



Return to God in Tennyson's "In Memoriam" : Islamic Perspective

Fadhil Madloul said Akaabi

Abstract

This research is an analytical study discussing the issue of doubt as it contradicts the belief in God to Alfred Lord Tennyson in his great elegy, "In Memoriam." The Islamic religion calls for the return to God and it emphasizes that God would rejoice in the believer's return to Him and repentance from sins and disobedience. The mercy of God is available for those who would like to be repented at any time in their lifetime. God has no deadline for repentance and return. This research is a comparative study that deals with the issue of return to God after disobedience and doubt between what was mentioned in the poem *In Memoriam* and the Islamic perspective in this regard. This study revolves around the question of whether there is any correspondence in the concept of return to God between what is mentioned by Tennyson in *In Memoriam* and what is given in the Holy Quran. Through the evidence that would be presented in the body of the paper, harmonization between what Tennyson mentioned in *In Memoriam* and what is written in Quran and the prophetic Hadiths (The Prophet Muhammad's talks) would be proved.

Introduction

Returning to God is a concept that has at least two meanings: The first is the return to God after leaving this world by death, for the Almighty God created man and sent him down to earth to live on it, and then he will be brought back to Him after death. The second meaning, which is the subject of this study, is to return to the bosom of His mercy after disobedience, doubt and denial of His existence. **"It is He who accepts the repentance of His worshipers, and remits the sins, and knows what you do".**



(Quran, 42:25).

English poetry has plenty of poems that discuss this issue, especially in the Victorian era, when scientific theories prevailed, which are essentially meant to doubt and deny the existence of the Almighty Creator. Many reasons stand behind the doubt across the ages and the Victorian era is of no exception for it witnessed many transformations that contributed greatly to this unfortunate result indicated by doubt and denial. Moreover, scientific theories such as the theory of evolution by Darwin have portrayed that there is a contradiction between science and religion, considering religion and the Creator as a metaphysical matter that cannot be experimentally proven, and that science is an apparent matter that can be recognized by the senses. The church, for instance, with its corruption has a role in making people turn away from and oppose religion, and thus they doubt and deny the existence of Creator.

"Church officials seem to be at least (if not more) corrupt than leaders in the world at large". (Keller, 67).

On the other hand, the spiritual aspect has alienated the human and set him up to revolve in a whirlpool of doubt, mental illness and an internal conflict between the call of the instinct for the return to God and the sweeping currents that surround him and are reinforced by theories and scientific discoveries. Philip Davis states, "Paradoxically, perhaps the most powerful religious phenomenon of the age was religious doubt, the sheer life-seriousness with which the threat of unbelief was experienced by those who could live in ease neither with nor without religion" (Settle, 3).

The English poet Alfred Tennyson lived those circumstances which were exacerbated by the death of Arthur Hallam his close friend and the would-be brother in law. His poem entitled *In Memoriam* represents the top of his creativity in dealing with theories already mentioned. It is a poem that envisions a lot of pain, the suffering of loss, and the contemplation of the destiny of death and what is after death. It exhibits a struggle that leads the poet to believe that the Almighty God never gives way to the creation of man and then makes him die and the matter is over. Rather, there is another more beautiful and purer life next to the Creator characterized by comfort and peace, which is a situation that distances him from deep sadness and bitterness and brings him near to happiness, tranquility, and firm faith in God.



Alfred Lord Tennyson is rightly considered as a representative poet of the Victorian age. "Few poets have been so completely representative of their time, have entered so fully into its moods, or have, to such a degree, first moulded and then satisfied the tastes of their contemporaries as Alfred Tennyson" (Gayley and Young, 274). Some writers have likened Tennyson to the Pope "In reflecting the restless spirit of his progressive age, Tennyson is as remarkable as Pope was in voicing the artificiality of the early eighteen century. As a poet, therefore, who expresses not so much a personal as a national spirit, he is probably the most representative literary man of the Victorian era". (Long, 458).

