

Death and Dying in the Qur'an

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Abstract

Death is a central element in the Qur'an. In this discursive essay, the importance of death and the afterlife is discussed and highlighted.

Modern medicine whispers to us something we prefer not to admit that we like hearing. Softly it soothes our fears by implying that death is unnatural. Death as unnatural has become a truism in our culture that does not need a proof. It does not fit with our image of our worth, and thus is a tragedy at best, a travesty at worst. To conquer death is part of modern medicine's mission, although no one would admit to this. Of course it is ironic that in the age of biology, where death is understood as part of the life cycle, we secretly, or unconsciously, believe in an immortality not to be attained in an afterlife or a different bodily form, but rather in this life, with our own bodies that we already possess. Like the character in Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure," we hold that a lived life, no matter how badly it is lived, is better than any death. This "kneaded knot," as the human flesh is called, should not cease to be the beauty that it is.

While modern biology has enshrined death as part of the cycle of life, our perception of our place in history makes it an affront to our sensibilities. Thus, death is hardly allowed any space in our world. Not that we do not know that it is coming, but we act as if it will never come. The very form in which we have shaped our existence now presupposes its absence. In this sense, we are at a unique moment in human history: death might be everywhere, but it is always something that happens to others who are not as care-

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ful as we have been so far. Collectively, we insist on structuring our lives as if death has no bearing on it. Death, in this sense, is not even a metaphysical problem any more.

The pagans of Arabia knew that human beings are tragic because they die. To be heroic was one way of overwhelming death, if only for a brief moment. There was also the option of salvific religions and their promise of an eternal life in faith. All the same, whether they were pagan or followers of a salvific religion, human beings shaped their lives as if death were always present. As such, death overwhelmed the world of those who belonged to any pre-modern society. We, the post-Enlightenment human beings, could not be more different from them on this point. Life to us is not infused with the overwhelming presence of death, and so death does not cast a shadow over our lives. Life no longer reminds us of death. None of us would echo the words of Purcell's "Funeral Mass for Queen Ann" and declare that in the midst of life we are in death. In the midst of life we are in life.

Thus, to speak about death and life after death as presented in an old text, a pre-modern text – and here it is the Qur'an that I would like to examine – is to try and imagine a world in which the reality of death was the only certitude and the only predictable element in human life. This is almost impossible for us to envision, for death in this form does not exist for us. To us, death is always an accident having no independence or reality. Ontologically, death does not exist, for it is no more than the result of a germ, a car accident, or aging mitochondria. If only we fiddle enough with the gene responsible for aging, we will have life eternal. If only we had enough antioxidants in our cells! As such, we do not concede a place to death; however, we all seem to die despite ourselves.

It is thus inescapable that when we speak of death and the afterlife as the ancients spoke of them, we often sound absurd, as absurd as talking about devils and demons as if they were real. The only way to speak sensibly of death and life after death as such is to treat them as historical topics instead of ontological realities. To come face to face with how the ancients saw death is invariably amusing to us, as we are amused when we admire the pyramids and the mummies. Had the ancient Egyptians known what we know, they would not have lived their lives so absurdly.

But an historical investigation can only take us so far. Perhaps we ought to add another dimension in an attempt to situate ourselves in their place. A good place to start a dialogue with the ancients is to admit the similarity between our predicament and theirs. Thus despite the apparent differences

in our attitudes to death, there is a shared predicament that makes us both alike. We deal with death by denying its existence; they dealt with it by making it the only constant. It is not that we are any more rational than they were or that we have solved the riddle, for modern medicine is not helping us any more than mummification helped them. Yet we are not willing to give up antibiotics any more than they were willing to give up mummification. The inequities they visited upon their corpses in order to mummify them are matched with our willingness to let the knife of the plastic surgeon visit our living bodies.

