

THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTITY OF LIFE FROM THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

*Ramizah Wan Muhammad
Fadhlina Alias
Puteri Nemie Jahn Kassim
Nasimah binti Hussin*

Abstract:

Muslims believe that only Allah swt has the ultimate will and power over life and death. Life is merely a gift and a loan entrusted to mankind until death takes place. It is therefore forbidden for any person to intentionally end a life; to do so would be to commit a grievous transgression against Allah. Islam holds life in the highest esteem to the extent that the duty to preserve life forms one of the core principles in maqasid al-shari'ah. Protection of one's life includes taking care of one's body, health and mind from that which would lead to harm and death. All lives are equally inviolable; Islam does not discriminate one's life on the basis of nationality, race or religion. In order to ensure a just order that protects both individual and public interests at large, Islam prescribes certain legitimate situations where the dimensions of sanctity of life are qualified, for example, by permitting to end life in self-defence or in due course of law. There is thus a need to understand the wisdom behind the sanctity of life principle in Islam, not only by studying its importance, but also the overall scope in which it operates.

Keywords: Sanctity of life; *maqasid al-shar'iah*; Islamic law

INTRODUCTION

The sanctity of life is a fundamental and paramount axiom that transcends all religions, cultures and communities in the world. Mankind considers life to be precious and inviolable, and it cannot be taken away even upon voluntary consent. Rules regulating human conduct dating back as early as ancient religious scriptures have accordingly reflected the inherent and universal acceptance of this sacred principle. To violate it would be an abomination, resulting in penal consequences. Modern legislation seeks to protect the sanctity of life in the same spirit by criminalizing acts such as murder and suicide. Accordingly as much as law safeguards life, it is only through due process of law that life is allowed to be taken away. Similarly in Islam, the preservation of life is regarded as one of its most sacred imperatives, and this has been mentioned many times in its primary sources, namely the Holy Qur'an and hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him). To take a life amounts to a grave sin against Allah. Islam does not only command that life be given the highest respect and protection, but also specifically prescribes punitive action if such a law is breached.

THE MEANING OF “SANCTITY OF LIFE”

There is no one definitive definition of “sanctity of life”. Nevertheless, traditional and modern ethics concur that it embodies the idea that life is sacrosanct and must be treated with the utmost respect and dignity. An intentional act to end one's life threatens the core of this doctrine and is therefore considered to be a grievous wrong. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, “sanctity” in the present context is defined as “ultimate importance and inviolability”. Kuhse states that the sanctity-of-life ethics is one that “absolutely prohibits the termination of life and that sees all human life, regardless of its type or quality, as of infinite and intrinsic worth”¹. Keown similarly acknowledges that because all lives are intrinsically valuable, it is always wrong to intentionally kill an innocent human being.²

¹ Helga Kuhse, “Debate: Extraordinary Means and the Sanctity of Life.,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 7, no. 2 (June 1981): 75, doi:10.1136/jme.7.2.74.

² See John Keown, “Courting Euthanasia?: Tony Bland and the Law Lords.,” *Ethics*

Omoyefa mentions that the value of life is ultimately grounded in its sanctity and quality, which must be protected and allowed to flourish for the mutual good of the individual and society at large.³ A working definition of the sanctity of life is provided by Gushee:

The concept of the sanctity of life is the belief that all human beings, at any and every stage of life, in any and every state of consciousness or self-awareness, of any and every race, color, ethnicity, level of intelligence, religion, language, gender, character, behavior, physical ability/disability, potential, class, social status, etc., of any and every particular quality of relationship to the viewing subject, are to be perceived as persons of equal and immeasurable worth and of inviolable dignity and therefore must be treated in a manner commensurate with this moral status.⁴

The inviolability principle is especially significant in the medical context because of its direct nexus with the ethical duty to prevent harm. The Hippocratic Oath, which is one of the earliest and widely known codes of medical practice, contains the following sentence which acknowledges the sanctity of life: “I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel; and in like manner I will not give to a woman a pessary to produce abortion”. The first provision of the International Code of Medical Ethics which is based on the Declaration of Geneva (the modern restatement of the Hippocratic Oath), similarly states that “a doctor must always bear in mind the obligations of preserving human life”.