In Memoriam is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest elegies ever written in English. Tennyson basically wrote many sections of *In Memoriam* to mourn the passing of his intimate friend, Arthur Hallam. The poem consisted of 133 sections excluding the prologue and epilogue. It is Tennyson's most prominent, being his master piece. It was written through seventeen years (1834-1850). Although the different sections of the poem were primarily intended to lament Hallam's death to show Tennyson's grief over the death, many questions can be evoked. These questions are: Is there indeed life after death? And if there is, will it be a conscious life? Will there be mutual recognition between Tennyson and his friend after he dies and leaves to the other world where his friend Hallam already is? Can Hallam watch Tennyson's sorrow from his heavenly residence? All these questions may be asked by a doubtful person or even by a non-believer. The main step to have faith is to doubt, so the poet could answer all these questions and doubts. Through the different states of doubt, the poet transcends to the domain of faith which results in self-confidence, courage, and hope for the future of mankind. This can be seen in Holy Qur'an, especially when the Prophet Abraham argues with the unbelievers and as follows: **"Thus We showed Abraham Malekoot (The world of the unseen, related to spirits, souls, and wonders of the heavens) that he could be one of those with certitude. He noticed a planet as night fell over him. He stated that "This is my lord." But when it set, he said, "I do not love those that set. Then, as he noticed the rising moon, he said, "This is my lord." however, once it had settled, he said, "If the Lord of mine does not guide me, I will be among the erring. Then, as he saw the sun rising, he said, "This is my lord, this is bigger. "But as it set, he stated, "O my people, I disown your idolatry. I**



have directed my attention towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth—a monotheist— and I am not of the idolaters.”

Religion in Queen Victoria’s Era

The Victorian era is frequently portrayed as being devout and genuine, as they call it the “Era of Doubt and Religious Confusion” however, while this is true to a certain extent, it was also a period of social transformation and scholarly inquiry. Science, rationality, and Scriptural input were all proving too difficult to trust. Darwin's Birthplace of *Origin of the Species* in 1859 proposed the advancement hypothesis; savants, like Nietzsche, who is famous for declaring "God is dead," promoted elective world ideas; and a few researchers addressed Scriptural data. However, as antique structures have been discovered and decoded, the early languages were much better understood, and a new light was also cast on the Book of Scriptures. Maurits S. Berger sheds light on the significance of Islam, pointing out the reasons why he has attempted this important task, and as follows:

"Islam’s recent arrival in Europe by means of migration, violence and media images has kindled a wave of interest in Europe’s past and present relations with Islam. Publications on these subjects are prolific, [they are made] to provide the first comprehensive overview of the entire thirteen-century history of Islam in Europe from 700ce until now (most existing literature covers only a part of this history); to identify the role of ‘Islam’ during this period; and to look into the impact of this long history on the current discourse and situation of Islam in Europe...and [to] allow us to sample and interconnect the enormous corpus of existing knowledge on Islam in Europe and to put it in chronological and thematic order. This framework should provide the reader with novel insights into the history of Islam in Europe." (Berger, 13)

Berger proceeds to say that the image of Islam in Europe is not a mere historical event. He says that Islam is to sum up the story of the Muslim and non-Muslim Europeans—native and non-native. Islam points to the conflict with Europe struggling to shape its identity in the thirteenth century. Though this is a comparative research, Islam in the Victorian period was getting stronger and more doubtless to a great extent, Qur'an was one of the most significant books that had been sold, Islam was going worldwide especially in Europe at the time when the European people doubted the Bible and Christianity and even the name of God. (Berger,14)

Tennyson's Doubt and Faith



“There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds”. (Alfred Lord Tennyson). Religious doubts occupied a big part of the intellectual climate of the Victorian era, and Tennyson was affected and sensitive to it as any man else. Tennyson was a religious man and had a faith that cannot be subdued by reason. All his doubts have found their expression in *In Memoriam*. A rather definite statement regarding this doubt is expressed in *In Memoriam* and as follows:

I think we are not wholly brain,
Trust I have not wasted breath:
Magnetic mockeries; not in vain,
Like Paul with beasts, I fought with death; (cxx. 1-1).

