

7 | Death, Resurrection, and the Hereafter

Mahommah Baquaqua was born in 1824 into a noble Muslim family in Djougou, Benin, in West Africa. As a young man, Mahommah was sold to European traders and eventually taken to Brazil. In 1847, he traveled on a ship transporting coffee to New York, from where he was able to escape with the help of abolitionists. On his journey from West Africa to New York, Mahommah had been owned by many different slave masters.¹ Under them, he suffered such brutality that he attempted to drown himself during his captivity in Brazil. Referring to the abuses and cruelties he endured at the hands of one of his masters, Mahommah wrote:

But the day is coming when his power will be vested in another, and of his stewardship he must render an account; alas what account can he render of the crimes committed upon the writhing bodies of the poor pitiless wretches he had under his charge; when his kingship shall cease and the great accounting be called for; how shall he answer?²

In his statement, Mahommah was pointing to the day of judgment. In times of suffering and grief, he found hope in the Islamic theology of the hereafter and the accountability it promises.

¹ For more information about Baquaqua, see Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua and Samuel Moore, *Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua, a Native of Zoogoo, in the Interior of Africa* [...] (Detroit: Geo. E. Pomeroy, 1854), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/baquaqua/summary.html>.

² Quoted in Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 91.

Belief in life after death has been part of the creeds of many religions. It is one of the six articles of faith in Islam. Perhaps no religious scripture is concerned with life after death as much as the Qur'an. Descriptions of heaven and hell are quite vivid in Muslim scripture. One can find almost no passage that does not reference the hereafter, and interestingly, belief in God and the hereafter are often juxtaposed in the same verses. The Qur'an presents faith in the hereafter as a common belief of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.³

The Qur'an on the Resurrection of the Body

We know from the Qur'an that the Meccan polytheists did not believe in life after death.⁴ They rejected the Prophet's message of resurrection and accountability on the day of judgment, arguing: "There is nothing beyond our first death, and we shall not be resurrected."⁵ The Qur'an explains their view as claiming that "there is no life but our worldly life. We die and live, and nothing destroys us except time."⁶ The Meccans also challenged the Prophet by calling on him to bring their ancestors back to life.⁷ The Qur'an states that they had no knowledge of the hereafter and only followed their own desires. It is God who gives life, causes people to die, and gathers them on the day of resurrection.⁸

In other passages, the disbelievers of Mecca get more specific in their view of the resurrection: "What! When we and our forefathers have become dust, shall we really be raised from the dead? We have heard such promises before, and so did our forefathers. These are nothing but tales of the ancients."⁹ In another verse, the Qur'an

³ Qur'an 3:114.

⁴ Qur'an 16:38.

⁵ Qur'an 44:35-36.

⁶ Qur'an 45:24.

⁷ Qur'an 45:25.

⁸ Qur'an 45:26.

⁹ Qur'an 27:67-68.

relates their accusatory question: “Who can give life to the bones when they are decayed?”¹⁰

Engaging with the disbelievers’ arguments against belief in resurrection and accountability on the day of judgment, the Qur’an provides its own answers. One response is that it is possible for God to resurrect the dead given that he is the Almighty (al-Qadir). To challenge the argument that decayed bones could not be brought to life, the scripture points to the creation of humankind:

Does not man see that We [God] created him from a sperm? Yet behold! He is an open opponent. And he makes comparisons for Us, and forgets his own creation. He says, “Who can give life to the bones when they are decayed?” Say, “He will give them life Who created them for the first time, for He is well-versed in every kind of creation. It is He who made fire for you from the green tree, and behold, you kindle from it.” Is not He Who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like of them? Yes, indeed. He is the All Knowing Creator. When He wills something to be, His way is to say, “Be!” and it is! So, glory be to Him in whose Hand lies the dominion of all things. It is to Him that you will be returned.¹¹

The Qur’an also alludes to spring as evidence of resurrection: “Look, then, at the imprints of God’s mercy, how He gives life to the earth after its death. This same God is the one who will give life to the dead. He has power over all things.”¹² In another place, it points to signs of resurrection in the creation: “And how We send blessed water down from the sky and grow with it gardens, the harvested grain, and the lofty date palms with ranged clusters, as a provision for God’s servants; and We give new life with it to land that is dead.”¹³ The passage concludes that similarly, “this is how the resurrection of

¹⁰ Qur’an 36:78.

