

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE SUMMONING OF EVERYMAN AND ITS COMMON PRINCIPLES  
WITH THE ISLAMIC FAITH**Sabrina Abdulkadhom Abdulridha<sup>1</sup>Wafa' Abbas Sahan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assist. Lect. Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research College of Education University of Al-Zahraa for Women

<sup>2</sup> Assist. Lect. Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research College of Education University of Al-Zahraa for Women

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**Abstract**

Religion is a sacred system of beliefs that commonly identifies the originality of creation and declares the moral requirements of every individual. Devoted followers reveal their commitment to a religion by faithfully acknowledging its set of beliefs and principles, performing its religious practices, showing appreciation for life and its gifts, and taking its representatives as role models during their lifespan to obtain ultimate salvation and a promised afterlife. The spread of religions has had its many different ways across the centuries. With the start of the Middle Ages, literature was one of the most powerful and convincing tools used to spread Christianity and major principles across Europe. The morality play, *The Summoning of Everyman* (1485), is one of the most successful literary pieces that has been set up for such aims. The play still proves its strong relatability today's world, for the sacred message it withholds. The content of this message can be seen as a message that is shared and agreed upon by most religions, not Christianity alone. The Islamic faith is one of those religions that has many things in common with Christianity. This play may then serve as a message for people with an Islamic faith as well, and constitutes a reminder as well as a trigger warning to prepare oneself for death and the Day of Judgement.

**Key Words:** Christianity, Death, Everyman, Islam, Morality play, The Holy Qur'an.

## مسرحية استدعاء افريمان والاسس المشتركة مع معتقدات الدين الإسلامي

وفاء عباس صحن<sup>2</sup>صابرينا عبد الكتظم عبد الرضا<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> م.م. كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية/ جامعة الزهراء (ع) للبنات<sup>2</sup> م.م. كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية/ جامعة الزهراء (ع) للبنات

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### المستخلص

الدين عبارة عن نظام مقدس متضمن لمجموعة من المعتقدات التي تحدد بشكل عام الاسس الكونية اضافة الى توضيح المسؤوليات الأخلاقية المتوقعة لكل فرد. هناك من يبدي التزامه بالدين من خلال امانة الاعتراف بمعتقداته ومبادئه، اضافة الى تأدية المتطلبات الدينية، تقدير الحياة وهباتها، واتخاذ الشخصيات الدينية البارزة كنماذج يحتذى بهم في حياته للوصول الى الخلاص النهائي والجنة الموعودة. كانت لأنشار الأديان طرقها المختلفة عبر العصور. مع بدايات العصور الوسطى، كان للمجال الأدبي أقوى الأدوات وأكثرها إقناعاً لنشر الدين المسيحي ومبادئه الرئيسية في جميع أنحاء أوروبا. المسرحية الأخلاقية، استدعاء افريمان (1485) مثلاً وتعد واحدة من أنجح الأعمال الأدبية التي تم إعدادها لمثل هذه الأهداف. لا تزال المسرحية تثبت ارتباطها القوي بعالمنا اليوم، والرسائل المقدسة التي تحتويها. يمكن النظر إلى محتوى هذه الرسائل على أنها مشتركة ومتواجدة في معظم الأديان، ولا تقتصر بالمسيحية فقط. العقيدة الإسلامية هي إحدى تلك الديانات التي توافق مع الدين المسيحي في اسس كثيرة. لذلك يمكن لهذه المسرحية ان تشكل رسالة للأشخاص ذوي العقيدة الإسلامية أيضاً، لتذكير وتحذير المؤمن للاستعداد للموت ويوم القيامة قدر المستطاع.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المسيحية، الموت، شخصية "افريمان"، الإسلام، مسرحية اخلاقية، القرآن الكريم.

## 1. *The Summoning of Everyman: A Brief Introduction*

On a historical note, the famous morality play, *The Summoning of Everyman* was written in circa 1485 by an unidentified writer. This play is among the very few morality plays of the late Medieval Era that is known to have survived in four editions and is originally said to be a translation from a Dutch play entitled *Elckerlijc* written by Peter van Diest in 1485 (Hadfield 93). It is necessary to define this type of late Medieval plays for a more thorough understanding. They are:

dramatized allegories of a representative Christian life in the plot form of a quest for salvation, in which the crucial events are temptations, sinning, and the climactic confrontation with death. The usual protagonist represents Mankind, or Everyman; among the other characters are personifications of virtues, vices, and Death, as well as angels and demons who contest for the prize of the soul of Mankind (Abrams and Harpham 201).

