The Reality of Death and Its Role in Reforming the Human Soul

<"xml encoding="UTF-8?>

With the general and inexorable decline of religious identity in modern society, comes a decline of the belief in the Afterlife. Most contemporary societies can be described as positivist, which sees only the reality accessible to the senses or to the instruments that supplement them as valid and scoffs at the Unseen as mere fantasy and myth. As such death is seen as the final fall of the curtain, bringing an end to the meaningless cosmic aberration called intelligent life. The idea that death is the final end of life and there is nothing beyond has not led to liberation of the mind despite all modern man's claims of self realization and freedom. It has led to an obsessive attachment to the life of this world and a frantic, futile effort to escape death. Modern man, especially in Western society tries to escape death by sanitizing it. For example, dead bodies are pumped up with a cocktail of chemicals and makeup carefully applied to make them look as lifelike as possible. A growing number of the rich, place hope in science and have their bodies or heads cryogenically frozen right after death in the hope of being "resurrected" in a brave new world where medicine is advanced enough to revive the long dead and cure whatever disease they had been suffering from. And they try to escape the presence of death by minimizing its social presence. Remembrance of the dead is fast becoming a personal affair with no social dimensions and the earlier one could get over the loss and "get on with life" the better.

This attempt to flee death however, has not succeeded. Indeed, what is surprising is that it has created the opposite, a morbid fascination with death in popular culture. Nowhere is this fascination with death more prevalent than in film where killing is plentiful, varied and with realistic detail. Most blockbuster movies usually come with the standard fare of sex, violence and death which are the major factors for their popularity. Life after death is usually portrayed in a macabre fashion. Indeed, there is no Hereafter, only this life and those who cheat death inhabit this world as "undead" vampires, vengeful and frustrated ghosts or still rotting zombies that wreak a jealous vengeance upon the living by eating them and infecting them with the virus of eternal suffering. The only ideal life, the only "heaven" is one that it is not touched by death at all, one, where death is repelled with the intervention of technology. This is the imaginary world inhabited by clones and the perfect fusion of man and machine, or man and computer, the cyborg. Thus death is evil and hideous and whatever comes after death is the same. There is no better life than physical perfection that continues forever and this could only

be achieved by fusing the biological with the mechanical, or by the creation of spare bodies or parts in the form of clones. In all cases the only universe they occupy is this physical one for there is no other beyond it. This type of thinking has ramifications in other aspects of the culture as well. We have seen appearance of the Gothic style of dress, characterized by the preference for black coloured clothing, white make-up with black lipstick and nail polish, all symbolizing death and morbidity. There is also a fascination with vampires and vampirism and there is an underground culture centred on vampirism involving drinking blood and even filing incisors down to points to mimic vampire fangs. Then there is the attraction of the pseudo religion of New Ageism which is a syncretism of Buddhist and Hindu teachings combined with the Western occultism and science.

This strain of thought is fascinated with a narrow idea of reincarnation which takes this world as the only stage upon which all eschatological phenomena manifest. In other words, because this world is the only reality, heaven and hell and all states after death take place right here, you just simply change bodies to experience it.

One major positive thing that all of this proves, is that religion is something rooted in the nature of man. It is rooted in his fitrah, or transcendent human nature. And any attempt to deny or alter that reality would only result in that tendency being xpressed in another, albeit more erroneous or distorted manner. It means that there are things that our very existence cannot be devoid of. It cannot be devoid of love, the desire for it and the expression of it. It cannot be devoid of hate, the desire to be far away from those things that would compromise our existence or our security. It cannot be devoid of the need for society and it cannot be devoid of the need for religion. As such, from the point of view of Islam, no human being can be devoid of religion, not even a self professed atheist, for even though that person might say that he doesn't believe in God or in religion, that person would "invent" a deity and a religion to fill that gap in his soul that his existence needs. That deity could even be an idea and the religion could be the dogmas and conceptual consequences that arise from that idea. Imam Ja'far al Sadiq (a.s.) was asked what was the minimum degree of polytheism, he replied:"It is to contrive or invent an opinion and to take sides with people who are for it and to be against those who oppose it."Islam teaches us that death is rooted in the nature of things. It is something that characterizes this material world which is a state of transformation and becoming, and one manifestation of this is decay and dissolution. Our bodies, being part of this material world are also subject to these laws and must eventually pass away.

