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# The Great Misread: Life and Death in Islam and Its Relation to the West

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# The Great Misread: Life and Death in Islam and Its Relation to the West

## **Abstract**

Details of death in the Islamic faith and how it is related to the two major monotheistic religions of the West, Judaism and Christianity.

## **Keywords**

death, Islam, religion

## **Disciplines**

Comparative Methodologies and Theories | Islamic Studies | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

## **Comments**

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The Great Misread, Life and Death In Islam And Its Relation To The West:

In the West, little is known and much is misunderstood about Islam. Due to terrorist acts committed throughout the World, and the perpetrators justifying their actions by using Islam, the religion has become associated with acts of violence to many in the Western world. This is an unfortunate mischaracterization of a religion that in many ways mirrors important aspects of the Christian and Judaic faith, that are predominant in the West. The use of suicide attacks has convinced many that the Muslim faith doesn't place the same value on human life compared to Christianity and Judaism. This is another misunderstanding of the Muslim outlook on Individualism and the role of the individual in society, as once again the Muslim faith's outlook on the role of the individual is similar to Christianity and Judaism. The Muslim outlook on death itself is also misunderstood by many in the West, who once again fail to see the similarities in it with relation to many western religions. Many in the West blame the religion of Islam for the violent history of the Muslim world. This demonstrates an ignorance of history however. The Muslim world's experience with violence and death mirrors the previous Judeo-Christian society of the West. Where religious wars caused tremendous levels of violence in Europe, this again shows the misunderstandings of Islam in the Western world and how death is seen. Therefore although the Islamic world is experiencing large levels of death and violence, it is not because of the religion itself, but the comparative infancy of Islamic society compared to Judeo-Christian society, showing the similarity of Islam in its development, and outlook on life and death compared to the Judeo-Christian religions of the West.

The Islamic outlook on life itself is important to understanding the Islamic view of death. This is so because in most cases of religion, death is seen as the ending of one's physical life and beginning of the eternal spiritual life. Like the Judaic and Christian faiths, Islam has an important view of life and has a code of conduct that is supposed to prepare followers of Islam for the eternal afterlife. In Islam, one is expected to follow what is known as the five pillars of Islam. (Islam Guide Home). Through following those five pillars, one is demonstrating their faith in Allah and his prophet Muhammed. Also in the process one is showing their willingness to follow Islam's central pillars, demonstrating their worth to being rewarded with eternal prosperity in the afterlife because of the faith Muslims have placed in their religion through following the five pillars (Islam Guide Home). The five pillars of Islam include the Testimony of Faith, which is when a Muslim accepts Allah as the only deity of the Islamic faith and Muhammed as his prophet. This is considered the most important pillar of Islam because it concludes one's acceptance of the most important figures in the Islamic faith (Islam Guide Home). The second pillar is Prayer, Muslims are expected to pray five times daily. In so doing, one is supposed to be connected directly with God and feel happiness if one is following the Islamic faith loyally and honestly (Islam Guide Home). The third pillar is giving *Zakat*, or as known in English as giving charity. The logic behind giving charity in the Muslim faith is that all property belongs to God, and is therefore owned by humans only through trust. Thus Muslims are expected to purify themselves by giving to the needy and demonstrating their goodwill and faithfulness to Allah by helping the most vulnerable in society (Islam Guide Home). The fourth pillar in Islam is fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. In doing this, Muslims demonstrate how they are purifying

