

QA young man wrote:

Dear Mr. Hamid,

I have just viewed the beheading of Eugene Armstrong and would like to know why is there Evil in the World? Why does Allah not stop Evil?

Three questions follow:

1. Is Allah willing to stop Evil, but unable to? This would mean that he is impotent. Is Allah able to stop Evil, but not willing to (perhaps for some reason) ? This would mean that he is malevolent, for nothing by worldly or heavenly logic could justify what happened to Eugene Armstrong.
2. Does the opportunity for some people to "choose" their own actions (in order to be judged upon later) justify what happens to others?
3. If Allah is both willing and able to stop the evils, then why do actions like the one in this clip happen again and again and again

Regards,

AAssalaamu `Alaykum wa Rahmatullaahi wa Barakaatuhu

As shocking as it is to see persons like Nick Berg, Eugene Armstrong and now Ken Bigley being executed, it is difficult to comprehend or explain what is going on.

Although I can respond to your three questions briefly and succinctly in the same order as you have asked them, But I would prefer to be long-winded in this case and address some issues behind your questions as well.

The fundamental issue behind these questions is the issue of human death and suffering. This issue should be looked at both from a micro perspective and a macro perspective. The micro will be the human perspective on death and suffering and the macro will be the divine perspective. I will try to briefly present the Islamic view from both perspectives. However, before doing so let me express my amazement on your selection of the events to ask about.

Personally, I am shocked and saddened and perturbed whenever and wherever I see the loss of life and suffering of people, regardless of whoever caused it. Although it is happening too much and too often, I have not been able to become used to it. Every such incident shocks me and gives me painful feelings. Why can't people be peaceful? Why must they hurt others? Why do they not respect other's life and property? Why are people so self-centred? Why are they so cruel and senseless? Why? Why? Why?

It hurts me whether the death and suffering is caused by state-sponsored terrorism, a radical group's reaction to state terrorism, an act of a deranged individual or a random crime. It bothers me whether it is to advance some political goals, preserve economic interests, vent religious animosity or an act of desperation. It shocks me equally whether it is carried out by so-called Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Communists, Secularists, etc. And there are numerous examples of occurrences on a regular basis in each of the categories that I have mentioned.

Death is painful, regardless of how it is inflicted: An atomic weapon, a chemical weapon, a daisy cutter bomb, an oxygen depleting bomb, burying the enemy soldiers alive in the burning sand, a missile, cluster bombs, napalm bombs, grenades, land mines, bullets, a car bomb, a suicide attack or knife. Precious life is lost whether the killer wears a uniform or not. Every life is precious regardless of the colour of the skin or religion or citizenship or economic status of the killed. For innocent civilian men and women and children who are dying, it is irrelevant whose pretext is more justified or who started it and who is reacting to it.

Where I need your help is to understand why an intelligent, sensible, civic-minded person such as yourself would pick only a certain example to ask the question, instead of raising the issue in its proper perspective as a global human problem? Do you think that the killings by those resisting an occupation are worse than the massive killings, destruction and devastation caused by invading and occupying forces? Are you suggesting that it is ok for one party to kill a large number of people and devastate huge populations, but it is cruel and shocking if the other party kills anyone?

I am a peace activist because my goal in life is to help human beings create an environment of peace and justice. And this goal has been assigned to me by Allaah as a Muslim, just like it has been assigned to every Muslim as a duty. I have dedicated a considerable part of my adult life to this endeavour. What I have come to realize is that if we want to establish peace and justice, we cannot be selective, biased or one-sided. Unless we treat, condemn and disassociate from every act of terrorism in the same way regardless of the perpetrator or motive behind it, things will not improve. Justifying one act while condemning the other will only keep exacerbating the situation as it is doing now.

Please think about this point.

Now coming to the Islamic views:

From the micro perspective, the Islamic teachings are very clear and categoric:

Life is the most sacred asset bestowed by Allaah that must be respected, preserved, nurtured and protected. Its sanctity in Islam is greater than any of the religious sanctities. The greatest punishment of Allaah is set for those who take a life unduly. Saving or preserving a life is so important that even the practices disallowed in Islam become allowed to the extent of the need to save life. Even animal life has sanctity in the sense that one is allowed to hunt or slaughter an animal only for food, not for fun, game or any other purpose.

Every statement is based on the teachings of the Islamic texts. I have not provided textual references for the sake of brevity. Please feel free to ask if you want me to include those references. All these teaching have been taught because the objective of Islam is to establish peace and justice in the world.

