

Beyond Death

An Islamic concept of heaven

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THE ISLAMIC CONCEPTION OF HEAVEN

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At the very outset it seems necessary to make a few remarks concerning the function of philosophy with regard to this problem. The problem is of a transcendental nature and directly pertains to our religious consciousness. That heaven is real and exists cannot be revealed to our senses. But should it for that reason be denied by philosophy? No. Philosophy must take its data from various forms of human consciousness - from the scientific consciousness, from the artistic consciousness, from the moral consciousness - so also from the religious consciousness. It is not the function of philosophy to question their facts because they alone are its data. Its function is rather "to grasp their elements conceptually and to combine them into a system".^{1[1]}

We thank and praise Him (Allah) and invoke the blessing of Allah on His messenger, our master Muhammad, the last of all the prophets.

Life after death and hence heaven and hell are data given to us by the religious consciousness. The business of philosophy is to understand them-to evaluate them.

My task at the present occasion is to present the Qur'aanic conception of heaven for it is this conception, which seems to me to be the most reasonable. But before doing so it seems necessary to give briefly the views of the Qur'aan concerning the various stages of human life. The following verses from that book are highly instructive in this connection:

"(Those) who shall inherit the heaven, they shall abide therein.

"And certainly we created man of an extract of clay;^{2[2]}

^{1[1]} Realism. S. Z. Hasan, p. 2.

^{2[2]} Cf. another verse of the Qur'an: The 17th Sura, Nuh, Verse 17:
"And Allah brought you forth from the earth as a growth

Then We placed him as (a drop of) sperm in a place of rest, firmly fixed;

Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood;

then of that clot We made a (foetus) lump;

then We made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh;
then We developed out of it another creature. So blessed be Allah, the Best to create!

Then after that you will most surely die.

"Then surely on the day of resurrection you shall be raised.

And We have made, above you, seven tracts; and We are never unmindful of (Our) Creation.

And We send down water from the sky according to (due) measure, and We cause it to soak in the soil; and We certainly are able to drain it off (with ease).

"Then We cause to grow thereby gardens of palm trees and grapes for you; you have in them many fruits and from them do ye eat."

These verses give us in brief the whole process of human evolution as also the part played by religion in human life. Man arises out of the earth. The earthly matter passes through several stages of evolution before it finds its sublimation in the human form. It takes the form of the life-germ, which, though it is microscopic in size, is the repository of the physical, intellectual and moral features of man. The germ grows and becomes man. In a grown-up man it is the physical aspect, which is more usually and more thoroughly realized. But the human frame is only a vehicle for the soul to develop itself. The soul has to evolve itself from the crude form of simple consciousness to a certain stage of spirituality. This evolution can be worked out only through the cultivation of our faculties. The Qur'aan uses the word falah for this cultivation. Falah literally means the furrowing out of the latent faculties. Thus the peasant who tills the land and brings to surface the innumerable treasures of the earth is called fellah in Arabic. Man ought to act similarly. His soul possesses infinite potentialities of advancement. He has to till the field of the depths of his soul and

bring out his latent faculties. But just as the ordinary peasant needs rain for his crop, so man too needs a rain. That rain comes from God in the form of Revelation and is given to humanity through the medium of Prophets. Man should become a receptacle for this spiritual rain if he wishes to reap a good harvest. Without it the field of human soul would become sterile and subject to decay.

This has been further pointed out in the Holy Qur'aan, the 91st Sura, asShams Verse 7 to 10

"Consider the soul and Him who made it perfect, And He enlightened it as to wrong and right;. Successful indeed is he who purifies it and sorrow will indeed be his portion who corrupts it."

Thus the Qur'aan regards man as an evolutionary being who has been created of the goodliest fibre and possesses the highest capacities of making spiritual progress. In fact, the very first attribute of God mentioned in the opening verse of the Holy Qur'aan is Rabb, i.e. He who leads His creatures through one stage after another until they attain perfection.

