

Zoroastrian influence on traditional Islam

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Zoroastrianism is an ancient Persian religion. Arguably the world's first monotheistic faith, it was founded by the prophet Zoroaster, or Zarathrustra, who probably lived in Iran in the sixth century BC or earlier. Most of what is known about him comes from the Avesta – a collection of Zoroastrian religious scriptures. Zoroastrianism shaped the mighty Persian Empire and was the state religion of its three major dynasties, until the Muslim conquest of Persia in the seventh century AD. As one of the oldest religions still in existence, it has very deep influence on many of the world's religions and cultures, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

It is through hadiths that traditional Islam was strongly influenced and partially shaped by Zoroastrianism

Many beliefs and practices of traditional Islam were either influenced by or directly borrowed from Zoroastrianism through hadith hearsays.

As a case for study, here we will go through a few examples of parallels between Islam and Zoroastrianism:

The divine names

The traditional Islamic 99 Names of Allah track the Zoroastrian 101 Names of Ahuramazda.

Angels

The popular Muslim interpretation of the Quranic term malaika as some spiritual winged creatures is similar to the Zoroastrian concept of Yazatas (angels), which are divine beings allegedly created by Ahuramazda to help him maintain the flow of the cosmic order and quell the evil forces of Ahriman (the Devil, Iblis) and his supporting demons (devils, shaitans).

The Ascension to Heaven

There is a very noticeable [similarity](#) between the traditional Muslim story of Miraj and the Zoroastrian story of Viraz about the extra-terrestrial journey, in almost all their minutest details.

A literalist anthropomorphic concept of monotheism

Both traditional Muslims and Zoroastrians perceive God, through a literalist anthropomorphic view, as a deity for worship.

Temples for prayer/worship

Muslims are called to mosques/masjids for prayer. Zoroastrians are called to fire temples Atash Behram and Agiaries for prayer.

Daily act of prayer/worship

The Islamic ritual salat/namaz parallels the Zoroastrian namaz or "Geh" (meaning time or place), which refers to 'timed worship'.

Praying five times a day

The similarity between traditional Islam and Zoroastrianism is striking in relation to the exact number and the timings of their five daily prayers, which is 'specifically' commanded by Allah to Muhammad – and by Ahuramazda to Arda Viraz – during their journey to Heaven.

Following of the Sun's movement

Both Muslim musallis and Zoroastrian worshippers precisely follow the course of the Sun to determine their times of prayer.

Call to prayer

Muslim worshippers are invited to the mosque for prayer through a ritual call (azan) by a caller five times a day, while Zoroastrian devotees are summoned to the prayer by the ringing of a bell in their temple five times a day.

Ritual purification before prayer

Muslims are required to perform ablution (wudu) by washing their face and limbs and, in some cases, by taking a bath (ghusl) before commencing their prayer. Likewise, Zoroastrians are required to do ritual purification (padyab) by washing their face and limbs and, in some cases, by taking a bath (nahn) before commencing their prayer.

Head cover

Muslims, both men and women, traditionally cover their heads during prayer, in the same way as Zoroastrians are required to cover their heads during prayer.

Facing the direction

Muslims worship while facing towards the Kaaba at Mecca, which is traditionally understood as the Qiblah, a direction often indicated by a wall niche (mihrab) of a mosque. Similarly, Zoroastrians perform their ritual prayer facing a central blazing fire (cf. Quran 27:8, 37:1-4), as a symbol of divine grace.

Reciting scripture in the original language

During prayer, Muslims are required to recite portions from the Quran in Arabic, in the same way as Zoroastrians are required to recite portions from the Avesta (Gathas) in its original language, Avesta.

Dawn prayer

Islamic Fajr prayer parallels the Zoroastrian dawn prayer Havaan.

Noon prayer

Islamic Zuhar prayer parallels the Zoroastrian noon prayer Rapithwan.

Afternoon prayer

Islamic Asr prayer parallels the Zoroastrian afternoon prayer Uziren.

Evening prayer

Islamic Maghrib prayer parallels the Zoroastrian evening prayer Aiwisuthrem.

Night prayer

Islamic Isha prayer parallels the Zoroastrian night prayer Ushaen.

Daily duas or supplications

Both traditional Muslims and Zoroastrians need to memorize and recite on daily or regular basis certain structured duas, or supplications, related to particular actions and occasions.

