SSR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (SSRJAHSS)

Homepage: https://ssrpublisher.com/ssrjahss

Volume 3, Issue 11, 2026 ISSN: 3049-0391 (Online)

Christianity and Islam in the Eyes of History: Exploring the Common Fronts

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Received: 10.10.2026 | **Accepted:** 14.11.2026 | **Published:** 19.11.2026

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DOI: *10.5281/zenodo.24363062*

Abstract **Original Research Article**

Christianity and Islam have a lot in common. At the level of unity of God, moral codes, education and art of writing, regulation of marital life, superstition and dress codes, both religions are similar, so, it was easy for the Negus of Abyssinia to accept the first set of Muslim migrants in history in 615 AD on asylum. European colonialism and evangelism have however pitched these two against each other, rather than forging a common front against ills within the society, they are at each other's throat. To bridge this gap, religious history should be made a part of history curriculum; educational institutions should endeavour to organise periodic inter-religious workshops or conferences while Christians and Muslims must endeavour to work together and speak with one religious voice as enshrined in their holy books.

Keywords: Christianity, Islam, Religion, Evangelism, Moral Codes.

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Introduction

The period of the acquisition of the knowledge of the existence of One Supreme Being is not clear. At various points, man worshipped trees, rivers, rocks, sun, moon etc. As man became more knowledgeable and wise, he accepted the existence of One Supreme Being but worshipped lesser creatures that were regarded as intermediaries. The worship of more than one God is polytheism. Those who believe in the worship of one Supreme Being, rather than forging a common front against disbelievers, have on the contrary through aggressive evangelism become their own worst enemies. The most dominant religions at the head of monotheism are Islam and Christianity. At the intra-religious level, deadly and cut throat competition exists as well, with numerous sects in existence, each projecting and protecting its ideology. At the inter-religious level, evangelism has pitched one religion against the other, with the belief that God accepts no other religion while at the same time each sect within a religion sees others as not doing the right thing.

There are many areas of similarities in Christianity and Islam which if harnessed by practitioners can lead to better understanding, harmony and tolerance. A morally upright society can be easily achieved if efforts are put in place to study each other's religious tenets. Traditional African belief system is different from that of the Europeans or Americans. While traditional Africa believed in the existence of a Supreme Being who is too high to access, European belief system did not recognise that until the coming of Christianity and Islam. The presence of praise names for the Supreme Being in African languages similar to what obtains in Christianity and Islam gives credence to it and it therefore becomes unnecessary to refer to

Africans as pagans, the term aptly fits the Europeans.

Traditional Belief Systems in Africa

There is no unified mode of traditional religious worship among Africans, different people worship in different ways. What however existed among them was the belief in the existence of the creator of the universe who they call by their own ethnic names.

The Ebira religious belief system for instance centres on God whom they call *Ohomorihi*, *Ihinegba*, and *Oricha*. In their description of the Almighty God, the Ebira shower praises on Him- *Adayiebeba* (our father above); *Ikokokoukou* (The All Powerful, The Omnipotent); *Ovaraka Dosi* (Of limitless size); *Ovarakahiduma* (Providing thunder when He stirs); *Ogodogodo onuvoza ometu* (So far away that no man's hand can reach Him). (Ibrahim, 1968) In addition are the following, *Okavomavo* (Doer of what He says); *Ochiriji mokareyi* (The Unseen Judge); *Oduajini suhuo tenyi* (He destroys today and repairs tomorrow); *Ohinoyi eneimasu ara Ohinoyi eneimehine ara* (King who sleeps not nor dose off) among others.

The Ebira concept of God is not traceable to any particular time. Through comparative study, they were already aware of the existence of God before migrating to their present location. The Ebira of Kotonkarfe area, for instance, call God *Ihinegba* while the Igarra of Edo State call Him *Oshomorishi*. (Sule, 2015) In view of this, the belief in God had been with the Ebira as early as possible in their existence, but the mode of their belief is not known. The knowledge of the existence of God was revealed to adherents of Islam and Christianity through prophets, God never showed himself physically to them. That the Ebira were aware of the existence of God as well as the aforementioned praise names similar to those of the Christians and Muslims points to the idea that God must have revealed himself to them also. As a society that was not fortunate to develop the art of writing, such revelations were not written down. They only made use of the much that the memory could retain. The Ebira perceive God as an invisible being and this perhaps is responsible for their appeasing of spirits and ancestors who were believed to intercede between man and God.

