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Acknowledgments:

This issue consists of one article contributed by Mr. Sabir Abdur Rahman who is an Islamic Scholar and a specialist in Interfaith Dialogue.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in the articles are those of their authors and do not necessarily represent the Muslim Planet Project.



Announcements

1. Independence days in November Mubarak to Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Albania, and Mauritania.
 2. Muslim Planet has started a series on [Spirituality](#).
 3. “Migration from East to West Punjab: A Personal Recollection” was presented to a group of Jewish and Muslim artists in MD. If interested, please contact us for a copy.
 4. You can send us announcements of countrywide interest for inclusion in this News Journal.
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Interfaith Commonalities and Differences in the
Concept of Messiah: An Anthropocene Analysis

By

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Abstract:

The concept of a coming Messiah is common to the three Abrahamic faiths. This commonality offers a unique opportunity to understand multiculturalism and its challenge in the context of how this common concept evolved under the prevailing Anthropocene conditions. Starting from the common underlying need for the concept, the analysis leads along the culture-unique paths that its evolution took for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The analysis further explores how the psychological underpinning and cultural dynamics continued to replay themselves in the recent history of the concept of Messiah as it manifests itself in Muslim cultures. The approach therefore offers a coarse analysis of the dynamics of multiculturalism as well as a fine-grained analysis of the same. The Islamic Faith offers a unique circumstance because it adopts the concept of a Messiah from Judeo-Christian traditions and adapts it to its own cultural and geopolitical circumstances, in the process, introducing multiple formulations of the concept. The cultural challenges have been formidable leading to crucifixion, excommunication, and schism. The paper analyzes the cultural dynamics within Judaism, Christianity and Islam; and within Islam it addresses the Sunni and Shiite traditions as well as the phenomena of Baha'ism and Ahmadi'ism.

Introduction

The concept of Messiah runs through the Abrahamic Religions. This paper analyzes the concept in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to explore a common theme dotted with differences of local historicity. The paper also examines the Anthropocene aspect of this concept by looking into questions like how it originated in the context of the Jewish history, how it evolved as the history unfolded, and how the religious traditions and sociopolitical situations mutually intertwined. The objective is best served by a chronological view.

Jewish Messiah

The tradition of Messiah among the Abrahamic religions started in the Anthropocene context of the Jewish history. When the Israelites were in bondage in Egypt, they wished for a Messiah who would deliver them from bondage and lead them to freedom. Moses arose among them and delivered them from bondage, leading them out of Egypt. The Hebrew people left Egypt around 1280 BCE [1], and, after spending 40 years in the wilderness of Sinai, crossed the river Jordan to enter Canaan around 1240 BCE [1]. It was then that they began their quest to possess the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. According to Torah, that land had been promised to Abraham and his children [2] since the time of Abraham some 500 years before the Hebrews crossed Jordan into Canaan. God had promised [3] that He would Himself deliver this land into the exclusive possession of the Hebrew people. With God guiding them every step of the way, it would take the Hebrew people about 250 years to finally control most of the Promised Land, and to establish, around 1000 BCE, the Kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capitol [4]. In less than a century, the Kingdom would split into two, when, around 931 BCE, the North separated from Judah to establish the Kingdom of Israel with Samarra as its capitol [5]. The Hebrew domination of the Promised Land lasted for about 300 years. Then things began to turn bad for them. First, the Assyrians destroyed the Kingdom of Israel in the North [6] around 722 BCE. Then the Babylonians destroyed the Kingdom of Judah [6] in the South around 587 BCE and destroyed the First Temple.

[Anthropocene Need for Messiah](#)

In bad times people begin to wish for help from the unknown regions, and begin to hope for the appearance of a Savior, a Messiah, and a Deliverer. After the Babylonians conquered and enslaved the Jews and destroyed their Temple, the Jewish people were facing bad times. They began to wish for a Savior, a Messiah, who will lead them back to days of glory. The later Biblical writings contain references to this wish in the form of predictions of the coming of a Messiah [7]. These predictions spelled out the conditions which would induce the Messiah to come, who he would be in terms of his family lineage, and what he would accomplish when he finally arrived [8].

