Comparative Analysis of Eschatological Beliefs in Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam: Insights through Ninian Smart's Dimensions of Religion

Analisis Perbandingan Kepercayaan Eskatologi dalam Buddhisme Cina Malaysia dan Islam: Tinjauan melalui Dimensi Agama Ninian Smart

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to perform a comparative analysis to explore the factors contributing to the similarities and differences in eschatological beliefs between Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam. The analysis used Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion, namely doctrine, ritual, mythic, experiential, ethical, social, and material to evaluate the common and contrasting dimensions shared by Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam. Interviews were conducted with six Muslim converts who were formerly Buddhists. The study revealed that the doctrinal dimension has the highest frequency, indicating a strong focus on the theological differences in eschatological beliefs between Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam. The ethical dimension follows closely, highlighting the importance of moral behaviour in both religions. The material and social dimensions show moderate frequencies, reflecting how practices and communal customs shape beliefs about death. The experiential dimension, though less frequent, emphasises personal spiritual experiences, while the ritual and mythic dimensions receive the lowest references, suggesting a greater emphasis on doctrinal and ethical aspects over specific rituals and narratives. The study also found that moral justice and ethical conduct in the doctrinal dimension are closely related to the ethical dimension. Additionally, the social dimension's emphasis on community and support is linked to funeral traditions in the ritual dimension. These findings indicate areas of alignment between Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam, revealing shared purposes but differing practices. Ultimately, the common emphasis on virtuous living provides a basis for interfaith dialogue on ethical values.

Keywords: Eschatological Beliefs; Malaysian Chinese Buddhism; Islam; Religious Dimensions; Interviews

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menjalankan analisis perbandingan bagi meneroka faktor-faktor yang menyumbang kepada persamaan dan perbezaan dalam kepercayaan eskatologi antara Buddhisme Cina Malaysia dan Islam. Analisis ini menggunakan tujuh dimensi agama Ninian Smart, iaitu doktrin, ritual, mitos, pengalaman, etika, sosial dan material untuk menilai persamaan dan perbezaan dimensi antara Buddhisme Cina Malaysia dan Islam. Temu bual dijalankan dengan enam orang mualaf yang dahulunya beragama Buddha. Hasil kajian menunjukkan dimensi doktrin mencatatkan kekerapan tertinggi, menandakan penekanan terhadap perbezaan teologi dalam kepercayaan eskatologi antara Buddhisme Cina Malaysia dan Islam. Dimensi etika berada di tempat kedua, menunjukkan kepentingan kelakuan moral dalam kedua-dua agama. Dimensi material dan sosial menunjukkan kekerapan sederhana, menggambarkan bagaimana amalan dan adat komuniti membentuk kepercayaan tentang kematian. Dimensi pengalaman, walaupun kurang disebut, menekankan pengalaman rohani peribadi, manakala dimensi ritual dan mitos mencatatkan rujukan paling rendah, menunjukkan penekanan yang lebih besar terhadap aspek doktrin dan etika berbanding ritual dan naratif tertentu. Kajian ini juga mendapati keadilan moral dan kelakuan etika dalam dimensi doktrin berkait rapat dengan dimensi etika. Selain itu, penekanan dimensi sosial terhadap komuniti dan sokongan turut dikaitkan dengan tradisi pengebumian dalam dimensi ritual. Dapatan ini menunjukkan wujudnya titik persamaan antara Buddhisme Cina Malaysia dan Islam, dengan matlamat yang serupa tetapi amalan yang berbeza. Secara keseluruhannya, penekanan bersama terhadap kehidupan berakhlak mulia dapat menjadi asas bagi dialog antara agama mengenai nilai-nilai etika.

Kata kunci: Kepercayaan Eskatologi; Buddhisme Cina Malaysia; Islam; Dimensi Agama; Temu Bual

INTRODUCTION

From a terminological standpoint, eschatology refers to the branch of theology that explores themes related to death, judgement, and the ultimate fate of humanity (Bakhtiar, 2001; Zailan, 2019). Eschatology holds a significant place in the Islamic faith and is considered one of the crucial areas of knowledge for Muslims. It ranks fifth among the Six Articles of Faith (*Iman*), specifically encompassing the belief in the Day of Judgement. The other articles include the 1) belief in Allah as the one and only God, 2) belief in Angels, 3) belief in the Divine Books (e.g., Taurat, Zabur, Injil, and Quran), 4) belief in the Prophets (e.g., Muhammad S.A.W., Adam A.S., Ibrahim A.S., Musa A.S., Dawud A.S., Isa A.S., etc.), and 6) belief in Predestination (*al-qada' wa I-qadar*). Belief in the Day of Judgement prompts individuals to be mindful of their actions in this world, as they will be assessed and rewarded in the Hereafter (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2009).

In the context of Buddhism, eschatology is commonly understood not in terms of a linear "end of the world," but rather through a cyclical cosmology (*samsara-cakra*) in which the universe undergoes continuous cycles of creation (*utpatti*) and destruction (*pralaya*) (Lopez, 1995; Harvey, 2013). Central to Buddhist eschatological thought is the concept of *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth governed by *karma* (Gethin, 1998). This eschatological perspective, rooted in impermanence (*anicca*), cyclical renewal, and the potential for ultimate liberation (*moksa* or *nirvana*) through spiritual discipline (*sadhana*) (Rahula, 1974; Keown, 2000), is a core feature shared across the three major Buddhist traditions, namely Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana (Powers, 2007; Williams, 2009).

Given the theological significance of eschatological beliefs in both Islam and Buddhism, it becomes important to understand how these concepts function within Malaysia's religiously diverse society. Malaysia is home to 20.6 million Muslims, 6.1 million Buddhists, 2.9 million Christians, 2.0 million Hindus, and 860 thousand adherents of other religions (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). The presence of multiple religious traditions makes the understanding, acceptance, and respect of differing eschatological beliefs vital for promoting social harmony and unity in the country (Aboo Talib & Baharuddin, 2020; Yew et al., 2021).

This is particularly important considering the ethnic and religious composition of the country, which comprises 21.61 million Bumiputera, 6.88 million Chinese, 2.00 million Indians, and 0.21 million individuals from other ethnic backgrounds (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). Recognising and respecting religious diversity is not merely a social ideal but a national imperative. The importance of such unity was echoed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in his address at the 2024 National Journalists' Day (HAWANA) in Kuching, Sarawak, where he emphasised the need to reject racial and religious extremism in favour of peace and national stability (Jon, 2024).