This difference is not one of superiority, for our presumed correct understanding of what death is has not reconciled us to it, just as their faulty understanding of death did not mean that they were less able to enjoy life and its beauty. Our faith is pinned on modern medicine and its promises; theirs was based on mummification or any other salvific promise and the power inherent therein to ensure a resurrection of the body. In many ways we have conquered religion by making all of its promises real and visible in this life. Only by admitting the resemblance between us and the ancients could we hope for any empathy on our part for their worldview, and thus the prospect of seeing death through their eyes. Ultimately, no matter how much we analyze their understanding of death in rational terms, we will not understand their world and the hold death had on their imagination unless we also imagine death as a reality.

The Qur'an is, for the benefit of those who have not read it, very much like a stream of consciousness novel – you can open it and read any page, and it immediately hits the ground running. This is because it is not a narrative work, but rather a discourse about God, faith, and the meaning of life. There is thus no one place where death is dealt with exclusively.

Moreover, the Qur'an is constituted of three major protagonists: God, humanity, and the Prophet. Rhetorically, it is structured to presume that God is the speaker and humanity is the object of the revelation. Part of its rhetorical strategy is that God speaks about humanity to humanity. Despite being a text that was mostly composed when Muhammad was in a very weak position and hardly in a place to be triumphant, the Qur'an speaks to humanity triumphantly. Its triumphal tone is based on the presumption that it knows human beings better than they know themselves.

The Qur'an always pretends to win any argument, and its trump card is, invariably, death. Thus death is not just one topic among others; rather, it is an organizing principle. Death renders null and void all human arguments against the irrational assertion of the existence of a universal God. It also

renders absurd all human arguments against the worldview entailed by belief in a universal God, insofar as human beings are unable to solve the riddle of death. But the arguments conducted around the topic of death function well, because they rest on the shared assumption of Muhammad and the pagans that death renders human life incomplete and so is a problem in human existence. If the pagans did not share this assumption, then there would have been no point in arguing about it. The Qur'an was not creating a problem and pretending to offer a solution; rather, it was addressing a major issue in pagan Arabia: the impossibility of immortality and the absurdity of life in the presence of death.

The Qur'an thus reminds the pagan Makkans of something they were not disputing but were, nevertheless, not yet willing to accept: every soul shall taste death (29:57). Needless to say, the use of "taste" was not lost on them. Death shall, as it were, be served, and we will have to eat it. In another verse, the sarcasm is even more pointed: death will feel like a drunken stupor, a cup of wine as it were (50:19); those drinking the wine of death will be taunted and asked: "Isn't this a fate that you strove to avoid?" The Qur'an actually does not mind repeating platitudes and to great dramatic effect, for example, when it reminds Muhammad and his people of death by stating its reality in the plainest language possible, as a simple tautology: "You will die, and they will die" (39:30). There is almost the sense that the mere mention of this fact constitutes a resounding condemnation of human arrogance.

Lest we enjoy the comfort of our precautions against death, the Qur'an also pokes fun at these efforts by declaring that death will overtake us, run as we may, even if we hide in high fortified towers (4:78). Are we building them, thinking we might live eternally (26:129)? Another example of this taunting is how the Qur'an deals with the possibility of Muhammad's failure as a prophet. Certain of God's victory in history, the Qur'an was sensitive to Muhammad's doubts about the prospects of his own success. To assure him, it was eager to dispel his doubts by reminding him that God has the last word in human affairs. The point made to Muhammad was that death will overtake the pagan Makkans after he dies (21:34). No need to worry. Death is God's triumph, and He will win the day with or without Muhammad. Let me quote here the wording of the Qur'an:

No person before you have We made immortal. If you yourself are doomed to die, will they live on forever? Every soul shall taste death. We will prove you all with evil and good. To us you shall return. (21:34)

Some of the Qur'an's most poetic parts deal with the moment of death. The emphasis here is on the dying person's solitude. Death makes poignantly clear what the hustle and bustle of life has managed to hide: human beings are solitary creatures, standing alone no matter how surrounded they are by others. When it matters, no one can offer help. No amount of love and wealth can offer us company in death. Death not only cuts others off from us, but cuts us off from others. *Surat al-Qiyamah* depicts a dying man surrounded by his family. The section opens with a shout of denial – the Arabic for “No” – symbolizing the rebuttal to all of the arguments put forward by humanity to deny the truth of the resurrection:

