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SUBMITTED: 2014-06-24
PRINTED: 2014-06-24 13:57:51
REQUEST NO.: REG-10045974
SENT VIA: Manual
EXTERNAL NO.: 7940529

REG	Regular	Copy	Journal
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VDX Number 7940529

Our Number 7940529

Printed Date 19 Jun 2014

⑤ BL 504. D33 1992

Request From Carleton University Library

Bibliographic Details

Author Edited by H. Obayashi

Title Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions

ISBN/ISSN

Control Number

Date of publication 1992

Article Details

Article Title Your Sight Today is Piercing: Death and the Afterlife in Islam

Article Author William Chittick

Pagination 125-139

Date

Note

Name Mohammed Rustom

Patron Barcode OOC-000806536

Patron Status OOCEF

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Return To

DEATH AND AFTERLIFE
Perspectives of World
Religions

EDITED BY
Hiroshi Obayashi

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

24
33
192

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Death and afterlife : perspectives of world religions / edited by Hiroshi Obayashi.

P. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-275-94104-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Death—Religious aspects—Comparative studies. 2. Future life—Comparative studies. I. Obayashi, Hiroshi.

BL504.D33 1992

291.2'3—dc20 91-3876

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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A hardcover edition of *Death and Afterlife* is available from the Greenwood Press imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc. (Contributions to the Study of Religion, Number 33; ISBN: 0-313-27906-3)

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 91-3876
ISBN: 0-275-94104-3

First published in 1992

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881
An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11

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Pritchard, James B., ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed., with supplement. Copyright © 1969 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

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PREFACE

This book offers a historical and cross-cultural survey of the varieties of perceptions regarding death and hopes for survival beyond death found in different religious settings. Major religious traditions of the world, past and present, contain perspectives of perennial importance on the topic of death and afterlife; this is especially evident in their mythical patterns and doctrinal teachings. These myths and doctrines are not only directly reflected in mortuary and funerary practices, but also inform patterns of beliefs and rituals that shape human lifestyles. It may not be too difficult to explore the understandings of death and afterlife in various cultures by simply isolating and discussing relevant teachings and narratives from their religious traditions. But issues such as these concern more than sacred texts; they affect the innermost core of the human psyche and constitute the very fabric of human existence. For this reason they can be explored adequately only by a comprehensive understanding of a given religious system rooted in an overall culture. For example, the Christian concept of death and resurrection is certainly misunderstood when it is uprooted from the context of a particular biblical framework and the subsequent evolution of Christian theology. The same can be said of Hindu concepts of reincarnation and the Taoist cult of immortality. Only those who have a comprehensive historicocultural familiarity with such traditions can provide a proper focus for these issues and help us come to a true understanding of them. No single scholar can master all the cultural blocs and religious traditions necessary for a thorough comprehension and penetration of the manifold conceptions of death and afterlife. Thus one must rely on experts in each field.

Although the thirteen chapters that constitute this volume share a common objective of offering an outline of the beliefs, myths, and practices, reflecting the views of respective religions on death and afterlife, the way in which they

“YOUR SIGHT TODAY IS PIERCING”: THE MUSLIM UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH AND AFTERLIFE

William C. Chittick

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of Islam all Muslims have accepted the resurrection of the body and the existence of heaven and hell as fundamental articles of faith. Both the Koran and the Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) provide many details about the events that will occur after death. In brief, we are told that on the first night in the grave, people will be questioned by the two angels about their beliefs and will be put into a pleasant or an unpleasant situation according to their answers. They will remain in the grave until the Day of Resurrection, when everyone will be mustered before God. The Scales will be brought out, and each person will be judged. At this point, “whoso has done an atom’s weight of good shall see it, and whoso has done an atom’s weight of evil shall see it” (Koran 99:7-9). Finally, people will be given everlasting abodes in paradise or hell.¹

Belief in the afterlife is so basic to Islam that Islamic thought has been divided into three basic “principles” from early times: the Unity of God (*tawhid*), prophecy (*nubuwwa*), and eschatology (*ma’ad*) or questions pertaining to the next world. To understand the third of these questions, we need some knowledge of the first two.

Islam defines the Unity of God with the statement, “There is no god but God,” a formula that makes up half of the Islamic testimony of faith (the second half being “Muhammad is the Messenger of God”). This declaration of God’s Unity does not mean simply that God is one. It means that everything in the universe has been brought into existence by a single Reality and is inextricably connected to it. Nothing can be correctly understood unless it is tied back to God. The Koran tells us repeatedly that whatever is found in the heav-

ens and the earth is a "sign" (*aya*) of God. God created all things through his power and wisdom, so each and every creature gives news of his nature.

