

A Comparative Study of Beliefs in Islam and Zoroastrianism

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Abstract

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world. Islam is a major religion of the world. Both Islam and Zoroastrianism are monotheistic religions. However, both of them are different. Both the religions have different beliefs, set of values, customs, holy book and holy prophet. Even their concept of God is quite far apart. We look around us and some questions pop in our mind. Who created this world, the sky, space, sun, trees, clouds, seas, oceans, and mountains. Who created humans and other living creatures? All these questions lead us to believe that there is an entity a power behind all this, who has created everything. This entity became known as God. Scholars all over the world study and carry research on these two religions. Islam teaches us to believe in one and only God “Allah” whereas in Zoroastrianism in the guise of God a dualistic belief is there. This dualistic belief has been studied very thoroughly by experts and religious scholars. The major beliefs and thoughts and developments in Islam and Zoroastrianism would be discussed here in the light of evidence from various articles. How both the religions influence each other and what are both their perspectives on each other and their ideologies? All these factors would be discussed in this article.

Keywords: Zoroastrianism, Islam, Holy Quran, Avesta, Resurrection, Fasting, Saying Prayer.

Abstrak

Zoroastrianism adalah salah satu agama tertua di dunia. Islam adalah agama besar di dunia. Kedua agama, Islam dan Zoroastrianism, adalah agama monoteistik. Namun, kedua agama ini berbeda. Kedua agama memiliki keyakinan, nilai, adat, kitab suci, dan nabi yang berbeda. Bahkan, konsep mereka tentang Tuhan sangat berbeda. Kita melihat sekitar kita dan beberapa pertanyaan muncul di pikiran kita. Siapa yang menciptakan dunia ini, langit, ruang, matahari, pohon, awan, lautan, dan pegunungan.

Siapa yang menciptakan manusia dan makhluk hidup lainnya? Semua pertanyaan ini membuat kita percaya bahwa ada entitas atau kekuatan di balik semuanya, yang menciptakan segalanya. Entitas ini menjadi dikenal sebagai Tuhan. Para sarjana di seluruh dunia mempelajari dan melakukan penelitian tentang kedua agama ini. Islam mengajarkan kita untuk percaya pada satu-satunya Tuhan "Allah", sedangkan dalam Zoroastrianisme terdapat keyakinan dualistik. Keyakinan dualistik ini telah dikaji secara sangat menyeluruh oleh para ahli dan sarjana agama. Keyakinan, pemikiran, dan perkembangan utama dalam Islam dan Zoroastrianisme akan dibahas di sini berdasarkan bukti dari berbagai artikel. Bagaimana kedua agama saling mempengaruhi dan apa pandangan mereka satu sama lain dan ideologi mereka?

Kata Kunci: Zoroastrianism, Islam, Al-Quran, Avesta, Kebangkitan, Puasa, Ibadah.

Introduction

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world which originated in Persia, the modern time Iran. Islam originated in the 7th century ACE in Mecca, Arabia. Every religion requires a set of beliefs, without those a religion is hollow. Zoroastrianism was founded by Prophet Zoroaster whereas the Holy Prophet of Islam is Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). The main beliefs in Islam are belief in Oneness of God, belief in Angels, beliefs in revelations (books) of God, belief in the day of judgement, belief in qadr (premeasurement) and the belief in resurrection after death whereas in Zoroastrianism, Zoroastrians believe in one God called Ahura Mazda. They believe that their God is Omnipotent, source of all goodness, creator of life, Omnipresent and unchanging. However, their main belief revolves around the dualistic cosmology of good and evil are fighting and in the end the God of Good prevails. The Zoroastrians also believe in the afterlife.

Zoroastrians believe in one god, Ahura Mazda, which leads to a dual cosmology of good and evil. The God of Good, Ahura fights against the God of Evil, Mainyu and in the end God of Good wins. The people in Zoroastrianism are given free will to follow the righteous path. In Islam, the one and only God "Allah" who has taught them his teachings through his beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He guided the people towards the right path and showed them what was evil and forbid them of their evil ways to which they had fallen victim of. The complete guidance on how to live life in Islam has been provided to us by Allah through his Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), so it has been made easier for the Muslims to follow the right path as it had already been shown to them through the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

On the other hand, in Zoroastrianism the maxim of good word, good thoughts, Good Deeds is there to remind them of the right path. They have to fight for themselves. Zoroastrians pray and bath several times a day to keep their body pure. Their most controversial practice to keep themselves and their soul pure is polygamy and incest. Class difference is also very distinct in this religion. In Islam, Muslims only pray 5 times a day. They keep fasts which has scientifically proven to keep a man's body and soul healthy and

clean. They even have Zakat System, which means donating money so that it can be distributed among the poor. This serves to lessen the class difference in their society. Islam treats everyone equally without the basis of class or nationality.

