The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology
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7 Muslim Eschatology

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The Koran speaks of death, the end of the world, and resurrection more than any other major scripture. The Hadith, or corpus of prophetic sayings, follows suit, as does the tradition in general. The relevant primary literature is vast, and nothing like an adequate survey of important texts has been written. As for the significance of Muslim eschatological teachings, most of the secondary literature seems to agree with Fritz Meier, who writes, “The basic concept of the ultimate origins and the hereafter in Islam ... is not characterized by any particular originality, and as a system is no more satisfying than the corresponding Judeo-Christian one.”[1]

A good deal of more-recent research, however, suggests that the original contributions of Muslim scholarship were just beginning to develop at the point where Meier leaves off, that is, around the time of Ibn Rushd (Averroes), who died in 1198. Ibn Rushd's contemporaries, especially his fellow Andalusian Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) and Persian philosophers such as Suhrawardī (d. 1191), opened up new interpretive strategies that came to predominate in many circles during the later period, though these have been ignored in most studies. The best book on Muslim eschatology in English, by J. I. Smith and Y. Y. Haddad, provides a broad overview “of the Islamic eschatological narrative” as established in “classical Islam,” meaning roughly up to al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). It then jumps to the modern period, specifically Egypt, and speaks about contemporary thinkers who take their intellectual orientation from the West.[2]

It is certainly true that, as Kevin Reinhart remarks, “[t]he Koran's message is simple: life is consequential [and] earthly deeds make an abiding and everlasting impress on the fate of the soul.”[3] But neither the Koran nor the tradition neglects the rationale for this apparently simple message. To make real sense of it, we need

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a clear concept of God, the cosmos, and the human soul. Muslim thinkers dealt with the relevant issues in three broad domains of inquiry: theology (in the widest sense, including metaphysics), cosmology, and spiritual psychology, though these were typically integrated into single narratives.

The Realms of Posthumous Becoming

In order to grasp the significance of Muslim teachings on the afterlife, we need first to have a sense of the basic eschatological narrative as set down in the Koran and the Hadith and elaborated upon by generations of preachers, scholars, and teachers. Generally, it goes like this:[4]

God himself takes the soul at death, though Koranic verses also say that he sends the Angel of Death or “his angels” to perform the task. After the first night in the grave, the soul is confronted by Nakīr and Munkar, two angels who question it about its God, its prophet, and its scripture. If the soul gives the right answers, it is taken up through the heavens into the presence of God, but if it gives the wrong answers, it is prevented from entering the higher realms. In either case, it is then resettled in the grave, where it experiences foretastes of its situation after the resurrection. For the blessed, the time passes quickly and pleasurably; for the damned, slowly and painfully.

When the last day is near, terrible events occur that mark the end of heaven and earth as we know them. Finally, the angel Isrāfīl blows the trumpet, and all those in heaven and earth swoon. After forty years, Isrāfīl again blows the trumpet, and everyone awakens. All creatures from the time of Adam, even wild animals and rebellious demons, are mustered together in utter helplessness on a vast plain under a burning sun. People find themselves naked, barefoot, and uncircumcised. They sweat so much that the water covers the plain and rises up to their knees or armpits or nostrils. They stand there for forty years, or three hundred, or even longer, though the believers experience the time as the length of a single daily prayer.

The Koran calls the end of this world and the beginning of the next by many names, including “last day” and “day of resurrection.” The former seems to designate the initial events that prepare the way for the latter, whose length is sometimes said to be fifty thousand years. Scales are set up for the weighing of deeds, and angels appear, some of them with “the distance of a hundred-years' journey” between their eyes. Finally, God himself descends to carry out the interrogation. People are called forth one by one to be asked not what they did, but why they did it. The scrolls of their deeds are placed in the scales, good deeds in one pan and evil deeds in the other. They are then taken to the bridge over hell, “finer than a hair and sharper than a sword.” Those whose good deeds outweighed the evil find it short

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and broad, and those whose evil deeds outweighed the good slip and fall into the pits of hell. Not all who fall stay, however, because God asks for intercession on their behalf. The prophets step forth and intercede for their communities, and then all those who had safely

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crossed the bridge are given a chance to intercede. Finally, the “Most Merciful of the merciful” steps forward and removes from the fire a handful of souls burnt like cinders, who “had never done any good whatsoever.” He casts the cinders into paradise, and people spring up like herbs after a desert flood.

The Koran is especially graphic when describing the terrors of hell. People are overcome by flames and clothed in garments of tar. Every time they scream and shriek, boiling water is poured down their throats, melting away their organs. As often as their skin and organs are burned away, God replaces them. Their bodies are pierced by iron rods and torn apart by beasts and demons. The Hadith literature and the popular preachers add gruesome details. There is a strong current in the accounts, however, that suggests that hell is in fact a purgatory for many, if not most, of those who go there.

The descriptions of paradise are no less graphic. The garden is watered by rivers of water, milk, honey, and wine, and its inhabitants have everything their hearts desire: every sort of beautiful flower, bird, and scent; food and drink of unimaginable variety; luxurious clothing and peerless jewelry; marvelous companions (including their family and friends from this world); perfect spouses; and all the joys and delights of human intimacy, not least the sexual. The sacredness of sexuality in this world is already stressed by the tradition, with little of the shame and prudery characteristic of the ascetic tendencies in Christianity. Here, Islam is more closely aligned with Judaism, if not with Hinduism.

