

Comparing Afterlife Beliefs in Buddhism and Islam via Muslim Converts' Views

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Abstract

This study examines and compares afterlife beliefs in Buddhism and Islam by interviewing Muslim converts who were previously Buddhists. Using a qualitative approach, it aims to foster understanding and respect for diversity in Malaysian society. The study identifies two types of differences: shared differences in funeral rituals and distinct differences in afterlife concepts. The shared differences involve funeral traditions, while similarities in ethical principles are noted. The findings suggest that exploring afterlife beliefs through the experiences of converts provides valuable insights into the interplay of religious ideologies. Sociologically, these differences illustrate how religious doctrines influence cultural practices and social structures. Both religions incorporate cultural elements into their beliefs, promoting social cohesion and ethical conduct, shaping individual behaviours, and reinforcing family and communal bonds, thus contributing to social harmony.

Keywords: *Afterlife Belief, Buddhism, Islam, Comparative Study, Interview.*

INTRODUCTION

An afterlife refers to a post-death existence believed by some individuals (Hornby, 2020). Even for those who do not believe in an afterlife, the concept held by past cultures can serve as an indicator of the evolution of human consciousness (Thompson, 2002). Within the context of religion, few moments hold as much significance as physical death, as it prompts contemplation of a realm beyond time and space. The major religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have developed funeral and mourning practices that provide spiritual comfort and reflect their core beliefs about death (Gwynne, 2018). Research indicates that religion's multifaceted nature is associated with a positive outlook on life and death, while also reducing fear of death (Niemeyer et al., 2011; Bassett & Bussard, 2018).

The notion of afterlife, the continuation of life beyond death, is a vital element within Buddhism. It plays a crucial role in understanding the cycle of rebirth, the principle of *karma*, and serves as a source of inspiration for spiritual pursuits. The concept probes into the nature of existence, provides ethical guidance, and imbues life with significance and purpose (Tsomo, 2006a).

The significance of the afterlife in Islam cannot be overstated, as it stands as a cornerstone belief within the faith. Exploring the concept of the afterlife in Islam holds importance due to its profound influence on the worldview and conduct of Muslims. It offers moral direction and fosters a deeper comprehension of the spiritual dimensions of the religion (Ismail & Abdul Jalil, 2021).

The value in comparing these esteemed religions lies in promoting mutual understanding, respect, and acceptance. This comparative analysis aims to avoid misrepresentation, criticisms, or glorification that may breed enmity and instead focuses on appreciating the inherent goodness, fostering tolerance for differences, and identifying common ground between the religions (Yew et al., 2021).

Understanding, accepting, respecting, and tolerating diverse cultures and religions is of great significance in Malaysian society, which is characterised by its multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-religious composition (Aboo Talib & Baharuddin, 2020; Yew et al., 2021). In Malaysia, the population consists of 20.6 million Muslims, 6.1 million Buddhists, 2.9 million Christians, 2.0 million Hindus, and 860 thousand individuals from

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other religions (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). Additionally, the ethnic makeup of Malaysia includes 20.94 million Bumiputera, 6.72 million Chinese, 2.04 million Indians, and 0.3 million individuals from other ethnic backgrounds (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). The Malaysian government actively upholds and safeguards this diversity (BERNAMA, 2021).

Therefore, the significance of this study underlies in recognising the evolution of human consciousness through the concept of afterlife and highlights its importance in Buddhism and Islam. The comparative study aims to foster mutual understanding and respect, while acknowledging the value of diversity in Malaysian society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Afterlife from the Perspective of Buddhism

Buddhists attach great importance to matters of the afterlife due to their commitment to the Noble Eightfold Path (i.e., right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditative absorption or union), which is linked to their liberation (*nirvana*) from the cyclic pattern of birth, decay, and death known as suffering (*samsara*) (King, 1994). Consequently, Buddhist traditions place significant emphasis on reflecting upon the meaning of life and the ultimate end of life (Tsomo, 2006b).

The cycle of *samsara* encompasses six realms within the universe: the realms of gods (*Deva*), titans (*Asura*), humans (*Manusya*), hungry ghosts (*Preta*), animals (*Tiryagyoni*), and hell (*naraka*). The realm of gods (*Deva-loka*) is characterised by tranquility and happiness, free from worldly distractions. The realm of titans (*Asura-loka*) is inhabited by beings consumed with jealousy towards the gods, leading to a lack of lasting joy. The human realm (*Manusya-loka*) is the familiar world of both sorrow and joy, pain and pleasure. The realm of hungry ghosts (*Preta-loka*) is considered lower in the cosmic hierarchy, where spirits experience constant frustration due to their insatiable desires. The animal realm (*Tiryagyoni-loka*) is also regarded as inferior, lacking the same level of intelligence, awareness, and freedom as humans. Lastly, hell (*naraka*) is a state of suffering and torment, but only until negative *karma* is purged, allowing the spirit to be reborn in higher realms (Gwynne, 2018). Figure 1 illustrates the Buddhist wheel of *samsara*, depicting the setting of the Buddhist afterlife.

