

Facing the Face of Death in Serenity: Learning from Abrahamic Religion

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Abstract

You and everyone you've ever known someday will die with a certainty. Death is a topic which relevant to us, and yet it isn't pleasant to talk about. Western societies embrace individualism that promotes the personal autonomy of the dying. IOM defined a "good death" as "one that is free from avoidable suffering for patients." Suffering is a state of undergoing pain, distress, or hardship. There are 3 types of sufferings: physical, mental, and spiritual. Is it then realistically possible to have a death that is free from suffering? According to research conducted by Pew Research Center on Religion, Abrahamic Religion counted as the largest religion totaling 55.3 % of the world population. Its followers believe that God created mankind in His own image. As life is precious, holy and sacred, only God has the authority to give and take life. Augustine of Hippo, a fourth-century philosopher believed as creations there is a natural longing to join the Creator. For that humans have to go through physical death before being able to join God eternally in spirit. When we have faith as a foundation to be based on, we accept physical death as a way to join our Creator. Thus, we are able to free ourselves from distress and hardship. We can peacefully undergo the process and look forward to the moment we join our Creator perpetually. So, can we face death in serenity and embracing the future with God in peace and joy? Yes, we can and should.

Keywords: good death, death, after life, resurrection, dying, suffering, God, Abrahamic Faith, serenity, peaceful

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Introduction

Mom had ovary cancer. She was misdiagnosed with TB and was treated for about 2 years prior finally finding out that she had ovary cancer stage 4. The doctor hesitated to tell the truth of her stage condition. That from medical analysis, mom had only few months to live. She was dying and it was only a matter of time before she returned to join her Creator. Instead of telling us the hard fact, her doctor used more words that seems misleading her and our family further away from the heartbreaking truth. The doctor then advised us that we should try chemo and 'leave and let God decide the result'.

Not knowing that she had no more chance to prolong her good life, with the support of the family, she agreed to do chemo. The next 5 (five) months after she found out about her ovary cancer were spent in and out of hospital. She lost all her hair, she lost all her confidence and the most important thing, and she lost "quality time" that she could have spent with the family even though it will be just a good few short months. She suffered a great deal of physical, emotional and mental pains.

Watching her through those sufferings were heartbreaking and traumatic for the family. To this day, 17 years later, on some days near her birthday or death anniversary, I often thought of her and wish that she could have had 'End of her journey' in serenity, less sufferings and more peaceful manner.

She is not the only one that had the life journey ended that way. Amongst us here, there are many sons, daughters and family members that probably had the same thought and wish like I do when we think of our beloved family member that has passed in similar circumstances.

Pew Research Center released report on Global Religious Future Project in 2017, which analyzes religious change and its impact on societies around the world. Reporting in Between 2015 and 2060, the world's population is expected to increase by 32%, from 7.3 billion to 9.6 billion. Christians were the largest religious group in the world in 2015, making up nearly a third (31%) of Earth's 7.3 billion people. Muslims were second, with 1.8 billion people, or 24% of the global population. Jews, with 10 million people or 0.01% of the global population. The three religions of Abrahamic Faith count 55.5 %, more than half of the global population. Thus the perspective and beliefs of the believer of the Abrahamic Faith matter because their number is significant and continue to grow with the improvement in health sector and living standard worldwide while annual global death count is declining.

Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) released data in 2016 on number of death by cause of death. 53 million people died globally in 2016, the biggest cause is cardiovascular diseases at 32.26%, second cause is cancer at 16.32 %. In most cases, the cancer was found at later stage and therefore the death is approaching months away from the diagnosis. But usually there are still few months before the final end of life is there. Thus, it can be prepared in the most suitable ways for the dying ones, that will not only ease them from suffering, pain, and guilt of leaving their loved one but also making them going in their final journey in serenity, peace and to certain extent: joyfulness.

I. A Good Death According to Western Society

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) in 2007, published its definition of “a good death” which defined as “one that is free from avoidable suffering for patients, families and caregivers in general accordance with the patients’ and families’ wishes.”

Western societies embrace individualism that promotes the personal autonomy of the dying, including avoiding suffering for the patients, families and caregivers. When the patients are well aware of their diagnosis and prognosis thus able to make their own choices about how and when they shall live and die.