Our present life is a preparation. It is necessary to work out our faculties and bring them up to a certain stage of evolution in our earthly sojourn (stop-over or stay). Then alone shall we be fit for progress in the life after death.

Our every action in this life has a hereafter. It creates a permanent impression on the soul. When the soul departs from the body, it leaves this body for good. It then adopts another kind of body. The great Muslim philosopher and divine, Shah Waliullah, calls it Nusma³[3] This Nusma is perhaps what is spoken of by Sir Oliver Lodge as ectoplasm. He says: "Exudation (secretion) of a strange white evanescent (changing) dough like substance, which has been photographed by scientific enquirers in different stages of evolution, and which shapes itself into parts or whole of the body, beginning in a putty-like mould, and ending in a semblance (taking on a form). This is the spiritual body that contains the Spirit and yet is distinct from the ordinary body."³[3]

³[3] [The Mystical Message, P. 601](#)

although it commenced its life with the same potentialities as the ripe one. Similarly if we have not attained a certain stage of spiritual development in our earthly life, we cannot enter the heavenly life.

Now, after departing from the physical body, the soul does not enter its life of heaven or hell at once. It remains suspended in the ethereal (beyond the earthly) world called Barzakh in Islam. Here its faculties remain in abeyance, though intact, and this state will continue till the hour of resurrection when it will be sent to either heaven or hell. But the impressions, which it has acquired on earth through its actions, come to the surface. Character being the crystallization of one's thoughts "the thoughts that he or she was thinking in this world take their shape - virtuous thoughts take happy shapes, and wicked thoughts take shapes of calamities according to what he believed in this world."⁴[4]

The Qur'aan declares that a day will come when the solar system will be destroyed which will result in ending the present conditions of life totally. God will then bring into existence new heavens and a new earth as the Holy Qur'aan says in the 14th Sura, Ibrahim, Verse 48:

On the day when the earth shall be changed into a different earth, and the heavens (as well), and they shall come before Allah, the One, the Supreme

This new world will have an affinity with the body of the soul, which will be different from the one that it had on earth. This new body has been described in the Qur'aan as "new creation".⁵[5] It has been further stated to take the colour of our actions on earth. The Holy Qur'aan says in The 3rd Sura, al-i-Imraan, Verse 106 and 107:

⁴[4] Keemiya-i-Sa'adat: Imam Ghazzali.

⁵[5] Holy Qur'aan 34th Sura, Saba, Verse 7

(Some) faces shall turn bright and (some) faces shall turn dark, then as to those whose faces shall turn dark (it will be said): Did you disbelieve after believing? Taste therefore the punishment because you disbelieved. And as to those whose faces turn bright they shall be in Allah's mercy; in it they shall abide.

Now, the souls, which are suffering from spiritual diseases and do not come up to a certain standard will be sent to a spiritual hospital called hell. The Qur'aan has to say much on the subject but to go into details would be a long digression. Suffice it to say that hell will be one of the stages in the process of evolution for the soul that has not utilized the opportunities provided to it in its earthly sojourn and has stunted its faculties and got diseased and corrupted. After cure it shall come out of that state and shall start on its evolutionary journey. Imam Bukhari records a tradition of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his family) to this effect:6[6]

When the sinners shall have attained tahzib and tanqiyah, they will be allowed to enter heaven.

The words tahzib and tanqiyah are highly meaningful spoken"

Tahzib means the cutting off of the branches of a tree so that the tree may enjoy a more luxuriant growth; and tanqiyah means the separating of the corrupt and the corruptible parts from a thing in order to purify it completely.