One of their own did rise, and his birth and life did initiate a new age. Jesus declared that he had come to remind his people, the twelve tribes of Israel, to return to the law as given to them by God through Moses and later Prophets, because, as he said, his people had forgotten the law or had corrupted it [⁹]. Some of his people accepted him and became his followers. But the establishment along with many others of his people rejected him and turned against him. After he was gone, the number of his followers continued to rise, but mostly outside the Hebrew community. His followers called him Jesus Christ, the Messiah and the Savior, and called themselves the Christians. They elevated Jesus to be Divine, called him the only begotten Son of God, and therefore God [¹⁰]. Christian Faith would spread far beyond the land of Palestine in which Jesus preached his message, and would become the religion of almost all of Europe, and through European expansion, of the new world in North and South Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia Pacific [¹¹].

The Search Continued

Jews were waiting for Messiah. When Jesus came, many rejected him. But they kept on waiting for Messiah. Another possibility would arise within a little over a century.

The land of Jews had been under occupation by a succession of invaders; the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and the Romans. Jews never fully accepted to live under occupation and continued to struggle to regain their independence. They rose against Rome in the year 66 of the Common Era [¹²] – the era initiated by the arrival of the Messiah whom the Jews had mostly rejected. The struggle failed. They were crushed by the Romans, who destroyed the Temple and made it difficult for Jews to live in and around Jerusalem. The Jews would rise again around 132 AC [12]. This time they were led by a very capable general, Shimon Ben Kosibah, under whose leadership the struggle achieved a measure of success for some time [¹³]. Rabbi Akiva gave him the name "Bar Kokhba" meaning "Son of a Star" from the Star Prophecy verse [¹⁴]. People called him Bar Kokhba and many accepted him as messiah. He took the title of Nasi Israel and ruled over the country that was virtually independent for two and a half years; and it minted its own coins. But the glory was short lived. Romans crushed the revolt, killed a large number of Jews, destroyed hundreds of Jewish villages, expelled

Jews from Jerusalem, and changed the name of the land to Palestine to dissociate it from Jewish identity. Shimon Ben Kosibah was killed in the fighting. After the failure of the revolt, people turned against the man they thought was Messiah. Some even referred to him as "Simon bar Kozeba" meaning "Son of lies" or "Son of deception".

Jews continued to wait for the Messiah. Over time, the concept of Messiah went through a good degree of intellectual transformation giving rise to Messianic Jews [¹⁵]. The Anthropocene idea of a Messiah slowly became the hope for a Messianic Age [¹⁶], when all faithful together will bring about an atmosphere in which humans will live a happy and prosperous life. As such, each person would contain and possess elements of the personality of a Messiah.

Even the Christians and the Muslims are waiting for a Messiah, who may or may not be the same, and may not be the one that Jews are waiting for. The differences and similarities are attributable to the anthropogenic situations of each people, as is discussed below.

Christian Messiah

Christians believe that Jesus died on the Cross, was resurrected to life and in his second life ascended to heavens where he has been ever since [¹⁷]. According to the Book of Revelation in the Christian Bible, Jesus will return to earth to establish the Kingdom of God [¹⁸]. The conditions that will induce him to come, the manner in which he will come, and what he will do when he finally comes are perceived to be well defined [¹⁹]. Every now and then, there is a discussion about the prevailing human conditions that are considered to be appropriate for the second coming of Jesus. However, the benefit of the return of Jesus and the Kingdom that he would establish is only for those with faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior [²⁰].