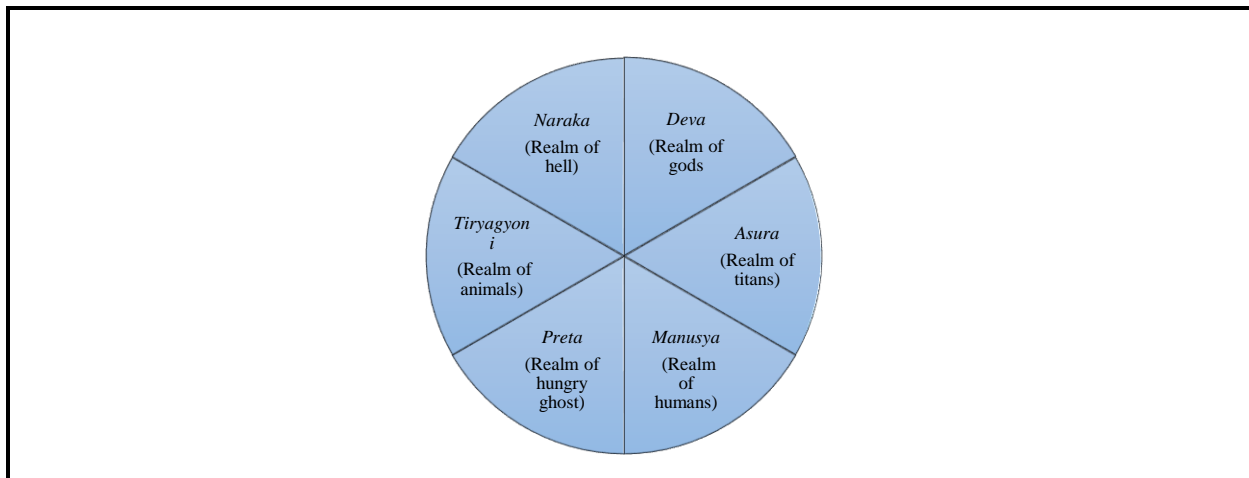


Figure 1: The Afterlife Setting of Buddhism.

According to the samsaric worldview, individuals' fortunes in this life are determined by the quality of *karma* carried over from their previous life. *Karma*, based on the principle of cause and effect, determines the cosmic realm in which one is reborn after death (reincarnation). In Buddhism, *karma* is measured by the degree to which one overcomes or succumbs to ignorance, greed, and hatred (Gwynne, 2018; Tsomo, 2006a).

Hence, the aforementioned six divisions or planes of existence are referred to as the “worlds of desire,” where individuals remain within *samsara* and are attached to desires, anger, and delusion in their embodiment (Masel et al., 2012; Chidester, 2002). These realms are temporary and imperfect, subjecting individuals to aging, decay, suffering, death, and painful rebirths until they attain *nirvana*, which signifies spiritual liberation (Pat Fisher,

2009). The Buddha described rebirth simply as the continuation of existence based on the apparent continuity of impermanent moments of consciousness (Tsomo, 2006a).

In Buddhism, the cessation of suffering and the end of the cycle of rebirth can be attained by eliminating all cravings and attachments, leading a life free from karmic consequences (Pat Fisher, 2009). Through enlightened consciousness and detachment from embodiment, one achieves *nirvana*, breaking free from the cycle of death and subsequent rebirths in new bodies and places (Chidester, 2002). Those who have attained *nirvana* in their lifetime are known as *arhants*, enlightened individuals. When an *arhant* passes away, their individuality ceases, and they enter the ultimate state of *nirvana* (Pat Fisher, 2009). Such a person cannot be found by *Mara*, the god of death (The Dhammapada, 170).

At the death of the physical body, an *arhant* enters *parinirvana*, the final *nirvana*, which is described as an everlasting state of deathlessness. *Parinirvana* transcends time, space, birth, death, and all conditioned qualities of existence that are familiar to ordinary awareness (Chidester, 2002). In Buddhist texts, *parinirvana* is depicted as a state unlike anything else known, where there is no earth, water, fire, or air, and neither this world nor the world beyond exists (Samyutta Nikaya, I.157-59). This final state is profoundly different from any other experiential reality (Chidester, 2002).

Death is an inevitable fate for all living beings, yet its timing remains unpredictable. *Yama*, the Lord of Death (similar to *Mara*), is depicted as eager and ready to seize his next victim. Neglecting the certainty of death can lead to a life wasted on worldly pursuits, leaving one unprepared for the most significant moment in life. Recognising this, the Buddha advised his followers to cultivate their minds through meditation and mindfulness, both in intensive practice and in everyday moments (Tsomo, 2006a).

In accordance with the understanding of life and death in Buddhism, a Buddhist funeral serves the purpose of assisting the deceased in navigating the challenging process of death and rebirth. It is common to invite monks to the home to chant or recite a *Bardo* prayer when someone passes away. In certain cultures, family members may even dress as monks or nuns for a brief period to contribute to the accumulation of good *karma* (Gwynne, 2018).

During a Buddhist funeral, the body of the deceased is prepared and dressed appropriately, and it is not necessary for the funeral to take place immediately according to Buddhist tradition. A delay of several days is allowed, especially if it allows relatives and friends who live far away to attend the ceremony. The funeral procession is often accompanied by uplifting music intended to console the grieving individuals and generate additional good *karma* (Gwynne, 2018).

In Buddhist cultures, cremation is a common practice for disposing of the body, although there are exceptions. This practice is likely influenced by Indian culture, where burning the body symbolises ritual purity and serves practical hygiene purposes (Gwynne, 2018; Tsomo, 2006a). However, in societies influenced by Chinese culture, such as Chinese society itself, Buddhists may be influenced by Confucian customs, considering the body as a gift from ancestors to be respected and preserved, leading to a preference for burial. In Tibetan cultures, there exists a unique practice known as “sky burial,” where the body is dismembered and offered to birds and animals as an act of generosity after the person’s consciousness has departed (Tsomo, 2006a).

