

A Comparative Study of Chinese Philosophy and Islam: The Pursuit of Prosperity

For years, China's thoughts and culture have been represented by Chinese philosophy. Many great philosophers, such as the likes of Confucius, Laozi, and Mozi, have presented their own interpretations of our world, discussing and determining societal hierarchies, ethics, and our relations with metaphysical concepts. By leveraging the many lessons that Chinese philosophy has to offer, one can learn to explore their inner self while finding their individual goal and purpose in life, redefine their perspective of societal roles and responsibilities, and better grasp the meaning behind the workings and balance of the world and higher powers. In fact, as an individual who grew up in a Muslim community and experienced various religious teachings, I realized upon delving deeper into Chinese Philosophy that many of the conveyed messages in our religion were previously introduced into the Chinese culture and lifestyle. Therefore, in this essay, I will adopt Islam as an example and explain why I believe the lessons and ideologies that Chinese Philosophy provides could be employed in similar ways to religious teachings in order to teach us the truth of our lives and guide us to serenity.

One of the first and foremost similarities between Islam and Chinese philosophy lies in the concept of Dao and the god in Islam, namely Allah. The provided descriptions of both Dao and Allah are mainly stated using negative assertions. In other words, rather than assigning favorable properties to these ideas, such as Allah is kind, we should focus on what they are not, as we cannot fully grasp their properties. For instance, both Allah and Dao cannot be defined, yet they are what give everything meaning. They do not have a beginning or an end. Dao is said to be born before heaven and earth. At the same time, Allah is the almighty, omnipotent power that is said to have existed before anything else and is considered the ultimate creator of anything that exists, including heaven and earth.

In addition, there is a considerable resemblance between Daoism and Islam in the idea of predetermination and the natural flow of life. Daoism encourages us to be passive creatures who commit dispositional acts that accord with the flow of nature. This passivity is achieved through non-actions (无为), which, rather than doing nothing, requires us to let things take their course. This non-action-oriented life would prevent people from having excessive desires in life as such desires could highly likely cause injury to oneself and others, ultimately ruining the natural balance and flow of the world. This is similar to what is practiced in Islam, as the Arabic word

Islam means surrender, which, rather than giving up, means accepting our role in this world, abiding by the natural flow of our lives, and serving as passive and obedient followers of Allah.

Chinese Philosophy and Islam also share resembling notions regarding the nature of human beings. By studying the philosophies of Mencius, we learn that human beings are innately good as we are born with moral competence, and it is due to the outside world's influence and external forces that we become evil. Laozi considered the infant as the epitome of Dao and thought of their soft, undefined, and potent states, similar to everything that emerges from non-being, as close to the heart of Dao. Accordingly, as humans age and harden, they move further away from the source of Dao until they die and are returned to the source (i.e., "the mother"). Similarly, the *Quran*, the sacred book of Islam, considers newly-born infants as the purest and most innocent form of human life, suggesting that we are all born with innate goodness. This book, which represents the messages of Allah, warns us of various sins and actions that could lead us to become evil. In addition, it states that we are born from god, and we will return to god, conveying a similar process regarding the natural way of life proposed by Laozi.

Upon further thought, one could discover the similarities between how Islam and Chinese philosophy describe the ideal social hierarchies that enable us to realize our societal roles and responsibilities and work towards a common global goal. Mohist philosophy teaches us that each person is to do good to serve an interest. Although many men may not know what good to do to serve this interest, Mohism suggests that heaven has full knowledge of such actions, and this divine knowledge is based on universal love. That is, by possessing universal love, we could acknowledge what is best for the interest of humanity and, thus, realize our own interests. The same message is depicted in Quran, as the common goal for all human beings is to do good in the world and reach heaven. Knowledge regarding what good to do to reach this goal is also provided in Quran. For instance, we are encouraged to help our neighbors, spread the word of Allah, and discourage others from committing sins. Mohism also emphasizes the process of becoming rather than being, thus, encouraging individuals to be less concerned about their physical being as they lead them to a world of trouble and worry. Such virtues are also emphasized in Islam, encouraging Muslims to focus on preparing for life after death, as the ultimate goal of life is rejoining god in the high heavens and having eternal peace instead of obsessing over temporary and materialistic possessions. While providing this knowledge, the words of Allah also state that each individual has the freedom of choice regarding their actions in

life. This demonstrates that while humans have the ability and choice to do good or evil, they possess the inner potential and motivation to do good, a notion that has also been mentioned in Mencius' philosophy. In addition, both Islam and Mencius' accounts of Confucianism imply that moral failures are failures to develop one's inner heart (innate goodness) and advise individuals not to be tempted by external desires.

Great importance is dedicated to family bonds and loves within societies by Muslims and followers of Chinese philosophy. Mohammad and Confucius considered it an honor to screen family members and kindly teach them to refrain from wrongdoings. Mencius considered family as the place to learn the ways of righteousness and become virtuous. At the same time, Islam regards the family as where faith in Allah is maintained and consolidated. In fact, by leveraging the virtues within the bounds of families and blending the teachings of Islam and Chinese philosophy, one could gain a new perspective on universal love. We mentioned that by Mozi's philosophy, universal love enables men to realize common interests that benefit society as a whole. Correspondingly, in *Quran*, all Muslims are considered brothers and sisters whose responsibility is to protect and motivate one another on the path to heaven.

