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**MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON THE AFTERLIFE
AND ITS EFFECT ON ACTION: A COMPARISON**


BY

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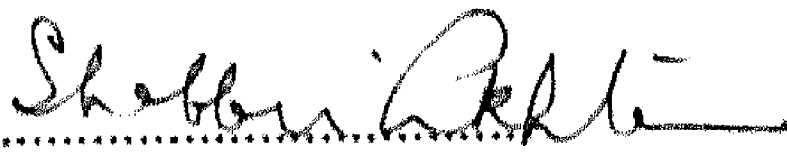
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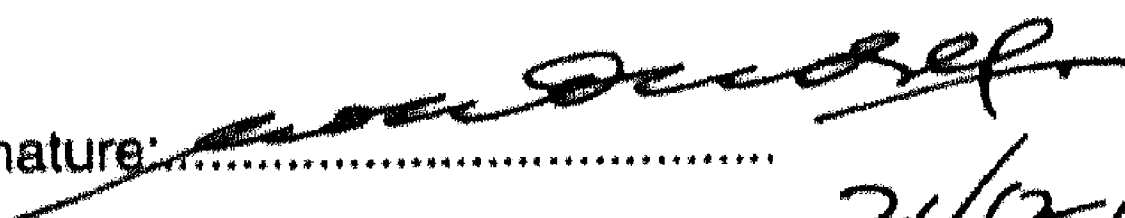
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Abstract

Muslim and Christian View on the Belief in the Afterlife and Its Effect on Action: A Comparison

This study tries to explore the belief in the afterlife and its effect on action according to Islam and Christianity theoretically, and also according to the perspectives representative of contemporary Muslims and Christians in Malaysia. The approach used for this study are: library research and survey method, using questionnaires distributed to selected Muslims and Christians around the region of the national capital i. e. Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. In conclusion, this study illustrates that according to the Muslims there is a direct relationship between one's belief in the afterlife and action. However, there is no such relationship between belief in the afterlife and action in Christianity. This is due to the theological difference of the two religions; Islam which teaches the importance of faith and good works for the success in the afterlife, in contrast to Christianity which emphasizes faith alone as the criteria for salvation.

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I

INTRODUCTION

We created man with the best constitution, but then We sent him down to the lowest state of the low, except those who believe and do good deeds. (Qur'an 95: 5)

... what really matters in the sight of God is true faith and good deeds rather than formal affiliation with a certain religious community. Whoever has true faith and good deeds to his credit is bound to receive his reward, since God will judge people on the basis of merit rather than on the grounds that a man's name happens to be listed in the world as a member of one religious community or the other. (Maududi-Towards Understanding the Qur'an, Leicester, United Kingdom, 1988. p. 80).

In Kuala Lumpur, on April 24th, 1994, an institution for promoting the understanding of Islam throughout the world in general and in Malaysia specifically was opened. This institution named *Institusi Kefahaman Islam Malaysia* (Institute of Islamic Understanding, Malaysia) which was the brainchild of the Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir, was created in order to promote the understanding of Islam not only to Muslims but also to non-Muslims. In light of its mission, the institute held in conjunction with its official opening, a seminar on religious tolerance entitled "Islam and Tolerance". It is a very relevant topic considering the Malaysian scene because Malaysia is not only a multi-racial

but also a multi-religious country¹. A lady participant of this seminar who is a Christian, after noting how relevant and timely the seminar was (due to the religious tension between the opposing parties during the election in Sabah²), proceeded to say that although the word tolerant has many negative connotations such as to say that we may tolerate the bad behavior of a naughty child but in the inter-religious context, we must learn to tolerate and accept existence of other religions and hopefully from this tolerance, we will then develop an understanding of the other religions and a respect for it. For tolerance can only be maintained when we understand other religions.

It is in light of trying to create tolerance for other religions through understanding them that this thesis hope to contribute through this research. In order to understand a religion, its foundation and ideals must be studied in depth. The foundation of all religions lay within its

¹Khoo Kay Kim, "Tolerance in Malaysian Social Scene". Paper presented for Conference on Islam and Tolerance held by the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, in Kuala Lumpur on the 23rd March, 1994. Professor Khoo Kay Kim says, "No discussion of Malaysia's social scene can meaningfully proceed without a direct reference to its unique society. Malaysia has often been cited as an example of a plural society *par excellence*. It is more complex than most plural societies in the world-Indonesia included-because it is no less than Asia in miniature which also means that, *inter alia*, it contains the heterogeneity of India, China and Indonesia, among four (if not indeed three now that the Soviet Union has disintegrated) of the largest nations in the world".

