

COMMITTEE II
The Value of Human Life

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THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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"Whosoever kills a human life for other than (in return of) manslaughter, or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind; and whosoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind".
(The Qur'an: al-Maidah 5:32).

Specific and clear as it is, at a qualitative and a quantitative level, this Qur'anic injunction prescribes an ethical criteria and basis for dealing with human life.

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That unjust and unethical handling of an individual human life is as grave as taking away the life of the whole humanity is not only a strong statement, it also qualifies exceptions to this principle. There are only two possible ethical situations when loss of human life can be tolerated viz. A) when violating human rights of a person, his life has been taken, or B) when a person or a system is causing destruction to human society, peace, justice, and human rights by prevailing corruption, exploitation, oppression, and injustice. Fitnah (corruption, distortion, exploitation) is to be eliminated as a pre-requisite for the establishment of a just social order. To make human life miserable is no less evil than to take it away. Restoration of human society to its natural, pure, and ethical state, is so important that in doing so even human life may be violated but with a very clear caution that violating one human life, unjustly, is like violating the life of the whole of humanity.

The underlying principle, on which Islam basis its understanding of human life is social justice or 'adl. Irrespective of color, race, language, sex, economic, political, or social station of a person 'adl, as defined in the Qur'an and the Sunnah provides the ethical framework and basis for treatment of human life.

Individual's right must be protected and guarded in all situations. However, no individual, ethically, should be allowed to intrude and violate the same right of the other person in a society. If the balance of society is harmed, corruption and injustice will prevail and human life will become miserable. Therefore, social justice demands a serious response to all such violations. This is done in order to save and protect human life as such.

Human life, is not confined to one's physical well being. Besides his physical existence every human being has a moral and ethical existence. This requires from him a certain level of human behavior. If a person falls short of this minimum standard of humanity and becomes a beast, or an animal (Kal-anam baI hum adal 7:179) an ethical judgement must be made and injustice must be stopped.

Upholding social and ethical justice, Islam does not take a relativist approach. It, on the other hand, specifies through a definite treatment of rights and obligations of individuals, society, and state, situations when ethical and social justice will warrant a corrective action.

The Qur'anic injunction of amar bial ma'ruf wa nahi 'anil munkar, refers to the individual as well as the collective social good. Therefore, the axiological basis of human life prevails over the pure physical existence.

From where does this social justice draw its authority? Is it society which determines its own good. Does it have an institutional existence. Who ultimately judges between the individual good and social good. These and similar questions call for an analysis and systematic treatment.

In Islam, social justice and social accountability has a primacy, because man in Islam has to play essentially a social role. Man is neither a product of a historical evolutionary processes nor a consequence of a mechanical bang. Similarly, man, at a theological level, has not fallen. Being ethical and moral in his constitution, man's first act of disobedience was also an exercise of his volition. The Islamic position, therefore, is candid and simple. Adam and Eve were created to serve Allah as His Vicegerents (khulafa) on earth. The moral and ethical creative role of man, in Islam, is directly related with the guidance and instructions provided by Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala regarding man's attitude towards life.

This elevated place of human being makes him most valued creature on earth. However, the reason deter of this most valued creation remains his exercise of ethical and moral volition at an axiological level.

The axiological basis is not understood as a social projection, on the other hand, society is an externalization of basic Islamic values. Universalistic, as it is, the

biological existence. Social norms, fidelity, ubudiyah (serving Allah), honesty, uprightness, etc. don't emerge from or represent a given culture. They are outcome of man's conscious ethical existence.

The value of human life in certain human cultures is recognized as a convention, or a compromise or contract. Conventions, continuous practice, and social behavior consequently take the form of legal and social institutions. Islam, on the contrary, makes an effort to discover the ethical and divine basis on which human, social, and individual behavior is determined.

The norms provided by the divine and ethical guidance lead to an on going dialogue between man and revelatory instructions (wahy). Whenever an issue about human life arises human reason and the non-variable, specific, and defined divine guidance interact through the process of Ijtihad and suggest possible positions, solutions, and steps to be taken by human beings.

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Islam views the issue of human life in a wider perspective in which five other principles play a central role. These include, besides the preservation of human life, protection and proper observance of faith, reason, property, honor, and lineage.

If a conflict arises between these principles and human life, in most of the situations, the later will prevail over

the former. This is why in a situation when protection of human life requires even violation of divine instructions (halal wa al haram), the Qur'anic principle is to allow temporary violation of even what has been proscribed in order to save human life. The reason resides in social justice. The divine plan individual human right and reason to preserve human life even when a temporary violation is to be made.

In Islam human life enjoys status of a trust (amanah). Man is no more than a trustee. The real owner of human life is Allah. He has caused it and He alone can take it away. Man must exhaust all his efforts in serving and saving human life. An immediate implication of this Islamic position is that no individual is allowed to either harm or kill his life. It is an Islamic obligation to provide human body with necessary nourishment and service to survive.

Suicide, is a grave violation of trust and causes irreparable harm to man's ethical standing. It is important to note that Islamic shari'ah has prescribed prayer for the dead as a collective obligation on all Muslims. However, if a person commits suicide Muslims are asked not to pray for the person.

