

Heaven and Hell in Islamic Thought

The afterlife is an inevitable reality in Islam, Christianity and some African Traditional Religions. Though these three religions view heaven and hell differently.

The Qur'an is consistent in its emphasis that "the alternative for each individual at the Day of Judgment are two: the bliss of the garden or the torment of the fire." Those who cross the *sirat* successfully enter heaven and those who fall off of it are thrown into the abyss of hell. In addition to the Qur'anic emphasis on the reality of these two destinies, the Qur'an (and of course Islamic tradition) provides an elaborate depiction of heaven and hell. Concerning the torments of hell, the Qur'an declares: "For it is a tree That springs out Of the bottom of Hellfire: The shoots of its fruit-stalks Are like the heads Of devils." It continues: "then on the top of that They will be given A mixture of Boiling water. Then shall their return Be to the (Blazing) Fire" (Sura 37:62-68).⁹³

Further, when unbelievers see hell "from a place far off, They will hear its fury and its raging sigh." And "when they are cast, Bound together, into a

⁹³ Geisler & Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 121

Constricted place therein, they will plead for destruction there and then!" (25:12-13). Furthermore, it has fierce "boiling hot water" (55:44), with "a fierce Blast of Fire and Boiling Water, And in the shades Of Black Smoke" (56:42-43). "When they are cast therein, They will hear The (terrible) drawing in Of its breath Even as it blazes forth, Almost bursting with fury" (67:7-8). The people of the Fire are sighing, wailing, and wretched (11:106). Their scorched skins are constantly exchanged for new ones so that they can taste the torment anew (4:45). They drink festering water and though death appears on all sides, they are not able to die (14:16-17). People are linked together in chains of seventy cubits (69:30-32), wearing pitch for clothing and fire on their faces (14:50). Boiling water will be poured over their heads, melting their insides as well as their skins, and hooks of iron will drag them back should they try to escape (Sura 22:19-21).⁹⁴

On the other hand, heaven, which is usually referred to in the Qur'an as "Gardens of Felicity" (37:43), "is a place where believers find whatever their hearts desire." In heaven people will be "facing each other On Thrones (of dignity)," and they will drink "from a clear-flowing fountain, Crystal-white, of taste Delicious to those Who drink (thereof)." The

⁹⁴ Ibid., 122

faithful are promised the companionship of young and beautiful women. For "beside them will be Chaste women, restraining Their glances, with big eyes (Of wonder and beauty)" (37:48). "They will recline (with ease) On Thrones (of dignity) Arranged in ranks; And We [God] shall join them To Companions, with beautiful Big and lustrous eyes " (52:20; cf. also 56:22; 55:72; 44:54). They are content, peaceful, and secure. They do not engage in idle talk and experience only peace. None will ever taste death. "Rather, they will enjoy gentle speech, pleasant shade, and ever available fruit, as well as all the cool drink and meat they desire. They will drink from a shining stream of delicious wine, from which they will suffer no intoxicating aftereffects" (37:45-47). The faithful will wear armlets of gold and pearls as well as green and gold embroidered robes of the finest silk, and will be waited on by menservants (cf. 52:24; 56:17; 74:19).⁹⁵

Other components of paradise include tall, shady trees laden with an unceasing supply of fruit that hangs within reach, and is not forbidden. The blessed, with their spouses (Q 36:56) will be seated comfortably (*muttaki'in*, often mistranslated as "reclining"), on upholstered seats (*surur*, Q 56:15) and *arā'ik* (Q 83:23), which are things to sit on, not beds but chairs. Seated on them, the people of

⁹⁵ Ibid

paradise will look around (yanzurūn, Q 83:23, 35), clearly enjoying the scene around them. There will be what delights the eyes (Q 43:71) and nothing to jar the ears: “There you will hear no idle talk” (Q 88:1), “no vain or lying talk” (Q 78:35). They will wear green silk garments and gold and silver bracelets (Q 18:31, 76:21).⁹⁶

However, it is clear throughout the Quran that there are two essential qualifications for entry into paradise: īmān (“belief”) and ‘amal ṣāliḥ (“good deeds”), which frequently collocate in the Quran making it clear that one without the other is not enough. Paradise is a reward for “what [the blessed believers] have done” (Q 56:24). So fundamental is ‘amal’ that “God has created death and life to test you and reveal which of you is better in actions” (Q 67:2).⁹⁷

In Islam, paradise is *achieved* by good deeds – a life of strict abstinence from self-indulgence. If the good deeds of a man outweighs his evil deeds, he may be granted admittance to paradise. This view runs contrary to what the Bible teaches. For as much as the Bible encourages God deeds, they are not the

⁹⁶ Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, ed., *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, vol.1 (Boston: Brill, 2017), 59

⁹⁷ Ibid, 51

yardstick or condition for entering heaven. Good deeds are the fruits of the transformation that has taken place in a believer's heart, having accepted Jesus into his heart. They are proofs that he has become a new man in Christ, not the condition for entering paradise. Otherwise, the redemptive work of Christ will be in vain, since salvation and admittance into heaven can be earned through good deeds.

