

The Mother of All Exams

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Almighty Allah as the Absolute Originator, Creator and Fashioner created life and saturated it with an ultimate purpose and meaning. He then created man as a foremost component in the web of creation. He made him the vicegerent on earth to whom everything in the heavens and on the earth had been subjected. In his capacity as Allah's vicegerent, man is bidden to responsibly inhabit the earth, interact with the rest of life's realities, and gratefully avail himself of the infinite blessings and bounties spread out by his Creator.

All this is intended to innately demonstrate, as well as attest to, the greatness, benevolence and providence of the Creator. In addition, while discharging his vicegerency mission, man is to generate a legacy that will consciously and by design confirm the same ontological actualities. That legacy is what the substance of each and every Islamic cultural and civilizational expression should be.

If the creation of man - and the creation of the worlds - is the outcome of Allah being the active Originator, Creator and Fashioner, then the nature of the operational procedures of man on earth - and of all other beings - is the outcome of Allah being the Most Merciful, the Most Kind, the Equitable, the Guardian, the Owner of all Sovereignty, the Supremely Exalted, and the Lord of Majesty and Generosity.

Hence, Allah created man in His own Image (*Sahih Muslim*). It means that man has been endowed with many qualities as Almighty Allah's,

such as life, knowledge, power of hearing, seeing, understanding, etc. However, the features of man are fundamentally different from those of Allah. Only the names are the same, as there is no comparison between the Creator and His creation, and between the Master and His servants. The Qur'an declares: "There is nothing like Him..." (al-Shura, 11). That is why the biggest and most common misdeed committed by man is either deifying himself or anthropomorphizing (humanizing) God.

In other words, via both passive and active engagements, man is to spend his life on earth searching, discovering, absorbing and living the truth. Only that way will man become true to himself, his existential purpose and his Creator and Master. Life is at once a test and a gift. The test is to be passed and gift enjoyed, both with distinction.

Almighty Allah is the Ultimate Truth. Life and man are unmistakable manifestations and proofs of that Truth. Man's presence and role on earth signify a fine thread that connects all the primary and secondary physical and metaphysical aspects of life - and of the truth. Man is as much a target as an active protagonist in the world. He originated from the Ultimate Truth; he exists surrounded by endless portents and displays of the truth; he himself is a truth; and, finally, everything he conceives and does ought to authenticate and support the very truth.

A brief journey

Man is sent to this world for the short term. He and everything he has are owned by his Creator and Master. Man is here for a purpose. He has a mission to accomplish, that is, to realize and through his entire being personify the truth. At the end of his brief journey, man returns to his Creator and, expectedly, is held accountable for what he has done to the earthly test and opportunity. He is examined about

his overall performances. For man, death is not the end; it is the beginning.

The exam is instantaneous and in the grave. It happens in *barzakh* (the period between a person's death and his resurrection on the Day of Judgment). It is the mother of all exams, in the sense that it is the most important and most consequential assessment for man and his impending destiny. It denotes a watershed in his continuously unfolding life journey.

If man passes this exam, he is bound to pass all subsequent exams. But if he fails or does badly, he is bound to fail and do badly in all succeeding exams, including the one on the Day of Judgment. The exam, therefore, is the origin and cause of all exams and anxieties of man, one way or another. It is his *raison d'être*.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said: "The grave is the first of the stages of the Hereafter; whoever is saved from it, whatever comes afterwards will be easier for him, but if he is not saved from it, what comes afterwards will be worse for him." The Prophet also said: "I have never seen any scene but the grave is more frightening than it" (*Jami' al-Tirmidhi*).

It is reported that the companion 'Uthman b. 'Affan did not weep by dint of remembering Paradise and Hell, but used to do so if he stood by a grave. When asked why he was doing that, he would quote the above *hadith* (tradition) of the Prophet.

The Prophet used to pray and seek refuge with Allah "from the tribulation of the grave and the torment of the grave" (*Sahih al-Bukhari*).

For man, death is as real and compelling as life. Everything ends with the former. All roads lead to the depth and darkness of the grave.

This is the reality of life, regardless of whether man was willing, or was ready, to accept and live with it.

