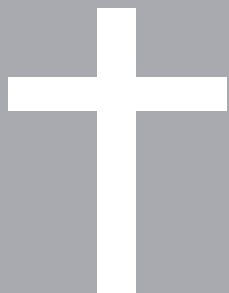


ANNUAL FALL MCGINLEY LECTURE



Life After Death:

**Hopes and Fears for Jews, Christians
and Muslims**

The Reverend Patrick J. Ryan, S.J.

Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society
Fordham University



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Those of you who know me well will understand if I begin this lecture in Africa, where I lived and worked for more than a quarter of a century. Given the topic this evening, you will also understand why I visited Ghana for four days a month ago, to participate in the funeral of a close friend. Permit me now to take you with me on an African journey about life, death and life after death.

I.

AN AFRICAN PRELUDE

While in Ghana last month I noticed that many streets in the University of Ghana campus have recently been given names. The sign on one of those streets—Agyei Barimah Crescent—brought back memories I had not expected to confront again. Agyei Barimah was a first year student in May 1979, a time when Ghana was living through the last months of a despotic military dictatorship that had begun in 1972. Participating with some of his boisterous fellow students from Commonwealth Hall in a street

cleanup exercise in central Accra one Saturday morning, Agyei Barimah met a dreadful end. The nervous police—always worried about the political volatility of students in a crowded urban center—shot randomly at the students and killed him.

The young man shot dead by the police was a Catholic and also an Asante, a member of a matrilineal society that dominates central Ghana. Furious with the military government, his fellow students had demonstrated after his death not only in Accra but all along the 200 miles of road to his village by the river Tano where he was to be buried a week later. The corpse, which had been frozen in the University Teaching Hospital mortuary, was now incongruously dressed in a mortar board and the academic gown of his residential hall. When I arrived at Agyei's village early on the morning of the funeral, the body lay within an elaborately canopied bier in an open field near the local Catholic Church. I had arrived shortly after dawn. A young Presbyterian minister, one of my students at the time, beckoned for me to approach the bier and conduct the transfer of the body to the coffin in what he called "the Catholic way." I had no idea what "the Catholic way" might be, but I didn't let on. I started to pray aloud; nearby students, drunk and rowdy until then, fell silent. Agyei Barimah's relatives, tired from a sleepless night of wake-keeping, approached the bier. His mother's brothers, draped in the fulsome clay-red cloth that is the mark of matrilineal relatives in mourning, gathered around me. Patrilineal relatives, draped in black, removed their toga-like outer garments and surrounded me, the matrilineal uncles and the corpse with a wall of cloth. Gently we lifted the corpse, now wet from defrosting, into the coffin.

For one who had died so young, childless and the victim of sudden violence, Asante funeral rites are traditionally curtailed, or even suppressed. Such a "bad death," as it is called, prevents the deceased from providing for his matrilineal ancestors a channel of rebirth, precisely because the youth died childless. Furthermore, the violent nature of a murder is said to "offend" the Earth, which must be pacified for every

burial, but especially when the one to be interred has met a violent end. Such a death may in some sense be thought culpable, the result of willful bad choice made at the moment before birth when God gives, or the human being chooses, a destiny (*nkrabea*). The victim may have died like this because of some offense that brought on the ire of witches or other invisible forces. Such a youthful victim of sudden death was traditionally buried hastily and at noonday, an unpropitious hour. But traditions are changing, especially under the influence of Christianity. The relatives of Agyei Barimah insisted that his burial be delayed until the later afternoon, to avoid the stigma of “bad death.” Having arrived just after dawn, I suddenly realized that I had a long day before me.

Within the wall of cloth surrounding the corpse, one of his matrilineal uncles reached into his pocket and produced two coins which he wished to place in the coffin with the corpse. Another uncle, looking remorsefully at me, remonstrated with him: “No! This is a Christian funeral.” I looked up from the corpse, tears in my eyes. “Let it be,” I said, “Let him give the coins.” The uncle was offering his nephew the coins of passage across the river of death, a motif known both in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds as well as in Asante. But in the old Asante tradition, the possibility of such blessed survival, such a crossing of the river of death, was denied to one who had died a “bad death.” The gift of the uncle’s coins transcended Asante cultural expectations and bespoke a hope for life after death. “Let it be,” I repeated, and Agyei Barimah, just before his Catholic funeral, a Liturgy of the Resurrection, was given the fare to cross the river to the land of his ancestors (*asamando*), even though he had not continued their lineage.¹

Although there are many hopes and fears we may all share about life after death and many different ways in which we Jews, Christians and Muslims have imagined life after death over the centuries, my interest in life after death this evening centers on one particular form of survival, the resurrection of the dead, understood quite concretely as the resurrection of the body. I thought of that in 1979 as I helped to lift the cold and wet

corpse of Agyei Barimah into his coffin. Greek aspirations for survival of the soul, but not the body, may have satisfied philosophers in ancient Athens, but the peasants in the Greek countryside may have wanted something a bit more concrete. The hero Achilles in the underworld tells the visiting Odysseus that he would much rather be a living slave than a ruler among the shades of the dead.² So would many of us. Let me take you now on a rapid tour of Jewish, Christian and Muslim hopes and fears for life after death, concentrating in particular on bodily resurrection.

II.

LIFE AFTER DEATH IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

There is some evidence in ancient Israel, at least in the Iron Age (after 1200 BCE), for something normally connected, and on a much grander scale, with the neighbors of Israel in Egypt: the depositing of grave goods in tombs.³ Presumably such grave goods signified popular belief in ancient Israel that the deceased could use these things after death, unless the Israelites had a sense of humor in the face of death, like some modern Americans, who slip into the coffins of favorite relatives such treasured objects as Oreos and mini-bottles of single-malt whiskey.

Hope for a particular form of life after death, not mere survival of the soul (a not particularly Jewish notion) but resurrection of the body, developed late in the tradition of Israel, probably most clearly in the last two centuries before the Common Era. Earlier Israelites were more interested in the survival of Israel through progeny. There were, however, some yearnings and even positive hope expressed for rescue from the grave, which was envisaged as the entry into the pit of the underworld (*Sheol*). “God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,” one voice cries out in the Psalms, “for he will receive me.” (Ps 49:15) The nature of that divine rescue from the pit of death, or of the reception that God might provide for one so rescued, was left fairly vague. There is, however, at least one substantial portion of the prophetic work ascribed to Isaiah of Jerusalem, possibly interpolated into his corpus by later thinkers in that

prophetic school, that has been characterized as the Isaiah Apocalypse. (Isa 24:1-27:13) The prophetic speaker in this context sees different fates awaiting the wicked and the just. The former have no hope for survival: “The dead do not live; shades do not rise—because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them.” (Isa 26:14) But the same fate will not be visited on the just: “Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.” (Isa 26:19) A more corporate rather than individual version of such hope can be found in a passage from Ezekiel, who was writing sometime after the end of the Babylonian Exile in the late sixth century BCE. Ezekiel envisions the return of the Jews from Babylon to their homeland as the revival and en fleshment of a valley of dry bones for whom God promises resurrection of the body: “You shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.” (Ezek 37:13) But was such a resurrection motif only imagery in the Isaiah Apocalypse and the work of Ezekiel?

Why did genuine hope for the resurrection of the body eventually arise among some Jews in the early second century BCE? The Seleucid or Syrian Greek rulers, who had inherited from Alexander the Great in the late fourth century BCE the political domination of much of the territory that is the modern Middle East, tended to take a dim view of the Jews within their realm, especially by the early second century BCE. The feeling of antipathy was mutual. The last of the major Syrian Greek rulers, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (r. 175-164 BCE), slaughtered many faithful Jews who resisted his wholesale campaign of *hityavnut*, Hellenization of every aspect of Jewish life, including the Temple worship in Jerusalem. The priest Mattathias and his sons, the Maccabee brothers, spearheaded an eventually successful revolt against the tyranny of Antiochus IV, but before it succeeded not a few Jews lost their lives in battle or as individual martyrs for the faith. It may have been such deaths of young people that motivated hope for a completed, resurrected bodily life in “the world to come” (*haOlam haBa*: the phrase can also be translated “the age to come”).