¹¹ Qur’an 36:77–83.

¹² Qur’an 30:50.

¹³ Qur’an 50:9–11.

the dead will be.”¹⁴ The Qur’an also indicates that resurrection is as easy as the creation of one being: “Your creation and your resurrection are only as the creation and resurrection of a single soul.”¹⁵

Theology of the Hereafter

Muslim theologians approach the subject of the hereafter through God’s attributes, because the manifestations of God’s names require both resurrection and human accountability. God is the One Who Creates with Wisdom and Purpose (al-Hakim); therefore, nothing is created in vain. God creates humans who reflect his own attributes. If human lives concluded with death alone, this would contradict his wisdom, and human life as such would be a waste. Why would the most precious and most intelligent creature of creation die to no avail? Moreover, humans desire eternity; they long to live forever. God has equipped human nature with this desire. If God is loving and compassionate toward creation, why would he not fulfill the human desire for eternity? Similarly, one of God’s names is the Just One (al-‘Adl), which refers to the divine notion of harmony, order, and balance in both this world and the next. While humans long for justice and are encouraged to strive toward it, there remains much injustice in this world. Those who commit major crimes against their fellow humans often get away with their misdeeds. Many leave this world without ever being held fully accountable. There are people who are born into suffering. People often face injustice despite being good natured and innocent. Is this consistent with God’s justice?

A case in point is the tragic story of Christine Jessop, a nine-year-old girl who went missing on October 3, 1984, in Ontario, Canada. Her body was found three months later. Christine had been raped and murdered. Guy Paul Morin, Jessop’s neighbor, was

¹⁴ Qur’an 50:9–11.

¹⁵ Qur’an 31:28.

charged with her death. However, Morin was exonerated in 1995 after serving eighteen months in prison. Police were able to identify the killer, Calvin Hoover, in 2020 by using a new investigative technique called genetic genealogy. What made this incident even more complicated is that Hoover had committed suicide in 2015.¹⁶ This is just one example of unresolved justice. Hoover left this world with dignity, and he is not the only one. There are so many people, including Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein, who leave this world without being held accountable for their enormous crimes. The justice in this world remains insufficient to comfort and compensate their innocent victims. Human accountability on the day of judgment will rectify those injustices and bring balance and order to God's creation. Those who have promoted goodness in this world will eventually be rewarded, and those who have caused evil and suffering will be held accountable and face their rightful punishment – unless they have sought forgiveness and repentance.

Considering that injustice often happens in secret, the Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes that God sees everything and that there is nothing that is outside of his knowledge: "He knows what is in the heavens and the earth; He knows what you hide and what you disclose; God knows well the secrets of all hearts."¹⁷ In one of the hadiths, the Prophet said: "On the day of judgment a sheep without horn will take its right from a sheep with horn."¹⁸ The Qur'an highlights that even if people get away with their injustices here on earth, they will eventually have to face the ultimate judge who awaits them in the hereafter. Since the divine attributes are reflected in this world only in a dim and limited manner, God's name the Just One (al-'Adl), along with many of his other qualities, will be fully revealed in the afterlife.

¹⁶ Ronna Syed and Shanifa Nasser, "Toronto Police Identify Killer in Cold Case of 9 Year Old Christine Jessop," *CBC*, October 15, 2020, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/christine-jessop-news-conference-1.5763673.

¹⁷ Qur'an 64:4.

¹⁸ *Jami' al-Tirmidhi: kitab al-qiyamah, bab ma ja'a fi sha'n al-hisab wa al-qisas*.

