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A Brief Overview of *al Jinn* within Islamic Cosmology and Religiosity

Introduction

For centuries humans have been fascinated and have had a deep attraction for the supernatural, the unknown and the unseen. Whether it is with living creatures from other planets (i.e., visitors to this planet, chance meetings with the extra-terrestrial beings, sightings of unidentified flying objects) or something as seemingly simple as speaking with psychics, reading one's horoscope, or seeking someone to communicate with the dead. For some there is an unspoken fascination and/or longing for a deeper connection or insight into the cosmological plane within the spirit world. For others, spirits are no more than the souls of dead people, or ghosts, and even some pretend that spirits do not even exist. However, those who believe in a higher power know that spirits are either the forces of good or evil; both battling against each other to gain influence over humanity. Islamic religious beliefs tend to explain a realm of the unknown and unseen within cosmology. It is from this realm that Islam explains the world of al jinn and its connections to Islam.

The *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* defines cosmology as a "divinely governed order of the universe and the place of humans within it" (Neuwirth 2001:441). This Qur'anic understanding of cosmology is taught within five very diverse sectors. These sectors are: (1) the divine six-day-work of creation of the material world, (2) human kind and its habitat in nature, (3) demons or spirits (*jinn*), (4) the animal world, and (5) the resolution of created space on the day of doom (judgment). In this article, I will focus on sector three that deals with demons or spirits, more commonly known in the Islamic world as *al jinn*.

When the average person hears the term *jinn* (genie), one often has a vision of a genie living inside a beautiful vase or bottle with a luxurious plush couch and living area inside of it. Or perhaps even the story of

Aladdin comes to mind. Nevertheless, these things come to mind because for centuries of folklore stories that were used to teach about the jinn. However, as time went on, the stories changed, thus providing a distortion of the events surrounding jinn. Or perhaps with a more Western perspective it has become rather fictionalized. From researching and gathering data from ancient, mid-evil, and modern/contemporary Islamic history, this article will explain who and what the jinn are and show how they function in traditional and/or contemporary Islamic cosmology and religiosity. This will be done by providing a brief overview of the origin of jinn to discover who and what they are, how they were created, how and where they live. Then a brief explanation of the differences between humanity and jinn will be explored, which will lead into learning about the powers of the jinn and the roles of both the good and evil jinn within Islam.

The Origin of Jinn

It is said that the jinn were on earth before human civilization began. In fact, in Islam it is believed that the jinn were the first creatures created. The jinn are said to have been created long before Pre-Islamic Arabia (prior to the rise of Islam in 630 CE). "Because the jinn are deemed to be closer to heaven than Earth, they are called *jinn*, deriving their name from the word in Arabic for heaven: *Jannah*" (Lawrence 2007:185). Asad¹ teaches the meaning of jinn from the Qur'an to be:

In the usage of the Qur'an, which is certainly different from the usage of primitive folklore, the term jinn have several distinct meanings. The most commonly encountered is that of spiritual forces or beings which, precisely because they have no corporeal existence, are beyond the perception of our corporeal senses: a connotation which includes 'satans' and 'satanic forces' as well as 'angels' and 'angelic forces', since all of them are "concealed from our senses". In order to make it quite evident that these invisible manifestations are not of corporeal nature, the Qur'an states parabolically that the jinn were created out of 'the fire of scorching winds', or out of 'a confusing flame of fire', or simply 'out of fire'. (Asad 2008:1135)²

Because jinn were created from fire, this great difference created a boundary between humans and jinn, thus making the jinn feel superior to human. This superiority complex created a great defiance, forever changing the world of Islam.

The Great Defiance

As aforementioned, the Qur'an teaches that jinn pre-existed human

beings. But since the jinn were not doing as *Allah* (God) intended, he removed the evil jinn from earth and then proceeded to create the Garden of Eden and then the traditional Christian creation story was derived. However, the angels saw one jinn in particular, which was an orphan and took pity on him and decided to bring him up to heaven to reside with them. This orphan jinn's name is *Iblis*, commonly known as Satan. According to the Qur'an, Satan was never actually an angel, but rather, a jinn. Angels are made from light and jinn are made from fire.

