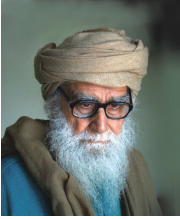


MAN

AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE



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If a group of people were asked, “What is the most important issue for humankind today?” People would have different answers. Some would say that the spread of nuclear weapons was the most important issue. Some would say the population explosion, while others might say that the production and distribution of wealth were of paramount importance.

Such diversity of opinions shows that people in general do not properly recognize themselves. If they did, they would all agree that the most critical issue facing humankind was man’s total disregard of the reality of his existence. Man persists in ignoring the inescapable fact that one day he must die and be called to account before his Maker. If he were to become aware of the reality of his existence, it would be to the afterlife rather than to this world that he would direct his attention. If you stand in a bustling shopping centre during rush-hour and observe what people are hurrying towards, you will realize what a person has chosen as his fundamental issue. Why do you think there is an endless stream of traffic in the streets? Why has the merchant decorated his shop? Where are the crowds of people coming from and going to? What is the main topic of people’s conversation and the true purpose of their meeting one another? What interests them the most? To what use are their finest talents and resources put? What have people taken with them from their homes, and what do they intend to return with? If you can answer these questions, you will also be able to deduce exactly what it is that humankind has chosen to base his life on and what it is endeavouring to achieve.

This article explores Islamic perspective about ‘man’. A discerning reader, it is hoped, will be inspired to ponder over and compare this perspective with his natural feelings. For progress and success in life, the stream of thought ought to be refreshed by the inclusion of novel ideas and fresh observations.



The Concept of Man

Man is God's servant. Man has been created by God with a specific plan, that is, to place him temporarily on Earth in order to give him the opportunities in the form of different situations to help him to mould himself into a heavenly personality. Those who make use of this opportunity, which is referred to as 'passing the test' in the Quran, will be rewarded, while those who fail will be rejected.

For the purposes of this test, man has been granted freedom in this world. Whatever man receives in this world is not a matter of right but is means of trial. Every situation here is a test, and in all situations man must give a proper response, as is required of him by God.

The proper attitude for man is not to take to the path of his desires, but to understand the divine plan of creation and then after being convinced of its ineluctability; he should build his life accordingly. Man may deviate from the divine plan by misusing the freedom given to him by God, but he cannot save himself from the consequences of this deviation.

In such a state of affairs, it is in the interest of man himself that he remain extremely cautious in determining the course of his life. Instead of being guided by his whims and petty desires, he should make God's will his guide. Instead of pursuing his own desires, he should lead a life in conformance with the commands of God.

Man may be a masterpiece of divine creation, but he must nevertheless remain subservient to the plan of God. Making a full acknowledgement of these two aspects of the existence of humankind is the key to human progress. Man succeeded in building the modern industrial civilization by discovering and exploiting the laws of nature. Similarly in the next world man will achieve lasting success on a much greater scale, but only after striving earnestly to comprehend the creation plan of God for humanity and adhering unflinchingly to its edicts.



The Relationship Between Man and God

The Quran says, “When My servants ask you about Me, say that I am near. I respond to the call of one who calls, whenever he calls to Me: let them, then, respond to Me, and believe in Me, so that they may be rightly guided. (2: 186) This shows that the relationship between man and God is reciprocal. Man offers God what he has, then God bestows His favours in return. Man offers his Lord a gift of realization, piety and thankfulness. In return, God provides him with eternal guidance and prosperity.

Man can deal with any problem in either of two ways: the pious and morally proper way, or the way in which such values are abandoned. The correct answer to the call of God is for one to use one’s intellect to ascertain the right course of action and then follow it, difficult as it may seem. One then automatically avoids the easy, though misguided way.

Sometimes one is faced with the choice between callous and unjust action on the one hand, and righteous, fair treatment on the other. If one answers God’s call as it should be answered, one will not flinch from the righteous path and will refrain from indulging in oppression and cruelty.

Man is free to think of what he has, within him and outside, as a result of chance. Alternatively, he may look at it all as the fruits of his efforts; or he can acknowledge reality and consider it all as having come from God. A person who adopts this latter course will answer the call of God implicit in every blessing by exclaiming, “Lord, You are the Bestower and You have given me everything!” When one has offered one’s mind and heart to God in this way, then God will provide one with guidance, which means a righteous life in this world and eternal Paradise in the next.

Man persists in ignoring the inescapable fact that one day he must die and be called to account before his Maker. If he were to become aware of the reality of his existence, it would be to the afterlife rather than to this world that he would direct his attention.

Man and His Mind

Man has been created by God with two opposing yet complementary qualities: the spiritual and the physical. On the one hand is his mind, in respect of which he finds himself limitless. He can think anything he wishes; there are simply no boundaries to his thinking. Yet, in his physical existence, man is extremely limited. He is bound by innumerable constraints. The greatest limiting factor which man faces is death. Death nullifies all greatness in man.

