ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Thanatopsis in Muslim Theological and Ethical Works

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ABSTRACT

Some people have perceived that Muslims want to die rather than to live in this world due to their theological beliefs in the eschatological matters such as the existence of the Paradise, the eternal abode for the pious Muslims. This paper does not support such view and it wants to show the opposite by making its points from the subjects of death and thanatopsis in Muslim theological and ethical works. The thanatopsis in the Muslim theological and ethical works does not welcome death as soon as possible but it welcomes a longer life in this world. The thanatopsis in such works does not welcome death but it is considered as means to control the evil desires found in human minds or souls. This paper plans to prove its thesis by providing the references to the Muslim revelational sources praising and recommending life rather than death and the views of Muslim scholars on the subjects of death and thanatopsis. Through the thanatopsis, the Muslims do not welcome their own deaths but they want to get their death times be extended as long as possible. Through the thanatopsis, they prefer to live longer in this world rather than to die sooner. For them the thanatopsis aims at controlling the evil desires since they bring sinful acts and destructions to human bodies and souls sooner than the destined deaths.

Key words: Thanatopsis, Muslim Theology, Muslim ethics, sinful acts, evil desires.

Introduction

I agree with the statement made by Dina Greenberg (2007) that “Beliefs and customs surrounding death, funeral rites, and mourning provide a window into a society’s most deeply held values.”(2007). Muslims believe in death and life after death. They do not deny death and they also do not deny the existence of life after death in the hereafter. They do not subscribe to the thanatological concepts such as “the denial of death”, “the fear of death” and “the dread of death” although such concepts are apparent among some western societies. Kate Arthur has stated that the thanatological literature in the West is “full of the theme of fear of death” due to many factors such as “the developed world’s alienation from nature, secularism, rationalism, cyber and/or technological isolation, medicalization, social/economic/political structures and simple ignorance.” (Arthur 2002). She explains that the Western secularists, psycho-analysts and humanists are very afraid of death because they do not believe in the eternity or immortality of human souls. “The psychoanalytic school and many of its philosophic successors agree that death is the basic source of all anxiety, the terror that haunts all human activity, claims Becker.” (Arthur 2002). They have been under the influence of “the denial of death” that first introduced by Sigmund Freud in 1915. (Arthur 2002). However, Arthur points out, “The great religions have urged contemplation of death in life as a means to spiritual wholeness. Instead of being abolish from life, death is universally integrated to religious observance. If the faithful embrace death in life then they are more able to accept the exigencies of life, death and transcendence. Death in life lends symbolic meaning to conundrums of human existence.”(Arthur 2002). Surely, Islam is one of the great religions until this early 21st century A. C. or this 15th century A.H.

This paper is on thanatopsis based on Muslim theological and ethical works. However, it is probably relevant to first introduce the death and its meanings and proofs in Muslim theological works.

2. Death in Muslim theological works:

Historically Islam is the religion received and spread by the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia in the seventh century C.E. In 610 he started to receive the divine revelations when he was about forty years old and he received, delivered and spread the revelations up to his death in 632. The textual corpuses of the divine revelations are found in the Koran and the Prophetic traditions. According to Daniel Brown, the Koran can be approached in three different ways namely the Koran “as sacred object, as historical artifact, and as discursive text to be interpreted and understood.”(Brown 2004: 54). The divine revelations received and spread by the Prophet Muhammad can be broadly divided into theological, legal, ritual and ethical domains.

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The Arabic word for death is al-maut as mentioned in the Koran (65: 10) that exhorts the believers to spend some of the bestowed bounty given by God before death come to them. The Koran (39: 42) stresses that God makes an individual or a living being die when the time for his death has been decreed for him. Another Arabic word that used to mean death is ajal although it has something to do with time and duration. Among the meanings of ajel are “term, appointed time, limited time, fixed term, period, duration, date; deadline moment of death, instant of death, death” (Baalbaki 1996: 40). The Koran (7: 35) explains that every generation or individual has its or his own fixed time whereby when that time reaches, it can be neither delayed nor advanced by a single hour or a minute.

In Muslim Arabic theological works, the death is categorized under the belief in the Last Day or al-yawm al-akhir in Arabic. The Last Day has been defined as the ending of the life on the earth and the starting of another life made by God in order to for the calculation, the good reward, and the punishment. The belief in the Last Day means the firmest and strongest belief in what will happen after the death such as the life in the isthmus or al-barzakh in Arabic, the events of the doomsday, and the affairs after the doomsday such as the resurrection, the congregation, the segregation, the record, the scale, the calculation, the compensation, the bridge, the pond, the intercession, the paradise and the hell. (Fatimah 1998: 396).