As the story continues, Allah finished creating the Garden of Eden and made Adam and Eve. Allah then designated that Adam would reign over all things on earth. Allah commanded that all of the angels and *Iblis* were to prostrate themselves before Adam. "They all prostrated themselves, save *Iblis*, who refused and gloried in his arrogance: and thus he became one of those who deny the truth" (Q-Asad 2:34).³ *Iblis'* defiance of Allah's order inadvertently resulted in his removal from heaven, never being able, under any circumstances, to return again. "I am better than he: thou hast created me out of fire, whereas him Thou hast created out of clay. [God] said: Down with thee, then, from this [state]—for it is not meet for thee to show arrogance here! Go forth, then: verily, among the humiliated shalt thou be!" (Q-Asad 7:12-13). Upon *Iblis'* departure, he asked Allah if he could live until the Day of Judgment. Allah granted *Iblis'* request. "Said [*Iblis*]: Grant me a respite till the Day when all shall be raised from the dead" (Q-Asad 7:14). Many Muslims believe that it was during *Iblis'* defiant fall when evil completely took over his entire being. However, when *Iblis* asked Allah for life until the Day of Judgment is how the jinn became immortal.

In *Iblis'* anger, he began to attempt to argue with God and say harsh threatening words. "[Whereupon *Iblis*] said: Now that Thou hast thwarted me, I shall most certainly lie in ambush for them all along Thy straight way, and shall most certainly fall upon them openly as well as in a manner beyond their ken, and from their right and from their left: and most of them Thou wilt find ungrateful" (Q-Asad 7:16–17). *Iblis* "will take every path he can against them, on their right, left, in front of them and behind them. He will attack them from every direction" (al-Ashqar 1998:71). It is said that all the jinn living with immortality until the Day of Judgment, whether good or evil, are all descendants of *Iblis*.

The Residence of Jinn

Since the great defiance of *Iblis*, jinn are not inhabitants of earth in quite the same manner as humans are. Jinn are the inhabitants of the subtle and immaterial, or subtly material, world (*alam al-malakut*) into which the

material and physical world is plunged, as if into a liquid. "If we picture a room in our mind, the 'medium' in which that imagined room exists supports form, but is itself subtle; it is the *alum al-malakut*. In traditional cosmology, the physical world is a 'crystallization', or projection, out of the subtle world, the 'ether'; the 'ether' is a projection out of the surrounding formless, or Angelic, world; and the Angelic world is projected out of Being" (Glasse 1989:457).

Jinn are said to be the inhabitants of the subtle world, some of whom are "non-central" beings like the non-human creatures of this world, while others are "central" beings, like humans. Jinn have free will, are endowed with an intellect, and are capable of grasping reality. Thus, some argue that they are capable of being saved. The jinn who occupy this central state have therefore religions and revelations, and some of their religions correspond to the religions of the world of men (Neuwirth 2001:442).

It is said that during the Prophet Muhammad's journey to Ta'if he recited the Qur'an at night in the desert and a party of the jinn came, listened, and believed. "Later their chiefs came to the Prophet Muhammad and made a *bay'ah*, or an allegiance, with him on the spot which is today the 'Mosque of the Jinn' in Mecca" (Esposito 2010).

Similarities in Jinn and Human Beings

While the world of the jinn is generally believed to be perfectly parallel to the human world, the primary difference is that jinn are able to move between their world and ours, while humans cannot perform this task (Rothberg 2004:36). Although the difference in nature between a jinn and a human is quite clear, the jinn, after *Iblis* was evicted from heaven, are further subject to limitations that humans are also limited by. The jinn cannot hear what goes on in heaven or see heaven. The jinn, once upon a time, were able to fly up and enter heaven whenever they liked. But they are no longer able to enter heaven, nor are they able to hear what is discussed in heaven. Furthermore, they are no longer able to know anything about destiny. Those jinn powers were removed when *Iblis* was evicted from heaven. "They are nonetheless still represented as being perfectly capable of rising up to heaven without divine assistance" (Chabbi 2003:48). The divine guard at the gates of heaven requires all of its powers, launching against them fiery traces (*shihab*), to throw them back to earth and prevent them from collecting the secrets of the future (Q-Asad 37:10; 72:8-9).

"Jinn are believed to be both less virtuous and less physical than humans, but like humans, endowed with the ability to choose between good and evil" (Esposito 2010). The jinn, like human Muslims, are required to worship Allah and follow Islam. The Qur'an states, "He governs all that

exists, from the celestial space to the earth; and in the end all shall ascend unto Him [for judgment] on a Day the length whereof will be [like] a thousand years of your reckoning” (Q-Asad 32:5).

Like humans they have free will and the right to choose between doing good or evil (Rothberg 2004:29). This being said, there are stories of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian jinns. This just further explains the greatness of God allowing free will. In the same way that jinns are allowed the right to choose between doing good or evil, they are also allowed the right to choose their religion. Nevertheless, no matter what their religious beliefs, as afore-mentioned, all jinn will be judged on the Day of Judgment as promised by Allah.