The Books of Maccabees, of which only a Greek version survives, were probably composed soon after the events they describe in the second century BCE. In several vivid passages these works reflect a strong hope for life after death, precisely in the form of resurrection of the body, nowhere more dramatically than in the account of the martyrdom of seven Jewish brothers and their mother who refuse to eat pork at the command of Antiochus. The second son defies Antiochus before he dies: “You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws.” (2 Macc 7: 9) When only one son is left, his valiant mother urges him to maintain the same faith in God who can raise the dead. Note the parallelism in her words between the wonder of procreation and the wonder of resurrection. “My son, have pity on me. I carried you for nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you. I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God’s mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers.” (2 Macc 7:27-29)

The Book of Daniel, purportedly narrating events taking place during the Babylonian Exile, actually reflects the same Syrian Greek persecution of the Jews in the early second century BCE. The last chapter of Daniel looks forward to a deliverance from persecution that is much less this-worldly than the Exodus from Egypt or the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon, the prime examples of the deliverance of Israel in earlier portions of the Hebrew Bible. The future hope of the author of Daniel centers on deliverance from the ultimate captivity, the ultimate exile: death. Like the Isaiah Apocalypse, the Book of Daniel sees different fates awaiting the faithful and the faithless. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to

shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” (Dan 12:2-3)

By the time of Jesus, the Jewish community living in the Roman-ruled Middle East, and especially in Judea and Galilee, was of two minds on the resurrection of the dead, and I will treat the New Testament account of the quandaries involved later. But the lay movement known to us as the Pharisees (*Perushim*) continued the hopes of the Maccabees for resurrection of the body, while the Sadducees, an older aristocracy surrounding the Temple and its officiants, rejected the notion of resurrection. With the Roman destruction of the refurbished Second Temple in 70 CE, the influence of the Sadducees declined, and the rabbis in the Pharisee tradition who preserved Judaism in the early centuries of the Common Era considered bodily resurrection of the dead a central component of Jewish faith. The Babylonian Talmud, in the *Tractate Sanhedrin*, cites several texts from the Torah that imply the resurrection of the dead: “[I]t is written ‘and you shall contribute from it the Lord’s offering to Aaron the priest.’ (Num 18:28) Would Aaron live forever? ... [T]his indicates that [Aaron] was to be resurrected and the children of Israel would give him offerings.”⁴

There were dissenters on this theme over the centuries before modern times, but Orthodox Jews to the present day, as well as many Conservative Jews, still place their hope in the God who raises the dead to life. Maimonides in the twelfth century CE expressed a consensus on the resurrection of the dead that prevailed in most Jewish circles until the nineteenth century. “The great reward is the life of the world to come and the punishment is the cutting off of the soul [in the world to come]” (Principle XI) But Maimonides also specifies the possibility of some sinners, weak but basically faithful, making it into the world to come. Such a sinner “will be punished for his sins, but he still has a share in the world to come and is among the sinners of Israel.” (Principle XIII)⁵ Maimonides was also affected by the Aristotelian philosophical tradition and did not

confuse resurrection of the dead and the reality of the world to come with the restoration of normal physical life. For Maimonides, “the human soul returns to the body. This is the intended meaning of *Resurrection of the Dead*,”⁶ but such return of the soul to the body does not mean that eating, drinking and sexual activity will characterize the life of the resurrected.⁷ In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides insists that those “who have no share in the world to come, who are cut off and destroyed and are judged on account of great wickedness and sins forever and ever” include “heretics, atheists and those who reject the Torah and deny the resurrection and the coming of the Messiah” as well as “the apostate.”⁸

Many modern Jews in Europe and America, and especially those who adhere to the Reform tradition, do not share Maimonides’ convictions about the world to come. They evade any clear reference to a hope for resurrection of the dead and the world to come when they pray to God “who has implanted within us eternal life.”⁹

III.

LIFE AFTER DEATH IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Jesus and his disciples had much in common on the subject of the resurrection with the Pharisees in the first century CE. In the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, Jesus takes on the Sadducees on this topic with some vigor. The Sadducees threw up to him a conundrum. They told a hypothetical tale of seven brothers, married according to levirate law,¹⁰ one by one, to the same childless bride. Such an unlucky widow poses a difficulty for the doctrine of the resurrection. “In the resurrection, whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.” (Mk 12:23) The reply of Jesus to the Sadducees’ conundrum argues that even in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible (the only ones Sadducees regarded as authoritative), the resurrection of the dead is implicit in God’s words spoken to Moses in the burning bush: “I AM the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” (Mk 12:26, quoting Ex 3:6) Following principles not untypical of Jewish exegetes in the early centuries of the

Common Era, as we can see in the passage from the *Tractate Sanhedrin* cited earlier,¹¹ Jesus interpreted the divine proclamation to Moses of God's present relationship ("I AM") to the dead patriarchs as an assertion of continuing relationship, even beyond the physical death of the patriarchs so cited. "He is the God not of the dead but of the living; you are quite wrong." (Mk 12:27) In the world to come, where, according to Jesus, those who rise from the dead "neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Mk 12:25), the unlucky widow becomes a free agent.

When Paul, according to the Acts of the Apostles, was brought to trial before a Sanhedrin made up of both Pharisees and Sadducees, Luke maintains that he divided them among themselves: "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of resurrection of the dead." (Acts 23:6) The earliest written documents of the New Testament come from the pen of Paul, composed over a period of a decade starting about 51 CE. Paul's experience of Jesus, very different from that of the disciples who had accompanied Jesus during his public career, began in the early 30s of the first century CE. The Gospel writers, especially Luke, record visions of the risen Jesus by his disciples over a period of forty days. (Acts 1:3) But after their experience of the ascension of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit, the apostles claimed no further visions of the resurrected Jesus. Paul, however, insists that he personally experienced, some five to eight years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, a genuine vision of the risen Jesus. After listing the male eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Jesus, Paul boldly asserts that "last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." (1 Cor 15:8) By this vision Paul apparently means his call experience: "God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles." (Gal 1:15-16)¹² The Acts of the Apostles three times fleshes out these two testimonies by Paul with accounts of his experience on the road to Damascus.¹³ Was the vision Paul had of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus mainly an interior event? If it was, such a vision, especially

given Paul's insistence on its significance for Gentiles, could not but be controversial in the early Jewish-Christian Church, especially because of Paul's recent career as a persecutor of Jewish Christians.

The traditions that Paul received about the resurrection of Jesus concentrate only on the eyewitness testimony of men, the sort of testimony that might be accepted in a rabbinical setting; they run counter to the four evangelists' insistence that the first witnesses of the risen Jesus were women. But the importance of the resurrection for Paul's preached theology appears most clearly in a passage from the First Letter to the Corinthians: "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power." (1 Cor 15:20-24)

The image of the risen Christ as "the first fruits of those who have died" returns in a different form a few verses later, and should keep us from confusing the resurrection of Jesus or the resurrection of anyone else with what may be called the resuscitation of the dead, as in the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus, called forth from his tomb, has to be untied from his grave wrappings (Jn 11:44); the risen Jesus, by contrast, leaves the grave wrappings behind (Jn 20:5-7). Michelangelo's famous statue of the risen Jesus in the Roman Church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva shows Christ notably unclothed, apart from a swirl of bronze added over the sculptor's objections by ecclesiastical prudes.