Euthanasia is allowed in 5 (five) countries: the Netherlands, Belgium, Colombia, Luxembourg and Canada. Physician-Assisted Suicide (PAS) is legal in Switzerland, Germany, Japan, the American states of Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Vermont, Montana and California, and in Washington, DC. But in most countries in the world, both Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide are illegal. To kill another person deliberately is murder or manslaughter, even if the other person asks you to kill them.

Death is not always painful. Some people die without any pain at all. But others have a lot of pain. But with terminally ill case, for example with cancer, up to 90 percent of people experience pain at some point in their journey, and up to 35 percent of patients describe their pain in the last week of life as severe or intolerable. The amount of pain you experience can vary depending on your diagnosis. People dying from cancer have severe pain and suffer greatly, and not just physically but emotionally as well.

Physical suffering / great pain can accentuate other symptoms such as shortness of breath and anxiety. Emotional suffering can leave patient short-tempered and unable to concentrate, in turn making it difficult to have meaningful conversations with your loved ones and health care provider who assist the patients during those moments. Spiritual suffering causes the dying ones to feeling alone and empty. Those three types of suffering rob them of their last good moments here on earth with their loved ones. For those left behind, the memory of the dying process will linger for years to come. If that time was marked by sufferings and pain, it can result in prolonged grieving.

II. Death According to Abrahamic Religion

II. 1. Death According to Jewish

In Judaism, death is not a tragedy and life is valued above almost all else. Because life is so valuable, it is not permitted to do anything that may hasten death, not even to prevent suffering. Euthanasia, suicide, and assisted suicide are strictly forbidden by Jewish law. The Talmud states that you may not even move a dying person's arms if that would shorten his life. Where death is certain and imminent, and the patient suffers then Jewish law does permit one to cease artificially prolonging life. Thus, in certain circumstances, Jewish law permits "pulling the plug".

Death is the natural process of human life. Death becomes a transition to the afterlife. This time of transition is seen as a sacred event. If man is created in the image of God, the soul will be back to God the creator. The godly soul will return to its origin, namely God the divine source (Jaffer, 2016). Because of that, the death is understood

as the segregation between the physical and the spiritual part of human body. Those two parts are conjoined during the time of conception. While the physical returns to the earth, the spiritual one starts the journey to the next life.

II.2. Death According to Christianity

From the understanding of Judaism and Christianity, God created mankind in His own image. He exhaled His breath into man. Therefore, it gives life an infinite value to humans as an hour, a day or a week of life is representing as much value as many months or years.

We inherited God's image and breath. We are created. God as The Creator owns our life and we are thus not the ruler of our own life and death. Our life is sacred therefore we have a task to guard this (our) precious life. Furthermore, from the Holy Bible, it is stated within The Fifth of God's commandment: "Do not kill".

The Bible statement on Life is clear, "The LORD has given, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD," (Job 1:21). We are forbidden to take people life and we cannot take our own life because only God has the authority over human life.

The Christians believe that death is the climax of their terrestrial life. The life of human is limited by time. Death is normal for the human life because his life is not boundless. Only God is limitless and eternal.

Death for Christians leads them to meet the Lord. The mundane life is only temporary. It is not everlasting. They have a great hope in death because they believe that through the death, the Christians will be reunited with the Lord. "We should be cheerful because we would rather leave these bodies and be at home with the Lord (II Corinthians 5:8)" St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "I want to see God and in order to see him, I must die." To be one with the Lord, a man must be away from his body. In the death experience, the soul of human is separated from the body. The soul will be reunified with the body on the day of resurrection of the dead (Catechism 1005).

II.3. Death According to Islam

Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un (Arabic: رَاجِعُونَ إِلَيْهِ وَإِنَّا لِلَّهِ إِنَّا) is a part of a verse from the Qur'an which translates to "We belong to God and to Him we shall return."

For the Muslims, The Qur'an explicitly states that divinity not only shapes our end, but determines the moment and type of our demise (Qur'an 56: 57–62; Cheraghi et al., 2005). Islam respects the individual's pathway to God and does not wish to intrude on a relationship that is ultimately controlled by divinity. The Qur'an makes it very clear that the afterlife is more important than present life, at least in terms of one's eternal destiny, for one will be judged and rewarded there according to one's deeds in this life. Once death has taken an individual, that person belongs to God and the other world. Popular notions of God's workings will often pointedly refer to sickness as a test (Cheraghi et al., 2005), with the ultimate aim is to make the person more religious. Hence, even quite ordinary Muslims will view a life-limiting illness through the prism of their personal relationship with God.

