

The Hereafter

Wilson: Now it is about time to discuss the important issue of Immortality. The Old Testament is not clear on the subject of the Hereafter. The Jews, therefore, do not emphasize life after death. The New Testament has dealt with the subject and spoken clearly of the Hereafter; consequently, the Christians, in general, subscribe to the belief in the Hereafter. I know that the Holy Qur'an confirms this doctrine, but I would like to know if it is considered one of the articles of the faith of Islam.

Chirri: The Doctrine of Resurrection is an important article of the Islamic faith. The book of Islam declares that the human race shall cease to exist on this planet, and that on a certain day, appointed by God and known only to Him, every human being will be brought back to life again and required to give an account for what he had done during his lifetime. Every individual will receive on that day a reward or punishment according to his good or bad deed:

“Everyone on it (the Earth) passes away, and there endures forever the might of your Lord, the Lord of Glory and Honor.” 55:26-27

“And they used to say: When we die and become dust and bones, shall we then be raised? Say: The ancients and those of later times will surely be gathered together for the appointed hour of a known day.” 56:47-50

Wilson: The concept of the Hereafter is very remote from the area of our human experience. It is not easy to conceive that a person who died physically will continue to live spiritually or that he will live later, long after he died. Science, though not able to disprove the possibility of life after death, is not able to give any support to such a concept.

Chirri: Although the concept of the Hereafter is beyond the area of our human experience, it does seem to be logical. To be consistent, we have to subscribe to this doctrine. We believe in God and His justice. The Just God, Who is All-Powerful, is not expected to leave a good doer without a reward, nor should we expect Him to leave an oppressor unpunished. Millions and millions of good doers, oppressed and persecuted, lived and died without being compensated. Millions and millions of wrong doers, persecutors, murderers, and tyrants lived and died without being penalized in this world. The Just God

Who is All-Powerful, should not let such wrong doers escape His punishment, nor should He leave the good doers uncompensated. There must be another world in which there will be an ample time for implementing the heavenly justice.

The Holy Qur'an bases the necessity of the Hereafter on the concept of the heavenly justice:

“On that day (the Day of Judgment) men will come forth as scattered individuals, so that they may be shown their works. So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it.” 99:6-8

Wilson: Your argument in support of the doctrine of the Hereafter falls short of its ultimate goal. It is a good argument, but all it amounts to is that we should expect a future world in which God rewards the good doer and penalizes the wrong doer; but it does not prove that our expectation will materialize. There is a great difference between what ought to be and what will be. Our purpose is not only to show the need for a future world, but to prove, also, that that world will become a reality.

Chirri: The existence of the future world cannot be proven by a direct and tangible evidence. It is beyond the area of our perception and experience. It is a future unrelated naturally to our present, nor is it linked with it through a familiar cause. Tangible and direct evidence on such a future is absent, but indirect evidence on that future is available.

The prophets of God had forecast the future world, and we may rely on their information. The evidence of the truthfulness of those prophets is the indirect evidence on the Hereafter. We may rely on the statements of a prophet such as Muhammad, because his prophethood is supported by a tangible evidence. A prophet does not mislead the people, nor would he misinform them. We have to accept his statements on the future as well as on the present. To accept his prophethood and doubt his information is inconsistent.

Wilson: How important is this article of the faith in Islam from the Qur'anic point of view?

Chirri: In many passages from the Holy Qur'an, the belief in the Hereafter is placed next to the belief in God. This shows that the belief in the Hereafter is more important than any other article of the Islamic faith after the belief in God:

“Surely those who believe (in Islam) and those who are Jews, and the Christians . . . , whoever believes in God and the Hereafter and does good, they have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them nor shall they grieve.” 2:62

“They believe in God and the Hereafter, and they enjoin good and forbid evil and vie one with another in the good deeds. And those are among the righteous. ” 3:114

Wilson: Muhammad has informed mankind of the Hereafter. His information is clear and positive. Jesus, before him, advanced some information on the subject. Moses seems to have been completely silent on

the issue. This raises a question: The absence of information on the subject in the books of Moses is puzzling. If the doctrine of Resurrection is so important, it should have been revealed to Moses, as well as to Muhammad and Jesus.