Given the current societal context, this study examines the common and contrasting dimensions of eschatological beliefs in Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam. Malaysian Chinese Buddhism, is primarily practiced by the Chinese community and is characterised by a syncretic blend of Mahayana Buddhism, Chinese traditional religions such as Taoism and Confucianism, ancestor veneration, and, in some cases, elements of Theravada Buddhism. Although many adherents identify as Buddhist, their religious practice often incorporates aspects from these other traditions (Tan, 1983). Guided by Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion as an analytical framework, this study conducts a comparative analysis of the doctrinal, ritual, mythical, experiential, ethical, social, and material dimensions that inform eschatological worldviews in both religions. This approach aims to illuminate the factors underlying both

similarities and differences in eschatological beliefs, thereby contributing to deeper interreligious understanding within Malaysia's religiously diverse society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ESCHATOLOGY IN MALAYSIAN CHINESE BUDDHISM

Buddhist perspectives on death and the life hereafter are closely tied to the Noble Eightfold Path, which comprises right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditative absorption or union. This path is central to attaining liberation (*nirvana*) from *samsara*, the cyclical process of birth, decay, and death characterised by suffering (King, 1994). Consequently, Buddhist traditions place considerable emphasis on reflecting upon the meaning of life and its ultimate end (Tsomo, 2006b).

Within the samsaric worldview, an individual's present circumstances are shaped by *karma*, an accumulation of moral actions and intentions carried over from previous lifetimes. Governed by the principle of cause and effect, *karma* determines the realm into which one is reborn after death. The quality of *karma* is measured by the degree to which one overcomes or succumbs to the mental afflictions of ignorance, greed, and hatred (Gwynne, 2018; Tsomo, 2006a). The Buddha described rebirth not as the transfer of a fixed soul, but as the continuation of existence through an apparent continuity of impermanent moments of consciousness (*anicca*) (Tsomo, 2006a).

Liberation from *samsara* is achieved by extinguishing all cravings and attachments, thereby ending karmic accumulation (Pat Fisher, 2009). Through enlightened awareness and detachment from embodiment, one attains *nirvana*, permanently escaping the cycle of death and rebirth (Chidester, 2002). These doctrinal principles underpin Buddhist funerary customs, which aim to guide the deceased through the process of death and rebirth.

Funeral practices vary among Buddhist cultures but commonly include inviting monks to chant or recite prayers, such as the *Bardo* prayer, to assist the consciousness of the deceased (Gwynne, 2018). In some communities, family members may temporarily wear monastic robes to generate merit on behalf of the deceased. The preparation of the body, choice of attire, and scheduling of the funeral are approached with flexibility, often allowing time for distant relatives to attend. Funeral processions may incorporate uplifting music intended to comfort mourners and create additional positive *karma* (Gwynne, 2018).

Cremation is prevalent in many Buddhist contexts, reflecting Indian cultural influence where burning the body symbolises ritual purity and serves hygienic purposes (Gwynne, 2018; Tsomo, 2006a). Tibetan traditions, by contrast, may observe "sky burials," in which the body is ritually dismembered and offered to birds or other animals as an act of generosity once consciousness has departed (Tsomo, 2006a).

Among Malaysian Chinese Buddhists, who include followers of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions, religious practice is often influenced by an amalgamation of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk beliefs (Tan, 1983). Many adherents observe Buddhist rites without a deep understanding of doctrinal foundations, instead following long-standing cultural customs (Tan, 2013; Chin, 2023; Tan & Yong, 2023). In traditional Chinese belief, funeral rituals are performed to secure pardon for the deceased's sins and ensure a favourable judgement in the life hereafter. Maintaining the physical integrity of the body is seen as vital, reflecting Confucian beliefs that the body, as a gift from one's ancestors, should remain intact. Dying with

an incomplete body is thought to hinder the soul's rest, while improper funeral arrangements are believed to negatively affect the Hereafter and bring misfortune upon the family (Chin, 2023).

For many Malaysian Chinese Buddhists, honouring the deceased entails conducting a complete funeral, even at considerable financial cost. Elaborate rituals, chanting, and the intervention of religious specialists are believed to guide the deceased along the correct path towards paradise, preventing the soul from wandering (Funerals Malaysia, 2016). In this worldview, the spirits of the dead remain present on earth, influencing the family's fortune, health, and prosperity (Yick & Gupta, 2002). Misfortunes are sometimes attributed to the failure to fulfil proper rites, prompting consultation with Taoist priests to identify and remedy spiritual causes of hardship (Tanggok, 2010). This aligns with Wolf's (1978) observation that Chinese religious practice is deeply intertwined with gods, ghosts, and ancestors.

Economic factors help explain the fluidity of Chinese attitudes towards religion in Malaysia. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Chinese migrants endured harsh working conditions and looked to religion for good fortune, immediate assistance, and psychological comfort (Tan, 2013). Consequently, Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns at the time focused primarily on chanting and performing rituals (Ong, 2005) rather than addressing transcendental concerns, a practice that continues today. The development of Chinese religion in Malaysia was thus shaped by migrants' reliance on divine protection and blessings for worldly pursuits. As Tan (1983) notes, folk religions emerge from the lived experiences of the masses and reflect their fundamental concerns for peace, prosperity, and security.

Contemporary Chinese Malaysian Buddhist funerals often incorporate symbolic practices that some Buddhist leaders criticise as inconsistent with canonical teachings. Venerable Suvanno (1996), a senior Theravada monk, identifies rites such as placing a bowl of rice with chopsticks before the casket, placing water and a towel beneath it, burning paper houses, cars, and currency, distributing red threads to mourners, and washing with "chanted" water to ward off bad luck. He contends that these customs, rooted in superstition (*mixin*), should be replaced with funerals aligned with authentic Buddhist principles.

The persistence of such rites can also be understood through the influence of Confucian ethics, particularly the concept of filial piety (*xiao*), which demands unconditional respect, care, and obedience to one's parents (Cheah et al., 2018). The Book of Rites frames filial piety as most profoundly expressed through burial and mourning rituals, which serve as public demonstrations of devotion and grief. Failure to perform these rites properly is regarded as a moral failing (Keawsuwan, 2021). In Chinese parent-child relations, compliance with filial expectations may stem more from fear than from internalised moral conviction. This dynamic can lead to the fulfilment of ritual obligations without genuine belief in their necessity (Ho, 1994). In Malaysian Chinese families, filial piety remains a powerful social force, sustaining elaborate funerary traditions that blend religious, cultural, and superstitious elements.

The eschatological beliefs of Malaysian Chinese Buddhism centre on the idea that the soul's journey after death is shaped by *karma*, moral conduct, and the proper performance of funeral rites. Influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk religion, these beliefs hold that elaborate rituals, chanting, and offerings can secure a favourable rebirth, guide the soul towards paradise, and prevent it from becoming a wandering spirit. The life after death is also viewed through the lens of filial piety, where fulfilling burial and mourning obligations is both a moral duty and a means of ensuring the deceased's peace and the family's continued fortune.

