

How has the development of fatalism compared within Christianity and Islam, and how has it positively impacted modern practices?

World Religions

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I. Introduction

Theological fatalism is a commonly discussed topic within theology but is rarely evaluated in a comparative study. The religions compared in this essay are Christianity and Islam, two major world religions, though beliefs regarding fatalism are widespread. The concept of fatalism is a belief that events are beyond one's control and is often denominated in religion as the preordained will of a higher being.¹ Fatalism raises questions on theological concepts like human sinning and to account for the inequality of human suffering. A main problem in fatalism is that if human beings have control over their sins, then God's Day of Judgement may seem contradictory if human beings do not have free will.² Christian and Islam philosophers account for this contradiction in many ways but they can be consolidated into two modes of thought, either in the belief in free will, that humans have total control of their actions, or in the belief in the lack of totality of fatalism, that though fatalism exists, its role is not dominating in human decision-making.

Both religions generally have varying and sometimes opposing perspectives on the question of fatalism. Throughout time, definitions of free will have accommodated to suit a model more appropriate to knowledge gained and changing attitudes. As an overview, a generally accepted virtue within Christianity is a strong belief in free will with limited exceptions in the present. This model of free will, opposing fatalism, describes the personal control one has over one's fate. Islam defines fatalism within the principle of quadar, the belief that Allah has knowledge of all that will happen as it is his will. Divine destiny signifies, however, that the individual is responsible for the outcome of his actions at the end of life. This essay will start

¹ Bennett, Oliver. "The manufacture of hope: religion, eschatology and the culture of optimism." 116.

² Rice, Hugh. "Fatalism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University.

with a discussion of the development of fatalism within Christianity, next, it will examine the development of this conception within Islam, and finally, it will define how comparisons in their developments have shaped modern practices with such real-world effects as shaping linguistic, psychological, and historical actions within each religion. In total, the essay will conclude that fatalistic thinking has faced extremes in both religions despite biased perceptions, and that despite differences, similarities in these religions have accounted for predominantly positive practices within each religion when moderated.

II. Christian fatalism

The Christian view of fatalism has experienced great change as philosophers have reconciled this dilemma. These reconciliations include Augustine's views on free will c. 400 A.D., particularly the belief that man has moral agency. Moral agency is the ability for someone to judge "right versus wrong" in their actions, or to judge their own actions.³ Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo was a strong proponent for the values of a certain religious sect referred to as Manichaeism, which held both Christian and Persian values. Augustine's response to Manichaeism was initially based on his desire to escape his sin without claiming responsibility, justifying his actions as out of his personal control. He eventually challenged the Manichee, though, as he felt deceived by their practices and eventually began claiming responsibility over his own evil.⁴ Aquinas believed that God still had a role in the evils he committed as he felt that God had endowed humanity with the ability to make its own choices.

On the other side of the debate was theologian Pelagius who believed that one's actions were controlled by the self almost entirely. The debate is as follows: Pelagius thought "that

³ AUGUSTINIANS AUSTRALIA. "The Manichee." *AUGNET : 1031 The Manichee*, 2013.

⁴ *Ibid.*

salvation was the just reward for only those who had merited it through their own actions, whilst Augustine saw salvation as a free and unmerited gift that was entirely dependent upon God's grace,"⁵ Augustine accused Pelagius of supporting free will too heavily and consequently denying the divine's role in human actions. This debate was an early form of fatalism that had strong implications regarding the future of fatalist thinking. Augustine's belief primarily prevailed, paving the way for future dissent between the amounts of control one has in moral agency.

Other key philosophies in this theology included Thomas Aquinas' beliefs regarding supralapsarianism, God's predestination of salvation.⁶ This branch of thought is referred to as Thomism, and a key subscriber to this thinking is theologian Bochenksi. Bochenksi believed that his Thomist views and belief in free will were compatible. However, historian Łukasiewicz believed that "freedom of will and necessity preclude each other. Therefore, divine (fore-) knowledge determines human volitions and actions," (Łukasiewicz's views on Thomism signify that humans' free will is countered by the fatalism described).⁷ This argument counters the compatibility of Thomism and free will.

