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(IJLGC)**www.gaexcellence.com/ijlgc**DEATH PERCEPTION AMONG MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN
ELDERS IN MALAYSIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**Javeria Ansari^{1*}, Noor Shakirah Mat Akhir²¹School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, Malaysia javeriaansari@student.usm.my<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0693-0860>²School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, Malaysia shakirah@usm.my<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9253-1997>

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Abstract:

Death perception among different religions arises the acceptance and rejection of afterlife, Hell and Heaven. Muslims have a strong belief of afterlife and this belief is a part of their life. Christians also share the same belief of afterlife and the existence of Heaven and Hell. This belief serves as a relief of being united with the loved ones. Death is something that is promised regardless of age, gender or any other factors. Its perspective is different among every religion and has great impact on their lives. This study is a comparative religious study, aiming to examine the concept of death and the factors which influence the death perception in Islam and Christianity. Further, this study also analyses the similarities and differences regarding death perception of Muslims and Christians in Malaysia. This study is conducted in Malaysia due to the reason that it is a unique Islamic country where 63.5 percent Muslim and 36.5 percent population is non-Muslim. Similarly, Penang is selected because 54.5 percent non-Muslims as compare to 45.5 percent Muslims are living there. Data from 40 elderly respondents were collected through questionnaires, 20 were Muslims and 20 Non-Muslims. Questions related with death beliefs and death perceptions were asked and respondents answered in the light of their religious beliefs, personal feelings and experiences. The results of the study highlight different perceptions about death among Muslim and Christian respondents. However, they all are agreed that by having good health and good quality of life, the fear of death decreases in old age. The results of this study are helpful for health care professionals, and policy makers in designing and promoting special health care support programmes for elders in order to shape positive death perception among them in accordance to their religion and making their lives positive and worth living.

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Christians, Death Perception, Malaysia, Muslims



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Introduction

According to Foong & Aziz (2022), death perception is a unique phenomenon among human beings. It relates with gender, age and other social factors, especially religion which plays vital role in the acceptance or rejection of death perception. In Islam, death is a way of meeting the creator and is directly associated with its remembrance. The constant remembrance removes Muslim's desires of this world. Such man does not fear death rather accepts it as a reward and ultimate freedom and is considered as best companion, most intelligent and most generous among all humanity as stated by Al-Ghazali in his book, *The Remembrance*. Whereas on the other hand, a man who does not remembers death indulge in the worldly desires and think of death as prison. As in the Hadith:

Abu Huraira (RA) reported Allah's Messenger (PBUH) as saying: The world is a prison-house for a believer and Paradise for a non-believer. (Sahih Muslim 7417, The Book of Zuhd and Softening of Hearts, volume 6).

Such a person gets attached to worldly desire and gets wahn in his heart as described by Hadith:

Narrated Thawban (RA): The Prophet (PBUH) said: The people will soon summon one another to attack you as people when eating invite others to share their dish. Someone asked: Will that be because of our small numbers at that time? He replied: No, you will be numerous at that time: but you will be scum and rubbish like that carried down by a torrent, and Allah will take fear of you from the breasts of your enemy and last enervation into your hearts. Someone asked: What is wahn (enervation). Messenger of Allah (PBUH): He replied: Love of the world and dislike of death. (Sunan Abu Dawood 4297 (Battles (Kitab Al-Malahim), volume 4).

Similarly, in Christianity, death is considered detachment of soul from the body and its union with God for eternal life in Earth (Foong & Aziz, 2022). Jesus talks about death in His three parables of the Pearl, the Net and the Mustard Seed as:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live..." (John 11:24-25)

Although, recent studies in Malaysia have focused on comparing death perceptions among elders of Malaysia in Hinduism (Lamba, et al. 2022), but no research is made in comparison of death perception among elder Muslims and Christians. Malaysia is facing ageing as a growing challenge (Nor & Ghazali, 2021) and for this reason, elders of Malaysia are selected for this

research. According to Kasmo, et al. (2015), death perception among different religions arises the acceptance and rejection of afterlife and Hell, Heaven. Muslims have a strong belief of afterlife, and this belief is a part of their life. They are most devoted to their religion, despite age and any educational mean, they have strong belief they live their life according to this belief. This belief makes up their perception of death. Christians also share the same belief of afterlife, and they also believe in the existence of heaven and hell. This belief serves as a relief of being united with the loved ones (Pangandaman, et al. 2021).