Despite the sensuality of the mythic depictions, the Koran makes explicit that all the joys and delights, all the sufferings and torments, point to deeper realities, which are nearness to God, on the one hand, and distance from him, on the other. Some theologians had misgivings about the “vision” of God, given his transcendence, but generally the tradition acknowledges that the beatific vision is the *summum bonum*. Hell is the failure to find the good that had been offered: “No indeed, but upon that day they shall be veiled from their Lord” (Koran 83:15).

This bare-bones account is susceptible to indefinite expansion and elaboration by bringing in more Koranic verses, sayings of the Prophet, and explications by venerated figures of the early tradition. Not only that, but every word mentioned by the Koran has been the object of intense scrutiny by generations of scholars, who approached the material from a wide variety of perspectives, including the linguistic, legal, moral, theological, mystical, and philosophical. Each perspective has had proponents who often disagreed not only with other schools of thought, but also with fellow members of their own school. Western scholarship has generally highlighted the interpretations of early Kalam (dogmatic theology) for reasons having more to do with the place of theology in Christianity than the role that it has played in the Islamic tradition. In what follows, rather than reviewing the Orientalist interpretations of Kalam, I will suggest something of the overall significance of the eschatological literature among the more thoughtful interpreters.

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Principles of Islamic Theology

By “theology,” I mean God talk, not the specific approach of Kalam. Despite Kalam's highly developed methodologies and prominence in the secondary literature, it represents a rather narrow approach to theological issues, typically apologetic and polemical. In the actual spread of the Muslim ethos and world view, the symbolic hermeneutics developed mainly by authors associated with Sufism was far more influential. The secondary literature categorizes this dimension of Islamic thought as “mysticism” or “esotericism,” but such labels do not help us appreciate the enormous diversity and sophistication of both its theoretical and rhetorical development. Especially important was the manner in which it permeated the poetry of the Islamic languages—by far the most popular form of literature.

It should be noted that Avicenna and other Hellenophile philosophers, who interacted with Sufi theorizing in many fruitful ways, devoted a great deal of attention to the soul's immortality and its posthumous becoming. The outstanding philosopher of later times Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) devoted several books to eschatological issues and, in the concluding fourth of his monumental *Al-Asfār al-arba*ʻ*a* (“The Four Journeys”), dealt with the diverse dimensions of the soul's reality, whether in this world or the next, with unparalleled thoroughness. His theories may have been inaccessible to ordinary Muslims, but that is by no means the case with the parallel teachings found in poets like Rūmī, ḥāfiẓ, and Jāmī.

Generally, all theological thinking in Islam is founded on the so-called three principles of faith: the unity of God, prophecy, and “the return” to God, that is, the general topic of last things. Within the tradition itself, the significance of the third principle depends utterly on the implications of the first two. “Unity” translates *tawḥīd*, which means literally to assert (God's) unity or to say that God is one. However, the manner of asserting unity transforms an apparently bland declaration into a dynamic methodology. The standard sentence that does so is the first half of the Shahadah, or testimony of faith, the words “[There is] no god but God.” “No god” (called “the negation”) strips everything other than God of subsistence, independence, and all other positive attributes. “But God” (“the affirmation”) declares that all phenomena in fact derive from God's very reality. It should be remarked parenthetically that those who translate this sentence as “There is no god but Allah” turn a subtle meditation into an exclusivist dogma, often unwittingly.

The quickest way to understand *tawḥīd*'s vast range of implications is to recall the Koranic refrain “To Him belong the most beautiful

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names." God is merciful, so "There is none merciful but God." God is living, so "There is none living but God." God is good, so "There is none good but God." God is knowing, desiring, powerful, forgiving, vengeful, and so on down the list of the "ninety-nine names." In each case, only God is truly knowing, desiring, powerful, and so on. Nothing in the universe can stand up to his reality, for nothing is truly real but the Real (*al- ḥaqq*). In short, *tawḥīd* is understood first in terms of negative theology, an approach that is common to practically all Muslim theologians.

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By no means, however, does Islamic theology stop here, even if some readings of Kalam suggest that it does. Sufism in particular highlights the complementary point of view: given that there is nothing real but the Real, whatever traces of reality appear in the cosmos and the soul can be nothing but the Real's radiance, what the Koran commonly calls his "signs" (*āyāt*). Despite the numerous verses that assert God's transcendence, many also assert his immanence.

God in his unity, then, is both transcendent and immanent. *Tawḥīd* means that he alone is truly real and that he alone possesses the concomitants of reality—being, life, consciousness, desire, power. It also means that he alone parcels out these qualities to creation. "Everything has its treasuries with Us, and We send it down only in a known measure" (15:21). His absolute and infinite reality demands that nothing can escape his grasp for the blink of an eye. All things are in effect recreated at each moment—a point already made by Ash'arism, the dominant school of Sunni Kalam.

Prophecy

The second principle of faith, prophecy, asserts that the prophets are those who have been chosen by God to provide others with the guidance needed to achieve everlasting happiness. The Koran says that God has sent a prophet to every community, though Muhammad is the last. Adam was the first, and this provides a mythic justification for the notion that God's guidance is coterminous with the human condition. Problems arise because of the human tendency to fall into "forgetfulness," which was in fact Adam's only sin. "He forgot" (20:115) and, as a result, "disobeyed" (20:121). If he was sent down to earth, this was not simply a punishment, but also a fulfillment of God's words to the angels before creating him: "I am setting in the earth a vicegerent" (2:30).

