

REVIEW ARTICLE

Eternal Destinies: A Comparative Analysis of Eschatological Perspectives in Islam and Hinduism

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Abstract

This research paper provides an in-depth analysis of eschatological viewpoints within Islam and Hinduism, delving into both their differences and similarities in terms of the afterlife, judgment, and salvation. In Islam, a linear eschatological paradigm is presented, which signifies a Day of Judgment where individuals are either rewarded with Paradise or Hell based on their deeds in the worldly life and their belief. On the other hand, Hinduism offers a cyclical understanding of existence, wherein a soul reincarnates driven by *karma* until it achieves *moksha*, which is the liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Despite their distinct eschatological perspectives, both faiths aim to address the ultimate fate of the soul and the moral implications of human actions. By drawing parallels between these two religious traditions, this study seeks to enhance the comprehension of how diverse theological contexts contribute to shaping beliefs about the destiny of the soul. Moreover, the examination of these eschatological viewpoints provides valuable insights into the broader understanding of spiritual and moral implications in both Islam and Hinduism.

Keywords: Eschatology, Comparative Studies, Islam, Hinduism.

1. Introduction

Afterlife, as a concept, pertains to the belief in an existence after the end of one's physical life. This belief is deeply rooted in various religious traditions and is influenced by their respective doctrines and teachings (Chaplin, 2000). The notion of life after death holds a significant place in the framework of many religious belief systems, serving as a cornerstone that gives meaning to an individual's present life on earth. It is a reflection of the profound impact that religion has on shaping an individual's perspective of the world, subsequently shaping their convictions regarding existence beyond death. The idea of an afterlife is a recurring theme in the teachings of almost all major world religions, albeit with diverse interpretations and manifestations across different faiths (Stark & Bainbridge, 1996).

2. Impact of Beliefs about Life after Death on Human Life

Religion and its concepts play a crucial role in shaping the belief in life after death (Chaplin, 2000). The belief in life after death is considered a foundational aspect of many religious belief systems, particularly those discussed in this study. This belief imbues life on earth with meaning and underscores the level of importance an individual assigns to religion in understanding the world, which in turn influences the strength of their belief in life after death. The nature of one's beliefs regarding life after death not only informs various religious practices and institutions, but also governs the way an individual leads their life. The concept of life after death suggests a direct relationship between one's earthly existence and the hereafter. Life after death is considered a realm of reward and punishment

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and is a fundamental tenet across most major religions (Obayashi, 1992). This concept is extensively explored in the sacred scriptures of Islam and Hinduism.

The belief in life after death significantly impacts individuals' lives, and research has shown a strong belief in it to be associated with improved psychological well-being (Silton et al., 2011). Uncertainty about the afterlife often leads to increased distress and intrusive thoughts, similar to posttraumatic stress, following a loss (Carr & Sharp, 2014). Unpleasant beliefs about the afterlife were strongly linked to poorer mental health whereas pleasant afterlife beliefs were associated with better mental health (Flannelly et al., 2008). Additionally, studies have indicated that a strong belief in life after death is negatively correlated with depression, anxiety, and other psychological issues (Flannelly et al., 2006). Furthermore, tranquillity and self-possession have been found to positively correlate with the belief in life after death (Ellison et al., 2009). Previous research suggests that religious participation and belief in the afterlife may enhance cooperative behaviors and mutual assistance (Rezvani Nejad et al., 2021).

Actions and consequences in this life have a significant impact on life after death. Conversely, belief in life after death also influences one's actions in this life. A person who disbelieves in life after death may find that his belief in God or the life he led, driven by a deep sense of purpose, lacks coherence. There will be no motivation for his sufferings and trials in this life, and no reward for patience. The injustices that one faces in life would be intolerable if mankind were to believe that there was nothing beyond death. Human beings are constantly tested in different ways. Belief in life after death serves as a source of optimism, security, and improvement. It provides more courage and confidence to those who lead pious lives in this world, giving them hope that something much better awaits them for their right conduct.

3. Concept of Life after Death in Islam

In Islam, the concept of life after death holds significant importance, as it shapes the beliefs and practices of Muslims. The afterlife, according to Islamic teachings, is a realm where individuals undergo judgment by Allah, the ultimate judge, based on their actions and conduct in the earthly life. This divine

judgment serves as the decisive factor in determining the eternal destiny of each individual. It is believed that those who have lived righteous and virtuous lives will be rewarded with entry into *Jannah*, also known as Paradise, where they will experience eternal bliss and tranquility. Conversely, individuals who have led a life of wrongdoing and transgression will face the consequences of their actions in *Jahannam*, which is the Islamic concept of Hell, signifying eternal suffering and anguish. The concept of Islamic eschatology has been elucidated below:

3.1 Barzakh

After a man experiences the world, as long as it is decreed by Allah, he moves to the first world of reward or penalty in the afterlife. Once an individual dies, their deeds cease, except for three types of recurring and rewarding benefits for which they are the cause. These are continuing charity, beneficial knowledge, and righteous children who pray for them.¹ The deceased then remains in the *barzakh*, also known as the 'bridge', which is the world between their death and the Day of Resurrection. The term *barzakh* occurs three times in the Quran. In 25:53 and 55:20, *barzakh* is referred to as a partition between two seas. The third occurrence is in 23:100, which is of particular importance here. The verse states: "That I might do righteousness in that which I left behind." No! It is only a word he is saying; and behind them is a barrier until the Day they are resurrected."² This verse applies the concept of a barrier to eschatology and death.

The interrogation commences immediately after the burial of the deceased. The Prophet would stand near the grave and instruct the people to seek forgiveness for the departed, as they will be questioned. The two angels responsible for the questioning approach the deceased and inquire about his Lord, beliefs, Prophet, and religion. A satisfactory response results in a positive outcome, while a failure leads to severe punishment. These angels, known as *Munkar* and *Nakir*, question the deceased about his faith. According to Islamic belief, Allah supports and strengthens the believers during this process. The righteous believer will confidently affirm the oneness of Allah and the prophethood of Muhammad, while the unrighteous one will be filled with fear. Furthermore, it is believed that a door to Paradise will be opened for the believer and a door to Hell for the disbeliever.^{3 4 5 6}

¹ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin/6/56> Riyad as-Salihin Book 6, Hadith 56

² All Quran references are retrieved from <https://quran.com/>. Translation by Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali & Muhammad Muhsin Khan.

³ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/mishkat/1/126> Mishkat al-Masabih, Book 1, Hadith 126

⁴ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/42/158> Sunan Abi Dawud 475, Book 42, Hadith 158

⁵ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/mishkat/1/123> Mishkat al-Masabih, Book 1, Hadith 123

⁶ Hadith narrated by Baraa' ibn Aazib (ra). The Hadith can be found in Mishkat al-Masabih 1630 Book 5, Hadith 106 Graded Sahih by Al-Albani: <https://sunnah.com/mishkat/5/106> Also narrated by al-Hakim in al-Mustadrak (1/93) and classified as Sahih by Shaykh al-Albani in Ahkam al-Jana'iz (no. 108)

The believer will have the opportunity to observe their place in *Jannah* while the disbeliever will have the opportunity to observe their place in *Jahannam*. The grave of the believer will be expanded as far as the eye can see, whereas the grave of the disbeliever will be constricted. The good deeds will appear in the form of a dignified, well-dressed, pleasantly-scented figure who will bring positive news. Conversely, the bad deeds will manifest in the form of a poorly-dressed, unpleasantly-odorous figure who will bring distressing news. According to the Hadith of al-Bara' ibn 'Azib, the disbeliever will be subject to punishment with an iron chain until they disintegrate into dust. The people of *Jannah* will welcome the good soul, and it will be given glad tidings. As for the evil soul, there will be no such welcome, and they will only receive bad tidings. The believer will also be shown the Hellfire from which he was saved, and the disbeliever will be shown a glimpse of Paradise which he was denied.⁷ The angels perceive the fragrance of the believer's soul and greet it as they would a family member.⁸ As for the disbeliever, the angels of wrath will come to him with sackcloth, and they will be called to Allah's wrath.⁹ An individual will be shown their place in *Jannah* or *Jahannam* continuously (Quran 40: 46). This is also mentioned in a Hadith of the Prophet ﷺ.¹⁰ The animals can also hear the voices of those who are being punished in the graves.¹¹ The grave of the disbelievers will be filled with darkness.¹² The living cannot hear the punishment of the grave.¹³ The grave of the believer will be well illuminated, and they will rest peacefully in their grave, longing to share this good news with their family.¹⁴ The answers given by the believer in the grave will be a result of Allah's aid¹⁵ (Quran 14: 27).

3.2 The Day of Judgment

The Day of Judgment is the day of final assessment of mankind's life on earth. The topic of the last judgment (mentioned as *yawm al-deen* or *yawmal-qiyaamah* in the Quran) is one of the most significant themes in the Quran. It repeatedly appears in various

forms, especially in the initial Meccan surahs which are dominated by the idea of the approaching day of judgment when all the creation will be judged. Belief in the Day of Judgment, along with the associated belief in Paradise for those who have done good deeds and in Hell for those who disbelieved in Allah and did evil, is one of the pillars of Imaan.¹⁶ Numerous verses of the Quran state that those who trust Allah and the Day of Judgment are considered to be believers (2:62; 3:114; 4:162) and those who refuse this are considered as having strayed or those who have disbelieved (4:136). One of the purposes of the abundance of such verses in the Meccan surahs was to grant solace and comfort to the Muslims who were undergoing persecution for their faith. The *Ahadith* also provide additional emphasis on the importance of belief in the resurrection.