Another doubt that troubled Tennyson was why mankind has to endure mental and physical suffering. Various poems reveal, however, that he has realized certain questions to which there are no answers. Thus he lately seems to come to conclusion that suffering for the individual, as well as for mankind, is necessary. Two lines from “The Ancient Sage,” an extremely subjective poem, can be regarded the conclusion of the poet for this question as well as other questions that have created doubt in his mind: “For nothing worthy proving, can be proven,/ Nor yet disproven.” (Wright, 3).

Science leads to Faith

When we read some lines in *In Memoriam*, we may find some references that doubt raised by science.

The wish, that of the living whole
No life may fail beyond the grave,
Derives it not from what we have
The likest God within the soul?

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;



That I, considering everywhere
Her secret meaning in her deeds,
And finding that of fifty seeds
She often brings but one to bear,

I falter where I firmly trod,
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar-stairs
That slope thro' darkness up to God,

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope. (*In Memoriam*. Section LV)

Here, in these lines we find that the faith of Tennyson is not solid or firm. He refers that doubt and denial is grown with science. Religion looks upon the individual life as something holy, while science tells us that Nature is absolutely careless of the single life. Thus God and Nature seem to be at conflict. Science points to the waste to the waste of individuals and even species on a huge scale. While religion teaches us that in the ages of God, even tiny creatures are sacred. If science is to be believed, man is only a monster. And comparatively to what Tennyson mentioned in this regard, Islam praised science and was never an enemy of science, and never stood a stumbling block in its path. Rather, it called for it and urged it, raised the status of science and scholars, and made science boards as worship boards surrounded by angels, and they set their wings for science and scholars, and even students of knowledge. Islam has also been based on rejecting every claim without proof, and denial of subordination and traditions, and following conjectures and whims. Pioneering, Islam created the psychological and social “climate” for the flourishing of science and the establishment of a bright scientific life. Moreover, Islam considered that science is the best way by which the existence of God Almighty is proven and which leads to a firm belief in Him. Qur'an has clarified this in many verses; God Almighty says: "**Allah bears witness that there is no god but He, as do the**



angels, and those endowed with knowledge—upholding justice. There is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise". (Quran, 2:18)

Faith leads to comfort

With the passing of his friend Arthur Hallam, Tennyson lives in deep grief and depression. As result, Tennyson's faith has changed dramatically. *In Memoriam* reveals the journey of Tennyson from doubt and disbelief, and grief and distress that accompanied it. But once he realized that death doesn't mean the nothingness, Rather, it is a stage of another emergence in another world. "To the poet, death without a faith in a future life, would be preferable to life if he cannot have a faith in a future life". (Lall, 54).

Apparently, the poet's belief in immortality was as important to him as his belief in God's existence. Tennyson's mind is now shifting away from doubt and thoughts of death toward peace and hope for a renewed life.

This truth came borne with bier and pall
I felt it, when I sorrow'd most,
'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all —

O true in word, and tried in deed,
Demanding, so to bring relief
To this which is our common grief,
What kind of life is that I lead; (*In memoriam*, Section 85)

At the end of the poem, Tennyson states that happiness that he will know and will never lose, and wit which will be blended the happiness of all the world, will flow from the divine side of his friend's personality. The poet will not lose his friend even when the poet dies. Tennyson wishes to hold those truths which cannot be proved but which are sustained by faith, faith that results from a victory over doubt. In the end, soul meets the soul in the next life.

