

INSIGHTS INTO THE ISLAMIC ESCHATOLOGY

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With God’s help, we would like to present some brief insights into the Islamic eschatology, on the basis of the texts of the Holy Koran and Prophetic Tradition (*ḥadīth*). As a matter of fact, it would be more appropriate to speak about the teachings of Islam on an eschatology that is common to Jews, Christians and Muslims, as well as to all human beings.

The central principle of Islam is the *tawḥīd*, the affirmation of the absolute uniqueness of God. This metaphysical statement is at the heart of all the traditional doctrines, in spite of the diversity of their prospects. However, the God of monotheistic religions is not an abstract God: He has a personal relationship with the human. He creates and reveals Himself through His speech. Because God created the human to be worshipped by it, our worship in this world (*al-dunyā*) gets its final meaning at the moment of the passage into the Other World (*al-ākhirā*), and of the sight of God’s Face. This is the reason why the faith in God and the faith in the ineluctable return to Him (*al-ruj‘ā*) are so intimately linked.

Surely we belong to God and to Him we shall return (*Innā li-llāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji‘ūn*).¹

The Koran announces the advent of the Last Day, The Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāma*) and of Judgement according to Religion (*yawm al-dīn*), when the men and women will stand

1. Kor. II, 156.

up from their graves and will be led to their Lord, and judged for their deeds. The Koranic Revelation presents itself as the ultimate recall (*dhikr*) of this eternal truth that comes a brief amount of time before Doom's Day. The Prophetic Tradition teaches that Islam is set in God's plan for the world as the time that spans between the afternoon prayer (*ṣalāt al-ʿaṣr*) and the sunset prayer (*ṣalāt al-maghrib*).² Muslims see themselves as the last ones that have been called upon to work according to God's words, in a Prophetic Tradition that parallels the Evangelic parable of the Workers of the eleventh hour. As for the last Hour (*al-sāʿa*), it is called so because it comes «very quickly» to us (the root of the Arabic word for «hour», *sāʿa*, also means «to hast», *tasʿā*).³ Prophet Muḥammad (may God's Peace and Benediction be upon him) once said to his companions:

We were sent, me and the Hour, like that» and he made a sign by joining two of his fingers.⁴

There is no purpose in trying to know when this Hour will come, because the knowledge about it only belongs to God. The Prophet, when he was asked about it, once said:

Who is questioned about it does not know more than who is questioning.⁵

And the Holy Koran adds:

They will question you concerning the Hour, when it shall come. Say: 'The knowledge of it is only with my Lord; none shall reveal it at its proper time, but He. Heavy is it in the heavens and the earth; it will not come on you but

2. Bukhārī.

3. Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, trans. *Les Illuminations de La Mecque*, dir. by M. Chodkiewicz, Sindbad, Paris, p. 173.

4. Bukhārī.

5. Muslim.

suddenly!⁶

However, although the Hour is a divine mystery, Prophet Muḥammad announced some of its precursor signs. More specifically, its coming is marked by the increase of social problems and moral confusion. In the prospect of Islam, the outer events are the signs of inner reality. The disorders of society bear witness of the disappearing of spiritual life. Prophet Muḥammad announced to his companions:

I do not fear for you that you associate somebody to God, but I fear for you this world and that you begin to quarrel about me. It will be your loss in the same way as your predecessors went to their loss.⁷

Anyone looking at the world as it is now can see the accomplishment of this Prophetic sentence. The Islamic community is breaking out into political and theological streams that are more interested by nationalism, rationalism, or technical progress, than by the sense of sainthood and the quest for knowledge.

Prophet Muḥammad used to say:

Rabbi zidnī ‘ilman, My Lord, increase me in knowledge.⁸

Who is now asking God to give him knowledge, in a truly contemplative life that is not the opposite of action, but its complementary side? Prophet Muḥammad used to repeat:

Allābumma lā ‘aysba illā ‘aysbu-l-ākḥira O my God, there is no like except the life of the Hereafter.⁹

6. Kor. VII, 187.

7. Bukhārī and Muslim.

8. Kor. XX, 114.

9. Bukhārī.

Who still believes in his return to God, with the sense of responsibility that this return actually implies? On one side, nobody thinks that this life is going to end and that it takes a meaning from the Afterlife. On the other side, many desecrate the genuine attraction by God and the sense of sacrifice for others, and transform them into a profane, political violence.

