

The Afterlife and the Reality of our Ephemeral Existence

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The general decline of religious belief in modern man has resulted in the abandonment of the belief in the Afterlife. Most contemporary cultures only see as valid the reality accessible to the senses or to the instruments that supplement them, and ridicule the unseen as mere fantasy and myth. As such, death is seen as the final fall of the curtain, bringing an end to the meaningless cosmic anomaly called 'intelligent life'. The idea that there is nothing beyond this world has not led to the liberation of the human mind but to an obsessive attachment to life itself and a frantic, futile effort to escape death. Humans have tried persistently to escape death, whether it is by searching for the stream of eternal life, pumping bodies with cocktails of chemicals and make-up, mummifying them, or more recently, cryogenically freezing bodies or heads right after death in the hope of being "resurrected" at a time when medicine is advanced enough to revive the dead. These unsuccessful attempts to flee death have created a morbid fascination with death in popular culture. Nowhere is this attraction more prevalent than in film where killing is plentiful, varied and presented in vivid detail. In Hollywood, there is no life after death, only this life, and those who cheat death inhabit this world as "un-dead" vampires and frustrated ghosts intent on wreaking a jealous vengeance upon the living by infecting them with the virus of eternal suffering. In this fusion, the only ideal life is one that it is not touched by death, where death is repelled with the intervention of technology. This is the imaginary world inhabited by clones and the perfect blend of man and machine, or man and computer - the cyborg. Thus death is evil and hideous and whatever comes after death is the same. There is no better life than physical perfection that abides forever and this can only be achieved by uniting the biological with the mechanical, or by the creation of spare bodies in the form of clones. In all cases, the only universe they occupy is this physical one for there is no other world beyond it. This type of irrational thinking has ramifications in other aspects of western culture such as the preference for the colour black for dressing, or ghostly white make-up, fascination with vampires and even the filing of incisors down to sharp points to mimic vampire fangs, all of which symbolise death and morbidity. Then there is the attraction of the pseudo-religion of New Ageism which is a syncretion of Buddhist and Hindu teachings combined with Western occultism and science. This strain of thought is fascinated with a narrow idea of reincarnation which takes this world as the only stage upon which all eschatological phenomena manifest themselves. In other words, because this world is the only reality, heaven and hell and all states after death take place right here; you

simply change bodies to experience them. All these attitudes towards the Afterlife are in fact rooted in faith, which is itself rooted in the nature of man. Any attempt to deny or alter that reality only results in that tendency being expressed in another, albeit more erroneous or distorted manner. Faith is innate in human life. Our existence cannot be devoid of love, the desire for it and the expression of it, or the desire to be far away from feelings that compromise our life and our security. As such, from the point of view of Islam, no human being can be devoid of faith, not even a self-professed atheist, for that person would need to INVENT a deity to fill that gap in his soul. That deity can be an idea, and faith the beliefs that arise from that idea. Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq(a) was once asked to identify the minimum degree of polytheism. He replied: "It is to contrive or invent an opinion and to take sides with people who are for it and to be against those who oppose it." Islam teaches us that death is rooted in the nature of things. It is something that characterises this material world, a world that is a state of transformation and becoming. One manifestation of this is decay and dissolution. Our bodies, being part of this material world, are also subject to these laws and must eventually pass away. The Holy Qur'an says: "Everything will perish except His face." (28:88) It is God Himself who has created death, for one of His Names is "Al- Mumeet" the "One who gives death" so there is wisdom and goodness behind death. Death plays a role in controlling the population. An example is encapsulated in the story of a group of people who asked their prophet to pray to his God to take death away from them. He did so and God accepted his prayer. They became so many that their lives became crowded and their offspring too many. Before long they became too preoccupied with seeking their livelihoods, so they asked the prophet to ask God to return them to their previous state. Death for man is a portal, a birth into a higher, and more real and subtle life. Whether that state is a heaven or a hell, this Afterlife is the world that human beings are truly made for. We have been created for the next world and not for this one, for annihilation and not to remain, for death, and not for life. We are in a transient place, a place which is a path to a higher existence beyond earthly life. Even if it remains for us, we will not remain for it. We thus have to prepare for our transition to the eternal abode, and this is the essential function of this world as a stepping stone, a place where we secure our salvation and build the lives we want in the Hereafter. The Prophet Jesus(a) is reported to have said: "Indeed, this world is a bridge, so cross over it but do not build on it." 'Not build on it' here means that we should not make this place a permanent abode. The intention behind our building is whether it is for here and now or for the Hereafter. For example when we build to make opportunities for our children, to ensure the continuity and strength of the society of believers, to enhance the power and welfare of the Muslims, this is

not building for this world but for the Hereafter. What we take from this world should be our good deeds, our positive influences on individuals and society, and our sacrifices for the truth and for what is right. In preparation for a good death, Ali ibn Abi Taleb(a) advises us to; "Fulfil obligations, avoid the forbidden, adopt good moral traits, and then do not care whether one should fall onto death or death fall onto you." We fear death because with it we enter the unknown. This is due to our attachment to the world. The Prophet was asked why people despise death and in response the Prophet asked the questioner, "Do you have wealth?" the man said that he did. Then The Prophet again asked, "And have you given it away?" The person answered, "No." Then the Prophet said, "This is why you do not like death." The believer should anticipate and contemplate death, prepare for it and welcome it. As a result, when the time comes for his transition to the next life, the passage will be easy and peaceful. "For a believer, death is like taking off dirty clothes, undoing shackles and heavy chains and changing into the finest and most scented of clothes. It is the easiest of mounts and the most comforting of abodes. As for the infidel, it is like taking off fine, comfortable clothes, and changing into the dirtiest and roughest of clothes, the most terrifying of stations and the (greatest of punishments."(Imam Zain al Abideen(a