Since every theistic religion generally believes that God is sinless, perfectly holy and righteous, all human righteousness is compared to a filthy rag when likened to His perfect holiness and righteousness. Hence, every human tendency to claim self-righteousness before the perfectly holy and righteous God is totally crushed. Such self-righteous posture before God is arrogance and foolishness at its best. Therefore, since the all-righteous God will not put up with our unrighteousness, He lovingly gives us the gift of His righteousness through Jesus Christ.

Through the death of Jesus on the cross, our sins were atoned for, and totally forgiven. The assurance of salvation and divine forgiveness offered to every sinner who would accept God's offer of salvation is what gives Christians the hope of an eternal abode in the paradise of God. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). John Stott maintains: "Christianity is a religion of salvation, and there is

nothing in the other religions of the world to compare with this message of a God who loved, and came after, and died for, a world of lost sinners.”⁹⁸ Christianity is more of what God has *done* for us than what we can *do* for God.

Heaven and Hell: African Concepts

Historically, Africa is heir to a triple heritage of religion and culture: namely African traditional religions, Islam, and Christianity. As early as the first century C.E, most of North Africa was part of the Roman Empire and therefore part of Christendom. Later on, the region came under Islamic influence, and today much of North Africa is Islamic and culturally Arabic. Meanwhile, communities like those of the Swahili of East Africa present a religio-cultural hybridity a result of years of blending indigenous African cultures with Islamic ones. Needless to say, Africans who have come into contact with Islam and Christianity have been influenced by the rather sharply defined eschatological notions featuring a final judgment, heaven and hell, and final resurrection as destinies of the soul. Muslims, for example, are encouraged to persevere through earthly tribulations in view of the "day of the Resurrection" when a judgment will be made in their favour,

⁹⁸ Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 13

assuming they live a righteous this-worldly life (see Qur'ān, sūrah III:185).⁹⁹

African belief systems have been most palpably influenced and shaped by the encounter with nineteenth-century missionary Christianity. This Christianity was articulated in terms of Western culture, and its introduction coincided with the colonization of Africa. Moreover, for the most part assuming a radical difference between themselves and their worldviews and the Africans and their worldviews, and convinced of the need to convert Africans from their allegedly "primitive" and therefore "inadequate" or even "wrong" beliefs, missionaries deliberately tried to erase African beliefs and practices and to replace these with ostensibly Christian ones. This process had a tremendous impact on all aspects of African beliefs, including notions of the afterlife, our immediate concern here.¹⁰⁰

Teresa Mbari Hinga further explains:

Symbolized by the physical head, *ori* is also connected with God, *Olódùmarè*, who is the source of all being and before whom one's *ori* kneels to receive one's destiny prior to

⁹⁹ Teresa Mbari Hinga, *Afterlife: African Concepts* <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/afterlife-african-concepts> (accessed 26 April, 2021).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

being born into this world. One's ori, therefore, is the essence of one's personality as it controls and guides one's life according to the destiny received prior to birth. At the end of one's physical life, one will give an account of one's earthly conduct before Olódùmarè (God) who will determine one's postmortem existence either in the "Orun rere " (Paradise or good orun) or "Orun apadi " (hell or Orun of the Potsherds), where one suffers a wretched afterlife. According to Bolaji Idowu, life in the "good Orun" is but a larger and freer copy of this worldly life, minus earthly pains and tribulations. The best postmortem reward is a reunion with one's relatives who have died before, particularly ancestors, the Ara Orun (Idowu, 1994, p. 177). Although Idowu presented this idea of afterlife in the context of traditional Yoruba society, it is important to note that some scholars have questioned this apparently theological explication of the Yoruba notion of afterlife. The notion may be due to the strong influence of Islam and Christianity on Yoruba culture at the time Idowu collected his materials.¹⁰¹

Hinga concludes:

It would seem, then, that contemporary debates about the afterlife in Africa are simultaneously discussions about this world and this life. It

¹⁰¹ Ibid

would seem also that the emphasis by Africans on a this-worldly and corporate approach to salvation resonates significantly with the prior key affirmations about God and the world in the African worldview. As we recall, Africans believe that the destiny of the individual and the community are interdependent, interconnected, and intertwined. Africans also believe in a universe that is in process of formation and transformation, and therefore life means being involved in a process of becoming, together. Moreover, in the African view, to be is to participate in an ongoing dance of life propelled by God's creative and sustaining power. This dance is only interrupted, not ended, by physical death. In the African worldview, then, notions about the "afterlife" and notions of "this life" complement and flow into one another.¹⁰²