Death perception also changes with age. According to World Health Organization (WHO, 1981), 60 years is defined as the age of transition of people from adulthood to elderly age in 1980. Elderly people fear death more than younger generations. This may be cause of many things like feeling of loneliness, fear of dying, and watching death of loved ones (Sebea, et al. 2021). Previous studies have found that religion plays a vital role in overcoming this fear among elders (Ghasemi, et al, 2020). Studies on Malaysian elders have been made and factors that are associated with death fear and coping mechanisms to overcome this fear and to make life more enjoyable and worth living are also discussed (Ngah, et al. 2023).

This study is conducted in Malaysia. The reason for selecting Malaysia is that it is a unique Islamic country where 63.5 percent Muslim and 36.5 percent population is non-Muslim. Similarly, this study is conducted in a specific region only which is Penang. The reason of selecting this region is the presence of multi-religions people, where 54.5 percent non-Muslims as compared to 45.5 percent Muslims are living.

Literature Review

Past studies have focused on death perceptions and its association among different religions, but no research has been conducted on comparing death perception among Muslims and Christians, focusing on elders of Malaysia.

Bahadur and Petras (2020) discovered that the concept of death differs among religions and rituals regarding death also varies from each other. In Islam, death is considered a pathway from suffering and hardships of the world to peace and comfort. In the study regarding beliefs of death in Islam. Initially, the researcher states that death for Muslims do not indicate end of life. It is rather considered a beginning of new eternal life which starts from grave and continues in heaven or hell. Then, the researcher focuses on explaining rituals in Islam regarding death. These rituals include closing of dead persons eyes, informing the relatives and closed ones, washing of body by same sex and applying perfume referred as Kafoor, shrouding of body into three plain white clothes (kafan) for male and five plain white clothes (kafan) for female, funeral player or Salat ul Janazah, transporting of the body into grave, mourning that lasts only for three days, and lastly, visiting of graves in remembrance of the loss. In the last, the researcher sheds up light on the qualities of people of Heaven and Hell.

Meanwhile, Segal and Nickolas (2021) have discussed that Christianity also shares the same concept of death as Islam. Christians believe that death is a pathway of body from hardships of this world to eternal bliss. This eternal bliss is achieved by union with Jesus Christ. The author defines that Christian belief on resurrection of Jesus on cross for his people guarantee them eternal happiness in this world as well as heaven because they are completely free from all sins. The author also discusses the second coming of Jesus which will cause this world to end, and Kingdom of God will establish. According to Park and Roshi (2021), the concept of hell and

heaven is also a part of Christian belief. A study concluded that Christian belief about afterlife and heaven, hell is part of their faith. Like Islam, Christians also believe that true believers and followers of Christianity will enter eternal heaven. Whereas, on the other hand, a non-believers and non-followers will enter eternal hell.

Sarkar, et al (2023) identified that females usually live longer than males. So, they face factors like loneliness, depression, and widowhood. These factors influence these females both mentally and physically. The study conducted on widow women showed connection of these factors with the physical and mental life of elderly females. The researcher suggested that it is the duty of every individual and the community as a whole to look after these vulnerable females and make policies regarding it in order to make their lives enjoyable and worth living. According to Mainiyo and Sule (2023), this can be achieved easily and have a positive impact on society because Quran serve as a guidance medium for Muslims. It covers every aspect of life and how to act upon these aspects. And Muslims follow the instructions given in the Quran because their belief is that it is the word of Allah.

