



Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Puranic Cosmology in Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana Compared with the Qur'anic Cosmology

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Abstract

The beginning and end of the world, together with its constituent elements, occupy a significant position in teachings of religions and their sacred scriptures. Cosmological concepts have held a central place within comparative religion studies. Both Islam and Hinduism have frequently addressed such cosmological questions in their canonical texts. This dissertation adopts a phenomenological approach to examine cosmological ideas in Islam and Hinduism. Within the Puranic literature of Hinduism, especially from classical era (after 200 C.E.), five main thematic areas are discernible; three of which relate directly to creation of the world, its destruction, and cycles of cosmic renewal. The Qur'an also presents distinct cosmological perspectives. Puranas, composed in praise of three deities Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, form a major corpus of Hindu sacred literature. Among them, the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana, representing Vaishnavite and Shaivite traditions, respectively, contain particularly detailed cosmological narratives. These two texts, therefore, constitute the principal focus of the study. The research first outlines the general cosmological ideas of Hinduism and their intellectual background, then examines the Puranic cosmology, particularly in the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana, and subsequently explores the cosmological concepts of the Qur'an based on exegetical sources. We conclude by identifying the similarities and differences between these two sacred cosmologies.

Keywords: Puranic Cosmology; Qur'anic Cosmology; Vishnu Purana; Vayu Purana; Cosmos.

Background and Research Context

Questions concerning the origin and destiny of the world have always occupied a fundamental place in religious thought. Narratives of creation and eschatology across different faiths reveal each tradition's understanding of the cosmos and its ultimate purpose. Within comparative religion, the study of cosmogony and eschatology has been a key field of inquiry, and scholars have often compared creation myths and end-time narratives across civilizations. Nevertheless, comprehensive comparative research on the cosmological ideas found in Islamic and Hindu scriptures remains rare. The Hindu Puranic texts, in particular, offer one of the richest mythological accounts of the universe's creation and destruction, portraying an immense and cyclic cosmological vision. In contrast, the Islamic worldview, rooted in the Qur'an and its interpretive traditions, presents a monotheistic and linear conception of time and creation. Within this intellectual context, the present research investigates the shared grounds and distinctive characteristics of cosmology in two major traditions: Hinduism, represented by Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana, and Islam, represented by the Qur'an.

Objectives and Research Questions

The primary objective of this research is to compare the cosmological frameworks of the Hindu tradition (as presented in the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana) with those of the Islamic tradition (as articulated in the Qur'an) and to elucidate their similarities and differences. The study seeks to address the following key questions:

- What are the central cosmological concepts and teachings in the Puranic texts, with particular emphasis on the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana?
- Upon what fundamental principles and elements is the Qur'anic cosmology based?
- What similarities and differences can be identified between the Puranic and Qur'anic cosmological systems?

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This research employs a phenomenological framework within the study of religion. The phenomenological approach requires religious phenomena to be described and analyzed from the internal perspective of believers, without external value judgments regarding their truth or falsity. Accordingly, this study approaches Islamic and Hindu cosmologies as distinct yet comparable religious phenomena. The research is qualitative and relies on content analysis of primary texts and interpretive sources. For the Hindu

side, it examines Puranic literature, especially the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana, to identify and explicate the major elements of Hindu cosmology. These texts were chosen as representative of two key theological currents, i.e. Vaishnavism and Shaivism, thereby encompassing a broad range of Hindu cosmological views. For the Islamic side, relevant Qur'anic verses on the creation and structure of the universe, together with authoritative exegetical works and prophetic narrations, were analyzed to construct a coherent picture of the Qur'anic cosmology. Through a comparative procedure, major cosmological themes, such as the origin of creation, the structure of the cosmos, the nature of cosmic time, and the end of the world, were examined side by side to highlight convergences and divergences. Employing a comparative method within a phenomenological framework made it possible to describe both worldviews neutrally and to compare them on equal theoretical grounds.