This is man's severest test. In all his apparent greatness, he must acknowledge how humble his existence is. Passing from a limitless to a limited environment he must acknowledge the confines within which he lives. He must accept restrictions in an atmosphere of apparent freedom. Man is constantly under trial in this world. To pass these tests, he must learn his practical limitations vis-à-vis his intellectual limitlessness. By so doing, he can save himself from all misapprehensions, and can exercise his free will in the sphere of reality.

So far as animals are concerned, their thinking capacity barely goes beyond the immediate needs of survival. They are, in this sense, like living machines. By contrast, the stretch of man's thinking is vast. The greatest test of humanity is to discover a balance between thought and action.



The proper attitude for man is not to take to the path of his desires, but to understand the divine plan of creation and then after being convinced of its ineluctability; he should build his life accordingly.

Man's Quest

Man longs for a perfect world, however he is compelled to live in an imperfect one. His happiness is always short-lived and every success is, in some way, marred by losses. The aspirations that he cherishes in the early days of his life are shattered as he begins to age. Just as he begins to take root on Earth, disaster, old age, disease and death overtake him.

How enchanting the flowers are, but they blossom only to wither. How brilliant is the sun's radiance, but it shines for only a short while before being enveloped in darkness. Miraculous though man's existence is, no miracle can save him from death. Everything in this world shall perish. Although this world is inexpressibly beautiful and meaningful, all its virtues are bound to fade. All mundane things have a dark side to them. How, one may ask, could God who is Himself perfect, be satisfied with the creation of an intrinsically imperfect world? The absolute cannot abide in the non-absolute. This world must be inconclusive. Another world must follow to compensate for the inadequacies of the present one.

Everyone is seeking some unseen fulfillment. Everyone seeks a perfect world, but this has always eluded man. It is quite natural for man to seek something which is beyond him. The true object of his aspirations and strivings is the One, Infinite God. The entire cosmos testifies to the existence of the Supreme God. The emergence of a world of infinite blessings is just as likely as the existence of the present transitional world. How can an inherently infinite Creator be satisfied with a finite manifestation of His attributes? God, Who created all things from naught, can surely endow creation with perpetuity.

Man is always searching for a world of everlasting content. This quest is quite correct and in accordance with human nature; but his dreams cannot come true in this world, for here; there cannot be an eternally perfect order. The resources needed for such a world are lacking. The Prophet taught that God has made this world one of trial and tribulation, not one of reward and retribution. This world is brimming with challenges and hardships which put man to the test. The factors required for a life of everlasting delight and repose will be forthcoming only in the next world. Death divides these two worlds. Death marks the completion of the trial of man and his entrance into the world of eternity.

If one wishes one's dreams to come true, one should not try to construct a heaven on Earth. One should rather try to succeed in the trial of life, accepting the role of God's true servant, adopting the model of the Prophet and restricting one's freedom to the limits which God has laid down. The dreams of those who succeed in the trial of life will be fulfilled in the next world. Those who fail will find nothing but woe awaiting them.

Paradise is that eternal world of God in which His attributes will appear in all their perfection. It will be free of all the defects we experience in the world about us. Paradise is an evidence of God's absolute power to make beauty perpetual and joy boundless in a world of everlasting peace and contentment.



When one has offered one's mind and heart to God, then God will provide one with guidance, which means a righteous life in this world and eternal Paradise in the next.

Man and Opportunity

It is a matter of everyday experience that in order to make progress in this world, chances and conducive environment do not conveniently present themselves at every juncture. They are few and far between. But most people, unconvinced of how imperative it is to realize their special importance, fail to grasp them in time. Thus, golden opportunities are lost forever, and all that remains is regret at having so foolishly missed them.

The same is true of the Hereafter, but on a scale barely appreciable by human beings. There are the wholly different dimensions of eternal bliss or eternal damnation to be taken into consideration. Everyone, of course, has been given opportunities in the present world to act in the interests of his salvation in the life after death. And then death—the great cut-off point—comes and puts an end to opportunities for all time. After death, when man's eyes are opened he receives a severe shock. Now he finds himself doomed to eternal regret at having squandered unparalleled opportunities, due to his own ignorance, foolishness and lack of a sense of timeliness.

Everyone in this world should behave as a morally responsible servant of God and everyone is given equal opportunities to do so. Yet, in the Hereafter, there will be some who will flounder on the question of missed opportunities, while there will be others who will pass the divine test because of opportunities seized and turned to good advantage. It will be quite obvious on that Day which of God's servants availed the opportunities to serve Him, and which of them did not.

