

Lesson 15: Life, Pre-existence and Eternity

Divine Life

One of the Attributes of Perfection of God is that of Life (ḥayy), as the name Al-Ḥayy (the Ever-living) is one of the Most Beautiful Names of God. The name Al-Ḥayy has been applied to God in verses of the Holy Qur'an, and in most cases, it is accompanied by the name or attribute Al-qayyum (the Self-existing). For example, it is thus said:

﴿اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ﴾

“Allah—there is no god except Him—is the Living One, the All-sustainer.”¹

In one verse, God has been described as the Living One who does not die:

﴿وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى الْحَيِّ الَّذِي لَا يَمُوتُ﴾

“Put your trust in the Living One who does not die.”²

In a verse quoted earlier, the expression of praise (kalimah al-tahḥīl) – Lā ilāha illallāh (There is no god but Allah) – comes before the Name Al-Ḥayy, but in other verses, the said Divine Name comes before the expression of praise:

﴿هُوَ الْحَيُّ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَادْعُوهُ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ﴾

“He is the Living One, there is no god except Him. So supplicate Him, putting exclusive faith in Him.”³

This verse points to Eternal Life as exclusive for God, showing that except Him, no one is ever-living, just as Godhood (*ul-hiyyah*) is exclusive to God. What is meant, therefore, by *Al-Qayy* in the verse “*He is the Living One*” and the like is “the Living One by essence” (*al-Qayy bi 'dh-dhāt*). It means that there is no Living One by essence except God and other beings receive the bounty of life from Him.

As such, God is the Living One by essence and the Origin of the lives of other beings, and this is the meaning of His Self-existence (*qayy-miyyah*). *Al-qayy-m* (the Self-existing) means that God is the Ever-standing and the Subsistence-bestower to the creatures, and since His Life is essential and necessary, He knows no death and annihilation.

The Essence and Classifications of Life

Qayh (life) has various functions:

1. It means existence and being. It is in view of this meaning of life that the absolute existence is called ‘ever-flowing life’ (*Qayt al-suriyah*).⁴ In the Holy Qur’an, *aay*’ (to give life) is applied to creation and origination. For instance, it is thus stated:

﴿وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَحْيَاكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُحْيِيكُمْ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَكَفُورٌ﴾

“It is He who gave life then He makes you die, then He brings you to life. Indeed man is very ungrateful.”⁵

The phrase *aayakum* (He gave you life) is synonymous with the phrase *khalqakum* (He created you) in this verse in which the opposite of *Qayh* (life) is non-existence:

﴿اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ ثُمَّ رَزَقَكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُحْيِيكُمْ﴾

“It is Allah who created you and then provided for you, then He makes you die.”⁶

2. *Qayh* means derivation of the desirable effects from every thing, and the opposite of *Qayh* in this function is non-derivation of the desirable effects from every thing. For example, the revival of the earth means the growing of plants in it and its fertility and productivity, and the opposite is the ‘death of the earth’. The life of the human being lies in taking a step toward innate guidance and thus he must be a reasonable and religious person. For this reason, the Holy Qur’an has considered religion the human being’s life, for the true religion which is Islam is concomitant with the Divine disposition (*fiṭrah*).⁷

3. *Qayh* means a salient feature of the existent which is the source of performance of volitional acts. This kind of life can be found in the various types of animals and through scientific studies, it has been discovered that it also exists in plants (or at least some of them). This kind of life has some salient

features such as self-protection, environmental adaptation, habit and disposition, nourishment, growth, reproduction, objective-setting and selection, awareness and potentiality. The last two features (awareness and potentiality) are the most important and they manifest more in the human being. For this reason, philosophers have defined life with these two salient features:

أَلْحَيَاةُ هِيَ كَوْنُ الشَّيْءِ بِحَيْثُ يَصْنَدُ عَنْهُ الْأَفْعَالُ الصَّادِرَةُ عَنِ الْإِحْيَاءِ مِنْ آثَارِ الْعِلْمِ وَالْقُدْرَةِ.