themselves of worldly comforts, and in doing so making themselves closer to Allah. They also are meant to become more appreciative of what they do have and thus feel more sympathetic to the less fortunate (Islam Guide Home). The fifth and last pillar of Islam is the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca, in Saudi Arabia. When a Muslim is physically and financially able to do so, their pilgrimage to Mecca is meant to unite the physical with the spiritual in one standing before Allah in the holy city of the Islamic faith. Men wear simple garb to shed class distinctions in order for everyone to appear equal before God (Islam Guide Home). These five pillars of Islam are meant to act as a blueprint for Muslims to prepare themselves in the physical life for a dignified eternal afterlife. They are important to understand to demonstrate the Islamic perspective on life and how it correlates with death and the Islamic perspective with death. They demonstrate the Islamic perspective of life and the importance of the physical life, and that the spiritual life is simply a continuance of one following the Islamic faith in another form. Through this, in the Islamic faith life and death are connected in ways that are meant to influence a Muslim's conduct in the world in order to prepare for the afterlife. This further demonstrates the similarities between Christianity, Judaism, and the Islamic faith in how they all have a set of expected social norms and practices that determine one's faith in the afterlife. The Islamic view of the afterlife further serves as a testament to the similarities of the three major mono-theistic religions of the World.

The Islamic view of the afterlife is another example of how Islam is similar to the two major monotheistic religions that dominate the West. The afterlife is shaped by Islam in how someone's life expectancy is pre-determined by Allah, and how the death of an individual means the end of

the physical and beginning of the eternal spiritual life. This afterlife is entered through the event of Judgement (Gray, Islamic belief about the afterlife). In this event, a spirit is confronted before entering the afterlife to answer for their conduct in the physical world. This is also known as the Day of Resurrection, where the wicked are meant to be separated from the righteous (Gray, Islamic belief about the afterlife). The righteous who are remorseful of their sins committed during the physical life will be redeemed along with those who followed the doctrine of Islam throughout their physical life. Those who are not deemed righteous and those who reject Allah's divine nature will be subjected to eternal damnation (Gray, Islamic belief about the afterlife). In Islam, eternal damnation is regarded as being of unbearable misery and suffering, while also being described as containing unbearable heat (Mufti, 2006). When one in Islam is deemed righteous however, they are allowed to experience eternal happiness in Heaven. Islam paints heaven as an elegant concept, consisting of gardens containing an abundance of life's necessities, where suffering is an alien concept and satisfaction is the norm for all eternity (Mufti, 2006). The Islamic view of the afterlife and what determines eternal paradise or eternal damnation serves as a testament to Islam's similarities to Judaism and Christianity. Islam asserts a direct correlation between somebody's conduct in the physical life as being critical to their fate in the afterlife. Also that a code of conduct exists that followers of Islam are expected to follow in order to prove themselves worthy of eternal paradise. This is similar to Judaism and Christianity by how they both contain codes of conduct that are important to determining follower's fates in the afterlife, and by how all three religions

place an emphasis on accepting the totality of the deity of each religion as being the most important aspect of acceptance into the afterlife of each religion. Through those requirements, Islam shows its similarities with Judaism and Christianity with respect to details and beliefs regarding the afterlife. The process in Islam of having a funeral service contrasts with its many similarities to Judaism and Christianity, but despite the manner in which Muslim funerals are conducted, the way they are viewed by those in Islam continues to show similarities with the other major monotheistic religions.

In Islam, the process of conducting a funeral is different from Judeo-Christian funeral practices. When death appears imminent, it is hoped that family and close friends are present. They are expected to provide emotional comfort and encourage the expiring individual to say the “shahada”, an acceptance of Allah as the divine deity and a pledge of loyalty to Islam before the end of the physical life (Muslim Funeral Traditions). When the individual expires, Islamic law states that a funeral must be held as soon as possible, and the family must make arrangements as soon as possible (Muslim Funeral Traditions). In Islam there is the refusal to have autopsies performed on anyone who passes away, as Islam teaches that the performance of an autopsy on someone can desecrate the purity of the body, and thus many Muslims will not have an autopsy performed as a result (Muslim Funeral Traditions.). The practice of cremation is also banned in Islam, as it is considered disrespectful to the physical body (Muslim Funeral Traditions). Islam also has its own methods to prepare a body for burial, as it teaches a certain manner exists in how to uphold the dignity of a body before performing a burial. The washing of the body is meant to purify the physical body of sin to prepare it for the spiritual life. This