There are numerous ways to address the cosmic role of prophecy. One that can be especially helpful in understanding its relevance to the return revolves around the issue of the divine "command" (*amr*), of which there are two basic sorts: the creative or "engendering" (*takwīnī*) and the "prescriptive" (*taklīfī*). The engendering command is mentioned in such verses as "His only command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be! [*kun*],' and it comes to be" (36:82). Addressed to everything, it cannot be disobeyed, for it is the divine, existentiating act. The prescriptive command delineates certain activities and moral principles for human beings by way of the prophets. God prescribes, and these become the means to avoid the negative consequences of human embodiment and to achieve its positive possibilities. It allows people to make the best use of their freedom, which was given to them when God created them in his own image.

Theologically, the engendering command is associated mainly with divine names that stress God's transcendence and absoluteness, the names of "majesty" (*jalāl*) or "severity" (*qahr*). The prescriptive command is associated more with

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names that assert his immanence, those of "beauty" (*jamāl*) or "gentleness" (*luṭf*). In respect of transcendence and omnipotence, God is totally other, absolutely in control, and indifferent to the universe. In respect of immanence, he is "closer than the jugular vein" (50:16), and his predominant attributes are mercy, love, compassion, care, and guidance.

From the standpoint of the engendering command, all things are compulsory servants of God. But, as Rūmī reminds us, "Free will is the salt of service. ... The whole world glorifies God, but compulsory glorification has no reward."[5] Without free will, a thing is fixed in its station, unable to move toward or away from God. Its role and destiny are mapped out, and it can never cease being what it is. But people enter the world with no fixed identities and with an unlimited capacity for development because of their divine image. The manner in which they leave the world depends on how they use their talents.

The role of the prophets is to expose people to God's guidance and invite them to employ their free will to conform themselves with *al-ḥaqq*, a word that we have already met as a divine name—the Real, the Truth. This word means literally reality, truth, rightness, appropriateness, justice, and worthiness (along with the corresponding adjectives), and it also designates the human embodiment of these qualities: duty and responsibility. In modern times the word is employed in discussions of human "rights." The Koran applies it to all created things inasmuch as they follow the engendering command. God creates everything "only with the *ḥaqq*," as the Koran says in a number of verses. This means that the engendering command brings all creatures into being with truth and reality. They all act rightly and appropriately in every situation. The only exceptions are those addressed by the prescriptive command, which offers those with free will

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the option of disobedience and sin. If people avoid disobedience and exercise their freedom to choose *al-Ḥaqq*—the right, the true, the appropriate, their duty—they will achieve nearness to God after death. Despite the Koran's frequent warnings about the negative consequences of ignoring the command, however, it stresses God's compassion and forgiveness. One of the most explicit verses in this connection is this: “O My servants who have been immoderate against yourselves, do not despair of God's mercy! Surely God forgives all sins” (39:53).[6]

The Two Returns

The third principle of Islamic faith is called *ma‘ād*, commonly translated as “eschatology.” The word is both a locative designating “place to which one returns” and an infinitive meaning “to return.” The dual sense of the word points to the two basic issues that are addressed in the eschatological literature: the realms of becoming wherein the events of the eschaton take place and the modus operandi of the soul's journey to its final home.

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The word *ma‘ād* is employed once in the Koran: “He who made the Koran obligatory for you will surely take you back to a *ma‘ād*” (28:85). Several of the thirty-seven instances in which verbal forms of the same root are employed have direct relevance to the afterlife. In sixteen more verses, the Koran uses the word *marja‘* as a synonym. Most of these say that people will be taken back to God and that he will tell them what they had been doing and treat them accordingly (e.g., 10:56, 21:35, 23:115, 28:88). If the word *ma‘ād* rather than *marja‘* became the standard term, this is probably because much of the interpretive tradition paired the discussion of last things with that of first things under the rubric “Origin and Return.” The word for “origin” here, *mabda’*, derives from verbs that the Koran pairs with verbs related to *ma‘ād*, but not with verbs related to *marja‘*.

The engendering and prescriptive commands give rise to two sorts of return, compulsory and voluntary. God creates all things and brings them back to himself by the necessities of the creative process. At the same time he also prescribes right speech, right thought, and right activity for human beings and thereby opens up the path of return through faith and practice. Generally, Muslims look forward to reaping the fruit of obedience in the next world. Most Sufis and many philosophers, however, justify their approach by stressing the need to actualize the return to God here and now, before one is compelled to meet God simply by the unfolding of the cosmos.

If the two mythic moments that mark the engendering command are the word “Be!” and the resurrection, the two corresponding moments in the prescriptive command are the Night of Power (*laylat al-qadr*), during which the Koran was revealed to Muhammad, and the Night of the Journey (*laylat al-isrā’*), during which Muhammad ascended the “ladder” (*mi‘rāj*) to God. Having received and embodied the message, the Prophet reaped its fruit by experiencing the vision of God already in this life. The narratives make clear that he did not climb up by his own efforts—no one can do that. Rather, God sent Gabriel, the angel who had revealed the Koran in the first place, to guide him on his journey first to Jerusalem, then to the celestial spheres, and then to the divine presence. Upon his return, Muhammad announced that God had legislated the five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*). He is also reported to have said, when his companions asked him if they too could ascend to God, “The daily prayer is the ladder of the believer.” The prayer, which is the centerpiece of Muslim praxis and the heart of the prescriptive command, provides the necessary foundation for the free return to God.