The topic of death is the first topic comes immediately after the definitions of the Last Day and belief in the Last Day. The verses from the Koran are cited by Dr. Fatimah to prove the existence of death and its inevitability for every living human being. Death is a reality taking place with a human being and it is impossible for him to escape from his death. Death is God’s decree that cannot be avoided. God is the One who makes life and death. God sends His angel of death to take away the spirits or souls from the dying human bodies. Among the verses of the Koran on the death cited by Dr. Fatimah are the Koran (3: 185; 4:78: 32: 11; 39: 42; 50: 19; 56: 60; and 62: 8). (Fatimah 1998: 397).

The second topic after the death is the barzakh consisting of the life after death in the grave and after the grave until the resurrection day. Two angels named Munkar and Nakir are sent by God to pose few questions to the dead human being buried in his grave. If the dead human is able to answer correctly all the questions posed by the angels, he is in state of facility until the resurrection day. If the dead human is unable to answer correctly the questions posed by the two angels, he is in the state of disappointment until the resurrection day. There are the verses and the Prophetic traditions cited by Dr. Fatimah to prove the existence of the barzakh and its different conditions for the dead believers, non-believers, and the believers who committed the grave sins during their opportunities to live in on the earth. (Fatimah 1998: 398-401).

Dr. Muhammad Ahmad al-Khatib and Dr. Muhammad `Awdd al-Hazayimah in their Arabic theological work discuss about the death in the seventh chapter on the belief in the Last Day. According to both authors, the belief in the Last Day is the belief in what is revealed by God in His Book, the Koran, and what is informed by His Prophet Muhammad about whatever will take place after the death such as the happiness and unhappiness in the graves, the resurrection, the congregation, the record, the calculation, the scale, the pond, the bridge, the divine intercession, the paradise and the hell. (al-Khatib and al-Hazayimah 1997: 224). The congregation of human beings will take place after their resurrection. The records of human deeds are given to all human beings after their resurrection. The calculation and measurement of human deeds are done after their resurrection. The pond is available for the good and pious human beings; they are able to drink some water from the pond while they are waiting for God’s final judgment after their resurrection; the final judgment of God refers to the decision made by God for each human being either he is one of the members of the eternal paradise or he is one of the members of the eternal hell in the hereafter. (al-Khatib and al-Hazayimah 1997: 224-264).

In the Muslim English theological works, the death is classified under the belief in eschatology. Tabatabai, for example, presents the death in the chapter on eschatology. In his work, he presents the four theological pillars in Shiasm; they are Islamic beliefs in Shiasm. The four beliefs are belief in God, the Prophets, Eschatology and Imamology. (Tabatabai n.d.123-217)

It is obligatory upon all Muslims to believe in the death of all living beings especially human beings. The Muslim theological scholar named Shaykh Ibrahim bin Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Shafi’i al-Bayjuri (d.1277 A.H.) who wrote the commentary for the theological work written by Shaykh Ibrahim bin Hasan al-Laqani (d.1014A.H.) stated that it is obligatory upon us to believe in the death because in principle the death is witnessed by all rational human beings; it is also mentioned in the Koran (39: 30) stating that you die and they die, and the Koran (3: 185) states that every living self will die. And there are many of the Prophetic traditions indicating the death of human beings and other living beings. (al-Bayjuri 2004: 174-175).

Abdullah Yusuf Ali in his brief commentary to the Koran (3: 185) writes, “The soul will not die; but the death of the body will give a taste of death to the soul when the soul separates from the body. The soul will then know that this life was but probation. And seeming inequalities will be adjusted finally on the Day of Judgement.” (Ali 1996: 177). For the Koran (39: 30), Ali briefly comments, “Even the prophets are not exempt from bodily death, much less the righteous, but they live in their beneficent work and the memories they leave behind them. All men have to die, good or a like. But there is a life after death, and in that life all the
unexplained things about which people dispute in this world will be made clear in the presence of Allah.”(Ali 1996: 1189).

In Muslim theology, there is an angel who takes out the human souls or spirits from human bodies when they die. That angel is known as the angel of death or malik al-mawt in Arabic. Al-Bayjuri identifies the angel of death with the angel called ‘Izra’il (al-Bayjuri 2004: 175). According the Prophetic traditions cited by al-Bayjuri, the angel of death is very polite and very caring to the Muslims when their souls are to be taken away from their bodies. For the non-believers, the angel of death is very harsh and uncaring to them when their souls are to be taken away from their bodies. (al-Bayjuri 2004: 175).