ESCHATOLOGY IN ISLAM

In early Islam, Allah S.W.T. assumed the role of the supreme lawgiver primarily through the Quran, which Muslims regard as His exact words. For Muslims, the Quran has always been the central source of knowledge and guidance. Revealed over a span of 23 years and preserved for more than 14 centuries without alteration, it continues to proclaim itself as the divine revelation from the One True God. Its preservation is seen as evidence of its authenticity and reliability (Hosein, 2016).

The Quran carries a profoundly ethical nature, providing moral teachings and guidance on eschatology. Its primary purpose is to offer Muslims a didactic framework that inspires consistent righteousness and moral conduct in preparation for the Day of Judgement. It serves as a moral compass, encouraging piety and adherence to divine commandments (Taylor, 1968).

In addition to the Quran, Muslims turn to the Hadith, the recorded sayings, actions, and approvals of Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. (Al-Bukhari, 1994), for eschatological guidance. The Hadith holds a central place in Islamic law (*Shariah*), second only to the Quran. The recommended method of interpretation is to consult the Quran first, followed by the Hadith, ensuring accuracy and avoiding misapplication (Hosein, 2016).

The Hadith expands upon Quranic teachings, offering detailed depictions of the signs of the Hour, the resurrection, and the events of Judgement Day. Central to these teachings is the concept of moral accountability, where every individual's deeds are recorded and presented before Allah (Quadri, 2024). The Quran affirms that every soul will be judged with perfect justice, and even the smallest deeds will be accounted for (Quran 99:7–8).

Islamic eschatology (*'Ilm al-Akhirah*) teaches that death is not the end of existence but a transition to another realm, affirming the soul's eternal journey (Quadri, 2024). Following burial, the soul enters the realm of *alam al-barzakh* (the intermediate state between death and resurrection) (Al-Ashqar, 2008), where two angels, Munkar and Nakir, question the deceased about their faith (Quran 79:1–2). Passing this test brings comfort and glimpses of paradise, while failure marks the beginning of punishment in the grave (Jami' at-Tirmidhi, Vol. 4, Book 10, Hadith 2308).

Resurrection (*al-Qiyamah*) will occur on the Day of Judgement (*Yawm al-Deen*), initiated by the angel Israfil's blowing of the trumpet (Al-Ashqar, 2005a). The Quran describes this day as lasting the equivalent of 50,000 years (Quran 70:4). It contains numerous verses attesting to the reality of the life hereafter, describing the eternal abodes of paradise (*Jannah*) and hell (*Jahannam*), the resurrection, and divine judgement (Quran 3:185; 99:7–8).

On this day, the scales (*Mizan*) will weigh each person's deeds, determining their eternal fate (Quran 21:47). The concept of intercession (*Shafaʿah*) also plays a role, with prophets, martyrs, and certain righteous individuals interceding by Allah's permission, though ultimate judgement rests with Him alone (Quadri, 2024). Both paradise and hell reflect the justice and mercy of Allah.

The Quran portrays paradise as a realm of eternal bliss, beauty, and divine satisfaction, featuring rivers of pure water, milk, wine, and honey (Quran 47:15), with multiple levels reserved for the most righteous. It is described as the ultimate reward prepared by Allah, the Almighty, for His beloved (*awliya'*) and those who obey Him, a place of perfect joy and contentment, free from any deficiency or disturbance (Al-Ashqar, 2005b). In contrast, hell is depicted as a place of intense heat, boiling water, and garments of fire (Quran 22:19–20), where punishments vary in severity according to one's sins (Quadri, 2024). It is the abode prepared by Allah for those who reject faith, oppose His commands, and deny His messengers, a place of retribution for His enemies and a prison for evildoers (Al-Ashqar, 2005b).

Islamic funeral customs reflect the faith's emphasis on humility, respect, and the transient nature of worldly life (Ahmad, 1996). Obligatory rites include bathing the body, shrouding it, performing the funeral prayer (*Salat al-Janazah*), and burying the body in a grave (*lahd*) on its right side facing the Kaaba in Mecca (Ekpo & Ishaq, 2019). A supplication (*talqin*) is then made for the deceased.

Islam also stresses the importance of raising righteous children who will pray for their parents after their death. This is highlighted in the Hadith narrated by Abu Hurayra R.A., in which the Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. stated that a person's deeds cease upon death except for ongoing charity, beneficial knowledge, and prayers from a righteous child (*walad saleh*) (Al-Adab Al-Mufrad, Book 1, Hadith 38).

In Islam, eschatological beliefs, rooted in the Quran and Hadith, affirm that death is a transition to an eternal life, culminating in resurrection, divine judgement, and the eternal abodes of paradise or hell. These teachings emphasise moral accountability, the justice and mercy of Allah, and the transient nature of worldly life, guiding Muslims towards righteousness and preparation for the Hereafter through faith, ethical conduct, and prescribed funeral rites.

THE DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION

Roderick Ninian Smart (1991) introduces religion as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon in "The Religious Experience," arguing that it extends far beyond belief systems to encompass a wide range of human experiences and expressions. He proposed seven dimensions to understand the complex nature of religion in both theory and practice. The doctrinal dimension refers to the system of beliefs or teachings that explain the nature of the divine, the cosmos, and the human condition, ranging from monotheistic and polytheistic to atheistic frameworks. The ritual dimension involves formal practices such as worship, meditation, rites of passage, or sacred ceremonies, which may be performed individually or communally, often enriched by music or symbolic actions. The mythic dimension encompasses sacred stories, legends, and scriptures that convey religious truths and moral meanings, regardless of their historical accuracy. The experiential dimension deals with personal encounters with the sacred, which may evoke feelings of awe, reverence, fear, peace, or unity with the universe. The ethical dimension includes moral codes and behavioural guidelines, whether specific laws or general principles, often shaped by surrounding cultures and religious values. The social dimension focuses on the roles of religious leaders, communities, and institutions such as prophets, preachers, monks, teachers, or lay followers and the social structures they form. Lastly, the material dimension covers physical expressions of religion, including temples, sacred objects, scriptures, vestments, and artwork. Together, these dimensions offer a comprehensive lens for understanding how religion is integrated into human life and culture.

Expanding on this framework, Ninian Smart's "Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs" (2000) applies the concept of dimensions to analyse how different cultures interpret the world through religious and philosophical lenses. Smart (2000) defines "worldviews" as overarching frameworks through which individuals and groups make sense of their experiences, values, and beliefs. By examining key dimensions, namely doctrinal, mythic, ritual, experiential, ethical, and social across diverse cultures, Smart (2000) highlights both their similarities and differences, offering a thorough understanding of how religions shape human experience and understanding.