However, Brzeziński (2024) discussed that in Christianity, elders are considered extremely respectable. A study conducted on showing connection between faith in church and old age showed the importance of elders in Christian society and their association with churches. The researcher proved that Pope Francis thought and education on old age not only emphasizes the Catholics, but all Christian denominations because humanity should be shown to every human being regardless of denomination and age. Elders play their role in teaching younger generation through their experiences, religiosity and can make younger close towards their roots. Church community looking up for elders of the society and providing them with special care, importance and education meanwhile on the other hand elders connecting themselves with the church community in order to be united with the community and teachings of Bible were the main findings of the research.

Faudzi, et al (2022) have studied that Malaysians adults have a positive and respectable attitude towards elderly people of society. They see elders in the most respectable manner and consider looking after them, providing them, and connecting with them part of their duty. A study conducted by Hussein, et al (2021) on measuring the loneliness of Malaysian Older Adults proved that older adults feel loneliness more than young adults. The researcher classified loneliness into its three types which are social loneliness, emotional loneliness and family loneliness. All these types of loneliness result in depression, chronic diseases and health perception among the elders. In order to overcome this factor, Tan and Lee (2022) found that exercises and socialising is consider beneficial. A researcher conducted study on this and proved it. In his study, the researcher concluded that connection of older people with socialising has a positive and meaningful impact on their lives. Socialising includes meeting with friends in shopping malls, going on walks, attachment of oneself with religious educational institutions, and performing healthy exercises like Tai Chi.

Another study conducted by Lim, et al (2023) showed that older living with their adult children in Malaysia have better quality of life than those living alone. The researcher presented depression, disability, chronic diseases, low household income, and lack of socialising in older age one of the main reasons for poor quality of life. These mental and physical illnesses lead to dependency on other for basic functioning of life in older age. Similarly, Low, et al (2023) discovered that good quality life leads toward healthy ageing. Studies showed that elders who focus on healthy ageing have good quality of life. Like study conducted on Malaysian elders

showed that good quality of life depends on good health, family relationships, social connectivity, financial independence, and positivity. The study concluded that good health can be achieved by having proper healthy meals along with practicing mental and physical exercises. Social connectivity reduces negativity and sense of loneliness among elders. Similarly, being economically independent on others for medication and other necessities of life create self-confidence and a spirit of stability. And lastly, being positive in every aspect of life creates a positive and healthy environment for the elders themselves and for the people around them.

Previous researchers have discussed death perception among people of different religions, highlighting their beliefs about this concept. But there is no specific study available in existing literature that discussed the beliefs of Muslims and Christians about death and death perception according to their religious scriptures, in Malaysia. Therefore, this study is a novel study due to its vast discussion about these perceptions and beliefs.

Methodology

To achieve the objectives of this study, a questionnaire was developed with the help of previous related studies. Questions related with death perception were included in the questionnaire which was distributed among Muslim and Christian respondents.

Research Design

As data was collected through questionnaires for this study, the nature of the research design is non-experimental and descriptive. As this method addressed the research objectives of this study, this research design is the most appropriate to use (Kerlinger, et al, 2000). Respondents were selected by convenience sampling technique. This technique is a non-probability sampling method (Saunders, et al. 2009). Similarly, primary data collection method was used. Completely filled questionnaires of 20 Muslim and 20 Christian respondents were selected for further analysis.

Data Collection Method

As the requirement of this study is to collect data from individual respondents through questionnaire, primary data collection method was used (Bougie, et al, 2019). Completely filled questionnaires of 20 Muslim and 20 Christian respondents were selected for further analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

As this study is descriptive in nature, the answers of the respondents were carefully analysed to find out their beliefs and perceptions among death in the light of their religious scriptures.

Analysis and Discussion

Completely filled 40 questionnaires were analysed to come to the conclusion about death perceptions of Muslim and Christians respondents.