Quran is the holy book of Islam, which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Many things mentioned in the Quran have proved to be true according to the research and scientists. On the other hand, Avesta is the religious text of Zoroastrianism. It has hymns in praise of Ahura Mazda. Zoroastrianism was founded in Persia and till now it has strictly been practiced there. It is an ethnic minority religion. Islam today is spread all over the world and it is a minority religion in the world. It originated in the Arabian Peninsula and spread everywhere. This was a brief overview of both the religions. The first aspect to be discussed here is the beliefs of both the religions. There are many beliefs as it is necessary for each religion to have its own set of values which the believers can follow.

The Concept of God

God in Islam is “Allah”, the one and only God, creator of all the things and sustainer of the universe. He is immortal, perfect, omnipotent and omniscient. The Islamic concept of God emphasizes that God is pure and free from association with other beings. Thus, God is absolutely transcendent, unique and utterly other than anything in or of the world as to be beyond all forms of human thought and expression.¹ The briefest and the most comprehensive description of God in Islam is found in Surat-al-Ikhlās.² Allah is an Arabic word which means ‘the only God’. It occurs in Quran for about 2697 times. Allah has many other names which according to the Quran and Hadith are 99 names which tell us about His 99 attributes.

According to Gerhard Bowering: “They are traditionally enumerated as 99 in number to which is added as the highest Name (al-ism al-Azam), the Supreme Name of Allah. “Call upon Allah, or call upon The Merciful; whichever you call upon, to Allah belong the most beautiful Names” (Bowering, *God and God’s Attributes*). In Islam, the first pillar is the belief in oneness of Allah also called as Tauheed which means to believe that Allah is the one and only and there is no one.

like him. No one can compare to Allah. He is the divine creator who has created mankind and the world. His Greatness is unmatched and anyone who worships some other or compares Him to others would be going to hell as it is shirk, the greatest sin in Islam. He is as his most commonly used names Al-Rahman and Al-Rahim call him the Most Compassionate and the Most Merciful. He is said to be forgiving and merciful. He has the knowledge of all things that happen everywhere. Muslims believe that God is one and He is the sole creator of the universe. He is the only one who should be worshipped at all costs and should be praised all the time for his greatness. The praise and dhikr of Allah done in a person’s lifetime even is considered less.

On the other hand, in Zoroastrianism the concept of God is based on the dualistic cosmology of the good and the evil. The name of their God is Ahura Mazda which means Wise Lord. The Persian term for God is Khuda. Zoroastrians believe that he is only one and closer to the person than the person ever is to themselves. He is mighty and has no

¹ Muhammad Ibrahim Teymori, “The Creed of Imam Tahawi,” Book, n.d., <http://www.afghanicc.com/books/TheCreedofImamTahawi-4thSpecialEdition.pdf>.

² Cenap Çakmak, ed., *Islam: A Worldwide Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2017).

form. He is the most frequently invoked spirit in the Yasna. According to Bharucha: “The whole life of a pious Zoroastrian is or ought to be a sustained crusade against Angromainyush, the evil spirit and his evil workers.”³ Moreover he said: “Ahura Mazda in the Gathas is spoken of with six other peculiar appellations called Amesha-spentas i.e., the Holy Immortals. The remaining six are abstract epithets which along with Ahura Mazda the first proper concrete name make up a seven-sided picture of all-pervading effulgence always present to the inward and outward vision and every time exalting and illumining the mind”.⁴ So it is obvious that these names denote the characteristics of God.

According to Bharucha: “In selecting these from among the other innumerable divine attributes, Zoroaster apparently intended to impress the most original and striking of these attributes on the human mind, incapable as it is of comprehending all the infinite attributes of Divinity”.⁵ God according to the Zoroastrians is the entity that fights against the evil so that the good will prevail..