²The election in Sabah had just been held in February, 1994. There had been a number of allegation by the non-Muslim opposition party against the Muslim UMNO party in this election campaign. It is said that if the Muslims won the election they would tear down all churches, force the indigenous population to convert to Islam and they would all be circumcised--TV3 News Bulletin, February, 1994.

theology. All of the principles of a religion are spelt out in its theology. All the ideals of the religion is discussed and debated in its theology. Thus, it is seen that one of the best way to comprehend and understand a religion is through understanding its theology.

Al-Ghazali discusses the origin of Islamic theology and theologians by saying,

Now, God sent to His servants by the mouth of His messenger, in the Quran and Traditions, a creed which is true and whose contents are the basis for man's welfare in both religious and secular affairs. But Satan too sent, in suggestions of the heretics, things contrary to orthodoxy; men tended to accept his suggestions and almost corrupted the true creed of its adherents. So God brought into being the class of theologians, and moved them to support traditional orthodoxy with the weapon of systematic argument by laying bare the confused doctrine invented by the heretics at variance with traditional orthodoxy. This is the origin of theology and theologians. In due course a group of theologians performed the task to which God invited them; they successfully preserved orthodoxy, defended the creed, received from the prophetic source and rectified heretical innovations³.

From the explanation of al-Ghazali, it is clear that theology was meant to explain and defend the religious creeds.

This research deals with two fundamental aspects of theology, 1) belief/faith specifically faith or belief in the hereafter, and 2) action/good works in relation to the belief in the hereafter according to Islam and Christianity. The reason for choosing Islam and Christianity for this study is that both religions claim to possess the truth and both claim to be revealed religions. In studying these two

³ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Munqidh min ad-Dalal. Trans by W. Montgomery Watt as The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali. (Lahore, Pakistan: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1963) 27-8.

religions their similarities and differences can be found and the soundness of their claim can be assessed and understood. It is to be noted that in this work, the word belief and faith are used interchangeably, and so does the word hereafter and afterlife.

The proceeding chapters shall discuss belief in the afterlife both in Christianity and Islam and action in regard to this belief. But before proceeding to discuss faith in the hereafter and its effects on action in the two religions mentioned, it would be relevant to mention briefly the position of Islam and Christianity on faith and action in general, in this introductory chapter. Izutsu in his important work on Islamic theology says,

No one would deny that 'belief' or faith is the core of religion. In the specifically Islamic circumstances, moreover, the problem relating to this concept are of paramount importance not only because they are concerned so vitally the very essence and existence of Islam as a religion, but because the discussion that were aroused over the concept of 'belief' marked the starting point of all theological thinking among the early Muslims.

Stressing the historical importance of the problem of 'belief' *iman*, the famous Hanbalite theologian, Ibn Taymiyah, remarks that 'the dispute on what these two words meant was the first internal discord to occur among the Muslims; because of this problem the Muslims were divided into sects and factions, who came to differ on the Sacred Book and the Sunnah and began to call one another "infidels"'. And the first to enter the scene were the group or groups, of people known as the *Khawarij* or Kharijites⁴.

The first discord among the early Muslims was precisely about faith and action. The question was whether

⁴Toshihiko Izutsu, The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology. (New York: Books for Libraries, 1980) 1.

faith alone was sufficient or must it be expressed in works as well in order for a person to remain a Muslim. The extreme *Khawarij* group maintained that a grave sinner no longer remains a Muslim and declared *jihad* against such persons. A major part of religious opinion at that time however, due to their powerlessness under political pressure from the government, and in opposition to the *Khawarij*, held to another extreme opinion and declared that the possession of faith alone was sufficient for a person to be defined as a Muslim. These people are called the *Murji`a* or Murjites⁵.

The question on whether faith has any effect on action or vice-versa is indeed an important one in Islam. This question is also very important in Christianity. In explicating the meaning of faith and belief in Islam, Wilfred Cantwell Smith says that in Islam,

The term for faith, *iman*, is itself a verbal noun, . . . [therefore] it is more just to speak not of faith, . . . but rather of the act of faith. Faith is something that people do more than it is something that people "have"⁶.