The second principle declares that God has sent prophets to every nation on earth, reminding people why he created them and what he expects from them. Prophecy is a fact of human existence, which helps to explain why Islam considers Adam the first of the prophets. He was granted this high station when God placed him on the earth to be his representative (*khalifa*) among all creatures. After Adam, God sent 124,000 more prophets, but like all good things in this world, prophecy had to come to an end, and the last prophet was Muhammad.

The Koran maintains that all of the prophets have brought a single basic message: "There is no god but God." In other words, Islam holds that the declaration of God's Unity underlies every prophetic teaching. The prophets were sent to remind mankind of God's Unity and to point out the signs of his wisdom and mercy, which fill the cosmos. Their revealed teachings explain that human beings are inseparable from their Creator and Origin, and that he created them not because he had any need for them, but because he wanted others to share in the bounties of existence. Because human beings are God's creatures, they must follow the guidelines he set down for them to benefit from their situation. If they simply follow their own whims and desires, or the demands that a society forgetful of God makes on them, they will fail to take advantage of their existence in this world.

This brings us to the third principle of Islamic thought, eschatology. The literal meaning of the Arabic word is "return." The Koran tells us in many verses that all things have come from God and return to him. More particularly, human beings have been created by God for a specific purpose. The degree to which they succeed in fulfilling this purpose shapes their own selves, and their own self-nature then determines the mode in which they return to God after death. The modes of return to God are diverse in keeping with the diversity of human aptitudes and destinies. God is Merciful, Compassionate, Loving, and Gentle to many of his servants, but he also is Wrathful, Avenging, and Severe. He does not show the same face to each person. The face he does show depends on the creature's own self. If one person loves God and sincerely strives to live up to his own human nature, he will return to God and find him Loving and Compassionate. But if someone forgets God and ignores his human responsibilities, he will return to God and find him Severe and Wrathful.

What, then, is a human being? What are the potentialities of human becoming? Why does God tell people to do certain things and avoid other things? If God created human beings to enjoy the benefits of existence, why does he not let them enjoy life in the way they want to enjoy it? Why does he have to tell people that there are right ways and wrong ways of doing things? Why are they expected to do things they don't like to do? To answer such questions from the

Islamic point of view, we need to look closely at some of Islam's basic teachings concerning human nature.

DIVINE AND HUMAN QUALITIES

Human beings find themselves situated within the universe, which is defined as "everything other than God." The term includes as many galaxies and worlds and dimensions that may happen to exist, for all eternity. Because every phenomenon in existence is a sign of God, the universe is the sum total of God's signs.² The cosmos is created by God, to be sure, but more specifically, it is created on the basis of what God is in himself. If a generous man gives a gift, it will be a generous gift, and if a stingy person gives at all, he does so in keeping with his basic stinginess. Because God is fundamentally compassionate, merciful, and loving, he creates the universe as befits his compassion, mercy, and love. The universe manifests these qualities in a fundamental way.

Though everything that exists provides news of God's reality, God in himself is unknowable. How can the shadow know the sun? How can the artwork know the artist? Hence nothing provides a full picture of God. Human knowledge is only partial, though there is a sound basis for a certain understanding of God in the message brought by the prophets, since they were sent by God. When Muslims want to explain God's nature, they begin by quoting the Koran. There we read, for example, that God has many names. He is Alive, Knowing, Desiring, Powerful, Speaking, Generous, Just, Forgiving, Avenging, Merciful, Wrathful, Loving, Mighty, Bestower, Inaccessible, Life-giver, Slayer, Exalter, Abaser, and so on. Traditionally, there are said to be ninety-nine of these names.

To understand the universe in the context of the Divine Unity, we need to connect it back to the One God. A basic way of tracing things back to their roots in God is to show that everything found in the cosmos reveals God's names, since all the qualities of creation are his signs, reflecting his reality. The life of all living things derives from God's life, while all knowledge is a pale reflection of his knowledge. Every mother in the universe who shows love and compassion for her children participates in God's love and compassion for his creatures. The grandeur of mountains and sky is a dim reverberation of God's glory.

Each thing in the universe manifests an aspect of God, or, let us say, one or some of God's names. But nothing in the universe reflects God himself, God in his full glory as possessing the ninety-nine "Most Beautiful Names"—nothing, that is, except the human being. This does not mean every human being, but only those human beings who are fully human and who have actualized all the potentialities latent in human nature. It is the fact of manifesting every name of God—not only some of the divine names—that sets humans apart from all other created things, even the greatest of the angels. Man, in effect, is a little god, and for this reason God chose him as God's representative on the

earth. This, in the Islamic view, is one of the meanings of the famous verse in Genesis, repeated by the Prophet Muhammad, "God created the human being in His own image."

