1+1+1=1$ —really accept it—the response to all the seemingly unanswerable is again to rest in the mystery. It has to be that way. There has to be an admission that there aren't adequate words to elaborate it or answers to illustrate it. In fact, no amount of elaborating or illustrating will help. This is because any elaboration or illustration on a parable that suspends order is almost always subject to mysterious, unpredictable outcomes. We need to consider only a few logical outgrowths to illustrate:

$$1-0-1=0$$

$$1-1-1= -1 \text{ or } |1| \text{ (which expresses the absolute value of 1)}$$

$$-1-1-1= -3 \text{ or } |1|?$$

$$1+1+1+1= 4, 1+1, \text{ or } 1+1/3 \text{ or } 1?$$

$$1+1=2, -1, \text{ or } |1|?$$

Of the examples, only one of them provides an answer that aligns with orderly expectation. Each of the others necessitates a choice, requiring us either to take the answer that accepts the suspension of order as a one-off (for lack of a better term) or to build on the parable's suspended order using the only tools we know how; those being within the order to which we can relate. And even if we think we can reason it out, we have to admit that, because of the mystery, the answer to any of these illustrations could simply be 1 in the end. Or 7. Or 182. Or 5,975,682. Or, how about $1+1+1=33,000,000=1$?

For adherents of $1+1+1=1$, the real certainty in this world is that we can't have certainty as to how $1+1+1=1$ actually works. We must instead put our trust in the Absolute's resolution in finality and perfection, regardless of what apparent rules of order that may break. It's fine that mystery is a contingency, because no matter what, the only non-contingent is The Mystery's Resolve. And The Mystery's Resolve is One. So, in this sense of absolute, $1+1+1=1$ can indeed point toward tawhīd after all.

We can take a different approach, though, by using $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. The new expression exhorts us to look to "the signs God has provided within the heavens and the earth." Qur'an 45:3. The signs do not negate or deny mystery, because the more we begin to see the signs, the more we realize how much remains to be seen. But this type of mystery is not a passive one. It is instead one that propels, impels, and compels us to continue expanding our aperture. It is one that tells us there is something that God has woven into this order of things, something God wants us to investigate to appreciate; something that allows us to use the knowable and experiential to find our way to even more that is knowable and experiential so that eventually we find our way to experiencing the otherwise unknowable.

The Qur'an says that God will help us understand God's signs "through what we perceive in the utmost horizons of the universe and within ourselves." The understanding provided through these signs "will make it clear to us that God's revelation is indeed the truth." Qur'an 41:53.

There are plenty who may interpret the signs as ends in and of themselves—reality in and of themselves. Those of us who do, whether people of faith or not, will rely too heavily on our own observation of the relatable and articulable. If it doesn't fit within our perceived construct of certainty, we will refuse to cognize it. Our certainty gets bigger than God. For example, a bush can't really be aflame without burning. A person can't be healed by a touch. A virgin can't have a baby. There can't be a God. And lest we think this a phenomenon relegated to religious contexts, it is not. Certainly reliance in our own abilities to observe has, at one time or another, supported ideas ranging from insistence on a flat earth as the center of the solar system to miasma as the cause of disease. Had it not been for those who were willing to look beyond, we would still be afraid of dragons at the edges of the map.

But if we perceive the signs as having the potential to continue revealing truth upon truth, the elaborations of our parable re-expressed ($1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$) confirms for those of faith and not of faith that there's more than what we see. There is something on the other side of our capacity to know. There has to be. That which is seen in the expression of the parable will, as we test it out, necessitate that we look to something to which we can't see or really relate, at least not through any defined order of magnitude. The name of that can and will be debated, hence the spectrum of faith that can still range from total denial to total acquiescence to mystery. But if an adherent to the trinity, an adherent to Islam, and an adherent to atheism were having a friendly chat, they could all agree that, at some point, we seem to be ready, willing, and able to surrender to the certainty of something undefinable.

How so? We turn to another illustration, using our parable rephrased.

The basic premise of our parable is that one is one is one is one. In our first two elaborations, we see where we can go from 1 to 12345678987654321. The face of the parable gives us no way to see how or why we can move past the ones column, much less the ten-quadrillions. But we do know that it can be. The reason it can be is the power of what we don't see.

The mathematician calls it zero. It can also be called nothing, as in nothing plus five equals five. The parable's order depends on it, but it is not dependent on the parable or its order. It can, in our understanding of the order, stand completely alone. Yet it is somehow always there in everything, creating and regenerating.

Zero is a portal to infinities upon infinities on its right, its left, and vertically. Through it, our numbers also have endless potential and, in that sense, they can become somewhat similar to but never the same as zero.