Spirits and ancestors were appeased with sacrifices and material offerings, but such offerings were however not meant for God Himself. In any spiritual act of the Ebira, God's name was mentioned first and eulogized, sacrifices or offerings were not made with the sense that they were meant for Him. Pieces of kola nut, sacrificial meat, offerings or libations left on the ground or shrines were meant for the spirits and ancestors. The Ebira so much revered God that they had no cult object representing Him. (Ibrahim, 1968) The spirits were called *ori* by the Ebira, they were believed to reside in streams, big trees, and rocks. (Okene, 1995) They were regarded as creatures of God Almighty who were endowed with supernatural powers and were custodians of treasures such as rain, good harvest, and drinking water. In times of draught therefore, certain spirits were propitiated to ensure prompt rainfall and hence, good harvest.

Spiritual attachment to rain was not peculiar to the Ebira alone; Muslims do perform certain prayers to ensure rainfall in times of draught. For various problems that bedevilled the Ebira, oracles were consulted; they in turn beseeched the relevant spirits for solution. The Ebira believed in the ability of God to reward doers of good deeds and equally punish offenders both in this World and beyond, they believed that no deed could go without reward and those who committed crimes such as witchcraft must confess before their death, especially when they come face-to-face with the spirit world. (Ibrahim, 1968)

In traditional Hausa society, the people believed in the existence of a Supreme Being, *Ubangiji*, who created and ruled over everyone and everything. He was believed to be too mighty and far away from the reach of ordinary human beings. The Supreme Being was therefore only accessible through spirits, *iskoki*, who acted as intermediaries. The powers vested in these spirits, *iskoki*, by the Supreme Being, *Ubangiji*, enables them to influence the lives and fortunes of individuals, as well as the general conditions

of the society. (Smith, 1987) Praise names were equally reserved for the Supreme Being, a pointer to the fact that they were not pagans as the Europeans may want people to believe. *Ubangiji* means God Almighty while *maikowa maikomai* means the owner of everyone and everything. Others are *Ubangona*, Lord of the farm, and *kai-ka-faro*, You are the beginning. (Ahmad, 2020)

Documented Origin of Revealed Religion

The idea of monotheism is traceable to Abraham who lived about 2000 BC. Abraham was a wealthy man of his time who refused to worship other deities or offer sacrifices to the many gods his people worshipped. His family was rooted and notable in the art of idol worship to an extent that the head of the family carved idols with his own hands. (Koya & Kilani, 2014) Abraham, known to Muslims as Ibrahim, for the purpose of this study had two sons, Ismail and Ishaq (Ishmael and Isaac).

God states in the Glorious Qur'an as follows:

> We bestowed aforetime on Abraham his rectitude of conduct, and well were We acquainted with him. Behold! He said to his father and his people, what are these images to which ye are devoted? They said, we found our fathers worshipping them. He said, indeed ye have been in manifest error, ye and your fathers. They said, have you brought us the truth or are you one of those who jest? He said, Nay, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He Who created them (from nothing): and I am a witness to this (truth). Quran 21:51-56. (Ali, 2006)

The Holy Bible on its part has the following to say about Abraham.