Paul answers a hypothetical question: "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" (1 Cor 15:35) Paul compares the corpse that is buried with a seed planted in the hopes of fruition: "You do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or some other grain." (1 Cor 15:37) In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses a similar image to describe what will happen to him after his glorification (Jn 12:24). Paul

goes even further and refers to the risen body as something radically transformed: “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.” (1 Cor 15:44) Does this image compromise the reality of the resurrection? I think not: instead, it helps us to comprehend the four Gospels’ accounts of the risen Jesus, able to come and go mysteriously, even though the doors are locked (Jn 20:19), not always recognized at first (Lk 24:16; Jn 21:4), and demanding what seems to be more than normal cognition. Matthew tells us quite frankly that when the eleven disciples went to the mountain in Galilee where they were told to meet the risen Jesus, “when they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” (Mt 28:17) One such doubter in another Gospel narrative, Thomas, even insisted that he would not accept the reality of the resurrection unless he could put his finger into “the mark of the nails in his hands” and put his hand into the wounded side of Jesus (Jn 20:25). Thomas got what he wanted—or perhaps stopped short of such probing when confronted a week later by the risen Jesus. Thomas and all of us are bidden, along with Mary Magdalene, not to cling physically to the risen Jesus but to recognize that he has entered into a new dimension of his relationship with his Father: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (Jn 20:17) The risen body bears a direct relationship to the body of the person who has died, but it is the relationship of full flowering or fruition to what was only a seed, the mortal body. There is not much more we can say sensibly about this mystery, since we have no personal experience of it. The Lutheran theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, suggests that “the fate of Jesus Christ” is “the anticipation of the end”¹⁴ and will only become intelligible when understood in its setting, the general resurrection of the dead.¹⁵

In the early Church there were differences on how the resurrection of the dead was to be interpreted. The great theologian of the early third century, Origen (d. ca. 254 CE), affirms the resurrection of the dead but insists that the gross materiality of human bodies will play no part in the resurrected life. In this Origen does not differ very much from Paul.¹⁶

Later thinkers identified as “Origenists” in the sixth century, especially monks of the Monastery of Mar Saba outside Bethlehem, seem to have gone well beyond Origen and suggested that risen bodies would be quite different from mortal bodies and would even be spherical in shape.¹⁷ Did the Syriac homilist of the late fifth and early sixth century CE, Mar Jacob of Serugh, write his poetic account of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus as an apologetic against such “Origenists”?¹⁸ His Seven Sleepers are decidedly non-spherical boys.

Mar Jacob’s poem opens with an apostrophe to the Son of God, asking him to help the poet-homilist to tell the story of “the children of light” who are also described as “lambs from the midst of [God’s] flock” and “wheat [selected] from the tares.” All of these images derive from the Gospels and their perspective on life after death. Then the poem goes on to narrate how the Roman emperor Decius, whose short reign (249-251 CE) was marked by vigorous persecution of Christians, tried during a visit to Ephesus to impose the duty of sacrificing to the gods on Christian Ephesians, including seven boys who hid in a cave outside the city to avoid apostasy. There they slept, they thought for a night. Mar Jacob of Serugh says that “the Lord saw the faith of the dear lambs and ... took their spirits and raised them up above, to heaven, and left a watcher to be guarding their limbs.” Decius, outraged by their refusal to sacrifice to the gods, has the entrance to the cave blocked with cut stones. Two wise men, however, evidently Christians, mark the location of the tomb with an inscription “on tablets of lead” that preserves the names of the seven boys, leading to their veneration as martyrs for the faith.

About two centuries later, well into the history of the Eastern Roman Christian Empire, a wealthy Ephesian wants to build a sheepfold near that cave and in the process removes some of the stones from its entrance. Thus “light entered in and awoke the children of light.” Thinking they had only slept one night, the boys send one of their number secretly into Ephesus to buy food with coins they had brought with them two hundred years earlier. Entering the city, the boy sees crosses everywhere,

to his amazement. The coins he brings, two centuries old, arouse a commotion among Ephesians who think they must come from a hidden treasure. Eventually, the boy bearing the ancient coins is dragged before the local bishop, who rescues him from the crowd. The boy finally leads the Christians of Ephesus to the mountain retreat where he and his companions have slept since the persecution of Decius. Later, the Byzantine emperor, Theodosius II, is brought into the picture; he tries to persuade the boys to relocate to downtown Ephesus, but the boys prefer their mountain retreat, declaring that “the shepherd who chose us is the one who bade us be here.” They envision their role to be witnesses to the reality of the resurrection: “For your sake has Christ the Lord awoken us/ so that you might see and hold firm that the resurrection truly exists.” Covered with the emperor’s mantle they return to sleep until the general resurrection.¹⁹

These youthful witnesses to the resurrection, eight in number according to Jacob of Serugh (seven of them fairly taciturn, plus one spokesperson), exhibit a distinctive family resemblance to the seven martyred brothers and their valiant mother in the Second Book of Maccabees. We shall meet them once again, much transformed, in the Qur’an.

IV.

LIFE AFTER DEATH IN THE MUSLIM TRADITION

Few themes play a more central role in the earliest passages of the Qur’an, those first experienced by Muhammad as revelation while he was still in Mecca (610-622 CE), than “the day of the resurrection” (*yawm al-qiyama*), a phrase that occurs seventy times in the Qur’an. The seventy-fifth chapter of the Qur’an actually bears the title, Sura of the Resurrection, and it begins with a startling, almost macabre vision of the resurrection of all the dead, good and evil, and the accompanying realization by the evil of their condemnation: “No, I swear by the day of resurrection—/ No, I swear by the reproach-laden soul!/ Do human beings think that We [God] will not collect their bones?/ Yes indeed! We can even piece together

their fingers!/ But they want to continue living in sin./ They ask: ‘When will this day of resurrection occur?’/ When sight is dazzled,/ when the moon is eclipsed/ when sun and moon clash:/ on that day they will say: ‘Where can we escape?’/ But there will be no hiding place!/ With your Lord, though, on that day there will be a place of rest./ On that day human beings will be told what they put first and what they put last./ Yes indeed! Human beings will act as clear witnesses against themselves,/ despite all the excuses they proffer for themselves.” (Qur’an 75:1-15)²⁰

Muhammad’s preaching about the day of resurrection, as well as the day of judgment that inevitably follows, struck his uncaring Meccan contemporaries as nonsense. The Qur’an reports their skepticism: “‘Beyond our one death there is nothing; we will not be raised up. Bring back our ancestors if what you say is true!’” (Qur’an 44:35-36) Unlike the New Testament, which can point to the resurrection of Jesus as a foretaste of what lies in store for all who keep faith, the Qur’an proffers no clear example of a past resurrection.²¹ But the Qur’an does adduce arguments in favor of the hope for resurrection, noting the parallelism between God’s creating everything in the beginning and God’s revivifying the dead at the end: “They also say, ‘When we are reduced to bones and dust, will we really be raised up as a new creation?’/ Say: ‘Even if you are stone or iron/ or some created thing even greater in your minds.’ Then they will say, ‘Who will bring us back?’ Say: ‘The One who made you the first time.’ Then they will shake their heads at you and say: ‘When will that be?’ Say: ‘Perhaps it will be soon,/ someday when [God] will call you and you will respond with praise of Him, and you will presume that you have delayed only a little bit.’” (Qur’an 17:49-52) Note that in this passage from the Qur’an the resurrection of the body is imaginatively linked with the original creation of the body, a frequent Quranic motif. The Qur’an also offers analogies to the resurrection of the dead in natural phenomena, awe-inspiring for Arabs in a desert habitat, such as the growth of vegetation (Qur’an 41:39) and the transformation of dry soil by rain (Qur’an 53:11).

