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The Reality and the Philosophy of “Departing from the World”

What is the reality of death? What is the philosophy of life and death? For answering these questions, first of all, we must clarify our perception regarding death, in other words, at the beginning we must see how exactly death is and how we must visualize it.

Usually, most of the people are alarmed and fearful upon hearing the word 'death', and to them, death appears dreadful and terrifying, whereas, according to the Islamic ideology, this terminology or this subject has a different appearance and can be perceived in a different way. Basically it can be said that those who fear death, consider it to be a negative entity. According to this insight, death is an end of life and a moment of everlasting separation of man with his life. They believe that with death, the compounded substances of the body suffer a breakdown and return to nature and man too, is nothing except this very broken-down body. Hence, with death, everything ends with no hope remaining!!

Indeed, with this view and insight, death is darker and more dreadful than every other thing and perhaps, no calamity, pain, sorrow and tragedy can be greater and more painful than the tragedy of death, because death would mean the burial of all the desires, hopes, longings and in short, the termination of all things for man--- that man who loved life and eternity very dearly.

Anyway, Islam does not possess such a dark and fear-instilling view of death because according to the Islamic view, death is a positive entity. The moment of death is a moment of rebirth of man and a moment of his hastening out from a confined region of this world into a world, which is wide, expansive and rapturous. A world, wherein, man is not troubled by anxieties, sorrows and the material and natural limitations. Of course, those who have habituated themselves to worries and limitations must free themselves of such habits. In other words, becoming free from the clutches of mother nature entails some transient hardships but after that, in place of a confined and dark place, man is taken into a world which is extensive, infinite and full of luminosity and happiness.

According to this view, death is not annihilation but is inherent fallout of one stage of progress and

development of man. Similar to an infant in the womb of the mother, which, after reaching a particular stage of its development, just should not and cannot stay in the confined and dark womb of the mother and obtain nourishment from her blood, but must come out and continue its development in a more extensive world. Similarly, after a certain period, he should attain freedom from the confined and limited world of nature and hasten to another world, which is appropriate for his eternity-desiring soul.

In short, it is according to this view that life of man becomes pleasant and sweet and his death too, not only does not become a means of sorrow but also is regarded as an escape from the misfortunes, sorrows and limitations. And if his death is like the death of the champions and by his own choice and on the path of Truth and as a result, can be called martyrdom, then surely it will be more pleasant and more sweet, and in the moment of death and departure from the world he shall experience such pleasure that only the very righteous and the martyrs on the path of virtue and piety have the knowledge of, and these are the very people who can taste this pleasure. This is because, those pleasures cannot be described and if ever described, does not possess the same pleasure (which is gained by experiencing it).

The reality of death, according to the Holy Qur'an¹, as was previously referred, is 'Tawaffa' and not 'Faut'. 'Tawaffa' means the angels commissioned to seize the soul of man, seize it and release it from the captivity of the body and then transfer it to another world, towards his Lord.

Philosophy of Death

Why is it that man is created, and then after a certain period of time, in which he lives in this world, departs from it? If death is total annihilation and man after death becomes totally non-existent, this question is propounded with greater seriousness, meaning that, according to this assumption, the probability of the creation of man being futile and the life being vain and empty increases. But, in the event that we do not consider death to be a 'negative entity' and define it to be a transfer or a renewed birth, still the question arises and seeks its answer as to why exactly do we come into the world and why exactly do we get transferred from it?

This very question can be expressed in one of the two possible ways:

i) What aim did Allah or the Agent possess in creating His creations, or in other words, what benefit does He wish to avail of by the life and death of man and other creations?

If the question is put up in this form, it is necessary to state that the question and its answer is not related to our discussion and it must be deliberated in a discussion related and appropriate to it. All we can say is that Allah is an Independent Entity, and He avails of no benefit as a result of His creating His creations. Hence, the exact answer for "Then why did He create?" is related to profound, Gnostic topics.

ii) What purpose did Allah or the Agent have for his action? In other words, Allah created His creations and among them man, that they travel along which path and to where they reach or what goal they

follow? If the above question is expressed in this manner, we must say that according to the Qur'anic verse, Allah created the heavens and the creations so that they recognize Allah and worship Him:

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِي

“And I have not created the jinn and the men except that they worship me.” 2

In the meaning that, all the creations must, in their journey for perfection, reach a stage that they can, by means of man, become a mirror for the Divine Attributes, because it is in this stage that the worship and cognition of Allah can reach a stage which is befitting it.

In short, Allah created His creations and amongst them, man so that finally they reach the level of cognition of Allah and can understand His Beautiful Attributes and manifest them within themselves, because the real worship and cognizance of Allah can take the creation and man to a position and status, the specialties and the grandness of which must be referred to in gnostical topics.

So according to this view, the philosophy of life and death, which are part of the creation of Allah, become clear. The life and death and basically, the changes in the material world and the transfer from one stage of life to another of it or the transfer from one world into another world, all of these play a part in the journey of man and the creations towards perfection. Such changes or the ups and downs must be present, in the light of which, people can be tested, and the pure are separated from the unpure. This is what, the Holy Qur'an says:

الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْغَفُورُ

“Who created death and life that He may try you - which of you is best in deeds; and He is Mighty and Forgiving.” 3

According to this verse, firstly, both life and death are part of the creation of Allah. Thus, death is a thing which Allah has created and hence cannot be a 'negative entity', because a negative entity is not capable of being created.

Secondly, tests and trials are considered to be the philosophy of the creation of life and death so that it can be known who is the most righteous.

