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Islam's FIVE BIG LIFE QUESTIONS

WHO ARE WE? • WHY ARE WE HERE?
WHAT MATTERS? • WHERE ARE WE GOING?
IS THERE MORE?

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Islam's Five Big Life Questions

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C O N T E N T

Introduction	5
1. The Cosmological Question	7
2. The Epistemological Question	10
3. The Ontological Question	13
4. The Teleological Question	15
5. The Eschatological Question	17

In the Name of Allah, All-Merciful, Bestower of Mercy

INTRODUCTION

The starting point of any religion is wonderment. The sheer mystery of our lives demands an explanation. From the gas clouds floating in interstellar space, to the tiniest subatomic particles, the realm of action into which we have been thrust must be understood if we are to know how to live. 'The unexamined life is not worth living,' said Socrates, and this question is always true, always equally urgent. Religion, as the only means of finding an answer to this question, is thus the most important, indeed, in a sense, the only meaningful activity of man.¹

Being a book of guidance, and a roadmap for life, the Qur'an asks five big questions about us humans and our saga on earth, and provides satisfying answers to them. These five big questions are:²

1. The cosmological question: where did everything come from? 2. The epistemological question: how we know what we know? 3. The ontological question: it

1. Abdul Wadod Shalabi, *Islam: Religion of Life* (United States of America: Starlatch Press, 2001), 1.

2. This booklet is based upon Hamza Yusuf, *5 Big Questions in Life*, at: <https://youtu.be/LRI7aNnCrbc>

ISLAM'S FIVE BIG LIFE QUESTIONS

ask about the nature of existence? 4. The teleological question: why are we here? And 5. The eschatological question: where are we ultimately heading?

Such *ological* words can seem rather complicated at first. But when you break them down to their basic meanings, they are quite straightforward. So let's do that with each of them:

1. THE COSMOLOGICAL QUESTION

Nature has a rather splendid way of impressing us. There are few who have not been overwhelmed time after time, by a sense of awe at the beauty of a glorious sunset, the sight of distant mountains shrouded in a soft blue haze of mist, or the brilliance of a starlit night. As a child I found myself fascinated by the mysterious patterns of the constellations, the faint glow of the Milky Way, and the slow movements of the planets across the night sky ... It was easy to see why some people could dedicate a lifetime to the study of nature, and to see something of the spiritual and intellectual intoxication that resulted. So I set out on a voyage of discovery which still continues — a longing to make sense of the world in which we live and our own place within it.³

Let us breakdown the first of these difficult words. Cosmological is related to cosmology (from Greek, *kosmos*, meaning ‘world’, and *logia*, meaning ‘study of’). In other words, the study of the nature and the origin of the universe. So the cosmological question

3. Alister McGrath, *The Re-Enchantment of Nature* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), ix-x.

ISLAM'S FIVE BIG LIFE QUESTIONS

is about how we, and the entire cosmos, came to be; about how all this beauty and awe got here.

To this, the Qur'an says: *If you ask them who created the heavens and the earth, they will say, 'God'* [Q.39:38] Of course, while science offers an excellent modal for how our universe started from an initial Big Bang, it does not rule out an Agent behind it all. To deny an Agent is like saying that just because we know the inner workings of an iPhone, it now means we can dismiss the existence of Steve Jobs as its designer. In philosophy, this is a failure to distinguish between mechanism and agency. In other words, just because we know how something works, it does not deny an agent behind it.

As to the idea of an empirically unproven multiverse, even if it were to be correct, it only pushes back the question. Instead of asking how one universe came into existence, *ex nihilo* — from nothing — we are now obliged to ask how many or an infinite number of universes emerged? To posit an Agent behind the mechanism is the key.

The Qur'an asks: *Were they created out of nothing? Or were they the creators? Or did they create the heavens and earth? No, they have no surety!* [Q.52:35-6] That is to say, a thing cannot create itself from nothing. It

1. THE COSMOLOGICAL QUESTION

must have something else to bring it into existence. That something, or that 'cause' itself cannot have a cause, otherwise we would end up with an infinite set of causes going all the way back, *ad infinitum*. So rationally, there must be a 'First Cause' or 'Uncaused Cause' that has always existed without needing any cause itself. That Uncaused Cause, Islam says, is God: eternal, everlasting, whose existence is inseparable from His essence, who endows all living things with their quality of life, and who keeps all such existent things alive at each second of their existence.

Gazing at the starry heavens, or at the natural world, we so readily intuit an overwhelming sense of order and design, and — if given a chance to pause and to ponder — we would likely intuit that there must be a Designer. We would intuit that all this enchanting awe and beauty, all this sentient life, the universe's fine tuning, and the very fact that there is something rather than nothing, could not have come about via itself or by sheer, random chance.

2. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTION

It were far better never to think of investigating the truth at all, than to do so without a method.⁴

If knowledge, to oversimplify the definition, is *true, justified belief*, then what are its sources? Or to put it differently: We can claim to *know* something if we believe it to be true *and* that belief in it is justified. But what is its justification?

Classical Muslim scholars identified three principle sources of knowledge (*madarik al-'ulum*): [i] the five senses (*al-hawas al-khams*); [ii] truthful, trustworthy reports (*ikhbar sahih*); and [iii] rational inquiry (*al-nazr*).⁵ This corresponds to what's known in modern philosophy as epistemology, from the Greek *episteme* ('knowledge' or 'understanding'). So together, these sources yield a solid, comprehensive framework for

4. René Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind, IV* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952), 5.

5. See: al-Saffarini, *Lawami' al-Anwar al-Bahiyah* (Riyadh: Dar al-Tawhid, 2016), 3:736-46.

2. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTION

understanding how human beings acquire certainty and distinguish truth from falsehood.

When knowledge comes by way of the sound senses, a truthful report, or through sound reasoning, then it may be said to be justifiably true. If it comes from senses that are impaired, a false or unreliable report, or from illogical or faulty reasoning, then believing it will be unjustified.

For Muslims, truthful reports (*ikhbar sahih, khabar sadiq*) include the Qur'an, which is *mutawatir* (mass-transmitted via many individuals, separately, such that it is inconceivable for them to have concurred upon a fabrication or lie, or coincidentally fell into the same error). Such reports yield a level of knowledge that begets certainty (*yufid al-'ilm*), or definite and conclusive knowledge (*qat'i*). All other reports yield degrees of knowledge that are either: likely certain, probably certain, unlikely certain, highly uncertain, or clearly false.

At a far more foundational level, the epistemological question — i.e. how we know what we know — is because ultimately God teaches us. *The All-Merciful has taught the Qur'an, has created Man, has taught him speech.* [Q:55:1-4] Speech (Arabic *bayan*, to 'speak' 'articulate' or 'be eloquently expressive') is an innate

ISLAM'S FIVE BIG LIFE QUESTIONS

gift from God. This is why a child can form complex sentences or even manipulate the rules of grammar without being taught how to do so, yet cannot grasp basic maths until at a later age. So this suggests that the capacity for language is embedded within human nature from the very outset, whereas other forms of knowledge are acquired gradually via instruction or experience.

After the gift of speech, humans were given another extraordinary gift; namely, the ability to write: *Read in the name of your Lord who created, created Man from a clinging clot. Read! and Your Lord is the Most Generous, Who taught Man by the pen; taught Man what he knew not.* [Q.95:1-5]

We humans make the world with ideas, that are then conveyed through words. Then at some point in our history, words came to be written down so that the ideas and meanings of those words might be read by future generations. Our ideas or thoughts would be nigh on impossible to pass on for posterity's sake, if it were not for the ability to preserve them through the act of writing.

3. THE ONTOLOGICAL QUESTION

What a piece of work is a man, How noble in reason,
how infinite in faculty, In form and moving how ex-
press and admirable, In action how like an Angel, In
apprehension how like a god, The beauty of the world,
The paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this
quintessence of dust?⁶

As for the ontological question (from Greek, *on[tos]*, meaning 'being'), it concerns the nature of being and about who we essentially are.

Our intrinsic nature can be seen in the Quranic word for mankind, which is *insan*. Lexicologists say *insan* is derived from *nisyan*, to 'forget', or from *unsiyah*, being 'sociable'. To quote al-Raghib al-Asbahani:

'It is said he was named thus because he was created as a being whose nature is companionship with his own kind; people cannot live save with one another. For this reason it is said: "Man is sociable by nature

6. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co. 1911), 65-6.

(*al-insan madani bi'l-tab'i*),” in that people can only flourish through one another, and no individual can fulfil all of his needs by himself. It was also said that he was called *insan* as he finds solace or familiarity (*ya'nasu*) in all that he associates with. And it is said that ... he is named thus because God entrusted him with a covenant, but he forgot it.⁷

That Man, or *insan*, is sociable relates to our nature with one another. We humans find meaning through relationships, community, and shared purpose. But as for *insan* as *nisyan* — a forgetful creature — this is with regards to our nature vis-a-via God and our covenant with Him: *We indeed made a covenant with Adam before, but he forgot.* [Q.20:115] It's because man has a propensity to forget, that Revelation — known in the Quran as *dhikr* or 'reminder' — was revealed. Man forgets: Revelation reminds. It reminds him of the primordial pact and of the *amanah* or Trust: *We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid. But Man assumed it. Man is most unjust and ignorant.* [Q.33:72]

7. Al-Raghib al-Asbahani, *Mufradat Alfaz al-Qur'an* (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 2020), 86.

4. THE TELEOLOGICAL QUESTION

By contrast, the Muslim sees in creation the work of God, a manifestation of His signs and glory. For him, the cosmos, and all that it contains, is an array of symbols which speak of a higher order of reality. In nature there is nothing absurd or fortuitous; everything is endowed with a significance which may be discerned by anyone who remains unblinded by the mentality and biases of modernity.