As soon as a person is interred in his grave, there come to him two angels who make him sit up and they ask him the following questions: Who is your Lord? What is your religion? Who is this man who was sent among you (Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him)? What did you do (while in this world)? (*Sunan Abi Dawud*)

Who is your Lord?

A person is asked about his Lord first because his life was supposed to be a series of undertakings whereby Almighty Allah should have been acknowledged as the Creator, Owner and Sustainer of all things. Man should act only as a creation and servant. To answer properly this question, a person needs to constantly learn about his Lord, possess a right worldview about himself and existence as a whole, and to work on enhancing his relationships with Allah and everything that is His. A person is to live and die, learn, work, love and thrive only in the name of, and for, his Lord.

Man is created weak, ignorant and disposed to submit to and worship a deity. All his capacities man is to channel into the finding of the truth and the worship of Allah as the Absolute Truth. If not, in order to satiate his inborn susceptibility, man will end up worshipping something else, often his own fantasies and his own idols of the mind and soul. It follows that man's task on earth is as much to affirm and accept Allah as to discredit and destroy the phony idols and deities that may be harboured by his ego, greed, self-centredness and false aspirations as well as hopes.

This is critical, in that all other things and life aspects depend exclusively on what a person chooses as his deity and lord. Rightly

answering this first question affirms everything else, whereas doing so wrongly disaffirms and negates all the rest. And it will be a person's total being, deeds and legacy that will answer. The validity of earthly communication modes will be over.

What is your religion?

A person will be asked about his religion because he was created to worship Almighty Allah and to do so only within the spiritual and ethical framework of Islam as the only religion and the only way of life.

Islam is the only acceptable religion with Allah because it accounts for the truth, which is also one and constant. No other alternatives and life systems, adopted in lieu of Islam, will be accepted. Islam and the truth are twins. There can be no multiple faiths just as there can be no multiple truths.

Islam is Allah's religion. He gave it to man as a gift and a means to reach out to Him and so, to the whole goodness. For that reason was Islam (submission to Allah as the only certainty) revealed to each and every prophet in human history. Many of the current world religions and philosophies stand for the distorted versions or pale remnants of such revelations.

Rejecting the authentic Islam means rejecting Allah as Lord and the Source of all authority and legitimacy. What comes next is the devising of alternative ideologies and life systems, thereby ascribing all authority and legitimacy to man and his cognitive abilities. Such basically becomes an act of tipping man against God - the main legacy of Renaissance humanism and all its contemporary offshoots, such as modernism and postmodernism.

Allah says: "Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam" (Alu 'Imran, 19).

"If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter He will be in the ranks of those who have lost (all spiritual good)" (Alu 'Imran, 85).

Who is this man who was sent among you?

A person will be asked about Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) because to accept Allah as Lord and to follow Islam as religion, a person was expected to follow the only qualified teacher and role model: Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). No other person - idea or system - could serve as an adequate exemplar and guide to the accomplishment of the first two considerations.

In his worldview, his thinking and behavioural patterns a person should align himself with the Prophet's paradigms. Hence, learning about them, enriching and beautifying his personality with them, and applying them as much as possible, should be a person's life obsession. Following and obeying the Prophet means following and obeying Allah. Forsaking and ignoring the Prophet means, positively, forsaking and ignoring Allah, which will eventually result in being forsaken and ignored.

Allah says: "Say, (O Muhammad), "If you should love Allah, then follow me, (so) Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful" (Alu 'Imran, 31).

The question refers to the Prophet only as "this man sent among you". This implies that everyone, both in theory and practice, should know the Prophet so much that any slightest and even oblique reference to him should cause in a person a light-bulb moment. It should easily dawn

upon such a person that the "man" in question is the Prophet, the saviour of mankind.

Alluding to the Prophet simply as "man" further indicates that people must possess only correct perceptions and knowledge about him. They must know that he was neither a divinity, nor an abstract being, nor a myth.

What did you do?

And lastly, a person will be asked about his deeds in this life. It should be noted that this question comes last. The reason is that all deeds are conditioned by the ideas of deity (divinity), religion and prophet-hood. Man can be good only if he gets right those three modules. Without them, a person's being good is a relative thing and applies only to a narrow frame of reference. Deeds are the effect; a worldview, a belief system and values are the cause.