The Two Worlds

The world view established by the Koran, like that of the monotheistic context in which Islam arose, has a salient binary dimension to it. This is to say that it differentiates clearly between God and creation, thereby setting down the first implication

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of *tawḥīd*—God's transcendence, or the fact that God is utterly different from “everything other than God” (the standard definition of “the world” or “the cosmos”). Nonetheless, God's creative and revelatory activity—his two commands—allows us to grasp his presence in all things. It is this that makes possible transformation and salvation, or the movement from distance to nearness, or the transition from perceiving God's transcendence to actualizing his immanence.

The Koran speaks of the universe in terms of dualities, but any careful reading shows that in each case the book asserts their complementarity. No duality is absolute, for God's unitary reality lies behind all phenomena. The most basic of the dualities is perhaps unseen and visible. The unseen includes everything that in principle escapes the senses, especially spirits and angels. The visible embraces everything accessible to the senses. God is “Knower of the Unseen and the Visible” (6:73), but human beings, to begin with at least, know nothing of the unseen and must have faith in it. As the Koran mentions in several verses, the primary object of Muslim faith is the unseen, which in turn is subdivided into God, the angels, the scriptures, the prophets, and the last day. The tradition then summarizes

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these objects in terms of the three principles. Explaining the significance of the unseen realms becomes the fundamental justification for theology in all its forms.

The distinction between unseen and visible parallels that between heaven and earth. Heaven is typically understood as a realm of divine proximity marked by the celestial spheres and inhabited by spirits and angels; thus the Prophet met angels and other prophets at each level in his ascent. Earth is then the complementary realm, inhabited by bodily things. Heaven showers down rain and light, and earth shows its receptivity by producing plants and animals. In contrast to the unseen, however, heaven designates only created realms, not God himself. Paradise, typically called "the Garden" (*al-janna*), is not located in the heavens designated by the celestial spheres, but on a higher level. Some situate it between God's footstool, which "embraces the heavens and the earth" (2:255), and the throne, upon which "the All-merciful is seated" (20:5).

Central to any discussion of last things are the notions of life and death, which are severely relativized by the Koran. God is the living (*al-ḥayy*), just as he is the Life-giver (*al-muḥyī*) and the Death-giver (*al-mumīt*)—three of his ninety-nine names. By speaking of God in these terms, the Koran is saying that there is nothing truly alive but God, no giver of life but God, and no taker of life but God. In giving life, God gives of his own treasuries of life, and in taking it, he reclaims what belongs to himself. But God is essentially generous and, as the Prophet put it, "His mercy predominates over His wrath." He never takes life without replacing it with something better.

The distinction between "this world" (*dunyā*; literally, "the near," i.e., the near life or the near abode) and "the afterworld" (*ākhira*; literally, "the last," i.e., the last life or the last abode) is one of the most basic in the Koran. This world has an ambiguous status. It is described negatively inasmuch as it diverts people from God, and positively as the theater in which God displays his signs and provides the means to deliverance. The difference between this world and the next sets up a horizontal, temporal trajectory, from Adam to the last day. Those who die before the end of

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time remain in the grave until the resurrection, but the Koran implies and the Prophet makes explicit that the dead are more fully aware of the reality of things than are the living.

The dead await the resurrection in the "grave," which is taken as the "isthmus" (*barzakh*) mentioned in Koran 23:100: "Behind them is an isthmus until the day they are resurrected." Along with the notions of this world and the next, the isthmus provides orientation in terms of the temporal unfolding of the cosmos.[7] But a second, atemporal picture plays an equally important role: things extend in a vertical hierarchy from earth to heaven, from the visible to the unseen, from the bodily to the spiritual, from unconsciousness to pure awareness. Some theologians make little distinction between the horizontal and vertical depictions and consider "this world" identical with the corporeal, sensory realm, and "the afterworld" the same as the spiritual, intelligible realm. Most see the horizontal and vertical pairs as representing two complementary though overlapping dimensions of the cosmos.

The Isthmus

Only one of the three Koranic mentions of the isthmus relates it explicitly to the temporal dimension of the universe. The other two call it a barrier separating the sweet sea from the salt sea. The former can be understood as the invisible realm of spirit, life, and awareness, and the latter as the visible realm of body, decay, and ignorance. The Koran also tells us that along with heaven and earth, God created "what is between the two" (e.g., 5:17, 15:85, 19:65, 20:6).

In the world view that had already been worked out in some detail by the time of al-Ghazālī, the cosmos is divided into three basic realms: heaven, in between, and earth; or spiritual world, *mundus imaginalis* (as Henry Corbin liked to call it), and corporeal world. As "the light of the heavens and the earth" (24:35), God deploys the universe in a hierarchy that extends from pure created light (the archangels) to almost sheer darkness (the inanimate stuff of the corporeal realm). The unseen realm of created light is unitary and integral, though it has gradations of intensity. The visible realm of created darkness is multiple and dispersed. The isthmus separates the intense light of heaven from the darkness, that is, the dim light of earth. As an in-between realm, the isthmus is dark in relation to heaven but bright in relation to visible things, just as the isthmus after death is wakefulness relative to life, but sleep relative to the last day and what lies beyond.

