

Beginning of the End and Life Eternal

Based on the Qur'an and the teachings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW), the Islamic creed explicitly demands belief in the doomsday — the end of this worldly existence. As such, it shares eschatological views, i.e., doctrines or theories of the end (*eschaton*), with other major religious traditions. “End” here can have two meanings: First, it can mean the end of each individual human life; and second, it can mean the end of the world — or, more narrowly, of the human race. Qur'anic assertions definitely favor an end and disruption of the present universal world scheme.

Quite surprisingly, even from the predominantly secular Western academy books are now pouring out on the theme of the end of the world. We refer particularly to John Leslie's book titled *The End of the World: The Science and Ethics of Human Extinction*, published in 1996. Central to the book is a “doomsday argument” originated by the Cambridge mathematician and cosmologist Brandon Carter in the early 1980s. He argues that we ought to have some reluctance to believe that we are very exceptionally early, for instance, in the earliest 0.001 percent, among all humans who will ever have lived. This would be some reason for thinking that humankind will not survive for many more centuries, let alone colonize the galaxy. However, taken just by itself, the doomsday argument could do little to tell us how long humankind will survive. What it might indicate, though, is that the likelihood of Doom Soon is greater than we would otherwise think. Here “otherwise-thinking” involves taking account of well-recognized dangers like those of environmental pollution, water depletion, and nuclear war. There are also many other hazards which are seldom considered: for example, the risk that physicists of the future, experimenting at immensely high energies, will upset a space-filling “scalar-field” and destroy the world, a possibility taken seriously by some leading theorists. According to Richard Gott, Professor of Astrophysics at Princeton University, we can have virtually no idea, just from examining the dangers that we face, of how seriously our species risks imminent extinction. (*Nature*, May 27, 1993)

Today, scientists are listing so many risks that it could seem surprising that the human race has survived so long. The continued career of the human race is endangered by use of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, by destruction of the ozone layer, by greenhouse-

effect over-heating (conceivably of a runaway kind in which warming releases more and more methane, a powerful greenhouse gas), by desertification and pollution of land and sea, by loss of biodiversity and by diseases. Moreover, comets or asteroids, supernovae, solar flares, and black hole explosions or mergers might conceivably threaten the human race with extinction. So could unscrupulous genetic engineering. In addition, there might perhaps be strange risks associated with high-energy physics. In a vacuum metastability disaster, for instance, not just the earth's biosphere but the entire galaxy would be destroyed by an ever-expanding bubble. So the world, as science teaches us and as human speculations suggest, must have an end.

According to the Qur'an, the world is a place created with a limited time-span and man is being judged in it. He will have to give account of all that he does — his doings, not-doings, and mis-doings, and accept the judgement upon them as a “necessary” sequel (necessary within quotes because God's *Mercy* is unlimited). Life on earth will, one day, come to an end, and after that man will be rewarded or punished for his deeds and misdeeds. Those who live in the present world a life of obedience to the Lord will enjoy eternal bliss in the Hereafter, whereas those who disobey His commands will have to garner the bitter fruits of their disobedience. According to the Qur'an:

And every man's deeds We fastened around his neck and on the day of Resurrection will We bring forth a book which shall be proffered to him wide open: “Read your record. This day there need be none but yourself to make out an account against you.” (Isra 17:13-14)

The Islamic view of the Hereafter, and the last age of this world is a quite comprehensive eschatology and includes the “last things” strictly so-called — the idea of judgement and retribution, or a Day of Judgement, Millennial ideas, the catastrophic end of the world, and its renewal, and how the dead are related to that end of all things. The basic idea underlying the Qur'anic teachings on the Hereafter is that there will come a moment “The Hour” (*Al-Sa'ah*) when every human being will be shaken into a unique and unprecedented self-awareness of his deeds. *Al-akhira*, the “end” is the moment of truth: “When the great cataclysm comes, that day man will recall what he had been striving for” (79:34-35) is a typical statement of this phenomenon. If man is to be freed from worldly *ghuroor*, multi-layered self-deception, nothing short of a cataclysm — a great earthquake or catastrophe — is needed for the complete turning inside-out of the moral personality of man. Much more

detailed is the picture of the final world-catastrophe as found in Surah Takweer in these words:

When the sun shall be darkened and the stars fall; and when mountains move, and when she-camels with mature fetuses [the most precious possessions of a Bedouin] are abandoned; and when the wild beasts are herded together; and when the seas boil; and when kindred spirits are united; and when the infant-girl buried alive [as was the practice with some pre-Islamic Arabs] shall be asked for what sin she was slain; and when the deed-sheets are unrolled [before people] and when the sky is skinned off; and when Hell is ignited and when the Garden is brought near — then every soul shall know what it had prepared [for the morrow]. (Al-Takweer 81:1-14)

Other *ayaat* of the Qur'an tell us that Nature itself is convulsed in the end of the world-age — sun, moon, and stars are darkened; the heavens are shaken or rolled together, mountains and hills are scattered, the earth is shaken, removed, or dissolved. Although Qur'anic descriptions of the Last Day usually speak of a general and complete upset of the present cosmos, a dislocation of the earth and the heavens, a complete shaking of the earth — indeed, of “the earth being in His Hand-Grip on the Day of Resurrection and the Heavens being wrapped up in His Right Hand” (Al-Zumar 39:67) and “mankind being like scattered locusts and mountains like carded wool” (Al-Qari'ah 101:4-5) — all these descriptions really intend to portray the Absolute Power of Allah (SWT). Certainly, from the *ayaat* we are referring to, it is quite clear that this very earth will be transformed into a Garden, which will be enjoyed by its “inheritors.” Thus the Qur'an is speaking not of a total destruction of the earth but of its transformation, as every re-creation or major change requires a certain amount of destruction.

Christians and Muslims of today widely share a general belief in the approaching end of the world and indeed, as Br. Imran N. Hosein has shown quite convincingly in his article included in this issue of the *Qur'anic Horizons*, we now live in the last age, or the age that will witness the end of history. In fact, he sounds a clarion call by asserting that “the countdown has begun.” Just as the Qur'an repeatedly warns of the events that occur after a person's death, so also it warns of the end of time and says that many events will occur before the Last Day as signs of its approach. The canonical collections of *ahadith* are especially rich in describing these signs of the coming end. Certainly, Prophet Mohammad (SAW) warned that the end was near. According to one Hadith, he held up his thumb and forefinger with almost no space between them and said, “I and the Last Hour are like this.” Moreover, the fact that

Mohammad (SAW) is the last of the prophets is not unrelated to the idea that little time is left until the end of the world. There are few themes in the Qur'an and *Hadith* which are as often repeated and are as central as what is called *Al-Ma'ad* in Arabic, a term which must be understood as eschatology as well as resurrection.

Seyyed Hosein Nasr, while writing on this theme in his excellent work titled *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*, quite rightly observes that Muslim thinkers have been concerned with the questions of eschatology and the life of the individual Muslim has always been lived with full awareness of the eschatological realities. He is also right in affirming that most of the details of these teachings are usually put aside in everyday life by ordinary Muslims who are not given to meditating and thinking about them. In a higher philosophical sense *Al-Dunya* (the immediate objectives, the "here-and-now" of life) is not "this world" but the lower values, the basal pursuits which to ordinary people appear so tempting that most of them run after them most of the time, at the expense of the higher and long-range ends. According to the Qur'an: "They know only the externalities of this life, and are heedless of the higher and eternal ends" (Al-Room 30:7). The modern man living in the secular and materialistic ethos is generally so absorbed in his immediate concerns — particularly selfish, narrow, and material concerns — that he remains totally unmindful of his own mortality and the end of present cosmic order.

