Eschatology in Islam

Muslim commentators distinguish between expiation and forgiveness in the short-term and in their long-term effects. Apparently, to Muslims expiation covers sin and guilt during our time on earth, whereas forgiveness guarantees the remission of sin on the Last Day.

Biblically, guilt is said to be expiated when it is visited with punishment falling on a substitute. Expiation is made for our sins when they are punished not in us, but in another who consents to stand in our place. Sin is "covered" by vicarious satisfaction.

"If you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you." (Mt. 6:14-15)

"And whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone, so your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mk. 11:25)

These verses relate to our day-to-day relationship with God when we sin and displease Him.

So to the average Muslim, the distinction between expiation and forgiveness is merely playing with words, for when God covers our sins, He blocks them out once and for all. ***"I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more."*** (Jer. 31:34) God doesn't say that He will forget our sins, rather He says He will remember them no more.

I remember a well-known preacher in London who said, "Now is not enough, then is not enough, only in is enough. That is, dealing with our sin in the present is not enough for it fails to satisfy our human hearts. The promise of full salvation for the future beyond death is also unsatisfying, but to be ***"in Christ"*** now and forever brings real assurance to our hearts and minds. Hell is to be without the Lord Jesus and heaven is to be ***"in Christ"*** now and ***"in Christ"*** then.

The Subject of the Last Day in Islam

This subject is wide and many- sided. We have to speak of the soul at death, any intermediate state, the angels of judgement, the resurrection, the balances and the bridge, as well as heaven and hell. I hope to touch just briefly on all these subjects and I hope to give a fairly accurate overall picture of the whole subject.

Eschatology data in Islam is largely drawn from other Middle Eastern religions. The concept of balances, resurrection, angels and the "straight path" appeared first in Zoroastrianism which was the state religion in pre-Islamic Persia. Islam shares with Zoroastrianism an ethical monotheism based on a supreme, transcendent creator who will administer a final judgement and governs an afterlife of heaven and hell. This is why, after the 7th century Muslim conquest of Persia, Zoroastrians were legally tolerated for a while. But then, over the centuries, they were increasingly persecuted. Many emigrated to West India where they are called Parsees. So some Zoroastrian ideas were later developed both in Judaism and in Islam.

Faith in the Last Day is next in importance after faith in God or so it seems from the crucial verse Sura 6:62, *"Then they are returned to God, their protector – the truth. Does not judgement belong to God, the quickest to take account?"*

The early Meccan Suras in particular stress the significance of the Last Day. The term itself occurs 113 times in the Quran. Muhammad repeatedly and solemnly warned his followers of the certainty of death and the judgement that follows death. The Meccan citizens, like most in our contemporary culture, simply mocked him for his confidence in this statement of faith when there was no empirical evidence. Muhammad shared the Biblical assumption that the resurrection of the dead involves the whole of humanity – the just and the unjust. Sura 2:27 says, *"The hour is coming without doubt when God will raise all that are in the grave"* (i.e. those who have died).

It would be useful to sketch an eschatological timetable of events from the view of our Muslim friends. We would start with the moment of death and switch our concept of time in this universe to eternal time. This presents philosophical difficulties, but let us ignore these. A Muslim theologian called Al Bakari (Mustafa Ibn Kamal al-Din) who died in 1748 summarised the sequence in this way:

1. At death two angels will come and interrogate the corpse concerning his/her belief in God, His prophet and His religion. Many will be tormented in the tomb for giving inaccurate replies.

2. The signs of the last days will appear. The Anti-Christ (Ad dajjal – the Deceiver) appears in "the age of injustice" which will precede the end of the world. He will cause corruption and oppression to sweep over the earth (for 40 days or years). First the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven. God and Magog will emerge as well as other portents clearly borrowed from Christianity.

3. All living beings will die. The heavens will melt away. After a while God will set the world in order and raise the dead. The faithful will mount flying horses and soar to the shade of God's throne. This imagery is drawn from the rapture and other millennium concepts. Further parallels can be noted such as the sounding of trumpets. But this will not take place until evil spreads all over the world with even some Muslims joining up with unbelievers.