Muslim theologians do not agree on the nature of death whether it is an existence or non-existence, or wujudiy or ‘adamiyy in Arabic. For the Muslim theologian named Abu Hasan al-Ash’ari, death is an attribute of existence contrary to life. He justifies his definition of death by referring to the Koran (67: 2) stating that God is who has created death and life. Meanwhile Muslim theologians named al-Asfiryani and al-Zamakhshari define death as the non-existence of life form the existence of life. (al-Bayjuri 2004: 175). Abu Hasan al-Ash’ari (d. 932 C.E.) is the founder of the main Muslim theological and Kalam school spread among the Sunni Muslims.

For al-Khatib and al-Hazayimah, death is the opposite of life and when a human being dies, his soul is separated from his body and his soul goes up to God and moves on from a life to a life from a place to a place. The death is not a non-existence but it is a created existence since when a human being dies he does not become a non-existence but he moves to another existing world. Hence the death is not a total destruction or annihilation but a movement of a human being from the open world to the world of bahrak that exists between this temporary and destructive world and the eternal life world. (al-Khatib and al-Hazayimah 1997: 229). It is evident that both Muslim scholars namely al-Khatib and al-Hazayimah probably agree with the definition of death expressed by Abu Hasan al-Ash’ari although they do not refer to any work written by al-Ash’ari.

Tabatabai compares between a superficial view and Islamic view on death stating, “Although a superficial view would regard death as the annihilation of man and see human life as consisting of only the few days that stand between birth and death, Islam interprets death as the transfer of man from one stage of life to another. According to Islam man possesses eternal life which knows no end.”(Tabatabai n.d. 163). For Tabatabai, death does not mean man’s annihilation but his body is separated from his soul or spirit. His spirit is returned to him again after the Doomsday to receive either the divine reward or punishment based on his good or evil deeds during his life in this world. Tabatabai states, “Death, which is separation of the spirit from the body, introduces man to another stage in which felicity or disappointment depends upon good or evil deeds in the stage of life before death.”(Tabatabai n.d. 163-164).

For Tabatabai, the life of every human being has at least two stages. One stage is his life in this world and another stage is his life in the hereafter. All Muslims agree with their theologians who consider that a human life in this world is a human preparation for his another life in the hereafter since God has created humans and djinns to worship Him while they live in this world and to receive God’s rewards or punishments in the hereafter depending on their merits or good deeds and demerits or evil deeds acquired by them while they live in this world.

In Muslim theological works, death is not the final or last journey of every human being since Islam makes all Muslims to believe in the existence of life in the hereafter. Human life in this world or on this earth planet is a preparation for the human life in the hereafter. The events taking place in the hereafter after the death and the doomsday are presented under the belief in the Last Day in Muslim Arabic theological works and under eschatology in Muslim English theological works. According to Muslim theological works, Islam and Muslims reject thanatism, the belief that human soul dies with human body. The thanatism diametrically contradicts Islamic and Muslim theological doctrines on the eternity of human souls or spirits and the existence of the life in the hereafter whereby human souls are returned to their new bodies after the day of resurrection taking place after the doomsday.

3. Thanatopsis in Muslim theological and ethical works:

Thanatopsis is used here to mean reflection on death or recollection of death and in Arabic word it is called as dhikr al-mawt. The Muslim theologian, ethicist, philosopher and mystic Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 555A.H./1111 A.C) places the thanatopsis in the Islamic ethical principles. His work named Kitab al-arba`in fi usul al-din (the book on the forty principles of religion) presents the ten theological principles, the ten apparent action principles, the ten blameworthy ethical principles, and lastly the ten praiseworthy ethical principles. All together are forty principles of the religion of Islam. The ten praiseworthy ethical principles mentioned by al-Ghazali are: 1. Repentance, penitence or contrition. 2. Fear of God 3. Asceticism. 4. Patience, forbearance or perseverance. 5. Gratitude, thankfulness or gratefulness. 6. Sincerity, honesty or faithfulness. 7.
Prophet Muhammad. It is reported that 'Aishah asked the Prophet about becoming one of the ten martyrs. The Al-Ghazali cites the Prophetic tradition related to the thanatopsis as reported by 'Aishah, the widow of the Ghazali 1988: 204). Between the heart and the world. The death is unavoidable or inescapable as mentioned in the Koran (62:8). (al-is greatly rewarded because it is able to become a barrier from loving the world, and to cut the relationship the reward or compensation is great for those who recollect death in the law of Islam. The recollection of death is greatly rewarded because it is able to become a barrier from loving the world, and to cut the relationship between the heart and the world. The death is unavoidable or inescapable as mentioned in the Koran (62:8). (al-Ghazali 1988: 204).