Although both modern and theological concepts with regard to the inviolability principle are very much similar, a marked difference exists when it is perceived from the religious perspective. While

& *Medicine : A Christian Perspective on Issues in Bioethics* 9, no. 3 (January 1993): 34–7, <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11652743>>.

³ Paul Sunday Omoyefa, “Physicians and Sanctity of Life: Emerging Ethical Issues,” *Ethno Med* 4, no. 2 (2010): 100.

⁴ David Gushee, “The Sanctity of Life,” accessed 18 June 2014, <<https://cbhd.org/content/sanctity-life>>.

modern ethics view sanctity on the basis of the intrinsic value of human life, all major religions in particular Islam, Judaism and Christianity, attribute the sacredness of the principle to the fact that all life comes from and belongs to God, and only God has the right to take it away.⁵ Human beings must therefore protect the gift of life to the best of their ability. To intentionally commit any act which threatens and violates its sanctity is to blatantly defy the will of God and place the wrongdoer in sin.

Accordingly, Islam believes that everything in this world including life, is a loan from Allah. Every human being is thus under a religious duty to care for and maintain that trust in not only guarding and defending his own life from harm, but also that of others. This principle is imbued in the Islamic Code of Medical Ethics⁶ under the heading “Characters of the Physician”:

The physician should firmly know that ‘life’ is God’s awarded only by Him and that ‘Death’ is the conclusion of one’s life and the beginning of another. Death is a solid truth, and it is the end of all but God. In his profession the Physician is a soldier for “Life” only defending and preserving it as best as it can be, to the best of his ability.

The Islamic Code of Medical Ethics also dedicates an entire part to “The Sanctity of Human Life”. It mentions that “[a] doctor shall not take away a life even when motivated by mercy” and “in any case, the doctor shall not take a positive measure to terminate the patient’s life.”

⁵ See for instance FA Khan, “Religious Teaching and Reflections on Advance Directive-Religious Values and Legal Dilemmas in Bioethics: An Islamic Perspective,” *Fordham Urb. LJ* 30, no. 1 (2002): 267–275; Farzaneh Zahedi, Bagher Larijani, and Javad Tavakoly Bazzaz, “End of Life Ethical Issues and Islamic Views,” *Iran J Allergy Asthma Immunol* 6, no. February (2007): 5–15; Hazel Markwell, “End-of-Life: A Catholic View,” *Lancet* 366, no. 9491 (2005): 1132–5; Elliot N Dorff, “End-of-Life: Jewish Perspectives,” *Lancet* 366, no. 9488 (2005): 862–5.

⁶ First International Conference on Islamic Medicine, “Islamic Code of Medical Ethics” (Kuwait, 1981).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF “SANCTITY OF LIFE” ENUNCIATED IN THE PRIMARY SOURCES OF THE *SHARI’AH*

Islam upholds the sanctity of life and places the priority of protecting and maintaining life only second to the preservation and safeguarding of religion. The importance of the sanctity of life has been mentioned and emphasized numerous times in the Holy Qur’an and hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Allah states that life and death is strictly an exclusive prerogative that belongs to Him and that life cannot be taken away except by His Will:

- (1) “[He] who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best in deed - and He is the Exalted in Might, the Forgiving”⁷;
- (2) “.....Nor can they control death nor life nor resurrection”⁸;
- (3) “No soul can die except by Allah’s permission”⁹;
- (4) “And when their term has come, they will not remain behind an hour, nor will they precede [it]”¹⁰;
- (5) “And it is not [possible] for one to die except by permission of Allah at a decree determined”¹¹; and
- (6) “Allah takes the souls at the time of their death, and those that do not die [He takes] during their sleep. Then He keeps those for which He has decreed death and releases the others for a specified term. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought”¹².

The sacredness of life and the gravity of sin one commits in taking a life, be it his own or another, is stressed in the Holy Qur’an:

- (1) “Do not take life, which Allah made sacred, other than in the course of justice”¹³;

⁷ *Surah al-Mulk*, 67:2.

⁸ *Surah al-Furqan*, 25:3.

⁹ *Surah al-Imran*, 3:185.

¹⁰ *Surah an-Nahl*, 16:61.

¹¹ *Surah Ali ‘Imran*, 3:145.

¹² *Surah az-Zumar*, 39:42.

¹³ *Surah Al-Isra’*, 17:33.