The main characteristics of the morality play can accordingly be highlighted as including a wide use of allegory to intensify the audience's attention on the journey of death. It also tends to clear out the idea that the included Christian doctrines are religious obligations required to be carried out by the protagonist who is representative of all mankind. Such plays also highlight the virtues and vices of man in order to teach a moral lesson of the necessity of differentiating between good and evil. The protagonist of *The Summoning of Everyman* goes under the name 'Everyman,' and represents thereby all of mankind. The play sets off with a messenger introducing the audience with a prologue, giving away the frame of the work. He points to the fact that all people are sinners with no exception and that close attention is required if redemption and salvation is what they intend to obtain. The messenger departs after the delivered prologue and the action of the play starts with a monologue. God laments the fact that man has distanced himself from Him for the sake of earthly goods and pleasure. Therefore God summons a messenger named 'Death' wanting him to deliver a message to 'Everyman,' on Earth. Everyman must prepare himself for meeting his final fate soon; death. Having received the divine message, Everyman panics and hopes for the date to be postponed, even if that calls for bribery, but Death quickly declares that no bribery shall work now. Everyman shall face death and no money can postpone or halt death from approaching him. Everyman has only one right

left now; that is the right to find a companion to join him on the journey towards death (Ruud 217).

## 2. An Islamic Rereading of *The Summoning of Everyman*

The play is designed to be a morality play. True that the casual way of implanting and preserving Christian beliefs is done by preaching in Church services, however it is the procedure of storytelling that has a greater influence upon the receiver. Stories have a better chance to be remembered and constitute a reminder of the religious messages it beholds. Similarly, storytelling is an approach common in the Islamic faith as well, most noticeable in the holy book of the Qur'an. In Surat Yusuf, God declares the influential effect storytelling has and confirms that the retelling of events is to declare a moral lesson to Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) that he in turn is to retell and teach to the public and especially the Muslim community: "By revealing this Qur'an to you, we hereby narrate to you the best narrative, while before this you were among those unaware (of it)" (The Qur'an, 12:3). This morality play *The Summoning of Everyman* has used the concept of storytelling to serve as a reminder that man is a mortal creation of God and will have to answer God for all his earthly deeds. He must therefore be prepared for the day of Judgement and God's questioning by doing good during his lifetime on Earth.

A messenger warns the audience beforehand to pay close attention to the upcoming events of the play, directing them to its major theme: "Ye think sin in the beginning full sweet, / Which in the end causeth the soul to weep / When the body lieth in clay" (*The Summoning of Everyman*, 13-15). Revising these lines from an Islamic perspective, it might also constitute an alarm for Muslims, as the content of such a message is also found in the Holy Qur'an. God constantly reminds humankind of his mortality and much limited life span that must be cherished and lived out in an accepted way. In Surat Al-Rahman, the course of life is addressed as being trivial and limited, saying: "Every one who is on it (the earth) has to perish. And your Lord's Countenance will remain, full of majesty, full of honour" (The Qur'an, 27: 26-27).

As the action of the play takes its start, God expresses His excessive sadness and anger of human's arrogant nature by saying: "I perceive here in my majesty, / How that all creatures be to me

unkind, / Living without dread in worldly prosperity,” (*The Summoning of Everyman*, 22-24). Such anger is a message expressed in multiple verses in the Holy Qur’an: “Who hears Allah’s verses being recited to him, then he remains adamant out of arrogance, as if he never heard them. So give him the good news’ of a painful punishment” (The Qur’an, 25:8). Aside from the fact that both the Holy Qur’an and the play condemn the wrongdoings of humankind, both also spread the tokens of salvation within the text. A corner stone to direct oneself to the path of salvation is lending a helping hand to those in need in means of charity. It is however the greed and self-centered soul that many possess that causes the loss of the track towards salvation. It is expressed in the play with God saying: “Charity they all do clean forget” (*The Summoning of Everyman*, 51). The importance of charity in Islam is referred to with the terms ‘Khums’ and ‘Zakat’. Both are religious obligations in which Islamic followers should devote a decided sum of money for charity purposes (S.H. Nasr, Dabashi, and S.V. Nasr eds., 1988: 255). God confirms this by saying: “And know that wherever spoils you receive, its one fifth is for Allah and for His messenger, and for kinsmen and orphans and the needy and the wayfarer, if you do believe in Allah and in what We have sent down upon Our Servant on the decisive day, the day when the two forces encountered each other. And Allah is powerful over everything (The Qur’an: 10:41).