Holy Books

The Holy book of Islam is Quran which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the cave of Hira. The belief in Quran and the three other Holy books of Injeel, Turat and Zabur is one of the beliefs of Muslims. Quran, the Holy book is in Arabic, and it has been scientifically proven that there have been little to no changes in this book since the time it was revealed. It has been divided into 30 paras or juz with a total of 114 surahs inside it. Each surah carries guidance for the Muslims and all those who seek guidance for themselves in life. It contains the divine message of Allah Almighty. Throughout the years, this book has been read and researched and now, even the scientists have found the Quranic verses to be evidences for their current research.

The Quran was verbally revealed to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) through the angel Hazrat Jibrael (AS), over a period of 23 years. The word Quran is included in Quran about 70 times in the text. The people who learn it by heart are called Hafiz e Quran. Quran was compiled and preserved after the death of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in 632 by the four caliphs of Islam. Hazrat Usman, the third caliph is known as the “Compiler of Quran”. This book is the literal word of God, and it has remained unchanged with the years. Quranic verses and surahs are a part of the daily prayer of Muslims. The first surah, “Surah Fathia” is a part of namaz of Muslims. These Quranic verses are even displayed in the form of art and calligraphy, which is a popular art form. “Verses pertaining to natural phenomena have been interpreted by Muslims as an indication of the authenticity of Quranic message”.⁶ In Quran, God is eternal, omnipotent and omniscient. He is the creator of everything. All human beings are equal in their utter dependence upon God and their well-being depends upon their acknowledging that fact and living accordingly (Bell, 1970).⁷ The language of Quran is rhymed prose as it has both prose and poetry.

³ Ervad Sheiarji Dadabhai Bharucha, *Zoroastrian Religion and Custom* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala, 1985), 2.

⁴ Bharucha, 2.

⁵ Bharucha, 12-13.

⁶ Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2008), 62.

⁷ Richard Bell and William Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970).

Many interpretation of Quran also known as Tafsir is done which explains the meanings behind the Quranic verses. Tafsir is one of the earliest academic activities of Muslims.

On the other hand, the sacred book of Zoroastrianism is Avesta also called Zend-Avesta. The original version was destroyed by Alexander the Great, when he conquered Persia. Avesta consists of five parts, the songs and hymns being the original part of the Avesta called Gathas. Then, we have Yasna which has the rite preparation. Visp-rat contains homages to Zoroastrian leaders. Yashts has 21 hymns, containing myths of angels and heroes. The Vendidad contains civil and ritual law of Zoroastrians. Lastly Khurda Avesta (little Avesta) has prayers for specific occasions. These are the five parts of the holy book, Avesta of Zoroastrians. After, it was destroyed in the era of Alexander the Great, the remaining texts were saved and collected by the Sasanian Empire (224- 651 CE). 9th and 10th century summaries of the texts of Avesta tell us that only one-quarter of the book remains while the remaining three-fourth does not exist anymore.

“Several centuries later, one of the Parthian emperors named Valaksh, then had the fragments collected, not only of those that had previously been written down, but also of those that had only been orally transmitted”.⁸ According to Helmut Humbach: “The Denkard also records another legend related to the transmission of the Avesta. In this story, credit for collation and recension is given to the early Sasanian era priest Tansar, high priest under Ardashir r.224-242 CE and Shapur r.240/242-272 CE, who had scattered works collected of which he approved only a part as authoritative”.⁹

Saying Prayers

Saying Prayer is the pillar in both the religions. It is considered the symbol of purity and goodness. In Islam, this act is performed after Wuzdu, which means washing some of your body parts to clean yourself. Muslims pray five times a day. It is called Namaz in urdu and Salat in Arabic. Like Muslims, the Zoroastrians also pray several times a day. It is called Gah. They pray facing the sun or a source of light, whereas Muslims pray in the direction of the Ka'abah. This direction is called Qiblah.