The isthmus is inhabited neither by angels and spirits nor by bodily things like minerals, plants, and animals. Rather, it is the realm of beings like the jinn (including Satan), who are said to be created of fire. On the microcosmic level, the isthmus is the soul, born of the marriage of spirit and body. At least from the time of Avicenna, philosophers and Sufis increasingly described the isthmus as the realm of

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imagination (*khayāl*) or images (*mithāl*). Ibn 'Arabī places it at the center of his enormous project to synthesize all strands of Islamic thought on the basis of the Koran. He points out that, in actual fact, everything other than God is located in an isthmus between real being

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and sheer nothingness. All things are contingent upon the Real and receive their relative reality from the radiance of his light. All things are in effect images of God, or "signs," as the Koran puts it, though nothing is identical with the signified. Everything other than the Real is God's "dream," shimmering in a tenuous domain that is neither the pure unity of sheer being and absolute consciousness nor the utter emptiness of pure nothingness.

The cosmos is ranked in degrees in keeping with the intensity of its light and the clarity of its images. The unseen realm is invisible because of its brilliance, and the visible world is perceived because of its dimness. People are blinded by angelic light, not to mention the light of God. If not for the fact that we see through a glass darkly, we would not see at all. But faith in the unseen allows for a strengthening of spiritual capacity, thus bringing the believers "out from the darknesses into the light" (2:257).

The Divine Form

Few notions play as important a role in Islamic anthropology as the idea that God created man in his own image. The version of this saying transmitted from the Prophet can best be translated, "God created Adam in His form." The word "form" (ṣūra) needs to be clearly differentiated from image, given both the central role played by images and imagination in later Islamic thought and the prominence of Aristotelian hylomorphism in Islamic philosophy. The Koran itself includes *al-muṣawwir*, the Form-giver, among the divine names, and it uses the word "form" and its verbal derivatives in suggestive ways: "He formed you, and He made your forms beautiful" (40:64).

In explaining the significance of the Hadith of the divine form, Muslim thinkers often cite the verse "He taught Adam the names, all of them" (2:31). These are understood as the names of all creatures, or the names of God, or the names of both God and creation. The Hadith of the divine form along with the verse of the names then helps to explain the significance of human vicegerency (mentioned most explicitly in Koran 2:30). The human function in the cosmos is to know all things, to know the Creator, and to act on God's behalf for the good of all creation.

In the Koran, God says, "I created jinn and mankind only to serve Me" (51:56). Proper "service" (*'ibāda* = worship, to be a servant, to be a worshiper) means to render both to the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) and to creation their "rights" (*ḥaqq*), what is rightfully due to them. Were it not for the fact of God's mercy and forgiveness, this would be an impossible burden. The Koran (33:72) calls it "the Trust," which God

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offered to "the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, but they all refused, and Man carried it—surely he is ignorant, a great wrongdoer" when he fails to live up to it. The prescriptive command provides the guidance needed by the soul to learn the names taught to Adam, observe the rights of God and creation, actualize its own created divine form, and carry the trust. Al-Ghazālī and others refer to the growth of the soul as the process of becoming fully human. They often call it "assuming the character traits of God" (*al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*). The philosophical tradition is more explicit about what this entails: human beings are called upon to actualize the "deiformity" of their souls; the Arabic word, *ta'alluh*, derives from the same root as Allah.

The Soul

The single most important issue that came to be analyzed with the help of concepts like imagination and the divine form was the human soul. The basic mythic picture provided by the Koran and the Hadith is that God created Adam by molding his body of clay and blowing into it "of His spirit" (32:9). Spirit and clay, or light and darkness, are the heaven and earth of the human microcosm. Along with these two, however, God also created "what is between the two," the self that appears when spirit and body are conjoined. "Self" translates the Arabic *nafs*, the standard reflexive pronoun. The same word was used to translate Greek *psyche* and is usually rendered in English as "soul." It is this that becomes the focus of Islamic philosophy. As for Sufism, its leitmotif in the later period is the purported prophetic version of the Delphic maxim: "He who knows himself [= his soul] knows his Lord."

Given that God created Adam of clay and spirit, it is easy to understand that the essential nature of the human soul is in-betweenness. It is neither spirit nor body, or, it is both spirit and body. Every soul is an "image" of both heaven and earth. The manner in which human destiny unfolds can then be understood in terms of the relative predominance of unseen over visible, or spirit over body. Sometimes the texts talk about the "two faces" of the soul, one directed toward the light and unity of the spirit, the other toward the darkness and divisibility of earth. Spirit displays the divine attributes of life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, justice, and so on. Clay is inanimate and almost devoid of qualities in and of itself. Suspended between spirit and body, the soul grows by drawing upon the attributes of spirit, or by rising up from darkness into light.

The early theologians debated whether the resurrection was bodily, spiritual, or both. Were the Koranic accounts to be understood literally, allegorically, or in some other way? Was the soul essentially or accidentally immortal? These and many other questions, familiar to anyone who has looked at the debates in medieval

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Christianity, came to be thoroughly reevaluated and revamped with the appearance of Ibn ʻArabī. Teachings that had been alluded to by Avicenna and al-Ghazālī suddenly sprang forth full blown in his writings. The soul is set apart as an intermediary realm of being, the microcosmic analogue of the isthmus. It is spiritual and therefore one and undivided, but participates in corporeality through the multiplicity of its faculties. Vision, hearing, taste, touch, memory, cogitation, and all of the other soulish faculties derive from the unitary divine spirit, and the body is the necessary means for them to become differentiated. The soul is the locus in which the spiritual powers are diversified, even though it preserves its own unity.