Having briefly viewed the nature of hell, let us come to the heavenly life. The souls, which attain the required standard of perfection, will start on their evolutionary journey anew in the next world. They will carry impressions of their actions done on earth. These impressions will, because of rightness of the actions, enclothe the soul in a garb of indefinable happiness- "indefinable" because it will be of a wholly different character from earthly happiness. In our present state of finite and chained existence we cannot realize its reality. Our words have been invented to express things primarily of the physical nature. They cannot convey ideas of transcendental verities. These can be described only allegorically as the Qur'aan does. Ibn Jareer says: "Whatever is in the heaven has no resemblance with any thing of this world except in name." The Holy Qur'aan says in the 32nd Sura, as-Sajda, Verse 17:

No souls know what is in store for them of the joys (lit. that which will refresh the eyes) as the reward of their actions.

6[6] Bukhari: 9:532b, 8:542 and 3:620 indicate this (Aalim computer software)

According to a Hadith:7[7]

God has provided for the righteous that which "no eye hath seen, no ear hath heard, nor hath it ever occurred to the mind of man".

Thus the expressions descriptive of heaven which occur in the Qur'aan are allegorical (symbolic), e.g., gardens, rivulets, costly garments, delicious fruits, etc. To illustrate this point further, I may cite an incident of the Holy Prophet's life.8[8]

A pious lady saw a river in a dream and she somehow or other came to think that it pertained to one of the deceased Companions of the Holy Prophet, Uthman bin Maz'un. She related her dream to the Holy Prophet for explanation. He said: "It (i.e. the river) is his (noble) actions flowing for him (or for his benefit)."

I shall now give certain verses of the Holy Qur'an, which depict the heavenly life, but would like to put them under nine different headings for the sake of clarity.

1. The Qur'aan speaks of the heavenly life as the eternal one.

The Holy Qur'aan says in the 65th Sura, at-Talaq, Verse 11:

...And those who believe in Allah and do good deeds, He will cause him to enter gardens beneath which rivers flow to abide therein for ever..

Also, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 15th Sura, al-Hijr, Verse 48:

There no sense of fatigue shall touch them, nor shall they (ever) be asked to leave.

Again, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 18th Sura, al-Kahf, Verse 108:

Abiding therein, they shall not desire removal from them

2. That life will be free of all toil, of hunger and thirst and other physical needs.

The Holy Qur'aan says in the 20th Sura, Ta Ha, Verses 118 and 119:

Surely it is (ordained) for you that you shall not be hungry therein, nor bare of clothing; and that you shall not be thirsty therein, nor shall you feel the heat of the sun.

7[7] Bukhari

8[8] Bukhari

Also, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 16th Sura, an-Nahl, Verse 31:

The gardens of perpetuity, they shall enter them, rivers flowing beneath them: they shall have in them what they please. Thus Allah rewards those who guard (against evil).

Again, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 15th Sura, al-Hijr, Verse 48:

There no sense of fatigue shall touch them.

3. It will be free of evil thoughts and propensities (prejudice).

The Holy Qur'aan says in the 19th Sura, Maryam, Verse 62:

They shall not hear therein any vain discourse, but only 'Peace' Also, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 7th Sura, al-Araf, Verse 43:

And We will remove whatever of ill feeling is in their breasts.

4. It will be a state of supreme peace for the soul.

The Holy Qur'aan says in the 6th Sura, al-An'aam, Verse 127:

They shall have the Home of Peace with their Lord . . .

Again, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 56th Sura, al-Waaqi'a, Verses 25 and 26:

They shall not hear therein vain or sinful discourse except the word peace, peace.

Again, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 44th Sura, ad-Dukhaan, Verse 51

Surely those who guard (against evil) shall be in a place of security . . .

Also, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 3rd Sura, al-i-Imraan, Verse 107

And as to those whose faces turn bright they shall be in Allah's mercy; in it they shall abide

5. The Heaven will be the Abode of Light.

The Holy Qur'aan says in the 57th Sura, al-Hadeed, Verse 12

"On that day you will see the faithful men and the faithful women - their light going before them and on their right hand . . .