The most recurrently occurring terms that refer to the last day in the Makkan surahs are "Day of Resurrection" (*yawm al-qiyaamah*) and "Day of Judgment" (*yawm ad-deen*) (Quran 1:4; 15:35). In the Madinan surahs, the dominant terms are 'the last day' (*al-yawm al-aakhir*) like in 2:8; 3:114; 4:38 and *al-aakhirah*. The Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyaamah*) is also known as *al-yawm al-aakhir*, since there is no day after it. Many terms in the Quran are synonymous with the term *yawm al-deen*. Some additional names of the Day of Judgement include: "the hour" (*al-saa'a*, like in 6:31; 7:187); "the day of regret" (*yawm al-hasra*, 19:39); "the day of decision" (*yawm al-fasl*, 37:21; 78:17); "the day of account" (*yawm al-hisaab*, 38:16, 40:27) and "the day when the accounting will be established" (*yawma yaqoomul-hisaabu*, 14:41); "the day of meeting" (*yawm altalaq*, 40:15); "the day of approaching" (*yawm al-azifa*, 40:18); "the day of calling" (*yawm al-tanaadi*: 40:32); "the occurrence" (*al-waaqi'ah*, 56:1); "the day of deprivation" (*yawm al-taghaabun*, 64:9); "the inevitable reality" (*al-haaqqa*, 69:1); "the promised day" (*al-yawm al-mawood*, 85:2) and 'the overwhelming event' (*al-ghaashiya*, 88:1).

⁷ Ibn Majah. Also found in al-Albani, Sahih al-Jami; no. 1964, and al-Targhib wa'l-Tarhib

⁸ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/nasai/21/16> Sunan an-Nasa'i, Vol. 3, Book 21, Hadith 1834

⁹ Ibn Majah with a Sahih Isnad. Also found in al-Albani, Sahih al-Targhib wa'l-Tarhib

¹⁰ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/59/51> Sahih al-Bukhari 3240, Vol. 4, Book 54, Hadith 463

¹¹ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/80/63> Sahih al-Bukhari 6366, Vol. 8, Book 75, Hadith 377

¹² Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/muslim/11/93> Sahih Muslim 956, Book 11, Hadith 93

¹³ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/nasai/21/242> Sunan an-Nasa'i 2058, Vol. 3, Book 21, Hadith 2060

¹⁴ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/search?q=seventy+cubits+by+seventy> Jami' at-Tirmidhi 1071, Vol. 2, Book 5, Hadith 1071

¹⁵ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/urn/641370> Jami' at-Tirmidhi, Vol. 5, Book 44, Hadith 3120

¹⁶ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/muslim/1/5> Sahih Muslim 8 e, Book 1, Hadith 5

The Quran contains rich references to the Day of Judgment, although they are not presented in a sequential manner as with most topics. The different phases of the Day of Resurrection are mentioned in various surahs, sometimes explicitly and at other times allegorically. Muslim scholars have established a general sequence with the aid of the Quran and Hadith. Additionally, the Quran includes a variety of references to the timing of the day of judgment, notably: a) nobody, including the Prophet ﷺ, knows when it will occur, as only Allah knows its exact time (7:187; 31:34; 33:63); b) “the hour” (*alsaa’a*) may be very close (21:1); c) it is “a glance of the eye or even nearer” (16:77); d) it will occur unexpectedly (6:31).

Numerous signs of the Last Judgment are mentioned in the Quran, particularly in the Makkan *surahs*. These include natural catastrophes such as the sun darkening, stars falling, and mountains being removed (81:1-14). Other signs are the neglect of full-term she-camels, the gathering of wild beasts, seas turning to flames, and souls being paired with their bodies. Additional signs include the rising of the sun from the west, the arrival of the Antichrist, the descent of Isa (as), and the appearance of the *daabbah* (27:82). Landslides in three regions and a fire from Yemen will drive humanity to the gathering place. The appearance of Gog and Magog and prophecies of wars also feature in these eschatological signs.^{17 18 19 20 21}

3.3. Events On The Day Of Judgement

Day of Resurrection in 39:67-75. According to these verses, on that day, Allah will seize the earth and fold up the heavens. The trumpet will sound twice: first, causing all creation to die except those whom God wills, and second, bringing everyone back to life. The earth will illuminate with Allah’s light, and the record of deeds will be presented, with Prophets and witnesses summoned for judgment. Each soul will undergo judgement and receive appropriate rewards or punishment. Disbelievers will be driven to Hell, where they will be interrogated by its keepers (39:71), while the faithful will be admitted into Paradise, where they will reside eternally (39:73).