In the jinn’s society they have social classes much like humans. They have kings, courts, armies, and rulers. Rothberg says that the jinn even have “wars and armies and they engage in negotiations and create treaties (2004:35). They have communities just like humans. Jinn even get married! They have families within their communities, just as humans do.

In addition, jinn, like humans, have the power to procreate. They have sexual intercourse in the same manner as humans. It is believed that humans and jinn have even inter-mingled and gotten married. In these marriages, humans and jinn have had children. “In any case, although people claim that such marriages occur presently and have occurred in the past, if such does occur, it is rare and strange. Furthermore, the one who performs it must seek the Islamic ruling concerning it. It could be a case that the one who does it is, in a sense, overpowered and has no way to escape that situation” (al-Ashqar 1998:23). Since jinn have stronger mystical powers than humans, it is presumed that the jinn use their powers to marry humans. This is also why an Islamic ruling is needed.

Powers of Jinn

That which clearly distinguishes jinn from humans are their powers and abilities. Muslims believe that God has given them these powers as a test for them. “If they oppress others with them, then they will be held accountable” (Mission Islam 2007). Because Muslims know and believe in the jinn’s powers, they feel they can often make sense of the many mysteries that happen in our world. One of the powers of the jinn is that they are able to take on any physical form they like. “Thus, they can appear as humans, animals, trees and anything else” (Mission Islam 2007).

The ability to possess and take over the minds and bodies of other creatures is also a power that jinn are said to have utilized greatly over the centuries. “This however, is something which has been prohibited to them, as it is a great oppression to possess another being” (Mission Islam 2007).

In folk Islam, jinn are spirits invoked for magical purposes and are often held responsible for miraculous or unusual events and for a wide range of illnesses, which are popularly believed to have been caused by an imbalance between internal and external jinn. "Healers often speak directly to jinn prior to driving them out of patients" (Esposito 2010). This being said, Muslims believe that both good and bad jinn possess people for a wide variety of reasons. "Sometimes it is because the jinn or its family has been hurt accidentally. It could be because the jinn have fallen in love with the person. However, most of the time possession occurs because the jinn are simply malicious and wicked" (Esposito 2010). For example, legend has it that Sufis are considered to have divine powers they have received from the jinn, since they serve as intermediaries, between humans and the jinn. Because of their close relationship with and their ability to summon the jinn for obtaining spiritual power Sufi Muslims are believed to have the mystical knowledge necessary to be empowered for spiritual teaching, healing, and the use of natural medicines.

Sufis Healing and Medicine and Jinn

The Sufis are high rank spiritual teachers within Islam whose main responsibility is to maintain and transmit the hidden, deeper knowledge contained in the Qur'an. For Sufis, the supreme object in life is to serve and obey Allah, to emulate his divine attributes, and thereby to earn his good pleasure. Among the service to humanity that Sufis consider superior to all others is the healing of the sick. Their method is called the Sufi Healing. Kiyamaz defines Sufism, mainly called *tasawwuf* in Islam, as "a mystic approach to Islam. While Islamic Orthodoxy emphasizes the outward, public living of Islam, Sufism suggests its followers to turn within themselves and live Islam within their souls" (Kiyamaz 2002:10).

Sufis use the circle as a symbol to explain how they connect their practices to Islam. They see the Islamic Law (Shari'a) as the *circumference* of the circle, enclosing and ruling everything on this earth. They believe the Ultimate Truth (*Haqiqah*), Allah (one of the names of God in Islam), is the center point of this circle. They consider their way to reach Allah, which is their *tariqa* (meaning the path), is the radius that connects the circle with the central point. As there are infinite numbers of radii from the circumference of circle to the center of the circle, there are infinite numbers of *tariqas* (paths) that can lead to the ultimate truth. Another way Sufis explain this relationship is by using the analogue of a tree. They consider the roots of the tree as *Shari'a*, the trunk as the *tariqa* and the fruit as the *Haqiqah*. . . . Sufism is mostly rejected by the Islamic Orthodoxy because of

several reasons. The most obvious reason is that all tariqas have a sheikh, a spiritual leader who leads his/her disciples in their path leading to union with God. The disciple has to be totally obedient to his/her sheikh which places the sheikh in a higher level than the disciple. However, Islamic Orthodoxy say that every person is equal in front of God and no one can come between God and God's beings. Sufis claim the sheikh is only a guide for the disciples to find their path to God, not somebody who comes between. (Kiyamaz 2002:10, 11)

Sheikhs are the highest-ranking Sufis who have travelled the mystical path and are authorized to teach and heal. One of the most important medical traditions of the Middle East is Sufi medicine. The practices of the Sufis are not well known in the West, and their secrets have been taught to only a few individuals outside the Islamic tradition. Carefully guarded and passed on only within families, almost no physicians in the West have any knowledge on Sufi healing methods.