As stated earlier, God created human beings because he desired that others should share in the benefits of existence. What are these benefits? A benefit, according to Webster, is something that promotes a person's well-being. Human well-being is promoted by everything that promotes a person's humanness, or everything that allows him to be truly himself. As soon as the true human self is defined as an image of God, possessing all the divine attributes, it becomes clear that a person is truly himself only when he is Godlike. Only by becoming Godlike can he share in the benefits of existence, for only then does he possess those qualities that promote his well-being, that is, life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, justice, and so on.)

It is clear that few human beings manifest all the attributes of God. During the course of an average person's life only a few human potentialities come to be actualized, and these are not found in their full strength. No doubt people gain many of God's qualities through the mere process of growth and maturation. An infant enters this world with several divine attributes already manifest, such as life, knowledge, desire, and power. But the divine qualities found in a child are in embryonic form. Only gradually do they expand and develop. Take the divine attribute of speech, for example. At the beginning, it is a mere potentiality, and a newborn infant is not much different from any other animal in this respect. But the attribute develops quickly, and there is no limit to the perfection it can reach.

If people want to actualize any quality in its fullness, somewhere along the line they will have to take the matter into their own hands. The natural growth of an attribute like speech is limited by a person's environment and personal gifts. If a person wants to transcend his environment and take full advantage of his gifts, he will have to discipline and train himself. No one becomes a great poet, writer, or speaker without effort. In any field of human endeavor and activity the full actualization of potential demands dedication. But any field of endeavor you can name involves the utilization of some of the divine qualities deposited within the human being, not all of them.

If people strive to become great athletes, they may develop desire and power to a degree unimagined by others. If they devote themselves to helping the underprivileged, they may develop and manifest a compassion unique among their family and friends. Human possibilities are unlimited, and the actualization of each human quality brings out one or more of the divine qualities present within us because we have been created in God's image. But each of these possible activities, in the eyes of Islam, is of secondary concern at best. To be truly human a person's activities and efforts have to conform to God's purpose in creating him. That purpose was to allow his chosen creatures to share in the full benefits of existence. The fullness of existence has to be defined in terms of all God's qualities, not only some of them. Hence the human task is not to

concentrate on bringing out a single attribute, such as speech, or power, or desire, or compassion, but all divine attributes without exception.

How can this be done? Islam maintains that human beings are perfectly capable of developing some of their potentialities on their own. Their cultural, social, and personal situations define certain goals for them, and by working toward these goals they will manifest some of the qualities latent within themselves. But if individuals and societies set their own goals, there is one goal that is beyond their grasp. That goal is the full, total, and complete actualization of human possibility and perfection. No one can know, without guidance from outside himself, what potentialities are latent within his own soul. The reason for this is that human possibilities are defined by the divine attributes, and no one can know God unless God gives news of himself. A human being can set out to become Godlike, but he cannot possibly understand what it means to become Godlike or how he can become Godlike unless God tells him. This is the function of prophecy.

According to Islam, the prophets come with a twofold message. On the one hand, they provide knowledge of the Divine Unity. In other words, they explain the nature of Ultimate Reality and the interrelationship of all things. They set down how God is to be understood and point out the difference between those human beings who live in harmony with God and those who have turned away from God, occupying themselves with various secondary affairs on the basis of individual judgments of good and evil, right and wrong. The first part of a prophetic message is to provide a knowledge that places things in a proper perspective, situates man in the cosmos, and connects everything back to God. The second part sets down a path that people can follow to rectify the disharmony and disequilibrium so apparent in the human relationship with God. Islam often refers to this second part of prophecy as the "Revealed Law," or *Shari'a*.

The first part of prophecy defines the human situation. The second part describes a path of action whereby human beings can actualize to the fullest extent possible all the divine qualities latent within themselves. Many Muslim authorities speak of the Law as a "scale" (*mizân*) within which all things can be weighed. By weighing knowledge and activity in the scale human beings can be guided to the actualization of the full range of God's attributes in perfect balance, without the fear that one attribute will outweigh the others and produce a distorted image of God, something less than human.

If human beings weigh everything in the scale of their own understanding, they will upset the proper measure of things. Like children, they will see reality as centered on themselves instead of on God. But this is a reversal of the correct order, since the Reality of God defines the standards of existence. By perceiving and acting wrongly, people upset the balance inherent in existence and in their own primordial human nature.

The Law sets up equilibrium within the soul in a complex manner that has formed the subject of innumerable studies by the learned masters of the tradi-

tion.³ Here I can only offer a single example of what is involved: One of the principles of the divine scale is enunciated by the prophetic saying "God's mercy precedes His wrath." This means that God's mercy is more real than his wrath, and that wrath is itself a function of mercy. Within the original and primordial human nature, made in God's image, mercy and wrath are both present, but mercy predominates. Hence mercy and wrath cannot be used simply as a person sees fit. Just as God is essentially merciful and only secondarily wrathful, so also human beings must be essentially merciful and only secondarily wrathful. All the rulings and statutes of the Revealed Law are designed to put mercy before wrath.