   Sura 39:68 says, *"And the trumpet will sound and those in the heavens and those on earth will faint excepting whoever God wills; then it will sound again and now they will be standing expectant."* In the Hadith the 2 trumpets become 3 each of which has a particular function:

   - Consternation
   - Examination
   - Resurrection

4. The balances are brought out where the good and bad deeds of men and women will be weighed. Those whose good deeds outweigh the bad will go to Paradise. Muslims whose evil deeds pre-dominate will go to the fire with the hope that intercession will bring them out in due course. This view may have been influenced by the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory.

   Non-Muslims cannot have any hope of intercession. Their judgement is final. Muslims believe in the objective existence of these balances, but there is some dispute as to whether all Muslims will be weighed since there is a tradition that says, "O Muhammad, make amongst your people that no account is taken when they enter Paradise."

   There is a degree of specialisation in the department of the balances. So it seems there are separate scales for different tribes. The weights vary for different categories of good works such as prayer, fasts etc. The warrant for this is in the plural in the Quran. Muhammad had a tendency towards commercial metaphors. So he tends to confuse the picture by giving "the books" to given bodies. *"Read your book, no one else but yourself will have to make an account against you on that day."* Sura 17:15. *"Whoever accepts guidance is guided for his soul only, and whoever goes wrong only wrongs his own soul. But we do not inflict punishment until we have sent a messenger."*

   So there is a profit and loss view of good works that is observed by all Muslims. It is also clear that no soul can help another on That Day and each will give account to the most just of judges.

5. Al Sirat al Mustaqim: this means a path – the right way – in the Quran where it is used 33 times. Possibly originally it did mean a path on the ground, but tradition and later writers take it to mean a "bridge" across a great valley/chasm of fire. All people must pass over it. Some will pass over with lightning speed, some at a gallop (like horses). Some with their backs laden with sin will barely crawl over. The rest will fall into the fire.

The image of "the bridge" is borrowed from Zoroastrianism. Many Muslims will fall headlong into the flames, but with the eventual hope of rescue. Hints of this are thrown out in the Quran and are elaborated on by other Muslim writers. There is a right call – Al Arash, *"And the inhabitants of the garden will call to the inmates of the fire, 'We found what our Lord promised is true. Did you find what your Lord promised you to be true?' They will say, 'Yes'. Then a crier will call between them, 'The curse of God is on the unjust, those who wander from the way of God, seeking distortion in it and scoff at the hereafter. And then there will be a veil between the two and on the heights will be people who recognise them all by their works. And they will call to the inhabitants of the garden, 'Peace upon you'. They will not have entered but they will be hopeful."* Sura 7:44-46

Some regard Al Arash as a sort of 'limbo' for those who are in a middle ground deserving neither heaven nor hell.

So having sketched out some of the details of what Muslims believe will happen on the last day, let us focus our attention on three primary scenes:

- Resurrection
- Hell
- Heaven

Resurrection

There is a term in the Quran, 'Barzakh' which is the time mentioned briefly in the Quran. It is the time between an individual's death and his/her resurrection. It is a barrier between the living and the dead. Some Muslims believe that the circumstances experienced in Barzakh are conditioned by the deceased while alive. Sura 23:99-100 says, *"When death finally comes to one of them, he says, 'My Lord, send me back, that I may do right by what I neglected'. There is no way, for that is just talk and before them is a gap until the day they will be resurrected."*

So Barzakh is a partition between two spaces rather like the old Berlin Wall that used to separate East and West Berlin. Some Muslims also see it as a space between two events. *"Allah holds back on whom death has been decreed until the Day of Resurrection, meanwhile the interval between them will seem like one day."* A medical analogy may be a coma. Tradition says that Muhammad will be the first to be brought back to life.

Al Ghazali (died 1111 A.D.) was a famous Islamic lawyer in Baghdad. He had a great spiritual crisis and withdrew from public life and became a Sufi. He wrote a number of books seeking to integrate theology, ethics and mysticism. He had much to say about man's spirit, saying that the spirit is indestructible, but it is separate from the physical body and waits expecting to return to its resurrected body on "That Day". There is nothing astonishing in the reunion of body, soul and spirit according to Al Ghazali, for the soul was combined with the body when man was first created by God. Why shouldn't it happen even more dramatically on the Day of Resurrection?

According to Al Ghazali, the mind, unlike the body, shows no change at death and the dead person retains consciousness and may suffer pain or enjoy blessing in the grave.