There is one story told in the Qur'an, not entirely unlike the Christian story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, a story that may serve as a promise of future resurrection of the dead as the ultimate awakening of those who have kept faith with God. In the Sura of the Cave (Qur'an 18: 9-26) we are told about seven young men whose fidelity to the oneness of God motivated them to take refuge from persecution in a cave where they fell asleep—they thought for only one night, but actually for three centuries or more. When they awoke they served as witnesses to the intimate connection between fidelity to that one God and the hope for the resurrection of the dead that is so central to the Quranic message. The Quranic story of the Seven Sleepers lacks most of the specifically Christian details in the version preserved by Mar Jacob of Serugh or later Christian writers. As with so many stories in the Qur'an, however, it presumes familiarity with the narrative already, not because Muhammad had read it (Muslims generally deny his literacy) but probably because the story of the Seven Sleepers had entered into the oral tradition of Arabia through Christians living there. Muhammad may have known this story already, but it was re-experienced by him as revelation only when his Meccan compatriots challenged his teaching about the hour of judgment and the resurrection of the dead. God speaks once again in the plural of majesty: "Thus did We bring them [the Companions of the Cave] to their [the unbelievers'] attention so that they might know God's promise is true and that there is no doubt about the hour [of judgment], even though they hold various opinions about this matter." (Qur'an 18:21)

Originally Greek intellectual pursuits—loosely grouped together as *falsafa* (a word quite obviously borrowed from the Greek word *philosophia*)—began to find enthusiastic practitioners among a minority of Muslims by the ninth century CE. Many of these Muslim philosophers fell into a skeptical attitude about both protology and eschatology: the central doctrines of the Qur'an about creation of the universe in time and the consummation of that universe at some future point. *Falsafa* never had a large numerical following, but it did have an elite clientele among

some Arab and even more Iranian and Turkish Muslims for whom it provided an alternative worldview to that of normative Islam. Looking at the universe, the *ḥaylasuf* tried to discover more about *what it was* rather than about *Who made it*. For the Muslim philosopher the cosmos was less the result of God's creative activity than the result of interacting causes, first the four qualities (moist, dry, hot, cold) and then the derivative four elements (air, fire, water, earth). Change could be explained as the mixture of qualities and elements rather than as the result of divine initiative.

For the *ḥaylasuf*, the world, constructed of constitutive principles, could not have derived directly from God without sullyng the absoluteness and changelessness of God, conceived in Aristotelian terms as the Uncaused Cause and First Principle of Movement, eternally at rest. To avoid the notion that God went from not-creating to creating—and therefore underwent change in Himself—the Muslim practitioners of *falsafa* speculated that the visible universe was eternally created: absolutely dependent or contingent on God but co-eternal with God. In such an eternally contingent world, there was no place for an end of the world and no place for the day of resurrection.²² *Falsafa* so conceived and practiced was heading down a collision course with Islam, although leading Muslim philosophers tried various ways to reconcile their ideas about God and creation with revelation.

The great Muslim thinker, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE), once more involved in the practice of *falsafa* than he later thought spiritually healthy, developed many arguments to refute the principal teachings of the philosophers about God and the universe, especially in his polemical work, *Tahafut al-falasifa* ("The Incoherence of the Philosophers") that a few generations later provoked Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE; Averroes in the Latin West) to write his line-by-line refutation, *Tahafut al-tahafut* ("The Incoherence of the Incoherence"). Al-Ghazali, in an autobiographical work, takes on the philosophers in a briefer scope, singling out three principal teachings of the philosophers (especially al-Farabi and Ibn Sina [Avicenna in the Latin West]) for which they must be accounted

infidels (*kuffar*). The first and most egregiously infidel teaching of the philosophers, according to al-Ghazali, was their affirmation “that men’s bodies will not be assembled on the Last Day, but only disembodied spirits will be rewarded and punished, and the rewards and punishments will be spiritual, not corporal.”²³ The other two teachings of the philosophers that amounted to total infidelity, according to al-Ghazali, include their assertion that “God Most High knows universals, but not particulars” and “their maintaining the eternity of the world, past and future.”²⁴

The last two errors of the philosophers provide the intellectual underpinning for the first, the denial of the resurrection of the body. The word “particulars,” in Aristotelian terms, at least as interpreted by Thomas Aquinas, points to the unique individual (the *individuum* in classical terms, that which is undivided in itself) that is “signed” by matter, which differentiates one individual from another within a species, the universal or form that is generic. Thus, if I may play with these terms, Jesuit might be construed as a generic species or universal form, while Pat Ryan is an individual within that species, a particular differentiated by his unique matter from any other Jesuit. If God only knows Jesuits in general and not Pat Ryan in particular, my hope for life after death sinks into the grave. Even worse, the eternity of the world, past and future, reduces Pat Ryan to undifferentiated prime matter.²⁵

In the last book of his forty-volume work *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, suitably titled *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, al-Ghazali dwells at great length on every aspect of death and life after death and ends with an exhortation for all of us who must, willy-nilly, face the inevitability of death: “These Traditions, gathered together with those we have related in the *Book of Hope*, give us the glad news of the wide compass of God’s Mercy (Exalted is He!). It is our hope that He will not deal with us as we deserve, but will rather grant us that which is appropriate to Him, in His generosity, abundant indulgence, and mercy.”²⁶

V.

CONCLUSION: FUNERALS REMEMBERED

I began with a memory of death and the hope for life after death at a funeral in Africa. Let me conclude with some memories that will mark me out as what I am: an Irish New Yorker. I spent a significant part of my childhood attending wakes. For many Americans, that experience is much more occasional—if it ever happens at all. Some Americans consider it downright dreadful. They prefer the later memorial service, far removed from the corpse in place and time. But the Irish sources of my culture have developed a whole ethic of wake and funeral behavior. “I’m sorry for your trouble” is often said as an opener to the nearest family members standing by the coffin of the deceased. Prayer is uttered while kneeling beside the open coffin. Rising from that prayer one says that the dead person “looks so natural,” even if he or she doesn’t. A mass card is left near the coffin and a memorial card is picked up. Then the lively talk and bursts of humor begin, sometimes even including the principal mourners, depending on how expected or unexpected the death of their relative was. I have found, at least in New York, that Italian wakes are much more somber than Irish wakes; Jewish wakes, usually without the body displayed, in my experience, at least, are both solemn and serious. Muslims bury their deceased as quickly as Jews, with only the immediate family involved in washing and clothing the corpse.

Irish wakes are great places to meet old friends and exchange the latest news, the most hilarious jokes, happy reminiscences of times past. They provide a joyful setting for looking forward to life after death. James Joyce took the title of his last work of fiction, *Finnegans Wake*, from a Dublin music hall song that told the story of Tim Finnegan, a hodcarrier at whose disorderly wake whiskey (*uisce beatha* in Irish, “the water of life”) was accidentally spilled on the corpse, causing Finnegan to rise from the dead. That raucous song symbolized for Joyce what he called the oldest story in the West: death and the passage through the waters into new life.

I think you can now understand why I chose this evening's topic. There is something much more satisfying, intellectually and spiritually, about life after death conceived as the resurrection of the body than of life after death as the pale survival of a soul in the manner of the shades in the Greek underworld. Jews, Christians and Muslims have all looked forward to resurrection as a bodily event, albeit a transformed bodily event, the fruition or flowering of the spiritual-corporeal whole that is you or me. None of us is hoping for the resuscitation of our aging carcasses, so that we can grow older and older, more and more feeble, in some preternatural Florida. Resurrection of the body promises much more and much better than bodily prolongation. In that resurrected future I hope to meet not only the risen Jesus, but my family and friends as well, including my student whom I buried more than three decades ago, Agyei Barimah.