Human beings cannot possibly discern the real and ultimate nature of mercy and wrath on their own, since this pertains to the divine nature, which is unknowable in itself. By the same token, the human sense of right and wrong cannot tell them how to establish the proper balance between mercy and wrath. They may understand that mercy is a desirable human quality and that it must outweigh wrath, which, in its proper measure, also is a desirable human quality. They also may perceive that it is possible to overemphasize mercy or to place too much stress on wrath. But the whole secret of human perfection is to find the proper measure and balance, and this is inaccessible to human understanding without help from God, the source of all ontological attributes.

Mercy and closely related attributes such as compassion, love, and forgiveness are comparatively rare in human beings. The reason for this is that such qualities demand that people concern themselves with the good of others, just as God has concerned himself with the good of creation by bringing the universe into existence. But most human beings are too self-centered to put the welfare of others before or even on the same level as their own welfare. As a result, they choose to interact mercifully and lovingly with other people only to the extent that this lies in their own interests, as defined by their own short-sighted understanding. Hence they are quick to judge their neighbors and to defend their own castles from real or imagined encroachments. All this means that mercy, compassion, love, and forgiveness get pushed into the background. But this is a reversal of the proper order of existence, in which mercy precedes wrath. If a person lives the whole of his life out of kilter with existence itself, he will suffer terribly when God makes the real nature of things manifest to him in the next world. This is the basic message of Islamic eschatology.

DEATH AND DREAMING

Let us now look more closely at the Islamic conception of the cosmos or universe, which, as said above, is defined as "everything other than God." This will allow us to answer the questions: Where are heaven and hell located? Why are they there and not some place else? How can the descriptions of heaven and hell found in the Koran and the prophetic sayings be understood as anything more than allegories or symbols?

The Koran and the Islamic tradition divide the created universe into two

basic worlds. These are named by several sets of contrasting terms, such as invisible and visible, manifest and nonmanifest, high and low, subtle and dense, luminous and dark, spiritual and corporeal. Thus, for example, the visible world is defined as everything accessible to our sense-perception, whereas the invisible world is that which can only be known through God's revelations. Among the most important creatures who inhabit the invisible world are angels, who are God's messengers to the visible creatures. According to the Prophet, the angels were created out of light. In contrast, the body of Adam was molded out of what the Koran calls "clay," which is the basic substance of the visible world. We should not be surprised to hear that the light of the angels is invisible, since even physical light can only be perceived because it is thoroughly mixed with darkness. If it were free of darkness, it would be so intense that we could not look at it without being blinded.

The Koran, along with a good deal of Islamic thought, bases its dialectic on juxtaposing opposite qualities and asking us to meditate on the differences. Hence it is important to grasp the nature of invisible angelic light to understand the nature of clay. Angelic light has many intrinsic qualities, such as life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, and generosity. In other words, the angelic light manifests all the names of God in a direct and intense manner.⁴ In contrast, the basic attribute of the clay from which the visible world is constructed is darkness, which is the lack of light. This is not pure darkness, or else the physical world could not be perceived and would not even exist. But compared with the light of the angels, the light of clay is so dim that it has to be called darkness. Hence the concomitant attributes of light, such as life, knowledge, will, and speech, cannot be found in clay itself.

The created universe has two poles: the luminosity of the angels and the darkness of clay. One pole is pure light, life, knowledge, desire, and power, whereas the other pole does not manifest any of these qualities. Hence it is darkness, death, ignorance, listlessness, and weakness. But light and darkness make up only the two poles or two extremes of the cosmos. Between the two are found many degrees of mixed light and darkness. Islamic philosophy often refers to these degrees of mixed light and darkness as different degrees of spirit or soul, for example, the mineral, vegetal, animal, human, and angelic spirits. Each ascending degree of spirit manifests a greater intensity of the light of God.

A good way to grasp the structure of this universe is to picture an empty globe of practically infinite dimensions. The outward shell of the globe is the visible universe, made out of clay. At the center of the globe is the first creation of God, made out of pure light. Between the center and the shell is found a vast hierarchy of creatures who are neither pure light nor pure clay. They represent various degrees of light, or various mixtures of light and darkness. The closer we stand to the center, the more intense and purer is the light. The closer we stand to the shell, the weaker is the light and the greater the darkness.

In this cosmic globe whose center is light and whose shell is clay, human beings fill a special niche. As said earlier, human beings are made in God's

image, while the cosmos, as a whole, is the sum total of all the signs of God, displaying his names and attributes in an infinite spatial and temporal expanse. In other words, the cosmos, as a whole, also is made in God's image, so the human individual is a mirror image of the cosmos. As a result, a human being is called a "small universe," or microcosm, and the cosmos is called the "great universe," or macrocosm. Everything found in the macrocosm also is found, in some manner, in the microcosm.

