

Part 1: Value of life

Life is a divine quality: Among God's attributes and names in the Islamic scriptures, "the Living" (Al-Hayy) is one of the most obvious and outstanding one.

Sanctity of life

All forms of life are precious and are considered as signs of God. However, among all forms of life in the material world, human life is the most outstanding and the most precious.

Human life is so important that God mentions in the Qur'an its development step by step and finally after referring to the creation of spirit, which is considered as "Khalqan Aakhar" says:

"Blessed be the Best of creators!" [1](#)

If the creator of man is the best of creators, man himself must be the best of creatures – at least potentially.

Life must be appreciated and respected. Killing an innocent person not only is considered as a criminal act (i.e. murder), but also represents an underestimation or an insult to human life as a whole. The fact is interestingly expressed in the following verse:

For this reason We prescribed to the Children of Israel that whoever slays a soul, unless it be for manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he slew all men; and whoever keeps it alive, it is as though he kept alive all men; and certainly Our messengers came to them with clear proofs, but even after that many of them certainly act extravagantly in the land. [2](#)

One may conclude from the above verse that:

- Causing death to one person unjustifiably is like causing death to all people. In the other words, lack of respect for an individual life demonstrates lack of respect for life as such and, therefore, for all individual lives (1, 2). This is in agreement with the fact that whoever commits a murder is likely to murder more people and endanger all people (2).

- Giving life to one person or more precisely, saving one person out of one's respect for life is like saving all people (from killing dangers).
- Causing death to a murderer or someone who does mischief on the earth is permitted since it demonstrates respect for the lost life and prevents further dangers and damage to life as a whole. This is why the Qur'an considers legislation of the retaliation as a source of life, though prefers pardon when there is no fear of threat to the public security³.

Animal life: We also found in the Islamic hadiths that even killing or destroying animals unjustifiably is very severely condemned. For example, Imam Sadiq, the sixth Imam of the Shi'a Muslims, has informed about the divine punishment of a woman who had fastened a cat with a rope so the cat could not move and died out of thirst (3). A typical view among the Shi'a jurists can be found in the following passage by 'Allamah Mohammad Taqi Ja'fari:

Consideration of the whole sources of the Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) leads to the conclusion that animals must not be killed unless there is a legal permission (by God) like benefiting from them or being safe from their harm. There are adequate reasons for prohibiting hunting animals for fun and one can argue from these reasons for prohibition of killing animals without having a permitting cause (4).

Elsewhere he writes: "Hunting animals for leisure and without need is prohibited. Therefore, "if someone makes a trip for such hunting his trip will be a sinful trip" (5).

The above idea is part of a broader Islamic perspective on animal life. According to the Islamic law, there are many rights for animals that must be observed. Consideration of those rights show that not only their lives must be protected, but also the quality of their lives must be observed. For example, animals must not be bothered by forcing them to carry heavy goods or to move faster than they tolerate. Neither animals can be cursed or sworn at. It is reported that Imam Ali said: "Whoever curses an animal he himself will be cursed by God" (5).

Who is the giver of life and death? This is one of the basic questions in bioethics which can entirely influence one's approach towards life and its treatment. If one believes that life is created by chance or by man himself, then it will lose its sanctity. Therefore, it can also be destroyed by chance or by man. But if life is a gift of God for which we are held accountable, then it is not up to us to take it away.

God is the only source of life. This is an idea on which special emphasis has been put in the Qur'an. For example, we read:

Verily, it is God Who causes the seed-grain and the fruit stone (like date-stone) to split and sprout. He brings forth the living from the dead, and it is He Who brings forth the dead from the living. Such is God, then how are you deluded away from the truth? ⁴

Thus, life is a gift of God, for which we are held responsible. Not only just God gives life, but also just

God brings life to an end. For example, we read in the Qur'an:

... You bring the living out of the dead, and you bring the dead out of the living. And You give sustenance to whom You will, without limit [5](#)

According to the Qur'an, refuting Nimrod's claim of deity, the Prophet Abraham said (to him):

"My lord is He Who gives life and causes death." [6](#)(6).

Of course, it is possible to suppose that man and natural environment can have role in the process of giving life and causing death. The reason is this: in this world God usually acts through natural rules and cause-effect system.[7](#)

It is also possible to suppose that natural factors and circumstances may sometimes have role in something being created or brought into existence. However, it is only God Who truly and genuinely brings into existence or gives life[8](#). We humans have no control or even complete knowledge of our existence or life. So how it is possible to suppose that we can grant existence or life to something else?

