

# A Comparative Study of Pilgrimage in Christianity and Islam

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Visitation or pilgrimage to the Holy Lands is one of the common religious practices in most world religions and it is considered an essential act of religious devotion in the Abrahamic religions. Meanwhile, the article attempts a comparative study of the practice of pilgrimage in Christianity and Islam with the aim of identifying the similarities and differences in the practice. The origin, status and the spiritual benefits attributed to pilgrimage in Christianity and Islam are examined.

The methodology used in this research was a narrative-descriptive method using reliable Christian and Islamic scriptures. The collected data were thereafter analyzed based on textual and logical evidences to reach the research outcome.

Meanwhile, the findings showed that the pilgrimage is considered a form of religious exercise, not just an ordinary journey or tourism in both the Christianity and Islam.

## **Introduction**

From time immemorial, the visitation to sacred places has been one of the old practices virtually in all religions of the world but the methods or locations might be different. Every Abrahamic religion (i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam) has some common idea of pilgrimage but with a different historical background and locations.

In Judaism, pilgrimage is said to have its background from the Biblical Old Testament itself and it is the act and custom started and performed by the Prophets of God. The journeys of Abraham, Moses, and the other patriarchs, the exile of the Israelites from Egypt and their

forty-year journey through the desert were all pilgrimages, in the sense that they were means to an end: the possession of the land where milk and honey flows and where God has made his rest (Sirarpi, 2005: 7152).

Pilgrimage in Christianity is related in one way or the others to the personality of Jesus Christ or his mother. For instance, a place of birth, a place of worship, a place believed to be a certification site and any other places which has something to do with the holy personalities of Jesus Christ and Saint Mary are considered sacred places for pilgrimage. It is pertinent to say that there is no evidence in the Bible commanding the pilgrimage to the Holy house in Jerusalem, but it is one of the spiritual ethics which is common in Christendom. (Mccarthy, 2003: 343)

Pilgrimage to sacred places such as Mecca, Medina and other sacred places is permitted and encouraged in Islam. In fact, the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) is an annual religious gathering and an obligatory religious devotion for the Muslims – who are physically and financially capable – and it is to be undertaken at least once in a lifetime.(Martin, 2005: 7154 f.)

Meanwhile, it is pertinent to say that the pilgrimage to Mecca in the Islamic viewpoint is not a novelty practice introduced by Prophet Muhammad; rather it is believed to be as old as history of human being on the surface of the earth. According to some Islamic narrations, Hazrat Adam was considered the one that started the rites of Hajj when he was descended from the Heaven (Ya'kub Kulayni, 1986: 187 f.) and likewise, according to the Quranic reports, the elements of Hajj are traced back to the time of Abraham when he was commanded by God (along with his son Ismael) to raise the foundations of the Holy House in Mecca (Qur'an, 2 (Surah al-Baqarah): 127) and to invite the pilgrims from all over the world for pilgrimage (Qur'an, 22 (Surah al-Hajj): 27-30).

## Definition of terms

### *Pilgrimage*

According to A. S. Hornby (2000), the term 'Pilgrimage' is defined as "a journey to a holy place for religious reasons" or "a journey to a place that is connected with somebody or something that you admire or respect." From the definition, it is obvious that a pilgrimage is a religious visit or journey made by the adherents of a particular religious belief to the places considered sacred. And a person who embarks on such religious journey is referred to as a pilgrim. In the light of this, therefore, a pilgrimage is completely different from a tour, which is made for the purpose of entertainment and pleasure.

### *Christianity*

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000), the term 'Christianity' is defined as "the religion that is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ and the belief that he was the son of God." The adherents of the Christianity are therefore referred to as Christians.

### *Islam*

The term '*Islam*' is derived from an Arabic root *S-L-M*; which According to Hans Wehr (1976) literally means submission, resignation and reconciliation (to the will of God). However, in a religious context, Islam according to Az-hari (2000: 313) and Ibn Manzour (1993: 294) means a display of humbleness and obedience to the message of the noble Prophet of God. In other words, the term '*Islam*' is a religion of total and complete submission to the will and dictates of God, the Almighty and the directives of His Apostle; *Hazrat* Muhammad son of Abdullah. Thus, the adherents and followers of Islam are therefore referred to as Muslims.

### **The Status of Pilgrimage in Christianity**

In Christianity, pilgrimage is defined as a journey to a sacred place undertaken as an act of religious devotion, either as an act of veneration or penance, or to ask for the fulfillment of some prayer (Cooper, 1996: 215). According to another definition, "Pilgrimage is a journey undertaken to visit sacred places such as the scenes of our Lord's earthly life in Palestine, the 'threshold of the Apostles' at Rome, or the shrines of saints and martyrs." (Agate, 1980: 18) In other words, pilgrimage in Christianity is a religious journey undertaken by the Christians to sacred places or sanctuary either in the pilgrim's locality or abroad as an act of religious devotion in order to show a high level of respect to referred personalities/places or to solicit for forgiveness of the past sins or to solicit for the fulfillment of their legitimate needs.

