

UWTSD

Christian-Muslim Relations: Texts, Past & Present (HPRS7023)

Name: Sharon Chua (Student ID: 2116272)

Assessment 2: Choose one area of theological overlap between the Christian and Islamic traditions not covered in the course material. Provide a detailed report on the nature of the theological context identified, and its theological importance.

Topic: The Concept of the “Fear of God” in Christian and Islamic Traditions

INTRODUCTION

This paper posits that the “fear of God” being a major and important concept in both the Bible and Qur’an shares many similarities and readily presents itself as a common point of theological discussion. This concept also presents opportunities for collaboration in inter-faith dialogue. Traditionally, two hot topics for Christian-Muslim theological discussions have been on the nature and doctrine of God (Trinity – Christian and *Tawhid* – Islam) and on the person of Jesus / *Isa* (Son of God or prophet?) (Fastiggi 1993; Kuhn 2019). These two above-mentioned theological concepts have proven to be challenging for Christian-Muslim relations as each faith tradition differs greatly on their doctrinal stand especially on the issue of monotheism and the doctrine of incarnation (Fastiggi 1993, 458). The furthest these two hot topics in inter-faith dialogue can arrive at is mutual respect and accommodation for each other’s faith at the theological level. But the concept of the “fear of God” presents more potential for collaboration as the discussion at the theological level can translate to a praxis level in the moral and ethical dimension for both the Christian and Islamic faiths. This paper will first discuss the concept of the “fear of God” in Christian and Islam traditions and then discuss the theological importance of this concept for these two faiths at the praxis level.

YIR’AH (FEAR OF GOD) IN CHRISTIANITY

“The fear (*Yir’ah*) of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”
(Proverbs 9:10 ESV)

Yir'ah, the Hebrew word for “fear” in the Bible is often used in association with God - the fear of God. It connotes the idea of “respect, reverence, piety” for God (Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon). The fear of God is a key concept in the Bible and often this is associated with knowing God. These two concepts are synonymous in nature (Jindo 2012, 438). Jindo argues that knowledge precedes fear (438). Without knowledge of God, the concept of fearing God would remain only at a cognitive level and bears no impact on one’s life (438). Thus, for the fear of God to bear an impact in a Christian’s life, it would require an experiential knowledge and not just a cognitive knowledge of God. For example, in a bible narrative in Genesis 28:16-17, it says of one of the patriarchs in the Bible, Jacob: “Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” And he was **afraid**¹ and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” Jacob’s experiential knowledge of God led him to confess and acknowledge the awesomeness of God and this knowledge transformed his life. An experiential knowledge of God will thus result in an inner transformation in a person’s attitude to live a life that is conscious of an awesome God and which seeks to please Him. Jindo opined that a greater knowledge of God will result in a deeper sense of fear and reverence for Him (2012, 448). Evans further termed “the fear of God” as a recognition and respect for God’s authority which results in an accountability to God in all that Christians do (2021, 317).

TAQWA (FEAR OF GOD) IN ISLAM

“It is not their meat nor their blood, that reaches Allah: it is your **piety (Taqwa)** that reaches Him: He has thus made them subject to you, that ye may glorify Allah for His Guidance to you and proclaim the good news to all who do right.”

(Surah Al-Hajj: 37)

According to Kazmi (2021), the word “*Taqwa*” occurs in the Quran as a noun and verb for more than 250 times (Kazmi 2021). *Taqwa* “connotes a reverential or pious fear of God, the guarding of oneself from actions unbecoming of a believer and by extension from the punishment of the Hereafter” (Ohlander 2005, 139). The concept of *Taqwa* (fear of God) is a major one in Islam and a key theme in the Quran. Fazlur Rahman

¹ The word “afraid” here in Hebrews is *Yare’* and is the root word of *Yir’ah* ((Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon).