The span of a lifetime is also mentioned revealing that it is rather short and God reminds his people in different ways and manners that death lies ahead of him without escape. In the play, God reveals the idea in a troubling manner to capture the audience’s attention. He asks the character ‘Death’ to visit and deliver a message to Everyman on earth, saying:

...show him in my name

A pilgrimage he must on him take,

Which he in no wise may escape;

And that he bring with him a sure reckoning

Without delay or any tarrying (*The Summoning of Everyman*, 67-71).

Death might be ignored or even forgotten, but no escape is possible. It is a journey that every living being must undergo when the time has come. In the Qur'an, several verses have also expressed the idea in an affecting way, in the hopes that people might keep the concept of death in their minds: "Every soul has to taste death. It is on the Day of Judgement that you shall be paid your rewards in full. So, whoever has been kept away from the Fire and admitted to Paradise has really succeeded. The worldly life is nothing but an illusionary enjoyment (The Qur'an: 4: 185). To intensify the idea of death, God emphasizes that: "For every people there is an appointed time. So, when their appointed time will come, they cannot be late for a moment, nor will they get ahead" (The Qur'an: 8:34). So when time comes, God will send his messenger to capture the human soul.

In the play, 'Death' finally arrives Earth and confronts the rather arrogant and overconfident Everyman about his journey towards the grave, concluding the fact that his time on Earth has expired. Death reveals in detail: "For before God thou shalt answer, and how / Thy many bad deeds and good but a few; / How thou hast spent thy life, ..." (*The Summoning of Everyman*, 107-109). This is the day of Doom; a day that will include the answering of every human being that has walked Earth of what good and what bad he has done. In the Qur'an, God directly speaks of how He will be answering people's deeds and how good deeds will have a major impact on how God shall judge the answered person. God affirms that: "On the day when everybody shall find present before him whatever good he did and whatever evil he wrought, he will wish there would have been a wide space between him and that (day). Allah warns you of Himself, and Allah is compassionate to (His) servants (The Qur'an, 3: 30). So postponing death is no possibility and no award or bribery can be offered to achieve such a thing. Maybe on earth, bribing was an option, but such a chance is not an option if death approaches. 'Death' explain the matter in detail by saying:

I set not by gold, silver nor riches,  
Ne by pope, emperor, king, duke, ne princes.  
For and I would receive gifts great,  
All the world I might get;  
But my custom is clean contrary.



I give thee no respite: come hence, and not tarry (*The Summoning of Everyman*, 125: 130).

The Holy Qur'an also makes such remarks that nothing and no one may save you from a terrible afterlife other than your good deeds. God states: "and do not put me to disgrace on the Day when all will be raised to life, / the Day when neither wealth will be of any use (to any one) nor sons, / except to him who will come to Allah with a sound heart, (The Qur'an, 19: 87-89). No one shall remain on earth either. Life is but a trivial and short termed cycle that closes off with the final destiny of death. Death explains: "And in the world each living creature / For Adam's sin must die of nature (*The Summoning of Everyman*, 144-145). He explains here that life is a circle that all creatures must undergo. It is man's nature that must not be denied. The Qur'an states that: "He is the One who created you from dust, then from a drop of semen, then from a clot. After that, He takes you out as an infant. Then, (He makes you grow) so that you reach your full maturity, and, thereafter, become old – and some of you die earlier – and so that you reach the appointed term, and so you understand" (The Qur'an, 24: 67). So it is this life cycle that one must search for salvation and doing good deeds. Regret and wishing for another life time to make things up will have no use as well.

Everyman shows his deepest regrets of being arrogant, irresponsible and selfish. He laments: "How shall I do now for to excuse me? / I would to God I had never be gete! / To my soul a full great profit it had be; / For now I fear pains huge and great (*The Summoning of Everyman*; 188-191). Regret is a human characteristic that God has identified in the Qur'an, declaring that regret shall not save him from punishment either: "If you only could (be there to) see when they will be made to stand by the Fire, and they will say, "Would that we were sent back, then we would not reject the signs of our Lord, and would join the believers" (The Qur'an; 7; 27).