In an early short story titled "Pigeon Feathers," the late John Updike (d. 2009), a man who lived and died with this same hope for the resurrection of the dead, has his fourteen-year-old protagonist, David, find in the remains of pigeons he has shot down as nuisances in the family's barn a promise of very concrete life after death. David is dumbfounded to discover the beauty and variety of the dead pigeons' feathers, and what he sees confirms him in his faith that God is able to conquer death. "He was robed in this certainty," Updike writes, at the conclusion of the story, "that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever."²⁷ I hope this November evening, in what we Catholics call the Month of the Holy Souls, that you too are robed with that same certainty.

NOTES

- 1 On Asante funeral customs, see R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927) and many modern studies, especially Judith A. Vollbrecht, *Structure and Communitas in an Ashanti Village: The Role of Funerals* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1979).
- 2 See *Odyssey* XI: 488-491: “No winning words about death to *me*, shining Odysseus!/ By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man—/some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—/than rule down here among all the breathless dead.” See Homer, *The Odyssey*, tr. Robert Eagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), 265.
- 3 See Claudia Setzer, *Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity: Doctrine, Community and Self-Definition* (Boston/Leiden: Brill Academic Publications, 2004), 6-7. I am much indebted to this excellent work of Professor Setzer for my understanding of hopes for life after death in the early Jewish and early Christian traditions.
- 4 Tractate Sanhedrin 90b, in *The Talmud: Selected Writings*, tr. Ben Zion Bokser (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), 211.
- 5 For this translation of the Thirteen Principles of Maimonides, see Marc Mermelstein, “The 13 Foundations of Judaism,” available at www.mesora.org/13principles.
- 6 Moses Maimonides, “Treatise on the Resurrection,” tr. Hillel G. Fradkin, in Ralph Lerner, *Maimonides’ Empire of Light: Popular Enlightenment in an Age of Belief* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 165-66.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 8 *The Book of Knowledge from the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides*, tr. H. M. Russell and Rabbi J. Weinberg (New York: Ktav, 1983), 116.
- 9 “Morning Service for Week-Days,” in *The Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship*, Part I, rev. ed. (New York: The Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1940, rpt. 1978), 321.
- 10 On the levirate law, see Deuteronomy: “When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.” (Deut 25:5-6)
- 11 See Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., “The Gospel of Mark,” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 622b.

- 12 The Greek of this passage can be read literally as follows: “when he [God] who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son *in* me.” The most important aspect of this passage is the way it denotes the revolution worked within Paul by what he experienced that day.
- 13 On Paul’s call experience as narrated three times by Luke, see Acts 9:1-31, Acts 22: 1-21, Acts 26:2-23.
- 14 Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation,” in *Revelation as History*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg, tr. David Granskou (London: Macmillan, 1968), 143. For Pannenberg the whole purport of the teaching of Jesus was the announcement of the imminent eschatological reign of God. Jesus proclaimed the relativization of the Law and the resurrection of the dead as elements of this coming age. The fact that Jesus and his contemporaries may have expected the verification of these claims in imminent events of cosmic dimension does not mean that Jesus has been proven false or deceived, as Albert Schweitzer might maintain. Rather, Jesus has been proven paradoxically right by his own resurrection as the first fruits of the harvest of the dead; the resurrection of Jesus, then, can be understood as the proleptic dawning of the end-time. Pannenberg’s theology gives a new seriousness to the earliest stratum of Paul’s writing: “The dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4: 16-17). Unfortunately, this passage from Paul has been trivialized by fundamentalists hopeful of being caught up in “the rapture,” in the process abandoning their cars in heavy traffic.
- 15 See Wolfhart Pannenberg, “The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth,” in *Theology as History*. *New Frontiers in Theology: Discussions among Continental and American Theologians III*, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 101-33, and his response to the other authors in the volume, 221-76.
- 16 “So must we suppose that our bodies, like a grain of corn, fall into the earth, but that implanted in them is the life-principle which contains the essence of the body; and although the bodies die and are corrupted and scattered, nevertheless by the word of God that same life principle which has all along been preserved in the essence of the body raises them up from the earth and restores and refashions them. Just as the power that exists in a grain of wheat refashions and restores the grain, after its corruption and death, into a body with stalk and ear.” *Origen on First Principles*, tr. G. W. Butterworth, (1936, rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 141. Origen’s analogy of the resurrection as a transformation like that of a grain into a full ear of wheat derives in part from Paul (1 Cor 15:37-41) and John (Jn 12:24).
- 17 The “theologian emperor” Justinian (r. 527-565 CE) pushed in 543 CE for a condemnation at a Synod in Constantinople of nine theses attributed to Origen, who had been dead for nearly three centuries. The fifth of those condemned theses, nowhere to be found in the texts of Origen that deal with resurrection, entails the notion that “in the resurrection the bodies of human beings will be raised spherical

- in shape” [Greek: *sphairoēdei*; Latin: *orbiculata*]. See H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, ed. A. Schönmetzer, S.J., 32nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 207/407. For a judicious account of Origen and the difference between Origen and later “Origenists,” see H. Crouzel, “Origen and Origenism,” *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 10:653a-661b.
- 18 On the possibility of the story as anti-“Origenist,” see Sidney Griffith, “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur’an: The ‘Companions of the Cave’ in *Surat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition,” in *The Qur’an in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), 120.
- 19 For the full text of this work by Jacob of Serugh, see Sebastian Brock, “Jacob of Serugh’s Poem on the Sleepers of Ephesus,” in *I Sowed Fruits into Hearts (Odes Sol. 17:13): Festschrift for Professor Michael Lattke*. Early Christian Studies 12, ed. P. Allen, M. Franzmann and R. Strelan (Strathfield, New South Wales, Australia: St. Paul’s Publications, 2007), 13-30.
- 20 This is my own rendering into English, as are later quotations from the Qur’an.
- 21 Two passages from the second chapter of the Qur’an are sometimes said to refer to previous resurrections. The first passage consists of two verses, Qur’an 2:72-73, addressed to Jews: “Behold, you killed someone and began to blame each other on this matter. But God was the One who brought to light what you were trying to hide. Then We [God] said: ‘Strike [the corpse] with a piece of it [a heifer mentioned in verse 71]. Then God brings the dead person back to life and makes you see some of His signs so that you will be able to understand.’” The modern Qur’an translator and interpreter, A. Yusuf ‘Ali (*The Holy Qur’an*, tr. A. Yusuf ‘Ali, 2nd ed., 1934, rpt., n.p, American Trust Publications, 1977, 36, n. 81) has suggested that this passage develops further Deuteronomy 21:1-9, a passage from the Hebrew Bible that describes a ceremony for cleansing neighbors from blood-guilt for a person found murdered in the countryside without any evidence for who committed the crime. The Quranic verses do not so much describe a resurrection as a resuscitation of the dead for the purpose of establishing guilt or innocence of the potentially guilty. The second passage from the same Sura (Qur’an 2:259) is quite different: “[Take the example] of the person who passed by a town in ruins. He said ‘How will God bring it back to life after its death?’ God made him die for a hundred years and then [God] revived him and asked him: ‘How long did you stay [there]?’ and he said, ‘I stayed a day or part of a day.’ But [God] said: ‘No, you stayed there a hundred years. Look at your food and drink: they have not gone stale. Look at your donkey. Thus do We [God] make you a sign for people. Look at the bones and how We will assemble them and even clothe them with flesh.’ Thus, when it became clear to him, the person said: ‘Now I know that God is powerful in every matter.’” Like the Seven Sleepers of Qur’an 18, the anonymous witness to what God can do for a town in ruins has no idea how much time has passed since he died. His own revival by God may not so much be resurrection as resuscitation of the dead, to prove to this anonymous person that God can do as much to revive the ruined city he had seen and thought beyond hope. Many

- Qur'an commentators see this passage as having some relationship to Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37:1-14). See A. Yusuf 'Ali, *ibid.*, 105, n. 304.
- 22 See Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), I:428.
- 23 *Deliverance from Error: An Annotated Translation of al-Munqidh min al-Dalal and Other Relevant Works of al-Ghazali*, tr. Richard Joseph McCarthy, S.J. (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999; rpt. of *Freedom and Fulfillment*, [Boston: Twayne, 1980]), 66.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 I am grateful to Christopher Cullen, S.J., of Fordham University's Department of Philosophy for his help in formulating these sentences.
- 26 Al-Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife* [*Kitab dhikr al-mawt wa-ma ba'dahu*], Book XL of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* [*Ihya'ulum al-din*], tr. and ed. T. J. Winter (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1989), 261.
- 27 John Updike, *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 150.