Here Smith admits that faith in Islam is inseparable from action. The matter will be much clearer when *Iman*, *Islam* and *Ihsan* is discussed in the next chapter i.e., chapter two.

⁵Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).86.

⁶Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979) 39.

Another characteristic of the Islamic faith that Smith does not fail to mention is the fact that *iman* and knowledge are closely correlated. According to Smith, "the two refer to the same matters, so that one accepts that which one knows⁷". With a more authoritative expression, Isma'il R. al-Faruqi, as an Islamic scholar says that the word *Iman* is derived from *amn* or security which means that:

the proposition it covers are in fact true, and that their truth has been appropriated (i.e., understood and accepted) by the mind. . . *Iman* cannot be false in the sense that its object is non-existent or otherwise than it purports to say. . . *Iman* is hence "conviction", absolutely free of doubt or probability, of guessing and uncertainty. It is not an act, not a decision, nor a solution to accept, or put one's trust in, that which is not known to be true. . . ⁸

In regard to the relationship between faith and action in Christianity, Smith tries to convince his readers that faith in Christianity is similar to faith in Islam, in that it is followed by action. He cites an example of the baptism rite in the early century of Christianity where one pronounced a formula of rejection to former way of life of decadence and the acceptance of the new life offered by Christianity. He says that the word *credo* (which means faith in Latin) in the beginning, is used "as a term to designate an act of self commitment, in which the will is predominant⁹ . . . In addition, Smith also stated the position

⁷Smith 45.

⁸Isma'il R. al-Faruqi, Tawhid: Its Implication For Thought and Life. (Herndon, Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1982) 47-48.

⁹Smith 70-73.

of Thomas Aquinas regarding faith which according to Smith is that,

the object of faith is ultimate truth. . . Faith is not merely a dedication to the truth but an applauding of it, and acting in terms of it; it is lifeless if the will that is involved in the pursuit of truth be not also a will to good¹⁰.

However, the proposition that faith or beliefs in Christianity is based on truth or that the object of faith in Christianity is ultimate truth, can be disputed even among Christians themselves¹¹.

In light of this issue this research will attempt to contribute both in theory and in the contemporary understanding of belief in the afterlife particularly and its correlation to action by comparing and contrasting Islamic and Christian understanding of this topic.

In general, there is some similarity between Christian and Islamic teachings. However, where faith and action are concerned, particularly when it concerns human accountability, especially in the hereafter, there is a dissimilarity.

In Islam, the relationship between belief in the afterlife and action gave rise to an acute sense of responsibility and accountability of one's action due to the

¹⁰Smith 82.

¹¹John McManners (ed.), The Oxford History of Christianity, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993) 571-586.

belief in judgment. It is due to the belief in the afterlife that ethics becomes important in Islamic life.

This is different in Christianity where there is no direct link between belief in the afterlife and action. The afterlife is seen as the reward of the choice of faith made on earth rather than the choice of action. Belief in the afterlife in Christianity is about faith rather than about ethics or accountability of action.

Therefore, this thesis will proceed to illustrate that Islam emphasizes faith which is displayed in righteous actions because of judgment in the hereafter. For Christianity, it is found that faith is more emphasized almost to the exclusion of action particularly in relation to the hereafter.

Then, this thesis will deal with the adherents understanding of their theology and how it is practiced in their daily life through a survey. In Islam, this research will illustrate that the adherents' understanding of faith or belief in the hereafter would lead them to the conclusion that action is extremely important and has great impact on their faith.

In Christianity, the result of the survey will illustrate that the adherents' understanding of faith leads them to emphasize faith and minimize the importance of action. The reason for this is the understanding that there will be no direct accountability for Christians in the

afterlife as long as they believe in the salvific power of Jesus.

METHOD OF STUDY: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

This research is a comparative study on the belief in the afterlife and how it affects human action according to the perspectives of contemporary Muslims and Christians in Malaysia. The approaches which have been utilized for this study are: a library research for a theoretical foundation, and an unstructured questionnaire method to obtain contemporary religious perspectives.

First, the Islamic and Christian literature, translation of the Qur'an and hadith, and the Bible and its commentaries are examined for a comparative study on the concepts of the afterlife and its relationship to human action. This is to ascertain the theoretical foundation of the concept mentioned, and highlight the similarities and differences according to the Islamic and Christian sources.