In short, with a subtle cosmology of imagination to back himself up—not to mention enormously detailed elaborations of earlier forms of metaphysics, theology, epistemology, and Koranic hermeneutics—Ibn ʻArabī throws out the Aristotelian logic of either/or and shows that the soul must always be understood in terms of both/and, or neither/nor. He pulled the rug out from under the Cartesian move long before Descartes made philosophically explicit the increasing inability of Western man to see himself as an integral part of the cosmos. In this perspective, the soul retains the full integrity of its multiple faculties in the imaginal realm after death. But it is also shaped by everything it comes to know and every act it performs during its embodiment. It is thoroughly imbued with traits of character developed by conforming to or ignoring the prescriptive command.

To the extent that the traits acquired by the soul are virtues, they are divine attributes just like the faculties, for it is God who is truly generous, just, kind, forgiving, and loving, just as it is God who is truly seeing, hearing, and knowing. To the extent that they are vices, they represent deformations of the divine attributes, or light overcome by darkness. Death is the soul's awakening to its own interior connection with the infinitely vast *mundus imaginalis*. The soul continues to know and experience itself in bodily form, because corporeality is part of the very definition of what it means to be a soul, but its corporeality is no longer that of clay. It is the much more real corporeality of imagination, situated on a higher level of the return to unity.

The Origin and Return

The discussion of origin and return sets the backdrop for much of later Islamic thought. In English, the best elaboration of its implications is found in *The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return* by Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 1256), translated from the Persian by Hamid Algar. This book was one of the most popular handbooks of Islamic teachings throughout the Persianate world, that is, the greater part of Islamic culture, extending from Turkey through Iran into Central Asia, India, and China. If it is rarely mentioned in studies of Islamic eschatology, this is because

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it is relatively late and addresses the issue from the standpoint of the tradition, which places far more stress on the voluntary than on the compulsory return. Rather than reviewing its contents here, I will outline the picture of the universe that stands behind it and that continues to inform much of the tradition in later centuries down into modern times.[8]

The light of the heavens and earth is pure “Being” and pure “Consciousness.” These two words are the literal significance of the word *wujūd* (being, existence, finding, awareness), which from Avicenna onward became the primary designation for God in discussions of the divine essence and attributes. The light of God, who is *al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq*, “Real Being/Consciousness,” never ceases shining in this world and the next. Life, knowledge, desire, power, and the other divine attributes are always productive, but their traces become more and more dispersed at every descending stage. Light and its concomitant attributes gradually reach a degree of dispersion and ephemerality that allows them to be perceived by weak-eyed, embodied creatures—who themselves are nothing but the dim radiance of the same light.

Emerging reality does not simply peter out; it reverses direction when it reaches the lowest point of sustainability. In the philosophical tradition, this point is often called “matter,” though matter per se has no form, shape, or differentiation. In any case, to speak of a lowest point and a reversal of direction is not simply to talk of temporal succession, for God destroys and re-creates the universe at each moment. The returning movement of ascent is simultaneous with the originating movement of descent, which is to say that there is a never-ending process of emergence from the Real and submergence into him. The descending movement disperses; the ascending movement reintegrates. The first is centrifugal, the second centripetal. Each creature represents a specific combination of being and consciousness undergoing descent and ascent.

In our human situation, we perceive the world largely in terms of the return. We see various stages marking the ascent of creation up the hierarchy of increasing luminosity, being, and awareness. Talk of evolution, progress, improvement, and development has in view the centripetal movement of reality back to its source. Every evolution, however, is preceded by a devolution. As the Sufis like to put it, the ascending arc of reality curves back on the initial point of the descending arc, thus completing the circle of being and consciousness.

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God, the Koran tells us, is “the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward” (57:3). But these two dualities arise from our point of view —we can look back, or we can look ahead; we can look to the surface, or to the depths. *Sub specie aeternitatis*, there is only one reality, always transcendent and immanent, forever giving forth in every possible mode of being and consciousness. The forward and upward movement of life and awareness is simply the visible working its way back to the unseen. Increasing invisibility is perceived in the signs and traces—growth, activity, and so on. Our recognition of signs depends on our own invisibility and demonstrates the actuality of our own sense perception, imagination, and intelligence, which correlate with the three fundamental realms of being—earth, the in between, and heaven, or bodies, *mundus imaginalis*, and spirits.

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The external, inanimate surface of the world is the seedbed of inner life and awareness. Once the shining light of the Real exhausts the possibilities of sensory manifestation in the diversity of inanimate objects, it begins to make manifest its true, invisible nature through the inner powers of plants and animals. In the ascending levels that lead up to the human condition, the unfolding of the signs takes place largely through the limited forms and configurations that appear to us as the species and individuals of the natural world. But nothing in the external world has the capacity to act as a vehicle for the full range of divine self-disclosure. Human beings alone, made in God's form, open up to his infinity, but only in the unseen realms of soul and spirit.

At the surface of the human condition, relative uniformity is the rule, because all human beings belong to the same species. True diversity pertains to what lies beneath and within. The richest and most authentic human possibilities unfold not in our external activities, productions, and creations, but in the invisible depths of our souls. Alike in appearance, we are profoundly diversified by the invisible ramifications of our individual capacities for actualizing knowledge, power, generosity, justice, love, and the other divine character traits. It is this inner wealth that overflows into the outer domain of activities, arts, and artifacts, the variety of whose manifestations mirrors the flexibility and fluidity of the intensifying return.