Chirri: The absence of any statement on the subject in the books of Moses does not mean that God did not reveal to him any information on the Hereafter, nor should it prove that Moses never informed his people of a future life. The five books of Moses probably had undergone some changes and deletions. The Holy Qur'an informs us that Moses had spoken of the Hereafter:

“And he who believed (in the message of Moses) said: (addressing the opponents of Moses) O My people, follow me. I will guide you to the right way. O My people, the life of this world is but a (passing) enjoyment, and the Hereafter, that is the abode to settle.” 40:38–39

“And Moses chose of his people seventy men for Our appointed time, and when they were seized with violent quaking, he said: My Lord! If Thou hadst willed, Thou hadst destroyed them long before, and me with them. Wilt Thou destroy us for that which the ignorant among us did? It is but Thy trial (of us)... Thou art our Protecting Guardian, therefore, forgive us and have mercy on us, Thou art the Best of all who show forgiveness, and ordain for us in this world that which is good, and in the Hereafter (that which is good), Lo! We have turned unto Thee.” 7: 155–156

The Holy Qur'an informs us also that the Prophet Abraham had spoken clearly of the Hereafter, and that he prayed to God to show him how He revives the dead:

“And when Abraham said: My Lord, show me how Thou givest life to the dead, He said: Dost thou not believe? He said: Yes, but that my heart may be at ease.” 2:260

Wilson: You have stated that Islam teaches that every human being, on an appointed day known only to God, will be brought back to life. That day is the Day of Judgment. Now, may I ask about the long time which separates our life in this world from the Hereafter? Does man continue to live, in some form, after he dies until the Day of Judgment or does his life come to a complete extinction by death? Is there a clear Qur'anic statement on our life or extinction, subsequent to our death and prior to our resurrection?

Chirri: The human soul, according to the Islamic teaching, will not be extinguished by death. It shall continue to live throughout the long period which separates our physical death from our resurrection, and such a life is required for resurrection.

We cannot conceive man's resurrection if his life is entirely terminated by death. Resurrection means bringing the dead person back to life. If life entirely ceases to exist after death, there will be no way to bring back to life the same person. There would be two existences: one before death, and the other on the Day of Judgment. The two existences would be separated by a complete non-existence. The second existence could not be the same as the first one. There would be two persons, not one. The second one, at best, would be similar to the first, and never the same.

Resurrection of the same person, therefore, cannot be realized unless the life of the human being continues in some form after his death. Otherwise, the newly created one on the Day of Judgment would be other than the person whose life came to extinction by death. And the very purpose of resurrection will not be served if human life will not continue after death.

The purpose of the Hereafter is to reward the good doer and to punish the wrong doer. If man will cease entirely to exist after his death, he will not be able to receive any reward or punishment. The newly created person on the Day of Judgment will not be the same person who lived before. He will deserve neither a reward nor a punishment, because he is not the same one who lived before, nor did he do any good or bad.

Thus, we ought to understand from all the Qur'anic passages, pertaining to the Hereafter, that man will continue to live a spiritual life until the Day of Judgment. The Holy Qur'an, however, is explicit on this point:

“And speak not of those who are slain in the way of God as dead. Nay, (they are) alive, but you perceive not.” 2: 154.

“And think not of those who are killed in the way of God as dead. Nay, they are alive being provided sustenance from their Lord. Rejoicing in what God has given them out of His grace, and they rejoice for the sake of those who (being left) behind them, have not yet joined them, that they have no fear, nor shall they grieve. They rejoice for the favor of God and His grace, and that God wastes not the reward of the believers.” 3: 168–170.

Wilson: Those who subscribe to the doctrine of the Hereafter differ on an important point: some of them believe that life in the Hereafter would be only spiritual, while others believe that human life on the Day of Resurrection will be physical as well as spiritual. What does Islam teach in regard to this matter?