Death as a Creation of God

According to Islamic eschatology, this world will end (*qiyama*), leading to the hereafter. God will resurrect everyone from the dead and gather them on the day of judgment. Human beings will then be held accountable for their actions – good or bad. For each individual, however, the end of this world begins with one’s own death. Remembering death in this world is an important way of being mindful of the hereafter and planning accordingly. The Qur’an repeatedly reminds people of their ultimate destiny – namely, death: “Every soul shall taste death. We test you with evil and with good, and to Us you will be returned.”¹⁹ In another verse, the Qur’an points out that “death will overtake you no matter where you may be, even inside high towers.”²⁰ Nevertheless, death is seen as a sign of God’s creation or the manifestation of his name the Bringer of Death (*al-Mumit*). It is also part of God’s design.

Like life, God creates death. It comes as no surprise, then, that Islamic theology often depicts death positively. It is not a departure but rather a step forward to a new beginning. Whenever Muslims hear of the death of a loved one, they invoke the Qur’anic phrase: “We belong to God and to Him we shall return.”²¹ The poet Rumi (d. 1273) wrote about his future death and funeral in a way that eloquently captures the Islamic approach to death:

On the day of (my) death when my coffin is going (by),
Don’t imagine that I have (any) pain (about leaving) this world.

Don’t weep for me, and don’t say, “How terrible! What a pity!”
(For) you will fall into the error of (being deceived by) the
Devil, (and) that would (really) be a pity!

When you see my funeral, don’t say, “Parting and separation!”
(Since) for me, that is the time for union and meeting (God).

¹⁹ Qur’an 21:35.

²⁰ Qur’an 4:78.

²¹ Qur’an 2:156.

(And when) you entrust me to the grave, don't say,
 "Good-bye! Farewell!" For the grave is (only) a curtain for
 (hiding) the gathering (of souls) in Paradise.

When you see the going down, notice the coming up. Why should
 there be (any) loss because of the setting of the sun and moon?

It seems like setting to you, but it is rising. The tomb seems like a
 prison, (but) it is the liberation of the soul.

What seed (ever) went down into the earth which didn't grow
 (back up)? (So), for you, why is there this doubt about the human
 "seed"?

What bucket (ever) went down and didn't come out full? Why
 should there be (any) lamenting for the Joseph of the soul because
 of the well?

When you have closed (your) mouth on this side, open (it) on
 that side, for your shouts of joy will be in the Sky beyond place
 (and time).²²

God would not have taken the Prophet Muhammad's life if death
 were not beautiful, as another poet put it.²³ While it appears that a
 seed dies and disintegrates, in reality, it yields life. Likewise, the death
 of humans should be regarded not as destruction or an end but rather
 as "the sign, introduction, and starting point of perpetual life."²⁴

Muslims still mourn death but do so with the conviction that
 death is not an end; it is a new beginning. The Prophet's own expe-
 rience reflects this philosophy. He had seven children, and six of
 them died before him. When the Prophet's son Ibrahim died in
 infancy, his companions saw him weeping. They asked him: "Do
 you mourn the dead too?" The Prophet answered that in the face of

²² Jalaluddin Rumi, "On the Day of My Death," in *Diwan-e Kabir*, trans. Ibrahim Gamard,
 available at Dar-Al-Masnavi, accessed May 17, 2020, www.dar-al-masnavi.org/gh-0911.html.

²³ Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, *Çile* (Istanbul: Büyük Doğu Yayınları, 2014), 298.