The traditional doctrine of the cosmic cycles teaches us that these things have necessary to happen. As a matter of fact, everything that is possible has occurred, is occurring or will occur. The lower possibilities correspond to a larger ontological distance from the perfect Principle, and can appear only at the end of the temporal cycle. After the uprooting of the relation between God and the human that has been caused by the rise of materialism, we are now seeing the period of psychical dissolution, when the human opens to destructive forces coming from below. The communities of all religions must follow a similar way that brings them downwards.

Other troubles are still to come. The Prophet once warned his companions:

Since the creation of Adam, till the day of the Hour, there is not event that is more serious than the rise of the Impositor (al-Dajjāl).¹⁰

And the Prophet added:

Do you want me to speak about him as no prophet has ever spoken to his followers? He is blind in one eye. He is going to bring with him an image of Heavens and an image of Hell. The one he will pretend it is Heavens will be Hell in reality.¹¹

10. Muslim.

11. Bukhārī and Muslim.

The Impostor will bring wealth around him to those who will believe in him. And, according to the companions who reported this saying:

At some time the Prophet minimized the importance of the Impostor, and at some time he amplified it, to a point that we began to believe he was already in our palm-groves.¹²

Alas, the precursor signs of all that are visible. According to the ḥadīth,

the Hour will not occur before one sees about thirty impostor rise, and each one will pretend he is God's Messenger.¹³

Already false prophets are coming to sell their so-called methods of personal realization. Various sects and movements propose a cacophony of false gnosis and miracle recipes. Others reduce religion to a simple political force in the fight triggered by those who wish a clash of civilisations.

But Prophet Muḥammad warned us:

God is not blind in one eye. Well the Impostor is blind in the right-side eye.¹⁴

But the right-side eye is, according to the Tradition, the eye that is looking at God. It is an obvious sign. Prophet Muḥammad used to say about the Impostor:

He is too weak to be allowed by God to deceive the believers by apparent miracles.¹⁵

12. Muslim.

13. Bukhārī.

14. Bukhārī and Muslim.

15. Bukhārī.

However, it would be dangerous to be too self-confident about it. At the end, more and more discrimination is needed to make the difference between Good and Wrong, between Truth and Falsehood.

We, believers of these last times, are attempting to be faithful to God through the message of Revelation. We now have a peculiar responsibility. We should not revolt against the state of the things in the modern world. Revolt is not a virtue. Does not God say, in a *ḥadīth qudsī*:

Curse not time for God is Time (*al-dabr*)?¹⁶

Our duty is to bear witness of the spiritual legacy of which we are the heirs, to say the Truth and to manifest God's Mercy.

The Muslims are waiting for the return of Jesus Christ, Sayyidunā 'Īsā (Peace be upon him), who is the Anointed, that is, the Messiah (*al-Masīḥ*), and God's speech (*Kalimat Allāh*). They share this messianic expectation with the Christians, and, under different forms, with the believers of all traditions, especially the Jews. According to the Islamic Tradition, Sayyidunā 'Īsā is not dead. He is alive and has been called by God. He will come back. This is the reason why Prophet Muḥammad warned solemnly:

I swear by Who is having my soul in His Hands: very promptly the Son of Mary will get back to you as a righteous judge.¹⁷

As the Seal of the Saints (*khatm al-awliyā'*), Sayyidunā 'Īsā represents the inner dimension of religion, the one of the right intention (*al-niyya*) that manifests the purity of the heart (*al-ikhlās*) and vivifies the actions. According to the ḥadīth,