No, but when it reaches the neck and those around him cry out: “Will no one save him (will no one bring a cure)?” Do you still doubt that you are leaving? And all is now futile. Now you will be driven to God, for in this life he/she neither believed nor prayed. He/She denied the truth and turned his/her back, went to his/her kinsfolk elated with pride. Well have you deserved this doom, well have you deserved this doom. Well have you deserved this doom; too well have you deserved it.” (75:27-35)

The Qur'an repeats four times its victory over the recalcitrant dead man. Death is doom. The dying man knows it, his family knows it, and the Qur'an knows it. It then turns to interrogate humanity and I quote: “Do human beings think they will be left alone, having no purpose?” (75:36). And then comes the ultimate insult: the Qur'an reminds human beings of their lowly origins: “Were you not a drop of ejaculated semen fashioned into a blood clot? Then God formed and molded you, and made you males or females. Has He no power then to raise the dead to life?” (75:37-40)

The Qur'an is holding on to the pagan's argument that death renders life meaningless and turning it upside down. Indeed, it argues the very opposite: death, by forcing us to face the question of life's meaning, points to the solution – death is not an end, but rather a beginning. Life has a purpose, and thus we are not to be left alone. It is not our family who will be our company, but God, and we will have to answer to Him.

Elsewhere, the Qur'an neatly sums up humanity's condition and history:

The unbelievers say: “This is indeed a strange thing. When we are dead and turned to dust, are we coming back? Such a return is most improbable.” Yes, they denied the Truth when it was preached to them, and now they are perplexed. Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are in doubt about a new creation. We created human beings. We know the promptings of each one's soul and are closer to each one than his/her

jugular vein. When the twin keepers receive him/her, the one seated on his/her right and the other on his/her left, each word he/she utters shall be noted by a vigilant guardian. And when the agony of death justly takes him/her, they will say: "This is the fate you endeavored to avoid. And the Trumpet shall be sounded. Such is the promised Day." (50:1-17)

In the Qur'an, therefore, death is always tied to life after death, for only life after death renders human life bearable and meaningful and explains the mystery of human existence. The Qur'an sees life as part of a cycle: birth, death, resurrection, and life after death. Thus the cycle of human existence is not terminated at death, as the pagans thought, but continues on to an everlasting life in a post-judgment world of human perfection.

There is a story told about Muhammad trying to convince a fellow tribesman that there will be a resurrection and that the dead shall be brought back to life. The man, fed up with Muhammad's arguments, fetches a dried human bone, crushes it into a white powder, raises it in the palm of his hand to Muhammad's face, and asks him: "Is your God going to resurrect this?" And he blows the dust in Muhammad's face. This story is supposed to explain a section in the Qur'an, which I cite here:

Let not their words grieve you. We have knowledge of all that they conceal and all that they reveal. Is humanity not aware that We created them from a little germ? Yet is humanity flagrantly contentious. They answer back with arguments and forget their own creation. They ask: "Who will give life to rotten bones?" Say: "He who first brought them into being will give them life again. He has knowledge of every creature, He who gives you a flame from the green tree, and lo, you light a fire." (36:76-80)

The story is most probably apocryphal, but it sums up the Qur'an's delicate position in arguing for resurrection in the face of refuting physical evidence. Much energy was spent on showing why life after death is a reality, and many of the arguments were tied to a fundamental Qur'anic outlook: life has to have meaning because God is just. For life to have meaning, God must judge the world; since He is not judging it now, there has to be a Day of Judgment day, which means that there has to be a resurrection. All of these themes are invoked repeatedly, and the argument is hard to disentangle because it is multilayered.

Thus, in order to claim that there is life after death, the Qur'an had to create a parallel universe in which the resurrected would live. This it did with a relish not seen in the two monotheist religions before it, Judaism or

Christianity. The only parallel one can think of is the “Hymns of Paradise” by Mar Ephrem, a fourth-century church father. The Qur'an's detailed depictions of humanity's fate after death were soon augmented by the sunnah. Indeed, one of the most celebrated of Muhammad's miracles is his ascension to Heaven, where he visits Hell and Heaven and sees the Kingdom of God, so to speak. This story became one of the most illustrated subjects of classical Islamic literature, and soon even the literati were poking fun at such visits. In fact, one of the most illustrious Arabic epistles depicts such a trip by a poet, where he meets his fellow poets, those in Hell and in Heaven.