Al-Ghazali cites the Prophetic tradition related to the thanatopsis as reported by 'Aishah, the widow of the Prophet Muhammad. It is reported that 'Aishah asked the Prophet about becoming one of the ten martyrs. The Prophet replied yes and it is for a person who recollects the death twenty times everyday and every night. (al-Ghazali 1988: 204). From the Prophetic tradition related to the thanatopsis, it is evident that if a Muslim intends to become a martyr like the ten martyrs, he is able to becomes one of them provided that he recollects the death twenty times every day and every night. This means that his recollection of death twenty times per day and per night, his reward is equivalent with the reward granted to the martyr in Islamic theology and ethics. A Muslim is not required to become a martyr like the ten martyrs in the Muslim early history, but he can become one of them by recollecting the death twenty times every day and every night.

Al-Ghazali says that the Prophet said: “I left among you the two advisors, one is silent and another one is speaking. The speaking advisor is the Koran while the silent advisor is the death.” (al-Ghazali 1988: 205). Another Prophetic tradition concerning the thanatopsis cited by al-Ghazali is a man among the Helpers of the Prophet asked the Prophet saying “Oh God’s messenger, who are more sagacious and nobler among human beings?” The Prophet replied: They are those who are most recollecting the death and those who are most preparing for the death; they are the most sagacious; they go with the comfort of the world and the honor of the hereafter.”(al-Ghazali 1988: 205).

The two Prophetic traditions, recorded by al-Ghazali in his work, do not ask Muslims to die as soon as they can but to take the death as a silent advisor for them and to prepare themselves good enough in this world for the good and honorable life in the hereafter. The death can become an advisor for Muslims. Hence it is very useful for all Muslims to recollect the death every day and night because the thanatopsis reminds them about their responsibilities and duties to be carried out or performed fully and diligently for God’s sake as well as for the sakes of themselves, their families and their societies and nations. The thanatopsis constantly reminds all Muslims that their good deeds in this world are rewarded in this world and in the hereafter while their evil deeds are punished in this world and in the hereafter. All human beings including Muslims are not more sagacious if they do not recollect the death and do not prepare themselves for their deaths in this world. Muslims are more sagacious if they always recollect the death and be well prepared before their deaths come to them in this. The most sagacious Muslims are those who are making efforts and deeds to attain the good and comfort of this world and then the honor in the hereafter since all Muslims believe in the existence of another life for them in the hereafter.

The thanatopsis for the mystics has two benefits according to al-Ghazali. The first benefit is their disaffection with this world. The second one is their longing for the hereafter. (al-Ghazali 1988: 207). Theologically and ethically, the life in this granted by God for all human beings including Muslims are for them to be well prepared for the life in the hereafter; Muslims must take the full and good advantage of their lifetimes in this world for preparing themselves for their lifetimes in the hereafter. They should not keep postponing the good things that they should do in the morning to the afternoon and from afternoon to the next morning. Al-Ghazali cited the Prophetic tradition asking 'Abdullah bin 'Umar not to postpone or delay in doing the good things during the morning, afternoon and night times before his death comes to him since he does not know what will happen to him tomorrow.(al-Ghazali 1988: 206). This reminds all Muslims that the time of death is not known to them and hence they have to always prepare themselves well before their lifetimes come to the end.

The Malay Muslim theologian and ethicist named Shaykh Daud bin Abdullah Patani (1769-1842) has a work on thanathology and thanatopsis named Kashf al-ghummah, first published in 1238 A.H. Regarding the importance of thanatopsis for all Muslims, Daud refers to some of the Prophetic traditions. One of them explains that the thanatopsis can wipe out or eradicate some sins. Daud says that the Prophetic tradition reported by Anas asks Muslim to recollect death as many as he can since the thanatopsis wipes out his sins and make him an ascetic. (Daud, 1: 7-8). The second Prophetic tradition is about the importance of good ethical conducts and the thanatopsis. The Prophet was asked about the better believers and the Prophet replied that those whose ethical conducts are better. The Prophet was asked about the more numerous believers and the Prophet replied that those who are more in their recollection of death. The third Prophetic tradition is about the Muslims who recollect death twenty times every day and night are put in the same place with the martyrs during the congregation in the hereafter.(Daud 1: 8).
Daud also mentions the views of Muslim religious scholars regarding the significance of thanatopsis for all Muslims. The Muslim religious scholars mention three benefits for Muslims if they recollect death. First, they are hurry to repent. Second, their hearts are very content with what they have. Third, they are very diligent and dedicated in their worships. The Muslim religious scholars mention three disadvantages for Muslims if they do not recollect death. First, they forget to repent. Second, they do not feel satisfied with what they have, and finally they are reluctant and lazy in their worships. (Daud, 1: 9).