²⁴ Nursi, *Letters*, 284.

the death of our loved ones, “the eyes will weep; the heart gets sad. However, we will invoke the words that are pleasing to our Lord.” The Prophet then turned to his dead son: “If there was no hope in death, and if it were not the destiny of everyone, and if those were left behind would not be united with those who die, we would be in even more grief. We exceedingly mourn your death.”²⁵

Suicide and Euthanasia

Because the body is considered sacred, suicide is forbidden in Islamic jurisprudence. This approach is based on some of the teachings of the Qur’an and Muhammad. The Muslim scripture, for example, says: “Do not take life, which God has made sacred, except by a just cause.”²⁶ It also mentions that killing an innocent person is like killing all of humanity, and saving the life of an innocent person is like saving the lives of all people.²⁷ God is the one who gives and takes life. The time of death is assigned by him. In this regard, the Qur’an reads: “When their time arrives, they cannot delay it for a moment, nor can they advance it.”²⁸ In another verse, the Qur’an reminds us that “no one can die except with God’s permission at a predestined time.”²⁹ The impermissibility of suicide is reported in a number of hadiths as well. In one of them, Muhammad said: “Amongst the nations before you there was a man who got a wound. Growing impatient with its pain, he took a knife and cut his hand with which led to his death. God then said, ‘My servant hurried to bring death upon himself so I have forbidden him to enter Paradise.’”³⁰ In another tradition, the Prophet stated: “None of you should desire

²⁵ *Hadislerle Islam* (Istanbul: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2014), 7:549.

²⁶ Qur’an 17:33.

²⁷ Qur’an 5:32.

²⁸ Qur’an 16:61.

²⁹ Qur’an 3:145.

³⁰ *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab ahadi al-anbiya, bab ma dhukira ‘an bani israil.*

death because your pain and suffering. Instead you should pray as follows: O God if living is better for me then keep me alive, if death is better for me then take my life.”³¹ Based on the same premises, the overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars have concluded that “active” euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide are also forbidden in Islam. However, many of them believe that “passive” euthanasia is considered permissible in certain conditions. In the case of terminally ill patients, for example, if death is inevitable because of brain death or the patient is in a permanent vegetative state, then the life support can be turned off.³² Taking one’s life because of major psychological problems or losing sanity and consciousness is not discussed in the context of suicide. The tradition considers suicide as a major sin only if it is committed by a sane and conscious person.³³

Contemplating Death and the Hereafter

Contemplating death and the hereafter is an essential aspect of Islamic spirituality. A companion of the Prophet was asked about a common supplication that the messenger would address to God. He answered that Muhammad would pray: “Oh God, give us goodness in this world and the hereafter and protect us from the hellfire.”³⁴ The Qur’an relates that one of the prayers of Abraham was: “Our Lord, forgive me, my parents, and the believers on the Day when the Reckoning shall take place.”³⁵ Moses prayed in this manner: “And ordain for us good in this world and in the Hereafter. We turn repentant to You.”³⁶

³¹ *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-marda, bab tamanni al-marid al-mawt.*

³² Rishad Raffi Motlani, “Islam, Euthanasia and Western Christianity: Drawing on Western Christian Thinking to Develop an Expanded Western Sunni Muslim Perspective on Euthanasia” (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2011), 220–21.

³³ *Hadislerle Islam* (Istanbul: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2014), 5:510.

³⁴ *Sahih Muslim: kitab al-dhikr wa al-du‘a’ wa al-tawbah wa al-istighfar, bab fadl majalis al-dhikr.*

³⁵ Qur’an 14:41.

³⁶ Qur’an 7:156.

Islamic spirituality aims to maintain a balance between this world and the hereafter. The Prophet said: “For a believer the highest concern is the concern for both this world and the hereafter.”³⁷ While Islam does not encourage an ascetic or monastic life by which believers will retreat from eating, drinking, sleeping, and marriage, it discourages them from being overly attached to this world. In other words, the work of this world should not come at the expense of one’s relationship with God or their work for the hereafter. The Qur’an explains:

Men whom neither merchandise nor sale can divert from the remembrance of God, nor from regular prayer, nor from the practice of regular charity: Their only fear is for the Day when hearts and eyes will be overturned. That God may reward them according to the best of their deeds and add even more for them out of His grace, for God provides for whomever he pleases without measure.³⁸

That is why the following statement has become a mantra among Muslims: Work for this world as if you will never die, and work for the hereafter as if you will die tomorrow.