The teachings of the Buddha regarding impermanence serve as a means to awaken individuals to the reality of death and to encourage them to live a meaningful life. The Buddha emphasised that death is inevitable for all living beings, but that is not the sole concern. Drawing on the prevalent belief in rebirth in South Asian culture, he taught that unless individuals free themselves from the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*), they will be compelled to undergo another existence in one of the five (later six) realms or migrations (*jati*) (Tsomo, 2006a). Therefore, the concept of the afterlife holds significant importance in Buddhism, as being mindful of death allows individuals to perceive the true nature of reality: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anatta*) (Chidester, 2002).

Afterlife from the Perspective of Islam

In Islam, death involves the separation of the human soul, known as the spirit (*ruh*) (*damir*) or a combination of body and spirit (*nafs* in some interpretations), from the physical body. After burial, the body enters a phase called *barzakh*, which serves as a partition between Earthly life and the Hereafter. This phase signifies the occurrence of *As-Saa'ah al-Shughbraa*, a mini–Judgement Day for the deceased. Furthermore, death is regarded as a natural separation from the realm of material, which is considered an illusion, into the realm of the supernatural, representing reality (Sheikh, 1998). Islamic teachings emphasise that the realm of reality is far superior to the realm of illusion (Ibn Kathir, 2000ab).

The Islamic faith emphasises the importance of remembering death, as it is an inevitable reality that can occur at any time. Those who keep death in mind and prepare for it are regarded as the wisest individuals (Sunan Ibn Majah, Vol. 5, Book 37, *Hadith* 4259). Islam encourages believers not to chase after worldly pleasures, recognising that the Earth is temporary and perishable (Quran 57:20). However, believers are not discouraged from earning a livelihood and acquiring worldly possessions to prepare for the next life (Quran 28:77).

By remembering death, believers become more conscious and mindful, enabling them to prepare adequately for the eternal life that awaits them. It prompts them to reflect on their past sins and encourages repentance. Awareness of the proximity of death discourages greed for worldly possessions and instead fosters a desire to gather valuable provisions for the Hereafter. This includes nurturing qualities of righteousness and fulfilling the rights of others (Zakariya, 2005). In Islam, death is an imminent event that no one can escape (Quran 3:185). The angel of death, Izrail, is appointed by Allah SWT to separate human souls from their physical bodies.

Muslim funeral customs prioritise simplicity and respect, aligning with the teachings of Islam that emphasise the transient nature of earthly life (Ahmad, 1996). The obligatory rituals for handling a deceased body include bathing, shrouding, performing farewell prayers (*salat al-Janazah*), and burying the body in a grave (*lahd*) (Ekpo & Ishaq, 2019).

Once the deceased body is lowered into the grave, it is positioned on its right side with the face turned towards the direction of the Kaaba (*qiblah*) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia (Ekpo & Ishaq, 2019). Following this, a funeral prayer (*talqin*) is offered for the deceased. In Islam, it is emphasised for parents to raise their children to be righteous and dutiful towards them even after their death. Abu Hurayra reported that Prophet Muhammad SAW said, “When a person dies, all action is cut off for him with the exception of three things: charity (*sadaqah*) which continues, knowledge (*ilm*) which benefits; and/or a righteous child (*walad saleh*) who makes supplication for him” (Al-Adab Al-Mufrad, Book 1, *Hadith* 38).

Following the burial, in the realm known as *alam-al-barzakh* (the place where the soul resides after death until the Resurrection Day), the deceased is approached by two angels named Munkar and Nakir who ask three questions to test their faith (Quran 79:1-2). If the individual successfully passes this initial phase of the afterlife, the experience in the grave is pleasant, and they are granted glimpses of the joys of paradise. Conversely, if they fail, the grave becomes the first stage of punishment (Jami' at-Tirmidhi, Vol. 4, Book 10, *Hadith* 2308).

The resurrection of the deceased (*al-Qiyamah*) from the grave will occur during the Day of Judgement (*Yawm al-Deen*). The Resurrection Day will commence when the angel Israfil receives the command from Allah SWT to blow the trumpet. The duration of the Day of Judgement is described in the Quran as a day equivalent to 50,000 years (Quran 70:4).

The subsequent stage, known as the gathering (*al-Hashr*), will commence, where all creatures created by Allah SWT in the seven heavens and the earth, including angels, jinn, humans, and animals, will be led to congregate and assemble at *Mabiyar*. *Mabiyar* is an expansive and level area in the Hereafter covered in white sands, devoid of any lowlands or highlands. During this phase, those whom Allah SWT guides will remain guided, while those whom He leads astray will be gathered with their faces downcast, blind, dumb, and deaf (Quran 17:97). It is at this point that people will seek intercessory assistance from the first Prophet, Adam A.S. However, he will excuse himself, as will every Prophet throughout the history of humankind, until the last Prophet, Muhammad SAW. Prophet Muhammad SAW will beseech Allah SWT in a profound prostration, pleading for his

intercession (*syafaah*) to be accepted by Allah SWT and to relieve them from the misery of eternal waiting, decreeing that the accounting processes may proceed (Sahih al-Bukhari 7510, Book 97, *Hadith* 135).

Following it is the stage of reckoning (*al-Hisab*), where the deeds, both good and bad, will be weighed on the scales (*al-Mawazin*). This process begins with the calling of everyone by their name, followed by the presentation of their Book of deeds. The righteous will receive their books in their right hands, while the wicked will receive them in their left hands. Allah SWT states in the Quran, “Every man’s fate We have fastened on his own neck: on the Day of Judgement, We shall bring out for him a scroll, which we see spread open. (It will be said to him:) “Read your (own) record: sufficient is your soul this day to make out an account against you.” (Quran 17:13-14).