III. Resurrection According to Abrahamic Religion

III.1. Resurrection According to Jewish

The idea of resurrection is related to two types of character of human in the Jewish belief (Ryan & McGinley, 2012). There is distinctive destiny of afterlife between the just and the wicked. They will accept the fate according to their demeanor and deportment in the world. The wicked will not have any expectation for viability. They will be shattered and demolished. Their existence will be dissolved. "Those enemies are now dead and can never live again. You have punished them -- they are destroyed, completely forgotten" (Isaiah 26:14). But the just will be viable and find hope and assurance in their afterlife. "Your people will rise to life! Tell them to leave their graves and celebrate with shouts. You refresh the earth like morning dew; you give life to the dead" (Isaiah 26:19). The just will enjoy their afterlife. In the next life, they will be delighted, cheerful, and content.

Like the Isaiah Apocalypse, the book of Daniel sees the wicked and the just in the similar pathway. The book of Daniel is written during the Babylonian Exile (597 BCE). The writer hoped for the independency from molestation and torment. Besides that, the writer expected for the relieved situation from the sting of death. It is seen as the ultimate exile (Ryan & McGinley, 2012). "Many of those sleeps in the dust of the Earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence (Daniel 12:2)."

After the end of the Babylonian Exile, the prophet of Ezekiel contemplated about the word of God in resurrection of the human body (Ryan & McGinley, 2012). "The Lord said, 'Ezekiel, son of man, can these bones come back to life?' I replied, 'Lord God, only you can answer that'" (Ezekiel 37:13). Ezekiel associated the idea of resurrection to the return the Jews from Babylon. He described the resurrection as a coming home to the eternity and perpetuity with God.

The Jewish belief on resurrection is also can be based on the experience of their ancestor in the second BCE. Antiochus IV Epiphanes was the Greek ruler over the Syria. He ordered the Jews to follow his *hityavnut* policy as the hellenization or assimilation of Greek culture in every aspect of Jewish life (Ryan & McGinley, 2012). The Jews was not allowed to worship Yahweh. Only Zeus was praiseworthy. Under Judas Maccabeus leadership, they made a revolt. Many of them became the martyr of faith. The event generated hope for an afterlife. The Jews expected a resurrected bodily life in the world to come. "But the King of the universe will raise us from the dead and give us eternal life, because we have obeyed his laws (2 Maccabees 7:9)." Based on the Book of Maccabees, the Jewish find their strong belief for the afterlife.

III.2. Resurrection According to Christianity

The Christians believe on resurrection mainly because of the experience of Jesus Christ the Risen Lord. The first disciples wrote it in their writings. They experienced the visions of the Risen Lord over a period of forty days (Ryan & McGinley, 2012). "For forty days after Jesus had suffered and died, he proved in many ways that he had been raised from death. He appeared to his apostles and spoke to them about God's

kingdom “(Acts 1:3). The resurrection of Christ is the principal component for the Christian faith. Therefore, Christians believe that all human beings will be resurrected.

As the Lord, Jesus himself has the authority over the death. “I am the one who raises the dead to life! Everyone who has faith in me will live, even if they die. And everyone who lives because of faith in me will never really die. Do you believe this? (John 11:25-26)”

Paul as the disciple of Jesus had the same experience. After five to eight years after the death of resurrected of Jesus, he had an attested fact of the risen Jesus. “Finally, he appeared to me, even though I am like someone who was born at the wrong time. (I Corinthians 15:8) Paul explained on how our bodies will be when are raised to life. Our physical bodies will be altered into spiritual bodies.

