

Soul in the Quran

In order to identify the viewpoint of Islam with regard to the reality of the self of man we can utilize three types of verses:

First type: Verses related to death. In some verses, the Almighty Allah has compared death to 'Tawafi' (taking up). For example:

وَهُوَ الَّذِي يَتَوَفَّكُم بِاللَّيْلِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا جَرَحْتُم بِالنَّهَارِ ثُمَّ يَبْعَثُكُمْ فِيهِ لِيُقْضَىٰ أَجَلٌ مُّسَمًّى ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ * وَهُوَ الْغَايُ الْقَاهِرُ فَوْقَ عِبَادِهِ وَيُرْسِلُ عَلَيْكُمْ حَفَظَةً حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَ أَحَدَكُمُ الْمَوْتُ تَوَفَّتْهُ رُسُلُنَا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْرِطُونَ

And He it is Who takes your souls at night (in sleep), and He knows what you acquire in the day, then He raises you up therein that an appointed term may be fulfilled; then to Him is your return, then He will inform you of what you were doing. And He is the Supreme, above His servants, and He sends keepers over you; until when death comes to one of you, Our messengers cause him to die, and they are not remiss. (6:60-61)

وَقَالُوا أَإِذَا ضَلَلْنَا فِي الْأَرْضِ أَإِنَّا لَفِي خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ بَلْ هُمْ بِلِقَاءِ رَبِّهِمْ كَافِرُونَ * قُلْ يَتَوَفَّاكُم مَّلَكُ الْمَوْتِ الَّذِي وُكِّلَ بِكُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ تُرْجَعُونَ

And they say: What! when we have become lost in the earth, shall we then certainly be in a new creation? Nay! they are disbelievers in the meeting of their Lord. Say: The angel of death who is given charge of you shall cause you to die, then to your Lord you shall be brought back.

(32:10-11)

اللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى الْأَنْفُسَ حِينَ مَوْتِهَا وَالَّتِي لَمْ تَمُتْ فِي مَنَامِهَا فِيمَسِكُ الَّتِي قَضَىٰ عَلَيْهَا الْمَوْتَ وَيُرْسِلُ الْأُخْرَىٰ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

Allah takes the souls at the time of their death, and those that die not during their sleep; then He

withholds those on whom He has passed the decree of death and sends the others back till an appointed term; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect. (39:42)

In the above verses and other similar ones, death is describes as the taking up of the souls, which is accomplished by the Almighty Allah and the angel of death (Malakul Maut). Thus Raghīb Isfahani has stated that ‘Tawaffi’ implies taking up of the reality of a thing completely. In the above mentioned verses, death of man is explained in such a way that when the death of a person approaches his worldly reality is completely taken up through the Almighty Allah and the angel of death and nothing from it is wasted. That which is taken up leaving nothing behind is nothing but the soul of man. If man had been only a body without a soul, nothing would have remained that it should be taken up by the Almighty Allah and the angels, as the body of every man after death will decay and deteriorate. Thus the addressee in these verses is the same abstract soul of man.

Numerous traditions also prove the same point. For example:

Hanan bin Sudair has narrated from his father that he said:

I was with Imam Ja’far Sadiq (as) when mention was made of a believer and his rights. Thus His Eminence said to me: “O Abul Fadhl, should I not inform you about the position of a believer in the view of Allah?”

I said: “May I be your ransom, please do tell me.”

He said:

“When the Almighty Allah captures the soul of a believer, the two angels appointed on him ascend to the heavens and plead before the Almighty Allah: ‘O Lord, Your servant was the best of servants and he obeyed You most readily and refrained from Your disobedience. Then You have taken him to Yourself. Now what do You command us with regard to him?’ The Almighty Allah tells them: ‘Go back to the earth and remain besides his grave worshipping Me and recite supplications and write their rewards in the scroll of deed of My servant till I raise him up again.’”¹

Second type: Verses which state that after death, man will return to the Almighty Allah. There are a large number of verses of this type:

هُوَ يَحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ

He gives life and causes death, and to Him you shall be brought back. (10:56)

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ثُمَّ إِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ

Every soul must taste of death, then to Us you shall be brought back. (29:57)

إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعاً فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

...to Allah is your return, of all (of you), so He will inform you of what you did. (5: 105)

Such verses show that all human beings will return to the Almighty Allah. It is known that returning can be imagined only when the same person who lived in world, remains and then returns to Allah. If man had been only this material body, which decays after death and if nothing known as soul had existed, return to Allah would have been meaningless as the body of man is not capable of returning.