The domain of outward activity is only the beginning of specifically human concerns. The reintensification of light goes from visibility to invisibility, outwardness to inwardness, unconsciousness to awareness, practice to contemplation. As long as we are hindered by corporeal restraints, the invisible realms can only be accessed imperfectly. The soul needs to be freed from its fetters in order to spread its wings. Beyond the preliminary realm of development known as “this world” lies the realm of unlimited becoming called “the next world.” Death allows the infinite potential of the soul to achieve an invisible visibility through imaginal embodiment in realms of becoming that lie beyond physical possibility. Once the body is shucked off, the soul has direct access to the in-between realms that lead on to the divine spirit. Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that death internalizes everything that had been outward, visible, and physical in our own individual nature. What was external here becomes the stable ground of the soul's interiority there. In contrast, what was internal here—everything hidden in our thoughts and character traits—is externalized as the defining landscape of our new world.

In short, when death removes the density and darkness that obscure the invisible realms during life, the infinite domain of the isthmus comes starkly into focus. The senses continue to function, but no longer hindered by bodily objects and corporeal forms. Embodiment had prevented the soul from realizing the full range of its powers, but death sets it free. Not that the body was simply the soul's hindrance, quite the contrary. The body is necessary for the development of the soul's faculties, which embrace the properties of both spirits and bodies. Sufis and philosophers insist that only embodiment in this world allows the soul to come into being and develop its potential. As Mullā Ṣadrā's famous dictum puts it, the soul is “bodily in origination and spiritual in subsistence.”

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The body, Ṣadrā tells us, is like a net that is needed to catch the bird of the soul. Once the bird is caught and tamed, the net is discarded. Through the taming, the bird gains the powers of the spirit and learns how to fly on its own wings. The density, solidity, and exteriority of the body are gradually overcome, and the body itself is interiorized and imaginalized (*mumaththal*) to make way for the full experience of the intensifying reality that occurs on the journey back to God. So vast indeed is the soul's potential for development and expansion that, according to Ṣadrā, every human soul, whether of the blessed or the damned, will create an entire, independent universe in its posthumous becoming.

At the point of final return, we can discern one of the many ways in which God's prescriptive command is already included in his engendering command. The latter brings the universe into existence, but the former allows human freedom to play a significant role in cosmogenesis on the return trajectory. It is man's participation in the creative process that leads to a rearrangement of the cosmos after the differentiation known as resurrection and judgment. By placing “a group in the Garden and a group in the Blaze” (42:7), God in effect brings two new worlds into existence, for they have no raison d'être other than to be the locus for the unfolding of the true, diversified nature of human souls. Without the soulish dimension of reality made possible by human freedom, the whole notion of an afterlife loses its coherence. Thus Ibn ‘Arabī remarks, “If not for us, the afterworld would never have become differentiated from this world.”[9]

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The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology
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The Contemporary Situation

In assessing the role of eschatology in modern Islam, we should remember first that we are talking about a fifth of humanity, and there exists no survey of what Muslims are saying and writing today in their diverse languages. Nonetheless, a good deal of uninformed generalization goes on in the Western media, especially in the wake of 9/11 and the reported beliefs of those who undertake suicide missions. Many scholars of Islam have spoken out against the misinterpreted teachings about martyrdom and the afterlife that are used in the indoctrination of radicals, though little notice is taken of them in the media. Scholarship is more likely to make the news when it enters the fray against the Islamists by continuing the long-standing efforts of Orientalists to undercut the authority of the Koran. An extreme example is provided by the pseudonymous Christoph Luxenberg, whose erudite recent book in German has garnered headlines in the popular press because it claims (among other things) that Muslims have been misunderstanding Koranic language about paradise all along. He tells us that words that are read as “black-eyed virgins” and “swelling breasts” in fact denote “white raisins” and “juicy fruits.”[10] With a subtle appeal to the old Christian horror of associating sex with sanctity,

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the author blithely dismisses the long tradition of Muslim Koranic scholarship and shows an astonishing lack of sensitivity toward the symbolic language of myth.

Many observers have suggested that Muslims today tend to be more firmly rooted in their religious beliefs than are Western Christians and Jews. The return, as one of the three principles of faith, continues to play a central role in the Islamic understanding of God, self, and world. Indeed, without it, the first two principles of faith carry little existential weight. To the extent that Muslims take their religion seriously—always an open question—the afterlife is an ever-present and ever-urgent reality. It is precisely the deep-rootedness of this belief that allows scoundrels and demagogues to employ it in manipulating the naïve and uninformed.

But what role will eschatological teachings play in the Islamic future? Certainly, belief in the afterlife will not disappear, nor is it likely that the secularizing interpretations popular in the modern West will make much headway any time soon. Making predictions is always foolhardy, but at least one can note two broad tendencies that are likely to continue. Educated Muslims stand along a spectrum of attitudes ranging from the all-out “modernist” to the ultra-“traditional.” The modernist attitude is defined first of all by its hostility to the traditional, and second by the fact that it takes much of its inspiration from Western currents of thought, especially the ideological and scientific (or, more accurately, scientistic).

