

# DOES ISLAM SHARE ANY COMMONALITIES WITH HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHIES?

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## Abstract

Hellenistic philosophies and religions inspired by it are intrinsically atheist. Some of them were explicit in this regard while others remained ambiguous, bordering on polytheism. Certain religions who believe in one Supreme God, associate divine beings with it. In this article we have covered a brief survey of these philosophies, focusing on bringing out the similarities they share with each other. In doing so, we have demonstrated how Islamic beliefs are unique and distinct from the Hellenistic philosophies. This article throws light on a very crucial and complex topic related to the philosophy and Islam.

*Keywords:* Hellenism, Sophism, Pythagoreanism, Cynicism, Cyrenaicism, Platonism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Hellenistic Judaism, Hellenistic Christianity, Skepticism

The Greek Hellenistic philosophies emerged from the Mediterranean states from 600 – 1453 CE. This period can be divided into many distinct categories; the first being the *Pre-Hellenistic* era (600-300) BC, which includes Socrates (470-399) BC, Plato (428-347) BC and Aristotle (384–322) BC.

The period between 600 BC to 300 CE is known as *classical antiquity* and the period between 300 – 476 CE is known as *late antiquity*. The period between 476-1453 CE is known as the *middle ages*.

In this paper, we have discussed about the philosophies during the Hellenistic period (323-31) BC, Roman empire (31 BC – 456 CE), and the Eastern Roman empire, also known as the Byzantine empire (476-1453) CE.

## Hellenistic period (323 – 31) BC

The Hellenistic period ranges from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC to the emergence of the Roman empire 31 BC. During this period Greek culture expanded all the way up to West Asia, Central Asia and even to the north western parts of the Indian subcontinent. New gods were

added to the Greek religious sphere such as the Greco-Egyptian *Serapis* and eastern gods such as *Attis* and *Cybele*. A synchronization between the Hellenistic and Buddhist beliefs began to form in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and parts of northwest India.

Some people consider this period as transitory, between ancient and middle ages, as compared to the 200 years of Greek classical era during 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC.

The Hellenistic period marked the Greek colonization of major cities in Asia and Africa which resulted in its vast expansion. Since new colonies had their own indigenous culture, it resulted in a mix that gave birth to new languages such as koine.

## End of the Hellenistic period

Scholars differ as to what event signals the end of the Hellenistic era. Some scholars say that it ended with the final defeat of the Ptolemaic Kingdom at the battle of Actium in 31 BC, while others say that it ended when the Roman Emperor Constantine (306-337) CE moved the capital of the Roman empire to Constantinople (present day Istanbul) in 330 CE and issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE declaring Christianity as the official religion of Roman empire.

The Eastern Roman empire known as Byzantium, existed between 330 to 1453 CE. It ended when the Ottoman army took over Constantinople (present day Istanbul) on 29 May 1453.

## Hellenistic philosophies

The schools of thought that prospered during Hellenistic period are as follows.

### (i) Sophism

Sophists used tools of philosophy and rhetoric to teach virtue and excellence to the nobles in ancient Greece. Almost all the Sophist philosophers belong to pre-Socrates era. They include, (i) Thales of Miletos (624 - 546) BC, (ii) Anaximander (610 - 546) BC, (iii) Anaximenes (585 - 525) BC, (iv) Heraclitus (535 - 475) BC, (v) Parmenides of Elea (515 - 450) BC, (vi) Anaxagoras (500 - 428) BC, (viii) Empedocles (490 - 430) BC, (ix) Zeno of Elea (490 - 430) BC, (x) Protagoras (490 - 420) BC, etc.

These scholars asserted that everything should be based on logical reasoning; a stance, that was distinctively different from their predecessors.

### (ii) Pythagoreanism

Pythagoreanism was developed by Pythagoras (570-495) BC. This philosophy is based on certain ideas like (a) the metaphysics of numbers and the realities in nature; at their deepest, are mathematical in nature, (b) the destiny of the soul is its rising to unite with the divine, (c) certain mystical symbols like '*tetraktys*' can bring harmony to the spheres in the Cosmos, (d) the Pythagorean theorem, (e) the members of their philosophy / order / cult shall observe a strict loyalty and secrecy.

This philosophy looks controversial as its features are confusing. However, Pythagorean philosophy influenced almost all philosophies that followed him. Pythagoras wrote primarily on two subjects, (a) mathematics, and (b) Metaphysics, both sharing a part of each other.

### (iii) Cynicism

Cynicism was developed in 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Cynicism teaches a person to live a life of virtue in agreement with nature free from possessions, leaving the desires of wealth, power, health, or fame. The philosophers who developed this philosophy include, (i) Diogenes (412 - 323) BC (ii) Antisthenes (445–365) BC, (iii) Crates of Thebes (365–285) BC, and (iv) Demetrius (10–80) CE, etc.

Cynicism is based on certain principles, like (a) the goal of life is freedom from false belief, mindlessness, folly, and conceit. (b) Happiness is achieved by living in harmony with *nature* as understood by human reason. (c) Arrogance causes negative emotions and unnatural desires. (d) Human flourishing, depends on self sufficiency, love of humanity and indifference to the changes in life. (e) One can progress through ascetic way of life, free from influences of wealth, fame and power.

### (iv) Cyrenaicism

Cyrenaicism was developed by a student of Socrates named Aristippus (435–360) BC. As per this philosophy, pleasure and immediate gratification was supreme in a man's life and that, only individuals can know this by their experience. Any truth beyond this is unknowable.

