

# Muslim perspectives on ‘end of life’

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It is a great pleasure and an honour to be invited to such an august gathering. Let me begin by expressing a deeply felt respect that people have for the wonderful work you do in the labs, on the wards and in your clinics.

My own experience of the health profession is a very positive one. Three years ago when my wife was treated at the City Hospital I was so impressed with the consultants diligence and nurses care that I did a ‘Thought for the Day’ on BBC Radio. Acknowledging the excellent service provided by your profession.

As doctors you are in the business of saving lives, preventing illnesses and removing pain and sufferings from patients. These are the most noble human activities. The Quran teaches that ‘Whoever saves a single life it is as though he has saved entire humanity’. I am also grateful to the organisers for inviting me to this conference for another important reason. That is that in a world where the spectre of extremism whether it is religious, political or economic become a fact of life today there is the danger of regarding the evil actions of a few as representing the entire community. In the case of Muslims there has been a lot of misunderstandings and distorted portrayals of its core values. Based on ignorance they fuel hatred and fear – a phenomenon known as Islamophobia. So as the President of the Christian Muslim Forum – an organisation dedicated to building bridges and strong relationship between the two great traditions – for me this is an ideal spiritual and intellectual space for mutual understanding.

Let me now turn to my topic ‘Muslim perspectives of end of life’. My paper is an intense theological discussion based on traditional sources and scriptural reasoning.

It is very interesting that you have used the term, ‘end of life’. According to the structure of Muslim cosmos there is no ‘end of life’. Merely a transition, from one realm of existence to another. Muslims believe like Christians and Jews that God created our souls when he created Adam and Eve. Hundred and twenty days after the conception the soul enters the foetus and human life begins. From birth to the time of death is referred to as the worldly life. This is the probationary period a time of preparation for the life hereafter by carrying out the Divine will. Death therefore marks the return once more to realm of souls. And it is interesting that Muslim scholars often use this term ‘return’ signifying that they have already been there. The Quran says,

“ He created you the first time, and unto Him you shall be taken back” (41:21)

That all things or all affairs are taken back to God is frequent Quranic refrain. Here are three other basic beliefs of a Muslim, which will help us to understand the Muslim perspectives on suffering and death. They are:

Muslims beliefs about Life and Death

- “ The creator of the universe is God, the one the eternal, the all knowing, all-powerful the most compassionate”.
- “A person dies at his appointed time. Death is a state of the deceased and one of God’s creation”.
- Man consists of body and soul; the body is the physical entity whilst the soul is a spiritual reality and non-material. The two are distinctly different.

Suyuti a great fifteen-century theologian says: “Death is not annihilation and mere extinction but the separation of attachment of the soul from the body, and change of state and the transportation from one house to another” (Sharh u Sudoor). A famous quote about death is “Death is the bridge that unites the lover with his/her beloved”.

## What happens after death?

The Prophet describes the grave as “either a pit of hellfire or a garden of heaven”. The souls of righteous people will be in bellies of green birds taking them from place to place in paradise then resting under the Divine throne (Muslim).

When one of the disciples died the Prophet prayed for him in these words: “ O Lord! Make his grave spacious for him and brighten it” (Muslim).

A tenth century Muslim scholar Ibn Abi Adunya says, “When a righteous person dies, a bed from paradise is brought for him and he is told to sleep cheerfully and comfortably, for the Lord is happy with you and then his grave is opened for him and he enjoys its beauty smells its fragrance, his prayers, devotions and good deeds are his companions until the day of judgement” (Shortening long hopes).

These beliefs form the mental framework of a Muslim, these beliefs which are deeply ingrained in mind help to shape a particular attitude to life and death. Death is not viewed as a macabre, gruesome and draconian punishment. It is not the end but anew beginning. Some even regard it as a divine gift. The benefit of having this kind of attitude to death is it makes it easier for one to face it.

Death therefore is not a bizarre happening but one of the laws of nature like gravity, theories of dynamics and electromagnetism. It is never “ untimely” since death only comes at the fixed time.

“For every person is a fixed time; when that comes it cannot be delayed a moment or come earlier” (7:34)

Upon hearing the news of someone’s death the immediate response of a Muslim is, “To God we belong and to him we are returning” (2:1), or very simply this is the divine will.

This submission to the Divine will and surrendering helps the Muslim not to fight the natural process but accept it. This is beautifully expressed in the funeral prayer of the child. The Parents say, “O Lord! Make her a provision, a reward and a treasure for us in the hereafter, make her our intercessor whose intercession is acceptable”. This prayer explains the Muslim attitude of being the trustees and caretakers of children and our wealth. We are not the owner for God is the absolute owner. Muslims believe that when a child dies he/she will go straight to paradise – because children are born pure and sinless. This is the opposite of the Christian belief of inheritance of original sin.

There are two ways of dealing with the problem of suffering and death: One is to simply avoid it and try to ignore it, by not thinking about it. The second approach is to be fully aware of it and face up to it. Muslims are constantly advised to remember death and thereby be ever ready to meet death cheerfully.