The Day of Resurrection has about 21 synonyms in the Quran. The best-known are the Day of Judgement, the Day of Reckoning, the Day of Separation, and the Day of Immortality. Each of these terms has some aspect of the Day that will close world history. The Day of Judgement is not specified in the Quran in terms of time, but is understood to be near. It will be characterised by earthquakes, moving mountains, the sky "splitting open", heaven rolled back, the sun ceasing to shine, stars being scattered and falling to earth, the oceans boiling over, graves opening, the earth bringing forth hidden sins as well as lost stories and the dead themselves and people vainly trying to flee the divine wrath. Everyone will bow before God.

It is helpful to read Peter's description of the dissolving universe in 2 Peter 3:10-12. The Quran also has a description of that day – Sura 77:8-11, *"When the stars are extinguished and the sky is split open and the mountains blown away and the messengers are appointed their time …."* So a huge cosmic explosion which shakes the stars and the planets is envisioned. Jewish apocalyptic literature also supplies a description of the end.

Both the Quran and the traditions find an analogy in the birth process, *"The state of the believer in this world is like that of the embryo in the womb; when it comes out of its mother's womb, it cries as if in grief, but once it sees the light, it would not wish to return to its previous home. So also the believer when we see the radiance of heaven, we would never wish to return to our old life."*

Another illustration of the Resurrection is in Sura 22:5-7, *"O humanity, if you are in doubt about the Resurrection, remember that we created you from dust, then from a drop, then from a clot, then from a lump of flesh formed and unformed, in order to edify you and we keep in the womb those we wish, up to a designated time. Then we bring you out as infants and able to reach maturity, but some of you will pass away and some of you will be kept here until the age of senility such that they know*

nothing of what they knew before. … that is because God is reality itself, giving life to the dead, in command of all things … and the end of time is coming. There can be no doubt about it and God will resurrect those in the graves."

Such analogies are also found in the New Testament (Jn. 12:23-27 and 1 Cor. 15:1-58). But Paul does not base his arguments on analogies or metaphors, but only on fact – the fact of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus and His appearance to over 500 brethren on one occasion. Islam lacks any such foundation and analogies alone don't carry conviction.

Finally we will look at what is beyond the Resurrection – to heaven and hell. The Quranic imagery in this context appeals to those who have a materialistic concept of enjoyment and those who anticipate that the pleasures of <u>this</u> life will be multiplied and enhanced in the next life.

Hell

Hell will be in full view at the judgement of mankind. Both believers and unbelievers will catch a view of the fire as they cross the fateful "bridge". Hell has 7 gates guarded by 19 angels according to Muslim tradition. Scholars assume that Dante's descriptions of the torments of "the fire" are borrowed, in part, from the Quran and Muslim tradition. They may be right. It is indeed a very terrible place, with unbearable flames. Its inmates are tortured with burning chains and beaten with iron clubs. They are forced to eat bitter fruit, drink filthy blood and boiling water. There is no peace, but interminable wrangling. There is no release ever, but ceaseless remorse and there is no relief in death – eternal torture. No intercession will avail the unbelievers. Sura 5:31 says, *"Allah asks, 'Hell, are you filled up?' And it will answer. 'Are there any more?' "* Again we read in Sura 32:17, *"Allah says, 'I will fill hell with jinn and men'."*

In this connection, a Sufi called Newi nobly offered to God, *"If by your inexorable will, you make heaven full of mankind and you are able to fill hell with me alone and send them* (all people) *to paradise, Lord I am willing."*

The Quran records seven names for the fire:

- Jahannam for sinners who die without repentance
- Lazwa the abode of all Christians
- Utama a fire for the Jews
- Syees for devils and their offspring
- Safar for Zoroastrians
- Jahien a boiling cauldron for idolaters
- Hainweak a bottomless pit for hypocrites

It is doubtful if Muhammad intended to distinguish between types of pain in terms of the degree of torment. But Muslim commentators have located these regions in hell. The allocations are an interesting side-light on how Muslims think. It is also said that paradise has one more division than hell to show that God's mercy exceeds his justice.

Muhammad had a bitter enemy – his uncle Abu Lahab. Sura 111 has the title **Father of the Flame**. It says, *"Ruined are the hands of the one who flares up and ruined is he. His wealth is of no avail to him nor what he has acquired. He will roast in a flaming fire, his wife carrying the fuel, with a rope around her neck"*.