Even today, whenever individual or communal prayer takes place among Muslims, the hereafter is remembered. Invoking death is regarded as being mindful of God and the impermanence of the world. Once people internalize the idea that everything but God is subject to departure and death, they will refrain from attaching their hearts to ephemeral things.

Death is also mentioned in the story of Joseph, which the Qur’an calls “the best of stories.”³⁹ At the end of the narrative, Joseph asks God to make him die in righteousness.⁴⁰ When a happy story ends with a reminder of death and separation, it generally diminishes the reader’s joy and makes the story more painful for them. But in the

³⁷ Muhammad b. Yazid Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah: kitab al-tijarat, bab al-iqtisad fi talab al-ma’ishah*.

³⁸ Qur’an 24:37–38.

³⁹ Qur’an 12:3.

⁴⁰ Qur’an 12:101.

Qur'anic account, death is mentioned when Joseph is at the peak of happiness and joy. Having been betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery, he has risen to an important rank and, in the end, is reunited with his family. The fact that Joseph remembers death demonstrates his belief that there is greater happiness beyond this worldly life. The end of the story causes readers no sorrow; rather, it gives them hope and enjoyment. Constantly remembering death prevents people from being heedless of God's glory and too attached to the things of this world.⁴¹

The story of the prophet Abraham in the Qur'an can be read in a similar fashion. In the story, Abraham is searching for his Lord.⁴² When night falls, Abraham sees a star and says: "This is my Lord." But when the star sets, he says: "I do not love things that set." Abraham then sees the moon and says: "This is my Lord." But when it too disappears, he realizes it also cannot be his Lord. Upon seeing the sunrise and sunset, he reasons the same way. Abraham's search results in this conclusion: "I turn my face toward Him who created the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the polytheists."⁴³ The gist of the story is that the heart cannot be attached to those things that are subject to death and departure. When people are attached to such things, they cannot help but be disappointed. Loving things that are subject to death is not worthwhile because those things are not, in reality, beautiful. The heart is created to be the mirror of the love of God; to love things that are eternal precludes the love of ephemeral things.⁴⁴

Death and the Formation of a Virtuous Character

Although it has become less common in modern times, building a virtuous character through the remembrance of death has long

⁴¹ Nursi, *Letters*, 335.

⁴² For the related story, see Qur'an 6:74–79.

⁴³ Qur'an 6:79.

⁴⁴ Nursi, *Words*, 228.

been a part of religious traditions. For example, the Latin phrase “memento mori” (remember that you must die) was a mantra in medieval Christianity – an important practice in building good character. Such practices have been equally important in the Islamic tradition. The hadith collections usually include a book of *janaiz* (funerals), which is devoted to the subject of death. The Sufi tradition also takes the remembrance of death as a significant element of its spirituality and the formation of a virtuous character. The last – and longest – book of al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’ al-‘Ulum ad-Din* is dedicated to death and the hereafter.

Muslims consider remembering death to be a means of forming a virtuous character. It can be an important way to attain sincerity. Pretentiousness and excessive attachment to possessions are obstacles to sincerity. The reality of death keeps believers from pretentiousness and protects them from the traps of their own egos. This is why Muslims often recite Qur’anic verses such as “Every soul shall taste death” and “Truly you will die one day, and truly they too will die one day,” as contemplating that death is a significant part of their spiritual lives.⁴⁵ Constantly thinking of one’s own death brings the faithful to an ideal state of sincerity. It leads to a joyful life – one without remorse or regret in the end. Instead, pondering one’s death leads the believer to appreciate life and live it to the fullest.