It can be argued that God's omniscience allows men to act in a manner of their choosing. God's omniscience does not dismantle Christian views of God as a deity. Protestant beliefs during 1905 surrounded Max Weber's discussion of a newfound "work ethic". Believing that God set the task as an ethical duty, Protestants moved toward a capitalist method and devoted their lives to their work. Kininmonth relates that this newfound work ethic was a Calvinist work

⁵ Bennett, Oliver. "The manufacture of hope: religion, eschatology and the culture of optimism." *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. 122.

⁶ Łukasiewicz, Dariusz. "Bocheński on Divine Providence and Human Freedom." 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

doctrine which states “first, the elect are saved and everyone else is damned, secondly that God has selected the chosen even before their birth and humanity has no way of knowing who will be saved, and finally that salvation cannot be earned, for if it could be, humanity would have a kind of power over God”.⁸ Rather than believing that this vocation would allow them into the Kingdom of Heaven, Protestants believed that they were fulfilling the task that God endowed them with before birth. Protestants’ involvement in capitalism was a key factor in converting free will into God’s predestination.

As with the original sin in Genesis, humans chose freedom of action, and Christians today use this action to reconcile the indirect following of God’s -word. The story of genesis signifies a direct violation of God’s will, implying that the actions of humanity are its own to decide. In this story, God tells Adam that ‘When you eat of it you will surely die’ (Gen. 2:17). Yet, following Eve’s desires, Adam still eats the apple using his own reasoning and decision-making in contrast to obeying the orders God gave him. The consequences of this action are noteworthy, however, as after countering God’s will, Adam experiences separation from God in being forced away from heaven. The ability to make choices of one’s accord is the noticeable change in the separation, and with it, it can be understood that the original human sin allowed for greater choice and free will.

The final note to discuss in Christian fatalism is that decisions to act morally place some above others in the eyes of God. Bennet notes that “The eschatological ideas of divine justice that modern Christianity thus promotes seem to range from selective entry to the Kingdom of Heaven, primarily through the saving grace of faith, to a more comprehensive system through

⁸ Kininmonth, Kirsten. Weber's Protestant Work Ethic: a case study of Scottish entrepreneurs, the Coats Family of Paisley.

which no one is excluded”.⁹ Protestants, for example, believe that “by granting every individual freedom of choice, God wills the salvation of all souls equally”, meaning that following God’s will is one’s saving grace into the Kingdom of Heaven. Protestant attitudes line up heavily with Calvinist attitudes and Pelegius’ beliefs expressed earlier.¹⁰ Roman Catholics, on the other hand, believe that fatalism and free will work together to as “God moves the soul according to its nature,”¹¹ Their beliefs regarding fatalism work more closely with the belief that one’s free will allows entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Overall, Christian views have developed highly with shifting attitudes, resulting in varied beliefs on fatalism, even today. The reconciliation of fatalism primarily means the more prominent belief is that of fatalistic free will, that being free will provided by God.

III. Islamic fatalism

This portion of the essay will focus on Islamic beliefs regarding fatalism. First, misconceptions about Islamic fatalism will be addressed and will be followed by an analysis of discrepancies and evolutions of the theory throughout history.

Beliefs about Islamic fatalism are predominated by Samuel P. Huntington’s thesis in “Clash of Civilizations”. This controversial thesis claimed that fatalism is an inherent custom within the Islamic culture. Acevedo claims that proponents of Huntington’s thesis argue Islamic fatalism “as being at odds with the Westernized, Judeo-Christian vision that fosters the ethic of individual self-empowerment”.¹² Another fatalistic aspect of this society, according to

⁹ Bennett, Oliver. "The manufacture of hope: religion, eschatology and the culture of optimism." *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. 127.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 126.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² Acevedo, Gabriel A. "Islamic Fatalism and the Clash of Civilizations: An Appraisal of a Contentious and Dubious Theory." *Social Forces*, 1715.

Huntington's supporters, is that there is an extreme lack of individualism, as opposed to more Western individualistic ideals. However, critics of Huntington claim that his beliefs are anecdotal. Whether politically motivated against Islamic societies or just misleading, Acevedo believes that proponents conflate fatalism and submission, leading to a judgement of Islam for being fanatical. The "Clash of Civilizations" theory is key in understanding how other parts of the world perceive the religion of Islam.¹³

There is a paradox within the Koran and the Hedith, according to author Bennet, who sees predestination as follows: "On the one hand, God is represented as the omnipotent creator of the universe, who even determines the choices that each individual makes; on the other, he is shown to have endowed humans with free will, which allows them to exercise a genuine freedom of choice".¹⁴ The omnipotence of God contrasts with the free will that humans were apparently endowed with. According to Ringgren, this dichotomy can be seen in the debate between "a combination of pre-Islamic fatalism and Muhammad's belief in God's omnipotence".¹⁵ However, most Muslim teachers, Mullahs, would probably agree to the view of theologian al-Ash'ari, that Allah designated who would or would not be saved.