I will confine myself today to the Qur'an, which contains enough material to keep us busy. The most cited argument for resurrection is creation itself. If God could create humanity, he can surely recreate it. He only needs to say “‘Be,’ and it shall be” (36:82). Just like rain revives barren land, so shall God revive humanity. Moreover, the Qur'an informs us that the Day of Resurrection is a cataclysmic event that also heralds the end of the world. A cosmic catastrophe befalls the universe and everyone is caught by surprise. Let me quote a typical passage that sums up the theme of resurrection, re-creation, and judgment:

O people, fear your Lord, for the catastrophe of the Hour of Doom shall be terrible indeed. When that day comes, every suckling mother shall forsake her infant, every pregnant woman shall cast down her burden, and you shall see everyone reeling like drunkards although they are not drunk. Such shall be the horror of God's chastisement. O people, if you doubt the resurrection, remember that We first created you from dust, then from a living germ, then from a blood clot, and then from a half-formed lump of flesh so that we might manifest Our power to you. Sometimes you see the land dry and barren. But no sooner do We send water down upon it that it begins to stir and swell, putting forth every kind of radiant bloom. That is because God is the truth. He resurrects the dead and has power over all things. The Hour of Doom is sure to come – of this there is no doubt. Those who are in their graves will rise to life. (22:1-7)

The Qur'an takes pleasure in giving different names to the Day of Judgment or what it calls “the hour.” In one chapter, it is simply called “the event” or “the happening,” the implication being that it is the only event that will really happen: “When that which is coming comes – and no soul shall then deny its coming – abasing and exalting, when the land shall be rocked and the mountains crumbled and become a dust scattered, and you [O humanity] shall be three bands” (56:1-7). In another chapter, it is called “the hammer” or “the crashing blow”:

The crashing blow! What is the crashing blow? What will explain to you what the crashing blow is? On a day when people will be like scattered moths and the mountains like tufts of wool ... (101:1-5).

In yet another it is described as an "earthquake":

When Earth is shaken with a mighty shaking and throws off its burdens, and humanity asks: "What is happening to it?" On that day it will tell everything, because your Lord will order it to do so." On that day, people will come forward in separate groups to be shown their deeds. Whoever has done an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever has done an atom's weight of evil will see it. (99:1-8)

Yet before we continue to delineate the story of human destiny after death, I would like to mention the fact that what happens between death and resurrection is not something the Qur'an cared about very much. The Qur'an seems to imply that death is akin to sleep, an attitude that can be gleaned from the dramatized dialogues between the newly resurrected people and the angels:

What! They ask: "When we are turned bones and dust, shall we be restored in a new creation?" Say: "Whether you turn to stone or iron, or any other substance you may think unlikely to be given life." They will ask: "Who will restore us?" Say: "He Who created you first." They will shake their heads at you and ask: "When will this be?" Say: "It may well be near at hand. On that day He will summon you, and you shall answer Him with praises. You shall think that you have stayed in your graves [for only] a little while." (17:49-52)

Later Islamic tradition was not satisfied with this solution; rather, it believed that the dead would be resurrected in some form or another even before the Day of Resurrection. This doctrine became a hotly debated issue, and the Sunnis eventually espoused belief in the *barzakh* (the grave as an abode for the living dead) as part of their creedal formulae. This abode is a sort of a microcosm of the universe, where humanity experiences a rehearsal of the coming cosmic judgment that awaits everyone.