Heaven and Hell in Christian Thought

The Bible teaches the existence of heaven, a place of eternal joy, where Christians are in the presence of God. The Bible also speaks of hell (specifically Gehenna, or the lake of fire), a state of anguished separation of unbelievers from the presence of God. These are fixed states, determined by decisions made

¹⁰² Ibid

within this life.¹⁰³ In the meanwhile, believers look forward to a new heaven and a new earth with the New Jerusalem. There will be no tears, sorrow, pain, death, and night there because the Son of God will be there (Rv 21:1–4, 27; 22:1–5), and in the resurrected state there will be no marrying or giving in marriage (Lk 20:27–38).¹⁰⁴

Heaven is a place of absolute purity, joy, bliss, rest and glory. It is so glorious that no human word can adequately describe its splendour. Believers shall forever enjoy an unimpaired fellowship with God, and He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Luke 16:19-31 gives us a glimpse of the two world—heaven and hell.

However, worthy of note is the intermediate state—that state of the soul between physical death and the Resurrection. For the believer, the Resurrection will occur at Christ’s Coming: for the unbeliever, it will not occur until after the Millennium at the Final Judgment. When unbelievers die they go at once to Hades which is the abode of the wicked dead. The intermediate state of the righteous is called

¹⁰³ Walter A. Elwell; Comfort, Philip Wesley: *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001 (Tyndale Reference Library), 442

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*

“paradise.” When the righteous die they go immediately to be in the presence of Christ Jesus.

Also of great joy for believers in Christ is the thought of the rapture of the saints, when Jesus our Lord shall appear in the sky and snatch believers away from the earth before the great tribulation that is coming upon the earth. Believers shall be given a glorified, celestial body, and we shall be caught up with Christ in the air. This shall be one of the greatest events of all times.

Jesus promised His disciples, “I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may be also” (Jn. 14:3). Paul wrote: “... the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. ...” (1 Thes. 4:16b, 17) Jesus spoke also of great tribulation, “For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Mt. 24:21). This Great Tribulation is described in detail in the book of Revelation, chapters six through nineteen. (See also Dn. 12:1.) The tribulation will be caused by Satan, through the agency of one called variously: “the beast” (Rv.13:1), the “antichrist” (1 Jn. 2:18), the “man of sin” and the “son of perdition” (2 Thes. 2:3), and the “little horn” (Dn. 7:8).

The Great Tribulation will be concluded by the Battle of Armageddon and the Revelation of Jesus as

King of Kings, who will come with His armies of saints to bring judgment upon the “beast” and his followers (Rv. 19:11–21). The Great Tribulation is followed by the Millennial Reign of Christ, the Final Judgment, and the Eternal State (Rv. 20–22).¹⁰⁵

The Apostle Paul gives the rapture of the saints a clearer picture in 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52: “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

Believers may receive one or more crowns – the crown of life (James 1:12), the crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4), and the crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8). Those who have been won for Christ through our witness become our crown of rejoicing (1 Thess. 2:19). Through all of this, the centre of heaven will be God Himself, the Lord of heaven. Those around His throne are pictured as being in such awe that they cast their crowns before Him, and say, “You are worthy, our Lord and God” (Rev. 4:11).¹⁰⁶

On the other hand, the Bible also talks about the “Great Tribulation”. This refers to God’s final wrath upon the Antichrist and the Gentile nations that

¹⁰⁵ Duffield et. al., *Foundation for Pentecostal Theology*, 528

¹⁰⁶ Little, *Know What You Believe*, 145

follow him (Rv. 6:12–17). It is also called the “Great Day of His Wrath.” The reason the rapture has to take place before the great day of God’s wrath is because God has promised to keep the church saints from (Gr., *ek*, “out of”) the tribulation period (Rv. 3:10; 1 Thes. 5:9). 1 Thes. 5:9 reads: “*For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (emphasis mine).