Not only do things in the world die, so will this world itself. Even in the heavenly realms where there is no death, it is so because of Allah's mercy, for only Allah in His very Essence cannot

die. Concerning created reality, The Holy Qur'an says: "Everything will perish except His face." (28:88) And again, "Everyone on it (the earth) is ephemeral; yet lasting is the Face of your Lord, Majestic and Munificent." (55:26-27).

Thus death is a profound reality of this world. Imam Ali (as) said, "Nothing is truer than death." And he also said, "Everything has a fixed duration and an end." It is Allah who has created death, for one of His Names is "Al Mu'eet" the "One who gives death" so there is wisdom and goodness behind death.

The roles of death as a benefit to society and a means of population control, for example, are encapsulated in a hadith by Imam Sadiq (a.s.), who said: "A group of people of the past said to their prophet, 'Pray to your Lord to take death away from us.' He did so and Allah took death away from them. They became so many that their lives became crowded and their offspring became too many. A man now had to feed his father, mother, grandfather and his great grandfather to satisfy them and take care of them. They became too occupied to seek a livelihood, so they said, 'Ask your Lord to return us to our previous state', so their prophet asked his Lord and he returned them to their original state." Whereas for all other living created things like animals, plants microbes, etc, death is final and there is no afterlife, death for man is not so. It is a portal, a birth into a higher, more real and subtle life, whether that state is a heaven or a hell. This afterlife is the world that human beings are truly made for.

Imam Ali (as) in his will to his son, Imam Hassan (a.s.),"My son, know that you have been created for the next world and not for this one. (You have been created) for annihilation (here) and not to remain, for death, and not for life. You are in a transient place, a place which is a path to the Hereafter."

He also said,"This world is a transient thing, passing away, even if it remains for you, you will not remain for it."We thus have to prepare for our transition to the eternal abode, and this is the essential function of this world, as a place where we secure our salvation and build the lives we want in the Hereafter.Prophet Jesus (as) is reported to have said,"Indeed, this world is a bridge, so cross over it but do not build on it." Build here means that we should not make this place a permanent abode. It shouldn't be taken in the literal sense for we do build on it but what is important is the intention behind our building, whether it is for the here and now or for the Hereafter. For example when we build to make opportunities for our children available, to ensure the continuity and strength of the society of believers, to enhance the power and welfare of the Muslims, this is not building for thisworld but for the Hereafter. In traditional societies, for example, the tallest and most beautiful buildings were religious.

The same can be said for the arts and crafts, dress, and practically all forms of mundane

activity which were infused with the air of religion. Even today we take our shoes off before entering the home not only because of hygiene, but because the home is an extension of the mosque and therefore partakes of its sacredness.

Today's society is the opposite. The tallest buildings and the most lavish are those that belong to insurance companies and banks, and we walk into our homes with our shoes on just like we walk in the street and the market.Imam Ali (a.s.) said,"O people! Indeed the world is a passage, while the Hereafter is a permanent abode. So take from the passage for the permanent abode."What we take from this world should be our good deeds, our positive influences on individuals and society, and our sacrifices for the truth and for what is right. Imam Ali was asked what we should do to prepare for death. He said, "Fulfil obligations, avoid the forbidden, adopt good moral traits, and then do not care whether one should fall onto death or death fall onto you."

We fear death for many reasons, we fear it because it is the entrance to the unknown, and therefore Islam teaches us about death so we should not fear it. But Many Muslims still fear it, even though we have been taught something about it. This is because of being attached to the world. For example there is a hadith where the Prophet (s) was asked why people despised death. The Prophet (s) in response asked the questioner, "Do you have wealth?" the man said that he did. Then the Prophet (s) asked, "And have you given it away?" The person answered, "No." Then the Prophet (s) said, "This is why you do not like death."

And in answer to why someone would hate death, Imam Hassan (a.s.) replied, "Because you have wrecked your Hereafter and developed your (material) world and you hate to move from a place that is developed to a place that is demolished."

Thus, the believer should anticipate and contemplate death, prepare for it and welcome it. Therefore when it comes his transition to the next life would be easy and peaceful.Imam Zain al Abidideen (a.s.) said:"For a believer, death is like taking off dirty clothes, undoing shackles and heavy chains and changing into the finest and most scented of clothes. It is the easiest of mounts and the most comforting of abodes. As for the infidel, it is like taking off fine, comfortable clothes, and changing into the dirtiest and roughest of clothes, the most terrifying of stations and the greatest of punishments".