Life After Death:

Hopes and Fears for Jews, Christians and Muslims

A Jewish Response by Professor Claudia Setzer, Ph.D.

One thing many Catholics and Jews share is that we are not quite sure what we believe about life after death, nor what our tradition *really* teaches. My Catholic students, in spite of knowing their Apostles' Creed, which includes the affirmation of resurrection of the body, will tell me that the body dies, but the spirit lives on. My Jewish friends, in spite of reciting the blessing, "Blessed are you, O Lord, who gives life to the dead" as part of the central prayer of Jewish liturgy, will sometimes say they don't believe in any afterlife, and certainly not resurrection of the body. Some will claim Judaism as a whole rejects the idea.

One can hardly blame anyone. The idea of bodily resurrection is counter-intuitive, antiempirical, and as many pagans thought, quite unseemly. The pagan Celsus remarks that the body is full of all kinds of things not nice to mention and God would neither want nor be able to make it immortal. He asks, "What sort of person would have any further desire for a body that has rotted?" (*Against Celsus* 5.14)

The answer that many early Jews and Christians would give to Celsus: a person who believes in the power of God. Belief in resurrection emerges from a creation theology that stresses God as creator of the world and the human body. It carries with it several significant theological motifs that distinguish these early groups. So belief in bodily resurrection is two things, I think: shorthand for a set of ideas about God and justice, as well as a boundary marker that carves out identity and separation for different religious communities. In other words, it is a symbol that reaches beyond itself and trails all kinds of ideas in its wake: belief in God's power and providence, the union of body and soul, ultimate reward and punishment, and not incidentally, the legitimacy of those who teach it.

I won't say too much about the ideas of afterlife in the Hebrew Bible, as Professor Ryan has taught us about the Isaiah and Ezekiel material. But I would say two things: first, the idea of afterlife is at least implicit in the Hebrew Bible in some of the language of Sheol, or references to spirits of the underworld (*rephaim*, "shades," Prov 9:18), the forbidding of necromancy and divination, the calling up of the dead. Second, although the Ezekiel imagery of chapter 37 is often explained away as merely referring to national renewal, we have to ask, "Why this metaphor?" Why would anyone use such a graphic example of bodily resurrection as Ezekiel 37 unless they are speaking to a people who accept some kind of afterlife? "I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin ..." (v. 6). It implies they could imagine resurrection, even if this case is a metaphor. As Richard Friedman and Shauna Overton put it, the biblical silence on afterlife is really more of a whisper.¹ There is a fresco of Ezekiel's vision in the Dura-Europos synagogue in Syria in the third century, and another in the same synagogue showing Elijah's raising of the widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24).

What got me interested in the topic of resurrection of the body is that I noticed it was such a deal breaker for many early groups. People were read in or out of early communities based on whether or not they accepted it.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the preaching of resurrection contributed to the Pharisees' popularity with the people. In the example Father Ryan brought from Mark, Jesus writes off the Sadducees as ignoramuses because they reject it, saying they do not understand God's power or their own Scripture. Paul begins 1 Corinthians 15 saying, "How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there's no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised" and the whole enterprise of his preaching is futile. Justin Martyr in the second century says those who deny the resurrection of the dead do not deserve to be called Christians (*Dial.* 80.4-5). Let's look at the rabbis from the beginning of the third century.

In *Mishnah Sanhedrin*, a collection of laws gathered from earlier traditions, we read that:

All Israel has a share in the world to come, as it is said, *Thy people shall all be righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands that I may be glorified* (Isa 60:21). And these are the ones that have no portion in the world to come: he who says there is no resurrection of the dead [to be derived from the Torah], the Torah does not come from heaven, and an Epicurean. Rabbi Akiba says, Also he who reads heretical books, and he who whispers over a wound and says, *I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you* (Ex 15:26). Abba Saul says, Also, he who pronounces the Divine Name as it is spelled out (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10.1).

This is very unusual. The Rabbis very rarely legislate belief. Most of the *Mishnah* is about what one does, laws relating to prayers, agricultural laws, Sabbath observance, marriage and divorce, criminal and civil matters, and the like. They do have terms for people who we would call heretics, like *kofer ha ikkar*, one who "cuts the root" or denies a basic tenet (or the rabbis' authority), but most statements focus on observance. Note here that all of Israel is slated for some kind of afterlife, except these three groups: those who deny resurrection, those who deny the divine origin of the Torah, and Epicureans or *Apikorsim*. Epicureanism was a popular

philosophical movement at the time; one of its tenets rejected Providence. Whether there were gods or a god or not, divine beings did not involve themselves in human affairs.

Why? Why did it matter to anyone whether their fellow Jew (or Christian) believed in resurrection or any kind of afterlife? What could be less relevant for everyday relationships? I think the answer is that resurrection of the body was a symbol that condenses a set of beliefs. In studying these texts, I noticed many of the same ideas seemed to accompany resurrection. Let me just list them.

First, belief in the power and providence of God. More than any other idea, it seems to be a companion idea to resurrection. Note that the *Mishnah* about resurrection also rejects Epicureans, who deny God's care for the world. In 2 Maccabees 7:22-23, the mother encourages her son to martyrdom, saying she was not the one to give him life, but the creator of the universe, who will return his life and breath in bodily resurrection.

Second, another idea that fuels resurrection belief is the desire for justice. Clearly the evil are not punished in this life, nor the good properly rewarded, so some kind of afterlife is required. Body and soul acted in concert to do good or evil in this world, so they must be reunited to receive the proper punishment or reward. Mere death is not enough, as some Christian apologists also note, because it happens to everyone. It would be a boon for the wicked (1 *Apologia* 18.1; *Athenagoras*, Res. 19.7). One rabbinic story talks about body and soul using the analogy of a blind man and a lame man who had to team up to steal figs from a king's orchard, the lame man riding on the blind man's back. When they were caught, the king punished them together, since neither could have acted alone (*Lev. Rab.* 4.8). The king, of course, is God, reflecting on the nature of a human being.

This is my last point: that the human being, at least in these early sources, as in the Hebrew Bible, is a composite, a unity. Later rabbinic literature will indulge in more of a dualism that privileges soul over body, as will

later Christian theology. Perhaps this is a good place to think about Paul's imagery in 1 Corinthians 15. He's a hard nut to crack here. The seed metaphor does suggest some continuity between the psychic body (*soma psychikon*) that is put in the ground, and the spiritual body that is raised (*soma pneumatikon*), just as there is some aspect of a seed that grows into a plant. On the other hand, he says "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom" (15:50). So what is resurrected? He started the chapter castigating church members who rejected resurrection. I do not find helpful people who say he means a non-corporeal body is raised, since that literally means a non-body body. "Spiritual resurrection" is a meaningless term, and Paul cannot mean ordinary survival of the spirit, because then the seed metaphor doesn't work. Dale Martin's work suggests the ancients thought of the self as a mix of substances on a continuum from matter to spirit, so the body was a "hierarchy of essences."² Bodies that suffer, face danger, and go through death are not dismissed as unimportant, but are transformed through God's power, from ordinary matter-laden bodies to transformed, pneumatic bodies. But they are physical bodies throughout.