It is both difficult and out of place to attempt a connected and comprehensive account of the Qur'anic verses and sayings of the Prophet (SAW) relevant to the signs or marks that will presage the end of time. The Qur'an, for example, talks about a beast which will appear shortly before the final destruction: "When the word falls on them, We shall bring forth for them out of the earth a beast that shall say to them that people had no faith in Our signs" (27:82). Another verse foretells that the barbarian tribes Gog and Magog will be unleashed:

When Gog and Magog are let loose, and they slide down out of every slope, and the true promise draws near — then the eyes of the truth-concealers will stare: 'Woe to us, we were heedless of this! No, we were wrongdoers. (Al-Anbia 21:96-97)

In Old Testament too there is a similar mention of these barbarian tribes and we read: "Satan is now loosed and stirs up the nations, Gog and Magog and these compass Jerusalem" (Cf., Ezekiel 38). Br. Imran N. Hosein has a different, transcendental interpretation of the prophecies about Gog and Magog. But what is certain is that despite

differences of opinion even among Muslim thinkers on these issues, there are some core beliefs on which Biblical and traditional Islamic prophecies converge. For example, the Christians eagerly await the Second Coming of Jesus (AS) and believe that it will be accompanied by a world war, known in their literature as Armageddon, on a scale never witnessed before. This certainly corresponds to an ultimate world war mentioned in authentic ahadith of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) as *Al-Malhamah*. Many write-ups appearing in prestigious world magazines over the last few years tell us that lately, with the imminent turn of the millennium, some Christian sects have started planning to visit Megiddo in Israel, the purported site of the start of the world conflict, to be personally present at the Second Coming of Jesus (AS). This movement is likely to gather momentum during the remainder of the year and at the turn of the century. Today, both Jews and Christians think that the time is ripe for the appearance of their Messiah.

Like all traditional and orthodox Muslim scholars, Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi too, in his *Tafheem-ul-Qur'an*, expresses his belief in the physical ascension of Prophet Jesus (AS) and asserts that it is further reinforced by those numerous traditions which mention the return of Jesus, the Son of Mary, and his struggle against *Dajjal*, or the Anti-Christ, before the end of time. These traditions, in his considered view, quite definitively establish the Second Coming of Prophet Jesus (AS). In an appendix to his notes on Surah Al-Ahzab, he copiously marshals all these prophetic traditions.

Out of the vast *Hadith* corpus, special notice should be taken here of the last section of the *Hadith* of Gabriel. I agree with Professors Chittick and Murata that in this *Hadith* the mention of the marks or precursors (*amarat*) of the End is of special significance and import. One logical implication is that religion includes knowledge of the way in which time will unfold and come to an end. Hence there is an allusion to an Islamic view of history. Chittick and Murata very acutely observe:

Given the geometrical metaphor of dimensions, where time is a fourth dimension, it is appropriate to think of the Islamic conception of time and history as a dimension of the religion. And time also has something to do with the dimensionality of human beings, since everyone has a beginning and an end. (Cf., *The Vision of Islam*, by Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick)

Indeed man's confrontation with Time is traceable to the practical demands of human life. Even for the most primitive life needs become compelling when they arise and demand satisfaction in their

temporal context. Man's practical concern with time is far more vital than any historical or philosophic reflection on it. Islam, like all other religious traditions, responded to man's need to come to terms with all that is endowed with time. The spectacle of Nature's seasonal regeneration and periodic desolation must have been an awesome mystery for all reflective minds. But man has been more than a spectator of this cosmic drama unfolded in time and has always pondered over its ultimate significance and termination. Let me here quote the English rendering of the last part of the *Hadith* of Gabriel:

The man said, "Tell me about the Hour." The Prophet replied, "About that he who is questioned knows no more than the questioner." The man said, "Then tell me about its marks." He said, "The servant girl will give birth to her mistress, and you will see the barefoot, the naked, the destitute, and the shepherds vying with each other in building."

The two marks mentioned here can be interpreted differently but they hardly sound like a riddle. It is not too difficult to understand that the basic meaning of the two is that towards the end of time there will be a disruption in both the family setup and social order. The Qur'an-announced social order will be reversed and there will be profound disequilibrium at all levels. The Holy Qur'an makes reference to one's parents the first practical imperative after the affirmation of *Tauheed*. If the mother-daughter relationship is upset, then surely the entire fabric of family life stands shattered. The way girls attend colleges and universities for education up to the age of early twenties and their mothers perform all the household chores for them is one way in which the first mark mentioned in the *Hadith* is being instanced in our age. Br. Imran N. Hosein's view is different but definitely thought provoking.