opined that *Taqwa* is the single most important term in the Quran (2009, 28). It is an inner attitude that a Muslim must possess to be attuned to God to discharge God's responsibilities for him/her properly and according to God's will (Rahmah 1966, 320-321). Simply put, *Taqwa* is a God-consciousness of which every Muslim must possess before they can fully obey Allah's commandments. In the Quran, it states, "This is the Book; in it is guidance sure without doubt to those who fear Allah" (*Sura Al-Baqarah:2*). *Taqwa* does not just possess an orthodoxic dimension that informs Muslims of the need to fear God/to have piety only. But *Taqwa* is active and drives Islam and gives meaning and motivation to the religious rites and obligations of a Muslim (Ohlander 2005, 150). Without the active orthopraxis dimension, *Tawqa* would be dead orthodoxy. Fazlur Rahman further emphasised that *Taqwa* (fear of God) effects not just the religious life of the Muslims but also the moral life, developing in them a God-conscience to "squarely anchored within the moral tensions, the 'limits of God,' and not to 'transgress' or violate the balance of those tensions of limits" (2009, 29).

THE THEOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE "FEAR OF GOD" FOR CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM AT THE PRAXIS LEVEL

The "fear of God" possesses an innate power to transform individuals and society at the moral and ethical dimension for the better good of humankind in both Christian and Muslim traditions. Both Christians and Muslims can build on the similar concept of the "fear of God" independently and collaboratively to bring about God's blessings and a positive outcome for human flourishing. In Islam, Rahman opined that the individual is the bearer of *taqwa* and this drives the individual to be accountable to God to discharge his duties properly as God's highest creation in this earth (1966, 322). *Taqwa* cultivates a God-consciousness which will result in a positive "moral" and "ethical" quality in the private and public lives of Muslims and in their faith community and society at large (Ohlander 2005, 138, 147, 149). Likewise, the "fear of God" also leads to an accountability to God as individuals in Christianity (Evans 2021). This sense of accountability to God who is seen as good and righteous will direct Christians to have the desire to obey God and live out His commandments (Evans 2021, 318). Often, the "fear of God" is depicted as "a code for elementary standards of conduct, according to which humankind is expected to live" (Jindo 2012, 434). It is "an awareness or consciousness of the living presence of the absolute deity" that directs Christians to live and behave ethically (450). Ultimately, the "fear of God" leads to the

knowledge that one day all regardless of whether one is a Christian or Muslim would have to stand before God, the righteous Judge to account for his/her actions and behaviours (Evans 2021, 322; Osman 2004; 61; Rahman 1966, 322).

A common understanding on the theological concept of the "fear of God" also provides a platform to enhance peacebuilding efforts between Christian and Muslim communities and mitigate the conflicts in between. A Common Word opined,

"Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians."

Since the incident of the 9-11 Twin Towers attack in the United States in 2001, Islamophobia has increased especially in the Western part of the world. The theme of the clash of civilizations and unflattering portrayal of Islam by the Western media has been played and replayed many times over in the past twenty years (All Party Parliamentary Group On British Muslims 2017, 32; Alsultany 2012, 2). Thus, peacebuilding efforts between Christians and Muslims have to increase even more to counter the negativism and hostility, and narrow the gaps of misunderstanding between people of these two faiths. The people of these two faiths must first fear God and honour the peace that God seeks among the people and not stir violence. In Islam, God is the All-Peace who desires for all humankind to enter into peace with one another and that there should be no coercion in matters of faith (Osman 2004, 58-60). Similarly in Christianity, God calls for Christians to live in peace with others and peacemakers are Sons of God (Matthew 5:9; Hebrews 12:4). Thus, to "fear God" would definitely involve Christians and Muslims alike to respect God and live up according to His desired principles of human's engagement with one another in the world.

Operating on the basis of the concept of the "fear of God," Christians and Muslims alike would seek to be better versions of themselves as they stand before God. Collectively as faith communities, Christians and Muslims can pace set in the area of positive moral and ethical living in the society that they are in and also emerge as stronger collaborators in peacebuilding efforts to bring about a more peaceful and stable global order.

(Word Count: 1522)

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