Prophet Muhammad SAW has reminded us that good character holds the greatest weight of merit on the believer’s scale during Judgement Day (Sunan Abi Dawud, Book 43, *Hadith* 27). However, it is important to note that not every individual will undergo the scaling process, as the records of those who have committed blasphemy will be rejected and disregarded by Allah SWT (Quran 18:104-105). Consequently, the people of Prophet Muhammad (*ummah*) will be the first to be held accountable, as narrated by Hudhaifah who said that Prophet Muhammad SAW stated, “We are the last of the people of this world but the first on the Day of Resurrection for whose judgement will be passed before all other creatures.” (Sunan an-Nasa’i, Vol. 2, Book 14, *Hadith* 1369).

After successfully navigating the previous phases, individuals will then face the daunting task of crossing the razor-thin bridge (*al-Sirat*) that spans the fire of Hell. This bridge extends a distance equivalent to 70 years of travel (Sahih al-Bukhari 2840, Vol. 4, Book 52, *Hadith* 93). Those who fail to cross it safely will become residents of Hell (*Jahannam*) (Quran 66:6). It is important to note that in the sight of Allah SWT, a single day is equivalent to 1,000 years in our human calculation (Quran 22:47). Angel Maalik serves as the chief overseer of Hell, aided by 19 mysterious guards known as *al-Zabaniyas* (Quran 74:30-31).

As the believers approach the gates of Paradise (*Jannah*), any unresolved issues among them will be brought up and resolved at the bridge (*al-Qantara*) (Sahih al-Bukhari 2440, Vol. 3, Book 43, *Hadith* 620). Some individuals will be saved from the Fire through the intercession of Prophet Muhammad SAW, granting them entry into Paradise (Sahih al-Bukhari 7440, Book 97, *Hadith* 66). Paradise is an indescribably magnificent place, surpassing the beauty and transience of the earthly realm. Al-Sahl bin Sa’d reported that Prophet Muhammad SAW described *Jannah*, saying, “There will be bounties which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has ever perceived.” (Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 20, *Hadith* 1891). Figure 2 illustrates the phases of the afterlife in Islam.

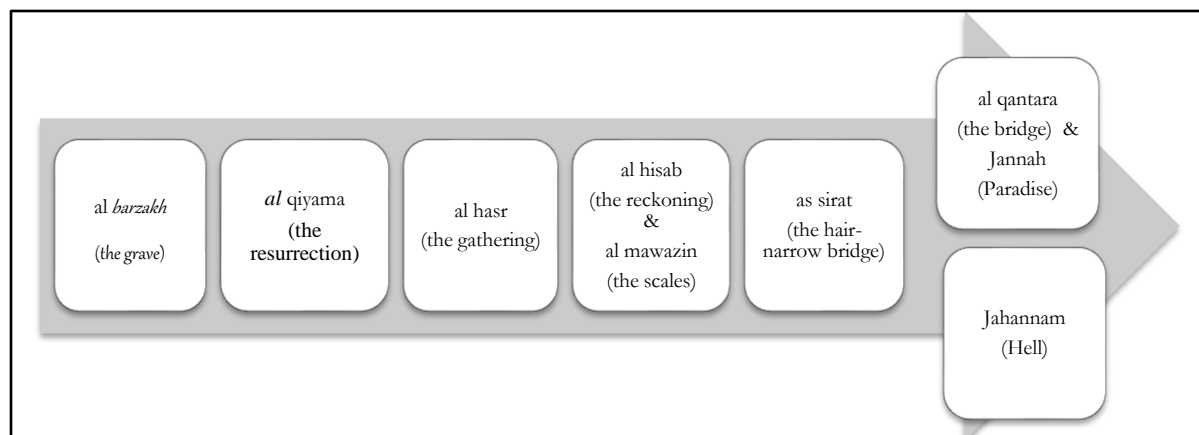


Figure 2: The Afterlife Setting of Islam

The moral, aesthetic, and rational aspects of human nature support the plausibility of an afterlife, as it is inherent in mankind’s disposition to be drawn towards the Divine (Quran 30:30). Furthermore, the attributes of Justice

and Mercy attributed to Allah SWT would hold no significance if there were no existence beyond death, as the Day of Resurrection serves as the ultimate expression of Allah SWT's Justice and Mercy (Quran 34:3-5).

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to analyse and compare the religious beliefs regarding the afterlife in Buddhism and Islam. The research employed a comparative analysis approach, using the traditional method of comparing and contrasting the two religions. By examining the similarities and differences, this study sought to provide comprehensive descriptions that enhance our understanding of these belief systems. Such detailed descriptions can offer valuable insights and initial ideas for exploring factors that contribute to both similarities and differences (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017).

Buddhism and Islam were chosen as the focus of this study due to their prominence among the Malaysian population, as reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022). Both religions share a fundamental belief in the existence of an afterlife, where individuals are rewarded or punished based on their actions during their lifetime. As a result, Buddhism and Islam find common ground in emphasising moral conduct (Mohd Nor, 2019). The comparison between the teachings of Buddha and Islam reveals that Muslim scholars have shown interest in establishing connections with other religions, particularly Buddhism, by identifying shared elements between the two belief systems. Additionally, it is evident that Islam consistently strives to foster positive relationships with other religions through effective approaches (Ramli et al., 2018).

Coccia and Benati (2018) describe the comparative method as a means of examining the differences and/or similarities between multiple objects or subjects, employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In line with this, the present study opted for a qualitative approach and conducted semi-structured interviews with six Muslim converts (*mualafs*) in Malaysia. The interviews were designed to be open-ended, allowing for spontaneous discussion with the participants. While semi-structured interviews generally follow a predetermined guide or protocol focused on a core topic, they also provide flexibility for exploration, allowing the conversation to take unexpected paths as it unfolds (Magaldi & Berler, 2020).