In the view of most Christians, Jesus has not yet returned, though many others have appeared and have made major contributions to the development and transformation of Christian Faith. More than one such persons appeared in Europe during the sixteenth century; Martin Luther in Germany, John Calvin in France, and John Knox in Scotland. In the 19th century, Joseph Smith appeared in USA. He declared himself to be a Prophet and founded the Church of Latter Day Saints. These reformers changed the Christian religion in an essential way. Until that time, almost all Christians belonged to one

of the two Churches; the Catholic Church based in Rome, and the Orthodox Church based in Constantinople. Almost all of Europe was Christian, and Western Europe belonged to the Catholic Church. Religion played a very important part in the life of people at all levels of society, including the Royal Families and the Kings; and the conduct of the rulers was closely governed by the rules of the church. Pope enjoyed political supremacy over the entire Western Roman Empire and continued to play a powerful role in Western Europe, often competing with monarchs for control over wide-ranging affairs of Church and state, crowning emperors, and regulating disputes among secular rulers. Even after its political influence had diminished, the Catholic Church and the Pope continued to be the supreme authority over all religious and spiritual matters with some notable exceptions due to the contributions of the above mentioned reformers.

Messiah amongst Muslims

The concept of Messiah does not conflict with Muslim ideology. However, Muslim doctrine of the Finality of God's Message, as delivered through Muhammad, implied that God would no longer directly speak to, or make a direct contact with, any human until the Day of Judgment. In this context, a prophet is elevated above a messiah. That condition of Muslim doctrine held worldwide for longer than a thousand years. No person of significant stature made a claim to have talked directly to God or to have received a direct revelation or inspiration from God.

It changed in the nineteenth century when four persons in succession would each make the claim that God had spoken to them. The first of them was Joseph Smith; the other three are discussed below.

Background

The Shia Muslim doctrine holds that a living Imam, who must be a direct descendent of the Prophet, has exclusive domain over the religious, spiritual and political leadership of the Muslim Community [²¹]. Muhammad had sons but they died as infants. He had four daughters; two of them had no children, one had a child who died young, and the fourth daughter, Fatima, who was married to Ali, had two sons and one daughter. The only descendants of Muhammad are

from his youngest daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali. Fatima holds a position of high honor in the Shia community, and Ali is regarded as the rightful inheritor of leadership of the Muslim community after Muhammad. The Sunni Muslims do not subscribe to this requirement for the leader of Muslim Community, and that is the primary difference between the two. However, Sunni Muslims also hold Fatima and Ali with regard, except they do not recognize their exclusive claim to the exclusive leadership of the Muslim Community simply by virtue of their blood relation to the Prophet.

Ali is the first Shia Imam. Succession, in Shia belief, had to be through his direct descendants. These Imams never were able to achieve political power and leadership, but they and their followers opposed the prevailing rulers and declared them to be the illegitimate usurpers of power because they did not descend from the Prophet [22]. The Imams and their followers were considered by the rulers, who were Sunni and not Shia, as dangerous [22]. There was a constant struggle between the Imams and the power structure. Many Imams died mysteriously, some even in prison. The twelfth Imam, Muhammad ibn al-Hassan al-Mahdi, became Imam around the age of four when his father, the previous Imam, died. Soon thereafter, Imam Muhammad disappeared mysteriously. His followers proclaimed that he had gone into hiding because the time and circumstances were not suitable for his work, but he would return under more suitable conditions [23]. Imam Muhammad ibn al-Hassan al-Mahdi disappeared around 872, is supposed to have never died and is believed by his followers to be still living. A great deal has been written about him, about why and how he disappeared, under what circumstances he would return, how would he be recognized when he finally appears, and what he would do and how he would do it [23].

It is primarily a Shia belief, but the story has been developing for over a thousand years and has continued to grow in power and mystery. The coming of Mahdi has been proclaimed to have been foretold by the Prophet himself [24]. Therefore, most Muslims, both Shia and Sunni, are waiting for the Mahdi. Christians had been waiting for the return of Jesus even longer. Those waiting for Mahdi have combined the appearance of Mahdi with the return of Jesus. This combined event has over time been accepted, in varying degrees, throughout the Muslim Community, Shia and Sunni both. Most of the Muslims are now waiting for the appearance of Mahdi

who will fight and defeat the Anti-Christ, known as Dajjal by Muslims, and pave the way for the return of Jesus. Mahdi will welcome and greet Jesus on his return and will work with him to establish the Kingdom of God [23]. But, in the Muslim view, this kingdom would be for the exclusive benefit of Muslims.