So Paul rails against those who go for a more Platonic ideal that liberates the soul from the body at death.

Back to the Rabbis: We see that this rich belief seems to be a shorthand theology that carves out identity and distinguishes particular groups. Let's look at the *Gevurah*, or "power" Blessing from the *Shemoneh Esreh*, the Eighteen Blessings, a prayer which, along with the *Shema*, is central to Jewish liturgy.

You, O Lord, are mighty forever; you revive the dead; you are powerful in saving. You sustain the living with loving kindness. You give life to the dead in great mercy. You support the falling, and heal the sick, and free the captive, and keep faith with those who sleep in the dust. Who compares with you, Master of power, and who is like you? [You are] King over life and death, causing salvation to flourish. You are faithful in bringing life to the dead. Blessed are you, O Lord, who revives the dead.

This is standard in Orthodox and Conservative congregations. It is also the most frequently cited example when people talk about the problem of not believing literally everything in the prayer book. It also became a distinguishing feature between Jews, especially when Reform Judaism revised the prayer book to something considered more rational in the 19th century. David Einhorn introduced the formula God “who has implanted within us eternal life” in his prayer book in 1856. The new Union Prayer Book of 1975 uses the following, “who gives life to all.” But look at the more recent Prayer Book from 2007, which reintroduces resurrection as an option: “Blessed are You, O Lord, who gives life to all (revives the dead).” My husband, a Reform rabbi, finds this re-introduction of resurrection very troubling, and wonders if Reform Judaism might lose its distinct identity. It’s not the only issue, of course, but he says “what does it mean to be Reform any more?”

So this idea is still a deal breaker, part of a group’s sense of identity. It has also been identified more with Christianity than Judaism, another reason some Jews see it as foreign. By the second century, resurrection of the body ballooned in importance for Christians. They had to confront the pagan challenges directly, including charges of atheism, incest, and cannibalism (against which resurrection was a good argument). Christians were also absorbing newcomers into their communities at a rapid rate and faith statements like “I believe in the resurrection of the dead (or flesh)” were efficient ways to encapsulate the values of the group. Jews did not develop the same kind of full-blown apologetic. In spite of some outbreaks of violence against Jews, they generally did not need to explain their religion to outsiders. It had the defense of antiquity, and they were already a distinct people by virtue of their lifestyle. And generally Judaism is a less creedal religion.

In spite of its Hebrew and Jewish roots, the idea of resurrection was picked up by Christians and became increasingly identified with it. As rationalism stirred European Jews in the nineteenth century, some were anxious to shuck it off. I would say Jews are not robbed in certainty. But

we are robed in hope. When one goes to a Jewish funeral, the eulogy will sometimes slip into imagining the person as still present with God, or someone we'll see again. We retain the stubborn optimism that is part of this idea from our classic texts, its sense of human wholeness and value, its claim that God created the world, including the body, and saw that it was good.

NOTES

- 1 Richard Elliot Friedman and Shauna Dolansky Overton, "Death and Afterlife: The Biblical Silence," in *Judaism in Late Antiquity, Part Four: Death, Life After Death, Resurrection, and the World to Come in the Judaisms of Antiquity*, ed. Alan Avery-Peck and Jacob Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 36.
- 2 Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), 15.

Life After Death:

Hopes and Fears for Jews, Christians and Muslims

A Muslim Response by Professor Hussain Rashid, Ph.D.

bismillah ir-rahman ir-rahim—In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful—*as-salaam alaykum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatahu*—May God’s peace, mercy, and blessings be with you.

I would like to begin by thanking Father Ryan for inviting me to give the response, Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse for helping me get here, Fordham for hosting me, and all of you for being here this evening.

Father Ryan outlined an introduction to a Muslim understanding of life after death. It whispered to the theologian in me to engage with speculation on what happens in the life after death. I worked up a short reflection on an unusual moment in Muslim history, when a small community of Muslims, known as the Isma’ilis, celebrated *Eid al-Qiyamah*, the Feast of the Resurrection. From a Muslim perspective, they acted as though they died that day and the obligations of ritual took on a radically different form. I intersected the conversation of the afterlife with one of predestination, God’s foreknowledge, and the linearity of time. While I

was having a wonderful intellectual time, I realized that I may bore you to tears, or be so convoluted as to make you wish you were elsewhere.

The scholar of religion took over, and realized the ways in which Muslims live their lives, with particular understandings of death that are far more relatable, and reflect on what theology means in practice. As I deliver this lecture, we stand about three weeks after *Eid al-Adha*, the Feast of the Sacrifice, when Muslims re-enact Abraham's call to sacrifice his firstborn son, and that ends the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. This Wednesday is also the first evening of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar, and begins Ashura, the first ten days of the month that commemorate the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's favorite grandson, Husayn, on the plains of Karbala in 680 CE.

These events give us a window through which we can glimpse—not so much conceptions of life after death—but what death in this life means. Working from the aphorism attributed to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and a person revered by the Sufis and the Shi'ah, that one should die before dying, it would seem that realizing that saying would result in a richer afterlife. In particular, if we take the idea that Islam started as an apocalyptic movement,¹ then we should expect ritual and commemorative life to reflect some notion of living the afterlife now.

I. THE HAJJ

The Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is perhaps one of the most iconic visions of Muslims participating in rituals. Spanning three days, the believers not only act as Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar, but act in a liminal state, being neither of this world nor the next. I offer here, not just a description of the days of events, but commentary offered by the great Persian poet-philosopher Nasr Khusraw in his poem called “The Secrets of Pilgrimage.”²

The first step in joining in the Hajj ritual is the donning of the *ihram*, or plain white cloth. This cloth represents purity and the placing of all Muslims on equal footing. It is highly evocative of the burial shroud common in Muslim funerary practices, and the twentieth century Persian thinker, Ali Shariati, uses the term *kafan*, or shroud, to describe the *ihram*. Further emphasizing this connection, he states, “[the pilgrim] witnesses his own dead body and visits his own grave ... The scene is like the day of judgment.”³

The Ka’aba, the cube-like structure that is the focus of the Hajj, is a nexus point, where the connection between heaven and earth is focused. It is believed to have been built by Adam, wiped out in the Noahic Flood, rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael, and cleansed and rededicated by Muhammad. The precincts around the Ka’aba are sanctified, and the believer enters an altered state of being, with the idea that she will be spiritually reborn at the end of this process. However, this should not preclude the idea of physical death, as historically the journey to and from Mecca was arduous and pilgrims prepared as if they were going to die on the trip.

After the donning of the *ihram*, the days of ritual begin, and Nasr Khusraw, our eleventh century poet, describes the physical actions as spiritual actions in heaven. He asks of his friend, returning from the Hajj, if he circled the Ka’aba in the same way that angels circle the Throne of God; or, if when he “separated from the Ka’aba ... Did you bury yourself there as if you were/already a heap of putrefied flesh and bones?”⁴

The goal of the believer is to enter this liminal area of the Ka’aba, prepared as though she is going to die, and come out of the experience reborn. In the film *Malcolm X*, a voiceover is added to Malcolm’s description of his Hajj experience that paraphrases a lengthier section of his autobiography. The narration has Malcolm talk about “the spiritual rebirth which I was blessed to undergo as a result of my pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.”⁵ This theme of spiritual rebirth is common, and can be witnessed in a fair

number of Hajj narratives collected by Michael Wolfe.⁶ It is within the sacred precincts that the believer dies, is judged, and is resurrected.