16. Bukhārī.

17. Bukhārī and Muslim.

there are no actions except by the intentions,¹⁸

and ʿĪsā is the Master of inner life. However, the Spirit (*al-rūḥ*), the breath of divine life that God put into Adam at the moment of the creation of the human, is progressively drawing back from the world. Or, more accurately, we are progressively getting more and more unaware of the presence of the Spirit in us. The bodies and ritual forms are losing their symbolical transparency and become opaque to the Spirit. Whereas they are the containers of spiritual influences, these forms now are considered as empty shells that can be left over on the shore during the final dissolution. Prophet Muḥammad warned:

How will you act when the Son of Mary will come back among you and your leader (*imām*) will be one of yours?¹⁹

The hearts will be checked by the rise of the Messiah. According to the ḥadīth,

There will be nobody among the People of the Book that will not believe in him (the Messiah) before his death, and, in the day of the Resurrection, he will be witness against them.²⁰

Sayyidunā ʿĪsā will be «the Sign of the Hour». The ḥadīth tells us how he will act:

The Messiah will strike the Impostor so heavily that the latter will melt as salt melts in water.²¹

The world is surviving in an unstable equilibrium. Only God knows when this equilibrium will cease, but the full manifesta-

18. Bukhārī.

19. Bukhārī.

20. Kor. IV, 157.

tion of the Spirit is inevitable, and the coming of the Messiah illustrates the irresistible force of Truth. There will be only a single Cry (*ṣayḥa wāḥida*), a Word from God brought forth by the Spirit, under the symbolic form of the Breath of the Angel of Judgment into the Trumpet (*al-ṣūr*). The Day of Resurrection will be a new Creation (*kbalq jadīd*) similar to the first one. It will be the day when the hidden meaning of the things will appear at last, when the mystery (*al-ghayb*) will be unveiled. It will be the day of the «turning around» (*inqilāb*), when the inside (*bāṭin*) becomes the outside (*zāhir*), and when the outside becomes the inside, when the invisible appears and the visible hides. Then the human beings will be judged according to the faithfulness of their hearts and the conformity of their acts to God's words, that is the «righteous balance» (*al-mīzān*). The Islamic Tradition teaches that Prophet Muḥammad will resurrect and get access to a specific station, called the Station of Praise (*maqām maḥmūd*), where he will become an intercessor for the whole mankind, because, according to the Koran, he was sent «as a Mercy for the worlds».²²

The tales that report on these events are symbolic. But they are not allegories without any consistence. The symbolised events already have their full actuality in the World of subtle forms (*'ālam al-mithāl*) where the Prophetic vision (*al-ru'yā*) has deciphered them. They already exist in the eternal present of divine Knowledge that encompasses the universal All-Possibility.

How can I rejoice, Prophet Muḥammad said, when the Angel with the Trumpet has already risen it, and has heard the order to blow into it? When will he blow?²³

The symbols must necessarily manifest in the development of time, the stream of which unfolds the immutable realities of the

21. Muslim.

22. Kor. XXI, 107.

23. Tirmidhī.

invisible world. Nobody knows how these things will occur. All what we can tell about them is included in the symbolic expressions reported by the Koran and the ḥadīth.

Surely the earthquake of the Hour is a mighty thing (*inna zalzalata-l-sā'ati sbay'un 'aẓīm*).²⁴

A prophetic saying advises those who will live when the Impositor comes to read on him the first verses of Chapter 18, «The Cave» (*sūrat al-kaḥf*). The Islamic Tradition considers it as a polar sura, because it is located exactly in the middle of the Koranic text. It includes three tales that have a deep spiritual meaning, as they teach us the mysteries of the doctrine of the cycles. Let me mention the last one first, the story of Dhū-l-Qarnayn (Peace be upon him), a prophet and hero who is sometimes identified with Alexander the Great, and who builds walls of iron as a protection against the waves of the Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj (Gog and Magog).²⁵ It is a clear announcement of the final dissolution.