That is to say that life means the existence of a thing in the form of actions that emanate from living creatures – conscious actions on the basis of power and freewill that emanate from them.⁸

Let us elaborate [this aforesaid idea].. In studying the creatures, the human being has found them to be of two types. One type consists of the creatures which have only one state as long as they exist in terms of sensory observation. Stones and similar objects belong to this type. The second type consists of creatures whose powers and actions stop in many cases although they exist and in terms of sensory observation, no defect can be found in them. Examples of this type are the human beings and various types of animals and plants.

In many instances, although their physical faculties and senses are sound, they cannot make certain moves and turns. At this point, the human being has arrived at the conclusion that this kind of creatures – in addition to the sensory and physical faculties and powers – has a distinctive feature which is the very source of feelings, mental perceptions and actions anchored in knowledge and free-will. That feature is called ‘life’. Therefore, life means a kind of existence from which knowledge and power emanate: ⁹

فَالْحَيَاةُ نَحْوُ وُجُودٍ يَتَرَشَّحُ عَنْهُ الْعِلْمُ وَالْقُدْرَةُ.

The Essence of Life with Respect to God

From the previous analysis, it becomes clear that *ḥayāh* (life) – especially in its last meaning – is a degree of existential perfection which is realized in every creature according to its capacity and level. Knowledge, power and will can be regarded as among its properties and effects. The essence of life with respect to God, therefore, is an attribute which is concomitant with the said features and effects.

Of course, these features and effects are proportionate to the existential level of God which is the very Necessity (*wujūd*) and Pure Existence (*ḥayr al-wujūd*). Hence, although the meanings of the Attributes and Names with respect to God – as well as to others – vary, their manifestations point to an Indivisible (*basṭ*) and Pure (*ḥayr*) Being who is the very Life, Knowledge and Will, [and the ultimate source of all who have life, knowledge and will].

The Proof of Divine Life

Given the previous discussions, the proof of Divine Life also becomes clear, for once an attribute is from the existential perfections in the sense that it exists from the perfections of the Existent by Himself (and not from the perfections of a specific natural, partial or similar existent), no doubt, God is entitled to that perfection, for in the Necessary Being by essence, there is no room for deficiency and contingency. Any attribute which can be conceived for Him by general possibility (in the sense that its materialization for Him is not impossible), definitely exists in Him. [10](#)

In his *Tajrid al-I'tiqad*, after proving [the existence of] power and knowledge in God, Muḥaqqiq al-ḥaqq has said:

كُلُّ قَادِرٍ عَالِمٍ حَيٌّ بِالضَّرُورَةِ.

“Every powerful [and] knowledgeable [being] is necessarily living.” [11](#)

That is, every powerful and knowledgeable creature is definitely alive, and since God is Powerful and Knowledgeable, it follows that He has the Attribute of Life.

Pre-existence and Eternity

All religious and theist personalities recognize God as Pre-existent (*azal*), Eternal (*abad*), Everlasting (*qadim*), Abiding (*bāq*), and Immortal (*sarmad*). There are two viewpoints on the interpretation of these attributes:

The first viewpoint which is popular and acceptable within the circle of philosophers is that these attributes have been interpreted in relation to time. On this basis, pre-existence (*azaliyyah*) and pre-eternity (*qadam*) means that God has existed in all the past periods, nay even before any earliest period that could be conceived, while eternity (*abadiyyah*) and subsistence (*baq*) means that God will exist at all times to come. And immortality (*sarmadiyyah*) means that God's Being will exist at all times – both past and present. It is worth mentioning that the scholastic theologians (*mutakallim*) have divided time (*zamān*) into implied (*muqaddar*) and ascertained (*muḥaqqaq*) [of the real and hypothetical time], and what they mean by time in interpreting the abovementioned attributes is its general meaning.