Interestingly, Chinese philosophers' motives and intentions for promoting goodness and realizing societal ethics also correspond to those of Islamic communities. Mozi found rewards and punishments as necessary instruments for encouraging ethical behavior within the society and felt that rulers were required to leverage such means, highlighting their importance in removing evil and its harms from the world. Xunzi believed that all humans are innately evil and, therefore, an appropriate legal system based on the values of sages was crucial for ensuring peace and prosperity. Legalism considered people's fear of punishments and emphasized understanding people's dispositions and manipulating them to design laws that direct them toward the pursuit of what is in society's interest. Islam also agrees on the necessity of rewards and punishments. In many parts of the *Quran*, we can observe clear illustrations and detailed descriptions of Heaven and Hell, the ultimate reward and punishment. Similar to the mentioned philosophies, these depictions act as instruments for encouraging virtues and preventing the sins that disrupt the world's order.

Chinese philosophy and Islam also highlight the importance of global leaders. In Confucianism, such individuals, referred to as sages, carry out the moral mission decreed by heaven to set the world aright. In Mohism, a leader, namely the Son of Heaven, is selected as the

wisest and most capable individual among men and is responsible for relaying the knowledge from heaven and dissolving disorder and conflicts within our world. A brief assessment of Mohammad, the prophet who promoted Islam, reveals a strong resemblance between his role in spreading the word of Allah, the responsibilities of the Son of Heaven, and the properties that are commonly associated with sages. The argument here is that Mohammad was not among the wisest of men, quite the opposite, as he could not read nor write before being assigned the responsibilities of a prophet. In addition, the Son of Heaven referred to the rulers of the time, such as the Zhou king, whereas he was a simple individual who did not possess any political power. However, Mohammad was chosen to act as a communication channel for god's messages and guide his followers toward the right path in life. In other words, he was taught about divine knowledge and its moral missions by god's will and was responsible for transferring this knowledge. Accordingly, based on Confucius ideologies, rulers are expected to set examples rather than order. In contrast, rulers in the Zhou dynasty were said to have earned heaven's support and been chosen based on heaven's mandate, all traits that the Muslim prophet possessed. Therefore, one can observe that these notions are indeed analogous at their roots.

Despite the above mentioned similarities, arguments could be made to demonstrate that there are also several subtle differences between the teachings of Islam and Chinese philosophy. For instance, Dao cannot be named, yet there are numerous names for Allah in *Quran*. In fact, unlike Allah, Dao is not a transcendent being; instead, it is a way of the cosmos, an idea that cannot be pinned down. Therefore, Dao and Allah cannot be referring to the same concept. Unlike Islam, some branches of Chinese philosophy, such as Legalism, consider humans innately evil. Accordingly, delving deeper into the beliefs in Chinese culture presents the concept of ancestor worship, which was practiced in the Shang dynasty and is adopted by many Chinese people in the modern era. However, ancestor worship is strongly forbidden in Islam as it promotes idolatry and leads individuals to uphold their family deity above the worship of Allah. In fact, by scrutinizing their respective beliefs, actions, and rituals, one can realize that there are many differences in how Chinese philosophy and Islam are adopted.

However, the purpose of this essay was not to advocate Chinese philosophy as a religion, such as Islam, nor did it intend to depict it as having the same structures and beliefs. Instead, it aimed to give nuance to the ways of thinking about life by highlighting such similarities. In addition, regardless of these differences, this essay attempted to explore what the notions in

Chinese philosophy and Islam fundamentally stand for and their coherent implications, as opposed to investigating how they are or should be implemented in our current societies. For instance, further research on Chinese philosophy led us to find the Han Kitab, which considers the resemblance between Mohammad and Confucian sages, regards the Islamic teachings as indistinguishable from Confucian rituals, and proposes an intuitive fusion of Confucianism and Islam. Such ideologies highlight the arguments presented in this essay and emphasize the importance of our position.

Compared to Islam and many other religions, Chinese philosophy is arguably also a way of life affecting every aspect of an individual's existence. In this essay, we explored similarities between Chinese philosophy and Islam based on a top-to-bottom approach. That is, we initially discussed the ideologies regarding higher powers and beliefs regarding the ultimate purpose of life. Accordingly, we analyzed the role of human beings in society, their innate morals, and their connection to higher powers. In addition, we touched upon similarities between the family and societal ethics. Considering these similarities could result in many valuable lessons. For instance, one could obtain a new perspective on religions by considering that the required knowledge for prosperity and eternal peace is rooted deep within us rather than messages from heavenly or godly powers. This would enable us to embrace the flow of nature and derive what we desire by observing our surroundings and pondering about the vast cosmos.

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