Building on Smart's work, Neville (2001) commends his systematic approach in "Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs," which enables nuanced comparisons of religious traditions. However, Neville (2001) notes that the framework may occasionally oversimplify the complexities of religious practices. Similarly, Sepehri (2016) contrasts Smart's historical, comparative, and phenomenological approach with Sayyid Haidar Amuli's mystical model, which emphasises inner experience and intuitive understanding, offering deeper insights into the transcendental dimensions of religion.

Smolenkov (2022) further evaluates Smart's research programme, focusing on his principles of syncretistic realism and informed empathy. These principles aim to create a global, pluralistic framework for comparing religions and worldviews, though critiques persist regarding the model's perceived limitations. Meanwhile, studies like those by Nuttall (2014) and Barnes (2000) emphasise the educational value of Smart's dimensions, noting their effectiveness in designing curricula and fostering a non-confessional approach to religious education.

Further affirming its applicability, O'Grady (2005) defends Smart's continued relevance in religious education by emphasising how his ideas help bridge conceptual and experiential divides, and advocate for balanced pedagogical approaches that go beyond doctrine alone.

In summary, Smart's seven-dimensional model offers a comprehensive lens through which religion can be understood in both its internal and external expressions. By integrating doctrinal beliefs, ritual practices, mythic narratives, emotional experiences, ethical principles, social structures, and material culture, the model captures the multifaceted nature of religious life. This holistic approach allows scholars and educators to analyse religion not merely as a system of beliefs, but as a lived and dynamic reality that shapes personal identity and community life. While some critics point to limitations in capturing deeper mystical experiences, Smart's systematic and empathetic framework remains a valuable and adapTABLE tool for analysing religion across academic and practical contexts.

Building on earlier research by Abdullah et al. (2024) that examines afterlife beliefs in Buddhism and Islam, the present study is the first to apply Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion specifically to the study of eschatological beliefs. This novel application provides a structured, multidimensional framework for understanding how doctrinal, ritual, mythical, experiential, ethical, social, and material aspects shape these beliefs. The framework has proven effective in revealing the underlying factors that account for both the similarities and differences between Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a comparative analysis approach, employing QSR NVivo to identify common phrases or themes that represent the similarities and differences in eschatological beliefs between Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam. By exploring these similarities and differences, the study aimed to assess the common and contrasting dimensions in both religions. These detailed descriptions provide valuable insights and initial ideas for investigating the factors that contribute to these similarities and differences (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017).

To examine the factors underlying both similarities and differences, Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion served as the analytical framework. Smart's framework was selected due to its goal of promoting understanding and harmony among diverse religious traditions (Malhotra, 1999), making it particularly suiTABLE for analysing eschatological beliefs in Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam. An overview of Smart's dimensions of religion is presented in TABLE 1.

TABLE 1. Indicators of the dimensions of religion

Dimensions	Indicators
Doctrine	Systematic explanations of religious concepts, which may be monotheistic (centred around a single God), polytheistic (involving multiple deities and possibly lesser spirits), or atheistic (without any deities).
Ritual	Rituals can be either public or private. On one end of the spectrum, rituals involve external actions or physical activities, while on the other, they occur internally within a person. There are various types of rituals. For instance, a focused ritual is directed towards sacred beings, whereas a harnessing or yogic ritual is a form of self-discipline aimed at achieving higher states of consciousness. Rituals also include rites of passage, such as child dedications and memorial services. Music often plays a significant role in religious or cultural ceremonies, enriching rituals like worship, meditation, festivals, and other communal practices by fostering spiritual connection, setting the mood, or enhancing focus.
Mythic	Stories related to religion often address themes such as time, space, deities, death, and ethics. In contemporary culture, there is a tendency to focus on whether these stories are historically or scientifically accurate, rather than their deeper significance. However, religious narratives were not always evaluated by these criteria, as their importance often lies in the moral, spiritual, or symbolic meanings they convey.
Experiential	Religious experiences can be understood as having two distinct "poles": 1. At one pole, individuals feel the presence of something sacred and external to themselves. 2. At the other pole, individuals experience a sense of unity with everything in the universe. These are not exact opposites but instead reflect different dimensions of religious experience. Each of these poles evokes distinct types of religious emotions: 1. The first leads to feelings of "awe, reverence, fear, and humility." 2. The second evokes emotions like "peace, confidence, calm, and joy."
Ethical	This aspect of religion provides guidance on how to behave. Some religions prescribe specific laws or rules to follow, while others emphasise broader ethical principles. This dimension is shaped by the values of the surrounding culture and is often influenced by neighbouring religions.
Social	Who are the key "experts, leaders, charismatic FIGUREs, and holy individuals," as well as other religious specialists? (e.g., prophets, preachers, monks, wanderers, teachers, rulers, shamans, etc.). Who are the significant laypersons? Additionally, what type of religious social structure do these individuals participate in?
Material	This encompasses items and structures such as: "places of worship and ritual, statues and paintings, the attire and vestments of monks, books, amulets, graves, sacrificial animals, and similar objects."

Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam were selected for this study due to their significant presence among the Malaysian population, as noted by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022). This study employed purposive sampling, specifically targeting individuals who have reverted from Buddhism to Islam. These participants were chosen because they provide valuable firsthand insights into both religions. Similarly, Ninian Smart emphasises studying the experiences and intentions of religious participants, focusing on what religious acts mean to those who perform them, by providing a non-judgemental description of how religion is believed and practiced by its adherents (Malhotra, 1999).

Six Malaysian Chinese Buddhists were interviewed, representing a syncretic practice that blends Mahayana Buddhism with Taoism, Confucianism, ancestor veneration, and occasionally elements of Theravada Buddhism, common among the Chinese community. TABLE 2 outlines their background information. Research by Guest, Namey, and Chen (2020) indicates that six to seven interviews are typically sufficient to achieve thematic saturation in a homogeneous sample,

with six interviews often reaching around 80% saturation. Saturation, a crucial concept in qualitative research, occurs when additional data no longer reveals new themes (Tight, 2023). Thus, six interviews were deemed adequate for this study, as no new themes emerged, and the data collected was sufficient to draw meaningful conclusions.

TABLE 2. Participants' Background Information

Participants	Gender	Age	Year of Conversion
Participant 1	Female	40	2006
Participant 2	Female	80	1970
Participant 3	Female	56	2007
Participant 4	Male	50	2014
Participant 5	Female	76	1984
Participant 6	Female	57	1987

Each participant responded to a set of three open-ended questions designed to explore their understanding and experiences related to eschatological beliefs. These questions included:

1. Based on your experience, what are the differences between Buddhist and Islamic beliefs about life hereafter?
2. What similarities do you observe between Buddhist and Islamic views on life hereafter?
3. How do you navigate the differences in eschatological beliefs between the two religions, particularly in relation to family, relatives, and friends—for example, when dealing with the death of a loved one?