For example, a person prays only because his understanding of, and relationship with, Almighty Allah, His Islam and His Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) are correct. Similarly, a person does not pray only because his worldview and knowledge concerning Allah, Islam and the Prophet, and his rapport with them, are flawed. The matter is never about one having - or not - enough training, free time, facilities, opportunities, etc.

The same goes to the rest of deeds. A person fasts, gives charity, performs pilgrimage, upholds high moral standards, etc., only because he knows that he subscribes to and follows a certain higher order of things and meanings. His actions are natural and spontaneous, yet full of sense and value. They are second nature to him.

Similarly, a person commits all sorts of spiritual wrongdoing only because of the beliefs, values and standards he had embraced as an

opposition to the revealed alternative. His actions, too, are utterly natural and instinctive. He does not intend them, so to speak; his ideas, principles and attitudes do. Indeed, physical movements and procedures connote the last thing human actions actually are.

As a result, in Islam, the most important thing is intention (*niyyah*). The Prophet said: "Verily, deeds are judged only by intentions (motives). Verily, every person will have only what he intended" (*Sahih al-Bukhari*). However, the depository of intention (*niyyah*) is in the heart, not within the scope of the mere tongue, or somewhere else.

It should likewise be noted that a believer will answer that his good deeds were in terms of reading the Book of Allah (the Holy Qur'an) and believing in it. This answer, as short as it seems, is rather comprehensive and full of substance. It is a continuation of the first three answers. Yet, it is their climax. Pertaining to the practical implementation in the realm of everyday life, a person regularly reads and comprehends the Qur'an, in addition to believing in its content.

It is not explicitly mentioned - and it was unneeded, for such is the nature of the mother of all exams that only sheer essence is articulated - but this answer, when considered against the backdrop of the first three answers, implies that the Qur'an was implemented as well. Having most genuinely Allah as the Lord, Islam as the religion and Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) as the Prophet, means that the Qur'an was applied to the letter.

That is so because there can be no Qur'an without Allah, Islam and the Prophet. A true believer not only reads, memorises, understands and implements the Qur'an, but he also identifies his total existence with it. He becomes a walking, or living, Qur'an. It therefore follows that the fourth answer is an abstracted and downscaled description of such an inclusive type of conduct.

Believers will answer to the effect of reading and believing in the Qur'an, even though, on the face of it, different answers might be given. This additionally shows the worth of the Qur'an. For Muslims, to have the Qur'an as the constitution and the primary source of law - yet of their whole existence - is not a choice but a must. In its exceptional way, the Qur'an is indispensable, just as Allah, Islam and the Prophet are in their own ways.

The case of nonbelievers

A nonbeliever will be asked only two questions: "Who is your Lord?" and "What is your religion?" His response to both questions will be: "Oh, oh, I don't know" (*Sunan Abi Dawud*).

A nonbeliever will not be asked the remaining two questions because doing so will be unnecessary - and Allah knows best. If he is asked, the same answers will have been forthcoming. Doing so will be rather meaningless and time-wasting, while the exam in the grave is only truth and substance-oriented. The answers *per se* will be expected, in that they are predicated on the first two questions and a person's answers to them.

Why to ask a person about the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and about his deeds if he did not take Allah as his God and Lord, and Islam as his religion and the way of life. In this regard, a person's relationship with the Prophet, as well as his deeds, by default, are bound to be inadequate.

It is remarkable that a nonbeliever will reply to the two questions simply that he does not know. He will not state who his lord (god) in lieu of Allah was, and what his religion (a way of life) instead of Islam was.

The reason for that is whatever a nonbeliever's tenets and life-patterns in this world were, they were wrong. They were furthermore bogus and functioned only as a mirage. A person lived a life deceived and captivated by them. Thus, as soon as he departed from this world, he realized what he lived for was fake and illusory. Now in the world of the ubiquitous truth and compelling actual realities, all those things commanded no sense or import whatsoever, let alone any status or authority. They did not deserve to be even mentioned.

A person suddenly found himself in the presence of the Absolute Truth and Reality, about which however he knew nothing. Everything was completely foreign to him, making him feel lost, betrayed and left in the lurch. His life ideals failed him completely, becoming mere shadows and nullities. Such a person's answer to the mentioned questions that he does not know represents at once a statement of truth and an expression of bitter distress and guilt.