The Koran tells us that God shaped Adam's body out of clay and then breathed into Adam of his own Spirit. Though Adam's outer shell or body is made out of clay, his center is the Spirit of God, made of pure light. Hence human beings are compounded of spirit and body. If we want to know the characteristics of the pure human spirit, we list the names of God: alive, knowing, desiring, powerful, speaking, generous, just, and so on. As for the body, at best it is a pale shadow of these attributes. Loosely speaking, it is their absence.

But this is still not a complete picture of the human being, since here we have only a shell and a center. Just as the macrocosm contains many degrees of mixed light and darkness, so does the microcosm. The inward human dimension that fills the "space" between the Divine Spirit and the clay of the body is called the "soul" (*nafs*). In itself, the spirit is pure light, whereas the body is almost pure darkness. The soul is an intermediary realm of mixed light and darkness.

When we think of a "person," whether ourselves or others, we have in mind the whole microcosm that makes up a human being, including spirit, soul, and body. It is important to grasp that all human beings are essentially the same in their spirits, since the spirit is the Divine Spirit, and in their bodies, since they are all made of clay. Where people differ is in their souls. Each soul represents a unique conjunction of light and clay, or spirit and body. Just below the surface each person displays a unique intensity of light. Some people manifest the light of the spirit more directly, and some less directly. But no two persons are the same.

What are the soul's attributes that combine to make up the unique personality of each human being? We can say that the soul is "neither light nor darkness," since it is the meeting between spirit and body. The attributes of light are the divine attributes, whereas clay represents the weakest reverberation of these same attributes. Hence the soul is neither pure life nor total death, neither pure knowledge nor complete ignorance, neither unlimited power nor total weakness, neither perfect speech nor plain inarticulateness. In every case, the soul is somewhere in between. Every soul manifests a unique configuration of all the divine attributes in differing intensities. No two souls possess exactly the same degree of knowledge, desire, power, speech, generosity, justice, or forgiveness.

The world of light is inhabited by angels, whereas the world of clay is filled with bodies. What or who inhabits the intermediate worlds between the angels and clay? As already mentioned, the philosophical tradition refers to some of

these intermediary creatures as different degrees of "spirit" or "soul." The Koran speaks about some of this realm's inhabitants, using terminology that is especially interesting because of its symbolism: It says that a group of God's creatures are made out of "fire." They are called "jinn," which means literally "hidden," since, like the angels, they are invisible. But their invisibility is not the same sort as that of the angels, since their light is mixed with darkness. Mythically speaking, "fire" is halfway between light and clay. Hence the creatures made out of fire are both visible and invisible, corporeal and spiritual, high and low, luminous and dark.

In the Islamic intellectual tradition the Arabic words used to name the substance of these intermediate, fiery creatures can best be translated as "image" (*mitâqil*) or "imagination" (*khayâl*). This does not mean that the jinn are "imaginary"—far from it. In fact, they are more real than creatures made only from clay, since they possess more of the attributes of light, which are the attributes of true existence. Scholars commonly use the adjective "imaginal" to distinguish these intermediary beings from "imaginary" things and from fantasy.⁵

Because imaginal creatures are situated between spirit and body, their qualities stand between those of light and clay. The best way to find examples of such creatures is to look at our own imagination, especially in dreams. Though dream images are rather flimsy excuses for imaginal realities, they have certain characteristics in common with the imaginal creatures who inhabit the intermediary realms of the macrocosm.

Whenever we see anything in a dream, we see something that stands between light and clay. In other words, we see a body that is not a body. On the one hand, the dream image is bodily, so it has the characteristics of clay, which are those qualities that can be perceived by the senses. The dream image can be heard, seen, touched, tasted, and smelled. On the other hand, the image is a spiritual thing, since it is invisible to other people and is woven out of the light of our own awareness. If you see your friend in a dream, you have really seen your friend, since you saw that friend and not another. At the same time, you are in fact seeing only yourself—not your body, but your awareness and consciousness. You perceive, in other words, your own soul, which is woven of light and darkness, awareness and ignorance, power and weakness. You perceive imagination.

Whether imaginal things are found between the shell and the center of the macrocosm or in the dream images of our own souls, they share certain characteristics. One of the most important of these is that they appear in forms that can best be called "appropriate" (*munâsib*). This point can be understood by looking at the science of dream interpretation (*ilm al-ta'bir*).