Dignity of man

Human beings have great status in Islam. They are honored by God[9](#) and can act as God's vicegerents on earth[10](#). They are endowed with reason and freewill and therefore are responsible for what they do. Therefore, humans bear the divine trust and can fulfill the goal of creation:

We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and man carried it. Surely he is very unjust, very ignorant. [11](#)

This verse suggests that the main problems which man is faced when exercising his freewill are injustice and ignorance[12](#). Of course, God has provided human beings with the basic knowledge required to distinguish between what is (morally) good or bad[13](#).

Man & the world: Human beings can benefit from the world and indeed every blessing of God including their own bodies and souls in a responsible way[14](#). Therefore, everything in the world which is at our disposal is both a gift and a trust. If it were just a trust we would not have permission to use them. Since they are gifts of God, we can use them. However, we cannot waste them or use them extravagantly as it is the case with any trust.

God;

"does not love the extravagant"[15](#)

In addition to this, the Qur'an[16](#) tells us that we are supposed to make efforts to improve the conditions of the globe as much as possible.

Dignity of body and soul: In Islam there is a close link between body and mind, or, more generally, between the material and the spiritual. In the same way that we need to look after our physical health we need to look after our spiritual health. Dignity of man extends to his body and therefore there is no way to harm or treat with disrespect human body, including one's own.

This dignity also extends to the period after death (7). There are many rulings pertaining human corpse which all indicate the continuity of the respect to human body even after separation of spirit. For example, human corpse must be properly washed, dressed, prayed on and buried.

The dead body must be buried in a respected place and the direction of Mecca must be observed. It is not allowed to dig the graves or unveil the buried body (8). Autopsy is allowed, if necessary (say, when there is the suspicion of murder) (9).

According to many hadiths, performance of any act that causes death to a living person like cutting off one's head is forbidden, even in a dead person. For example, Husayn Bin Khalid says that Abu 'Abdillah (the sixth Imam, Imam Sadiq) was asked about a man who has cut off head of a corpse. The Imam replied: "Verily, God has prohibited in respect of someone who has died the same thing that was prohibited when he was alive. So whoever does to a dead person what causes death to a living person must pay the Diyah (blood money).

I asked Abu Al-Hassan (the seventh Imam, Imam Kazim) about this. The Imam replied: "Abu 'Abdillah told the truth. The Prophet spoke thus." I said: "So whoever cuts off the head of a corpse, or cuts his stomach, or does anything else that causes death to the living must pay the Diyah of a complete person?" The Imam replied: "He must pay the Diyah of an embryo in the womb of his mother before the spirit was created into it and that is 100 Dinar (golden coin).

The Diyah of embryo belongs to his heirs, but the Diyah of this dead person belongs to him and not to the heirs." I asked: "What is the difference between them?" Imam replied: "Verily the embryo is something in prospect, whose benefit is hoped for (sought after), while the dead is something which has expired whose benefit has gone.

Therefore, when his organs are severed (Muthlah) after his death the Diyah belongs to him himself and not others. With this money, Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) will be performed on his behalf and other good deeds, such as giving alms, will be done." (10)

Thus, causing harm to a corpse is forbidden. Indeed, according to some hadiths, it is considered to be worse since the dead have no power to defend (7).

[1.](#) Qu'ran: 23: 14

[2.](#) Qu'ran: 5:32

[3.](#) Qur'an: 2: 178, 179

[4.](#) Qu'ran: 6:95

[5.](#) Qu'ran: 3:27, 3: 156, 9: 117, 10:31, 22:6, 30:4, 50:43, 53:44, 57:2, 67:29

[6.](#) Qu'ran: 2:258

[7.](#) Of course, there have been miracles and extraordinary acts performed by the Prophets or holy people. These may seem to contradict the general rule mentioned above: "In this world God usually acts through natural rules and cause and effect system". However, it must be noted that firstly miraculous and extraordinary acts do not represent the usual procedure, and secondly even in the case of such acts there is no exception to the cause–effect system. The only difference is that instead of natural causes supernatural causes are used. Just as there are natural causes, say, for treatment of an ill person, there may be supernatural causes, such as prayer and giving charity.

[8.](#) Qu'ran: 2:260, 3:49

[9.](#) Qur'an 17:70

[10.](#) Qur'an: 2:30

[11.](#) Qu'ran: 33:72

[12.](#) Qu'ran: 95:61

[13.](#) Qur'an: 91:8, 76:3

[14.](#) Qur'an: 45:13, 102:8

[15.](#) Qur'an: 6:141

[16.](#) Qur'an 11:61

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