Of course, it should be known that this “ test “ is not in its literal meaning that takes place on an appointed time and is taken from one particular group or according to a pre-determined subject-matter,

but it possesses a very wide meaning. In other words, the tests and trials here, encompass all the moments of the life and death of man, his ups and downs during the span of his entire life, even during his transfer into the next world and after that too. Basically, these changes and transfers prepare the ground for the development and progress of man. Similar to sportsmen, for whom, not only their competition is a trial and a test, but the pre-competition training is also considered as a form of test and these phasic trials and tests, help to prepare them for the original competition. Life and death and the transfer of man from one world to another world and also the bounties and at times the problems of life, according to the verses of the Holy Qur'an, are trials and tests for man which prepare him, stage by stage, for attaining his ultimate objective.

'Death'- according to the Holy Qur'an

In the Holy Qur'an, interesting and varied interpretations have been made, regarding death, the study of all the aspects of which, shall become very elaborate, hence we suffice by mentioning a few of the beautiful and expressive interpretations, which have appeared in some of the verses.

1. Meeting with Allah

The Holy Qur'an, in the last verse of the Surah Kahf, has expressed death as a meeting with Allah and says:

فَمَنْ كَانَ يَرْجُوا لِقَاءَ رَبِّهِ فَلْيَعْمَلْ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا وَلَا يُشْرِكْ بِعِبَادَةِ رَبِّهِ أَحَدًا

“So whoever desires to meet his Lord, he should do good deeds and not associate anyone in the worship of his Lord.”⁴

2. Return to Allah

Another interpretation which the Holy Qur'an has and which makes clear the reality of death, is “return to Allah”. However, the Islamic philosophers, regarding the manner of the creation of the entities (and amongst them, man) by Allah and after then, their return towards Allah, have subtle, profound and interesting theories. The Holy Qur'an says:

إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

“Verily, we are Allah's and verily to Him shall we return.”⁵

3. Seizing of the Soul

One of the beautiful interpretations of the Holy Qur'an in the matter of death is (توفى). This word means seizing a thing in its entirety. Hence, according to the verse under consideration, the reality of death is that the angels commissioned to take the soul, seize the entire personality of man at the time of death, and remove it from the captivity of the body. They, then carry it to the Divine Presence:

قُلْ يَتَوَفَّاكُمْ مَلَكُ الْمَوْتِ الَّذِي وُكِّلَ بِكُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ تُرْجَعُونَ

“Say: the Angel of Death who is given charge of you shall cause you to die, then to your Lord you shall be brought back.”⁶

'Death' - according to the Traditions

The traditions also contain beautiful, subtle, instructive and interesting interpretations regarding death, some which are mentioned.

1. The bridge of crossing

In some of the traditions, death has been referred to as a bridge, over which people, at the time of transfer from this world to the other world, shall cross and reach their goal, which is the other world. For example, Imam Husayn (‘a) on the day of ‘Ashura, speaking to his loyal companions said:

صبراً بنى الكرام فما الموت الاقنطرة تعبر بكم عن البؤس و الضراء الى الجنان
الواسعه

“Remain firm, O sons of noble people, because death is just a bridge which will cross you and transfer you from discomforts and troubles, into the extensive gardens of paradise. So which of you does not desire his freedom from prison and entering into a castle. Of course, death for your enemies is like their being transferred from a palace and a castle into prison and torture.”⁷

2. Removal of clothes

In some of the traditions, death has been compared to clothes, which of course differs, with respect to a believer and an unbeliever. Death, for a believer is like dirty clothes, which he removes and frees himself from its dirtiness and unpleasant odor, whereas, death with respect to an unbeliever is also like clothes, but beautiful, costly and pleasant-smelling, which he must remove from his body at the time of transfer

to the other world.⁸

3. Sleep

In some other traditions, death has been compared to sleep, in which the soul goes out of the body. The only fundamental difference between sleep and death is that the coming out of the soul from the body, at the time of sleep, is only for a short period of time. In addition, the connection between the body and the soul is not completely severed. On the other hand, researches pertaining to the soul has proved shown that the soul maintains a connection with the body in a very special manner. While, at the time of death and after that, the severance of this connection is more complete than that during sleep, although, after death too, a weak connection does exist for a certain period.

Another point is that the coming out of the soul at the time of death continues up to the Universal Resurrection. This tradition says:

قيل لعليّ بن الحسين (عليه السلام) ما الموت؟ قال للمؤمن كنز ثياب و سخة
قمله و فكّ قيود و اغلال ثقيله و الاستبدال بافخر الثيات و اطيبها روائح و
اوطىء المراكب و آنس المنازل و للكافر كخلع ثياب فاخره...

“Imam Muhammad Baqir (a’) was questioned as to what is death? The Imam (‘a) replied “ Death is the very same sleep that comes to you every night. However this is a sleep, which is very long, and man shall not wake up from it until the Day of Judgement. Thus one who sees different types of pleasure and happiness in his sleep over which he, (in his wakefulness) has no power and similarly he sees the different types of fear–instilling things, while he has no power over them. Thus, how is the state of happiness and fear in the sleep? (The affairs shall be similarly so in the state of death too). This is death. So be ready and prepared for it.”⁹

1. Sajdah (32):11

2. Zariyat (51):56

Of course, in our traditions, this worship has been compared to recognition of Allah, because worship with awareness is a consequence of recognition

3. Mulk (67):2

4. Kahf (18):110.

5. Baqarah (2):156

6. Sajdah (32):11

7. Ma’anil Akhbar, Pg. 289

8. Ma’anil Akhbar, Pg. 289

9. Ma’anil Akhbar, Pg. 289

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