So, the resurrection will take place on the Day of Judgment, Earth and life as we know it will vanish, all of humanity will be gathered before God, and He shall judge each person individually. The Qur'anic verses cited earlier imply that human beings are already being watched by at least two angels, one on the left and one on the right. Tradition has it that these two scribes, each of whom sit on one of our shoulders, keep an account of our good and evil deeds. This is the "book of deeds" that will be presented on the Day of Judgment to each individual:

When the trumpet sounds a single blast, when Earth with all its mountains is raised high and with one mighty crash flattened into dust – on that day the Dread Event will come to pass. ... On that day you shall be utterly exposed, and all your secrets shall be brought to light. The one who is given his/her book in his/her right hand will say: "Here it is. Read my book! I knew that I would come face to face with my account!" His/Hers shall be a blissful state in a lofty garden, with clusters of fruits within reach. We shall say to him/her: "Eat and drink to your heart's content, [for this is] your recompense for what you did in days gone by." But the one who is given his/her book in his/her left hand will say: "Would that my book were not given to me! Would that I knew nothing of my account. Would that my death had ended all! My wealth has availed me nothing, and I am bereft of all my power." We shall say: "Lay hold of him/her and bind him/her. Burn him/her in the fire of Hell, and then fasten upon him/her a chain [that is] seventy cubits long, for he/she did not believe in God, the Greatest, nor did he/she care to feed the destitute. Today he/she shall be friendless. Here, only filth shall be his/her food, the filth that only sinners eat." (69:13-15, 18-37)

Deeds are weighed, and a cosmic balance has been created for this purpose. It is not clear if the verses that speak of a balance (*mizan*) are figurative, and so, like the state of the dead in the graves, this also became a contentious issue. On the whole, Sunnis, who eventually became the "orthodox" Muslims, preferred to understand the Qur'an's words as literally as possible. Fear of metaphorical understanding was of course justified, for ultimately the rationale behind what one decided to understand metaphorically and literally was always hazy.

One verse says that each soul shall visit Hell. This was understood as a post-judgment event during which everyone will have to traverse a bridge over Hell. For the faithful and the already saved, it will be a meteoric travel at the end of which the gates of Heaven and Paradise will appear; for the damned, it will be the beginning of the agony that awaits them. The bridge will narrow until it becomes as sharp as a sword, causing the latter group to fall into Hell. Thus, Hell is a sort of pit that swallows the unbelievers.

The issue as to what source the Qur'an drew from to depict this after-world existence has engaged scholars for a long time. Clearly, there is not one source but rather the collective heritage from late Antiquity. One could, if one devotes one's energy to it, find the ultimate sources for much of this scenario. Yet on its own, this world is coherent and constructed according to the Qur'an's internal logic.

Despite the protestations of Muslim philosophers and many theologians, I would have to agree with Sunni theologians and admit that the Qur'anic depiction of Heaven and Hell is physical. That is, the Qur'an insists on the physicality and corporeality of human resurrection, heavenly delights, and hellish torments. There is no doubt that the bodies themselves, and not only the souls, are to be resurrected. There seems to be no actual separation between the two, for souls are only aware if they are in bodies; otherwise, they are in a sleeping state. Let me give an example:

I swear by the Day of Resurrection and by the self-reproaching soul. Does humanity think that We shall never put its bones together again? Indeed, We can remold its very fingers. Yet humanity would ever deny what is to come. "When will this be" it asks, "this Day of Resurrection?" (75:1-6)

I can give many other examples: believers are fed in Paradise; the kinds of food are recounted; the skins of the damned are burned only to be refurbished again and again; and so on. All of this is presented in stark physical descriptions that leave no doubt that we will inhabit a physical world.

But it is not only the afterlife's corporeality that is emphasized; the afterlife is also an immortal life. The Qur'an highlights and harps on this concept endlessly, and its significance has to be seen in relation to the pagan Arabs' tragic understanding of life. Human existence was a travesty because we were mortal, and mortality was banality. The Qur'an disputed this concept of human life and asserted the very opposite. The pagans, however, refused to be convinced and considered the idea of an immortal life something ridiculous. Mortality was the human condition; it was part of the definition of humanity. This was a gulf that truly separated the pagan Arabs from any society of late Antiquity, whether Christian or Jewish. The Qur'an was redefining humanity and bringing into inner Arabia what had become common all over the inhabited Mediterranean world.