The second tale invites us to ponder upon the meeting between Moses, Sayyidunā Mūsā (Peace be upon him), and a mysterious character who lives at the confluent of two seas (*majma' al-baḥrayn*), the one of this world and the one of the Hereafter.²⁶ The Islamic Tradition calls him al-Khaḍīr (Peace be upon him), a name that evokes the perpetual turning green of vegetation. Sayyidunā Mūsā is upset by al-Khaḍīr's actions that seem incoherent. But the reasons of the things finally appear to Mūsā, and al-Khaḍīr explains how important patience (*ṣabr*) is to grasp something of divine knowledge. May our Lord grant us a good deal of this patience among the chaos of the final period.

The third tale proposes the parable of the young People of the Cave, a Koranic version of the Christian tradition of the Seven

24. Kor. XXII, 1.

25. Kor. XVIII, 98-99.

26. Kor. XVIII, 60-82.

Sleepers of Ephesus. These young men take refuge in the Cave where God makes them sleep for 309 years. Then God wakes them up as a sign of Resurrection.

We made [people] stumble upon them, that they might know that God's promise is true, and that there is no doubt about the Hour.²⁷

The Sufis see this Cave as a symbol of the heart where the believers listen to the words of their Lord, in a total commitment to God. According to the Koranic words:

Take refuge in the Cave, and your Lord will unfold to you His mercy, and will furnish you with a gentle issue of your affair. And you might have seen the sun, when it rose, inclining from their Cave toward the right, and, when it set, passing them by on the left, while they were in a broad fissure of the Cave. That was one of God's signs; whomsoever God guides, he is rightly guided, and whomsoever He leads astray, you will not find for him a protector to direct. They would have thought them awake, as they lay sleeping, while We turned them now to the right, now to the left (*wa nuqallibubum dhāta-l-yamīni wa dhāta-l-shimāl*).²⁸

As the Men of the Cave follow the motion of the sun by the swinging of their bodies, the believer's heart follows the succession of the divine irradiations (*tajalliyāt ilābiyya*) by turning around constantly (*taq̄lib*, a word with the same root as *al-qalb*, the heart), in a total commitment to God. God unveils Himself through the veils of the things along the unfolding of time in a creating act that is constantly renewed. The human mind is unable to follow the succession of the divine manifestations through the mutations of the phenomena. Only the intellect that is traditionally located in the heart is able to do so, when it empties itself from

27. Kor. XVIII, 21.

28. Kor. XVIII, 16-18.

the world. This is why God says, in a *ḥadīth qudsī*:

My heavens and My earth embrace Me not, but the heart
of My believing servant does embrace Me.²⁹

Keeping after one's heart is one of the mysteries of the pole, the invariable centre where the believers of all religions will seek refuge during the final unfurling of the psychological waves.

All the Traditions recommend to multiply the invocation of God's Names during the events of the end of times. «Surely the invocation of God is greater (*Wa-la-dhikru-Llābi akbar*)»³⁰, the Koran says. During their ritual gatherings, the Sufis perform the invocation of God's name in the formula *Lā ilāha illā-Llāb*, «there is no god but God», and reproduce the motion of the bodies on the right and on the left under the breathe of the Spirit, according to the example of the Men of the Cave submitted to the action of the divine Grace.

Nobody knows whether he will live during the messianic times. But we are sure of the existence of our personal eschatology. We have tried to bear witness about it today. Beyond our ignorance and the limits due to our human nature, this faith in God is an anticipation of a knowledge that will be certainty. Because, although there is no doubt about our death, the Koran also tells us that certainty (*al-yaqīn*) will come after death.³¹ It is God's promise and «God's promise is true», as the Koran says. May this tradition of the Men of the Cave help us keep our hearts from the confusion of the world, and give us the patience to wait for the return of the Messiah (Peace be upon him) who will be able to gather all of us in the shining Beauty and Majesty of the Unique God. *Wa-Llāhu a'lam*, and God knows better.

29. This *ḥadīth*, often quoted by Ibn 'Arabī, is not in the canonical collections.

30. Kor. XXIX, 45.

31. Kor. CII, 3-7.