

Assessment Two

Similarities between Christianity's Jesus Christ and Islam's Husayn Ibn Ali

Christian-Muslim Relations: Texts, Past & Present

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Introduction:

Christianity and Islam's differences are well documented and not minimal. The role of Jesus differs in both monotheistic traditions, as well as the differing opinion of Christianity's concept of the *Trinity* to that of Islam's *Tawhid*. These explicit differences can cause a great barrier, in not only the values both traditions share, but omit personalities within their respective traditions exemplifying similar themes and similarities.

Christianity's figure of Jesus Christ and Islam's (especially that of the Shiite tradition), Imam Husayn ibn Ali share significant commonalities, specifically to the events of the Passion of Jesus and the Battle of Karbala. Both events have had far-reaching consequences in the development of each tradition, both theologically, and politically with the relevance not being diminished in the current geopolitical climate. Although some of these political narratives are heavily influenced by regional and local political factors, the inspiration of some of these movements provides an aura of a spiritual struggle (such as the Iranian leadership using the events of Karbala to garner emotional support to counter the Iraqi regime in the 1980s).

Both Jesus Christ and Imam Husayn share common themes and similarities in their respective struggle. Although both traditions have a differing view on some concepts of martyrdom, the shared themes of both individuals and events illustrate the shared narratives of both traditions. This can primarily be seen in the sharing of themes seen specifically in the Passion of Jesus and the Battle of Karbala, as well as other symbolic similarities between the two figures.

I. Themes:

Witness to Faith

One of the many areas of similarity between Imam Husayn and Jesus Christ is the themes the two individuals share, in both their spiritual lives and physical struggle. In the context of martyrdom, the term “*martyr*” as used in the New Testament means ‘witness’. A martyr is a witness not to an idea but to an event,” (Ayoub, 67). This concept has strong similarities with some of Islam’s views of martyrdom. The term *shahid* in itself emphasizes of one being a “witness,” with the concept being mentioned in the Quran well over 50 times (Ayoub, 70).

Both Jesus Christ and Imam Husayn have demonstrated being witnesses to their respective faiths, not just (as Ayoub states) to an idea but tied to the respective events that attained their martyrdom. Jesus’ claim to being a witness to God is tied directly to his ultimate sacrifice of himself in the tragic events of the Passion. Similarly, Husayn also demonstrated his witness to his grandfather’s faith in sacrificing his own life, as well as his companions and kin, on the battlefield of Karbala against the corrupt rule of the Umayyad caliph Yazid I. Both solidify their positions as elevated spiritual figures in these respective events with their lives, demonstrating their steadfastness in faith and practice.

Continuing this further, it is also imperative that the witness be solely motivated for the pleasure of God and his commanded faith, and not for any other desires. Both Christianity and Islam agree that “[t]he true martyr, the two religions agree, is he who is free from any other motive but that [of a] witness” (Ayoub, 75). Worldly desires such as money, fame, and power are absent from the intentions of the witness and are no factor in their pursuit. This spiritual being’s highest priority is to fulfill the commandments of God and is not concerned with the physical toll the current world entails.

Interestingly, both events show that the opposing figures are motivated by worldly desires, such as wealth and greed. According to the *Maqatil*, which is a compilation of detailed narratives of the heroics of the Battle of Karbala by various authors, it is stated that the Caliph Yazid “promised a ‘dara’ (ten [thousand] drachms) to [anyone] who brought him Husayn’s head” (Sindawi, 102). Although it would be improper to use the *Maqatil* as a fully canonical source when compared to other sources, the very illustration of this notion is significant. This has a strong similarity to that of Judas being motivated by money to hand Jesus to the authorities (Matthew 26:15), establishing that those with a lack of faith and flawed moral judgment can be corrupted by worldly desires. However, this spiritual figure does not and is above the temptations of worldly desires, demonstrating the true witness to faith as a martyr.

Preordinance/Premonition

Continuing further, both Jesus Christ and Imam Husayn demonstrate a preordinance and premonition of sorts in their respective struggles. When analyzing both figures, Sindawi draws out various similarities between Jesus and Husayn, by premonition and preordinance being a key factor (Sindawi, 102).

For Husayn, the *Maqatil* sources make it clear that Husayn was aware of his fate, as well as of his companions and kin. Even in more canonical sources, there is a demonstration of Husayn being aware of what may occur, if there is not a reasonable resolution with the sitting Caliph. However, the *Maqatil* and Shiite tradition illustrate that Husayn knew all along of what is to occur, and regardless of the physical toll that is to be afflicted on him, he must progress. The Shiite belief goes as far as to claim that Husayn “was said to have been destined for this sacrifice from the beginning of creation,” (Ayoub, 73), highlighting the preordinance of the events at Karbala.

