

**Islam**  
**and Coping with Death and Dying**

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## **Introduction**

The ever increasing complexity of modern life and the many problems that it brings necessitate the existence of a support system that helps human beings better deal with their pressured lives. Religion and spirituality, a strong support system, are playing an increasingly important role in helping people cope with their crisis. The knowledge of cultural and religious beliefs is particularly helpful in the psychotherapy of the dying patient as well as in the coping with the loss of loved ones. Islam has the potential of playing that role in the lives of its believers.

Islam, a religion that existed for about 1400 years, is the blueprint of a social order. It is a way of life, a system that encompasses the relationships of the adherents to each other and to their society from birth until death. The term Islam in the lexicon of the Arabs means "Submission" or "Surrender" to God. The religion of Islam is viewed in its essence as the religion of submission to the will of the omniscient Creator, the only God, who admits of no associates in the worship of Him. The followers of Islam manifest a strong devotion to God. They are very much dependent on God in the trivia of daily life.

There are three basic sources of the Islamic tradition. The most important is the Qur'an which for the Muslim is the revelation of God and the book in which His message to man is contained. From the Islamic point of view all knowledge is contained in essence in the Qur'an, the knowledge of all orders of reality. The prophet's Hadith (sayings) and Sunnah (actions), are after the Qur'an, the two most important sources of the Islamic religion. The prophet is the founder of Islam and the messenger of God's revelation to mankind. He is the interpreter of the book of God through his Hadith. The spiritual nature of the prophet is veiled in his human one and his purely

spiritual function is hidden in his duties as the guide of men and the leader of a community (Sunnah).

### **Belief in the Hereafter**

The Islamic belief in the hereafter is traceable to the earlier surahs or verses of the Qur'an. The Resurrection, Last Judgement, Paradise, and Hell are all described. At death, the body again turns to earth while the soul sinks to a state of sleep or unconsciousness until the day of Last judgement.

Belief in predestination is a pillar of the Islamic faith. The sayings of the prophet are replete with his insistence on God's role as preordainer and determiner of all that takes place. According to the sayings of Muhammad "God hath predestined five things to his servants; their duration of life, their actions, their dwelling places, their travels, and their portions". However, man is not acquainted in this life with anything of what God has predestined for him. The lack of this knowledge allows him personal freedom of choice and action, which are in no way affected by his ignorance and which ought not interfere in his fulfilling the normal obligations attending his belief.

It is also argued that belief in predestination prevents fortune or misfortune to sway the believer from the right path. Being alive to the purpose of divine will enable a believing Muslim to accept cheerfully his fate and to endure conditions of hardship and misfortune without loss of faith. Inasmuch as good and bad have been predetermined and decreed by God, no amount of human effort can hold back the inevitable. Hence the Muslim submits himself with resignation to all trials with the knowledge that this is a part of God's design.

### **Religious Coping of the Bereaved and Dying**

Religious faith is increasingly the medium of the bereaved and dying patients to overcome their painful ordeal. When human beings are faced

with overwhelming feelings of grief and despair, religious beliefs are a main solace. Caregivers are frequently utilizing these beliefs as therapeutic techniques in their practice. They are reframing their patients' situation more positively by concentrating on the immortal soul rather than the flesh. The belief in the soul is very strong in Islam. Dying patients who give up their control of their lives to God seek peace with themselves. By the same token, the bereaved seek comfort for their loss by concentrating on the immortality of the soul.

Patience is an appropriate coping mechanism used by the bereaved in dealing with their loss. The virtue of patience in Islam is emphasized in every facet of human life. Patience is promised to be the means for God's blessings and mercy. God said to the prophet: "Tell your people that if you are struck by some fear, hunger, loss of wealth and children, tell the patient ones who face a misfortune, we belong to God and to God we return. Those will have my blessings and mercy and those are the ones who follow the right path". When struck by a calamity, man should know that God is testing his patience and his beliefs. God wants to hear his prayers and pleas for only through those will man come out like "red gold".

Parting with the deceased and the following process of bereavement for the loss of a loved one are believed to be the most painful experience that a human being can go through. Islamic faith emphasizes the belief that everything on earth belongs to God. This is believed to be helpful to people who are dealing with their loss. A man has nothing before and after life. What man owns on earth, his family, his money, and his belongings belong to God. Man enjoys them and acts on them only with the will of God. At the time of death, God simply takes back what belongs to Him. Therefore

having this faith, it is easier for the believers to part with their loved ones because God got back what he originally owned.

Man can also overcome his grief and sadness by praying to God and appealing to his mercy. Surrendering one's fate to his mighty powers is the basis of the Islamic faith. The prophet instructed his people to cope with their troubles and resultant depression by repeating "There is no strength or way without God". He advocated surrendering to God because man's fate is in God's hands. The prophet asked his people to read the Qur'an to help them overcome grief, temptations, suspicions, and doubts, and to pray and ask for his mercy and forgiveness.

Islam also attends to the painful feelings of the dying in bidding farewell to their lives on earth. Death is believed to be the end of man's path in this world which leads to the other world. Therefore, although the flesh is forsaken, the soul is promised eternal existence. Man leaves this world and faces God alone without belongings just as he did at birth. What he carries with him are his good deeds and bad deeds. Therefore, a belief that the act of dying is a transitional stage that leads to the hereafter may give hope to the dying and ease their pain at their departure from this temporal world.

The inevitability of death and need for being in touch with reality are emphasized throughout the Qur'an. God told his prophet to convey to his people that the world is full of calamities and misfortunes that are inevitable. He called upon them to be patient and informed them that if they surrender to the will of God, He will bestow upon them three good things: prayers, mercy, and righteousness.

Facing death without fear of the unknown is commonly the issue most struggled with during that time. The prophet indicates that having fear in

one's heart is contrary to God's wish. Fear makes one's enemy happy while a friend sad; God is angry and the devil is pleased. The love of God makes it easier to accept the inevitable and agree with God's will. This is believed to be the characteristic of love and its secret. If man does not agree with God's will, then love is a lie.

The pain and despair that is felt at the death of a loved one is sometimes expressed in the form of weeping and wailing. According to Islam this is sacriligious because it results in the increased suffering of the deceased. However, tears expressed in the eyes of the mourners are a sign of mercy and compassion. This belief may speed the healing process by allowing the believers to ventilate their feelings and aid the bereaved in dealing with their mourning.

Islamic beliefs provided support in the form of guidelines to deal with the death of children and young adults. Special attention has been allotted to it due to the overwhelming pain that is usually felt given the young age of the deceased. The Qur'an refers to the young ones who float around heaven, enter every place and are not forbidden from any area. A man whose son died was consoled by the prophet and was told: "Aren't you happy that on Doom's Day your son will be next to you. He will be told 'go to heaven' and your son will ask God 'and my parents' and then God will listen and all of you will go to heaven".

The Qur'an, Hadiths and Sunnahs are replete with stories and anecdotes about death, bereavement, and the hereafter. These provide a very rich source for spirituality oriented caregivers to aid the bereaved and the dying at the moment of truth. When man is struck with misfortunes and becomes aware of his vulnerability, religious beliefs may be used as a vehicle for dealing with loss.

## References

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