Third type: Verses revealed about the creation of Adam and the blowing of the spirit of God into him. For example:

إِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي خَالِقٌ بَشَرًا مِّن طِينٍ * فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ

When your Lord said to the angels; Surely I am going to create a mortal from dust: So when I have made him complete and breathed into him of My spirit, then fall down making obeisance to him. (38:71-72)

الَّذِي أَحْسَنَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ وَبَدَأَ خَلْقَ الْإِنْسَانِ مِن طِينٍ * ثُمَّ جَعَلَ نَسْلَهُ مِن سُلَالَةٍ مِّن مَّاءٍ مَّهِينٍ * ثُمَّ سَوَّاهُ وَنَفَخَ فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِهِ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَ الْأَفْئِدَةَ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ

(It is He) Who made good everything that He has created, and He began the creation of man from dust. Then He made his progeny of an extract of water held in light estimation. Then He made him complete and breathed into him of His spirit, and made for you the ears and the eyes and the hearts; little is it that you give thanks. (32:7-9)

In the above mentioned verses, the blowing of the spirit of God into the body of man is regarded as his excellence, because the angels were asked to prostrate before man and pay obeisance to him. The word of soul is used in many occasions in the Holy Quran and the above verse is one of them. People asked the Messenger of Allah (S) about the reality of the soul and the following verse was revealed in reply:

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

And they ask you about the soul. Say: The soul is one of the commands of my Lord, and you are not given aught of knowledge but a little. (17:85)

In another verse is explained the 'command of Allah' as follows:

إِنَّمَا أَمْرُهُ إِذَا أَرَادَ شَيْئًا أَنْ يَقُولَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ * فَسُبْحَانَ الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ مَلَكُوتُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ

His command, when He intends anything, is only to say to it: Be, so it is. Therefore glory be to Him in Whose hand is the kingdom of all things, and to Him you shall be brought back. (36:82-83)

This verse mentions the act of creation by the Almighty Allah that is not gradual and timely, but that it is abstract and that He only says: Be and it comes into existence immediately and in simpler words it can be said that the creation of every phenomenon is in fact its existence.

All the phenomena in the world are created by the Almighty Allah. So much so, that we have two types of phenomena and two kinds of creations: material and abstract. The Almighty Allah brings into existence the material phenomena through the medium of cause and effects; this type of creation is called as 'Creation' (Khalq) in the Holy Quran and they are produced in time and in gradual stages. But there are no stages in the creation of abstract phenomena and it is not bound by time.

In such instances, terms like 'originating' and 'initiating' is used. Such phenomena are considered to be from the world of command; that is they have come into being merely by the Almighty Allah saying: Be! But to be more accurate, one should say: In creation of material things also there is no graduality from the Almighty Allah and it is only through the command of 'Be'; and if there are stages, they are only in the causes and in the acquisition of capabilities and not in the creation and action of the Almighty Allah as proved by the statement of:

بِيَدِهِ مَلَكُوتُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ

...in Whose hand is the kingdom of all things (23:88)

Kingdoms and unseen parts of all things are under the discretion of the Lord of the worlds and it is created and organized through His innate intention.

One of the implications of abstract things is the soul and spirit of man. But this abstract as opposed to other abstract things has two aspects: physical and material, which is related to his body; that is why the word of 'creation' is used in its creating. And second is the aspect of abstraction and spirituality, which is mentioned in the phrase of 'I blew my soul in him' and the phrase of 'then We caused it to grow into another creation' is used in this regard. Pay attention to the following verse:

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِّنْ طِينٍ * ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاهُ نُطْفَةً فِي قَرَارٍ مَّكِينٍ * ثُمَّ خَلَقْنَا النَّطْفَةَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْعَلَقَةَ مُضْغَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْمُضْغَةَ عِظْمًا فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظْمَ لَحْمًا * ثُمَّ أَنشَأْنَاهُ خَلْقًا ءآخَرَ فَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنُ الْخَالِقِينَ

And certainly We created man of an extract of clay. Then We made him a small seed in a firm resting-place. Then We made the seed a clot, then We made the clot a lump of flesh, then We made (in) the lump of flesh bones, then We clothed the bones with flesh, then We caused it to grow into another creation, so blessed be Allah, the best of the creators. (23: 11-14)

In the first part of this verse are mentioned the initial stages and movements of gaining capability and physical perfections in the creation of man and that is why the word of ‘creation’ is used. But when the soul of man is mentioned, the phrase of “then We caused it to grow into another creation” is used in order to declare its superiority over other phenomena. It is about this special creation that it is said:

فَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنُ الْخَالِقِينَ

Blessed be Allah, the best of the creators.

From what is stated above, it can be concluded that the soul of man in the view of Islam is an existing thing, which is abstract and superior to material matter that does not decay after death. On the contrary it is transferred from this world to the perpetual world of the hereafter so that it may be rewarded or punished according to its good or bad deeds.

1. Biharul Anwar, Vol. 6, Pg. 152.

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