There are four kinds of healing methods that are widely recognized: (1) modern; (2) traditional (acupuncture, herb remedies, etc.); (3) spiritism (yoga, magnetism, hypnotism, breath exercise, etc.); and (4) Divine spiritual power. Some Sufi healers call upon the jinn while working within the divine spiritual power method. Sufi "healers often speak directly to jinn prior to driving them out of patients" (Esposito 2010).

An important aspect of Sufi medicine is the blending of plant essences known as *attars*,⁴ which are used as the foundation of all aromatherapy. The powerful effect of various aromas on the spiritual and physical state has been brought to the highest level in Sufi medicine over the centuries through practice and study and has recently become an increasingly Western practice. Dietary therapy and suggestions for everyday meals and cooking to prevent disorders is another important aspect of Sufi medicine, known as *unani-tibb* in India. Many of these practices find their roots in ancient times when there were no schools of medicine so the natural practices behind Sufi medicine was all that communities or tribes had to rely on. While Sufism is not viewed as orthodox in the overall religiosity of Islam and is frowned on by many Muslims, Sufi natural healing methodology is very important and appreciated by many.

Muslims also believe it is important to keep their bodies clean as the temple of God (Allah). They are bound by dietary restrictions and even in modern times they often go to a natural source for healing for many illnesses. These practices in Islam illustrate the importance many Muslims feel in maintaining an alignment with both religious traditions and their culture.

Evil Jinn

One of ways that evil jinn manipulate people is through visions in which they seek to lead people away from the worship of Allah. When a person sees a vision it is very hard to deny what one has seen, for seeing is believing. Only by having a knowledge of the world of the jinn and a commitment to Allah can a person fight off being led astray. In visions given by evil jinn they often take the form of people's parents, thereby convincing many that the souls of dead people are still present among the people of the earth.

As mentioned above, *Iblis* has set out on a mission to corrupt the earth and its inhabitants as much as possible. One way *Iblis* and his descendants (evil jinn) do this is through body possession, and it is not only humans who can be possessed, but also animals, trees, and other objects. By possessing people or objects evil jinn hope to cause people to worship others besides God, which is one of the worst offenses a person can commit. Recent stories about idols acting when possessed illustrate this phenomenon.

Not so long ago the worldwide phenomenon of Hindu idols drinking milk shocked the world. From Bombay to London, Delhi to California, countless idols were lapping up milk. Ganesh the elephant god, Hanuman the monkey god and even Shiva lingam, the male private organ (!), all seemed to guzzle down the milk as if there was no tomorrow! Unfortunately people were taken in by this and many flocked to feed the Hindu gods. This feat was undoubtedly done by the jinn as a classic attempt to make people worship false gods. (Islam Mission 2007)

Muslims believe that if a person becomes possessed by evil jinn, then the name of Allah has to be used in expelling them. The Prophet Muhammad and his companions used many invocations to exorcise the jinn, and in all of them the name of Allah is used to help the possessed person.

How contrary this is to many modern-day exorcists. Many exorcists often invoke the names of others besides God to exorcise the jinn. When the jinn leave, these people believe that their way was successful. However, this is a ploy of the jinn, as it knows that if it obeys the exorcist, then it has succeeded in making him worship others besides God. The jinn often returns when the exorcist leaves, as it knows that nothing except the words of God can stop it from oppressing others. (Islam Mission 2007)

This is another reason why Muslims have been commanded to recite the Qur'an frequently in their homes. More specifically, it is said that if

Surah 2 (*Al-Baqarah*) is recited daily it will rid any evil from the home. As the Prophet Muhammad said, “Whosoever is an enemy of God and His angels and His message-bearers, including Gabriel and Michael, [should know that,] verily, God is the enemy of all who deny the truth” (Q-Asad 2:97).

Muslims believe that “jinn may choose to fully possess a human, moving his or her limbs, or simply to ‘haunt’ an individual, bringing bad luck and ill fortune” (Rothberg 2004:35). Some people are also afraid of evil jinn, especially “dreaded . . . heretic jinn who rejected Islam. Muslims claimed these malevolent spirits could attack them at any time and in any place. They considered them harmful, and they endeavored to fend off their evil” (El-Zein 2009:70). The interesting thing about Muslim attitudes toward jinn is their belief that there are more good jinn than evil jinn. Furthermore, some people believe the good jinn play a greater role in their culture and religious beliefs so they tend not to be too worried or concerned about evil jinn.