It is an axiom of Islamic thought that every form (*shâra*) in the universe manifests a meaning (*mâ'nâ*), just as every phenomenon is a sign of God. This is especially obvious in the case of the forms that we see in dreams. The Koran mentions dream interpretation as a science possessed by prophets such as Joseph. Muhammad himself used to interpret the dreams of his companions, and

gradually dream interpretation was developed as one of the practical sciences of Islamic civilization, as important for everyday life as medicine. In dream interpretation it is assumed that a dream is an intermediate reality, since it hides and reveals at the same time. Dream images manifest invisible realities in visible form. The dream interpreter has to grasp the connection between the form of the dream and the meaning that lies behind the form. The outward form displayed through imagination has a necessary and appropriate connection with the spirit, meaning, concept, or mood that it manifests. The interpreter must understand this connection and express the invisible content of the image in an abstract and rational form, or in an imaginative form closer to our immediate understanding than the dream image itself.

Islamic cosmology adds that the imaginal realities of the macrocosm display a connection between form and meaning just like dreams. Anything that exists within the imaginal world combines corporeality with spirituality, or form with meaning, but not in a haphazard manner. Moreover, imaginal things appear in appropriate forms instantaneously, since, like fire, their shapes are not fixed. Their forms constantly change in keeping with the meaning they manifest at any given moment. Like dream images, they undergo continual transformation. This change of form in accordance with an inward meaning can be seen to a certain degree even in the world of clay, since the soul is able to shine through the shell of the body. When people are happy or angry their faces are likely to show it.

In the world of clay it is relatively easy for us to hide our feelings and true thoughts from others, since our souls are hidden behind the veils of our bodies. But suppose for a moment that our bodies were made not of clay, but of fire. Then we would appear instant by instant in a form appropriate to our own thoughts, feelings, and moods, just as we appear to ourselves while dreaming. This is one of the keys to Islamic eschatological teachings: When the veil of the body is removed, the soul—which is an imaginal creature—manifests itself in its true form. The meaning and content of the soul is no longer hidden by the shell made out of clay. The soul reveals its true nature for all to see. Hence the Koran says about the experience of death, addressing the human soul, "We have now removed from thee thy covering, so thy sight today is piercing" (50:22). Hence, also, the Koran refers to the resurrection as the day when "secrets will be divulged" (86:9) and when "that which is in the breasts will be brought out" (100:10). "On that day you shall be exposed, not one secret of yours concealed" (69:18).

THE MAKING OF THE SOUL

It was said earlier that God's purpose in sending the prophets was to lay down a path through which human beings can fully actualize all the divine qualities, which are latent within them because they are made in the divine image. The divine qualities will manifest themselves in any case, but unless they

are shaped and molded by God's guidance they will appear without harmony and equilibrium. "Guidance," in sum, is itself a divine attribute that the soul must actualize. Its effect on the soul is to bring out the latent divine image in a balanced manner that will yield happiness and wholeness in the next stage of existence.

Because human beings are full and integral reflections of God, they possess an indefinite expanse of possibilities. God is infinite, and he manifests himself in an infinite variety of modes. Every creature other than a human being represents one of the modes in which God manifests his qualities and characteristics. An angel manifests light and transcendence, a lion manifests power and majesty, a bird manifests freedom and joy. Every nonhuman creature has a narrowly limited definition, certain tight bounds it cannot transgress. Creatures come into existence, follow more or less determined courses, and depart. A walnut tree never yields pumpkins, nor does a python turn into a rabbit. But a human being comes into existence as an almost unlimited potentiality. Every one enters the world basically the same, but one person leaves as a bodhisattva, another as a Shakespeare, and another as a subhuman monster.

By putting human beings in touch with the divine attribute of guidance, prophecy leads them in a direction that will allow them to achieve a harmonious and healthy flowering of their potentialities. The process whereby people actualize their latent divine perfections can be described through the analogy of the animal kingdom. Each species and variety of animal represents a specific combination of divine attributes, or a particular kind of created perfection. An elephant has skills not possessed by a tiger, and a bee can do what an antelope can never hope to accomplish. There are literally millions of these perfections in nature, and they are nothing but the "signs" of God. Human beings are set apart from all other creatures because they can accomplish the tasks of all things, whereas other creatures can only accomplish their own specific tasks. Moreover, there are certain qualities that humans possess to the exclusion of other things, foremost among them an intelligence that can understand the other creatures and their tasks. Because of intelligence, human beings can control the other creatures. This expresses, in concrete terms, the fact that God appointed man as his representative in creation.

To be perfectly human, a person must actualize the perfections of all things—all the signs of God—within himself, for he is a microcosm containing everything in the macrocosm. In other words, people must come to manifest all the names of God, but in the perfect harmony and equilibrium that is set down by the scale of the Revealed Law. If a person fails to realize these qualities, he will, in effect, become less than human. When the body dies the soul will be set free to appear in an imaginal form that manifests its own less-than-human nature, just as the soul appears to itself in bodily form during dreams.