Table 1: Demographics

	Muslims	Christians
Gender		
Male	11	8
Female	9	12
Age		
60-64 years	10	10
65-69 years	6	8
70-74 years	1	1
75-79 years	1	1
80-84 years	0	0
85-89 years	2	0
Who do you live with		
Alone	1	0
Family	18	19
Friends	1	1
How deeply you believe in God		
Deeply	10	14
Very Deeply	10	6

Source: (Author's Own Created Table)

According to table 1, out of 20 Muslim respondents, 11 are male and 9 are female. Whereas, out of 20 Christians respondents, 8 are male and 12 are female. Similarly, 10 Muslim respondents belong to 60-64 years age group, 6 belong to 65-69 years age group, 1 belongs to 70-74 years age group, 1 belongs to 75-79 years age group and 2 belong to 85-89 years age group. However, 10 Christian respondents belong to 60-64 years age group, 8 belong to 65-69 years age group, 1 belongs to 70-74 years age group and 1 belongs to 75-79 years age group. This shows diversification among Muslim and Christian respondents in terms of their gender and age groups. As per their living conditions, 1 Muslim respondent is living alone, 18 are living with their families and 1 is living with his friends. Among Christians respondents, 19 are living with their families and 1 is living with his friends. This shows the strong family system in Malaysia which reduces death fear among elders. Similarly, 10 Muslim respondents claimed that they have deep believe on God and 10 claimed that they have very deep believe on God. On the other side, 14 Christians claimed that they have deep believe on God and 6 claimed that they have very deep believe on God. These results indicate that all respondents of this study have their believe on God whether deep or very deep. Questions related with death perception were asked to all respondents, including 20 Muslim and 20 Christians. These questions were analysed in the light of their answers.

Due to the length of the answers of 40 respondents (20 Muslims and 20 Christians) for each question, their answers are summarized and the final version of Muslims and Christians respondents have been analysed to discover the similarities and differences in between both religions about death perception.

Question: Kindly Explain Your Opinion About Afterlife?

To answer this question, Muslim respondents replied that there are many phases that we need to go through. The grave phase, the judgment day & many more until which we reached heaven. All our deed good and bad in this world will be judged and Heaven will be given against good deeds and Hell against bad deeds. Similarly, Christian respondents replied that we believe that after we die, our soul will go to the God if we believed in Jesus. We also we will go to heaven during resurrection as Jesus had died on the cross for our sins. According to the Bible, life doesn't end at death. Instead, we step into eternity, either in the presence of God or separated from Him.

Question: How Do You Perceive The Existence Of Heaven And Hell?

To answer this question, Muslim respondents replied that Heaven and Hell are created by God as a final resting. As a Muslim, we believe in the existence of Heaven and Hell. They are both real and part of the unseen world that Allah has informed us about through the Qur'an and Hadith. As Muslim, we need to trust about Heaven and Hell so that we can be scared if we want to do bad things in this world. Similarly, Christian respondents replied that we believe both Heaven and Hell are real. Heaven is where we go if we accept Jesus as our Saviour, and Hell is for those who reject God. It's not just a story, it's serious, and it makes us want to share God's love with others. Heaven is where the righteous goes after death and Hell is where the unrighteous will go.

Question: Religion Surely Plays Important Role In Developing Death Perception. Kindly Describe?

To answer this question, Muslim respondents replied that religion plays an important role in shaping the perception of death as it provides guidance, comfort, and hope about the afterlife. It helps people accept death as a journey, not an end. Religions can be a guide in our lives. Besides, without religion we are like walking on a straight path without direction. Therefore, we must have religion to be a guide in this world and a reward in the hereafter. Similarly, Christian respondents replied that because of our faith, we don't see death as the end. We see it as a beginning of eternity with God. Without religion, we think death would be scarier and more confusing. In Christianity, death is the separation of the soul and the body. The soul will either go to heaven or hell. As Christian, we believe we will go the heaven for Jesus has redeem us and made us righteous through His grace that He has given to us freely.

