

One can sometimes equal three!



Big picture: Beware of using simple mathematical formulas to constrain or deny who God is. God is much bigger than maths. Yet, in certain contexts it is possible for one to equal three, like when describing a family. However, nothing in creation can fully explain the nature of God.

1. Muslims often reject the Trinity, claiming it does not make sense mathematically

The Trinity is often dismissed as being illogical using simple mathematics: $1+1+1$ equals 3 not 1. This is a popular polemic against the Trinity used by Muslim apologists¹.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that the doctrine of the Trinity is not the result of adding together three Gods as Quran asserts (See [Quran 5.116](#), [Quran 5.73](#)). The teaching of the Trinity, however, is the result of recognising that Scripture witnesses that there is one God, who eternally exists as three persons in relationship with each other who are each fully God.

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} 2x_1 + x_2 = 7 \\ x_1 + x_2 - 3x_3 = -10 \\ 6x_2 - 2x_3 + x_4 = 7 \\ 2x_3 - 3x_4 = 13 \end{array} \right.$$

2. God is our creator and more complex than mathematics or the laws of physics, trying to understand God using his creation only results in idolatry

Secondly, it is important to remember that the universe and the world we live in is far more complicated than simple maths equations taught to young children. Interestingly on a subatomic (quantum) level, things operate in a way that seem to go against the simple rules of maths and classical physics. If this is true of the created world, how much more should we expect this to be true of the God of the universe who created all things, defined the laws of physics, and brought time into being. Although God has revealed himself to us in a way we can understand (especially in the person of the Lord Jesus), trying to reduce God's being into our limited understanding and logic will only result in idolatry. We should always be wary of a God that fully comprehensible, such a God could only be the result of our own imaginations.

3. There are some examples of everyday things that can be one and three at the same time

However, on the other hand there are contexts where one can equal three. A family is a good example, a mother, a father, and a child. This is sometimes referred to as a 'compound unity' In Hebrew, the word for "one", "echad", can be used to express a 'composite' unity". It is interesting that this is the very example that the Bible gives at the beginning of Genesis, where it describes Adam and Eve becoming one flesh ([Genesis 2:21-25](#)). The same word is used in [Deuteronomy 6:4](#) for God². One other helpful example is the number 3. It is both a single digit, yet by very definition plural. Historically, many examples have been used to show that there something that is one can exist as a plurality. Common examples are Sun (sun/light/heat), Water (ice/liquid/steam), Shamrock (three leaves), Mind (memory/intellect/will), Triangle (one shape, three sides), to name a few.

4. We should understand that the Trinity is unlike anything in creation and take care when using examples to describe God

It is important to remember that God is not like anything in creation and each of the above examples cannot fully explain the mystery of the Trinity. Each analogy may help a little to explain the Trinity, but each fails somewhere. None fully explains the Trinity; they are illustrations, not definitions.

The Trinity is defined by three truths, 1. that there is one God, 2. who eternally exists in three persons in relationship with each other, who 3. each person is fully God, in others words, each possesses the same divine essence. In each analogy, the best we can example are two of the three truths, each analogy falls short.

In fact we should always be careful not to reduce the Trinity down to any human formula or analogy, as this will always lead to a false doctrine. For example the illustration of water being like the Trinity for example in that water can exist in three forms, a gas, a liquid, or a solid, is in fact a heresy called Sabellianism (a heresy taught in the 3rd Century)³.

Of course, these analogies can be helpful to disarm simplistic misconceptions of the Trinity. In these situations, it is important to qualify the fact that no example of anything created can fully explain God's nature.

The following table shows the issues with the use of analogies to explain the Trinity:

Analogy	One	Three	Helps Explain	Main Problem
Egg (shell/white/yolk)	One egg	Three parts	Unity with distinction	Suggests God has parts (partialism)
Sun (sun/light/heat)	One source	Three realities	Inseparable unity	Arianism
Water (ice/liquid/steam)	One substance	Three forms	Same essence	Modalism
Shamrock (three leaves)	One plant	Three leaves	Visual simplicity	Each part is incomplete
Mind (memory/intellect/will)	One person	Three faculties	One being, three aspects	Not three persons
Triangle (three sides)	One shape	Three sides	Equality and unity	Parts make the whole
Family	One family	three members	Community	Tritheism/Polytheism

It could be questioned why a doctrine so complicated and difficult to define could be the true description of God. In a debate between Shabir Ally and Nabeel Qureshi titled, "What is God Really Like: Tawhid or Trinity?"⁴, Ally, quoting James White, complained that "it is easy to fall into a heresy when thinking about the Trinity" commenting that believing in the Trinity is like "walking a very sharp edge between heresies". However, the very fact that the nature of God is something beyond our understanding should comfort us that the Trinity is not something created by humans. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the doctrine of the Trinity is in fact just the result of embracing simple declarative truths about God as he reveals himself in Scripture.

5. The Muslim claim that a simple unity is more logical is problematic

It is important to understand that even Islam has apparent contradictions that Muslims cannot easily explain, like the question of the Quran being the eternal word of Allah yet something separate to him. If the Quran is God's speech and God is eternal (Quran 85.22), then His speech cannot be created—it must be eternal as well.

In the early years this was a point of sharp dispute between Muslims. In AD 833, the 'Abbāsid Caliph al-Ma'mūn instituted a religious persecution known as the Mihna. Muslim scholars are imprisoned, flogged and even executed if they refuse to conform to the Mutazila doctrine and believe the Qur'ān is uncreated and co-eternal with God.

At the same time a God who is indivisibly one in nature is problematic if we claim he is self-sufficient and loving the same time. How can he love without creation?

In the Quran, Allah referring to himself in the 1st person plural pronoun, "We", (e.g. Quran 49.13) is problematic for a God who claims to be indivisibly one. When Allah says "we", who is he referring to? Neither the Bible or Quran credits angels with creation. Muslims often claim this is the use of the plural of majesty, or the royal we, but why would Allah use PLURALITY to communicate his greatness, if being he being ONE is greater than all?

Even though God is far beyond comprehension, it is a wonderful thing that he has made himself known to us in ways we can understand, especially in the person of the Lord Jesus. It is worth pointing out that as Christians our starting point with the Trinity is not mathematics or analogy but the person of the Lord Jesus, who we read of being both God and man, but also experience him as being Lord and Saviour. Christ is always a far better starting point when trying to 'prove' the Trinity rather than trying to fit the 'maths' of the Trinity into a logical argument.

References

1. 1 For example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZLxjTnJtow>
2. 2 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabellianism>
3. 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWpqqqZn7Kg> from around 1:17:00