Modernist interpretations have two extremes. On one extreme stand those who want to interpret the sources of Islam in order to show that Islam was sent by God to be a polity along the lines of liberal democracy; these approaches tend to devalue the importance of Islamic beliefs and practices. On the other extreme stand the so-called fundamentalists, who also focus on political teachings but who take as their model authoritarian ideologies on the one hand, and the certainties of science and engineering on the other. Although fundamentalists are often accused of wanting to take Islam back to the Middle Ages, many observers have pointed out that fundamentalism, in whatever religion it is found, is a typically modern phenomenon. It is intensely hostile to everything handed down from the past, with the sole exception of scripture, which of course is interpreted strictly in terms of current ideology. One should also note that, to the extent that some Muslim fundamentalists do look back to their own traditions, they draw inspiration from Kalam, the most literal-minded of all the schools of theology. Kalam's stress on the transcendence of God, who asks only obedience, leaving the natural world to us, helps to provide an ideological framework for politics and social engineering.

The second basic attitude found throughout the Islamic world is the traditional. This is built on the understanding that the Koran and the Hadith provide real solutions to the human predicament on the condition that people take the trouble to understand how their forebears read the texts. This attitude has been intensifying recently for the same reason that fundamentalism has been spreading: the universal recognition that the Enlightenment project has failed. People cannot live in the vacuum of meaning produced by the world views of post-Cartesian philosophy and materialistic science, world views that have infused education throughout the Islamic world for over a century. Those who incline toward tradition hold that

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the deepest questions faced by humankind can only be answered by looking back at the teachings of the sages and saints of the past. It is among the traditionally minded, especially the young, that a thirst has appeared to know more about the anthropocosmic visions of the likes of Avicenna, Ibn ʻArabī, and Rūmī. Such visions avoid the one-sided transcendentalism of Kalam, skewer any attempt to establish Cartesian dualism, and present us with the cosmos and the human soul in a permanent marriage permeated by the presence of God in both this world and the next.

Notes

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1. Fritz Meier, "The Ultimate Origin and the Hereafter in Islam," in *Islam and Its Cultural Divergence* , edited by F. L. Tikku (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 112.

2. Marilyn Waldman's "Islamic Eschatology" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1987), 5:152–56 , follows the same pattern. Louis Gardet's " Ḳiyāma" (resurrection) in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005) effectively ends the survey of theological and philosophical issues with Ibn Rushd. His much more thorough treatment of the topic in the third part of *Dieu et la destinée de l'homme* (Paris: Vrin, 1967) pays some attention to later Kalam. R. Arnaldez's entry "Ma'ād" in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* does a good job of citing a variety of approaches to interpretation, but is limited almost exclusively to the early period. Soubhi El-Saleh's *La vie future selon le Coran* (Paris: Vrin, 1971) focuses on Kalam, gives lip service to Sufism, then summarizes the views of a number of well-known modern thinkers. Among short studies of the early period, the most thoughtful is Meier's "The Ultimate Origin." On the related issues of apocalypticism and messianism, see Saïd Amir Arjomand, "Islamic Apocalypticism in the Classic Period," *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, edited by Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1999), 238–83.

3. Kevin Reinhart, "The Here and the Hereafter in Islamic Religious Thought," in *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* , edited by Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan Bloom (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1991), 15.

4. For the polished and highly influential version of the narrative provided by al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), see book 40 of his classic *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, translated by T. J. Winter as *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1989). A briefer and more popular account ascribed to al-Ghazālī was translated by Jane Idelman Smith as *The Precious Pearl* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1979). See also al-Ḥaddād (d. 1132), *The Lives of Man: A Sufi Master Explains the Human States: Before Life, in the World, and after Death*, translated by Mostafa al-Badawi (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1991).

5. *Mathnawī*, book 3, verses 3287–89, cited in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 114.

6. Ibn 'Arabī unpacks the implications of divine mercy for human becoming in numerous passages. In addressing the "everlastingness" of hell and the appropriateness of its punishments, for example, he is able to offer surprising but plausible interpretations of relevant Koranic verses. See William Chittick, "Ibn al-'Arabī's Hermeneutics of Mercy," in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture* , edited by Stephen Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153–68.

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7. For a thorough survey of traditional accounts of the isthmus, see Ragnar Eklund, *Life between Death and Resurrection according to Islam* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1941).

8. Little of this tradition is reflected in the secondary literature. Many scholars now acknowledge Mullā Ṣadrā's role in formulating a sophisticated philosophy of the soul, but few of its details have been brought to light, nor has much attention been paid to the fact that this interpretive tradition is very much alive. For example, Nuṣrat Amīn (d. 1983), who wrote under the pen name Yak Bānū-yi Īrānī ("An Iranian Lady"), published a book called *Ma'ād yā ākharīn sayr-i bashar* ("The Return; or, Man's Last Journey"; Tabriz: Sa'ādat, 1334/1955). In it, she provides a subtle exposition of Islamic eschatological teachings in simple Persian, following the line of the mature, later synthesis of philosophy, theology, and Sufism. She stands in stark contrast to the three modern-day Egyptian thinkers discussed by Jane Idelman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad in *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), who show little or no awareness of the traditional interpretations of eschatological data.

9. Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911), vol. 3, p. 253, line 21.

10. A report about the book in *Newsweek* (25 July 2003) led to the banning of that issue of the magazine in Pakistan. For a more recent report, see "It Ain't Necessarily So," *Economist* (1–7 January 2005), p. 40.

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