Zero and of itself can't be measured. There is not an adequate comparator on the number line, because nothing else is like it. Remembering that earlier, through our elaborations on our parable, we accounted for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, we can test this:

1. $0(y)=0$. No matter what number we try to multiply to get to zero, we can't come up with anything new. The answer will always be zero. We can say that 999 comprises 999 ones, in other words, it is related to 1 by 999 times. But how many times is it related to zero?
2. $0 / y = 0$. This is the truing of $0(y)=0$. As explained earlier, the process of truing, using the inverse, provides certainty that our blade is straight, our flight path is straight, and that our order is indeed order. Here, zero can't be divided. It never loses its zero-ness, no matter how many times we try to cut it or what we use to try to cut it.
3. $0 + y = y$. Zero plus or minus any number is the number itself. That doesn't mean that zero is irrelevant. It just means that there is no immediately relatable impact. Some may try to say, because we can't measure something unrelatable, zero doesn't exist. But we know it does. Our foundational order points to it. We also know it must have some sort of impact (albeit unmeasurable) because, even though it allegedly adds nothing tangible or subtracts nothing tangible, its effect shows up again and again and again and again. Every time we have to exceed the maximum degrees of magnitude that $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ can generate, we see the regenerative power of zero affording us something new: ...7,8,9...{10}...17, 18, 19...{20}...{30}...etc. It is the same in reverse, too: ...-7, -8, -9...{-10}, etc.
4. $y / 0 = \text{undefined}$. Dividing a million by ten results in 100,000. But try to divide a million by zero? We can't. We can't even say it results in zero. It is simply undefined.
5. $|0| = 0$. A final example of zero's incomparability is that it is unchanging. The number 17, for example, can be positive or negative. We can say its absolute value is 17 to help us with spatial relation. The absolute value of zero, on the other hand, is zero. Zero is neither negative nor positive, because its essence is unchanging. Its absolute value in the present, past, and future is always the same, zero.

In zero, we understand nothing. Through zero, we can glimpse, and accept, something of infinity. In a way, there's an impassable, immeasurable isthmus that separates 0 in zero's absolute sense from 1 in 1's relatable sense.

So how does any of this discussion of zero tie back to the parable?

Zero should not, for the purpose of the parable $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$, represent God. It's important to note, too, that 1 isn't meant to represent God. This differs from the trinitarian expression $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$. Where the latter is meant to represent the mystery of how God can be one in three persons, with each of the 1's representing a different person, the former is to provide us observable signs about how to know and experience *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*.

What must be remembered is that a sign isn't that to which it signals. Similarly, our parable is just a parable—as mentioned earlier, a homely proxy. So, we can say that, regardless of whether this could all be explained through a different parable (i.e., a different mathematical expression or by narrative imagery), for the purpose of the

parable $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$, zero is an orderly way to understand the point at which, out of nothing, God makes God's self known to us, and 1 illustrates to us the way God *is* known to us. The parable doesn't begin with zero, for the simple reason we wouldn't know how to do anything else if it did. It begins with 1, and then through its elaborations, expands. Through those expansions, we expand in knowledge. And as we begin to expand our knowledge, we expand our capacity for new signs. And as we expand our capacity for new signs, we begin to explore new knowledge. And so on and so on, seeing more and more and becoming more and more certain of how God's revelation is indeed truth.

As this aspiring Muslim understands it (which could be wildly wrong), we could use the words *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* as substitutes for zero and one, respectively. Neither can or should be said to be God, but both allow us to understand something about God. *Tanzīh* is to represent God's incomparable essence, that which we'll never measure or understand and is transcendent. The only point of relation is that it provides us a word to describe our first encounter with God. *Tashbīh*, on the other hand, describes the relational nature of God, that is, God's divine names. Where *tanzīh* is the point at which God expresses a desire for self-disclosure, *tashbīh* is the self-disclosure of God as disclosed. Just as we could true our parable, we can true this, too, but by turning from functions of multiplication and division to the revelation Surat al Ikhlas:

*Say, God is One,
God is eternal, the uncaused cause of all causes.
God is not begotten, nor does God beget.
There is no comparator for God.*

Surat al Ikhlas brings us to the edge of a fault line we have managed to avoid until now. For many who profess Islam, the surah is irreconcilable with the trinitarian belief that Jesus, peace be upon him, is God's only begotten son, a foundational trinitarian belief. And for many who profess the trinity, the bible passage John 3:16, which refers to Jesus, peace be upon him, as God's only begotten son, can't square with Surat al Ikhlas, a foundational testimony to *tawhīd*. It goes deeper, too. Words like incarnation and atonement, for instance, expose other fissures that may be unbridgeable. Statements like, "In fact, they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them as if they did," do the same.

But is that inevitable? Is it the result of a deep and mutual antagonism that is beyond reconciliation?

Despite the Gospel of John's use of the term *begotten*, it would be extraordinarily rare to hear a trinitarian purport that God had relations with a woman to have offspring. In fact, it would likely be much more common to hear a trinitarian doubt the virgin birth than to hear the birth was the result of physical intimacy. And as true or as blasphemous as incarnation, atonement, and death by crucifixion may seem to one audience or another, there is not a singular, monolithic understanding of what they mean.

This is not to suggest that doctrines of the trinity and tawhīd are the same. It's not to advocate for relativism, syncretism, or universalism, either.

It is simply to say that entrenchment to incompatibility is not the point of the reframed parable $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. When we begin with $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$, we do not begin at the fault line. And during a gracious and patient dialogue of $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$, it could just be that many (certainly not all) who ascribe to the trinity and many who profess tawhīd (certainly not all) could find more walkable land than they might have envisioned...perhaps along with some stepping stones placed strategically at a stride's length throughout those otherwise unbridgeable gaps.