### (v) Platonism

Platonism is the interpretation of '*dialogues*' written by Plato. It is based on ethical, religious, and political beliefs. In Platonism, eternal realities, referred to as '*forms*' by Plato remain unchanged irrespective of the change in the physical format of existing things. Over the centuries, many of Plato's followers developed new interpretations and theories (Neoplatonism) that included divine beings and deities responsible for various works in the Cosmos.

### (vi) Epicureanism

Epicureanism was founded by Epicurus (341 - 270) BC. Epicureanism claims that the universe is ruled by *chance* without any interference from the Gods. The absence of pain is regarded as the greatest pleasure in epicureanism. However, Epicureanism states that there are gods who are blessed and are taking care of various works in the cosmos.

### (vii) Stoicism

Stoicism is credited to Zeno of Cyprus (333–263) BC. As per this philosophy, it is important to live life in accordance with *nature* by overcoming destructive emotions. Stoics considered philosophy was not just a knowledge, it was a

way of life. They turn to it as a form of psychological discipline. Stoicism had never been 'purely academic as has been case with other philosophies. According to stoics, all existent things are corporeal, and they don't deplete their nature-of-being. For them, man is rational and mortal animal. The Stoics, like the Epicureans, consider God a corporeal entity, though not (as with the Epicureans) one made of everyday matter. While the Epicureans think the gods are too busy being blessed and happy to be bothered with the governance of the universe, the Stoic God is inherent in the whole of creation and directs its development in detail. For a stoic, the entire cosmos is a living thing and God in the cosmos is like the animal's-life-force for animal's body.

### Hellenistic Judaism

The Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians and Babylonians were the dominant religions at the beginning of written history (3100 BC). Mesopotamia was conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, and after his death, it became part of the Greek Seleucid Empire.

Thus, Judaism may have been first influenced by these polytheistic philosophies of the region. Later, they were influenced by Hellenism. There is ample evidence in the writings of Jewish philosophers of the time in this context. The principle propagator of Hellenistic-Judaism philosophy was Philo of Alexandria (30 BC – 45 CE).

Judaism is not a strictly monotheistic religion. The reason being that they believe in certain divine beings as the family of God who became angels. These beliefs are described in their holy books, Genesis 6 (ii & iv), Job 1 (vi), Job 2 (i), Job 38 (vii), Psalms 29 (i), Psalms 89 (vi) Psalms 82, and Daniel 3 (xxv). The book of Enoch describes Noah (Prophet Nooh عليه السلام) as the son of God.

Monotheism in its purest form is the belief in one Supreme God, the creator of this cosmos who is free from creature like attributes. The Jewish belief of divine beings as the family of God is a belief which does not meet this criterion. Ergo it

cannot qualify as a monotheistic belief in its purest sense as it is the case with Islam.

### Hellenistic Christianity

As has been the case with the Jews, early Christian scholars were also influenced by the pre-Hellenistic and Hellenistic beliefs. There is ample evidence to this effect.

Christianity believe in a *heavenly father* (God), his *son* (Jesus Christ (Isa عليه السلام) and the *holy spirit* Gabriel (Jibrael عليه السلام).

Understanding the Jewish and Christians beliefs requires the reader to see these faiths more from a polytheistic point of view, rather than monotheistic logic.

### Islamic Philosophy

The beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE was marked by the advent of Islam. Before the death of Prophet of Islam, Mohammed (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) in 632 CE, Islam had spread to the entire Arabian Peninsula.

During the Rashidun Caliphate and the Umayyad rule, Islamic conquests spread all the way from southern Italy, to the Indus valley in the Indian subcontinent. Later, the Abbasids, Fatimids and Mamluks were among the most influential powers in the world. The Islamic golden age between 800-1458 CE produced some of the most influential astronomers, mathematicians, physicians and philosophers of the Middle ages.

Muslims believe that there is one God who is the creator of this Cosmos. They worship Him during their 5 times prayers in the day. They do not associate any divine beings with God as they consider everything in this cosmos, including human beings, are His creatures.

In Islamic philosophy, there is no room for any divine beings except one supreme God who is free from the considerations of form, body, shape and space. Muslims believe that Islamic teachings and its philosophy remained the same, i.e., believe in one God, from Prophet Adam (عليه) to the last Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه) (و آله وسلم). Muslims believe in all Prophets sent by

God, including Abraham (Ibrahim عليه السلام), Moses, (Musa عليه السلام), Jesus Christ (Isa عليه السلام) as human beings.

Throughout the history of Islam, there have been instances where scholars (influenced by the Hellenistic philosophies) tried to mix the Greek culture with Islamic teachings. However, these attempts were successfully refuted by the Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazali, thus leaving the core teachings of Islam untampered and unchanged.

## Conclusion

Hellenistic philosophies share commonalities with either polytheism or atheism.

On the other hand, there can be no such commonalities found in Islam. The belief that there is one Supreme God who is the creator of this Cosmos and who is free from the considerations of face, form, shape and space is the bedrock of the Islamic belief system.

To claim that Islamic beliefs share any commonalities with Hellenistic traditions would represent a tenuous grasp on facts. Similarly, the claim that Islamic beliefs are based on the same '*monotheism*' as that followed by Christianity and Judaism is a poorly constructed argument lacking proper evidence.

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