This ultimate reckoning should make us examine our lives with greater earnestness. Are we sufficiently aware of the fact—considering that none of us are immortal—that we cannot go through life allowing one opportunity after another to slip through our fingers? We cannot surely expect to be offered unlimited chances for our salvation. Once death intervenes; looking for alternative possibilities beyond the grave becomes meaningless. There we are ineluctably faced with an eternity of success or an eternity of failure.

Man's Predicament

According to the law of nature, human beings are created in such situations where they have to spend most of their lives in struggle and hardship. Difficulty and sadness are an essential part of the creation plan of the Creator. No man has the power to prevent himself from the life of trials and tribulations. The Quran says: We have created man into a life of toil and trial. (90: 4) This system is to remind man of the fact that the present world is not made as a place of luxury and comfort, rather it is made as a testing ground. This world is created so that man may pass through different situations where it is being decided whether that person is eligible for the eternal life of Paradise or not. One who does not respond positively and rightly in these situations, is eligible to be separated from the rest and suffer eternal punishment.

The present world, highly developed though it is, the conditions of difficulty are still present. The people, owing to unawareness of God's creation plan, do not understand its nature. By giving the wrong response they prove themselves in the eyes of God like the ones who underwent the examination course, but could not make themselves successful.



How enchanting the flowers are, but they blossom only to wither. How brilliant is the sun's radiance, but it shines for only a short while before being enveloped in darkness. Miraculous though man's existence is, no miracle can save him from death.

Stress Management

In these times, big institutions have been established that provide services for de-stressing. In my opinion, the only true solution to this problem is stress management.

This is a matter of general observation that those people, who have suffered in their lives, develop the psychology of, “Let no other suffer what I have suffered.”

This psychology shows that man thinks of every matter as simply worldly matter. According to him, sufferings are only worldly suffering and the biggest task is to make this world a non-suffering place. Whereas this thinking is against the creation scheme of nature, therefore it is just not possible to make this world a suffering-free zone.

Whenever a person experiences unpleasantness in the world, it happens so that a person may take right lessons from it. These lessons should serve as reminders of the reality that the present world is the world of trial. Nobody can find a comfortable life here. Man ought to take lessons from negative experiences of the world. He must awaken the consciousness in himself that in this limited world he cannot achieve his desired life. That he has to seek his desired life in the next lifespan of the unlimited world.

In such a situation, the right lesson from unpleasant experiences is that man remembers the next world of Paradise. He awakens the thinking in himself that “let me not suffer in the Hereafter that which I have suffered in this world.” Successful is he, who has realized the eternal world in this temporary world; one who has discovered the secret of eternal success of the next lifespan in the failures of the present world.

God has made this present world in accordance with such a plan that here every man lives in ‘toil’. On the other hand, the world after death will be free from all grief and only the chosen people of God will receive it.

If observed in the light of this creation plan, the root of the entire human problem is that people want to make their Paradise in the world before death, whereas under the system of nature, such situations do not prevail here at all as may enable one to make one’s Paradise on Earth. Just as no building can be erected either on sand dunes or marshy lands, similarly, in this present world,

it is not possible for anyone to construct his luxury castle. When man meets with failure under the law of nature, he falls prey to different types of negative reactions which wreak further havoc to his personality.

The right way is that, man should acknowledge this law of creation, and plan his life in accordance with it. This plan is just one—in this present world to strive to make oneself the desirable person; so that one may be held eligible for admission to Paradise in the world after death. According to this creation scheme of nature, man has to be content in the world before death and in the world after death he will have Paradise in store for him.



One should try to succeed in the trial of life, accepting the role of God's true servant, adopting the model of the Prophet and restricting one's freedom to the limits which God has laid down.

Man and Animal

In the universe known to us, man is the only creature who possesses superior intelligence. No other creature, so far as we know, is so abundantly endowed with this faculty. Animals, apparently very much resembling us in certain ways, exist nevertheless on another plane, because all their actions are governed by instinct. Instinct, in the broad sense, may be defined as unconscious intelligence. Conscious intelligence, the wellspring of moral choice, is the hallmark of Homo-sapiens; no other species can lay claim to it.

Modern research has shown that the human brain has infinite potential. It contains about 100 billion neurons, interconnected via trillions of synapses and an equal number of non-neuronal cells. This shows that man is born with unlimited capacities. However, experience shows that everyone departs from this world with an acute sense of having failed to achieve what he most desired.

Fulfillment is the deepest aspiration of the human being, but seldom does anyone attain this objective before death overcomes him. This is a tragedy which falls to the lot of the majority of men and women in this life. There are innumerable creatures in the world other than man. They are born and they die like human beings. But unlike man, they are never faced with the problem of discontentment. The word 'tragedy' exists only in the human lexicon. Nowhere does it figure in that of animals.