In addition, the pagans were aware of this argument's implications: if we are immortal, then we cannot claim that life has no meaning and thus refuse to accept responsibility for our actions. The consequences, therefore, are moral, for immortality renders us, if not divine, then fully responsible for our deeds – a point that the pagan Arabs refused to concede. To them, human action was situational, so to speak, for one did as one's condition dictated, not as one's morals ordered. Muhammad was not only trying to replace their deities with a new one, but was also undermining their whole heroic moral worldview.

The Qur'an depicts the issue of responsibility for deeds in a parable. It is not clear when the events of the parable took place, but it seems to be beyond history:

And we offered the trust (*amanah*) to the Heavens, to Earth, and to the mountains, but they refused the burden and were afraid to receive it. Humanity undertook to bear it, but it has proved [to be] a sinner and a fool. (33:72)

Here, the Qur'an is insisting that human beings are unique, unlike anything in Heaven and on Earth, insofar as we have shouldered a responsibility or a trust from God. As such, human beings are not beasts. Indeed, in a stroke of genius the Qur'an assigns the world of pre-Islamic Arabia a name, *al-Jahiliyah*, the time of irrationality or absence of *hilm* (forbearance), thus highlighting the difference between Arabia and the already civilized monotheistic cultures around the Arabs. The Qur'an called those pagans who refused to accept the concept that everyone is fully responsible for his/her deeds "beasts"; indeed, beasts were better off. In short, God willed an end to their barbaric existence.

Those salvific religions, as we see, create a peculiar situation: the promised life, to the degree that it is the measure of our worth, becomes the main force in our earthly life. This is what the Makkans ridiculed, for this new worldview rendered their wealth, lineage, honor, bravery, and generosity – the values of a tribal warrior society – insignificant. To add insult to injury, the Qur'an was asking them to fear the Lord, humble themselves, and surrender their will to God, thus inverting their whole system of values. Traditionally, one's worth had been precisely measured by one's valor, courage, and total disregard for any danger, whether human or natural. To be asked to have the fear of God guide their lives was an affront to their manly sensibilities. All of the talk about Heaven and Hell sounded like threats and enticements, and the pagans were not impressed. Indeed, in one instance the Makkans asked for the chastisement to be sent rather than surrender to it:

Whenever our revelations are recited to them, they say: "We have heard them. If we wished, we could say the like. They are but fables of the ancients." They also say: "Lord, if this be Your revealed truth, then rain down upon us stones from Heaven or send some dreadful scourge to punish us." (8:31-33)

The more the Makkans refused to submit and continued to argue, the more detailed the description of the afterlife became: it was a garden full

of rivers of honey and wine, blossoming trees, and endless banquets of food and enjoyment. The blessed were adorned with cloth befitting royalty, jewelry, and attending servants. Hell, a roaring pit with a vindictive tongue that lashed the unbelievers with fire and taunts, was guarded by merciless angels who never answered the pitiful screams of its tortured and burning inhabitants. Their begging for water to quench their thirst was endless, and eventually the angels would relent only to give them a boiling drink that cut their innards and split their guts open. Burned, their skins are repeatedly replenished anew. This was no death and no life as the Qur'an describes it.

The torment was not a private matter either. Heaven seems to overlook Hell, and the Qur'an has dramatic scenes where the denizens of both converse and quiz each other:

And the people of Heaven cried out to the people of Hell: "What our Lord promised we have found to be true. Have you too found the promise of your lord to be true?" "Yes," they will answer, and a herald will cry out among them: "Cursed are the evil doers who have debarred others from the path of God and sought to make it crooked and who had no faith in the life to come." (7:44-45)

The Qur'an is also at pains to express the boundless possibility of delights available in the coming world. It contains things that human beings have neither seen nor heard of before. Later Muslims took this to mean that things there are of a different order: human beings do not age, defecate, sweat, bleed, or cry; their beauty never fades; their powers never diminish and their senses are always keen; their desires are answered even before they utter or think them; and their abodes and palaces are of pure gold and marble. The same is true also for the torments of Hell, for human beings will not be allowed to die, no matter how much they suffer.