6. In it a halo of holiness will encircle the souls.

The Holy Qur'aan says in the 16th Sura, an-Nahl, Verse 97:

Whoever does good, whether male or female, and is a believer, We will most certainly bestow upon him (or her) a pure life. . .

Also, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 22nd Sura, al-Hajj: Verse 24:

And they will be guided to pure (thoughts and) words and they will be guided into the path of (Allah) the Praised One

Also, The Holy Qur'aan says:

"He will cause you to enter. . . the Abode of Purity."

Again Allah says in The Holy Qur'aan says in the 3rd Sura, al-i-Imraan: Verse 15:

For those who guard (against evil) are . . . pure mates . . .

Again Allah says in The Holy Qur'aan says in the 76th Sura, al-Insaan: Verse 21:

And their Lord shall make them drink a pure drink,

7. In the glorious state of being encircled by Light, Peace, Mercy and Holiness of God, the souls shall sing hymns in praise of their Lord.

Allah says in The Holy Qur'aan says in the 10th Sura, Yunus: Verse 10

Their utterance in it shall be: Glory to Thee O Allah! And their greeting in it shall be: Peace; and they will end by saying: Praise be to Allah, the Lord of all the worlds.

8. In the heavenly state the souls will be blessed with the goodly pleasure (ridwan) of Allah.

Allah says in The Holy Qur'aan says in the 89th Sura, al-Fajr: Verses 27 and 28:

"O soul! that hath found satisfaction! Return to thy Lord well pleased with Him, well pleasing (Him).

Also, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 9th Sura, at-Tauba: Verse 72:

Allah has promised to the believing men and the believing women gardens beneath which rivers flow, to abide in them, and goodly dwellings in gardens of perpetual abode; and best of all is Allah's goodly pleasure - that is the grand achievement.

9. The climax of the blessings of the heaven will be reached in the vision of Allah and in living in His Holy Presence.

The Holy Qur'aan says in the 54th Sura, al-Qamr: Verses 54 and 55:

Surely those who guard (against evil) shall be in the midst of gardens and rivers, In the Seat of Truth, before (or with) the most Powerful Lord.

Also, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 75th Sura, al-Qiyaamat: Verses 22 and 23:

(Some) faces on that day shall be bright, looking to their Lord.

Also, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 33rd Sura, al-Ahzaab Verse 44:

Their salutation on the day that they meet Him shall be Peace.

Again, The Holy Qur'aan says in the 36th Sura, Yaseen: Verse 58:

Peace: a word from the Merciful Lord.

But when the description of the heavenly life has been given, I would emphasize a point again. This description is only meant to give us an idea and not to portray the really real heaven. The Holy Prophet Muhammad says:

"Leave that which you know of it (i.e. that form which you make in your mind)."

With regard to the real nature of heaven, I would ultimately refer to the meaning of the word "Jannat" which has been generally used in the Qur'aan to denote heaven. In the first place, Jannat means something concealed from the naked eye; in the second place, it means rank and luxuriant growth. Thus the heavenly life, according to the Qur'aan, is a life hidden from the eyes which consists in the unfolding of the latent faculties of the soul and its complete growth. Verily, it is a life of unlimited progress, as the Qur'aan says in the 38th Sura, Saad: Verses 53 and 54:

Most surely this is our provision (or sustenance) for the Day of Reckoning: it shall never come to an end

In the end I have to submit that this conception of heaven seems to satisfy all what the heart and the intellect requires of heaven. There is no element in it which conflicts with these yearnings. It satisfies my scientific consciousness because it affirms the existence and validity of law in that life. It satisfies my artistic consciousness because Heaven is a world of Beauty and Grace. It satisfies my moral consciousness because it is the abode where righteousness is combined with happiness and perpetual progress. It satisfies my religious consciousness because it affirms the realization of the highest yearning of my soul- the Vision of and proximity to my Lord. It fulfils the requirements of the conception of a transcendental condition and is best fitted for our acceptance.