O living will that shalt endure
When all that seems shall suffer shock,
Rise in the spiritual rock,
Flow thro' our deeds and make them pure,

That we may lift from out of dust
A voice as unto him that hears,
A cry above the conquer'd years
To one that with us works, and trust ,

With faith that comes of self-control,
The truths that never can be proved
Until we close with all we loved,
And all we flow from, soul in soul. (*In Memoriam*, section: 131)



In this mode, Quran affirms in many verses that turning away from God is the main reason of misery and unhappiness. The Holy Quran says: **"But whoever turns away from My Reminder, for him is a confined life. And We will raise him on the Day of Resurrection blind"**. (Quran, 20:124).

And in another place it confirms that return to God is the cause of happiness and peace of mind. says: **"Those who believe, and whose hearts find comfort in the remembrance of Allah. Surely, it is in the remembrance of Allah that hearts find comfort"**. (Quran, 13:28)

And The Holy Quran also says: **"Whomever Allah desires to guide, He spreads open his heart to Islam; and whomever He desires to misguide, He makes his heart narrow, constricted, as though he were climbing up the sky. Allah lays defilement upon those who do not believe"** (Quran, 6:125)

Doubt in Islam

Doubting the principles of faith and the principles of Islam get one out of the fold of Islam. A person who doubts is not a believer, as being firm upon belief is a condition for the validity of belief. A person, who doubts, neither confesses to the truth nor is he sure about it. Allah says (which means): **"Only those are the believers who have believed in Allah and His Messenger, and afterward doubt not..."** (Quran 49:15). **"I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah, and I bear witness that I am Allah's Messenger, and no one meets his Lord with this testimony without doubting in it except that he will be allowed to Paradise,"** the Prophet said. Therefore, not doubting is a condition for the validity of belief in Allah and His Prophet because the person who doubts is a hypocrite. Allah says (which means): **"Only those would ask permission of you who do not believe in Allah and the Last Day and whose hearts have doubted, and they, in their doubt, are hesitating)**. (Quran 9:45)

In this narration, the Prophet conditioned entering Paradise on uttering these testimonies with a content heart and without being in doubt. So if the condition is not fulfilled, one will enter into Paradise. However, one should differentiate between being content with this doubt as this takes the one out of the fold of Islam, and between the whispers of the devil of which one is not content with and which he tries to repel from his heart, as this is not disbelief [this does not take one out of the fold of Islam]. The fact that one hates these whispers and tries to repel them from his/her heart proves his correct belief. A true believer would never doubt his religion nor his God, it is a great sin and a believer with doubts is not a believer at all; doubts have no place in Islam, and Quran forbids this so doing for good.

***In Memoriam* versus Islam**



There is no doubt that Tennyson is spreading his thoughts about doubting the Bible, the Quran and the existence of God. His ideas have been in line with people's thoughts that are reading his books and poems, while the Quran has denied the possibility of doubting God existence and the Quranic representations held by true believers; in the end, some people would find that Tennyson is not a believer at all: some think that he actually has the right to question God and doubt him and so they do, and after all, Tennyson fans and followers cannot be underestimated, he had thousands of readers who read his words and believe them with closed eyes.

Alfred Tennyson's Faith

"Kind hearts are more than coronets, And simple faith than Norman blood". "His honour rooted in dishonour stood, And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true". (Alfred Lord Tennyson).

In these few lines, Tennyson describes the faith as something "complicated" and cannot be simple; he also despises those with simple faith and thinks it is a common thing and it is not something he agrees with, so in his opinion believers should not just be faithful easily as the Bible and the Holy books say, you must have faith in your way for example, and ask your faith and question it, that Is the definition of true-believing in his opinion.

But at the same time, Tennyson is a believer, that's for sure, in one of the lines he wrote he said:

"Faith and unfaith can ne'er be equal powers
Unfaith is aught is want of faith in all"

He describes the unfaith as "aught" which means "nothing", such a strong word to describe it, so he thinks that unfaithful people are much worse than those who doubt their faith. Tennyson did not want people to be unfaithful, most likely he just wanted people to think about their faith, questioning it and doubting it until they found that there is a true form of faith, maybe he just didn't like the way faith should be.