We can find the answer to this contradiction, if we compare man with animals. A comparative study of man and animals shows that the concept of tomorrow—an exceptional one—is entertained exclusively by man. If it is man's nature to want to extend his today into tomorrow, it is because he hopes that what he failed to find today, he will find tomorrow.

The case of animals is quite different. The study of animals shows that they have no concept of tomorrow. They live only in their today and also die in their today. A number of animal activities which seem to be based on a certain consciousness of tomorrow, for instance, the gathering of food by ants for the future, are governed by an innately perceived threat of extinction rather than by any consciousness of tomorrow or the future.

When we ponder upon this unique quality of foresight in man, we find that his urge to find fulfillment is relative to tomorrow, that is, he sees his

fulfillment as achievable in the future. The biological span of today is very brief, that is why nature has provided for human fulfillment in the lifespan of tomorrow.

There are two stages of human life, one pre-death and the other post-death. The pre-death stage is temporary, while the post-death stage is eternal. This division has been purposefully made. Its objective is to enable man to find in the next stage of life—tomorrow—whatever he has not been able to find today.

As mentioned above, the human brain has such an immense potential that man's physical age, about 100 years, is totally inadequate for its realization. Even if our age could be greatly extended, the conditions on Earth are so full of constraints that man's unlimited mind could never utilize its full potential. When we look at this reality, we are compelled to believe that man requires a far greater world and far greater longevity for his total fulfillment. In the present situation, the potential of the human mind must always fall short of being utilized to its fullest extent.

To explain life in terms of this reality, let us draw a parallel between human life and an iceberg. We are aware of only the tiny part of the iceberg which appears above the surface of the ocean, while the larger part lies hidden beneath the waters. In exactly the same way we are also aware of only that tiny part of life which occurs in the first stage before death, while the remainder—the infinitely extended part—lies hidden from us in the ultimate stage of life after death.

Keeping these realities in view, when we explain human life, we have to portray the present world as a temporary abode, rather than as man's eternal destination.

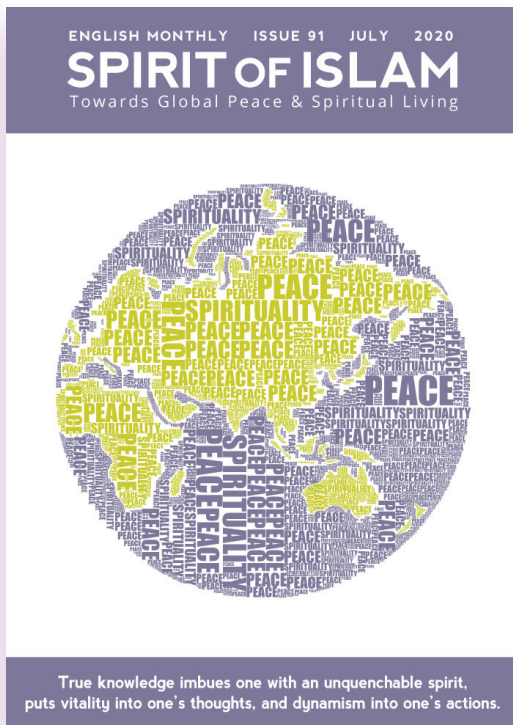
The lifespan before death is like a training period, and the present world is, as it were, man's training ground. Here, ideally, he should receive very thorough moral conditioning during what is only a temporary stay, and then move on to the next eternal world. Every man is necessarily faced with death. What is death? Death is, in fact, a bridge. It acts as a mode of transference from temporal life to an eternal one. It is in the Hereafter that he shall find the opportunity to utilize the full potential of his mind and achieve the happiness induced by total fulfillment.

However, in the second stage of life, the true achievers will only be those who have been receptive to the necessary training in the first stage. Those who arrive there without such training will be deprived of any further opportunity to exploit their own potential. Their case, in the world of the Hereafter, will be identical to that of one who remained deprived of fulfillment in the world he left behind, because of his own unwillingness to subject himself to moral conditioning. This deprivation will be, without doubt, a punishment; a harder punishment is difficult to imagine.

If man lives only in his today and dies in his today, it is as if he has lived and died the life of an animal. That man has truly lived who reaches his 'tomorrow' by living out his 'today' in a state of moral rectitude. He is the one who, after having reached the limit of this worldly lifespan, dies having made full preparation for his tomorrow. Indeed, it is only one such as he, who is worthy of being called a successful person.



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In this booklet, the Padma Bhushan awardee Maulana Wahiduddin Khan sets himself the task of investigating man's nature and his true place in the cosmos as revealed in the Islamic Scriptures. He then applies the results to the resolution of man's present predicament.

Published by: CENTRE FOR PEACE, BENGALURU, INDIA

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