This viewpoint is not free from controversy, for it is true that no time does God not exist can be assumed but measuring pre-existence and eternity on the basis of time necessitates treating God as a temporal being. This is so while God is behind time as commonly acknowledged by the theologians and theosophers. In reality, this interpretation stems from a superficial and ordinary understanding of the existence of God.

The second viewpoint which is adopted by the theosophers maintains that pre-existence and pre-eternity means that God's Being is not preceded by non-existence – whether non-existence by separation (*mafi'iq*) or non-existence by combination (*maj'imi'*) – as He is the Necessary Being by essence, and eternity and subsistence imply that there will be no non-existence ('*adam*'), posterior (*l'iq*) and accidental states ('*ri'*) in God's existence as He is the Necessary Being by essence. In other words, since God is the Necessary Being by essence, non-existence or non-being – prior or posterior – has no place in Him.

Whenever we refer to prior non-existence, it is called pre-existence (*azaliyyah*) and pre-eternity (*qadam*). Whenever we mean posterior non-existence, it is named eternity (*abadiyyah*) and subsistence (*baq'*). And whenever we imply both aspects, it is described as immortality (*sarmadiyyah*). Sometimes *sarmadiyyah* is used as synonym of *abadiyyah* and *baq'*, as in the following expression of Mu'addiq al-S:

وُجُوبُ الْوُجُودِ يَدُلُّ عَلَى سَرْمَدِيَّتِهِ وَتَنْفِي الزَّائِدِ

“And being the Necessary Being implies immortality and the negation of added qualities.”¹²

That is, being the Necessary Being proves that God is immortal and that His immortality and subsistence are identical with His Essence and not through the medium of a quality separate from His Essence (in contrast to Ab' l-'asan al-Ash'ar's notion of God's subsistence as separate from His Essence).

The expression quoted above shows that the late S has measured immortality on the basis of God's being the Necessary Being by essence and not on the scale of lack of temporal beginning and end.

Review Questions

1. State God's Attribute of Life while keeping in view verses of the Qur'an.
2. Explain briefly the different usages of *hayah* (life).
3. Write down the definition of *hayah* by the philosophers with elaboration.
4. Explain the essence of life with respect to God.
5. Write down the proof of God's life.
6. State the theologians' viewpoint on pre-existence and eternity.
7. Write down the pre-existence and eternity of God from the viewpoint of the theosophers.

¹. S'rat al-Baqarah 2:255; S'rat 'l 'Imr'n 3:2.

². S'rat al-Furq'n 25:58.

- [3.](#) [S̥rat al-Gh̥fir \(or al-Mu'min\) 40:65.](#)
- [4.](#) [ʿAk̥m Sabziw̥r̥, Shar̥ al-Asm̥' al-ʿusn̥, p. 238.](#)
- [5.](#) [S̥rat al-ʿajj 22:66.](#)
- [6.](#) [S̥rat ar-R̥m 30:40.](#)
- [7.](#) [ʿAll̥mah al-ʿab̥ʿab̥', Al-M̥z̥n f̥ Tafs̥r al-Qur'̥n, vol. 1, pp. 51–52.](#)
- [8.](#) [ʿadr al-Muta'allih̥n, Al-Asf̥r al-Arba'ah, vol. 6, p. 417.](#)
- [9.](#) [ʿAll̥mah al-ʿab̥ʿab̥', Al-M̥z̥n f̥ Tafs̥r al-Qur'̥n, vol. 2, pp. 328–329.](#)
- [10.](#) [ʿadr al-Muta'allih̥n, Asf̥r al-Arba'ah, vol. 6, p. 418.](#)
- [11.](#) [Kashf al-Mur̥d, station \(maq̥ad\) 3, chap. 2, issue 3.](#)
- [12.](#) [Kashf al-Mur̥d, station \(maq̥ad\) 3, chap. 2, issue 7.](#)

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