The deep searching question is: Is there human destiny given by God beyond this worldly life? The question for a Muslim like any other believer is what is that destiny? What is the divine purpose? Our answer is that man is khalifatullah the vicegerent of God on earth the successor on earth. The faith in an afterlife provides hope in divine intervention to recreate the world making it an eternal home for the righteous people. However this does not guarantee a blissful outcome for all, either in this world or in the world to come.

The idea of an eternal blissful life for the righteous after the day of judgement and divine proximity in paradise or separation and punishment in hell are basic articles of Islamic faith. The belief in the afterlife offers a clear meaning and purpose to human life. In this perspective every individual is the representative of Allah the almighty. This representative of God has been endowed with Divine attributes like knowledge capability, mercy and forgiveness. His mission is to acquire the divine colour Sibhgatallah. Since man has been created with 'free will' he is free to submit to his Lord or rebel against him he therefore will be held accountable on the day of judgement. The inevitability of either bliss or punishment, unpalatable as it may seem to modern man, nevertheless gives mankind dignity that makes them and the way they lead their lives significant. Life therefore becomes a test, a probationary period with a clear purpose and goal.

## **The Story of Job**

Let me now turn to question of bearing undeserved suffering lets begin with the famous story of Job. Job is not only an Old Testament figure but also a legendary figure in Muslim history. The patience of Job is proverbial amongst Muslims. Here is the story of Job's suffering:

“ Satan speaking to God claims that Job who is faithful to God in prosperity will not be faithful when he faces adversity. God allows Satan to test Job by destroying his property, by killing his livestock and members of his family and then afflicting him with painful and repellent diseases, so that all apart from his wife abandon him. Satan attempts to make Job waver in his faithfulness to God through his wife. Playing on her pity for him in his misery, he persuades her to urge him to sacrifice a child to Satan. Job realises that she has allowed herself to be taken in by Satan. He swears an oath to punish her with a hundred lashes if he recovers. In anguish he cries out to God, “ Satan has indeed touched me with hardship and pain” (5:41).

Job's faith shines out and despite this most difficult test he does not question God's wisdom and finally God hears him, relieves him of his illness, with a spring of water. He restores to him his family and livestock. Once again Job is healthy, wealthy and a prosperous man. God makes Job's patience and endurance a lesson for “ those with understanding”. The closing statement is a Divine accolade for the patient Job “We found him patient how excellent a servant! He was constantly turned towards us” (5:44). For Muslims this story clearly demonstrates that life is a big test and no one is spared this test, even God's beloved and devoted servants are not let off the hook!

The Question: Why Does God afflict us? Why take my child away from me? Why me? Are natural questions. The Muslims have tried to explain these in a variety of ways. Here I have selected some common responses to this perennial enigma.

## **Life is a big test**

This is one of the frequent recurring themes of the Quran. Repeated many times to emphasize the fact that a Muslim must reconcile himself with that fact straight away, and not waste time commiserating on the loss. The Quran teaches;

“ You shall certainly be tested with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits of your toil but give good news to those who patiently persevere, who say when afflicted by a calamity, To God we belong and to him is our return” (Al-Baqarah: 155).

We may well ask what is the point of God testing mankind? Tests are inevitable part of our lives. The object of life therefore is not to avoid or deny its tests rather courageously face them and ultimately pass them with flying colours. The Quran again asks, “Do people think that they will be left alone because they say, “We believe and will not be tested. And we indeed tested those before them” (Ankabut: 2). Thus making it clear that worldly life will not be a rose garden, a smooth ride but quite bumpy one!

Muslim sages have tried to rationalize these tests and trials of life by looking at them as a means of our personal growth and development. They make us strong; they make us patient and increase the capacity of enduring.

“ Many people think that tests from God are a sign of Divine wrath. However, Muslims believe that the trials afflicting us can be signs of His Love. The Messenger said, “ When God loves people, He tests them”. Whoever is content will have divine pleasure and whoever is displeased will have Divine wrath”. (Tirmidhi). When we are afflicted and suffering there are two possible ways of responding: One we become fearful, anxious and frustrated and even despair and become depressed. The second is that we will become stronger and capable of dealing with it.

These teachings spur and motivate Muslims to boldly face the tests and challenges of life and to remain content with Divine will. Thus the sufferings are not meaningless but means for bettering ourselves. Echoing the words of napoleon ‘victory belongs to the most persevering’.

## **Conclusion**

Can this religious philosophical framework adequately explain the death of a child to a bereaved mother?

My answer is yes. Muslims will be just as sad to lose their loved one as anyone else, however, they would not be hysterical or have suicidal despair. The attitude is one of truthful acceptance. Such reasoning coupled with deep faith in God’s benevolence does help many from despair. It gives meaning to life and shows its mysterious but under the control of all-powerful Lord.

Muslims put their trust in God, they completely rely on him. This helps them to surrender to the Divine will and thereby accept dying as a natural process. This opens up a new relationship between man and God and therefore one does not struggle against death. The Islamic prayers, the stories of the past great teachers who went through hardships are extremely consoling. This gives courage and confidence in oneself.

Thus the whole experience of dying, fear, sadness and anger can be turned into positive experience by these scriptural teachings and scriptural reasoning.

In order to prepare this peculiar and strong mental framework towards death and suffering Islam has laid a great emphasis on two things: Patience and hope. These are two of the most important tools in the believers toolkit, which make possible living a happy and content life.