¹⁷ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/65/158> Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 6, Book 60, Hadith 160

¹⁸ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin/18/4> Riyad as-Salihin, Book 18, Hadith 4

¹⁹ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/46/37> Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 3, Book 43, Hadith 656

²⁰ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/muslim/54/51> Sahih Muslim, Book 41, Hadith 6931

²¹ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/39/21> Sunan Abi Dawud, Book 39, Hadith 21

²² Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin/introduction/409> Riyad as-Salihin 409

²³ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah/37/175> Sunan Ibn Majah, Vol. 5, Book 37, Hadith 4274

²⁴ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/42/152> Sunan Abi Dawud, Book 41, Hadith 4729

The sequence of events on Day of Judgment day are not laid out in order, but scholars have attempted to make a sequence which is presented below:

- a) The Trumpet, mentioned in the Quran (74:8), will be sounded by Israfil. After the first sounding, “whoever is in the heavens and on the earth will fall dead except whom Allah wills” (39:68). Generally, it is believed there will be two soundings: one for unconsciousness (*nafkhat al-sa’q*) and one for resurrection (*nafkhat al-ba’th*). Some sources suggest a third sounding, the alarming (*nafkhat al-faza’*), based on Quranic passages (27:87-88). Hadiths also note that the Prophet ﷺ will be the first resurrected but will see Musa (as) holding one of Allah’s Throne pillars.^{22 23}
- b) The returning to life. It must be noted that some are of the opinion that returning to life (*al-ba’th*) is understood as the “resurrection of the souls and bodies” (Ibn Kathir, 2000).
- c) All creatures, including humans, jinn, and animals, will be gathered (6:38; 42:29; 81:5). Humankind will be gathered “barefoot, naked, and uncircumcised” (7:29; 21:104). Unbelievers will be driven to Hell on their faces (25:34). The Prophet ﷺ responded to doubts about this, stating: “Will not the One Who made him walk on his feet in this world be able to make him walk on his face on the Day of Resurrection?”²⁴
- d) Standing before Allah, all of Allah’s creation will stand before Him (78:38). The disbelievers will stand in the blazing sun and will find no shade anywhere (56:42-3 and 77:29-31)
- e) The review (11:18). This is the settling of accounts as well as questioning.
- f) Each individual’s record of deeds will be opened (17:13). Those who receive their record in their right hand will enter *Jannah*, while those with their record in their left hand will be cast into Hell (69:19-37). Some will receive their books behind their backs and wish for their own destruction (84:10-11). Allah may also transform some people’s wrongful deeds into righteous ones (25:70).

- g) The principle of justice dictates that equilibrium will be established (21:47). “The assessment of actions on that Day will be based on truth. Those whose deeds carry great weight will achieve success, whereas those whose deeds are light will suffer due to their injustice” (7:8-9).
- h) Creation will bear witness against individuals (6:130), with their eyes, ears, tongues, hands, legs, and skin testifying (24:24; 41:22). Prophets will testify against those who rejected their messages (5:109), and Isa v will witness against those who wronged him, including those who falsely believed he was crucified or the son of Allah (4:159).
- i) According to the Quranic verses 7:6 and 5:109, it is stated that Allah will question the Prophets and Messengers regarding their people and the responses they received. Additionally, in verses 34:40-41, it is mentioned that the Angels will also be questioned about those who worshipped them.
- j) On that day, intercession (*shafaa’u*) will only be accepted from those granted permission by Allah (2:254; 10:3). *Al-Kawthar* (108:1) refers to a river in Paradise granted to the Prophet ﷺ and a cistern in the place of assembly from which believers will drink ²⁴(Al-Munajjid, 2003).
- k) A bridge (*siraat*) is referenced to span across Hell (37:22-23). According to Hadiths, this bridge is described in detail, including the manner in which people will cross it, with some passing swiftly and others crawling.²⁵

3.4 Paradise (Jannah)

The Quran outlines life after death in connection with the Day of Judgment, where individuals are resurrected and judged based on their deeds (52:21). Paradise (*Jannah*) is for the virtuous, while Hell (*Jahannam*) punishes the sinful. The hereafter is an eternal physical realm with living, sentient beings. Paradise is depicted as a garden with gates guarded by doorkeepers (39:73), where the righteous dwell eternally with their spouses (35:35; 43:71). It features lush vegetation, shady trees (56:28-30), everlasting fruits (13:35), fountains (15:45), and a moderate climate (76:13). *Jannah*, meaning “garden,”²⁶ implies concealed bliss (32:17). Other names for Paradise include ‘*adn*, *jannaat al-ma’waa*, *daar as-salaam* (6:127), *jannat al-khuld* (25:15), and *daar al-aakhira* (40:39). Surah al-Waaqiah (56th chapter) describes resurrection day, identifying three groups for paradise:

‘the people of the right hand’ (56:8, 27, 38, 90, 91), ‘the forerunners’ (56:10), and ‘the ones brought near’ (56:11).]