History made it clear to us that pilgrimage in Christianity is an act of innovation, as there is no explicit command in the New Testament on the meaning and importance of pilgrimage (Sirarpi, 2005: 7148; 7152) and it was originally initiated and encouraged during the fourth century by Constantine I and his mother, Helena (Maccarthy: 343). Without any doubt, Christian pilgrimage is rooted in the eastern domain of Christianity, primarily in Palestine, where Jesus was born and accomplished his mission, and secondarily in Egypt, the cradle of Christian monasticism (Sirarpi, 2005: 7152). In the light of this, therefore, it is believed that it was the Imperial influence and not religious obligation that greatly contributed to the growth and development of Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Sirarpi, 2005: 7153). Since the Middle Ages, however, Rome also has been a major Christian pilgrimage site and this involves visits to a large number of sites associated with the Apostles, Saints and Christian martyrs, as well as to places both within the Vatican City and in Italian territory.

The concept of pilgrimage in early Christianity was similar to Ancient Judaism, except in one area: "...The meaning of pilgrimage in ancient Israel and in the early Christianity is similar yet differs markedly in one point: for the Israelite, a visit to the Temple was a requirement of faith to be fulfilled annually; for the Christian, that requirement has been fulfilled once and for all by Jesus Christ in his own final pilgrimage to the Temple. Therefore, the Christian pilgrimage became a journey to fulfill personal needs of piety rather than collective requirement" (Sirarpi, 2005: 7152).

Meanwhile, during an apostolic journey of the Holy father Benedict XVI to Santiago De Compostela and Barcelona in November 2010, he pointed out in his address to the purpose of pilgrimage in Christianity: "...To go on pilgrimage is not simply to visit a place to admire its treasures of nature, art or history. To go on pilgrimage really means to step out of ourselves in order to encounter God where he has revealed himself, where his grace has shone with particular splendor and produced rich fruits of conversion and holiness among those who believe. Above all, Christians go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to the places associated with the Lord's passion, death and resurrection. They go to Rome, the city of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul, and also to Compostela, which, associated with the memory of Saint James, has welcomed pilgrims from throughout the world who desire to strengthen their spirit with the Apostle's witness of faith and love...". (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010: 1 f.)

In Christianity, there are several spiritual benefits attributed to pilgrimage to the sacred and holy places. Visitation to the Holy Land assists the pilgrims to gain proximity to God and increases their piety. Similarly, it is also considered one of the ways to strengthen the faith in God. Another spiritual benefit of pilgrimage is the attainment of forgiveness from sins and deliverance from every kind of evil. The Pilgrims when getting to the Holy sites felt the blessings and the presence of God. According to one of the most famous early Christian pilgrims called Jerome, he described the opportunity to have better understanding of the Scripture as a spiritual benefit attributed to the pilgrimage to the sacred places: "...so we also understand scripture better when we have seen Judea with our eyes and discovered what still remains of ... ancient town."(Mccarthy, 2003: 344)

### **The Status of Pilgrimage in Islam**

The Arabic term '*Ziyārah*' is often translated to English as visit; call; visitation; tour (see Al-Baalbaki, 2010, entry "زيارة" (i.e. Ziyārat)) and at times as pilgrimage. In a literal usage, the term '*Ziyārah*' is defined as "turning and withdrawing from something"(Ibn Fāris, 1983, entry "زور" (i.e. Zūr)), but in the Islamic terminology, it is a form of visitation to the gravesites for the purpose of praying for the dead or visitation to the shrines of holy people (such as prophet Muhammad, his pure family members and descendants, his companions and other venerated

figures in Islam, such as the prophets, and Islamic scholars) for the purpose of seeking blessings. In other words, pilgrimage in the Islamic viewpoint is the turning or visitation which is accompanied with reverence at the heart and spiritual approach to religious leaders or their graves or places related to them in order to express and show love and reverence and acquire spiritual blessings.