Bab

The largest segment of the Shia Muslims are known as the Twelvers because they believe in Twelve Imams. The Twelvers believe that even after the twelfth Imam went into occultation around 872, he continued to communicate through a mediator, called Bab (Arabic for gate or door). He had appointed more than one Babs in succession, till he ceased to communicate around 940 [25]. The Twelvers believe that the Hidden Imam is alive in the world, but in concealment from his enemies, and would emerge just before the Day of Judgment. He will emerge as the *Qa'im* (he who will rise) and acting as the *Mahdi* (he who is rightly guided) will start a holy war against the evil, defeat the unbelievers and establish a reign of justice [25].

Many have claimed to be Mahdi but the first person who developed a substantial following was Siyyid Ali Muhammad, a Shia Muslim. He was a merchant from Shiraz, Iran. He claimed in 1844 that he was the Bab [25]. That would mean that the Hidden Imam Muhammad ibn al-Hassan, who had ceased communications around 940, had resumed to communicate after about 900 years, and had appointed Siyyid Ali Muhammad as the current Bab. Later, he began explicitly to proclaim that he was not merely the Bab to the Hidden Imam, but the Manifestation of the Hidden Imam himself. He claimed to be the *Qa'im*, the *Mahdi*, and new messenger from God with divine authority because God spoke to him. In a sequence very similar to how John the Baptist announced the arrival of Jesus Christ, the Bab, in most of his prominent writings, alluded to the Promised One, most commonly referred in Arabic as *man yazhiruhu'lláh*, "he whom God shall make manifest", and that he himself was "but a ring upon the hand of the one Whom God shall make manifest". Bab was a Shia Muslim and was claiming to fulfill a Shia Prophecy. He did gain some following. However, he and his followers were rejected and strongly opposed both by the Shia religious establishment and by the Shia Iranian government. He was accused of heresy and tried in a

court of law. Authorities admonished him to recant his claims, but there is no clear evidence that he did. He was convicted, sentenced to death, and executed in 1850. This would later give rise to the Baha'i movement.

Bahá'u'lláh

Within 20 years of the Báb's death, over 25 persons would claim to be the Promised One. But Mírzá Ḥusayn Alí Núrí was accepted most widely as the Promised One, and ultimately came to be recognized as the prophetic fulfillment of Bábism. He was a Shia Muslim from Tehran, Iran. Born in 1817, he was two years older than the Bab. He accepted the Báb's claim, became a Bábí and helped to spread Bábism, especially in his native province of Núr. He was recognized as one of the most influential believers of Babism. The Bábís were being persecuted by authorities in Iran and many were imprisoned in various places. Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí was also imprisoned in 1852. He was released from prison in 1853, but was exiled from Iran. He chose to go to Baghdad, Iraq [26]. At that time, an increasing number of Bábís considered Baghdad the new center for leadership of Bábism.

Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí adopted the title *Bahá'u'lláh*, Arabic for 'Glory of God', and that is the name by which he is now known. According to Bahá'u'lláh, in 1852, while a prisoner in Tehran, he had several mystical experiences and visions, which symbolically marked the beginning of his mission as the next Báb. Ten years later, in 1863 in Baghdad, he made a formal proclamation to a small group of his companions, declaring that God spoke to him. Then in 1866, Bahá'u'lláh publicly made his claim to be "He Whom God Shall Make Manifest". Eventually he was recognized by the vast majority of Bábís as the Promised One, and "He whom God shall make manifest". His followers began calling themselves Bahá'ís.

Bahá'u'lláh subsequently declared that he was the "Promised One" of all religions, fulfilling the messianic prophecies found in all world religions. Bahá'u'lláh's eschatological claims constitute six distinctive messianic identifications:

1. from Judaism, the incarnation of the "Everlasting Father" from the *Yuletide prophecy* of Isaiah 9:6, and the "*Lord of Hosts*" of Isaiah 47:4;

2. from Christianity, the "Spirit of Truth" or Comforter predicted by Jesus in his farewell discourse of John 14:17 and the return of Christ "in the glory of the Father";
3. from Zoroastrianism, the return of Shah Bahram Varjavand, a Zoroastrian messiah predicted in various late Pahlavi texts;
4. from Shi'a Islam the return of the Third Imam, Imam Husayn;
5. from Sunni Islam, the return of Jesus (Isa); and
6. from Bábism, "He whom God shall make manifest".

