



*Abstract of Papers of International
Conference on*

“Attitudes towards Death in the Context of Social
and Technological Changes: Challenges for
Muslims and Christians”

8 -10 April 2006

Center of Human rights Peace and Democracy
Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

Prologue

The sacred writings and teachings of Islam and Christianity contain a wealth of teachings about the key moments of life: its beginning, its end, and the relationships that give it much of its meaning. Over long centuries, those writings and teachings have been an invaluable source of guidance for believers.

Recent advances in scientific research and technological sophistication have raised totally new possibilities for deciding about birth and death. It is now often a simple matter to choose when and how to have children and when and how to die. At the same time, attitudes towards relationships and the expectations surrounding them have altered, giving rise to new approaches towards marriage, partnership, the family and community. These changes challenge the received teachings of the faiths.

What do the long-respected teachings of Islam and Christianity say about the key moments that affect lives of all human beings? How are these teachings challenged by recent developments in biotechnology? Can the teachings shed any light on current medical and biotechnological problems? If so, how could they be theorized in a new language?

In order to map the problems and to begin to search for answers, three annual Christian-Muslim conferences have been organized over the last two years. They are sponsored and jointly hosted by: Al-Mahdi Institute of Islamic Studies; The Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, University of Birmingham; the UNESCO Chair for Human Rights, Peace and Democracy, University of Shahid-Beheshti.

The first conference titled: New Approaches to Conception of Birth: Challenges for Christians and Muslims was held in Birmingham on 12-14 February 2004. A selection of papers presented at the Conference has already been

been published in the Journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Volume 16 (3), July 2005.

The second conference was held in Birmingham on 2-4 February 2005, on Marriage and its Alternatives: Challenges for Muslims and Christians.

The third (current) conference is being held on Attitudes towards Death in the Context of Social and Technological Changes: Challenges for Muslims and Christians.

Death gives rise to numerous rules pertaining to the deceased, their family, the society and, in general, anyone who has any relationship with the deceased. Apart from longstanding philosophical, ethical and theological questions concerning death with which the humanity at large has been faced, significant legal questions should also be addressed. The following are but a few out of many:

- Does death happen during a process or at an exact point? Put differently, what is the nature of death?
- What kind of standard – such as religious texts, social norms, scientific data etc. – could or should be utilized in order to determine an answer to the previous question?
- The failure of which human organ is to be considered as the constitutive element of death: heart, brain, sensory system, or a combination of them?
- Can we talk about a right to dignified death from a legal vantage point; Islamic or Christian law?
- From an Islamic and Christian point of view, is it lawful to waive the right to life? That is to say, are suicide, euthanasia and other consented forms of death permitted? How could the apparent conflict between a right to dignified death and the sanctity of human life be resolved?

Is there a limit in utilizing hospital facilities for the care of comatose persons, especially in case of shortage of

- resources? Who should bear the costs: the patient, her heirs or the State?
- What is the rule determining final death concerning brain dead people through positive or negative action in the following instances: the silence or prohibition of the relevant person while in good health, or her authorization or even request for such action or omission at death?
- What is the relation between a deceased person and her body and who is to decide about different issues relevant thereto, such as scientific research or transplantation?
- What are the criteria upon which a legal system can restrict patients with critical diseases in taking legal actions?

Answering the above questions requires philosophical, theological, ethical, sociological and psychological analyses. We do not, of course, expect to find an answer to all of the aforesaid questions in one conference. Nevertheless, we do expect to refine some of the questions and identify certain approaches to them in a conference.

I feel obliged to thank our sponsors, Almahdi Institute especially its Director, Mr. Arif Abdoulhossain; Center for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, in particular Dr. David Thomas and my colleagues in the UNESCO Chair, especially Professor Ardashir Amirarjomand and Dr. S. Mohammad Ghari Seyed Fatemi for their great contribution to organizing the Conference.

Rahim Nowbahar
 Director of the Department of Law and Bioethics,
 The UNESCO Chair & Centre for human Rights, Peace and
 Democracy,
 Shahid Beheshti university