Purposive sampling was employed in this study with a specific focus on individuals who have converted from Buddhism to Islam. These participants were chosen because they offer valuable firsthand experiences of both religions. The research aimed to answer the following questions:

What are the differences in beliefs regarding the afterlife between Buddhism and Islam?

What are the similarities in beliefs regarding the afterlife between Buddhism and Islam?

Table 1 presents background information of the individuals who participated in the study. To ensure confidentiality and encourage candid responses, the participants' identities have been kept anonymous, respecting their privacy.

Table 1: Participants' Background Information.

Participant	Gender	Age	Year of Conversion
Participant 1	Female	40	2006
Participant 2	Male	35	2006
Participant 3	Male	55	1983
Participant 4	Female	80	1970
Participant 5	Female	56	2007
Participant 6	Male	50	2014

In this study, the thematic analysis method was utilised to analyse the data collected from the interviews. Through thematic analysis, a qualitative and comprehensive understanding of the data is obtained, allowing for detailed exploration and nuanced interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis incorporates similar analytical procedures to content analysis, involving the generation of initial codes, identification of themes, reviewing and refining themes, and ultimately defining and naming the identified themes. The final stage of data analysis in thematic analysis involves reporting the findings derived from the previous stages (Vaismoradi

et al., 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this study, these processes were adapted to provide guidance to the coder during the data analysis phase.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Differences in Afterlife Belief Between Buddhism and Islam

The differences in afterlife beliefs between Buddhism and Islam can be categorised into two types; a shared difference and a distinct difference in the afterlife beliefs. The shared difference involves a contrast in funeral rituals/traditions. On the other hand, distinct differences in Buddhism’s afterlife beliefs encompass concepts such as reincarnation after death, deities and ancestors as saviours, and the emphasis on tangible expressions. Conversely, distinct differences in Islam’s afterlife beliefs encompass the belief in the Day of Resurrection as a judgement day, the provision of clear afterlife guidance, the emphasis on moderation, and the recognition of Allah as the sole worthy God.

Buddhism	Islam
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funeral rituals • Reincarnation after death • Deities and ancestors as saviours • Emphasis on tangible expressions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funeral traditions • The Day of Resurrection as a judgement day • Provision of clear afterlife guidance • Emphasis on moderation • Recognition of Allah as the sole worthy God

Figure 3: The Differences of the Afterlife Belief Between Buddhism and Islam.

Funeral Rituals/Traditions Disparity

From the input provided by the six participants, a shared contrast emerged in terms of afterlife beliefs between Buddhism and Islam, particularly in relation to the variance in funeral rituals/traditions. The following responses indicate that the participants were mindful of the differences by exercising caution regarding what is prohibited in Islam:

“When my stepfather was in the hospital, dying, I was the one who took care of him. I was only Muslim for a year at the time. I followed the Muslim’s tradition of reciting Surah Yasin to sick people. But I could not read the Arabic version yet, I just read the meaning, ten verses a day. I even taught him to utter *shabada*. I attended his funeral; I respected by wearing white like the others. I did not follow the ceremony because I was not his biological son. That was the only funeral I attended. But I always advise my friends who have family members from other religions to attend but never be part of any religious rituals. If we want to help clean the house, dress the deceased, we can, but no worshipping. We can come along to the grave, clean it, we can bring food but only to eat, not for offering it to the deceased.” (Participant 3)

“When my parents died, I didn’t join the prayer, but I visited their grave. I took care of my sick father for two years before he died. I taught him to say “*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*.” I remember when I was pushing my father in a wheelchair and stopped in front of a mosque, my father had his hands up while praying. May my father be counted as a follower of Islam. *Insha Allah*. In Buddhism, when someone dies at an old age, his passing is not mourned and red clothes are worn, like a happy occasion because he has given birth to many generations. If someone dies at a young age, black or white clothes are worn.” (Participant 4)

“We will still come to visit if a non-Muslim relative dies. I will give money to buy drinks, but not to buy paper or prayer equipment. Intention is important. I usually don’t follow their customs and events. Usually, I will visit before the cadaver is sent to the cemetery and give some money. At the beginning, I was hesitant to give money because I was worried that the money would be used to buy worship tools that are against Islam. When my parents died, I visited their graves. When my family members performed the ceremony, I just watched.” (Participant 5)

Nevertheless, upon their conversion to Islam, they persisted in displaying devotion towards their parents, siblings, and relatives. This are manifested through acts of caregiving for the ill, charitable deeds, and honouring the deceased by participating in funerals. Consequently, despite existing disparities, these actions served to strengthen the familial bonds. Similarly, Islam emphasises the maintenance of strong family connections (*silatur-rahim*) (Quran 13:25). Therefore, it is imperative for Muslim converts to possess the knowledge required to navigate such situations and prevent misunderstandings.

In addition to the noticeable disparity that emerged in terms of afterlife beliefs between Buddhism and Islam, particularly in relation to the variance in funeral rituals, the responses from participants revealed four distinct aspects of Buddhism's afterlife beliefs. These included concepts like reincarnation after death, deities and ancestors as saviours, and emphasis on tangible expressions.