Let us now look at life and death from the macro perspective:

Life starts with semen and goes through various stages: from semen to fertilized egg, to foetus, to birth, to death to eternal life hereafter. From that perspective, death is just a stage in the continuum of life. It is neither a punishment of God, nor an affliction, nor a bad thing. Just like birth brings a baby from the confines of the womb into a bigger world for a longer duration, death takes the person into even a bigger and eternal world. If people are not killed they are going to die any way. The reason killing is wrong is not because someone dies, but because instead of letting life take a normal course, someone crossed the limit, took the matter in his or her own hand, played God with another person's life and terminated it in disobedience to Allaah.

Allaah has full power and authority to make the world peaceful and perfect. He could have done so but in that case, he would have had to pre-programme human beings to do only the right things. They would not have freedom of action and choices. It is this freedom of action that allows people to do bad things and create chaos and suffering. And it for precisely this reason that Allaah made this world temporary; so that those people who tend to misuse their God-given freedom can be imprisoned in hell and all those who use their freedom to do good and to be nice and kind can enjoy their freedom forever in the hereafter. He does not interfere in the matters of this world because it will compromise people's freedom. So He lets them behave as they want for a temporary period of their life, then in the eternal life hereafter, he will do full justice and peace and tranquility will prevail forever.

The following excerpt from my book "Islam -- Does It Make Sense?" discusses this point in as under:

Problems in Perspective

Bestowing freedom of choice upon human beings and giving them the authority to execute their decisions has two built-in dangers. Firstly, people can make wrong decisions because of the imperfection of human knowledge and wisdom. Secondly, people can choose to misuse their authority and disobey Allaah by practising injustice, violating rights or doing other improper acts. Both result in problems in society and loss of peace, justice and harmony. The likelihood of such occurrences increases significantly because Allaah is not perceivable to people, which creates uncertainty about Him and makes people more prone to disobeying Him.

All of the injustices, exploitations, crimes, wars, environmental destruction, pollution, concentration of wealth in fewer hands vis-à-vis starvation of masses of people, etc. are examples of the problems created by the excesses committed by people in disobedience of the Creator. It is to weed out such people who misuse their freedom bestowed by Allaah and commit excesses that Allaah SWT put us in a temporary universe.

Making this world temporary also required building into it some imperfections. The natural laws had to be such that would lead to its own destruction. While it had to be made sustainable for a long period to let all planned generations of human beings find the earth hospitable and inhabitable, it must not have been perfect in all respects to continue in an ideal way forever. Some of its imperfections show up in the form of natural disasters. Natural disasters demonstrate to people the temporary nature of this world. They are a part of Allaah's plan as a sign of Allaah's power and authority. They remind people of the limits of the power and authority given to them in this world and the limitless power and authority of the Creator Himself. They put those who misuse their freedom in place and in check. Without such countermeasures and signs, the disobedient to Allaah would feel in full control of the affairs of the world and would rebel beyond limits creating insurmountable problems for other human beings.

Testing people through a temporary life had its own needs. Such natural laws for human life had to be ordained that would make the timing of a person's death unpredictable. An individual's span of life without a predictable time frame was designed so that people would prepare for death knowing that it can come anytime and that delaying obedience to God to a future time would be extremely risky because a future opportunity to repent and become obedient might not come. This required that people would die at different ages: some at very young age, some at very old age and others anywhere in between; and that such occurrence should appear random to people.

Those who do not understand these aspects of Allaah's plan tend to deny Allaah's existence on that basis. They think that if a Merciful Creator existed, He would not allow any injustice or crimes in the world. They do not realize that it is because of His mercy that He has put this temporary system in place to weed out the transgressors so that all others can have peace afterwards forever. They forget that once this short test is over, the victims of human crimes will enjoy the mercy of Allaah on the Day of Judgment and in the eternal life hereafter. Similarly, some people question that if an omnipotent God were taking care of the universe, why would human beings suffer from natural disasters? They miss the point that these natural occurrences evidence the power of God, become signs for the rebellious, and remind the faithful of the need to prepare for the ultimate destruction on the Day of Judgment. They wonder why a kind God would let the innocent people or a child die. They forget that there is nothing cruel or unjust in moving people naturally to the next stage of life where it will be perfect in every respect, continue forever, discomfort-free and full of pleasures and joys for the obedient people. That is where we will experience the full limitlessness of the mercy of Allaah. Even those who bear the grief of these deaths in this world will be compensated generously in the hereafter for all the troubles they had to suffer. We are going through a temporary phase on a path towards an eternal bliss.

I hope this explains the Islamic perspective on the questions that you raised. I will be looking forward to hearing your comments and feedback.

Wassalaam,
Ayub Hamid

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