Mu'tazili and Hanbali argued the resolution between *quadar* and *jabr*. *Quadar* as described in the Quran encompasses beliefs about determinism and the role of Allah in predestination. However, according to Mu'tazili, *quadar* was simply the human responsibility in righteousness. Mu'tazili believed in human free will strongly and was opposed by the Jabarites who believed

¹³ *Ibid*, 1715.

¹⁴ Bennett, Oliver. "The manufacture of hope: religion, eschatology and the culture of optimism." *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. 127.

¹⁵ Ringgren, Helmer, editor. *Fatalistic Beliefs in Religion, Folklore, and Literature*. ALMQVIST & WIKSELL, 1967. Doria.Fi, ALMQVIST & WIKSELL. 62.

that all human decisions in the form of free will derive from the will of God.¹⁶ Similarly, *jabr* is Allah's total predestination and control in all worldly events and Hanbali believed in *jabr* strongly. Another way to view this extremity in difference is that Al-Jabiriyah vs Al-Qadiriyyah are the two extremes of determinism. The Ash'arite position was the median of what the Jabarites and Mu'tazili believed. The Ash'arite proposed that God's omnipotence and human actions could work together; humans could not sin and then blame their actions on God's desire. This position is taken on by many Muslims in the world today.¹⁷

The Decree of Allah exemplifies his omniscience regarding human action. This omniscience warns individuals of the final judgement, and the promise of resurrection acts as evidence of the original creation that Allah completed, though this is not explicitly stated in the Quran. The Sunni view perceives that Allah solely knows of human action but does not act as a puppeteer of it. The Shi'a view does not accept fatalism in total, instead believing that Allah can change his predestined beliefs. This belief in change is referred to as the doctrine of *bada*, or the alteration of God's judgement pending the final stages of transcendence.¹⁸ The transcendent level of Divine Allotment and Ordainment, for example, is subject to changes and alteration due to behaviors such as praying and good kinship. However, as the Sunni do not have this belief in *bada*, a rift between their forms of belief has led to its criticism as it negates God's word. Berenjakar argues that a sense of optimism rather than apathy is created by this belief, as one's fate can be altered due to certain behaviors. According to this doctrine of *bada*, it is possible to

¹⁶ Kaminski, J.J. The Contemporary Islamic Governed State, Palgrave Series in Islamic Theology, Law, and History. 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 36.

¹⁸ Berenjakar, Reza. "In Defence of Bada." *Islamic College*. 325.

understand the question proposed earlier of how one can remain in charge of one's fate despite the Decree of Allah.¹⁹

To conclude, the most prevalent belief within Muslim cultures is like the Ash'atarite's.²⁰ belief that human will and God's omnipotence can work together, and that in total, fatalism and free will can be reconciled in their conjoining. Sunni and Sh'ia views differ extremely yet, yet they still believe that determinism is not the sole factor in human action.

IV. An examination of key differences

It is worthwhile to point out differences within these religions as to better understand in the next section how drastically they relate in contrast. The key differences in Christian and Islam beliefs are the perceptions of each religion's extremities. The autonomy of Christian and Islamic nations differs according to Facchini, creating a difference in the state of fatalism. Facchini argues the individualism that their key difference is in the autonomy sought in Westernized Christianity, and how Islamic nations differ in their lack of desire for capitalism. Facchini relates this lack of desire to the dismissal of individual rights and the discredited form of viewing the law as separate from God's will.²¹

Another key figure in exposing the misconceptions of fatalism is Acevedo, who summarizes that "Christian fatalism has generally been associated with a subtle and more rational notion of predestination while Islam has been characterized as fostering an extreme form of predestination that sways the theology towards fatalism".²² Although the commonly accepted

¹⁹ Facchini, Francois. "Religion, law and development: Islam and Christianity." *European Journal of Law and Economics*., 331.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Facchini, Francois. "Religion, law and development: Islam and Christianity." *European Journal of Law and Economics*., 331.