3.5 Rewards in Paradise

The most recurrently mentioned reward emphases on gardens beneath which rivers flow such as 47:15 of the Quran describes four rivers flowing in paradise. Some springs of Paradise have specific names like one is called *Kawthar* (108:1), another one is called *Salsabeel* (76:18); a third is called *Tasneem* (83:27). Other rewards that await the believers in Paradise are young boys serving wine (56:17), thrones to recline on (15:47, 37:44), green attires of brocade and silk (18:31, 76:21), bracelets of gold and silver (18:31, 22:23), fruit (2:25, 36:57), wine that does not cause intoxication (47:15, 37:45), containers of silver and cups of crystal (76:15), trays and plates of gold (43:71), pleasing weather (76:13), shade (4:57, 36:56), provision (37:41, 65:11), palaces (25:10), and whatever the believers desire and that which is delightful to the eyes (43:71, 50:35).

In the Quran, one can find general expressions, such as Allah’s pleasure (*ridwaan*, 3:15), His forgiveness (3:136), exoneration of evil deeds (3:195, 48:5), Allah’s protection from “the evil of that day” (76:11), the praise of Allah greetings of peace (10:9-11, 56:26). Verse 26 in chapter ten of the Quran promises *al-husnaa* and *ziyaada* ‘to the doers of good’. This is interpreted to mean looking at Allah’s Face (Ibn Kathir, 2000). The reward of being granted the ability to look at the face of Allah can be drawn from other Quranic passage such as 75:22-23.

3.6 Hell (Jahannam)

The Quran describes Hell as a place of both physical and spiritual torment. Common names for Hell include “the fire” (*al-naar*) (2:24), “*Jahannam*” (2:206), “*as-saeer*” (the blaze) (4:10), and “*al-jaheem*” (the hot place) (2:119). It is depicted with flames (*lahab*) (77:31) and as burning (*adhaab al-hareeq*) (3:181). The term “*haawiyah*” (101:9) is later defined as “a Fire, intensely hot” (*naarun haamiyah*) (101:11). The concept of Hell is portrayed in religious texts as having layers both above and below (39:16), being enclosed (90:20), and with sparks reaching as high as forts (77:32). Its fuel is said to include humans, stones, disbelievers (3:10), unjust people (72:15), and polytheists (21:98). Descriptions of Hell often include references to black smoke (56:43), scorching heat (52:27; 56:42), and boiling water (56:42).

²⁵ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/42/152> Sunan Abi Dawud, Book 41, Hadith 4729

²⁶ Extracted from <https://sunnah.com/muslim/1/361> Sahih Muslim, Book 1, Hadith 361

Hell is frequently characterized as a wretched resting place (2:206) with coverings (7:41), and sinners are depicted as wandering between boiling water and Hell (55:43-44). It is often mentioned as having seven gates (15:44) and a path (*siraat al-jaheem*) (37:23). Additionally, Hell is described as being lower than Paradise, with the tree of *Zaqqoom* growing from its bottom (37:64). The inhabitants of Hell include: disbelievers (2:24), those who die in disbelief (2:161-162), apostates (3:86-91), hypocrites (4:140), idolaters (14:30), transgressors (40:43), the arrogant (7:36), those opposing Allah and His Messenger (9:63), those who treat religion as amusement (6:70), and those who die in sin without practicing their faith (4:97). Specific sinners include those who deny Allah's signs (2:39), break covenants (2:83-85), or deny the Day of Judgment (25:11-14). Particular sinners also include murderers (4:29-30), oppressors of believers (85:10), those who wrong orphans (4:10) or violate inheritance laws (4:12-14).

3.7 The Punishments in Hell

The Quran commonly refers to punishment as *adhaab*, often emphasizing its severity with phrases like *adhaab al-azeem* (2:7), *su'al-adhaab* (2:49), and *adhaabun shadeed* (3:4). Punishments include both physical and mental suffering, with *adhaab aleem* (2:10) describing bodily pain and *adhaab muheen* (3:178) referring to humiliation of the mind. Physical punishments in Hell affect all senses. The damned will see Hell (102:7), be forced back when attempting to escape (32:20), and endure fire that repeatedly burns and renews their skins (4:56). Their garments and faces will be fiery and black (22:19; 39:60), and they will wear chains (40:71). Boiling water will burn them (6:70), and the food will be the fruit of the *Zaqqoom* tree, likened to devil heads (37:65) or a discharge of wounds (69:36). Inhabitants of Hell are described as bound with fetters (14:49), cursing each other (7:38; 26:96-102), witnessing Paradise (7:44-50), and surrounded by what they once mocked (45:33), while Satan abandons them (14:22). They are overseen by nineteen harsh angels, *az-zabaaniya* (74:30-31; 96:18). Hell itself is personified, observing from afar (25:12), inviting rejecters (70:17), sobbing and raging (67:7-8), and speaking to ask if it is full and if there are more (50:30).