The remembrance of death not only fosters self-contemplation and gratitude but makes people humbler and more sensitive toward their fellow humans. When people contemplate the ephemera of this world and think about their mortality, they can be more thoughtful toward one another. In his *Denial of Death*, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker points out a direct correlation between refusing to face our mortality and fostering conflict. He asserts that when humans face their mortality, the world becomes a better place.⁴⁶ As Becker says: “Man’s natural and

⁴⁵ Qur’an 3:185; 39:30. See also Nursi, *Flashes*, 217.

⁴⁶ See Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

inevitable urge to deny mortality and achieve a heroic self-image are the root causes of human evil.”⁴⁷

Contemplating death might also be an important cure for the often destructive emotions of enmity and jealousy. A person whose heart is full of enmity and jealousy toward a rival because of the worldly skills and blessings that rival has should realize that the beauty, strength, rank, and wealth their rival possesses not only are transient and temporary but also might be burdensome.⁴⁸

Death Rituals

Like adherents of other religions, Muslims practice specific death rituals. In the last moments of their lives, Muslims invoke the testimony of faith (*shahadah*). Those around the deathbed should encourage the individual to say: “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His messenger.” In the presence of the dying person, Muslims usually recite the Qur’an, especially chapter 36, “Surat al-Yasin.” Before burial, close relatives (ideally) wash the dead body, wrap it in a simple white shroud, and then say a prayer. Based on a prophetic hadith advising Muslims to hasten the funeral rites, it has become an important tradition in Islam to do the washing and the burial as soon as possible.⁴⁹

Attending a funeral service is a communal obligation. However, if enough members in the Muslim community fulfill the obligation, Islamic law allows the remaining Muslims to not attend. In one of the hadiths, the Prophet lists funeral attendance as a fundamental responsibility believers owe to one another.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1985), xvii.

⁴⁸ Nursi, *Letters*, 315.

⁴⁹ *Sahih Muslim: kitab al-jana'iz, bab al-'Isra' bi al-jana'iz.*

⁵⁰ *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-jana'iz, bab al-'amr bittiba' al-jana'iz.*

The funeral prayer usually includes a recitation from the Qur'an, especially the first chapter, "Al-Fatiha," and a proclamation of "God is great," as well as other supplications for the deceased and the congregation. Then the one leading the prayers asks the congregation to forgive the dead person for any wrongdoing, after which the congregation proceeds to the graveyard, often with people carrying the coffin together on their shoulders. In the grave, the head is laid in the direction of the Kaaba. Then the mourners close the grave with soil. In the cemetery, the congregation is involved not only in digging the grave but also in helping move the body into the grave. As in Orthodox Judaism, cremation is impermissible in Islam due to the sacredness of the body.

The common belief among Muslims is that physical death marks the separation of the rational soul (*nafs*) and the life-infusing soul or spirit (*ruh*). While the former perishes, the latter continues until the day of resurrection.⁵¹ After burial, the angels of *munkar* and *nakir* will visit the dead person to ask questions about God and the Prophet. According to the tradition, the soul of the deceased will remain in the intermediate realm (*barzakh*) until resurrection on the day of judgment.⁵² One's condition in *barzakh* depends on their state of faith and good deeds at the time of death – it can be either a heavenly or hellish waiting room.⁵³

The community usually shows support to mourners by offering condolences (*ta'ziya*). Part of the Sunna of the Prophet is also to offer food to the family of the deceased.⁵⁴

Death is a major theme of the Qur'an. It is a creation of God as well as a sign of his power. Despite the suffering that is associated with death, it is seen not as the destruction of a life but rather as a

⁵¹ Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 20.

⁵² Qur'an 23:99–100.

⁵³ *Jami' al-Tirmidhi: kitab sifat al-qiyama*.

⁵⁴ Mustafa Çağrıç, "Taziye," in *İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDK, 2011), 40:203.

transition to the eternal life as well as union with God. Remembering death is a means of building a virtuous character and being mindful of God.

Part III explores three contemporary cases in relation to God, evil, and suffering. I begin with disability followed by the environmental crisis and the coronavirus disease.