Implications of the exam in the grave

The implications of the mother of all exams are many. To begin with, people are not to live for momentary things and ideas. Rather, these are to be used for securing that which is truly real, authentic and everlasting. The bliss of the Hereafter is not to be traded for the short-term gains of this world.

People should not live for something that may simply anytime - upon their inevitable and eternally unexpected deaths - become meaningless and vain. People must not strive their entire lives to become somebodies only in the end to turn into de facto nothings and nobodies. Their existential legacies must not become ones of utter failure and ruin.

Surely, people are created to be way better and bigger than that. The greatest pain on the Day of Judgment will be the realization that one has wasted the only opportunity he had, and that he for that very purpose has abused all the gifts and potentials his Creator had bestowed upon him. The physical suffering notwithstanding, most hurtful will be unending regrets and feelings of guilt. Equally hurtful will be the realization that one is everlastingly rejected, ignored, forgotten and abandoned, just as he while in this world rejected, ignored, forgot and abandoned that which he was supposed to wholeheartedly accept, obey, love and cherish.

Moreover, all stages of one's earthly journey, and all exams, need somehow or other to give emphasis to the importance of the mother of all exams and to gradually prepare a person for it. They all should realign themselves.

This means that especially educational systems - albeit without discounting the roles of other socio-political and economic systems - should not nurture just superficial professionals and with that, unsophisticated citizens, who are most likely to be at odds with the quintessence of the approaching paramount exam. Rather, they should nurture universally good men and women, who will not only be prepared for the said exam, but also function as sources of genuine goodness and productivity in every given circumstance.

For Muslims, in no way can a knowledge and educational system be regarded as good if they keep a person ignorant about, and away from, his Creator and Master, his Islam and his Prophet. No life paradigm can be deemed successful if it alienates one from the revealed knowledge, Almighty Allah's only path, and all the heavenly moral standards.

The malaise of today's Muslims

It is truly shocking to discover to what extent many Muslims today are misguided on this. They hope to be of the successful but remain, to varying degrees, strangers to the Qur'an and its content, to the core principles and values of Islam, and to the spirit of the Prophet's life example.

Hence, many of the Muslim politicians and leaders are inept and downright corrupt; many intellectuals are misguided and arrogant; many business leaders are selfish, greedy and unscrupulous; many performers and entertainers are ill-advised, disingenuous and deluding; many media personnel are gullible and puppets, yet at the same time big-headed and avaricious; whereas a great many common people, lost, confused and starved of sincere consideration, righteousness and integrity, endlessly oscillate between the impact of the compass of one group and that of another. Not many stay completely immune to what is going on. Yet fewer succeed in preserving fully their Islamic purity, uprightness and zeal.

It seems that an array of feigned authorities and masters are more important than Allah, that countless fake heroes and exemplars are more flattering than the Prophet, that endless one-dimensional philosophies and ideologies are more fulfilling than Islam, and that biased deeds and accomplishments, which people pursue to satisfy their vain desires, are more gratifying than doing things in order to please Allah alone.

Apparently for many people the much-treasured Information Age is becoming a curse. They read ever-more and are exposed to an endless supply of information and knowledge. However, all they end up consuming is second-rate scraps and utter junk. That resulted in people becoming more and more estranged from what is actual, right and essential. They became alienated from nature, their very selves, and from each other.

Needless to say that it is only Allah's Shari'ah (immutable divine law), Islamic teachings and values, and the example of the Prophet that should serve to Muslims as a framework and point of reference in every cultural and civilizational undertaking of theirs. Only this will ensure the sustainability of their legacy and so, their happiness in both worlds. Only this furthermore will ensure that they will pass all the exams that lie ahead, in particular the mother of all exams in the grave.

History is the witness that there cannot be an option that can even come close to what Islam offers to its peoples. Following the painful colonization era, most Muslim societies experimented with all the available socio-politico-economic preferences, often more earnestly than their creators. However, nothing really worked. Muslims are still at the crossroads. Hopefully soon they will realize that Islam is the only solution and the only way forward. Hopefully soon we will all stop asking: "Will we ever learn"?