4. Concept of Life After Death in Hinduism

Hinduism is one of the ancient religions and very diverse internally. For many Hindus, death signifies a transition to another state, whether it be heaven,

hell, rebirth, or liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). This transition holds deep significance in Hindu beliefs, encompassing a variety of interpretations based on different spiritual paths. The most central theme of the concept life after death is the concept of multiple lifetimes that are influenced by an individual's *karma*. The concept of eschatology in Hinduism has been described below:

4.1 Karma, Samsara and Moksha

The concept of *karma* holds a central position in Hindu religious consciousness (Hutchinson & Sharp, 2008). It denotes the cycle of cause and effect and entails that righteous deeds produce good results, while evil actions produce bad results. Thus, individuals are responsible for their actions and the outcomes of those actions in their lives (Reichenbach, 1988). The law of *karma*, implies that the consequences of our actions, whether positive or negative, will eventually return to us (Davidson et. al., 2005). It suggests that one's deeds not only shape one's current circumstances but also influence one's future experiences, both in this life and in subsequent incarnations. *Karma* influences the duration of life, well-being, physical appearance, social standing, financial status, prosperity, and adversity (Reichenbach, 1988). This law underscores the interconnectedness of one's actions and their enduring impact on one's lives, emphasizing the importance of mindful behaviour and ethical conduct.

From the Vedic period, *karma* was seen as ritual action to appease the gods, managed by Brahmin specialists. In the Upanishadic era, it evolved into a broader ethical principle, recognizing that actions have consequences that affect one both psychologically and metaphysically, thus expanding *karma* to encompass all actions and their impact on life (Hamilton, 2001). The Hindu eschatological beliefs also include the concept of rebirths known as *samsara*. This entails a repeated cycles of birth and death through several lifetimes. The soul is considered immortal (Bhagavad Gita 2.13, 2.17-18). It is said to move through various bodies including plants, insects, animal and human forms (Hirst, 2005). An individual is bound to this repeated cycle of birth and death based on their *karma* until one attains *moksha*.

One lifetime is not considered sufficient to balance one's *karma* and usually takes several lifetimes. As mentioned in the Upanisads, the ultimate goal of Hinduism is to break the cycle of reincarnation and escape *samsara*, leading to the merging with Brahman. In Hinduism, the terms *moksha*, *nirvana* and *mukti*

(liberation) are used synonymously to describe release from *samsara*. It is considered as the fourth and ultimate *artha* (goal) of life and is achieved by performing righteous deeds and avoiding evil deeds. In order to approach *moksha*, there are three ways (*trimarga*) outlined in Hinduism namely: *bhaktimarga* (*moksha* through devotion to a chosen deity), *jnanamarga* (*moksha* through (*vidya*) knowledge), and *karmamarga* (actions done in accordance with one's *dharma* (religion) and righteous actions).

4.2 The Vedas

One of the oldest Hindu scriptures are the Vedas and comprises of the Rig Veda, Sam Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. In the Vedic tradition, death is considered a natural process. Fire rituals and hymns to deities were central to Aryan religion. Early texts suggest the deceased might ascend to heaven (*svarga*) with *Yama*, while later texts offer alternatives like scattering across the universe (Rig Veda 10.15.3), breaking into elements (Rig Veda 10.16.3), or living through descendants (Rig Veda 5.4.10). Cremation was typical, though burial was also mentioned (Rig Veda 10.18). The departed are guided by *Agni* and *Soma* through passages overseen by *Yama*, his dogs, and *Pusan* (Rig Veda 10.14.1-12; Atharva Veda 18.2.8). Heaven, governed by *Yama* and *Varuna*, reflects earthly life but is still bound by space and time. Ancestors, the Fathers, rely on sustenance from descendants (Rig Veda 6.75.9; Atharva Veda 6.120.3; Kane 1991), and one might reunite with loved ones in the afterlife (Atharva Veda 12.317, Kane 1991). *Sraddha* rituals place ancestors in different realms (Griffiths, 1889) based on merit or body parts scattered (Rig Veda 10.16.3; Atharva Veda 18.2.49). Rewards and punishments come from gods (Rig Veda 8.104.3; Atharva Veda 8.1.33), with no specific judgment day, and heaven (Rig Veda 10.14.2) is a reward for righteous deeds. Hell is specifically mentioned as a dark abyss or “*naraka-loka*” inhabited by demons (Atharva Veda 12.2.36; 2.14.3).