> As for Me, behold, My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name anymore be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. Genesis 17:4-6. (KJV, 2003)

As a confirmation of this prophesy, God Almighty further states:

> Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shall call his name Isaac: and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. Genesis 17: 19-20. (KJV, 2003)

Barely 2000 years after Abraham, was Jesus Christ born by Mary in Bethlehem. He began preaching to his people, the Jews, at a youthful age. He taught the worship of only one God Who is loving and merciful to His creatures. He was persistent in his preaching against greed and misinterpretation of the scriptures. The Jews were not comfortable with his teachings and therefore crucified him. His followers went through persecution for about 400 years after him until Emperor Constantine the Great of the Roman Empire accepted Christianity; from then on, Christianity began to spread. (WIKIPEDIA, 2024) The laws of Christ binding Christians are enshrined as follows:

> Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thy self. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Matthew 22: 37-40. (KJV, 2003)

Islam (submission to God) on its part originated in Mecca, one of the chief cities of Saudi Arabia and those who practice Islam are called Muslims. About 600 years after the departure

of Jesus Christ from this World, a prophet, known as Muhammad (PBUH), emerged in Saudi Arabia. Born in 570 AD, his father died before his birth while his mother died when he

was six years old. At a tender age, he was busy taking care of his uncle's flock and therefore had no time for any form of education. At the age of forty when he began receiving revelations from God, he recited them to scribes who put them together as the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an. He preached against the worship of idols by his people, their arrogant and violent life styles, injustice, inequality, usury, wife inheritance, among others. (Bairand & McCallum, 2020) The Arabs were naturally not comfortable with his teachings, but the ordinary people embraced him. In their bid to kill him, he escaped to Medina, about four hundred kilometres away. It was from there he enjoyed more followership. Sensing the danger posed by Muhammad's teachings to their socio-economic, religious and political lives, the Meccans organized a very large army and moved against him. With a force much smaller than that of the Meccans, Muhammad, after series of battles, became victorious. The victory of Muhammad drew more people to his side and after seven years in exile, he conquered Mecca and made all the people to follow the new religion. The religion was also accepted by all the cities around Mecca and Medina, so that by the time of Muhammad's demise in 632 AD, Islam had great following in Arabia. Even after his death, his followers continued to spread the message. (Bairand & McCallum, 2020)

Islam has five pillars, they are as follows:

>There is only one God, and Muhammad is His last prophet. Muslims believe in the other great prophets before Muhammad-Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, etc, but that Muhammad was the last and greatest of all the prophets.

>All Muslims must pray five times daily

>All healthy Muslims must fast in the whole of the ninth month of the calendar known as Ramadan.

>Muslims must give alms to the poor under the institution of Zakat.

>Muslims with the financial and physical ability are to perform pilgrimage to Mecca.

Apart from these pillars, certain things are prohibited in Islam, for instance, alcohol, interests on loan, adultery, injustice, shedding of blood, and immoral dressing among others. (Bairand & McCallum, 2020)

Common Front in Christianity and Islam

A close look at the tenets of Christianity and Islam reveal great similarities. With such identical tenets, they ought to collaborate in ensuring a morally just and socially upright society. Their evangelical posture has however acted as impediment to the realization of the above target. The evangelical approach adopted by the adherents is largely responsible for the hatred they exhibit towards each other, resulting in most cases to severe conflicts. In an effort to convert more people, they tend to preach and condemn each other. (John, 2014)

The similarities in the belief systems of Christians and Muslims motivated the first Muslim migrants in history to seek refuge with the Christian king (Negus) of Abyssinia in 615 A.D. when the intensity of the persecution from the Meccans became high. As their condition became unbearable, about eighty of them migrated to Abyssinia. They were well received by the Negus of Abyssinia after confirming that the source of the Christian and Muslim messages was one and the same. (Cyberistan, 2020)

The king and his people played host to the Muslim refugees and did not release them to the Meccan envoys sent to get them back. He accepted that the Muslims were closer to him in belief than the pagans of Mecca were, and therefore opted not to betray them. Up till the time these migrants left to join the main body of Muslims in Madinah, the Negus did not renege on his pledge to keep the Muslims safe and comfortable. (Cyberistan, 2020) If subsequent Christians and Muslims had behaved in the manner of the Negus and early migrants, the friction between adherents of the two religions would have been minimal. Areas of striking similarities as enshrined in their holy scriptures are presented in this section.