The thanatopsis is not intended to hasten the death for a Muslim. He is encouraged to recollect the death in order to remind himself about his obligations toward himself, his dependents, his families, his society, his nation and his creator God. He is discouraged from inviting the death for himself. The main purpose of the thanatopsis is to excel in this world with good deeds as his preparation for his life in the hereafter. If a Muslim prepares well in this world for his life in the hereafter, he is a more sagacious man according to the Prophetic tradition cited by Daud in his work. Daud reports that the Prophet explains that a wise man is someone who prepares himself in this world for his life in the hereafter and a weak man is someone who lives in this world following his own lusts and whims. (Daud, 1: 12).

Daud states the legal term “makruh” in Islamic law if a Muslim wishes to die and prays for his death when he faces some difficulties in his life in this world. Daud cites the Prophetic tradition saying, “Someone should not wish to die due to some ordeals inflicting upon him but he has to say oh God please prolong my life if it is better for me and please let me die if it is better for me.” Another Prophetic tradition discouraging Muslims from wishing to die is reported by Anas. The Prophet is reported as saying, “Someone among you should not wish to die. If he is a good man, he is perhaps able to increase his goodness and if he is a bad man, he is perhaps able to repent.”(Daud, 1: 13). Muslims should repent from their sins. Repentance is one the ten praiseworthy principles as mentioned by al-Ghazali in his work referred in this paper.

Regarding the juristic or legal term makruh in Arabic, its English translation is “undesirable”, “reprehensible” or “reproachable”. Muslim jurists have classified Muslim actions and performances in this world into five legal categories. First category is obligatory, fard or wajib in Arabic. The second category is forbidden or prohibited, haram. The third category is commendable or recommended, mandub. The fourth category is undesirable, makruh. The fifth category is permissible, mubah. (Ansari 1986: 77-78). If Muslims perform the prohibited actions or they do not perform the obligatory actions, they commit sins in Muslim theology and they commit crimes in Muslim law. Hence, according to Muslim law, if a Muslim wishes to die for some difficulties or troubles that he faces during his life in this world, that wish falls in the undesirable category. His wish to die is undesirable in Islamic law. According to the Prophetic tradition cited by Daud, it is better for a good Muslim to live longer in this world in order to increase his goodness. It is still better for a bad or evil Muslim to live longer in this world because he has time to repent from his evil acts and sins before he dies.

In his work, Daud does not mention the works of al-Ghazali on thanatology and thanatopsis but he mentions the works of Jalal al-Din ’Abd al-Rahman al-Sayuti and the works of Shaykh ’Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha’rani as his references. (Daud, 1: 4-5). Therefore, it is very evident and reasonable to state here that these four Muslim theologians and ethicists are among the Muslim scholars who see the significance of thanatopsis for all Muslims. However, they do not see the thanatopsis as an Islamic religious concept to encourage Muslims to wish to die as soon as possible. The thanatopsis is the Islamic religious concept to remind Muslims to perform and do all actions and performances that fall within the categories of obligatory, commendable and permissible in the Muslim law. If Muslims perform the obligatory, commendable and permissible actions in their lifetimes in this world, they are promised with rewards and goodness in this world and in the hereafter. The thanatopsis reminds Muslims not to do and perform all actions that fall within the prohibited and undesirable categories because such actions bring them to sins and troubles or punishments in this world and in the hereafter.

Conclusions:

By referring to the Muslim theological and ethical works, one was written by al-Ghazali and another one by Shaykh Daud, this paper is probably able to show clearly that the thanatopsis in Islam never encourages Muslims to shorten their lifetimes in this world. The thanatopsis is also not a Muslim theological and ethical principle for the Holy War and to become the martyrs in the Holy War. The thanatopsis is a Muslim psychological, spiritual, mystical, ethical and theological principle or concept that reminding all Muslims to be more capable and better Muslims in observing what is commanded by God and in controlling Muslims from doing whatever is prohibited by God. All Muslims should take advantage of their lifetimes in this world as good and wise as possible in order to prepare themselves for their another life in the hereafter. This is very much in line with the Koran (28: 77) commanding Muslims to seek the life in the hereafter through doing all good deeds and avoiding all evil deeds during their lifetimes in this world and they should not forget about their good shares in this world while they are looking for their good shares in the hereafter. To live longer in this world is better for a good Muslim since he is able to increase his goodness. To live longer in this world is still
better for an evil Muslim since he is able to repent from his evil deeds and sins before his dead term comes to him.

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