Secondly, this study explores the perception of contemporary "practicing" individuals on the issue of belief (in the hereafter) and action. Questionnaires were prepared and given personally to representatives of religious institutions or churches i.e., those who are involved directly with the masses, and the active members, to answer. More than two hundred (200) questionnaires were sent out to the

Christians and about one hundred and fifty (150) were sent to the Muslims in order to obtain fifty responses from each group. Therefore, there are a selected sample of fifty (50) respondents from each religion totaling a hundred. The reason for selecting fifty sample from each group is to fulfill the minimum requirement of the department. All of the respondents are adult Malaysian citizens whose residence are in the proximity of Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya.

For acknowledgment, it is to be noted that according to the General Report of Population Census 1980 (and this is the most recent and complete data available on the distribution of population by religion), out of 17.8 million population of Malaysia, 53.0 percent are Muslims and 8.6 percent are Christians. The rest of the population are reported as adhering to Buddhism (17.3 percent), Confucianism or Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions (11.6 percent), Hinduism (7.0 percent) and tribal or folk religion (2.0). In addition, 0.5 percent are noted as unclassified. This is to show that the result of this study is representative rather than exact.

The main questions the researcher inquired from the Christian and Muslim religious camps are:

1. Is there a strong link between faith and action according to the contemporary religious perspectives or whether faith necessarily manifest itself in action?
2. What motivates action for good and bad deeds?
3. In reality does the concept of the afterlife or hereafter has any role in shaping the mind and action of the Muslims and Christians?

The rationale behind this study is to encourage future development academically and in addition to the reading material which is lacking in the area of comparative religion particularly on Christianity and Islam in Malaysia. In addition, this study is hoped to serve as a path for mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians. This study should also be important to both Christians and Muslims as a stepping stone for reviewing and teaching sound religious and moral values and develop a sound moral-social order to suit our contemporary society in Malaysia.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The objectives of this research is to understand the similarities and differences between the Islamic and Christian theoretical concept of the "hereafter" or "afterlife" and its correlation with human action and the contemporary religious perspectives concerning the issue.

It is hoped that this thesis will achieve several objectives as mentioned earlier. Among them are:

1. To provide a basis for meaningful dialogue between Muslims and Christians in an atmosphere of understanding and mutual respects for each other.
2. To establish a methodical communication between Muslims and Christians to cooperate in creating a moral-social order to fight against corruption and moral decay prevalent today.
3. For developing a new strategy for da'wah purposes after the Islamic and Christian concepts of the Afterlife are put into perspective.
4. To add reading material for comparative religion which is lacking in Malaysia, as well as the Islamic world.

PROBLEMS ANTICIPATED

There are some challenges faced in doing this research which were anticipated and other which came up as a total surprise but actually added a great deal of information to this research

The "problems" that were anticipated had mainly to deal with the theoretical part of this thesis which were to lay the foundations of the belief in afterlife of the two Abrahamic religious tradition based on their own religious text, i.e. for Islam, the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet,

and for Christianity, the Bible and its commentaries. The problem faced were to find in the libraries available in Malaysia, sufficient supporting material for this theoretical foundation. On Islam, there are an abundant of material easily available. However, on Christianity, there is some difficulty in finding the necessary up to date material. In order to solve this problem, the collection of different churches, such as at the Theological Seminary Library (Petaling Jaya) and some individual's personal collections were sought. Ingesting the large amount of material in a very wide area covering two major religions, then explaining and presenting it in a coherent manner in a limited amount of time proved also a very formidable task.

The unanticipated "problem" that arose in this research had to do with the questionnaires on the Afterlife. Many people thought that the questions on Afterlife are personal and as a result many of the people asked refused to answer the questionnaire. That is why a large number of questionnaires were sent out. This is done in order to receive the required quantity of responses. Of the people who answered the questionnaire (many were important religious figures in their communities in the case of the Christians, while for the Muslims, some respondents are important figures or active members of religious organizations while many are concerned educated Muslims), many had not thought about theological issue in their

religion and were very unsure of what to answer and had to consult and review their religious teaching in order to answer the questionnaire. Except for a few, almost all lay members of the Christian churches were not willing to answer the questionnaire. [This is especially so after the incident on April 15, 1994 where the Immigration Department of Malaysia arrested one thousand (1000) Filipino maids in the compound of a Catholic church due to the violation of some immigration law. By this time even the church leaders hesitated to answer the questionnaire. Fortunately the collection of the questionnaire was almost done at the time]. Among other reasons, this demonstrates that the interest in theological issues in current times are waning and weak.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nothing fascinates and scares the living as much as the darkness of death. The countless number of books, documentaries and even movies shows man's enormous interest and deep desire to know what will happen to him after he/she dies. Some of the questions raised on what will happen to him/her after he/she dies are: 1) Do I live again after I die or do I become nothing?, 2) If I do live again after I die, what kind of life will I have? Will I live in the pleasure of heaven or will I suffer in hell? 3) What are the criteria for entering heaven and avoiding Hell? 4)

Will my choice of faith affect whether I end up in heaven or hell? 5) Will my action affect whether I end up in heaven or hell? 6) After I die, will I live again temporarily or eternally?