The statements of new Muslim reverts were analysed using thematic analysis, supported by QSR NVivo software, within the framework of Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion. The study followed the four-step thematic approach outlined by Naeem and Ozuem (2022). First, all interview data were transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed to uncover initial themes and key quotes that reflected participants' perspectives on eschatological beliefs. Second, recurring patterns and terms were identified and categorised as keywords representing their lived experiences. In the third step, these data segments were coded with short phrases or words to capture their core meanings and to simplify the information. Finally, themes were developed by grouping related codes, identifying patterns and relationships, and abstracting these into coherent descriptions that connect the research aim with the data. This process ensured that the resulting portrayal of beliefs emerged directly from participants' own narratives, maintaining both accuracy and authenticity while enabling a structured comparison between Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

FIGURE 1 illustrates the distribution of coding references across seven dimensions of religion related to eschatological beliefs in Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam, namely doctrine, ritual, mythic, experiential, ethical, social, and material. These dimensions help explain the similarities and differences in eschatological beliefs between the two religions.

The doctrinal dimension emerged as the most prominent theme in the findings ($n = 15$), revealing significant theological differences in eschatology. Malaysian Chinese Buddhism centres on rebirth and the karmic cycle, while Islam focuses on the Day of Judgement and eternal life in

either heaven or hell. Consistent with Gwynne (2018) and Tsomo (2006a), Buddhist belief holds that an individual's present circumstances are shaped by *karma*, the accumulated moral actions and intentions from previous lifetimes. In contrast, Islam teaches that resurrection (*al-Qiyamah*) will occur on the Day of Judgement (*Yawm al-Deen*), initiated by the angel Israfil's blowing of the trumpet (Al-Ashqar, 2005a). The Quran (3:185) contains numerous verses affirming the reality of life hereafter, describing the eternal abodes of paradise (*Jannah*) and hell (*Jahannam*), the resurrection, and divine judgement. These contrasting doctrines underscore the fundamentally different ways each religion conceptualises life after death.
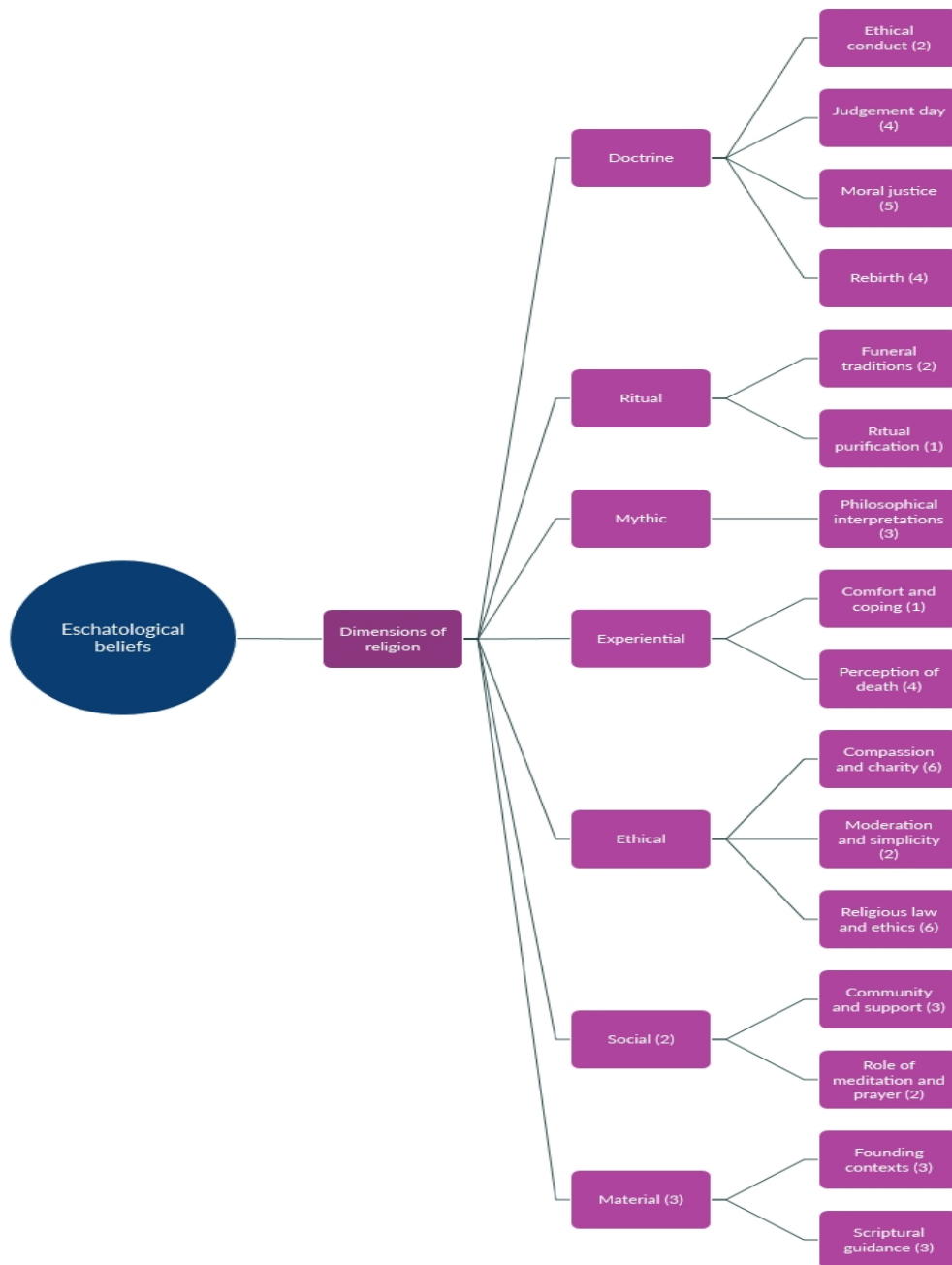

FIGURE 1. The frequency of the religious dimensions of Malaysian Chinese Buddhist and Islamic eschatological beliefs by coding references developed with NVivo

Participant 1 noted:

> "Buddhism emphasises the concept of rebirth after death, where one' actions in life determine their future existence. If a person has led a virtuous life, they will be reborn as a human in a prosperous and happy state, free from suffering. However, if their actions were negative, they will experience an unfavourable rebirth. In contrast, Islam teaches that all individuals will await the Day of Resurrection, when their deeds will be judged. The balance of their good and bad actions will determine their fate in the life hereafter."
>
> (Participant 1)

Although doctrinal teachings reveal significant differences, both traditions share common ground in their emphasis on moral justice and ethical conduct. As noted by Gwynne (2018) and Tsomo (2006a), Buddhism measures the quality of *karma* by the extent to which one overcomes or succumbs to the mental afflictions of ignorance, greed, and hatred. Similarly, Taylor (1968) observes that in Islam, the Quran embodies a profoundly ethical nature, offering moral teachings and eschatological guidance. Its central aim is to provide Muslims with a didactic framework that fosters consistent righteousness and moral conduct in preparation for the Day of Judgement (*Yawm al-Deen*).