²² Acevedo, Gabriel A. "Islamic Fatalism and the Clash of Civilizations: An Appraisal of a Contentious and Dubious Theory." *Social Forces*. 1721.

view is that Islam leans more toward fatalism, this misconception is factually incorrect but does lead to a key difference in how the religions are viewed. Misconceptions around Islamic fatalism are more prevalent, particularly the belief that all Muslims are fatalists and are consequently more violent. Defeatism, accepting fate provided without doubt, is a common view of Islamic fatalism by Europeans. Acevedo's statement regarding the tendency to interchange fatalistic thinking and Islamic "submission" and Huntington's supporters tie into this theory on Islamic fatalism.

V. An examination of key similarities

The similarities listed in the following section are far more numerous than those listed in the previous section. These similarities are important to explore as to understand a more important truth about religion's development itself.

The resolving of oneself to the higher entity, God or Allah, is equivalent to freedom in each religion. The creation of freedom is accessible in the understanding of free will prevalent in separate sects of each religion and the most common reconciliation is finding a lesser extremity than the two sides of this scale.

The concept of original sin is apparent in each religion. While Christianity discusses this concept in terms of Genesis, an epistle from famous theologian Ḥasan al-Baṣrī claims the separation of God and evil. According to this letter, the author believes that free will and predestination are compatible as humans have the choice to act maliciously due to their own separation from him. God provides guidance according to this famous epistle and humans act accordingly, though they have freedom of action.²³ This separation takes form in each religion, allowing us to see how each religion uses similar reasoning in the debate.

²³ Salem, Feryal. "Freewill, Qadar, and Kasb in the Epistle of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī to 'Abd al-Malik." 201.

Citations from the Quran and Bible both reconcile debate in each religion. Understanding what the holy texts of both religions state about the manner of action in humanity compared to God's omnipotence allows more canon visions of theology. Whether in the Quran or Bible, both religions strive for a deeper meaning with the texts already allotted.

The insights into the belief of free will are addressed by philosophers of both religions, signifying that the question holds importance in the definition of religion. If philosophers did not address the fundamental questions regarding their religions, this would describe that their answers did not hold importance. One of the more common beliefs is in a mix between free will and determinism. The still visible lack of clarity regarding fatalism within each religion signifies the complexities of human reasoning. Each has a common history of attempting to console the problem of fatalism yet there are still variants in the acceptance of fatalism such as the difference between Roman Catholics and Protestants or Sunni and Sh'ia variants.

VI. Effects on Modern Practice

Attempts to reconcile this debate are ongoing within each religion, and these attempts are prominent in the following discussion of effects on modern practice. Negative religious practices include deleterious effects on health and unnecessary cruelty within historical expansion. Through both visions on fatalism, Christians and Muslims have a manner of viewing the world with optimism about the future by producing meaning, divine justice, and understandings of final judgement. Christianity and Islam have commonalities in the predominantly positive effects fatalist thinking has in modernity when it is moderated.

Fatalism's role can affect one's health as shown in a case study by Monica D. Franklin studying the effects of religious fatalism on health, finding that health and this religious belief have an inversely proportional relationship. Those that believe their health is out of their control

have a lower chance of being healthy due to the lack of reporting one's illness by those who believe that they have no control. Therefore, there is less reliance on medicine as their health is presumed to be in the hands of a deity. Therefore, these religions that have entirely reconciled fatalism have found benefits in health, acting as a positive impact of fatalism in modern practice.²⁴

According to LaMothe, political problems act as symptoms of fatalism.²⁵ LaMothe relates that Christian faith in the United States has impacted reasoning within manifest destiny, the submission when entering war in Iraq, and even in blaming Muslims for the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Through the desire to maintain their fate, Christians use an expansionist mindset to remain in control and with power. LaMothe argues that this a negative aspect of fatalism, stating: "For Christians to seek and live out the fate of expansionist narratives and ideologies is to distort not only hope, but Christian hope in God's promises of love, compassion, and mercy".²⁶ When not moderated, Christian fatalism worked negatively to spread war and xenophobia, according to LaMothe.