As devastating as the idea of death may be, the play also ensures that this journey must be done alone. No Earthly companions and riches will not join the person on his path towards grave. All shall abandon him no matter how dear and close they were in his lifetime: "And forsake pride, for he deceiveth you in the end / And remember Beauty, Five-wits, Strength, and Discretion / They all at last do Everyman forsake, [cretion," (*The Summoning of Everyman*, 901-904). He will even find

himself answering God all alone in the Day of Judgement. God says: “You have come to Us all alone, just as We had first created you, and you have left behind you what We had bestowed on you, and We do not see your intercessors with you –those whom you claimed to be (Our) partners in (managing) your matters (The Qur’an, 7:94).

The love for money and wealth and the sins humans commit for the sake of money are extreme. It is almost as if they collect money, deceiving themselves they will own all of it even in afterlife. Goods personifies how he is nothing but a materialistic things and a temporary companion on earth: “For when thou art, this is my guise / Another to deceive in the same wise / As I have done to thee, and all to his soul’s reprieve (The *Summoning of Everyman*, 447-449). God also expresses human’s unapologetic love of money, warning him that it will not benefit him in afterlife:

And you will devour the inheritance with a sweeping gulp,  
and love wealth, an excessive love.

No! When the earth will be crushed thoroughly to be turned into bits,  
and your Lord will come, and the angels as well, lined up in rows, and Jahannam (Hell),  
on that day, will be brought forward, it will be the day when man will realize the truth,  
but from where will he take advantage of such realization? (The Qur’an, 30:19-34).

Instead humans should collect ‘Good Deeds,’ that will help reach salvation and the everlasting life in Paradise. He explains: “Then you go with your reckoning and your Good-Deeds together / For to make you joyful at heart (The *Summoning of Everyman*, 526-527). This emphasis is also laid inside the Qur’anic verses: “Whoever male or female, has acted righteously, while being a believer, We shall certainly make him live a good life, and shall give such people their reward for the best of what they used to do” (The Qur’an, 14: 97).

So while being alive, God gives a chance to repent and is open for forgiveness. Everyman is ready to ask for forgiveness and to be purified, implying the idea that other should do so as well: “Wass from me spots of vices unclean, / That on me no sin may be seen; (The *Summoning of Everyman*, 542-543). In the Qur’an several verses send the message to a valuable and irreplaceable opportunity: “O my people, seek forgiveness from your Lord, then turn to Him in repentance, and He



will release the heavens pouring upon you, and will add strength to your strength, and do not turn away like sinners” (The Qur’an, 12:52). In addition to the good deeds, knowledge is also an essential factor in salvation and reaching an eternal life of peace and serenity. Successfully guiding Everyman to repentance and salvation, the audience learns that knowledge is therefore the cornerstone to everything in life. The Qur’an also marks the importance of knowledge in multiple verses: “Say, “Can those who know and those who do not know become equal?” It is only the people of understanding who are receptive of the advice” (The Qur’an, 23:9).

The path of sinners has been cleared out as well as the path of forgiveness. And since both religions share the explanation of these contrastive paths, both the divine and human forms of narration can be a heart-felt warning and experience.

### 3. Conclusion

Sinning may seem to be sweet in life to many people, but shall be rewarded with severe punishment in afterlife. Doing good deeds and following a religious and morally accepted pathway that is approved by God, shall on the other hand lead the individual to a pathway towards Heaven in afterlife. Such is a message conveyed in many religions around the world, mostly highlighted in the Abrahamic religions. Islam, Christianity and Judaism along with many other religions have clearly stated this fact assuring that the concept of death is part of the natural cycle of life and therefore one must be fully prepared to reach salvation and ultimate peace. As most religions possess divine books and manuscripts that include direct messages from God to man, other forms of spreading awareness of religions were used by man to help spread the religion to an even broader space. That is why the Christian Church in the Middle Ages compiled plays like *The Summoning of Everyman* as an attempt to show and remind people of the major Christian beliefs and principles. Similar principles were already evident in the Islamic belief and stated in the Qur’an and other human works as well. That is why this research has summed up the similar messages that are included and that a warning and awareness exists in different forms, whether in Divine texts such as the Bible, the Qur’an or man-made text like this influential Medieval play. Muslims can then relate to the messages conveyed in such plays as the Islamic faith expresses similar concepts; that death is sooner than expected and good deeds and other preparations should be done before the clock stops ticking.

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