> "All actions, both good and bad, will be measured and rewarded based on what a person has done during their lifetime."
>
> (Participant 6)

> "The commonality among religions is their emphasis on doing good. All religions share this principle, as none advocate for theft or wrongdoing."
>
> (Participant 3)

The ethical dimension ($n = 14$) emerged as the second most referenced theme, underscoring the significance of moral behaviour and its perceived influence on life hereafter. This aligns with Gwynne's (2018) observation that in Buddhist practice, the preparation of the body, choice of attire, and timing of the funeral are handled with flexibility, often accommodating the arrival of distant relatives. Gwynne (2018) further notes that funeral processions may include uplifting music to comfort mourners and generate additional positive *karma*. Participant excerpts illustrate this perspective:

> "We will still pay a visit if a non-Muslim relative passes away. I will contribute money to purchase refreshments."
>
> (Participant 3)
>
> "In Chinese tradition, when someone passes away, the funeral is seen as the final tribute in this world, so the deceased is dressed in elegant clothing."
>
> (Participant 4)

Despite sharing common ethical foundations, the two religions differ in religious laws and ethics. In Islam, *Shariah* law provides detailed prescriptions for conduct in life and preparation for the Hereafter. Eschatology occupies a central place in the Islamic faith and is regarded as one of the essential areas of knowledge for Muslims (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2009). By contrast, Buddhist ethics, as outlined by King (1994), are grounded in the Noble Eightfold Path, encompassing right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditative absorption or union.

"Respect the expressions of faith from non-Muslims. Show concern, but do not participate in non-Muslim religious ceremonies. It is important to be clear about your own identity as a Muslim, understanding what is accepTABLE and what is not within Islam."

(Participant 1)

"I visited (my parents' grave) because they are my family members, and it is important for us to understand the situation. As the eldest son, I recognise that in Chinese tradition, property is usually inherited by sons. However, I have chosen to divide it equally among all five siblings."

(Participant 4)

"I will not engage in any rituals that contradict our (Muslim) beliefs."

(Participant 5)

"I myself will not compromise in any practice of those who contradict Allah's law. "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion" (*lakum diinukum wa liyadiin*)."

(Participant 6)

The discussion reveals that while both traditions encourage virtuous living, the ultimate outcomes and mechanisms for assessing one's deeds diverge. Besides that, the value of modesty and simplicity in religious practices is evident in both religions, although expressed differently. Islam emphasises simple burials, while Buddhism emphasises merit-making:

"In Islam, historically, if someone passed away in Mecca, the body was also cremated. If death occurred during the journey back to Kuching, the remains were sometimes placed in the sea, as the trip from Mecca to Kuching took three months. This practice was allowed in cases of emergency, as Islam also requires that the body be buried promptly… In Buddhism, when someone dies at an old age, their passing is not mourned; instead, red clothes are worn to celebrate the happy occasion of having brought forth many generations. Conversely, if someone dies at a young age, black or white clothing is worn."

(Participant 2)

"When a Muslim passes away, the body is wrapped in a white cloth before burial."

(Participant 4)

The material dimension ($n = 9$) reflects the significance of physical objects and structures in each religion, such as places of worship, the shroud (*kain kafan*), and the Quran. The differences in funeral traditions highlight the unique material cultures of each faith. In Islam, funeral practices and beliefs about the Hereafter are deeply rooted in its sacred texts. As Taylor (1968) notes, the Quran functions as a moral compass, guiding believers towards piety, justice, and adherence to divine commandments.

"Each (religion) has its own place of worship."

(Participant 2)

"When a Muslim passes away, the body is wrapped in a white cloth (*kain kafan*) before burial. In contrast, the Chinese tend to focus more on worldly matters than the Hereafter when it comes to funeral practices."

(Participant 4)

"The Quran is relevant and applicable to current situations, with a single verse being adapTABLE to various circumstances. It emphasises the importance of acting justly, even when dealing with people of different religions."

(Participant 4)

"In Islam, we have a clear understanding of what heaven and hell are like, as described in the Quran. Regarding the concept of hell, it is understood that those condemned will face burning in hell."

(Participant 5)

Besides that, economic factors caused the fluidity of Chinese religious attitudes in Malaysia. In the 18th and 19th centuries, harsh working conditions led Chinese migrants in Malaysia to seek good fortune, immediate aid, and comfort through religion, prompting Buddhist monks and nuns to focus on chanting and rituals rather than transcendental concerns, a practice that still influences the development of Chinese religion today (Tan, 2013; Ong, 2005). This reliance on divine protection and blessings for worldly pursuits shaped the development of Chinese religion in Malaysia, as reflected in Participant's 4 statement. Religious syncretism is evident in the incorporation of multiple deities into local Buddhist practice, as reflected in Participant 2's reference to "many gods and goddesses." Tan (2013) further describes Chinese religion as complex, with its extensive pantheon of gods, venerated ancestors, and intricate ritual calendar. In contrast, Islam, which developed in the Arabian Peninsula, is grounded in strict monotheism and an unwavering emphasis on divine justice.