In the modern practice of speech, author Kaminski notes that "'Inshā'allāh'" translates to "God willing", a phrase linking common speech and fatalistic thinking. For example, if one is saying goodbye to a friend, they will commonly say something like, "I will see you again soon, Inshā'allāh", combining free will in action with Allah's ultimate authority.²⁷ This aspect is more positive, as it links hope and optimism with speech rather than the previous example, which destroyed hope.

²⁴ Franklin, Monica D., et al. "Religious Fatalism and Its Association with Health Behaviors and Outcomes." *American Journal of Health Behavior*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2007.

²⁵ LaMothe, Ryan. "What Hope Is There: The Enthrallment of Empire Stories." *Pastoral Psychology*. EBSCO. Accessed 12 Sept. 2018. Originally published in *Pastoral Psychology*. 492-494.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 494.

²⁷ Facchini, Francois. "Religion, law and development: Islam and Christianity." *European Journal of Law and Economics*. 325.

Author Daniel Pipes writes about the modern impact of more fatalistic thinking within Islam, particularly in political and historical crises in which Saudi leaders have been more likely to claim that the event was due to the will of God. Imam Abdul Rahman Al Sudais is the mosque leader who said that after a stampede which killed 244 pilgrims: "All precautions were taken to prevent such an incident, but this is God's will."²⁸ However, the author combats that this fatalistic thinking does not represent Muslims in whole and cites historical activism such as within the Arab-Israeli combat lasting for 30 years (in which Arabs act imperviously against their defeats against the Jewish state). These actions rebuke the claims of entire Islamic fatalism predominating in how other cultures view Islam and reinforces that with a balance of fatalism and free will, optimism prevails.²⁹

A study by psychologist Littlewood of Bangladeshi psychiatric patients in London used in-depth interviews of Sunni Muslim patients with mental illness to examine how 25 participants perceived their illness. Beliefs in God's determinism of their illness were high. The use of the same word *inshallah*, as stated earlier, implies that beliefs in God's will were significant. The tendency to hope for actual healing and forgiveness was still high, however. Often, participants rather hoped to understand God's reasoning and receive his support through the illness than blame his will. Many remained truly uncertain about the roots of the illness in total, but still believed that all was in Allah's hands and trusted his reasoning. Intertwined with religion and modern medicine, patients trusted both doctors and their God in returning to health. The in-depth interviews revealed the hope in various sources and that fatalistic reasoning was common, though that their lives were not just in Allah's control but in their own and community's as well.³⁰

²⁸ Pipes, Daniel. "Are Muslims Fatalists?" *Middle East Quarterly*. Introduction.

²⁹ *Ibid*, Muslim Activism.

³⁰ Littlewood, Roland. Islamic fatalism': Life and suffering among Bangladeshi psychiatric patients and their families in London - An interview study 2.

VII. Conclusion

Christianity and Islam have worked separately to create an understanding of fatalism *and* free will. Christianity's striving toward acceptance of ancient theologians thinking has led to nearly universal support of free will working with fatalism. Islam has a strong acceptance of free will and predestination, too, though common beliefs are that their fatalistic thinking is more common. Their similarities are more numerous than their differences, and these similarities reveal the divergence in human thinking and attempts to overcome dilemmas.

However, this discussion still leaves many questions up for debate. Theologians have spent millennia attempting to understand the divine's role in shaping worldly affairs. This constant reshaping of theology signifies an incessant need to understand how to mix the word of religious texts and how to live in the modern world, as there is clearly a dichotomy within these religions.

Negative connotations of fatalism exist, particularly in relation to Islamic defeatism and Christian expansion. However, the hope found within this concept proposed within this essay is used as an attempt of understanding the broader cultural significance of this paradigm.

The role of fatalism in the historical implications and modern-day applications are heavy as apparent by modern practices of the concept. So many divergent forms of thinking make a true and complete analysis of the history of developing ideas in this topic difficult to attain. However, the results of the two case studies regarding determinism and health imply that one's beliefs are heavily influential in how one lives. There has been a fundamentally similar development of beliefs on this topic within these two religions, and these similarities are incredibly valuable to understand, particularly with the knowledge that moderating fatalism allows for more optimism.

Religions may vary widely in long accepted beliefs, but their conceptualizations of fatalism allows insights into the similarities that humanity holds across religions and cultures.

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