Faith in Islam

Faith in Islam is not anywhere near the faith in Tennyson's point of view for faith, in Quran almost 90-100 surahs talk about faith, and how his faith is everything in Islam and a Muslim heart. Also, Islam never tolerates anything related to faith; faith is the very basic thing in the



relationship between the Muslim and God. It is nothing complicated as Tennyson declares, Quran declares that Faith can also bring relief and help to a Muslim's soul in many and various ways: **"Hope and whoever relies upon Allah – then He is sufficient for him. Indeed, Allah will accomplish His purpose. Allah has already set for everything a [decreed] extent".** (Quran, 65:3). This verse provides as a source of hope for those who feel alone in this world; by remembering that Allah is and will be always enough for us all, we can have hope in the fact that we will never in fact be alone in this world. Knowing that Allah is there for us all can serve as an important reminder that all we ever need is faith in Allah and knowledge of the Holy Quran.

Another benefit of true faith in Quran is Tranquility: **"So verily, with the hardship, there is a relief. Verily, with the hardship, there is relief".** (Quran 94:5-6). **"Allah does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear"** (Quran 2:286). When feeling overwhelmed by struggle, pain, or certain obstacles in life, it is important to remember that Allah only tests those with as much as they can specifically handle and overcome. By understanding that each hardship is created specifically for you to overcome, it becomes empowering to know that Allah understands your strength more than you sometimes understand yourself. One more benefit will be referred to before the end of this study which is "Mercy." **"My mercy encompasses all things".** (Quran 7:156). A very obvious verse from the Holy Qur'an almost does not need explanation. Another verse that reminds us of Allah's mercy may be of assistance to individuals who are afraid of not being pardoned despite their earnest prayers and repentance. As stated in this verse from the Quran, Allah's mercy embraces everything and is limitless, implying that no matter who we beg for forgiveness from, we should do so with sincerity and confidence that our prayers will be answered..

Conclusion

Considering what I mentioned earlier about Tennyson and his beliefs, I can now be sure that Tennyson thinks that being a religious person means to pray to God and fear him or even obey him for the strength he has. Tennyson clearly showed no love for God, only doing his job as an obedient servant for Him which is true, but still he thinks he is forced to be obedient, which makes him feel angry. He once said in his meetings with queen Victoria that **"God could be more cruel than every human being,"** while the Holy Quran declared the very



opposite talking about cruelty , in one of prophet Muhammad Hadiths he said that God gives only 1/10 mercy to the human world, and 9/10 of the mercy is in the heavens where God is , so if you gathered all the mercy in the world somehow, this is only 10% of God's true mercy, Tennyson did not trust God that way, that is why he never thought about returning to God, so talking about returning to God, Many of Tennyson's poems deal with the temptation to give up and succumb to pessimism, but they also celebrate the virtues of optimism and highlight the significance of overcoming obstacles in life. So in short, Tennyson does not think that returning to God is a possibility, he wants to give up, and he wants people to give up as well. He focuses on fighting for life and living a happy life instead of thinking that life is a test we here are just mortal creatures that will gain absolutely nothing from it, so in *In Memoriam*, he talks about how faith can badly affect people who should simply give up on changing themselves and accept the reality that the humans are sinful and God is cruel so there is no need for redemption anyway.

But the Holy Qur'an gives quite the opposite thought: it does not matter how sinful you are, it doesn't matter what you did in past, even if you spent your whole life in sins and disobedience, God will welcome you and forgive you if you go back to him with a pure heart and truthful will. The Holy Quran said that God loves the “Awabs” [the obedient] who are the people who each time separate from God and fall in sins, they return to God again and ask for redemption, so the door for returning to God never closes, whereas Tennyson declares that people with sins are doomed for eternity, but Islam says as, it was narrated from the Prophet Mohammed, **“The penitents from their sins, just like the one who does not have sins at all.”**

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