II.

SUFIS, SHI'AHS, AND SUNNIS, YA HUSAYN!

From a mystical perspective, one does not need to go on Hajj to experience this death before dying. There are ritual practices that help tame one's soul and increase spiritual growth. In part, there is a strong ascetic element to these practices. In a Sufi saying attributed to Jesus, he says, "Seeing this world is like wanting a drink of sea water, for the more you drink the more thirsty you become until you die."⁷

This austerity associated with Jesus became a favorite theme, not only among Sufis, but also among more esoteric Shi'ah groups. Ali, the first divinely appointed guide of the Shi'ah and considered to be the first Sufi, says of Jesus:

He used a stone for his pillow, put on coarse clothes and ate rough food. His condiment was hunger. His lamp at night was the moon. His shade during the winter was just the expanse of earth eastward and westward. His fruits and flowers were only what grow from the earth for the cattle. He had no wife to allure him, nor any son to give grief, nor wealth to deviate (his attention), nor greed to disgrace him. His two feet were his conveyance and his two hands his servant.⁸

A later tenth century group, known as the Brethren of Purity, continues with this idea and offers commentary as to how the disciples acted after being in Jesus' presence. They say:

They saw what Christ (peace be upon him) had told and seen with the eye of the heart and the light of certainty and sincerity of faith, and they sought the other world, abstaining from the pride and allurements of this world, and thus being saved from the slavery of the world and its lusts. They put on patched garments and travelled with Christ from place to place.⁹

While the rejection of attachment to the world is clearly *an* important part of spiritual discipline, it is not *the* only part, or *the* most important part. The early Shi'ah Imams would act in such a way as though they were attempting to bring the afterlife here.¹⁰ Their prayers and sermons are littered with references to feeling the heat of hellfire, as though they wish to be judged and forgiven in this world, so that their afterlife is a resurrection that is bountiful.¹¹

These prayers and sermons determine a participatory culture, where believers can seek to emulate the judgment part of the afterlife in this world. Perhaps nowhere is that more evident than in Ashura, the first ten days of Muharram, which mark the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's favorite grandson, Husayn. By engaging in sessions known as *majalis* (s. *majlis*), believers are transported to the ten-day attack on Husayn and his small band of loyalists, including his infant son. The believer hears how the compatriots are denied water; how they are constantly harangued by a barrage of arrows; and ultimately, how Husayn is slaughtered, as his ill baby son is saved by Husayn's sister, Zaynab. The listener, for lack of a better English word, is redeemed by sharing in the suffering of the Imam and his family.

However, this poetic culture, while deeply embedded in Shi'ah ritual life, is not limited to that community. The famous Sunni Sufi singer, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, sings a *marsiya*, a poetic genre designed to tell the story of Karbala. The opening line is:

When believers remember the Martyr of Karbala
The world becomes upset
Blood flows as tears
Oh Husayn!¹²

The listeners, regardless of the community to which they belong, cannot help but be moved by the tale of suffering, and suffer with Husayn by proxy.

III.

IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT ...

From the Hajj to Muharram, we see the different ways that Muslims engage with conceptions of death and dying in this world, as though it were possible to die in this world. The logical extension of these practices is to live as though it were possible to have the afterlife in this life; a move beyond simply “dying,” or removing undesirable aspects of one’s personality. I began by talking of a group that, for a brief period, recognized the *qiyama*, or resurrection, as happening on earth.

The thirteenth century Shi’ah polymath, Nasr ad-Din Tusi, argues that the Prophet Muhammad brought a religious system (*shari’ah*) that, when prophethood turned into Imamate, was wedded to *qiyama* through Ali. Ritual action became a way of expressing Divine realities in this world.¹³ Of course, what is important in this construction is that for the Ismaili community of Alamut, where this was happening, there was a belief that the *qiyama* is a spiritual resurrection, not a bodily one.¹⁴ Jalal Badakhchani, in commenting on this theory, states, “Tusi interprets the *qiyama* ... as a call to the faithful to secure their spiritual resurrection and salvation here and now in the present world ... [which] requires a radical transformation of one’s life. ...”¹⁵

Of course, Tusi argues that the experience of *qiyama* in this world is not the end goal. There is still work for a believer to do. In fact, Tusi argues that believing that the *qiyama* is the aim is a form of idol worship that distracts one from God.¹⁶ This mirrors early Sufi thought, like that of the ninth century Rabia al-Basri. There is a story that says she was seen running through the streets of Basra with a bucket of water in one hand, and a torch of fire in the other. When asked what she was doing, she said she wanted to put out the fires of hell and burn down the gates of heaven. She did not want to love God from the fear of hell or the promise of heaven, but for the sake of God alone.

IV. CONCLUSION

This approach to death and afterlife in this world is the natural philosophical continuation of Muslim ritual life. The Hajj brings a Muslim into closer proximity to her own mortality, and the idea that it is possible to be in a direct, powerful relationship with the Divine. There are ritual practices and approaches that serve to make the past present, and the other world manifest in this world. This makes the approach of “death before dying” something that is accessible to everyone at every time. However, the focus still needs to be on God, rather than on Paradise or heaven. Tusi, in explaining the *qiyama*, argues that to die willfully now, in a spiritual sense, is to awaken to the true nature of God, and to provide the true purpose of life.¹⁷

We move from the basic understanding of life after death, to sophisticated ritual development that creates a virtuous philosophical cycle for the understanding of what an afterlife in this world could mean. Once the *qiyama* comes, we are left with a community of the walking dead. Perhaps not the brain-eating zombie types so prevalent in our culture now, but dead nonetheless, who attempt to redefine what life after death could look like.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, the works of David Cook, Fred Donner, and Abbas Amanat.
- 2 Faqir Muhammad Hunzai and Kutub Kassam, ed. *Shimmering Light: An Anthology of Ismaili Poetry* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 72-74.
- 3 Ali Shariati, *Hajj*, tr. Ali A. Behzadnia (Houston: Free Islamic Literature, 1980), 9. Accessed from: <http://www.qul.org.au/Files/Hajj/PDFs/Hajj%20%20Dr%20Ali%20Shariati.pdf>
- 4 Hunzai and Kassam, *Shimmering Light*, 73.
- 5 *Malcolm X*, directed by Spike Lee (1992; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000).
- 6 Michael Wolfe, ed. *One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing About the Muslim Pilgrimage* (New York: Grove Press, 1997).
- 7 Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 155.
- 8 Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 75.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 78.
- 10 Mohammed Ali Vakil and Mohammed Arif Vakil. *40 Sufi Comics* (2011), 25.
- 11 Sharif al-Radi, Muhammad ibn al-Husayn and Mohammad Askari Jaferi, ed., *Nahjul Balagha (Peak of Eloquence): Sermons, Letters, and Sayings of Imam Ali Ibn Abu Talib* (Elmhurst, N.Y.: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1984); Zain Al-Abidin, *Al-Sahifah Al-Sajjadiyyah*, tr. Sayyid Ahmad Muhani (Elmhurst, N.Y.: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1987).
- 12 From the five-volume Concert in Paris series, published by Ocora France.
- 13 Nasir al-Din Tusi, *Paradise of Submission: A Medieval Treatise on Ismaili Thought*, tr. S. J. Badakhchani (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 142.
- 14 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Secret Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizari Isma'ilis Against the Islamic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 155.
- 15 Nasir al-Din Tusi, *Shi'i Interpretations of Islam: Three Treatises on Islamic Theology and Eschatology*, tr. S. J. Badakhchani (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 13.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 32, 39.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 56.

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