The theme of preordinance and premonition is similar to that of Jesus and also highlights their infallibility in both of the respective traditions. Christian belief holds the preexistence of Christ very strictly, even before the creation of the world (John 17:5). Although not entirely the same as the belief of the foretelling of Husayn's eventual struggle, the fact that both individual's creation and/or struggle is preordained shows a strong correlation. Both of the individuals (either in birth or death) are destined from the beginning of creation. This illustrates how both traditions view these individuals as infallible beings, as common fallible beings would not have the honor of such high esteem of preordinance to their creation.

II. Other Similarities

Lineage

It is important to highlight that both Jesus Christ and Imam Husayn belong to an esteemed lineage. It is interesting to note how God did not choose common people in such high value, and that both figures have a prerequisite to their standing, via their direct lineage.

In both the Islamic and Christian traditions, Jesus is born to the Virgin Mary. His birth in itself is a direct miracle from God, and to have that miracle be possible, God used Mary to facilitate the miracle. Both traditions agree on her purity, chastity, and her direct communication and revelation to angels. Although the traditions differ on the nature of Jesus' birth (such as the conflict of the Prophet of God or the Son of God), the concept of Mary's facilitation and role is an area of mutual agreement.

Similarly, Imam Husayn also belongs to esteemed lineage. Him being the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad clearly shows his elevated status, but his similarity to Jesus is more in his relationship with his mother, Fatima (daughter of Muhammad) to that of Mary. In some Shiite traditions, Fatima "was a virgin when she gave birth to [Husayn], just like Jesus' mother,

Maryam,” (Sindawi, 82) as is highlighted in the *Maqatil*. Certain traditions hold Fatima’s purity to such status that she is also absolved from natural physiological factors like menstruation (Kashani-Sabet, 10). The similarity of Fatima’s chastity and purity to that of Mary provides their respective offspring a prerequisite to their status. Additionally, one factor in why they are held in such importance is due to the lineage of people who were born before them. Due to this, their physical suffering is even more tragic, further illustrating the immorality of society unable to recognize who these individuals are in terms of their importance to spiritual lineage.

Aftermath

The aftermath of the death of Jesus Christ and Imam Husayn has significant consequences and also share strong similarities. The pain of their excruciating death and martyrdom (although Christ rose again in Christian tradition) occurred in the realm of the physical world. Due to this, both individuals carry such enormous importance, that the universe is also mourning in their pain and suffering.

Sindawi illustrates this when analyzing the *Maqatil* chronicles and how similar it is to Jesus’ story. For example, when Jesus died “nature shook, there was darkness over all the earth, and the sun was darkened and the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom, and the earth did quake and the rocks rent,” (Sindawi, 102). Similarly, when Husayn is killed and beheaded, the world suffered the same consequences, as well as “the sun was eclipsed for 40 days, the horizon reddened, and blood poured from the sky.” (Sindawi, 102).

The similarities of the response of the natural world do not end there. After Jesus’ resurrection, he remained on the Earth for 40 days, after which he was ascended to heaven. It is also held by some within the Shiite tradition that after Husayn’s martyrdom (with his lifeless body remaining in the plains of Karbala) Husayn “was brought to the fifth heaven and was

returned later to the earth in Karbala, where he remained, not buried, for three days,” (Sindawi, 102). It is also interesting to note the importance of the number “40,” in which, for Husayn, the sun was eclipsed for 40 days and for Jesus the number of days he remained on earth before his ascension.

It is no accident that the authors of the *Maqatil* make a strong attempt to illustrate Husayn’s struggle as similar to Jesus. It is even more interesting since Islamic tradition has differing views on the Passion and death of Christ, when compared to their Christian counterparts. Yet one of the ways the authors of the *Maqatil* demonstrate Husayn’s saintly status is by establishing these similarities to Jesus (Sindawi, 100). Although still holding true to the Islamic version of Jesus, this also goes to demonstrate the elevated status of Jesus in Islam, where comparisons of Husayn are drawn to a Prophet other than his grandfather.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ and Imam Husayn show mutually shared values, as well as themes and similarities in their respective struggle within the sphere of Islam and Christianity. It is important to note that this analysis specifically highlights the Shiite version of Imam Husayn (with similar views also held across Sufis and some Sunni schools as well). There are a plethora of views regarding the concept of sainthood and infallibility in both Christianity and Islam, and Imam Husayn is no exception. However, even the slightest similarity within each religion’s traditions demonstrates the common ground found in these values. For these reasons we see Christians participate in the Shiite pilgrimage to Karbala to this day, illustrating these shared values. Concepts such as supreme faith in the divine, and the physical world not being the everlasting

reality are concepts that can be admired from representatives of both religions and doctrines, providing a common ground for mutual understanding and respect.

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