Reincarnation After Death

The prevalent afterlife conviction within Buddhism, as expressed by participants, was the belief in reincarnation after death, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

“In terms of teachings, Buddhism emphasises on rebirth after death. As soon as death occurs, one's deeds will be weighed. If the person is good, he or she will be reborn as a human again without torment and he or she will be reborn in a wealthy and happy states in a new life. If the person is bad, then the opposite will happen.” (Participant 1)

“In Buddhism, there is a concept of rebirth. What you do in this life has consequences in the afterlife. If you are bad, you will be reborn as heinous animals like pigs. You can also achieve the highest level of all which is Buddhho, which means you can guide others and therefore be qualified for heaven. Even though it teaches about how the life in this world is related to the afterlife, it is confusing because it does not have a direct timeline for the afterlife phases” (Participant 2)

“Buddhism has reincarnation. The deceased can be reincarnated as a ghost or in spirit form. This type of spirit is usually those who oppressed during their lifetime. The spirit will want revenge. But there is no definite, authentic source to prove it.” (Participant 3)

“When a Buddhist dies, he or she will be reborn.” (Participant 5)

Most participants demonstrated a solid grasp of Buddhism's fundamental afterlife concepts, including reincarnation and *karma*. It is evident that Buddhists undergo cycles of rebirth, with their fate determined by their *karma* – the causal effect of their actions. Participants also touched upon the various realms within the samsaric cycle, encompassing humans (*Manusya*), animals (*Tiryagyoni*), gods (*Deva*), and hungry ghosts (*Preta*). Consequently, Buddhism underscores the significance of accumulating virtuous deeds to attract favourable circumstances and attain a higher realm in the future (Bodhi, 2005).

Deities and Ancestors as Saviours

Beyond the realms of humans (*Manusya*), animals (*Tiryagyoni*), gods (*Deva*), and hungry ghosts (*Preta*) within the cyclical nature of *samsara*, participants also alluded to titans (*Asura*) and ancestors as figures of salvation for Buddhists, as highlighted below:

“It (Buddhism) is more of an ancestor-worshipped religion. When there is death, the livings (family members, namely) will burn incense paper known as '*duit akhira*'. The smoke from incense stick will reach the deceased in the heaven. The children and his descendants must send the dead 'supply'. (Participant 3)

“Buddhists worship in their temple, but not five times a day. Buddhism has many gods and goddesses. When my grandmother passed away and I was a Buddhist, I had to worship my grandmother. There is a picture of her and her name.” (Participant 4)

The presence of numerous deities in Buddhism stems from its capacity to adapt to diverse cultural environments, and their functions in providing guidance to adherents along their journey to enlightenment.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that the characteristics and reverence associated with these deities can undergo considerable variations across various Buddhist traditions and schools (Silk, 2019).

In addition to venerating the deities, Buddhists also engage in ancestor worship due to cultural practices. Ancestor worship is regarded as a gesture of respect and gratitude, a way of making offerings to those who paved the path ahead and are inescapably linked to one's journey (Baker, 1979). An instance of this can be observed in the Chinese tradition of burning paper money (*duit akhirat*), a ritual aimed at providing a contented and prosperous afterlife for the departed. This symbolic currency, commonly referred to as joss paper or ghost money, is set alight at ancestral gravesites or during specific festivals. The custom stems from a folk belief that the consumed paper money reaches the spirits of the departed in the heavens, serving as a sort of afterlife account (Sheng & Li, 2017). This practice finds its origins in a blend of Daoism and regional folklore.

Emphasis on Tangible Expressions

Following the Chinese practice of burning paper money as an afterlife ritual, other customs also come into view, including elaborate funeral ceremonies that involve extravagant expenditures, as demonstrated below:

“There are people who think that the Chinese like to show off. Actually, in the Chinese tradition, when someone dies, the funeral is the last honour in the world, so the deceased is dressed in beautiful clothes. When Chinese people die, their funerals cost a lot of money. The Chinese place less emphasis on death because they see the world more than the afterlife. They are more about things that can be seen as evidence to convince them. The Chinese also do not emphasise afterlife understanding, but rather only the worldly – there is no balance between the world and the afterlife.” (Participant 6)

“Our descendants were mostly buried when they died because cremation is expensive, reaching more than RM20,000. Sometimes the deceased are burned if single, as no offspring will come to pray for them. Thus, the temple will pray for them.” (Participant 4)

Funerals in the Chinese culture hold significant importance within Chinese social life. This importance stems from the fundamental beliefs cherished by the Chinese people. The performance of funeral rituals during a Chinese funeral is viewed as an extension of the Chinese social value of filial piety (Sankar, Neo, & Rycker, 2016). The expression of respect and gratitude for the departed persists through tangible expressions, exemplified by practices such as dressing the deceased in exquisite attire.

The Chinese approach to grief, as discernible from the participants' responses, revolves around societal considerations. Funerals are regarded as a means to honour the contributions made by the deceased to the world. In Chinese society, it is understood that every individual has made some form of contribution during their lifetime, with some achieving greater feats, while others contributing in smaller ways. These contributions, regardless of their scale, are celebrated, and the legacy of the deceased lives on (Qin & Xia, 2015).

On the other hand, Islam's beliefs about the afterlife encompassed four aspects. These included the conviction in the Day of Resurrection as a day of judgement, the provision of clear afterlife guidance, and an emphasis on moderation, as well as the recognition of Allah as the sole worthy God.

The Day of Resurrection as a Judgement Day

A widely held belief concerning the afterlife in Islam, as conveyed by the participants, was the faith in the Day of Resurrection as a day of judgement, as exemplified in the following quotes:

“In Islam, all mankind will wait for the Day of Resurrection when they will be weighed upon the good or the bad deeds that have been done to determine their condition in the hereafter.” (Participant 1)

“In Islam, when we die and after the end day, we will meet at Padang Mahsyar. This is where Allah will determine our hereafter; either heaven or hell.” (Participant 5)

The participants firmly hold the belief that on the Day of Resurrection, every Muslim's righteous and wrongful actions will undergo judgement. This momentous event will involve the gathering of not just humanity, but all

creatures brought into existence by Allah SWT on a vast plain known as *Padang Mahsyar* (Ahmad Ayoup, 2019). The fate of all creations of Allah SWT in the hereafter will be decided on the Day of Resurrection, serving as the supreme manifestation of Allah SWT's Justice and Mercy (Yew et al., 2021).