This discernment, which is also the capacity for respect and wonderment at the Creator's works, allows one to see in all things a testimony to the divine unity and omnipotence.⁸

The teleological question — why are we here? — is from *telos* or 'purpose'. The Qur'an provides us with a two-fold reply, one intimately related to the other.

Life, as Islam teaches, has much meaning and a lofty purpose. Life is not, as we are being indoctrinated today, all about the replication of selfish genes, in a

8. Roger Du Pasquier, *Unveiling Islam* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2006), 19-20.

ISLAM'S FIVE BIG LIFE QUESTIONS

meaningless world, itself a product of a huge cosmic fluke. Rather, *'Do you think We created you in jest and that to Us you would not be returned? [Q.23:115]*

The first of the replies to the teleological question is in these words of the Qur'an: *I did not create the jinn or mankind save that they should worship Me. [Q.51:56]* Worship (*'ibadah*) of the One true God: Allah, is the grounds for our existence. In fact, any other purpose in life derives its value from this ultimate purpose. It is through loving submission to Allah that human life finds its deepest purpose and fulfilment.

The other intertwined reason is: to know Allah. For we cannot worship Allah without knowing Him first: *God is He who created the seven heavens, and of the earth a similar number. His command descends amidst them, that you may know God is all-powerful over all things, and that He encompasses everything in perfect knowledge. [Q.65:12]*

The point in the verse is: *li ta'lamu* — 'that you may know' Him. We come into the arena of the world for no other reason than to know the admirable power, goodness and wisdom of Allah to the extent possible, by contemplating the beauty of the cosmos and the natural world as His works, to be swept away more ardently in praise and loving worship of Him.

5. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL QUESTION

With the entry into Paradise time is redeemed and everything falls into place. Were it possible for the blessed to retain a single unhappy memory this would not be the perfection promised them ... There can be no return to the shadows or ambiguities of the world, or of any other world, once the command has been given: *Enter, ye and your wives, into the Garden to be made happy ... therein is all that souls desire or all that eyes delight in, and there shall ye remain.* [Q.43:70-71]⁹

The last question concerns eschatology (from Greek, *eschatos*, meaning 'last' or 'end') and has to do with where we are ultimately heading. It is a question the Qur'an asks many times, and in many differing ways. In one verse, it asks: *fa ayna tadhhabun* — 'So where then are you going?' [Q.81:26] It continues by stating: *This [Qur'an] is but a reminder to the worlds, for any among you who wish to walk aright.* [Q.81:27-8]

So where are we all ultimately heading? It's not just to our graves, six feet under, as some imagine; but to

9. Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1997), 252.

ISLAM'S FIVE BIG LIFE QUESTIONS

beyond that. After we pass, we will come face to face with a life after death and to a final Judgement, with Paradise or Hell; eternal bliss or everlasting torment as end destinations. We are ultimately returned back to God's Final Judgement: *Those who, when struck by some misfortune, say: 'We belong to Allah and to Him shall we return.'* [Q.2:156] Injustices or crimes unpaid for in this earthly life will be paid for then. Good acts done unassumingly and unnoticed will be rewarded amply there. Sins, evil, wrongdoing, or a life of denial or disbelief will be recompensed accordingly; not a thing will be omitted, no stone will be left unturned. Sorrows or woes born patiently for Allah, and while having faith (*iman*) in Allah, shall be soothed and be transformed into a joyous bliss and solace unknown and unexperienced by any on earth.

The Prophet ﷺ said that Allah, exalted is He, said: 'I have prepared for my righteous servants what no eye has ever seen, what no ear has ever heard and what no human heart has ever imagined.'¹⁰

So when all is said and done, when all the warnings have been given, when all excuses are offered, and when all the calling comes to a close, then the Qur'an arrives at the moment: *When the sun is darkened, and*

10. Al-Bukhari, no.3244; Muslim, no.2824.

5. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL QUESTION

when the stars fall, and when the firm mountains are moved ... and when the seas are set boiling, and when souls are reunited ... and when the record of people's deeds are laid open, and when the sky is torn away, and when Hell is set blazing, and when the Garden is brought near; then every soul will know what it has prepared for itself. [Q.81:1-14]