Findings and Main Arguments

In the Hindu cosmological worldview, as reflected in the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana, the universe is cyclical and multi-layered. It undergoes perpetual cycles of creation, dissolution, and re-creation over immeasurable spans of time. Cosmic time is divided into distinct epochs, i.e. yugas, mahayugas, manvantaras, and kalpas. Creation is generally attributed to Brahma, the creator deity, who emanates from the supreme divine reality (such as Vishnu in the Vaishnavite system). Each cosmic era ends with dissolution, often under the agency of a deity of destruction, after which a new creation begins. The Puranas also describe a hierarchically structured cosmos comprising multiple realms of heavens, earths, and underworlds. In this way, Puranic cosmology presents a dynamic and recurring universe without an ultimate beginning or end in absolute time.

By contrast, the Qur'anic cosmology is linear and unrepeatable. The Qur'an declares that the one God created the heavens and the earth in six periods (or "days") and established order within creation. While the Qur'an refrains from mythological elaboration, it underscores divine omnipotence and the manifestation of God's signs in nature. The structure of the cosmos is described through references to "seven heavens," yet the Qur'an avoids the highly stratified cosmic geography characteristic of the Puranas. The Islamic vision of history begins with the initial act of creation and concludes with resurrection and the Day of Judgment, when the current world will end and a new eternal order, i.e. the Hereafter, will be instituted. Unlike the cyclical Hindu view, Islamic cosmology understands time as linear, purposeful, and finite, leading toward divine judgment.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that although both systems affirm a divinely originated universe and an eventual cosmic termination, they diverge fundamentally in their conceptions of creation and eschatology. The Puranic cosmology, with its polytheistic framework and recurring cycles, envisions a cosmos without an absolute temporal beginning or final conclusion; each dissolution is followed by another creation. The Qur'anic cosmology, grounded in strict monotheism, posits a single creation and a definitive end of time. Similarly, while Hindu cosmology incorporates the doctrine of transmigration and cosmic renewal, Islamic teachings maintain a one-time earthly existence followed by resurrection and eternal life. Despite these differences, both traditions employ cosmological symbolism to convey theological and moral ideas: Hindu cosmology, through cyclical time, illustrates the maintenance of cosmic order (dharma), while Islamic cosmology, through the final judgment, emphasizes divine justice and moral accountability.

Discussion and Significance

The findings show that each tradition expresses its distinctive worldview through its cosmological schema. The cyclical temporality of Hindu cosmology accords with the doctrine of reincarnation and the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, reflecting a universe that is eternal in essence though subject to endless transformation. Conversely, the linear temporality of Islamic cosmology corresponds to the doctrines of prophethood and the final judgment, emphasizing purposeful history, divine will, and human moral responsibility. This comparison is significant in revealing how the central theological concepts of each faith, such as karma and dharma in Hinduism, and tawḥīd (divine unity) and ma'ād (resurrection) in Islam, shape their respective narratives of cosmic origin and destiny. By delineating the commonalities and distinctions between these two traditions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of both and fills an evident gap in comparative religion.

From a scholarly standpoint, this dissertation advances interdisciplinary research in comparative cosmology and provides a framework for further exploration in comparative theology, philosophy of religion, and scriptural studies. Moreover, by elucidating differing cosmological visions, it may also promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue, promoting mutual respect and comprehension between adherents of diverse faiths.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that although the Puranic and Qur'anic cosmologies share thematic correspondences, such as belief in a divine origin of creation and the notion of an end-time, they differ profoundly in their structure of cosmic time, metaphysical hierarchy, and theological orientation. Through a comparative phenomenological analysis, both systems were evaluated within their own symbolic and doctrinal contexts. The study highlights how each tradition integrates cosmological thought with its theological and ethical vision: Hinduism through its endless cycles of cosmic renewal, and Islam through its linear movement toward divine judgment. The principal contribution of this dissertation lies in its detailed and balanced examination of Hindu and Islamic cosmologies as reflected in the Puranas and the Qur'an. It establishes a solid foundation for future research in comparative theology and enhances understanding of how cosmological ideas function as expressions of faith, myth, and metaphysical insight.

Dissertation Information

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