Provisions of Clear Afterlife Guidance

Another commonly held belief concerning the afterlife in Islam, as communicated by the participants, was the presence of explicit guidance for the hereafter, as evidenced in the following quotations: "In Islam, everything is clear. It gives us guideline to prepare any time before death comes for us. Our good deeds will accompany us and on the day of judgement, all will be judged. Thus, even before the *barzakh* phase, we must be prepared." (Participant 2)

"Islam is more detailed (afterlife explanation); there are mentions of angels in heaven, etc." (Participant 3)

The participants' comprehension of Islamic concepts related to the afterlife, including *al barzakh*, the Day of Judgement, and the angels (e.g., Munkar, Nakir, Maalik) assigned specific roles in the Muslim afterlife, resonates with Islamic teachings that stress the importance of instilling the belief in the Day of Judgement among Muslims. Islam strongly underscores the significance of the afterlife, with faith in the Day of Judgement serving as the fifth fundamental article of faith in Islam (Sheikh Obid, Siti Normala, & Demikha, 2012).

Emphasis on Moderation

Another frequently encountered belief regarding the afterlife within Islam, as articulated by the participants, was the emphasis on moderation, as exemplified in the following quotes: "In the past, if someone dies in Mecca, the dead will be burned. If someone dies on the way back to Kuching, the dead will be put into the sea, as the journey from Mecca to Kuching takes three months. This is permissible due to the state of emergency and in Islam also the dead needs to be buried immediately." (Participant 4) Islamic burial customs involve interring the deceased in a grave. Islam instills in its community a profound sense of respect for individuals, whether they are living or deceased. Consequently, Islamic doctrine insists on the burial of the deceased to safeguard their dignity. This practice also serves to ensure the preservation of the body, prevent odour dispersion that might attract wildlife, and maintain overall hygiene. In fact, interring the deceased is a collective obligation (*fardu kifayah*) that must be fulfilled and not neglected (Muhadi, 2021).

However, during emergencies or under circumstances, it is acceptable to handle the deceased's body using appropriate alternative methods, depending on the condition of the deceased and the situation (Dawoody, Winter, & Finegan, 2021). It is advisable for practising Muslims to hasten the burial process to safeguard the living from potential hygiene concerns (Muhadi, 2021). These considerations emphasise that Islam adopts a moderate approach in managing the body of the deceased.

"The non-Muslims think that when a Muslim dies, the body is only buried with a white cloth." (Participant 6)

Undoubtedly, it is a customary practice among Muslims to enshroud the deceased in a *kafan*, preferably a white cloth, in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, who stated: "Wear white clothes because they are the purest and they are closest to modesty; and shroud the dead in it." (Riyad as-Salihin 779, Book 3, *Hadith* 2) This underscores Islam's principle of moderation, even in the handling of the deceased, where expenditure is kept within moderate bounds.

Recognition of Allah as the Sole Worthy God

In contrast, one participant underscored his faith in Allah as the exclusive and worthy Creator of humanity, thus being the ultimate arbiter of human destinies. However, this belief also acknowledges that Allah SWT grants individuals the choice to perform good or bad deeds, with no imposition of compulsion in their actions (Quran 42:20).

"Allah the Almighty determines everything for us." (Participant 6)

Besides, having faith in Allah as the sole worthy God fulfills the first and foremost article of faith in Islam, that is, the belief in Allah as the one and only God. This core belief, referred to as *Tawhid*, constitutes a foundational principle in Islam. *Tawhid* unequivocally denies any form of polytheism or the association of partners with Allah, underscoring the unparalleled and absolute sovereignty of Allah in the Islamic perspective (Yew et al., 2021).

The Similarities in Afterlife Belief Between Buddhism and Islam

The participants’ answers on the similarities of afterlife belief between Buddhism and Islam can be categorised as conscientious awareness of mortality and concept of justice, as well as morality and ethical values, and purification.

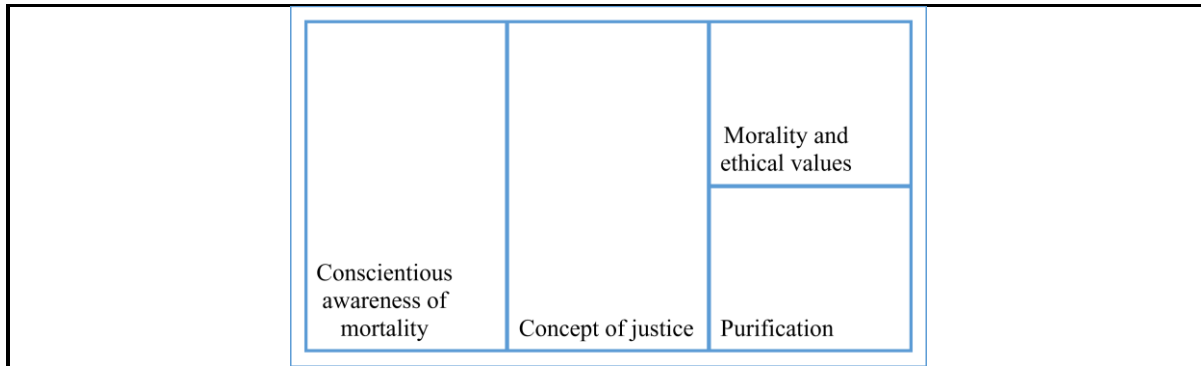


Figure 4: The Similarities of the Afterlife Belief Between Buddhism and Islam.

