

COSMOLOGY IN THE HOLY QUR'AN

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Sayyid Zahid Ali Wasti¹ has published a very thought-provoking article entitled “Medicine and Knowledge of God”. It is the English version of an earlier communication in Urdu and has thereby retained some characteristic features. To begin with, according to the contents as they now appear, the article can be properly entitled “The Idea of Creation in the Qur’an”. In fact, the first paragraph is actually entitled “Creation of Man”. In this paragraph there are four statements, all independent and isolated. Creation, as subject, is treated just as a poet, composing a ghazal in Urdu, would have done. Here every line has to rhyme with the others but, apart from it, each line can carry a sense entirely its own. On this pattern we find Wasti has offered four isolated statements, including the main one from the Qur’an. It is to be noted that when he refers to medicine, there is the humoral theory which accounts for the maintenance of health and even for life-span. But knowledge, coming from the Qur’an, can only be cosmology which primarily deals with the origin of life or creation: However, most authors confuse humoral theory with cosmology just as they confuse Existence with Creation.

(1) To start with Wasti quotes from the Qur’an, xcv. 4, that “man was created in the best mould”. The statement from the Qur’an, as it stands, appears axiomatic had there been a suitable commentary upon it, the same would have become derivative. This was required and may now be offered. When the mould has been chosen as the best, man emerging from it would naturally acquire the best Form. Now, Form is properly judged by its

¹ Sayyid Zahid All Wasti, “Medicine and Knowledge of God,” Hamdard Islamicus, 113 (1978), 79-87.

Function so that the best Form implies best Function. Here the Bible states that man has been created as the image of God and the Qur'an otherwise affirms that man is God's highest creation and, on that account, His representative on earth. It thus follows that man has been created to lead a noble life. When this is traced backwards we realise that man was formed in the best mould.

(2) The next statement comes as an independent one. It informs that "the ancient Greek physicians believed the corporeal part of man to comprise four (cosmic) elements, Earth, Water, Fire (Heat) and Air, and the Arabs followed them". This would be Greek humoral theory and not cosmology. Hippocrates formulated the Greek humoral theory. He was a practising physician concerned with health and longevity of man and only indirectly with the creation of the body. And to explain the maintenance of life four humours, corresponding to four cosmic elements, were necessary. The Greeks did recognise five cosmic elements which were Ether, Fire, Air, Water and Earth. But as humours Ether was not represented which calls for some explanation.

We reach our goal better if we consider the later Indian cosmology also. Here the cosmic elements are Akasha (Heaven), Air, Fire, Water and Earth. Now Divanji² has expounded that Akasha= Brahma, which rationally translated would be Creative Energy. Ether of Greek cosmology corresponds to Akasha of the Indian system and thereby becomes the element responsible for creation. Since medicine was not concerned with creation, in formulating the humoral theory, Ether was not represented. This is how there are five cosmic elements in Greek cosmology but only four humours in their humoral doctrine.

Let us now compare Indian cosmology and Indian humoral theory. The early Aryans had been nomads. When they first took to agriculture they were

² P.C. Divanji, "Brahma-Akasa Equation," Bharatiya Vidya, Bombay, Vol. IX, p. 148.

interested in understanding plant life. They discovered that plant life depended upon three factors, Warmth (Heat), Water and Earth. These became the elements of the first system of Indian cosmology. Its impact upon medicine gave the humoral theory called the Tridosha doctrine which recognises only three humours, corresponding to Air, Water and Heat (Fire) as cosmic elements. It is obvious that in the earlier system of cosmology, and in the humoral theory, there is no element to account for creation. However, it will be noticed that given Heat, Water and Earth, the latter two represent forms of matter, while Heat is energy. Philosophically interpreted, Heat occupied the place which later on was properly taken up by Akasha, Creative Energy. Aristotle is one of those who tried to raise the importance of Heat but he could not go very far. Ibn Bājjah, as his follower, has a treatise on Soul which Ma'sūmī³ has translated. Ibn Bājjah maintains that "the body that has a form is composed of Earth and Water. This transformation is possible through Heat. This heat is the organ of the soul". Thus the creative or at least the synthesising power is attributed to heat and this is a property of soul, but the source of soul is not indicated here. But we can see how the phenomenon of creation is left vague stopping merely with heat. Even paganism realised that creation must be finally traced to a Creator and, by what appeared obvious to the eye, Sun = Creator. Islam conceived a Creator deprived of all material qualities when Creator became the original all-creative power. Then the word of Divine Command, Amr Rabbī, as the word Kiln, Become, descended as quantum of creative energy, which transformed itself into matter, as Water and Earth, and entered into them, by now its own creation, as Rūh, Spirit. Thus Kun represents a quantum of "initial Creative Energy" and Rūk, "Creative Energy manifest". In this light the Quranic concept of Creative Energy is best explained by the complex 'Asir-Rūh or Kun-Rūh, which simplified becomes Rūh. Then what is Akasha in Indian cosmology would be Rūh in Quranic cosmology. In either case it is more than heat which could not be taken seriously as Creative Energy. Then