4.3 The Brahmanas

By the first millennium BC, Vedic rituals became more complex, overseen by *Brahmans* who compiled the Brahmanas, discussing death and the afterlife (Hopkins, 1992). Brahmanas are an extension of the Vedas and provide commentary on the performance of Vedic rites and ceremonies. They also expound upon the concept of reincarnation, rebirth and introduce concepts like re-death (*punararmtyu*) for those who fail to repay debts, avoidable through *Naciketa* fire sacrifices (Kane 1991). Even gods are seen as

mortal, needing sacrifices to achieve immortality. Fire sacrifices ensure only the body burns at death (Satapatha Brahmana 2.3.8-9), and man is reborn three times: from parents, through sacrifice, and at death (Panikkar, 2016). Rituals and Vedic recitations fulfill debts and may lead to attaining Brahman's nature (Satapatha Brahmana 11.5.6.9). Immortality is achieved through ritual precision, not divine favor, with the afterlife dependent on post-cremation rituals performed by one's progeny (Hopkins, 1992).

4.4 The Upanishads

The Upanisads speak about these concepts at great length expounding the concept that the *Atman* (soul) are identical with the Brahman. The Upanisads introduced a new salvation system within the Vedic tradition, challenging existing rituals. They questioned the permanence of this world and the World of the Fathers, proposing a new afterlife concept. The goal is for the *atman* (individual soul) to unite with Brahman (world soul) to end the cycle of rebirth. Thus, *Moksha* is attained through the identification of the *Atman* and Brahman. Upanisadic thinkers differentiated between permanent and transient aspects of existence (Hopkins, 1992), driven by desire resulting in rebirth (Jones, 2004), thought, and action (*karma*), and sought to escape the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) by realizing the *atman's* unity with Brahman.

The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad discusses re-death (*punararmtyu*) and transmigration (*punarjanma*), emphasizing knowledge to avoid it. The *atman's* journey can follow the path of gods or fathers, with the latter leading to rebirth. The Chandogya Upanisad describes a journey from cremation to the *Brahma* world, symbolizing renunciation and detachment from rituals. Virtuous conduct may lead to higher rebirth (Chandogya Upanisad 5.10.7), while attachment to worldly actions results in reincarnation. *Karma* can be transferred, for example, from father to son (Brhadaranyaka Upanisad 6.3.4; Kausttiki Upanisad 2.15). The ultimate objective is *moksha*—liberation and absorption into Brahman. Upanisadic scholars sought complete liberation through understanding the *atman's* unity with Brahman, renouncing worldly life for a forest-dwelling existence on the path of *jnana*. This path, combined with Vedic rituals, was integrated into the *Varnasrama-dharma system*, outlining responsibilities based on societal class and life stages. The ultimate stage is renunciation, where sannyasins seek to break free from rebirth through knowledge, *yoga*, and self-denial.

4.5 The Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita, a devotional poem within the Mahabharata, significantly influences (Bowker, 1993) Hindu beliefs on death, *karma*, the *atman*, and God, despite not being a Vedic text. It introduces the principle of *karma*, linking action to motive, and influences Vedic rituals and the Upanisadic path of knowledge, primarily appealing to the educated elite. By the second century BC, a new theological approach, emphasizing devotional theism, emerged, prioritizing devotion to deities like Vishnu and Shiva over Vedic rituals. This path offered salvation as a divine gift in response to devotion, replacing the World of the Fathers with a personalized afterlife through dedication to a chosen god (Hopkins, 1992).

The Gita presents three paths to salvation (Bhagavad Gita 13. 24-34): the way of knowledge (*jnanamarga*) (Bhagavad Gita 4-5), the way of action (*karmamarga*)

(Bhagavad Gita 3), and the way of devotion (*bhaktimarga*) (Bhagavad Gita 9-12). Actions must be selfless, driven by devotion to *Brahman* as *Krsna* (Bhagavad Gita 9:13-34), and free from the bondage of *karma* (Bhagavad Gita 9.26-34). The Bhagavad Gita teaches that the soul is eternal and imperishable (2.13, 2.17-18), influencing modern Hindu thought by emphasizing that focusing on God (*Krsna*) at the time of death aids the soul's journey (Bhagavad Gita 3.4; 5). The path of devotion integrates elements from previous paths, allowing devotees to fulfill household responsibilities without forsaking family or society. The three paths illustrate Hinduism's development, offering choices rather than hierarchies.