The Muslim authorities frequently use this animal symbolism to describe the form taken by the soul in the next world. In myth and fable each animal had traditionally been understood as representing one specific character trait. Thus

the animals provided perfect symbols for incomplete souls that are dominated by negative qualities. For example, the famous theologian al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111) writes as follows:

On the Day of Resurrection, meanings are bared. Then form takes on the color of meaning. If a person had been dominated by passion and greed [in the world], he will be seen on that day in the form of a pig. If he was dominated by anger and aggression, he will be seen in the form of a wolf.⁶

The great Persian poet Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî (d. 1273) expresses the same idea when he writes,

Our existence contains thousands of wolves and pigs—
good and evil, fair and foul.

The dominant trait determines man's properties:

If gold is more than copper, then he is gold.

At the Resurrection you will appear in the form
of the trait that governs your existence.⁷

In short, the next stage of human life, which Islam refers to as the "grave" (*gabr*) or the "interworld" (*barzakh*), is an imaginal realm in which the actual attributes of the soul display themselves in appropriate forms, exactly as in the dream state. But the interworld differs from dreaming in a number of ways. Thus, for example, we wake up from our dreams and quickly forget them, but we do not wake up from the interworld until the distant event known as the Day of Resurrection. Moreover, the interworld itself is a kind of waking up in relation to this world. As the Prophet said, "people are asleep, and when they die, they wake up." Hence the experiences of the interworld are more real and more intense than those of the present life, since the interworld stands closer to the luminous center of the cosmos. That is why the Koran says that a person's sight at death is "piercing." The soul will see clearly what it had only seen dimly when immersed in the world of clay.

STAGES OF THE AFTERLIFE

Islam distinguishes three major stages of becoming after death. The first, the just mentioned interworld, is the period from death until the Day of Resurrection, which occurs at the "end of the world," when the possibilities of human existence in this world have been exhausted. For each person the interworld represents an awakening in relationship to the life in the world, so the soul is more aware of itself and its surroundings than it was when it lived in clay. Because its existence is now totally imaginal, it perceives itself and its surroundings in appropriate bodily form. At this stage the soul does not enter into heaven or hell, since those two abodes will not be populated until after the Day

of Resurrection. It receives, however, a foretaste of its ultimate and permanent state. As the Prophet said, death is the "lesser resurrection" and the grave is "either one of the pits of hell or one of the gardens of paradise."

Some of the later authorities have compared the period spent in the grave to the time spent in the womb. The soul undergoes constant growth and transformation on the basis of the deeds it performed in this world. Then, as the Koran reports, the Day of Resurrection draws near and the angel Seraphiel sounds a blast on the trumpet. On hearing this everyone in heaven and earth loses consciousness. When Seraphiel sounds the trumpet for the second time people wake up to face the events of the resurrection.

The Prophet provided many descriptions of what happens in the grave that only make sense as imaginal events. As soon as we stop thinking of these accounts as metaphors we see that there is no reason that they should not represent a description of the actual experiences of the soul in the imaginal state of existence. Certainly one should be able to see a close resemblance between these descriptions and dream experience. In the interworld human acts, which had concrete form in the world of clay, are brought back and made present in a form appropriate to the intention and content of the act. All the Koranic and prophetic accounts of what happens in the grave can be understood on this basis. For example, the Prophet reported that after the believer has been questioned by the angels in the grave,

a crier calls from heaven, "My servant has spoken the truth, so spread out carpets from paradise for him, clothe him from paradise, and open a gate for him into paradise." Then some of the joy and fragrance of paradise comes to him, his grave is made spacious for him as far as the eye can see, and a man with a beautiful face, beautiful garments, and a sweet scent comes to him and says, "Rejoice in what pleases you, for this is your day which you have been promised." The person asks, "Who are you? For your face is perfectly beautiful and brings good." The man answers, "I am your own good deeds."⁸

The Day of Resurrection is itself a major stage of becoming. Some sayings of the Prophet speak of its length in terms of thousands of years. Many events take place, all of which are perceived in accordance with the state of the soul and the laws of imaginal existence. The happy souls destined for paradise experience these events as easy and pleasant, but the wretched souls undergo terrible trial and tribulation.

After the events of the Day of Resurrection people are divided into two groups. One group is taken into the Garden, and the other into the Fire, and there they remain forever. Both Garden and Fire are imaginal modes of existence in which the soul appears to itself and to others in keeping with its own real nature. The basic difference between the two is that the Garden is situated close to the source of light, whereas the Fire dwells in relative darkness. Hence a prophetic saying tells us that after the resurrection, light will be separated from fire and taken to heaven, whereas the heat of fire will remain in hell.