³ M.S. Hasan Mas'ūmī, "Ibn Bājjah's " 'Ilm al-Nafs," Pak. Hist. Soc., Karachi (1961), p. 38.

Quranic cosmology employs three elements, Creative Energy, Water and Earth, the latter two as material and forming the human corporeal system. The Qur'an, vi. 2, states: "God created man out of clay," when Clay=Earth. Further, the Qur'an, xxv. 54, maintains: "God created man from water." The importance of Quranic cosmology is best realised when we compare it with the earlier Indian cosmology. It will be understood that the former explains creation of human life, while the latter, the existence of plant life, and these two are: (i) Quranic cosmology: Rūh, Water, Earth: (ii) Earlier Indian cosmology: Heat, Water, Earth.

I have explained how later on philosophers tried to interpret Heat as Creative Energy but, failing to convince themselves of it, accepted Ether as a special element responsible for creation. Now, there is in Nature the phenomenon of Inversion. When an entity becomes energetic it gives rise to its opposite. But the energising power is donated by Rūh. This may be taken as axiomatic here but has been explained before.⁴ Then Water further creates as its opposite Fire, and Earth its opposite as Air. Thus given Water and Earth as forms of matter we automatically have Fire and Air as well. But to imagine Heat as energy producing Cold, means self-annihilation, and nothing can be destroyed in the Universe. Thus the opposite of Heat, or any form of energy, can only be matter, and as such the opposite of Rūh can be matter, and we have it as Water and Earth, the primary forms of matter. By now we can state that Rūh created its opposite as matter, in the form of Water and Earth, and then entered into its own creation thereby resulting as man. Creation of man was one continuous process which, however, is understood best as two different phases of matter which produced form or the human figure, and as energy incorporated, or Rūh, imparting movement and thus life.

⁴ S. Mandihassan, "The Creative Principle in Alchemy," Pak. Philos. Journal, Lahore (1977), XV/2, 38-61.

(3) The third statement Wasti offers implies that the body having been created to maintain life it must assimilate substances donating energy and in turn the body also produces energy when “the sum total represents, Cotabolism+Anabolism=Metabolism. It is this metabolic process that is another name for life.” Obviously the phenomenon discussed is “vegetative” life or existence, as opposed to its origin or creation.

(4) The fourth statement inserted is thoroughly isolated. It is a couplet of Urdu poetry without even bearing the author’s name. It has, however, been translated as follows:

“Life is the proportional arrangement of the (five) elements while death is their disintegration.”

I have previously discussed⁵ this verse which is the contribution of the famous Urdu poet, Pandit Chakbast, of Lucknow. At the same time I offered a literal translation as follows:

زندگی کیا ہے عناصر میں
ظہور ترتیب
موت کیا ہے انہیں اجزا کا
پیشاں ہونا

“What is life, but the manifestation of coordination among elements.

What is death, but the disintegration of the same constituents.”

He speaks of Zindagī, or life-span, and not of Hayāt or life. There is no doubt that Chakbast, as a poet, has presented the humoral theory in a most

⁵ S. Mandihassan, “The Bases of Alchemy.” *Stu. Hist. Med.*, New Delhi, (1977), I/1, 54.

beautiful form. But a humoral theory cannot be identified with a cosmological doctrine. In fact, I have explained that the constituents of humoral theory are best appreciated as Creative Energy represented by the first cosmic element permeating the other four which have become four activated humours. The interested reader may refer to this articles explaining how the humoral theory has been virtually misunderstood for cosmogony.

Summary. Humoral theory is not identical with cosmological doctrine. The latter contains an element representing Creative Energy. Akasha in Indian system of thought and Rūh in the Qur'an pertain to no humoral theory but instead each to a system of cosmology. Here the elements are Rūh, Water and Earth. Rūh is Creative Energy manifest, with its initial form as the word of Divine Command. With such an original life-force, man was formed in the best mould, acquiring the best Form, to discharge the best Function, when life's aim becomes Nobility. Medicine is concerned mainly with health and not with nobility of life.

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