Within Iran there was a strong rejection of Bahá'u'lláh and the Bahá'ís, just as there had been rejection of the Báb and the Bábís [26]. But the movement and their leader were in Baghdad, Iraq, and therefore beyond the reach of the Shia Iranian authorities. The Sunni authorities of the Ottoman Empire did not react as violently to the claim of being the Bab, or the Mahdi, but the claim of being messenger of God did not sit well with them. In time, the Bahá'ís would be forced to make a choice; continue to call themselves Muslim and face persecution or call themselves something else. Ultimately, they gave up any connection to Islam and began to refer to their faith as a new faith started by Bahá'u'lláh. By now, Bahá'ís do not remember, and do not care to be reminded, that their faith began within Islam.

Ghulam Ahmad

A couple of decades after Bahá'u'lláh declared himself to be the Promised One, and within his life time, rose a Messiah in Punjab, India; Mirza Ghulam Ahmad declared in 1889 that he was the Promised Messiah, the second coming of Jesus, the Reformer of the Age, the Mahdi awaited by Muslims, and a Prophet of God [²⁷]. He declared that God spoke to him and that he was making his claim on Divine authority. Since the finality of Prophet-hood in Muhammad was of paramount importance to Muslims, he did not challenge that finality but modified it. He created a differentiation between a law-bearing prophet and a non-law-bearing prophet, and declared that Islam had been completed and perfected in Muhammad and the complete and perfect Law of God was contained in the Qur'an. No law-bearing prophet would come after Muhammad and Qur'an cannot be altered or modified. However, non-law-bearing prophets can come after Muhammad in order to reform and strengthen Islam.

These prophets would be subordinate to Muhammad, the last law-bearing prophet. Thus, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, according to his claim and the belief of his followers, is a non-law-bearing prophet who is subordinate and deputy to Muhammad, and whose advent is the continuation of the prophet-hood of Muhammad [27]. The distinction of law-bearing and non-law-bearing prophets did not, however, find any acceptance among the mainstream Muslim community. To complicate matters further, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad declared that any Muslim who does not accept him as a prophet is a rejecter of faith and therefore not a Muslim. The main stream Muslim community has strongly rejected such claims of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and considers his followers to be heretic [²⁸].

The movement attracted some followers in Punjab and other parts of India. It also carried its mission overseas and found greater success there than it found in India. Unlike the Bahá'ís, who under persecution decided to give up their claim to Islam and severed their connection to Islam, Ahmadis have refused to give up their claim to Islam [27]. They continue to insist that they are Muslim and claim to practice Islam in its pristine form. They hold that Islam is the final law for humanity as revealed to Muhammad and they have been assigned the task of restoring it to its true essence and pristine form, which had been lost through the centuries.

Conclusion

The concept of Messiah has its roots in the Jewish tradition. During the days of bondage in Egypt, the Hebrews wished and waited for a Messiah who would deliver them from the bondage. Moses delivered them from bondage and set them on their path to days of glory in Canaan, the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. The days of glory do not last forever for any one. They ended for the Hebrews in their enslavement by the Babylonians. Once again, they began to wish for a Messiah, a Deliverer. In time, other Abrahamic religions would join the Hebrews in wishing for a Messiah, namely the Christians and Muslims. Every segment would have their own definition of who the Messiah would be, what he would do, and for whose benefit. Many Messiahs appeared over time; each was accepted by some and rejected by others. The dynamics of these

evolutions were Anthropocene; driven by the particular geopolitics of the land and the communities.

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- 9 Matthew 23:23-39.
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- 14 Numbers 24:17: "There shall come a star out of Jacob"
- 15 Messianic Jews https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messianic_Judaism
- 16 Isaiah 9:1-7
- 17 Hebrews 9:27-30 “Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the

sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” .

Hebrews 10:12-13 “But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool.”

18 Mathew 24:30 “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

19 Mathew 24.

20 Acts 4:11-12. “Jesus is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

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