Question: How Often You Read Scripture, Prayed, Attended Worship Services, And Had Contact With Religious Leaders?

To answer this question, Muslim respondents replied that we pray multiple times a day. read Quran and its translation everyday. We believe that we have lived a long time and will likely die soon, we should read the Holy book more often, attend knowledge gatherings and learn more about religion. It is because we have to carry these practices with us into the afterlife, so we will make more effort to do acts of worship every day. Similarly, Christian respondents replied that we read the Bible and Pray every day. We also meet our religious leaders once or twice a week. Some said that we skip 2 Sunday services (church) in a month and don't really read bible regularly. We believe that reading our holy book, praying, and gathering with pious people is a necessity in our life.

Question: How Would You Define Death?

To answer this question, Muslim respondents replied that when a Muslim dies, all their deeds come to an end except for three things, ongoing charity, beneficial knowledge, and the prayers of a righteous child. According to Muslims, death is a transition from life on earth, to hereafter, a continuation. Death is the return of the soul and spirit to its Creator, our duty in this world is complete. Similarly, Christian respondents replied that death is when our physical body dies, but we believe that our soul lives on. It's like leaving this world and going to be with God. It's terrifying. Some said that we are afraid of death but in the sense of not seeing the ones we love like our parents, but we believe that we will reunite again. Just the end of life on earth, and new life on heaven.

Question: How Do You Prepare Yourself For Afterlife?

To answer this question, Muslim respondents replied that we do a lot of good deeds as true Muslims. We also prepare ourselves by doing many acts of worship. We have prepared to face this kind of situation everyday and repeatedly doing the good things as a Muslim and we do whatever Allah has endorsed to us. Similarly, Christian respondents replied that we try to follow Jesus every day, repent when we sin, read His Word, and love others. In Christianity, we believe that we are beloved and already atone by the love of Jesus so the way we prepare for the afterlife is to have faith and follow what our scriptures are saying.

Question: Your Afterlife Will Be Affected By How You Live In This World? Kindly Explain Your Feelings.

To answer this question, Muslim respondents replied that this makes us feel responsible to live righteously and always seek His mercy. We are sure that He will give back much more, unimaginable, as rewards for our good deeds. So, do all our best to be a good Muslim. Similarly, Christian respondents replied that we believe that if we live according to what the Bible teaches, trusting God and trying to obey His commandments, we will have eternal life. It motivates us to live in a way that honours God.

Conclusion

In the light of the responses of Muslim and Christian respondents, it can be concluded that religion plays vital role in the life of both believers. Muslims strongly believe that they are the representative of Almighty Allah on the earth, so they have to spend their life according to the orders of their Lord and the teachings of their Holy Prophet (PBUH). Similarly, Christians also believe that they are created by God and they have to spend their lives according to the teachings of Jesus so that they can be successful in Hereafter.

According to both religions, death is a reality and everyone has to face it. But the perception about death is different in both religions. Muslims believe that death is the name of transfer from this world to Hereafter where they will be rewarded by Almighty Allah. If they will do good deeds, they will be entered into heaven. But, due to bad deeds, they will be thrown to Hell. Therefore, every Muslim tries to do good deeds to get heaven, and they don't fear about death. Similarly, Christians also believe that they will go to Heaven or Hell. But their motive of life is to act upon the teachings of Jesus only as they treat Him as God. Similarly, they also believe on death and afterlife, but they have no strong arguments about afterlife, heaven or

Hell, as they leave everything on Jesus. Because, according to their faith, he has sacrificed himself against the sins of their followers. The beliefs of both Muslims and Christians show them the right path and encourage them that they must do good deeds and prepare themselves for the death which is reality. Similarly, they all are agreed that by having good health and good quality of life, the fear of death decreases in old age. The results of this study are helpful for health care professionals, and policy makers in designing and promoting special health care support programmes for elders in order to shape positive death perception among them in accordance to their religion and making their lives positive and worth living.

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