washing is also recommended to be performed by family members of the deceased (Muslim Funeral Traditions). When the body is cleansed of sin, the body is now meant to be covered in an inexpensive white sheet, with the hands placed in a position of prayer (Muslim Funeral Traditions). Due to the urgency to bury a body as quickly as possible in Islam, the event of a viewing is not a part of the funeral process in Islam (Muslim Funeral Traditions). After the body is buried as quickly as possible, the event of a post-funeral reception does occur in Islam. During this reception, it is customary for attendees to bring food for the family affected by loss, and to console the family in what is known as the period of mourning in Islam (Muslim Funeral Traditions). This period of mourning, is meant to last about 40 days, but for the spouse of the deceased it may last up to 4 months, and the spouse must also refrain from interacting with the opposite sex except in cases of emergency (Muslim Funeral Traditions). That aspect of the grieving process in Islam regarding the conduct of the spouse is usually only followed in more conservative Muslim circles, and is given many exceptions due to its general impracticality (Muslim Funeral Traditions). The practices and methods regarding death and the funeral process in Islam demonstrate the religion's own authenticity, while also demonstrating again its similarity to Judeo-Christian methods regarding the process of conducting a funeral and the cycle of grief. In Islam like in other Western monotheistic religions, human life is valued and prepared for the abstract concept of the afterlife. Islam demonstrates its own unique rules by how they only allow burials to occur, demonstrating its respect for the physical body and the Muslim belief in having the family take a direct role in preparing the body for burial demonstrates the



importance of familial relations in the Islamic faith. With the process of conducting funerals, the Islamic faith certainly highlights its unique nature of customs that involve the funeral process, while also showing its similarity to Judeo-Christian attitudes towards life and the preparation of the physical life for the spiritual.

The Islamic outlook on life itself is seen by the West as not placing enough value on the individual, seeing the individual as an expendable resource to a collective goal. This commonly held belief does not take into account historical context and how it relates to the Islamic view on the value of life and the meaning of death. Due to the Islamic world's comparative youth to Judeo-Christian civilization, the evolution of Islamic society has not occurred at a compatible pace compared to Judeo-Christian civilization. Looking at the evolution of Islamic society up until the present day, it can be seen that this evolution mirrors the evolution of Judeo-Christian society. This can be seen by how Islamic society with its roughly 600 year deficit of evolution compared to the West, can be seen as responding to the same problems in the present that the Western world faced during that time period 4-5 centuries ago in its overall development (Khan 2013). The same questions the Islamic world is facing today about life, death, and the role of the individual in Islamic society has been confronted by Judeo-Christian society 4-5 centuries ago. While the Islamic world wrestles today with the value of the individual, intellectual movements like the renaissance, the enlightenment, and liberalism have served to advance the cause of individual liberty the West now enjoys and what today considers that idea to be a central pillar to the Judeo-Christian experience. This is relevant to death in Islam by how they have yet to experience these

intellectual movements. But also to understand the value placed on human life by societies, with Islam as a particular focus, because to understand how a society such as Islam values human life will explain how a society handles death.

Due to the perceived lack of respect for human life in Islam, some in the West use that to justify intensified violence in the Muslim world, and the authoritarianism that is prevalent throughout Muslim countries. What those asserting this fail to analyze however is the lack of historical context to justify these claims. Through understanding history and the Islamic world's evolutionary path in it, it can be seen that once again the Islamic world is merely experiencing the same political problems that Judeo-Christian civilization experienced along the path of societal evolution. As violence exists in Islamic society today between the two dominant sects of the Muslim faith, being Sunni and Shia Muslims. This occurrence mainly reflects the similar inter religious conflicts that occurred in the West between Protestants and Catholics in Europe during the 16th, and 17th centuries. The period of intense religious warfare in Europe which can be seen through the Spanish Inquisition, French Wars of Religion, and the Thirty Years War can be seen as the same occurrences happening in the Western world when it was at the same point of evolution that Islamic society is at today (Kreis, 2002). This is relevant in order to understand how Islam is more similar to the West in terms of its historical evolution than some are willing to admit, and how both of these monotheistic societies have experienced the same kinds of violence that is a part of the evolution of societies. It is merely because Islam is held to the same standard in the West with respect to what is civilized, when in fact the same standard cannot be

applicable considering the Islamic world being roughly 600 years the junior to the main religions of the West. This is also relevant by how violence such as the inter religious wars happening today in the Muslim world shape Islamic views on life and death.