The Garden is said to have eight basic levels; the Fire has seven, though there are innumerable subsections to each level. Some authorities maintain that the degrees of heaven and hell are as numerous as human souls. No two souls leave this world in exactly the same form, and none develops and grows in the interworld in the same manner. The soul's perception is thoroughly shaped by its own characteristics, so no two persons perceive the same object in exactly the same way. In paradise once a week the faithful are taken for the Day of Visitation, in which they are given the highest blessing of the Garden, the vision of God. But, as the authorities remind us, "the water always appears in the color of the cup." In other words, no one sees God in exactly the same form. Everyone sees God in keeping with his own capacity and understanding. No believer has the same capacity as the prophets, and the prophets themselves are ranked in degrees. As God says in the Koran, "those prophets—we have preferred some of them over others" (2:253)—so some prophets have a more perfect vision of God.

If the highest bliss is to be given vision of God, the worst chastisement is to be veiled from God. That is why one of the Muslim authorities can sum up this whole discussion by saying, "The next world possesses two abodes: vision and veil."⁹ To be veiled from God is the worst punishment, since it is to suffer the disintegration of oneself. Human beings, it must always be remembered, were created in God's image. By failing to live up to the divine qualities deposited in themselves they cut themselves off from God, who is the source of everything that they are. They had had the potentiality of becoming semidivine, but they have transgressed their own nature and become less than human. It is the grandeur of the divine attributes in man that allows him to suffer in hell.

In the Fire, people lose the integrating factor that made them human. They are torn this way and that by conflicting forces within themselves. But all the while they maintain an awareness of what they should have become. The Fire is their own regret assuming concrete, imaginal form, appropriate to the perceivers. By the way, most Muslim authorities maintain that the fires of hell eventually will abate. After many aeons those who dwell in the Fire will become so accustomed to the veil that they would not be able to bear entering into paradise. God's all-embracing and precedent mercy gives solace even to the damned.

NOTES

1. The best account of basic Muslim beliefs concerning death and the afterlife is provided by J. I. Smith and Y. Y. Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981). Despite its title, the work deals only with descriptions of the afterlife, not with the traditional "understanding" of these descriptions. For a survey of basic beliefs and the manner in which they have been understood, see W. C. Chittick, "Eschatology," in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. S. H. Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 378–409. Both of these

works provide bibliographies of the literature. Other works that deal with how the tradition has understood the descriptions of the afterlife include J. W. Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Muḥalla Sadra* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); Chittick, "Rūmī's View of Death," *Alseerat* 13, no. 2 (1987): 30–51; idem, "Death and the World of Imagination: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Eschatology," *Muslim World* 78 (1988): 51–82.

2. The word "universe" in Arabic, *ʿālam*, often is explained in terms of other words from the same root, such as *ʿalam* and *ʿalāma*, which mean "signpost," "mark," and "designation."

3. For a detailed discussion of this function of the Law, cf. W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), ch. 11.

4. The angels, however, are divided into many kinds, and most of them manifest only some of the attributes of God. Although the light displayed by each kind of angel is pure and intense, in some cases the light of knowledge will dominate, in others the light of power, in others the light of love, and so on.

5. When the philosophical tradition speaks of some of the intermediary beings as "spirits," this does not imply that they are purely spiritual in nature. It simply means that there is an invisible, animating reality beyond the visible body. In relation to a plant's body, the "vegetal soul," which allows it to grow and reproduce, is invisible and, therefore, spiritual. In relation to the human rational soul, the vegetal soul can be called bodily, although this body is "subtle" (*latīf*), not "dense" (*kathīf*). At the same time, all levels of soul and spirit—except the Divine Spirit itself—can be referred to as "imaginal" creatures, since they dwell in an intermediary realm between pure light and pure darkness.

6. Ghazālī continues by making the connection with dream interpretation: "That is why, if a person sees a wolf in a dream, it is interpreted as a wrongdoer, and if he sees a pig, it is interpreted as an impure and filthy man. The reason for this is that sleep symbolizes death: To the extent that a person moves away from this world through sleep, form follows the inward meaning." *Kīmīyā-yi saʿādāt*, ed. A. Arām (Tehran: Markazī, 1319/1940), 18.

7. *Mathnawī*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1925–40), Book 2, vs. 1416–19. Cf. W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 101–107.

8. Tabrizī, *Mishkāt al-masābīh* (Delhi, 1325/1907), 142. Cf. J. Robson, trans., *Mishkāt al-masābīh* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1963–66), 341. The hadith continues by providing a parallel description of what happens to the unbeliever. His "evil deeds" appear to him as a man "with an ugly face, ugly garments, and an offensive odor."

9. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār Sādir, n.d.), 2:335. 18.