According to Bharucha: “Gahs are simple praises of invisible chiefs The most important is the “nirang-e-kusti” i.e., the prayerto be recited at the time of untying and retying second girdle.”¹⁰ He further explains in his book “Zoroastrian Religion and Customs” that: “It is repeated as a preparatory formula reminding the recite to remain steadfast on the path of religion and duty. Every Zoroastrian recites it several times a day for example, in the morning, before prayers, before any ceremony etc. Every time it is accompanied by previous washing of the face, hands, and feet”.¹¹ This reference is the proof of the fact that the Zoroastrians also pray in their fire temples.

Resurrection and the Day of Judgement

The belief in resurrection and the day of judgement is a fine belief of both the religions. In Islam, the Day of Judgement is called Ghiamah which means rising. Islam tells us that

⁸ Helmut Humbach, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra and the Other Old Avestan Texts* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 1991), 52-53.

⁹ Humbach, 53-54.

¹⁰ Bharucha, *Zoroastrian Religion and Custom*, 9.

¹¹ Bharucha, 9.

in first everyone will die and then by the blowing of the trumpet, all the humans would be resurrected from their graves after which their good and bad deeds would be weighed for fair judgement. In Zoroastrianism, the concept of resurrection and the day of judgement is present. According to them all the dead people at the time would be resurrected and the world becomes new all over. As contrary to Quran which discusses Ghiamah in detail Professor Gholam Hosein Arabi and Professor Rahman Keshavarz write: "This fundamental and important issue is very brief and obscure in Avesta."¹²

In Zoroastrianism, there is no aspect of judging people for their acts, which seems to be the sole purpose of the Day of Judgement in Islam. In Islam the time of resurrection is not known to anyone except Allah, as it is said: "They ask you about the Hour, when will be its taking place? Say: The knowledge of it is only with my Lord None but He shall manifest it at its time. It will be momentous in the heavens and the earth. It will not come on you but of sudden" (Al-A'raf: 187).

The "Comparative Study of Islamic and Zoroastrian Eschatology" says: It can be said that Resurrection like the eternal event of the emergence of Islam is an unexpected event that suddenly appears in the human landscape. On the contrary, Ferashkard, as the eternal event of Zoroastrian, is an expected event that has been modeled in the essence of the creation of the universe.¹³

The duration of this day according to Islam is that there would be no proper concept of day and night, at that time, and if calculated from our current methods. It would be equal to one thousand or fifty thousand years. On the other hand, in Zoroastrianism, it would take three days and nights. As for the place in Islam, people will rise from their graves while in Zoroastrianism, the dead would be resurrected at the place where they lost their life. As in Quran: "And the trumpet shall be blown, when lo! From their graves, they shall hasten on to their Lord" (Yasin, 51).

The faces of the righteous and good people in Islam would be brighter in comparison to sinners whereas in Zoroastrianism, the good people would be distinguishable from the sinners just as white sheep are from the black. In Zoroastrianism, everyone has to pass through a molten metal and good people would think of it as warm milk. Bundahishn "Then, all people shall be burnt in molten metal and purged. The righteous will think of it as warm milk".¹⁴ However in Quran all the sinners will pass through hell and the rest would be unharmed.

In Islam, the dead will rise when the trumpet will be blown by the Angel Israfil. In Zoroastrianism, however, the rise of the dead is related to Saoshyant. In Islam this will happen simultaneously whereas in Zoroastrianism, this will happen in parts. So this concept and belief in resurrection and the Day of Judgement does exist in both the religions. However, there are many differences found in them. The main difference lies in the detail as Islam provides a detailed explanation of this belief whereas Zoroastrianism is lacking in the details of this day.

Fasting

¹² Arabi Gholamhosein and Rahman Keshavarz, "A Comparative Study of the Resurrection in Islam and Zoroastrianism," *Revista Publicando* 5, no. 16. (2) (n.d.): 3.

¹³ M. Aghaei, *Comparative Study of Islamic and Zoroastrian Eschatology, Haft Aseman*, 2007, 87.

¹⁴ F. Dadegi, *Bandshah*, trans. Mehrdad Bahar (Tehran: Toos Publishing, 2016), 147.

