

Comparing Islam and Christianity through the lens of prayer books

Winter 2019

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There are uncountable numbers of religions and faiths in the world. Islam and Christianity have the two biggest population. Why are they still popular in today's world despite the fact that they were first introduced more than 1000 years ago? The one reason lies in the form they have been spread. Both of them have been successfully utilizing written words on parchments and papers to spread the words of God since the medieval ages. It is significant for us to learn differences and similarities on the efforts that the old predecessors made earlier in the Islam world and the Christian world in order to further develop our understanding in religions. For further exploration, we are going to review four samples of prayer books, two from Islam, the other two from Christianity, in the context of page layout, script writings, and decoration. The first example is Juz' 25, commissioned by the Ilkhanid Sultan Ūljāytū. The second example is the Mamluk Sultan Baybars II's seven-volume Qur'an written in gold in thuluth script. The third example is Leaf from Breviary 1390 and the last one is Hours fragment 15th Century.

First of all, let's talk about the page layout. In Baybars II's Qur'an, you can see quite wide spacing for margins and between lines. In the large spaces, there are circles and marks which are going to be mentioned later. In Christian prayer books, there are wide margins, yet there are not many spaces between written rows. Some of these pieces contain drawings in the margins. Juz' 25 is unique among these four because it does not have much spacing for margins compared to the other three. Although it does not have much of decorative features that other

examples can afford in their extra spaces, it carries the sacredness of God's words with its unique intensity and continuity. This Qur'an is indeed full of Arabic letters. Arabic is written from right to left. When you see the left pages, you can see the effort that the writers made to put as many letters as possible to not leave any extra spaces on one page. The last letters in each row are indeed about to reach to the edge of the pages. Also, you can barely see the spaces between rows. By not having extra spaces in pages, it does not allow readers' eyes to rest while reading Qur'an. The pages full of words immediately impresses readers with intensity. Moreover, not having spaces between sentences and sentences do not allow us, readers, to think about other things other than the words of Qur'an. It enables readers to give us an illusion of continuity, that the words can last eternally. That intensity and idea of eternality can navigate readers to imagine God as a solemn and sacred one.

Second of all, let's see the differences and similarities in decorations. Juz' 25 almost has no decoration because of narrow spacing. The other three have each unique decorations. In each page of the Baybars II's Qur'an, it has several circular dots which are half as small as the letters in the book. On the base of a golden color, it has blue dots in the center and on the edges. The lines go from the dots on the edge to the central dot. Half of the triangular spaces between the lines are colored with shiny red ink. The circles almost look like tiny flowers sprung between lines and, with their size, they give us pleasant feeling while following words of Qur'an. Other decorative features in this book are drawings appearing once in a couple of pages. One such drawing on f7v is a circular shape with four arrows pointing vertically to the end of the page. On the edge of the circle, three dots are located between every two arrows while keeping the distance to each other equal. Then, you can see the circular lines. Some

spaces in between are colored with dark blue and gold. In the center of the circle, there is another circle colored with shiny red. There are elaborate drawings on the circle. You can see a plant's leaves and petals and an angular unknown object. Another drawing you can see is a teardrop shaped one. It has a similar flowery object and angular object in the inner circle which is colored in dark blue this time. On top of that, as filling the rest of the shape, it has flower petals with their edges colored in red. This object has arrows pointing vertically toward four edges of the page and has

equally-spaced dots in between. What we can tell from these drawings is that they follow a very

strict rule of; having straight horizontal arrows in four directions; being symmetry in shapes and outer decorations; having a gold color between inner and outer circles; inner circles have either shiny red or deep blue color. All the observed drawings follow this rule, which gives the readers a satisfyingly well-organized impression. This preciseness makes the words of God more disciplined. Furthermore, the golden elements in playful colors such as red and blue add splendor to the pages. The color combination of deep blue, shiny red and gold gives the readers a noble impression as a whole. In the Christian prayer books, the strict rules for the decorative drawings in the page margins cannot be seen. Yet, in Book of Hours fragment, we can observe the charming leaf decoration on the right side of paragraphs. There is a big petal of lily which is a symbol of the Virgin Mary in the middle with cerian blue and gold, then there are green leaves

and red fruits surrounding that. The random dots are spread to fill the rest of the space. Compared to the drawings on the Baybars II's Qur'an, it gives rather a carefree impression. Hence, both of these two drawings promote the idea of God through different forms. The pictures on the Qur'an spreads the word of God through a highly organized and luxurious form. It tells us that sacrality of God's words is unwavering and magnificent. Whereas the pictures on the Christian prayer book expands the idea of God's words through high-spirited lively drawings of flowers and plants. It tells us that God's words are approachable and something that readers can practice in daily life. Furthermore, both of these drawings use the depiction of nature. It lets readers imagine the relationship between the power of nature and the power of God.

Lastly, we are going to explore the meaning hidden in the letters in each book. In Juz'25, at first glance, it does not look to have many decorative features on each letter. However, when you look at each letter carefully, you can tell from the thick and heavy ink handwriting that the calligraphers paid attention to brushstrokes. They took a long time and engaged in the creation of this of God's words wholeheartedly. In Baybars II's Qur'an, you can observe the letters in mostly in gold, shiny red and dark blue. Also, all the letters are edged with thin black ink and all the holes in letters are filled with black ink. From the different widths in each part of letters, the calligraphers seemed to follow the rules of brushstrokes in Arabic and pay attention to write letters in the most professional way that Arabic could be written. This is such a crisp and elegant handwriting that it must have been satisfying for people to see the actual calligraphy process. On the other hand, in Christian prayer book, Book of Hours fragment, the letters themselves

are well organized that they are identical to those typed with a keyboard. Each paragraph initializes with a huge letter with thick gold ink and a space filled with blue or red ink. These letters are carefully created that it could possibly take at least ten minutes to draw one of them. What we can tell from scripts in these books is that immense efforts and time were put in these letters and all of them are carefully written. The letters show us so much faith the predecessors had for the Gods and they wanted readers to feel the same way. These all handwriting as a whole transforms to tell us the respect for the sacredness of God's words in the medieval Islam and Christian world.

To sum up, both Qu'ran and Christian prayer books spread the sacredness of God's words in a variety of forms such as disciplined lettering and drawings of nature. The enormous effort and time put in the completion of one book are in common and ultimately, that effort and time that we can observe implicitly through the books represent the faith people had for the God the most.

Works Cited

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