There was also Mar Jacob of Serugh, the Syriac homilist who wrote about the resurrection (Ryan & McGinley, 2012). He lived in the late fifth and early sixth century CE. He composed the poem about the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. It narrated how the Roman emperor Decius persecuted the Christians. In Ephesus, the emperor forced the Christians to make a sacrifice to gods. There were seven boys who did not want the sacrifice. They hid in a cave. They slept over night. Mar Jacob of Serugh wrote that the Lord saw the faith of the dear lambs and . . . took their spirits and raised them up above, to heaven, and left a watcher to be guarding their limbs. Because the kids felt hungry, one of them bought a food. When got into the city, he felt surprised. He found many crosses. He brought the coin from two centuries old. The people were also surprised because of the coin and his presence. Finally, the boy led the Christians to the cave where he and his friends had slept since two hundred years ago. They continued the role to be witnesses to the reality of the resurrection. “For your sake has Christ the Lord awoken us so that you might see and hold firm that the resurrection truly exists.”

The idea of resurrection of the body is similar which can be quoted from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The resurrection of the flesh means not only that the immortal soul will live on after death. But that even our mortal body will come to life again (Catechism 990).

III.3. Resurrection According to Islam

The prophet of Muhammad may had been aware of and informed about the story of the Seven Sleepers (Ryan & McGinley, 2012). The story had been retold in the oral tradition. The Christians lived in Arabia spread the story orally. The prophet of Muhammad re-experienced this vision when he had a disputation with the Meccan countryman about the hour of judgment and the resurrection of the dead. “Thus did we bring them [the Companions of the Cave] to their [the unbelievers’] attention so that they might know God’s promise is true and that there is no doubt about the hour [of judgment], even though they hold various opinions about this matter (Quran 18:21).”

There are many Quranic verses about the resurrection of the dead. God show the people how he would resurrect the dead. “How can you disbelieve in Allah when you

were lifeless and He brought you to life; then He will cause you to die, then He will bring you [back] to life, and then to Him you will be returned.” (Surah Al-Baqarah 2:28)

More than that, God shows them how he brings some animals back to life. In Surah Al-Baqarah 2:260 “And [mention] when Abraham said, "My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead." [Allah] said, "Have you not believed?" He said, "Yes, but [I ask] only that my heart may be satisfied." [Allah] said, "Take four birds and commit them to yourself. Then [after slaughtering them] put on each hill a portion of them; then call them - they will come [flying] to you in haste. And know that Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise."

Conclusion

None of us wants to die but a well-rounded life should have a beginning, middle, and an end. There will always be sorrow and grief. But each one of us should be able to say, in that next place: "I had a good death in serenity". It is rational to fear death. Particularly if death comes through illness, our body has lost its appetite for living. Our own death gives grief to people we loved. It is natural that we feel sad for them, and for the loss of so many things we hold dear must be painful. While we cannot stop or take the physical pain of the dying one we can lessen their emotional and spiritual pain, offer emotional support and spiritual accompaniment in order for the dying one to be fulfilled spiritually and ready for the final journey.

The question of why some suffer at death and others do not could be summed up in one statement: "God is sovereign." That is not just a trite and easy statement. When Jesus healed a man born blind, the disciples questioned Him. "“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life’" (John 9:1-3). God allows some to suffer so that "the work of God might be displayed." In other words, God allows some to suffer to bring glory to His name and others not to suffer for the same reason. It is His sovereign will that determines each circumstance. Therefore, we can safely say that no suffering is without a purpose in the plan of God.

Saint Augustine of Hippo is a fourth century philosopher whose groundbreaking philosophy infused Christian doctrine with Neoplatonism. He is famous for being an inimitable Catholic theologian and for his agnostic contributions to Western philosophy. He believed as creations there is a natural longing to join the Creator. For that humans have to go through physical death before being able to join God eternally in spirit.

Therefore, however a believer dies; it is but a transition to "face to face" with the LORD. Once that transition has been made, all of the sorrow and pain of the suffering will end. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

The relinquishment of life in the final phase is possible and can be a time of peaceful acceptance, knowing that we have so much to look forward when we join our Creator

in eternal life, calm and peaceful which contrast with the tensions and frustrations of the battles to survive in life. Therefore the believers have great hope in death because it reunites them with God.

The face of the Creator alone will abide. All things are return to God by means of a recapitulation spoken of, with as abundance of imagery, in all holy and sacred books of Abrahamic Religions. Death for believer of Abrahamic Faith is leading to life eternal with the ultimate good who is God.

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