

Afterlife: Comparison of Muslim and Christian Doctrines

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The afterlife has always been something of great appeal with differing approaches of different religions. Each having focused, discussed and explained the events and philosophy of this doctrine. It mostly holds a place in the divine religions such as Islam and Christianity. From these two religions in particular, arise many philosophical issues concerning this doctrine of theology. Both Christianity and Islam promise certain benefits to their adherents, and these benefits require some contrast that would befall, or may befall, those who fail to adhere to their rules and codes of practice. Although both have this same approach, they differ in their details. The resurrection is a point of some controversy amongst the two religions. The Muslim and Christian doctrine unanimously agree upon resurrection, and that it would be a bodily resurrection. Both Qur'an and Bible affirm this fact:

"Does man suppose that We shall not put together his bones? Yes indeed, We are able to proportion [even] his fingertips!"

Qur'an (75:3-4)

"... That there shall certainly be a resurrection of both righteous and the wicked"

Bible (Acts 24:14-15)

Originally the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection was understood as Gods intervention so as to vindicate Jesus as a sign and guarantee that every true follower of Jesus, including those who had already died, would be able to dwell forever in the Kingdom of God [Cohn, 'Cosmos, chaos and the world to come', 1993, p.207]. Although the idea of a bodily resurrection has caused problems for many groups, theologians from both sides accept it, and agree that the bodies will be resurrected and changed (Bible, 1Corinthians 15:51-54) and molded differently relative to the deeds of ones life; the pious having a more greater and glorious body than that which they were given in this life, and the vice versa for the wretched [Penelhum, pp.44-45].

However some Christians, in particular the Premillennialists[1], hold to a doctrine of multiple resurrections, whereas Muslims believe in one single resurrection of all souls. The Premillennialists and some others believe that there would be more than just a single resurrection, and rather teach that there would be two.

These being, the resurrection of believers at the beginning of the millennium and then followed by the second resurrection of those believers at the end of the millennium [Copeland, 2004]. Dispensational Premillennialists further there own theology by adding two more; the

resurrection of tribulation saints at the end of the seven-year tribulation and the resurrection of millennial saints at the end of the millennium [Reagan, Resurrections and Judgments, How Many and When, 2004]. These opinions are not found upon by the Bible,

hence is the doctrine of several resurrections is found deficient by most Christians. The Bible, as does the Qur'an, presents the resurrection of believers and unbelievers as occurring together, and teaches that believers will be raised on a specific day in a specific hour, not several times or according to different millenniums:

"... An hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice. And will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgement"

Bible (John 5:28-29)

The Bible does distinguish between groups that will be resurrected but it does not differentiate between the times of resurrection of the different groups as is proclaimed by some.

"... The dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened"

Bible (Resurrection 20:12)

Resurrection is not considered to be limited to distinguished groups; rather all of humanity will be resurrected, be they righteous or wretched, and this is the belief of both traditional theologians, Christianity and Islam. However there will be a separation on the day of resurrection, this separation will be of the righteous from the wicked. The Bible emphasises on the various groups of resurrection such as the groups that are raised as righteous being the imperishable (Bible, Corinthians 15:42), those raised in glory (Bible, Corinthians 15:43), those raised in power (Bible, Corinthians 15:43), those raised as a spiritual body (Bible, Corinthians 15:44).

Also the belief that those who are raised as the wicked, although some Christian theologians disagree or deny the belief that the wicked will be raised. Since the Bible does not contain anything with regards to this group and for this reason it is often rejected. Nevertheless there is still some belief that the wicked will indeed be raised from the dead, and just as the righteous are raised from the dead immortal, so to are the wicked. This belief in immortality of the resurrected is also applied by Muslims theologians; man once created has no end, this life is the short period of what makes up our life to come.

Some thinkers amongst both the Christian schools [Kvanvig, 'Heaven and Hell', 1997, p.565] and Islamic [al-Ghaza-li, 1999, pp.196-7] schools of thought believe that the wretched are capable of experiencing eternal suffering. There have been new up rises from the traditional line of thought that have disputed this idea of eternal punishment for short term sins and

whether it is within the justice of God to mandate such a thing. This matter is for God to decide, although some Muslims hold to the opinion that only few people will actually be kept in hell forever, whilst others will ultimately travel towards God and hence into heaven.'