Unity of God: The two religions brought strict monotheism to religious worship. Their belief in the one Omnipotent God who created heaven and

earth has brought about unity in worship. All forms of worship or religious rituals are directed towards only one God, a contrast to other known forms where adherents worship many deities. The following verses of the Bible support monotheism. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy might". Deuteronomy 6:4 (KJV, 2003) Furthermore, the Bible says; "And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, which is the first commandment of all? And Jesus answered him, the first of all the commandments is, hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, this is the first commandment". Mark 12: 28-30 (KJV, 2003)

The Qur'an on its part has the following to say about the unity of God. "It is He Who hath

Created for you all things that are on earth; moreover, His design comprehended the heavens,

for He gave order and perfection to the seven firmaments; and of all things He hath perfect knowledge". Qur'an 2:29 (Ali, 2006) Muslims, Christians and those that practice Judaism are the religious groups that have washing of bodies and worship with faces to the ground enshrined in their holy books. In Exodus 40:30-32, Moses performed the following acts: "And he set the laver between the tent of the congregation and the alter, and put water there, to wash withal. And Moses and Aaron and his sons washed their hands and feet thereat. When they went into the tent of the congregation, and when they came near unto the alter, they washed as the Lord commanded Moses". (KJV, 2003) Also in Exodus 30:17-21, the following is recorded: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses saying. Thou shalt also make a laver of brass, and his foot also of brass, to wash withal: and thou shalt put it between the tabernacle of the congregation and the alter, and thou shalt put water therein. For Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet thereat. When they go into the tabernacle of the congregation, they shall wash with water…So they shall wash their hands and their feet…it shall be a statute forever for them, even to him and to his seed throughout their generations." (KJV, 2003)

The above can also be supported by the following in John 13:5-9: "After that, he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel…Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered…what I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter saith unto him, thou shalt never wash my feet, Jesus answered him, if I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head". (KJV, 2003)

What clearly resembles the Muslim ceremonial prayer of Friday was demonstrated in Nehemiah 8:4-6 by Ezra and his congregation as follows: "And Ezra the scribe stood up on a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose: and beside him stood Mattithian…and Meshullam...And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people (for he was above all the people) and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the Great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground". (KJV, 2003)

As a testimony that what is being practiced as worship by man is also practiced in heaven, the Bible has this to say: "And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped GOD." Revelation7:11 (KJV, 2003)

Moral Codes: The two religions introduced codes aimed at regulating the social life of adherents. Laws were made against social ills such as adultery, hatred, cheating, stealing, and disrespect for parents, alcoholism, etc. Islam on its part goes further to place blanket ban on consumption of alcohol, indecent dressing, interest on loans, and alteration of measurement among others. Flesh of swine (pig) is detested by the two religions, as well as alcoholism. The

following biblical verses attest.

> And the swine, because it divideth the hoof, yet cheweth not cud, it is unclean unto you: ye shall not eat of their flesh, nor touch their dead carcass. These ye shall eat of all that are in the waters: all that have fins and scales ye eat…Ye shall not eat of anything that dieth of itself. Deuteronomy 14:8-21. (KJV, 2003)

In the case of the evils of alcohol, the Bible states in Proverbs 31:3-5 that:

> Give not thy strength unto women, nor thy ways to that which destroyeth kings. It is not for kings, o'Lamuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: lest they drink and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted. (KJV, 2003)

In terms of greetings, the two religions share same mode, for example, Jesus said in John 20:21; "Then said Jesus to the magain, peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, evenso send I you". The popular Muslim greeting of Assalamu Alaykum is translated as "peace be unto you, just as Jesus said in the Bible, translated from Hebrew as 'Shalom Aloukum'. (KJV, 2003)

Education and Art of Writing: The arts of writing associated with the holy books of Islam and Christianity have not only enhanced transfer of knowledge but have made histories of many people of the World known to others. The Arabic language for instance was used in recording activities of Muslim travellers who visited the area of West Africa in the past. Through them, many happenings in the West African past were reduced to writing and have been of great benefit to historians. Islam on its part has a very standard and well-organized educational pattern, which helped a lot in creating awareness among the people. (Awe, 1965)

Regulation of marital life: Christianity and Islam frown at marrying unlimited number of wives. This is very unlike traditional settings of marrying without limitation. Laws were enacted to regulate marital life in such a way that divorce, which was very prevalent, was reduced drastically.