Chirri: The teaching of Islam is very clear on this point. Man will be brought back to life on the Day of Judgment physically as well as spiritually. A human being is not only a spiritual being. Re-creation of a real man requires both body and soul; otherwise, he would be a sort of an angel rather than a human being.

There is another reason to expect both physical and spiritual resurrection:

The very concept of resurrection cannot be realized without reconstruction of the human body. Since man will continue to live spiritually after his death, his resurrection cannot mean re-creation of his spirit because his spirit did not die. Thus, the spiritual life alone in the Hereafter cannot be called resurrection because it does not add anything to the life of the individual which has continued in its spiritual form. Resurrection can only be realized by re-creation. This means reconstruction of the disintegrated body and reuniting it with the soul which still exists. The language of the Qur'an is very clear on this point and does not accept any different interpretation:

“And the call is issued, then lo ! from their graves they will hasten on to their Lord. They will say: O woe to us! Who has raised us up from our sleeping place? This is what the Beneficent promised, and the messengers told the truth. It is but a single cry, then lo! They are all brought forth.” 36:51-53

“So turn away from them. On the day when the Inviter invites them to a hard task—their eyes cast down, they will go forth from their graves as if they were scattered locusts, hastening to the Inviter. The disbelievers will say: This is a hard day.” 54:6-8

Wilson: The concept of the physical resurrection has its own difficulties: Suppose a cannibal ate a human body. The eaten body would be integrated with the body of its eater. If the body is resurrected on the Day of Judgment, it would not be possible to judge whether the body belongs to the eater or the eaten. Suppose a human body were eaten by a bird or an animal. The eaten body would be integrated with the body of its eater. What will be resurrected on the Day of Judgment? Is it the bird and the animal or the human body?

Chirri: No food would be entirely integrated with the body of its eater, and resurrection does not require the existence of all the elements of the body. As long as the substance or some of the substance of the body remains unintegrated with the body of the eater, the reconstruction of the respective body would be possible.

Furthermore, God Who has power over everything can distinguish between the original parts of the body of the eater and what was integrated with it from the other body. He is able to separate them and to reconstruct two separate bodies.

Suppose the separation is impossible, God is able to create a body from different elements other than the lost one and unite the newly created body with the human soul on the Day of Judgment.

Wilson: Some religions teach that the human soul is simple and indivisible, and some philosophers subscribe to these ideas. Does Islam teach the same or does it have a different teaching in regard to this?

Chirri: The Qur'an is silent on these points. It does not confirm nor deny the simplicity or the indivisibility or the immutability of the human soul. Nor does it state that the human soul is a substance or that it is non-physical or physical. It is completely silent on all of these aspects, and it actually dismisses all these questions. They are beyond the human knowledge, and the answer to any of these questions will not serve a religious purpose. From the Holy Qur'an:

“And they ask thee about the (human) soul. Say: The soul proceeds from my Lord's command, and of knowledge you are given but little.” 17:85

Wilson: Some religions teach that the human soul after death may occupy a body of a newly born child

or it may occupy a living body of some animal. Does Islam subscribe to any concept of reincarnation or transmigration?

Chirri: The Holy Qur'an clearly denies the concepts of reincarnation and transmigration. The human soul, leaving the body at the time of death, will not be allowed to re-live in this world in any form. From the Holy Qur'an:

“Until death overtakes one of them, he says: My Lord, send me back, that I may do good with that which I left. By no means! It is but a word that he speaks. And behind them is a barrier, until the day they will be raised.” 23:99–100

Thus, the Holy Qur'an states that the human soul will not live twice on this Earth, so it will not be allowed to occupy another living body, human or non-human.

The observable facts support this teaching. If the human souls are to occupy new human bodies, there would be no increase in population, because a human soul can occupy only one body. The population of the world was about one billion in the last century. Now we have about five billions. How can we account for the increase of four billions if no new souls are created?

As a matter of fact, if the concept of reincarnation is a reality, the number of the population should not go above two persons, because at the beginning there were only the two human souls of Adam and Eve.

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