Fasting in Islam is one of the five pillars of Islam. It has been mentioned various times in Quran and this practice was taught by the Holy Prophet (PBUH). It takes place once a year for 30 days in the month of Ramadan, where Muslims fast at dawn till the time when the sun sets. It was implemented for the first time in the second year after hijrat 654A.H. This practice increases a person's self-restraint and will power. According to Tabbara: "as well as an experience which generates feelings of compassion for the poor".¹⁵ "The communal nature of the Ramazan fast very likely makes it the most widely observed pillar of Islam".¹⁶ This practice keeps a Muslim fit physically as well as mentally, when the person always has to stay pure and keep themselves from sinning as it is the holy month of Ramazan.

In Islam it is compulsory to keep all the fasts in the month of Ramadan along with the Qaza fasts which are kept if you break an obligatory fast or are excused from a part of all Ramadan fasts. This is considered very beneficial for the human soul and body. On the other hand, in Zoroastrianism, this practice has been vehemently rejected in its history. Zoroastrians believe that to fight the evil one should keep both their body and soul fit and according to them, this practice of fasting weakens the physical body and hence a person cannot protect themselves from evil and sinning.

According to Zoroastrian priests, the only fast is to keep oneself away from sinning. They believe that food is an important part of building strength and without it a person cannot withstand the evil forces. They don't believe in fasting but instead avoid eating meat for four days in each month. These days are called "Nabor" and it means "don't cut (or slaughter). As according to Dhalla : " One high priest or dastur recently even went so far as to counsel laity that the only permissible fast is that of abstaining from sin".¹⁷ They believed that hunger and thirst were the root cause of their sufferings so it should be avoided at all costs. Eating and drinking are promoted to fight against the evils.

Even in Islam the scientific research has found that the practice of fasting has a lot of benefits. It regulates the bad cholesterol and it can help people lose weight. Fasting in the month of Ramadan is a month long detox that cleanses our body of harmful toxins. It brings a positive change in our lifestyle. Studies also show that through this our brain becomes more resilient to stress and adaptable to change. It also improves our mood and learning capacity. So it appears to be a very useful practice in Islam.

Conclusion

Islam and Zoroastrianism are both monotheistic religions but still differences can be found in their beliefs, practices and way of living. Discussing some of the core beliefs of both the religions, it was found that their concept of God is vastly different. In Islam, Allah is the eternal creator and the divine master and the Muslims believe in the Oneness of Allah and it is the first pillar of their religion. Contrary to Islam, Zoroastrian God Ahura Mazda along with his six attributes was introduced by their Prophet Zoroaster. The religion Islam was brought by the final Prophet of Allah, Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) to guide the Muslims to the right path.

¹⁵ A.F. Tabbara, *Ruh AlDin Al-Islami* (Beirut: Islamic Book Services, 1998), 165-67.

¹⁶ L. Gardet, *L'islam, Religion et Communauté* (Paris: Descellée de Brouwer, 1967), 167.

¹⁷ Maneckji Nusserwanji Dhalla, *Zoroastrian Civilization from the Earliest Times to the Downfall of The* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922), 1922.

The Holy Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which contains all the instructions and guidance to live one's life rightfully. It is a complete book with a total of 114 surahs. The Zoroastrians have their Holy book called Avesta which is a collection of hymns and prayers. Though most of the book has been lost with time, only one-quarter of the book remains. Saying Prayers is one of the pillars of Islam and Muslims pray five times a day. It is an obligation which must be carried out if one wants to be a true Muslim and win Allah's favor. Zoroastrians also pray several times a day. Their prayers consist of hymns and are called Gahs.

As for Fasting, it is also one of the five pillars of Islam which shows its importance for Muslims. The Zoroastrians on the other hand, don't believe in fasting. They believe that food and drinking are crucial for religion whereas Muslims believe that the will to sacrifice for their religion is important and Fasting is one such practice which shows their love for Allah and their willingness to sacrifice for Islam.

The belief in Resurrection and the Day of Judgement also exists in both religions. The only difference being the details in Islam and the lack of details in Zoroastrianism. In Islam, except the exact time of the Day of Judgement, minute details have been provided of it whereas this factor is not present in Zoroastrianism. Both the religions have their own practices and beliefs which are not to be overlooked. Both are very distinguishable from each other. Islam originated in Mecca whereas Zoroastrianism originated in Iran and spread to India too. Today only a few 100,000 to 150,000 Zoroastrians are found whereas Islam is one of the biggest religions of the world with its everlasting impacts on the other religions and cultures too.

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