Conscientiousness Awareness of Mortality

In addition to the differences in afterlife beliefs between Buddhism and Islam, a common theme highlighted by the participants was a conscientious awareness of mortality, as evident in the following quotations:

“Belief in the afterlife, and good deeds will get good rewards. It teaches humans to avoid bad actions because they have bad consequences.” (Participant 3)

In Buddhism, the practice of being mindful of death (*maranasati*) holds significance, as death is an inescapable destiny for all living beings, despite its unpredictable timing (Chidester, 2002). The concept of *karma* in Buddhism, which governs the law of causality, guides Buddhists towards leading a virtuous and unblemished life (Thera, n.d.). Conversely, in Islam, the remembrance of death carries importance as it serves as an expression of believers’ genuine faith in Allah’s assurance of the forthcoming Day of Judgement, motivating them to prepare for their provisions in the afterlife.

“In terms of the conveyance of meaning, Buddhism emphasises on the worldly aspect rather than the afterlife. In contrast, the Qur’an is alive and relevant to the current situation. One verse of the Qur’an can be used for many situations.” (Participant 6)

Nonetheless, despite Buddhism’s instruction to be mindful of death, Participant 6 contended that Buddhists tend to prioritise worldly aspects, as evidenced by the prominence of tangible expressions in funeral rituals, which can vary based on the sect and culture within Buddhism (Bajželj, 2017). In contrast, Islam, as outlined in the Quran, particularly in *Juz’ ‘Amma*, places a strong emphasis on the afterlife. *Juz’ ‘Amma* encompasses the last 37 chapters of the Quran and predominantly serves as a didactic guide to eschatology, aiming to help individuals purify their souls in anticipation of the impending Day of Judgement (Zailan, 2019).

Concept of Justice

Another frequently emphasised theme by the participants was the concept of justice present in both Buddhism and Islam, as indicated by references to deeds and rewards, as demonstrated in the following quotes:

“Buddhism and Islam both have an emphasis on doing a lot of good for the afterlife. There is a measure or weigh of one’s deeds.” (Participant 1)

“There is the concept of sins and rewards in the afterlife.” (Participant 2)

The existence of an afterlife plays a pivotal role in upholding human justice. Buddhists contend that the doctrine of reincarnation can morally justify humanity by offering every individual the chance to seek redemption (Bodhi, 2000). Meanwhile, in Islam, the concept of the hereafter ensures justice in a divine manner, wherein any Muslim must adhere to the articles of faith mandated by Allah SWT, with a special emphasis on believing in Allah as the One and Only and The Most Just (Yew et al., 2021).

Morality and Ethical Values

According to one participant, morality and ethical values hold significance across all religions as they guide individuals in cultivating humanity.

“The similarity of religion is to teach us to do good. Other religions are the same. No religion teaches us to rob and do evil.” (Participant 5)

Believing in the existence of an afterlife serves as motivation for individuals to uphold moral values and ethics in their lives. In Buddhism, the consequences of all morally significant actions are shaped by the ethical nature of those deeds (Bodhi, 2000). In essence, an individual’s moral character determines their destination in the afterlife. Similarly, in Islam, virtuous conduct carries the most weight in the hereafter (Sunan Abi Dawud 4799, Book 43, *Hadith* 27).

Purification

Additionally, a participant pointed out that in both Buddhism and Islam, the body is cleansed before burial, as depicted in the following manner:

“In Islam, the deceased needs to be abluted and bathed, but in Buddhism, it is rarely done. Islam is cleaner.” (Participant 4)

In Buddhism, it is customary to cleanse the deceased before burial as a gesture of reverence and to ready the body for the subsequent life (Gwynne, 2018). Conversely, in Islam, the rationale behind washing the deceased is to present them in a pristine and pure condition before they stand before the Creator. This is akin to how a living individual prepares themselves for acts of worship such as *salat*, Quran recitation, *tawaf*, and more (Alfilfilany, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study, aimed at examining and comparing afterlife beliefs in Buddhism and Islam through the lens of Muslim converts, has revealed both shared and distinct differences in these two faiths’ perspectives on the afterlife. The contrast in funeral rituals/traditions represents a shared difference, while foundational ethical principles emerge as a unifying factor. Analysing the differences in afterlife beliefs between Buddhism and Islam from a sociological perspective reveals how religious doctrines shape cultural practices and social structures. Both religions integrate cultural practices into their beliefs, with Buddhism incorporating ancestor worship and tangible expressions, reflecting its adaptability, while Islam emphasises familial bonds and moderation, influencing social cohesion and ethical conduct. Funeral rituals and afterlife beliefs in both religions serve as mechanisms for social cohesion, reinforcing family ties and communal responsibilities, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. The belief in an afterlife motivates ethical and moral conduct, with Buddhism’s concept of *karma* and Islam’s clear afterlife guidance encouraging virtuous behaviour, contributing to social harmony and justice. These differences highlight the intricate relationship between religious doctrines, cultural practices, and social structures, influencing individual behaviours and broader societal norms and values. These findings underscore the importance of recognising and respecting the diversity of religious beliefs within Malaysian society and highlight the elaborate interplay between religious ideologies and personal faith evolution. By promoting multireligious understanding, this research contributes to a more harmonious and inclusive

society that values the unique perspectives of each faith while fostering mutual respect among religious communities.

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Participant 6. 2023, August 14. Personal interview. Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) office, Kuching, Sarawak..