> "Before converting to Islam, I was primarily focused on making a profit. However, after embracing Islam, I no longer dwell on it as much, as I believe that Allah is just and all-powerful over everything."
>
> (Participant 4)

> "Buddhism includes many gods and goddesses, while Islam emphasises the worship of Allah, the One."
>
> (Participant 2)

> "We understand that Allah is always observing our actions."
>
> (Participant 5)

The social dimension (*n* = 7) highlights the roles of holy individuals and preachers in shaping eschatological beliefs, as well as the influence of community and family involvement. Participant 2 reflected on her experience of encouraging her father to embrace Islam:

> "Before my father passed away, I taught him to say "*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*." I remember pushing him in a wheelchair and stopping in front of the mosque, where he raised his hands in prayer. May my father be considered a follower of Islam. *In shaa Allah*."
>
> (Participant 2)

The social dimension highlights shared elements of communal practices and family involvement in both religions. Although it received fewer references, the findings suggest that social norms surrounding death and funeral rites shape how eschatological beliefs are expressed. Cheah et al. (2018) note that the endurance of such practices can be linked to Confucian ethics, particularly filial piety (*xiao*), which calls for unwavering respect, care, and obedience towards one's parents, as reflected in the participants' excerpts:

> "Respect the expressions of faith from non-Muslims and show genuine concern."
>
> (Participant 1)

> "Every three years, I rotate with my siblings to visit our parents' graves. We take the time to visit and clean the graves."
>
> (Participant 4)

> "I believe we have no issues (when it comes to the differences in eschatological beliefs) because, as far as I am concerned, during *Cheng Ming* (a traditional Chinese tomb-sweeping day in early April, when families clean ancestral graves, make offerings, and pay respects), I will accompany them to the grave and assist in any way I can."
>
> (Participant 5)

Additionally, prayer in Islam shapes how believers prepare for and view the life hereafter. *Salah*, one of the Five Pillars, is performed five times daily at prescribed times: *fajr* (dawn), *duhr* (noon), *asr* (afternoon), *maghrib* (evening), and *isha* (night) (Al-Bukhari, 1994). In Buddhism, devotional practices such as meditation, chanting sutras, or reciting mantras occur during morning or evening sessions, ceremonies, or retreats, but their frequency is flexible and determined by personal or communal choice (Kariyawasam, 1996).

> "Islam emphasises praying five times a day, while Buddhism also includes worship, but not at a frequency of five times."
>
> (Participant 2)

> "We have direct communication with Allah through our prayers."
>
> (Participant 5)

The experiential dimension (*n* = 5) reflects personal spiritual encounters with eschatology. Participant 5 described how her perspective on life after death transformed after embracing Islam. Similarly, Chin (2023) notes that a key psychological factor influencing conversion is the desire for a clear and positive identity that offers a coherent framework for understanding life. This motivation often arises when one's previous religion fails to fulfil that need.

> "For me, as a Muslim, the process of what happens in this world seems more logical and fair. I find it difficult to grasp the concepts of *karma* or reincarnation – being so good that one becomes like Buddha, which I assume is what they mean by reaching heaven. However, this idea does not resonate with me or help me understand how to approach life in the hereafter. In contrast, the Islamic perspective, which emphasises that there is no return to this world, feels more logical to me… For me, we can communicate directly with Allah and seek Allah's help without relying on the interpretation of intermediaries. In this way, life on Earth becomes easier, and we understand how to achieve success in this world."
>
> (Participant 5)

The experiential dimension also illustrates how perceptions of death shape psychological attitudes and practices associated with dying.

> "When I contemplate death, I wish to pass away in faith, at home, in my own space, rather than elsewhere. I constantly pray for good health and protection from harmful and dangerous viruses like COVID-19."
>
> (Participant 2)

> "It would be beneficial to share with non-Muslims about death and the afterlife, as I believe they would appreciate the awareness, especially among family members and siblings. However, many of us hesitate to discuss this because it is a sensitive topic. We certainly do not want to see our brothers, sisters, and family members in hell. This is why it is important to convey the message of Islam to them. I thank Allah for guiding me to Islam as a means to avoid the fires of hell. Since we cannot predict the time of our death, we should strive to prevent future regrets. I hope they have the opportunity to realise this."
>
> (Participant 3)

Beliefs regarding eschatology offer psychological reassurance and serve as a way to cope with death, as highlighted by Participant 5:

> "With the knowledge of what awaits us in the next world, Islam allows us to find peace of mind in our actions. As I mentioned, we have two guiding principles: understanding what will happen in the Hereafter and knowing the do's and don'ts. We can anticipate the consequences of not following Allah's commands or committing sins. This provides us with clear guidance on how to behave on Earth, reminding us that our relationship is directly between us and Allah."
>
> (Participant 5)

Lastly, the ritual and mythic dimensions were the least referenced (*n* = 3, respectively), suggesting that while specific rituals and mythological narratives play a role in both religions, they were not central to the discussions in this study. This may imply that participants were more focused on theological and ethical aspects rather than detailed ceremonial practices or mythological stories related to eschatology.

The ritual dimension of eschatological beliefs also reflects cultural traditions surrounding death, with funeral practices shaped by local customs. In traditional Chinese thought, influenced by Confucian values, maintaining the physical integrity of the deceased is vital, as the body is regarded as a gift from one's ancestors and should remain whole (Chin, 2023). This is reflected in Participant 2's observation that most of her ancestors were buried upon death:

> "In Buddhism, when my grandmother passed away, I had to perform rituals for her, which involved using a picture and her name. In contrast, Islam does not require such practices. Most of our ancestors were buried when they died because cremation is costly, often exceeding RM20,000. In Buddhism, remains are sometimes cremated if the individual is single and has no descendants, as there would be no one to worship them, and the temple would then perform prayers."
>
> (Participant 2)

The obligatory rites in Islamic funerals include bathing the body, shrouding it, performing the funeral prayer (*Salat al-Janazah*), and burying the deceased on their right side facing the Kaaba in Mecca (Ekpo & Ishaq, 2019), as reflected in Participant 2's statement. In Buddhism, bathing the body is also traditionally observed as a sign of respect and to prepare the deceased for the next life (Gwynne, 2018). However, as Participant 2 remarked, "in Buddhism, this is rarely practiced," reflecting the pragmatic approach to religion among many ordinary Chinese, where practices are adapted to cultural context rather than strictly adhered to (Tan, 2013):

> "In Islam, the remains must be washed and purified through ablution, whereas in Buddhism, this is rarely practiced. This emphasises the cleanliness of Islamic customs."
>
> (Participant 2)

The mythic dimension centres on philosophical interpretations, shaped over centuries by the insights of religious scholars and leaders. According to Tan (2013), the idea of modern Buddhism was brought by religious leaders of various traditions to revitalise Buddhism.