The most controversial aspect of Islamic society today is the concept of martyrdom, and whether or not it is sanctioned in Islam. In Islam, a martyr is seen as someone who goes and fights, dying on behalf of the religion in the process (Black 2008). A martyr is seen by many Muslims as someone who has died expanding the boundaries of Islam, and thus strengthening the faith (Black, 2008). The practice of sacrificing oneself in conflict on behalf of a religion can seem odd to most outside of Islam, but many in Islam believe that a martyr and their family will be rewarded for the sacrifice in the afterlife (Black, 2008). This belief of “paradise” being the reward for martyrdom is the main motive for participants in Islam, who are motivated through the personal achievement of “paradise” in the afterlife, and how they are told by Imams that their martyrdom will further the Islamic faith. This factor of the Islamic faith is the most polarizing aspect of Islamic culture, as martyrdom is used as a instrument of terrorism frequently. It presents a pressing question about whether or not the concept of martyrdom belongs in the modern world, and if it can be reconciled with the five pillars of Islam. The underlying problem with the issue of martyrdom today is that many Imams misinterpret the justifications for martyrdom itself. The context with which martyrdom is acceptable is in the case of religious struggle, known as “Jihad” (Concept of Martyrdom in Islam), this does not mean merely a

conflict against nonbelievers as many fundamentalists assert, but the practice of people being willing to give to their life on behalf of Islam (Concept of Martyrdom in Islam). Making martyrdom itself a demonstration of commitment to the Islamic faith by being willing to sacrifice oneself. The main controversy within Islam however is when a Jihad is justified, as martyrdom can only occur during a period of religious struggle (Concept of Martyrdom in Islam). This is where martyrdom has done much harm by how fundamentalists use the concept of martyrdom to engineer acts of terrorism, leading to the deaths of innocents. This is an unfortunate series of developments with respect to how the concept of martyrdom has been used as of recent, by how fundamentalist leaders in Islam have turned martyrdom into a way for Muslims to demonstrate commitment to the faith by harming others in a unjustified way. It is the responsibility of all leaders within Islam to lobby their constituencies to reject the modern concept of martyrdom, as the way it is used today is incompatible with the five pillars of Islam which promotes treating everyone with respect.

In conclusion, through exploring the many aspects of Islamic views on life and death, it can be seen that Islam is similar to the other two major monotheistic religions of the Western world. Also through the chronological development of Islam as a religion and how it influences societies under it shows the similarities in evolution between Islam and the Judeo-Christian cultures. Only through the misreading of historical context can Islam's views on life and death be seen as incompatible with Judaism and Christianity. Although Islamic doctrine itself demonstrates differences that exist between other monotheistic religions, the external and ritualistic structure of those religions, along with the history that accompanies them is quite

similar. Through studying Islamic perspectives on social conduct, views about the afterlife, methods of handling death, views of the individual, and the historical development of Islamic culture shows that Islam is structured in a way that is more similar to Western religions than people would originally assert. Martyrdom in Islam however presents a challenge to the reputation of Islam as a culture, and as a religion. It is something that must be overcome in the Islamic faith, making it an important undertaking to overhaul. This is similar to other monotheistic religions throughout history by how similar reforms from within the faiths themselves changed the ritualistic nature of the faiths. This can be seen through the reforms implemented by the Catholic church during the Protestant Reformation to prevent the further erosion of its membership as an example. A reform movement within Islam can change how Muslims view martyrdom and make it a practice not involving the deaths of innocents. It is only through Islam's deficit in time to develop that Islam is seen as so different to the major monotheistic religions of the West, when in fact, Islam is at the same point of socio-political development that influences their beliefs about life and death that Judaism and Christianity were experiencing 4-5 centuries ago.

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