There are amongst the Christians who theologise that the wicked will be those who experience the second death, holding to the idea that this will be literal. They do not take the concept of second death to be the punishment of the hereafter but rather hold to the opinion that after the resurrection and judgment, the wicked will die again, i.e. a complete separation of resurrected body and spirit. Some differ and hold to the opinion that the wicked will not be annihilated, but that they will spend eternity as disembodied spirits in the fire of hell. The Bible itself seems to be relatively silent on this subject.

Another concern that comes to surface is the justice and fairness of the non-adherents of Christianity or the non-adherents of Islam being cast into hell fire. Jonathan L. Kvanvig [Companion to philosophy of Religion, 1997, p562] separates the issue of punishment into different theses. The first thesis is that of punishment, this being the purpose of hell. Both Christianity and Islam define the purpose of hell as to retributively punish those whose earthly lives and behaviour warrant it.

What is understood logically is both heaven and hell are created out of God's divine justice.

The Qur'an mentions in several places about the separation of the good doers and evil doers: "And the day the Hour sets in, they will be divided on that day: As for those who have faith and do righteous deeds, they shall be in a garden, rejoicing. But as for those who were faithless and denied Our signs and the encounter of the Hereafter, they will be brought to the punishment."

Qur'an (30:14-16)

"When the Greatest Catastrophe befalls, the day when man will remember his endeavours, and hell is brought into view for one who sees, as for him who was rebellious and preferred the life of this world, his refuge will indeed be hell. But as for him who is awed to stand before his Lord and forbids the soul from [following] desire, his refuge will indeed be paradise."

Qur'an (79:34-41)

Thus both Muslims and Christians regard hell as a punishment of not accepting and submitting to God; however there are other notable opinions of hell. Contrary to hell being part of the divine justice of God, it has also often been seen by many mystics to be His mercy. This understanding sprouts from two possible understandings, the first being that God places the disobedient out of His love and mercy for them in hell, in order to purify them, for heaven cannot take in any impurity.

The punishment in Hell fire is a purification process, so that the non-adherents can prepare

themselves to enter heaven. The second understanding is that God still places some attention to those people, though it maybe for the purpose of punishment, they regard anything from God as goodness, and regard it pleasing that He gives them attention regardless of this being His wrath.

From this opinion concludes that the real punishment of the afterlife is when one has neither been sent to heaven nor to hell, and God has turned his face away from them, i.e. He removes all and any attention of His love from them. Although these are possible understandings, no verse of the Qur'an actually asserts them. Any verse that asserts God turning His face away or not speaking to the evil doers is understood as a removal of His mercy and actually a manifestation of His wrath, which is the punishment and torment of hell.

"Indeed those who conceal what Allah has sent down of the Book and sell it for a paltry gain- they do not take in, into their bellies [anything] except fire and Allah shall not speak to them on the Day of Resurrection, nor shall He purify them, and there is a painful punishment for them"

Qur'an (2:174)

Kvanvig (pp.562-63) mentions that the second traditional thesis is the 'No Escape Thesis: it is metaphysically impossible to get out of hell once one has been consigned there'. This is seen as something mainly maintained in Christian theology, Islamic theology does not agree. Muslims believe that everyone passes through hell, those ordained to wrath of God will remain there, whilst those ordained to be rewarded heaven, will travel through, without feeling or knowing they have even past through hell.

"The day you will see the faithful, men and women, with their light moving swiftly before them and on their right, [and greeted with the words:] 'There is good news for you today! Gardens with streams running in them, to remain in them [forever]. That is the great success.' The day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to faithful., 'Please let up on us, that we may glean something from your light!'

Qur'an (57:12-14)

This is further supported by the idea that those who are cast into hell themselves will be the fuel which ignites the fire. Therefore those souls which have no wrongness and wrongdoing within them cannot ignite the fire, so they just pass through. Christian theology has also had some minor modification, this arising from their doctrine of harrowing of hell, according to which is an event between time of Jesus' death and his resurrection, where he preached to the inhabitants of hell, some of whom accepted his message and thereby went to heaven. Although those Christian theologians who accept this deny the second thesis, they also regard the harrowing of hell doctrine to be a one time event, and it is now impossible for anyone to do

the like and escape from hell.

The third thesis which Christian theologians draw attention to is the Anti-Universalism Thesis: some people will be consigned to hell. Anti-Universalism is the thesis that goes against universalism; the belief that all people will eventually be saved. The Islamic theology follows the same idea of the thesis of anti-universalism; however the Christians doctrine has many approaches by their various theologians. The traditional doctrine is the belief in universalism, whilst those who believe otherwise such as the Annihilationists who believe in the final destruction or complete annihilation of the wicked differ, holding to the doctrine of Anti-Universalism.