> "Buddha's teachings have many variations, influenced by the teachings of different monks. The scriptures can be difficult to comprehend, and adherents are not always taught how to understand them. I have read the texts, but it has only been a matter of reading without truly grasping their meaning."
>
> (Participant 1)

> "(With the knowledge of what awaits us in the next world); This ensures that we will not be deceived or misled by what monks or intermediaries say. For instance, in Buddhism, individuals may consult a medium by shaking sticks at the temple. When the sticks fall, they bring them to the medium for interpretation regarding their future and what may happen next."
>
> (Participant 5)

The findings highlight that doctrinal and ethical dimensions play a central role in shaping eschatological beliefs in Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam, while the material, social, and experiential dimensions provide additional context. Rituals and myths, although important, received less attention, with the study's focus on theological and moral frameworks.
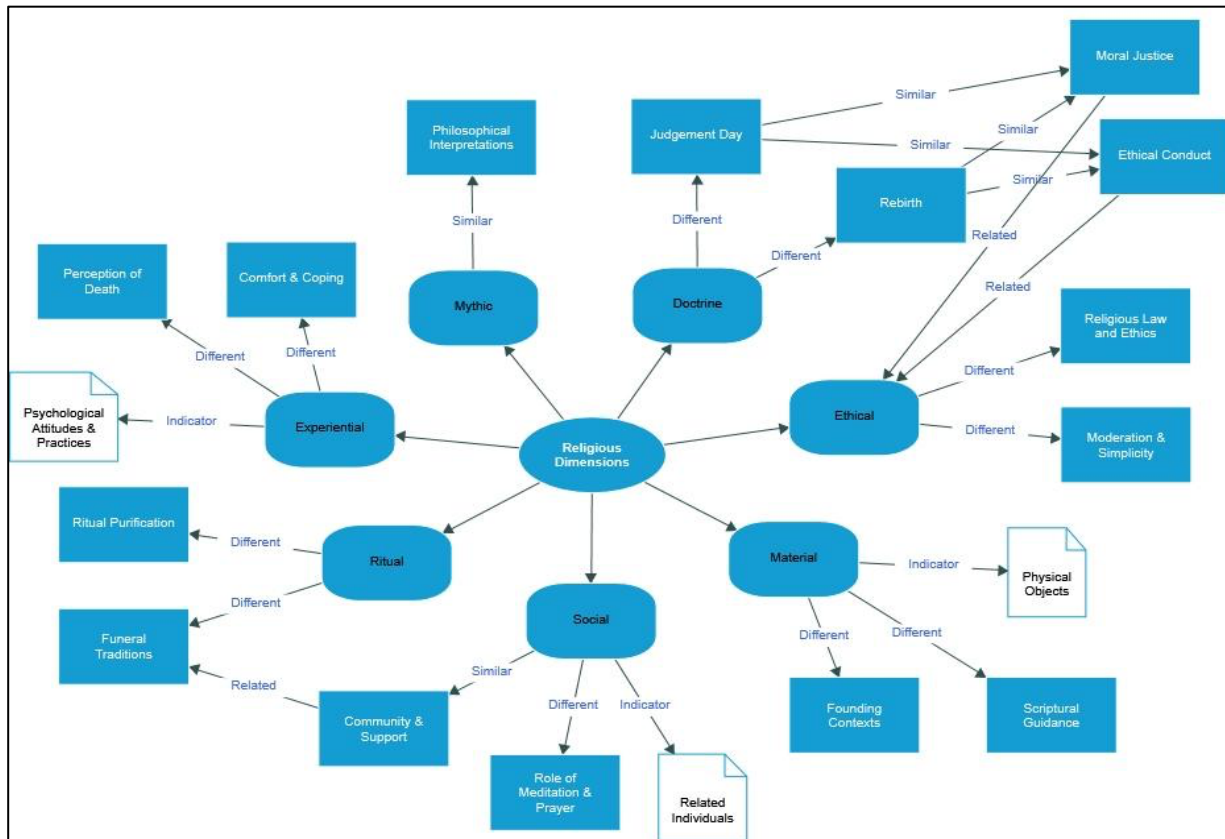
FIGURE 2. Thematic representation of eschatological beliefs in Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam across seven religious dimensions developed with NVivo

FIGURE 2 presents a thematic analysis of eschatological beliefs in Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam across the seven religious dimensions. No table similarities are found in the doctrinal dimension, particularly in moral justice and ethical conduct, where both religions emphasise the ethical implications of behaviour and its consequences in the life hereafter. These doctrinal elements connect to the ethical dimension, underscoring the significance of moral actions. The social dimension also highlights the role of community and support, particularly in death-related rituals (ritual dimension), reflecting both traditions' emphasis on communal involvement in funeral practices.

However, key differences emerge in specific beliefs, such as the interpretation of Judgement Day in Islam and the concept of rebirth in Buddhism. These distinctions extend to ritual practices (ritual dimension), including purification rites and funeral traditions, where each religion exhibits unique customs. The analysis also identifies areas of alignment where Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam share foundational ideas but differ in their specific teachings, such as the concept of rebirth and various funeral practices. Ethical values (ethical dimension) like moderation and simplicity show divergence, as do material elements (material dimension) like scriptural guidance and founding context. Overall, the analysis highlights both shared and distinct beliefs about the Hereafter, with areas of alignment revealing similarities in purpose but differences in practice. This perspective is reinforced by Mohd Khalli, Sintang, and Prasojo's (2025) findings, which show that mixed-faith families can still be managed effectively despite religious differences.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the diversity of eschatological beliefs in Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam, as demonstrated by the distribution of coding references across seven religious dimensions. The fundamental theological differences are evident, that is, Malaysian Chinese Buddhism emphasises rebirth and the karmic cycle, while Islam centres on the Day of Judgement and eternal life, reflecting each faith's unique understanding of existence beyond death. Despite these distinctions, the ethical dimension reveals significant similarities, with both religions advocating for moral conduct, compassion, and charity in preparation for the Hereafter. This shared emphasis on virtuous living fosters common ground for interfaith dialogue regarding ethical values.

FIGURE 2 supports this, presenting a thematic analysis where similarities in the doctrinal dimension, particularly in moral justice and ethical conduct, show how both religions connect these concepts to ethical behaviour and eschatological consequences. The social and ritual dimensions further highlight the communal nature of death-related practices, with both traditions emphasising community roles in funeral rituals. However, key differences emerge, particularly in Islam's focus on Judgement Day and Malaysian Chinese Buddhism's belief in rebirth, which extend into distinct purification rites and funeral traditions.

Additionally, the material and social dimensions illustrate how cultural contexts shape funeral practices and eschatological beliefs. Islamic simple burials contrast with Malaysian Chinese Buddhist merit-making rituals, reflecting the influence of local traditions and the adaptability of religious expressions. The experiential dimension shows that individual perceptions of death provide psychological reassurance, as eschatological beliefs shape attitudes towards mortality and fulfil a universal human need for comfort. While the ritual and mythic dimensions received fewer references, they still underscore the importance of specific rituals and narratives in shaping eschatological beliefs.

In conclusion, this study highlights the doctrinal differences between Malaysian Chinese Buddhism and Islam regarding eschatological beliefs, while also pointing to shared ethical foundations that encourage virtuous living. The interplay of cultural traditions and individual experiences adds depth to these beliefs, enriching the appreciation of diverse religious perspectives on life and death.

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