However, principal events of the Tribulation shall include:

1. *The removal of the Church and the Restrainer of evil* (2 Thes. 2:1, 7, 8).
2. *Restoration of the daily sacrifice in a rebuilt temple by covenant with the Antichrist* (Dn. 9:27).
3. *Outpouring of judgments resulting from the opening of the seven seals* (Rv. 6:1–8:1).
4. *Outpouring of judgments from the sounding of the seven trumpets* (Rv. 8:6–11:15).
5. *The taking away of the daily sacrifice by the Antichrist, and the setting up of the abomination of desolation* (Dn. 9:27; 12:10, 11; Mt. 24:15). (This happens in the middle of the seven years, which are divided into two parts of three and one half years: Rv. 11:2, 3; Dn. 9:27, 12:11; Rv. 12:14. The latter half is considered to be the “Great Tribulation.”)
6. *Increased persecution of Israel* (Rv. 12); *144,000 Jews from the twelve tribes are sealed* (Rv. 7:1–8); *an innumerable company of Tribulation saints, from all nations, converted during the Tribulation, are taken to Heaven* (Rv. 7:9–17).
7. *Total control by the Beast and the False Prophet; the introduction of the mark of the Beast and his*

number, with compulsory worship of the Beast's image (Rv. 13).

8. The judgments resulting from the outpouring of the seven vials of wrath (Rv. 15, 16).

9. Judgment upon the Harlot, mystery Babylon (Rv. 17, 18), who probably represents apostate religion.

(After the Rapture of the true Church, organized religion with a “form of godliness but denying the power thereof” will become increasingly corrupt, even aligning herself with the Beast’s government.)

10. Gathering of the kings of the East and armies of the Antichrist (Beast) to make war with the remnant of Israel, resulting in the Battle of Armageddon (Rv. 12:17, 16:12–16).

11. Celebration of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rv. 19:6–9).

12. Christ returns with His armies of saints to confront the Beast and his armies, and the Beast's armies are destroyed by the brightness of Christ's Coming (Rv. 19:14–21; 2 Thes. 2:8).

13. The Beast and the False Prophet are cast into the Lake of Fire (Rv. 19:20).

14. Satan is cast into the Bottomless Pit (the abyss) for one thousand years (Rv. 20:1–3).¹⁰⁷

The Bible is also clear about the final destiny of the wicked and everyone who rejects God and His Son, Jesus Christ. Hell is the final destiny of the wicked. It is a place reserved for Satan and his cohort, and everyone who rejects God’s offer of salvation, through His Son, Jesus Christ. Hell is a place or state

¹⁰⁷ Duffield et. al., *Foundation for Pentecostal Theology*, 52.

of everlasting fire (Mark 9:43). It is a place of unending torment, woe, anguish, and despair. It is also conceived of as a place of utter darkness and everlasting punishment.

Some have attempted to minimize the horror of hell as described in the scriptures, but their opinions do not change anything in this regard. The Jehovah's Witnesses even blatantly reject the biblical teachings of hell, saying God cannot be so wicked to send anyone to hell. To deny this clear biblical teaching is to deny that there is judgment at all. The idea of judgment is explicit in Scripture.

Believers will be judged, but not with unbelievers: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10).¹⁰⁸ According to William Evans, "This is a judgment, not for destiny, but for adjustment, for reward or loss, according to our works, for position in the kingdom – every man according as his work shall be."¹⁰⁹

John describes the final judgment of the unsaved at the Great White Throne of God in Rev. 20:11-12: "I saw a great white throne and him who sat on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book

¹⁰⁸ Little, *Know What You Believe*, 143

¹⁰⁹ William Evans, *The Great Doctrines of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1949), 254

of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books”. Also intriguing is the fact that Satan will also be judged (see Rev. 20:10).

Therefore, hell is reserved for Satan and the unsaved who rejects God and His Son. This is a clear and unequivocal teaching of the scripture. If there is no judgment for wickedness, God then ceases to be just, but God is just and His justice and holiness will not permit Him to simply overlook sin. Every sin and act of obedience must be judged. However, anyone who goes to hell will be there, not because God hates him so much, but simply because he *chose* to reject God’s offer of salvation.

The good news is that God has provided the way of escape through His Son, Jesus Christ: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (emphasis mine).

Finally, heaven is for those who have given their lives to Jesus by confessing Him as their Lord and Saviour, while hell is reserved for everyone who refuse to accept God’s offer of salvation through His Son Jesus Christ. In other religions, good deed is emphasized as the condition for entering heaven, but in Christianity, it is not about our good works, but about the finished work of Christ. Accepting Him by faith is what gives us entrance into heaven (His kingdom), but by our good works, because we are incapable of earning our salvation, neither can we

merit heaven through good works – salvation is God’s gift, not a reward for good works.

For further reading:

Netton, Ian Richard, *Islam, Christianity and Tradition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2006.

Francisco, Adam S., *Martin Luther and Islam*.
Boston: Brill, 2007.

Study/Discussion Questions

1. How has Jesus touched your life and the lives of people around you?
2. Does the Bible teaching about heaven and hell increase your commitment to Jesus or it makes you uncomfortable?