Superstition: The two religions succeeded in reducing the level of superstition in the life of adherents. In traditional societies, happenings were either attributed to activities of witches or spirits. Other issues such as reincarnation, killing of twins, killing of female children and so on that were held high were watered down by the two religions. Muslims and Christians hold that belief in God was paramount and with faith, man can overcome all challenges, as problems are either caused by man himself or are tests from God. In some societies, certain suspects were made to suffer for certain calamities that befell others, but the two religions regard such as unbelief.

Dress Code: Except for some deliberate violations or ignorance, the two religions frown at indecent dressing, especially for women. While Muslims have largely maintained some measure of sanity in terms of dressing, many Christians have chosen to neglect biblical injunctions in preference to western civilization. Western civilization on its part is very liberal in dressing, thereby accepting some form of nudity or near nakedness as norm. Going down history lane, the dress code of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, and Catholic Reverend Sisters are almost in tandem with Muslim dress codes, but ordinary members of the same Catholic Church and other church goers prefer the Western-Euro-American form of immoral, inhuman and shameful form of dressing. The following Qur'anic and Biblical quotations can testify.

> I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array. 1Timothy 2:8-9. (KJV, 2003)

> And Rebekah lifted up her eyes and when she saw Isaac she lighted off the camel. For she said unto the servant, what man is this that walketh in the field to meet us? And the servant had said it is my master: therefore she took a veil and covered herself. Genesis 24:64-65. (KJV,

2003)

> But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be uncovered. 1 Corinthians 11:5-6. (KJV, 2003)
>
> O prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves (part) of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ALLAH is Forgiving and Merciful. Qur'an 33:59. (Ali, 2006)

Similarly, dresses are supposed to be worn by believers to please God and not to glorify self as well as others. It is surprising that despite clear and unambiguous injunctions from the holy books, Christian youths in particular engage in what is referred to as eye-catching and temptation-loaded clothes such as skimpy dresses, mini-skirts, and skin-tight wears among others. (Muhammad, 2014) The religious leaders seem not to be doing much in terms of reprimand and guidance in manner of dressings. This is probably due to the fear of losing members or the indisputable excessive European cultural influence on Christianity.

A solution to the cut-throat competition and hatred prevalent among Christians and Muslims is what has been referred to as "Ecumenism and Religious Dialogue". In broad terms, ecumenism relates to the inter-faith movement striving for greater mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation among world religions. (John, 2015) What this means therefore is that in Nigeria where the major battle is between Christians and Muslims, a movement of the two religions should be established.

If any inter-faith movement exists already, it must be strengthened to engage in persistent fruitful dialogue aimed at forging a common front against unbelief and the promotion of mutual cohesion.

Conclusion

The belief in the existence of a Supreme Being who created the universe and all things in it, both living and non-living, is not a monopoly of Christianity and Islam alone. The tenets of the traditional religion of many societies accommodate such belief; modes of belief and worship however differ. Human inability to see that Supreme Being with naked eyes made many traditional religious worshippers to decide to act through intermediaries. Those who totally reject the existence of a Supreme Being are mostly found among the Europeans and Americans.

Codes of religious behaviour and forms of worship have created a form of identity for adherents of each of the two religions. If not for the unavoidable highjack of the Christian religion by the western European world, the line dividing it and Islam would have been very thin. Their mode of evangelism also would have taken a collective and collaborative approach against unbelief, instead of the unnecessary and unhealthy competition they find themselves in. In an effort to create a saner society, religious history should be made a course in the history curriculum to enable historians teach the real history of religion, devoid of evangelism. Educational institutions should endeavour to organise conferences and workshops on regular basis so as to disseminate vital religious knowledge capable of fostering unity, understanding and mutual coexistence. Christians and Muslims should work together and close ranks so that they can together fight the scourge of corruption, immorality, disunity and decay in every facet of national life.

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