So Muhammad had a vengeful picture of hell where Uncle Abu Lahab will roast while his poor wife will have the painful task of loading the fire with wood keep the flames burning.

In one of the Hadith we are given a scientific absurdity. "Allah ordered the fire to burn for a thousand years until it turned red and then another thousand until it turned white and then another thousand years until it turned black and that is its present colour. When the fire complained it was being consumed, God gave it two natures – in summer boiling and in the winter freezing cold."

A Christian theologian said we should not enquire too closely about the geography of heaven or the temperature of hell.

Paradise

This is a word of Persian origin which occurs twice in the Quran. In the hot, barren deserts of Central Arabia where frequently the outside temperature is over 50° C, a dreamland would be a land of cool gardens flowing streams – neither too hot nor too cold. In an area where the average Bedouin have a limited diet, limited access to water and a subsistence diet of dates and camels milk, it isn't surprising that desert Arab Muslims dream of an eternal prospect of reclining on very comfortable couches, wearing rich cool clothing, enjoying exquisite food as well as drinks mixed with camphor and celestial wine. Even sexual pleasures were not ignored. Muslims would enjoy the company of dark-eyed maidens with swelling figures and coy glances as well as having pure wives.

The polygamy of the Prophet would then become the privilege of the humblest Muslim. There they would praise God and watch the fiery torments of the damned with whom they could converse, but to whom they could not give any water.

John's vision of heaven in Revelation is of a different order. The details will be familiar to all readers of the Bible. We may point out a single topographical difference. John speaks of a Heavenly City built four-square and tells us there will be no more sea. John was surrounded by the sea on the island of Patmos just off what is now the Turkish coast. So possibly John envisaged a place that could not be tossed about or shaken.

As mentioned earlier, paradise has eight names and these are unlike the different names of hell. There is no allocation of different categories of the righteous. There are different degrees of happiness in heaven, but they are not defined. Pleasures that God-fearing Muslim believers shun on earth will be available in heaven. The Hadith says, "If you want to enjoy wine in the hereafter, abstain from it here and now". When Muhammad was asked if the clothes worn in heaven were hand-woven, he replied, "No, they grow on trees".

The materialistic notions that we find in the Quran have some of their origins in Judaism: "The wives of the just will bear children daily". The Lord Jesus rejects all such sensual views. Those who are worthy to be received into the "Age to Come" and the Resurrection, ***"Do not marry nor are given in marriage but they are like the angels in heaven"***. (Mt. 22:29-30)

The primary aim of marriage is the raising up of children and the survival of the race. But since death will be no more in heaven, there will be no point in having the procreation of more children. Many thoughtful Muslims are embarrassed by these carnal details. Al Ghazali (died 1111) spiritualised the relevant passages in the Quran in the fervent hope that like-minded Muslims would seek the far deeper joys of God's presence.

Rabia expounded the Quranic eschatological texts (The Study of the Last Things) in a way that shows she had rejected the literal sense. On one occasion when she heard someone reading, "The people in paradise are enjoying themselves with their wives in the shade", she cried out, "I pity those people who, even in heaven, require pleasures of this sort!"

Another committed Sufi, Burhani, wrote, "I do not say that paradise and hell do not exist, but I do say they are nothing to me. Because God created them both and there is no room for any created thing in the last place that I am."

We, as evangelical believers, would also echo some of this and reject all ideas of sensual rewards and physical punishments. C. S. Lewis discussed the whole problem of eternal rewards and pointed out that there are two sources of rewards. One source is natural rewards that are appropriate for natural processes that we undertake to gain them. An unnatural reward is something that is tagged on to an activity and does not belong to it by right. The man who woos a woman to win her love has the natural reward of marrying her. A man who woos a woman in order to get her money would have an unnatural reward. A general who fights for victory has victory as a natural reward. But a general who fights to earn a peerage and become a Count/Lord has an unnatural reward.

The true reward of a life of worship and service on earth is eternal life which begins now and culminates with a vision of God and eternity in His presence. What the Quran offers is an unnatural reward! The Sufis have a better expectation. But as believers in the Lord Jesus, we have the Person who can and will bring all our expectations to pass – ***"Christ in you, the hope of glory"***. (Col. 1:27)