5. Discussion

Islam and Hinduism have distinct beliefs about life after death, but there are some interesting commonalities between the two (Figure 1):

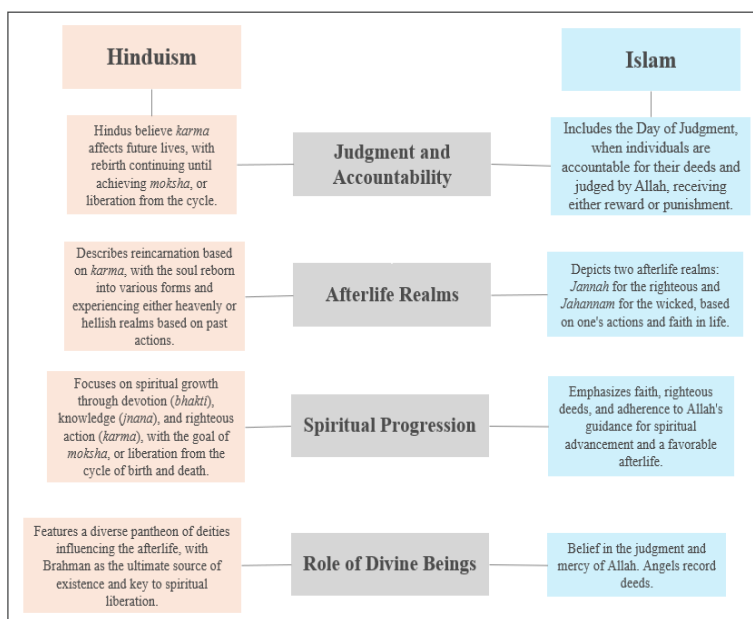


Figure 1. Similarities in the eschatological beliefs between Islam and Hinduism

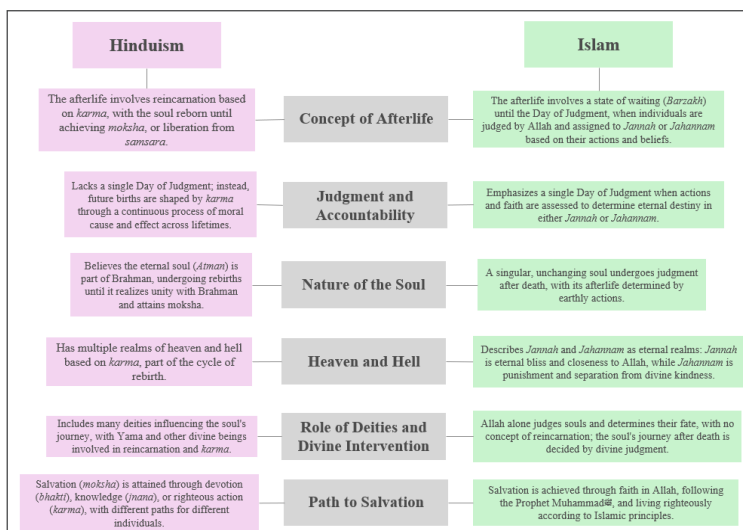


Figure 2. Differences in the eschatological beliefs between Islam and Hinduism

While these similarities exist, it is important to acknowledge the profound differences in doctrines, practices, and concepts of the afterlife in both religions. The disparities between Hinduism and Islam concerning life after death are significant and reflect the distinct theological and philosophical foundations of each religion. Here are some key aspects where they diverge (Figure 2):

These differences highlight the broader theological and cosmological perspectives unique to each religion, influencing their understanding of existence, morality, and the ultimate purpose of life. It is crucial to recognize how these foundational views shape the beliefs and practices of their followers. The varied interpretations of existence, morality, and life's purpose are deeply embedded in these perspectives. This complex interplay between theology, cosmology, and human experience underscores the rich diversity of religious thought and tradition.

6. Conclusion

This comparative study examines the eschatological perspectives in Islam and Hinduism, emphasizing the significant differences and intriguing similarities between these two major world religions with regard to life after death. The analysis sheds light on the distinct eschatological frameworks of Islam and Hinduism, deepening our understanding of how these frameworks influence the ethical and spiritual practices of their adherents. By gaining appreciation for these perspectives, one can acquire insight into the diverse ways in which human cultures address fundamental questions about existence, morality, and the ultimate fate of the soul. This study contributes to broader discussions on religious philosophy, interfaith dialogue, and the universal quest for meaning beyond this life.

This study aims to enhance the belief systems of both faiths and provide insights into the theological, philosophical, and moral frameworks that shape these beliefs within these traditions. Additionally, it seeks to foster interfaith dialogue by highlighting commonalities and differences in eschatological views, thus promoting mutual respect, understanding, empathy, and inclusivity among the followers of both faiths. Eschatological beliefs often influence ethical and moral behavior. By comparing these beliefs, we can also gain insight into how different religions address issues such as justice, suffering, and the nature of good and evil, and how these perspectives impact adherents' behavior and ethical decision-making. For

students and educators, comparative eschatological studies offer a rich field of inquiry that enhances critical thinking skills, promotes cross-cultural understanding, and fosters a deeper appreciation of the diversity of human thought and spirituality.

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