In Islam, there are various types of visitation or pilgrimage, ranging from the compulsory pilgrimage such as the pilgrimage to Mecca or *Hajj* and the voluntary pilgrimage such as the visitations of the graves of the holy Prophet in Medina, his pure descendant and the visitations of the graves of the faithful and righteous people. The annual pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca (i.e. *Hajj*) is a religious duty which is considered as one of the pillars of Islam. *Hajj* is an obligation for all Muslims to perform once in their lifetime, provided they are physically and financially capable to do so at its time; otherwise, they are exempted from such an obligation. Interestingly, a command to undertake pilgrimage by the Muslims was directly made from the Holy Qur'an and the practical demonstration of the Prophet (*Sunnah*). The verse 97 of chapter 3 (Surah Al-Imran) says:

*"...And it is the duty of mankind toward Allah to make pilgrimage to the House — for those who can afford the journey to it — and should anyone renege [on his obligation], Allah is indeed without need of the creatures."*

Generally speaking, visitation to the graves of the righteous people, particularly the noble Prophet of God or sacred places attributed to him is accepted by all the Muslims. However, in Shia Islam, the visitation or pilgrimage to graves of pure household and descendants of the Prophet (such as Lady Fatimah and the twelve Infallible Imams) is also considered among the requirements of loyalty towards them. In actual fact, the visitation or pilgrimage to the holy shrines of the pure household of the Prophet is considered among significant cultural symbols of Shia Muslims.

In several Sunni *Hadith* books such as *Sahih Muslim*, *Sunan an-Nasai* and *Sunan Abi Dawud*, the holy Prophet himself made several visits to graves of some faithful companions and the martyrs of Islam. Similarly, he gave the directive to the Muslims to visit the graves as it will remind the people of death and the hereafter. He was reported to have said:

*“In the past, I forbade you to visit graves, but you may now visit them, for in visiting them there is a reminder (of death).”<sup>1</sup>*

In accordance with several narrations from the Holy Prophet and his pure household, there are several spiritual benefits attributed to pilgrimage in Islam. One of the greatest spiritual benefits of pilgrimage in Islam is the remembrance of Allah. Attainment of piety and consciousness of Allah, which contributes positively to the life of the pilgrims, is another spiritual benefit of pilgrimage in Islam. Remembrance of death and the Hereafter is another spiritual benefit attributed to the visitation of graves of the righteous people.

### **Similarities and differences in Pilgrimage in Christianity and Islam**

After a study of the origin, status and the spiritual benefits attributed to the practice of pilgrimage in Christianity and Islam, some areas of similarities and differences can be observed:

#### **i) Similarities**

1. It is believed by the adherents of both, Christianity and Islam, that the pilgrimage to the Holy Lands is considered permissible and a highly recommended practice to attain spiritual connection with God.
2. Similarly, pilgrimage to sacred places is considered a form of religious devotion, and not just a mere tour. Therefore, certain ethics have to be observed by the pilgrims.
3. In Christianity and Islam, pilgrimage is a form of spiritual visitation or journey to a person or place considered sacred for a particular purpose, such as gaining proximity to God, purification of soul and forgiveness of sins.
4. The pilgrims to the Holy Lands are considered ‘holy’ in both, Christianity and Islam. In other words, it is believed in Christianity and Islam that the pilgrims to the Holy Lands –due to the spiritual magnetism of the sacred places – start to lead a more pious life.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the length of the reference, the chief editor put it in this footnote. The author gives as source: Sahih Muslim, Book 11 (Book of Funeral prayer), Hadith 136; Sunan an-Nasai, Book 21 (Book of Funerals), (Chapter on visiting graves), Hadith 216. Sunan Abu Dawud, Book 21 (Book of Funerals), (Chapter on visiting graves) Hadith 147.

**ii) Differences**

1. In Christianity, there is no direct command in the New Testament enjoining the performance of pilgrimage to the Holy Lands, but the command to embark on pilgrimage (such as pilgrimage to Mecca) is directly given in the Holy Qur'an. Similarly, the noble Prophet of Islam embarked on visitations to sacred places and he enjoined his followers to do the same.
2. In Christianity, pilgrimage to Holy and sacred places are voluntary practice but on the contrary, there is an obligatory pilgrimage (such as Hajj) and a voluntary pilgrimage (such as visitation of the graves of the righteous people) in Islam.
3. In Islam, there is a fixed time (i.e. the twelfth month) in the lunar year for the performance of the obligatory pilgrimage (i.e. *Hajj*). Performing it in other period is considered null and void. However, there is no particularly appropriate time to make a pilgrimage in Christianity.
4. In Islam, when the pilgrim enters a special state of sacredness (*Ihram*), there are certain things that will be considered forbidden for him/her. However, there is no such prohibition in pilgrimage in Christianity.
5. In Islam, the pilgrimage of the Muslim to Mecca is an annual obligation of the Muslims who are physically and financially capable once in their lifetime. The pilgrimage of Christians to the birth place of Jesus, the city of Jerusalem, Rome is considered an honor, not an obligation.

**Conclusion**

Pilgrimage to the Holy Lands played a significant role in the religious life of both the Christians and the Muslims. Meanwhile, despite the fact that there a comparative number of differences between Christianity and Islam on pilgrimage, there are still a number of similarities between the two religions in this regard. The two Abrahamic religions considered pilgrimage to the Holy Lands as a form of religion devotion, not just a tour for the purpose of attaining proximity to God.

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