The traditionalists define the God of love unable or unwilling to place anyone into hell and that 'God's Justice cannot require it' [Horton, 'The Concept of Hell']. Whereas the Annihilationist approach is justified using the acceptance of punishment in hell, and rather than the God of Love they incline towards a God of justice. Muslim theologians who believe in both love and justice as being part of the essence of God regard the manifestation of these attributes in the different areas.

This means the love and justice of God manifests itself in heaven, whilst the wrath and again the justice of God manifest themselves in hell. This can also be understood differently, which would be that the casting into heaven or hell is part of divine justice, so the accounting on the day of judgement is the manifestation of God's justice, and not really heaven or hell themselves. Again, both these ideas can be reconciled and understood as all three dominions; judgement day, heaven and hell to be the manifestation of His divine justice. [Lari, 'Resurrection, judgement and the hereafter', 1992, pp.43-47].

Other views regarding this thesis also have been taken up by different thinkers, but what all these thinkers agree upon is the punishment thesis, and so considering hell a fundamental part of the belief in both systems. Thus what is evident is this belief is the basic principle for the traditional thought of both religions, and the side opinions of the few have been based in and around this main concept.

As it is human nature it does not bring to surprise that the issue of hell and expiation has aroused many altered opinions from that of what is understood traditionally. The issues related to justice hold a great regard in this field of discussion.

The attention it has received has aided in purifying the real understanding of hell away from the sidetracked opinions, though it is understood why such opinions arise. Humans generally feel more comfortable with receiving undeserved benefits than being the vessel of Gods wrath for the misdeeds they have committed. However when man puts personal emotion aside and tries

to understand the nature of hell itself then he would be able to conclude without difference to that of what is traditional.

Christianity and Islam have many theological differences, however those related to the afterlife and in particular dealing with the concept and nature of hell seem to fit one another, maybe not in absolute, but closer than any two other religions, when compared. Those schools that have emerged arguing for God's Love and rejecting eternal damnation and punishment in hell, have done so only because of their misunderstandings of God's nature. Once it is understood that God, both the God of love and of Justice, then it can be understood that the resurrection is merely a manifestation of His Justice. Therefore there is a vast difference between eternal punishment and eternal reward.

The reward that God bestows without measure derives from His generosity and mercy and there lies no problem amongst people with this being eternal. The problem they have lies in understanding of punishment as eternal. As there is no mention of the sinful and their position made in this issue cannot be discussed from the Christian approach. There are verses in the Qur'an that seem to refute firmly the idea of complete mitigation.

"Do they not know that the punishment of whomsoever opposes God and His Messenger is the fire of hell, to reside therein eternally?"

Qur'an (9:63)

"They are those whose lot in the hereafter will be nothing but the fire"

Qur'an (11:16)

"Those who engaged in disbelief and called Our signs lies are the people of hellfire; they shall dwell in it eternally"

Qur'an (2:39)

"Whoever among you Muslims turns back from his religion and dies in a state of unbelief, his deeds shall vanish, both in this world and the hereafter, and he will always be a companion of the fire"

Qur'an (2:217)

Syed Mujtaba Musavi Lari explains these verses in the same light, mentioning it to be 'impossible to give them some special interpretation in order to deny the permanence of the punishment of hellfire' (pp.216-7). He understands these verses as proclaiming that permanent residence in hellfire is due for those unbelievers for whom all possible avenues to salvation are blocked. As for those who have committed a certain number of lesser sins and offences, he says 'they shall either spend an appropriate amount of time in hellfire or receive the kindness and forgiveness of God'. This opinion corresponds to the understanding of the

verses, hence is non-disputable. This process needs to be understood correctly for all concepts to correspond and fall into place. The Islamic approach in this is that the wrath of God comes from His mercy, so the punishment He places on the wrongdoers is but His mercy for the righteous. Just as if a man wanted to kill a second man, and the third came to stop the first man, but he could only stop him via killing him or inflicting pain onto him. So the third man out of his mercy for the second man kills or inflicts the first man. In this parable the third man represents God, the first man represents a wicked soul and the second a righteous. After death the righteous will be prevented from reaching God's mercy because of the sins of the wicked, and the wicked cannot enter heaven. So in order for God to bestow His mercy upon the righteous it requires Him to punish the wicked. So ultimately it does go back to the God of love and mercy as is thought by the few Christians who actually apposed the punishment thesis. Consequently Islam holds a reconciliation opinion between the traditional Christian approach .to punishment and it few opposition theologians

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