Prayers and intercessions for the dead

In both traditional Islam and Zoroastrianism, while every individual will get absolute justice according to her personal merits, her posthumous fate can also be influenced by the supplications and intercessions by her family and friends acting on her behalf.

The questioning angels and the torture of the grave

The traditional Muslim belief about the torture of the grave after a tough interview of the deceased by the two questioning angels, Munkar and Nakir, is identical with the Zoroastrian concept about the afterdeath punishment following the enquiry around the deceased's soul by the two archangels, Vohuman and Mithra.

Eschatological concepts

The similarity between traditional Islam and Zoroastrianism is evident in many eschatological concepts, including beliefs in saviours (saoshyants, mahdis), the pronouncer of final judgment (the apocalyptic Saoshyant, Dabbat al-Ard), the phase between death and resurrection (burzaxw, barzak), the heavenly maidens (the Daena, the houris), the lote tree in paradise (the humaya, the sidrah), the borderland between heaven and hell (the middle abode, the A'raf) and so on.

The Bridge over Hell

The Islamic Pul-Sirat, or the Bridge over Hell, totally parallels the Zoroastrian Chinawad Bridge, which all the souls will have to cross before entering either the Heaven or the Hell according to their deeds.

Heaven and Hell

The traditional Muslim concept of physical Heaven (Jannah) and Hell (Nar) shares similarity with the Zoroastrian Heaven (a realm of eternal happy life) and Hell (a realm of permanent torment). It is interesting to note that the Islamic word al-firdaus, or paradise, originally derives from the ancient Iranian (Avestan) word Pirdaus.

Battle between Good and Evil

The traditional Islamic beliefs variously parallel the Zoroastrian dualistic cosmology of Good and Evil, e.g. in the concepts of the revolt of Devil or Satan (Ahriman, Iblis) against God (Ahuramazda, Allah), the angels and demons fighting an unequal cosmic war, the weighing of virtues and vices and the ultimate triumph of Good over Evil through Heaven for the righteous and Hell for the evil-doers.

Mesopotamian influence on Islam and its impact on traditional Islam through hadith-based misinterpretation

On one hand, many beliefs and practices of Semitic or Abrahamic religions are expectedly similar or even identical, often sharing common roots with various Mesopotamian cultures. On the other hand, many of them were either initially influenced by or directly borrowed from Zoroastrianism. Also, notably, many of the Zoroastrian concepts and rituals themselves were imported from, or moulded by, elements belonging to the ancient Mesopotamians (Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians), including imageries such as the depiction of god Ashura and the Lamassu.

Many Quranic/Biblical stories, for example, had their origins in ancient Mesopotamian myths, in particular the creation myth, the Garden of Eden, the flood myth, the Tower of Babel and the legends of figures like Nimrod and Lilith. The story of Moses' origin resembles that of Sargon of Akkad, and the Ten Commandments mirror Assyrian-Babylonian legal codes.

Let us consider two famous examples in this regard: the story of Adam and the story of Noah.

The Quranic story of Adam is a re-narration of the Genesis myth that the Old Testament writers seem to have originally borrowed from the ancient Sumerians. Both the Genesis myth and the Sumerian myth have a beautiful garden (paradise) as their common setting. Both mention the garden being watered by heavenly rain. Both narrate the consumption of a forbidden fruit and the curse befallen those who consumed it. Both have similarities in mentioning the creation of the female in relation to the male's rib – though, while the biblical female was created from it, the Sumerian female was created to heal it. The Biblical name Eve (Hawa) means life and thus tracks the Sumerian equivalence, Ninti, which means 'lady of life'.

Likewise, the story of Noah in the Quran is a re-narration of the Pentateuchal flood story which parallels many ancient Mesopotamian flood myths inscribed on tablets that are hundreds of years older than the Bible – including a Sumerian myth of 2800 BC, where the flood hero is the priest king Ziusudra, and the Epic of Gilgamesh of 2100 BC, where the Ark-builder is Utnapishtim. ...

However, while the Quran renarrates these stories as *parables* or *mathal* of earlier generations, with intent to deliver a range of deeper messages in a figurative way, their hadith-based literalistic readings have misinterpreted them as real or historical accounts, thus causing serious impact on traditional Islam.