The other sign in its more literal and *prima facie* sense is quite apparent for all to see, but we agree with Chittick and Murata in maintaining that there is no reason to suppose that building mentioned in the *Hadith* refers only to physical structures. Qur'anic usage of the term suggests that it may just as well refer to anything that humans can build, including houses, machines, societies, nations, philosophies and ideologies. In short, this sign suggests that when the last times draw close, every social order instituted by the Prophet (SAW) will be disrupted and overthrown. Human life, thought, and society will be ruled by fabrications of human cleverness which grows out of the basest instincts of the human self. The allusion is to those who have the moral qualities and character traits of the meanest and most despicable members of society; as such they are loathed by people of character and

staunch Islamic faith. They will take pride in erecting grandiose structures and buildings. This, of course, is a common sight in present-day Middle East.

From amongst the contemporary Islamic revivalist scholars and leaders, Dr. Israr Ahmad is one who firmly believes that the close of world-drama is not far away. Even though verbally all Muslims believe in the end of this worldly existence, hardly any other scholar explicitly refers to the authentic prophetic sayings which foretell the last events which will take place before the Doomsday. He has an acute awareness that the end is not far off. There is something in the air, a writing on the wall, a tense feeling of imminence, of history gathering pace for the final remarkable events. This conviction of his is based on a critical look at and analysis of, the present world scenario. He is convinced that the global happenings are already moving in the direction predicted by the Holy Prophet Mohammad (SAW) and reported in authentic traditions. His seminal ideas on the subject have been very elaborately and ably rendered into English and published in a tract *Lessons from History* published by Markazi Anjuman Khuddam-ul-Qur'an Lahore — essential reading for all concerned and motivated Muslims.

According to Dr. Israr Ahmad, in the Middle East, the stage is gradually being set for an ultimate World War between the forces of Good and Evil. Even though in the hard facts prevailing today we generally see a state of humiliation of Muslims and their virtual enslavement by the forces of the New World Order, the author — on the basis of authentic prophetic traditions — has a staunch belief in global domination of Islam. One notes with dismay that very few Islamic scholars nowadays pay heed to these authentic prophecies, according to which four major episodes will take place before the end of the world. In chronological sequence they are as follows:

1. The ultimate World War (*Al-Malhamah*) of human history, which will be fought predominantly in the Middle East;
2. The appearance of Anti-Christ, or *Dajjal*, in the final phase of that War — a leader of the evil forces who will inflict great sufferings and destruction on the Arab Muslims.
3. The arrival of Mahdi and the re-appearance of Prophet Jesus Christ (AS), who will cause the extermination of *Dajjal* and his followers; and finally,
4. The establishment of the System of *Khalifah*, or the domination of Islam, over the entire globe.

The most significant point of Dr. Israr Ahmad's presentation is that he considers the future Muslim leader in the person of "Mahdi" and the re-appearance of Prophet Jesus Christ (AS) — beliefs generally dubbed by modernist Muslims as *Messianic* ideas — to be not only based on genuine and authentic *ahadith*, but also quite rational and logical implications of the Qur'anic asseverations with regard to Islam's global domination. The noteworthy point in this context, however, is that despite these beliefs his view of Islam is thoroughly dynamic and active. The prophecies of the Prophet (SAW) in respect of Islam's domination do not absolve Muslims of discharging their religious obligations in the right earnest. Only true belief, i.e., *Iman*, and maximum possible effort in the way of Allah (SWT) guarantee salvation and eternal bliss in the Hereafter.

The upshot of this editorial article is that the Islamic belief in the End should make us conscious of the "ends" and purposes of life and life-orientations. The verses of the Qur'an bring the reader face to face not only with his or her individual mortality but with the final catastrophic end of the entire present cosmic order. This realization of the ephemeral and transitory existence of this world should make us work most assiduously for the life to come, because life in the Hereafter is inexhaustible and without limit. It is endless and eternal. I shall close these lines by quoting two very short verses of Surah Al-Ma'arj:

They surely take it (the Reckoning) something for
away, but We see it very near! (Al-Ma 'arj 70:6-7)

Absar Ahmad