These are the questions that this project is trying to deal with. For the purpose of this project, this inquiry has been limited to two Abrahamic religions, Islam and Christianity. Thus, the review of literature will be restricted to these two religious traditions view on the afterlife.

Islam:

No study on Islam can be complete without first studying and examining the Qur'anic and the Sunnah viewpoint on the issue. In order to achieve this, at least six different major *tafasir* has been looked into. These *tafasir* are *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Explanatory Notes*, by Yusuf Ali; Muhammad Asad's, *The Message of The Qur'an*; Maududi's *The Meaning of The Qur'an*; Pickthall's, *The Glorious Qur'an: Text and Explanatory Translations*; Sayyid Qutb, *Fi-Zilal al-Qur'an*. After careful study of these *tafasir* mentioned above, it is obvious that the Qur'an insists that belief must be followed by action in order to attain felicity in the hereafter. So many verses or *ayats*

attest to this¹². The major works on hadith literature primarily *Sahih Bukhari* and *Muslim* were also consulted.

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali's *Remembrance of Death and Afterlife*.¹³ was also studied. Al-Ghazali discusses here a theme of universal interest: death and the life to come. Al-Ghazali begins the work by reminding everyone of the importance and inevitability of the Afterlife. He then describes the stages of the future life: the vision of the angels of the grave, the resurrection, the intercession of the prophets and ends the book with the torments of hell and the delights of heaven. This book is designed to warn its readers to prepare for the inevitability of death and the Last Day with good works as prescribed by Islam.

The book by Ibn Kathir titled *The Signs Before the Day of Judgment*¹⁴, provided ample description of the event before end of the world and the Day of Judgment. This book begins with citing the relevant Qur'anic *ayats* and hadiths about the Final Hour. It then proceeds to cite hadiths foretold by the Prophet which describe events and condition leading to the Final Hour and how people will live in those times. The main contribution of this work is compiling the relevant Qur'anic verses and Prophetic hadith relating to the

¹²See Chapter II on Islam.

¹³Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife, trans. by T. J. Winters (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 1989).

¹⁴Isma'il Abu'l-Fadl 'Umar Ibn Kathir, The Signs Before the Day of Judgement, trans. by Huda Khattab, (London: Dar Al Taqwa Ltd., 1991)

Final Hour. Like the previous work, this one also has the purpose of reminding the believers about the Last Hour "when every human being will stand in judgment for their previous action" says its editor Muhammad Isa Waley in the introduction¹⁵.

Books on the development of Muslim groups or sects were reviewed also because they are related to faith and action. The well known material for this subject are the classical works of Baghdadi¹⁶ and Shahrastani¹⁷. In their works on the development of Muslim sects, the two authors try to enumerate and explain the basic belief of the Islamic sects or group.

M. A. Quasem's book titled *Salvation of the Soul and Islamic Devotions*¹⁸ challenges the idea that the concept of salvation is only relevant to the Christian. According to Quasem, salvation is a central concept in Islam. However, the meaning of salvation, its causes and result is different in Islam than in Christianity. He explains his understanding of the concept of salvation in Islam in the first chapter using many Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions to support his view. Because of the idea that in Islam belief

¹⁵Ibn Kathir 7.

¹⁶ Abu Mansur al-Baghdadi, Moslem Schisms and Sects(Al-Farq Bain Al-Firaq), trans by Kate Chambers Seelye, (New York: Ams Press Inc., 1966).

¹⁷Muhammad b.'Abd al-Karim Shahrastani, Muslim Sects and Division (The section on Muslim sects in Kitab al-Milal wa'l-Nihal), trans A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn, (London: Kegen Paul International, 1984).

¹⁸M. A. Quasem, Salvation of the Soul and Islamic Devotions, (Bangi: National University of Malaysia, 1981)