Good Jinn

Because jinn have the right to choose between good and evil, this makes the jinn more widely accepted within Muslim religious tradition. Muslims feel “to ignore or try to avoid them is to invite defeat, loss of health and even death” (Lawrence 2007:185). Jinn are mentioned numerous times within various parts of the Qur’an and even have an entire Surah written about them (Sura 72). Although Muslims believe in jinn as a whole and accept them as part of their religion and religious practices, it does not mean that they are not aware of the evil works of the jinn. Muslims fully recognize that *Iblis* is “a betrayer of man” (Q-Asad 25:29), thus creating evil jinn who want nothing better than the destruction of humankind. The Qur’an teaches that just as there are some jinn who are “surrendered to God, there are some who have abandoned themselves to wrongdoing” (Q-Asad 72:13).

Jinn possession can take place not only by evil jinn, but also by good jinn. However the major difference is that Muslims welcome possession by good jinn. When possessed, a person is said “to be worn by” or “to wear” a jinn. Some Muslims who are possessed feel that it is a great honor to be chosen and possessed by good jinn. It is as much of an honor as to “wear a *hajib*,” the female head covering, as it is to “wear a jinn.”

Humans may also have friendships with jinn. Most jinn possessions are by male jinn who possess a human female, however, the female *jinnia* are believed to be particularly forceful and persuasive in pursuing a love affair with a human man. Rothenberg’s research found that “the jinn wear

all people, but the majority are women. It is about 60 or 70 percent women, 10 to 15 percent children, and the rest are men. There are more women who are worn by the jinn because they are jealous [of] . . . each other. If a woman is married to a man that another woman loves, that other woman will make magic for the first one, and so on. In most cases the jinn comes by magic, rarely for revenge" (2004:37).

In addition to bodily possession, Muslim belief speaks about the good deeds of the jinn and is specifically recognized as the jinn's role in serving humans. For example, it is said that the jinn built Solomon's temple.

King Solomon had power over the jinn; he was, in fact, their King as well as the King of the human world. So when King Solomon decided to build Solomon's Pools just a short walk from Artas, he ordered the jinn to do the necessary labor. Obedient to their king, the jinn worked and worked, digging the pools and lining them with stone. In the meantime, King Solomon sat and watched, leaning on his staff. . . . Unbeknownst to the jinn, King Solomon actually died one day as he sat on his chair leaning on his staff. Only forty years later, when the progress of worms eating his staff finally left the king to tumble to the ground, was the truth known. Set free of their labor, which was practically complete anyway, the jinn fled to Artas. (Rothberg 2007:29)

Conclusion

There are many centuries of Islamic religious tradition connected to the jinn that is beyond the scope of this brief article. It is also true that there are some areas of Islamic cosmology that have attracted very little scholarship. Therefore, more research is necessary to further explore the nature of the jinn, their works, and how the jinn are accepted within the various sectors of Islamic society. Nevertheless, this brief overview was provided as an introduction to the world of the jinn within the cosmology of Islam.

This research has also provided background information to show that Islam, like many Christian religions, has an unspoken mystical aspect. The intent of this article is that it be used as background information to encourage more research into the deeper complexities of the Islamic religion. Christian readers should not allow the differing views or practices of a religious group to provide a singular understanding concerning the views of the entire religious group. For example, there are some Christians who are superstitious. This does not mean all Christians are superstitious. In the same way, while many Muslims are involved with the jinn there are some who have nothing to do with them.

Nevertheless, there are some uncanny correlations between what Islam believes about *Iblis* (Satan) and the evil jinn, and what Christians believe

about Satan and evil angels. Christians find warning in the Holy Bible concerning the deceptions of Satan and the Qur'an offers similar warnings. It is my hope that this research has provided a deeper insight, not just about Islamic beliefs, but also more specifically about the cosmology within the history and make-up of Islamic religious tradition so that Christians can be better informed as interreligious dialogue takes place.

Notes

¹Asad refers to the The Message of The Qur'an. This is a version of the Qur'an that was transliterated by Muhammad Asad, who devoted two years to the correct translation for modern readers. It is said to be the best English version of the Qur'an.

²Future quotations from Asad's, The Message of The Qur'an, will be documented as a Qur'anic ancient text (i.e., Q-Asad 2:34, which is representative of the surah and verse).

³All references to the Qur'an are taken from Asad, Muhammad. *The Message of the Qur'an*. Dubai: Oriental Press, 2008.

⁴Attars is named after Fariduddin Attar, one of the major Sufi teachers, who wrote over 30 books.

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