In view of the above Islamic position human life is not only to be preserved but it acts as a value for other human actions to be justified. If there is harm expected to human life

a number of Islamic injunctions are to be re-interpreted because of value of human life transcend other considerations. A few examples in this respect may make the point more clear.

Islam is essentially a declaration of the fact that Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala is the highest authority and no association or sharing in his authority, attributes, and functions can be allowed, however, if human life is in danger a believer may temporarily suppressed his faith to save human life. This brings ethical relativism into discussion. Ethically a believer is supposed to be steadfast and even sacrifice his life for his faith. However, it is equally ethical for him when a situation demands that he may suppress his faith for a higher value namely preservation of life. A careful study will reveal that Islamic doctrine of jihad is based essentially on the sanctity of human life as a supreme value. Similarly, Islamic position on voluntary death is indicative of value of human life.

In modern bioethics there have been discussions about legal, socio-cultural, interpersonal, and medical aspects of such death. It is held by some scholars that death with dignity is better than prolongation of life with artificial help, therefore, voluntary euthanasia has been considered by some as individual decision, family decision, or in some situations as a medical decision. Islam, since it assigns prime value of human life does not accept the legal view taken by adherence of voluntary death. As

mentioned elsewhere individual human being, according to Islam, does not own his body or life. Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala has given human beings life and body as a trust (amanah). The trustee has every right to utilize body and soul, however, cannot exploit, misuse, harm, or annihilate body and life. A crude elaboration of the above will be Islamic position on prostitution. The prostitute, according to Islam, has no authority whatsoever on body and life. Human body cannot be rented, sold, exploited, or misused against the purpose of its creation. The purpose of human body is to help in achieving a peaceful, dignified, and meaningful living while prostitution is a mistrust. It is as if declaring a war against the purpose and objective of human creation by Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala. A prostitute declares that the body which has been given as a trust is not a trust but owned by the individual, therefore, the individual can put his body to use and utilization which may satisfy the individual.

Legally, Islam does not regard an individual or even his parents or family as owner of life. The pre-Islamic concept of slavery in which in some cultures husbands owned their wives, masters owned their slaves, and parents owned their children has been completely rejected by Islam. The individual nafs, life, is owned only by Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala. Therefore, the Qur'an said you cannot be unjust to your ownself (nafs), your nafs has a right on you (6:26). This very clear separation between individual,

his body, and life by the Qur'an makes it clear that an individual cannot terminate his life whenever he desires, due to the fact that he is neither the owner of life nor this will confirm with Islamic understanding of value of life.

It is also obvious that legally family has no claim on the body or life of an individual. This is well presented in the Islamic position of treatment of the dead. As soon as a person is dead it is not an obligation on family alone to take care of the ceremonies required for washing of the body and the burial. On the contrary, it is a collective obligation. The community is responsible to take care of the last ceremonies, however, it is customary that the family of the deceased take care of the requirements although they are not legally responsible.

The individual live in a social context. He may think as an individual that his life is no longer required but in a social context he has relationship of rights and obligations with his wife, his children, his parents, his brothers and sister, his uncles, and other relatives and so on. He cannot deprive his relatives and friends of the rights and obligations he has towards them and they have towards him. Therefore, it is not simply a matter of individual decision. This indicates how the value of human life has penetrated deep in Islamic treatment of life, individual, and society.

The value of life also demands from a medical doctor that besides his medical investigation he should consider Allah

Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala's will and power as an important factor. Even when his equipment may show less or least chances of survival Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala has a power which may change the critical situation of a patient into a hopeful and healthy situation. Medically there are many examples which can be quoted where a person was declared medically dead yet he survived and continued for quite a number of years, therefore, medical decision to unhook the equipment is not easy and purely professional. The reason again is value of human life which Islam wants to maintain.

Looking from a slightly different angle one may say if a person is to be on medical equipment it will be un-economical or in some situations it will be undignified for the sick person. Islamic position is very simple. Presently use of medical equipment may be very costly, however, disallowing unhooking of the equipment will compel technicians to devise more economical ways of support and survival of human life. On the other hand if on prima facie and due to economic consideration unhooking the equipment is allowed we will never be able to bring down the cost of medical assistance in such cases of terminal illness.

It may also be noted that voluntary euthanasia means existence of a deep sense of frustration, disappointment, and absence of hope in the individual as well as his medical consultant. Islam is a religion of hope and trust in Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala, and would like its adherents never to lose their trust in the power and authority of their Creator.

The value of human life transcends all other considerations is a very clear Islamic position, however, a clear distinction is made between human life and animal life. Human life stands for human existence based on an ethical behavior while animal life is purely biological existence, therefore, conscious human behavior assigns real value to human life. If the objective is biological survival it degrades human existence. On the other hand, if objective is serving higher values of life, proper understanding of man's relation with other human beings, the Creator, and universe the same biological existence develops into human existence which enjoys highest level of recognition and virtue.

The Islamic scheme of life in which law, education, society, economy, and political system play an important role is subservient to value of human life, culture, and society are its manifestations, therefore, it will be appropriate to say that the very term Islam which refers to ultimate peace and ultimate liberation from submitting to one's own desire and priorities stands for upliftment of human existence and for recognition of human life as a supreme objective. This is the reason, as stated earlier saving one human life is saving the whole of humanity.

Wa akhiru da'wana anil hamdulillahi rabbil alamin.

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