I would like to discuss a few of the many details mentioned by the Qur'an, since they can give us a glimpse of the complexity of the details offered. There are, for example, horrifying features created to add to the torment of the damned, the most notorious being the Zaqquq tree:

Is this not a better welcome than the Zaqquq tree? We have made this tree a scourge for the unjust. It grows in the nethermost part of Hell, bearing fruit like devils' heads. On it they shall feed, and with it they shall cram their bellies, together with draughts of scalding water. Then to Hell shall they return. (37:62-68)

The same tree is mentioned in another instance:

The fruit of the Zaqqum tree shall be the sinner's food. Like dregs of oil, like scalding water, it shall simmer in his/her belly. A voice will cry: "Seize the sinner, drag him/her into the depths of Hell, and then pour scalding water over his/her head, saying: 'Taste this, illustrious and honorable one! This is the punishment that you doubted.'" (44:43-50)

Parts of the Qur'an's descriptions of the world to come are sometimes difficult to decipher. For example, the Qur'an mentions a place called al-A'raf, most probably the first mention of purgatory in human history – a place of cleansing before one's proper admittance to Paradise.

No talk about the Qur'an's depiction of Paradise is complete without a mention of its sensational maidens, the famous houris. Many who know nothing about Islam know about these, and to many non-Muslims they are the symbol of a crude religion. If polemicists still enjoy discussing and ridiculing these maidens, scholars, who are titillated all the same, have tried to determine this myth's origins. Recently, I advanced a solution to this riddle, not that it matters ultimately, for although I am part of the higher critical tradition of Biblical scholarship, on which Qur'anic studies is modeled, I find the obsession with origins more telling about our intellectual disposition than about the document we ultimately are studying.

All the same, I did offer my own analysis. I have argued that the houris are nothing but a reflection of the mythical figure of Hera the *buopis*, the cow-eyed goddess of marriage and consort of Zeus. What most people do not know is that beside the houris, there are also young servants, ephebe boys who are cup bearers to the believers. This is also nothing but Gany-mede, Zeus' other consort. Thus the blessed will be a Zeus-like figure, a deified new human being who is now enjoying the life of the pagan world's deities, which was so much the desire of humanity. The Qur'an was not only assuring the pagans of immortality, but of a life akin to that of the Olympian deities. The Qur'an is nothing if not the most complicated response to the troubled world of late Antiquity: it harmonized Judaism and Christianity and promised the Olympian life to converted pagans.

The Qur'an's Paradise and Hell are thus a summation of late Antiquity's world: it upholds the Christian and Jewish resurrection myth and the pagan life of the deities, and presents human beings as new creatures enjoying an Olympian existence with eternal life. Humanity, as such, has at last lived to see its perfection.

The mandate of this lecture asks that the speaker talk about his/her own reflections on the issue of life after death. I, of course, have so far avoided that, not because I am shying away from it, but because I thought to leave it

to the very end. My view of the whole issue of faith is one of totality: if you believe in anything, you are no different from any other formal believers. Thus to believe in a philosophical God (that is, a God Who is fashioned such that He is acceptable philosophically) is little different to me than a theological God, or, for that matter, an inconsistent God, for faith makes equals of us all. Having said that, I think contemporary faith is different from its pre-modern counterpart. We believe, but on our own terms. Each one of us is thus a full theologian, an orthodox on our own, a remarkable democratization of religious life. Thus we are no longer surprised to see Muslims who do not fit our conception of what Islam is all about. This is so because of our very lives now, their consumer nature and consumptive qualities (both consuming material and being ourselves consumed in the process), make any attempt at a rigid spiritual life impossible even when in conformity we are very selective; but more importantly, we are able to decide for ourselves the worth of what we are doing.

I have yet to speak of my attitude to life after death. I am not sure how to describe myself, for although I do believe in a life after death, when you probe me you will find that I am not clear about what precisely I am talking about. But actually it does not matter, for as I said, even those who have faith in an afterlife are busy living life in an immortal mode. Perhaps what counts is the trappings of the funeral. I have no hesitation about that. When I die, I want a Muslim funeral – not a generic Muslim one, but one held in my hometown with my own relatives around me, like I have seen it done all my life. I hope to have one like that, for that would make me very happy.