

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term II.5

Opening Comments

Tonight, we turn our attention to the understanding of life, death, and life in the Muslim tradition, beginning with a selection of texts from the Quran and the Hadith. In order to orient us to these texts, I would like to begin with a brief overview of the life of Muhammed, and then of the relationship of the Quran which he recited to the scriptures of Jews and Christians.

Muhammed born in Mecca in 570, and his father died before his birth. His mother died when he was five, and he was raised by his paternal grandfather. His grandfather died three years later, so he was raised by his paternal uncle. This is why God tells him in the Quran: “Did not God find you an orphan and give you shelter and care? And He found you wandering, and gave you guidance. And he found you in need, and made you independent” (93:6-8). He married Khadija, the widow of a wealthy Meccan merchant, in 595. Four sons survived this marriage.

By 610, Muhammed became deeply disturbed by the idolatry and polytheism of Mecca, as well as by the materialism of this trading center. He withdrew to a cave at Mt. Hira outside of Mecca in order to fast and contemplate. During this time, he had an overwhelming experience of transcendence, and was told to recite verses in beautiful Arabic.

96:1 Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created Man of a blood-clot. Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the Pen, taught Man that he knew not. No indeed; surely Man waxes insolent, for he thinks himself self-sufficient. Surely unto thy Lord is the Returning.

Notice that the first oracle highlights the theme of returning to God, which is a theme we will encounter in the discussion of life after death.

After three years, he finally told others in his clan about these revelations, which become the Quran, which means “recitation.” Opposition to these revelations grew in Medina, as they condemned polytheism and the neglect of the poor and the orphan for the sake of mercantile greed.

107:1 Hast thou seen him who cries lies to the Doom? That is he who repulses the orphan and urges not the feeding of the needy. So woe to those that pray and are heedless of their prayers, to those who make display and refuse charity.

This opposition culminated in an attempt to assassinate Muhammed, and it became clear that he had to leave Mecca. In 622, he undertook the *Hijra* to Yathrib, which was later renamed Medina, the City of the Prophet. This marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. A treaty was drawn up with the Jews and pagans of Medina for the mutual protection of Muslims.

Between 625-28, battles broke out between Muslims in Medina and their opponents in Mecca. Muhammed thought the Jews were siding with Mecca. He felt deeply betrayed, and expelled and/or executed major Jewish tribes in area of Medina. By 630, Mecca was taken by Muslims without bloodshed, and became the center of Muslim expansion. Mohammed made his final trip to Mecca in 632 and died that same year in Medina on June 8. Between 632-750, Islam expanded rapidly throughout Arabia, north Africa, Spain, the Middle East, and Asia.

It is clear that Muhammed understood the recitations he was receiving from God to be the culmination, and hence the confirmation, of all the previous messages God had revealed to humanity, beginning with Adam, Abraham, and Moses, right up through the prophets to Jesus son of Mary. And he insists that all of these prophets told of the future coming of Muhammed.

26:194 Truly it is the revelation of the Lord of all Being, brought down by the Faithful Spirit upon thy heart, that thou mayest be one of the warners, in a clear, Arabic tongue. Truly it is in the Scriptures of the ancients.

87:15 Surely this is in the ancient scrolls, the scrolls of Abraham and Moses.

God describes Muhammed as “the unlettered Prophet” (7:157), which means that he did not study the Torah or the Gospels, but received the Quran directly from God, as is maintained by both the Sunni and Shia traditions. However, as already mentioned, Muhammed knows Jews in the area, as well as Christians, so he not only knows of the Torah and the Gospel, but he also cites passages from the Talmud, and knows of Christian monks. On the other hand, it is not clear that what Muhammed calls the Torah is the same as the first five books of the Bible, and that what he calls the Gospel is the same as the writings of the New Testament. The Quran seems to want to correct or even replace these texts as much as it wants to confirm them. Many of the same figures appear in the Quran as appear in the Bible—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, etc.—but the stories about each of them are often dramatically different.

Muhammed initially found the Christians to be more receptive to his message than the Jews, because the Christians who heard his recitation were deeply moved by it and became believers.

5:85 they wax not proud; and when they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognize. They say, 'Our Lord, we believe; so do Thou write us down among the witnesses.'

However, it soon became clear to Muhammed that neither Jews nor Christians were receptive to the recitation of the Quran, as they maintained that their own books, either the Torah or the Gospel, contain the final revelation of God.

2:80 And We gave to Moses the Book, and after him sent succeeding Messengers; and We gave Jesus son of Mary the clear signs, and confirmed him with the Holy Spirit.

When there came to them a Book from God [i.e., the Quran], confirming what was with them, they disbelieved in it; and the curse of God is on the unbelievers. Evil is the thing they have sold themselves for, disbelieving in that which God sent down.

85 And when they were told, 'Believe in what God has sent down,' they said, 'We believe in what was sent down on us'; and they disbelieve in what is beyond that, yet it is the truth confirming what is with them.

He concluded that neither Jews nor Christians would become Muslims, but they would instead insist that everyone follow their own religion, even though they radically disagree with each other about what the true religion is.

2:113: Never will the Jews be satisfied with thee, neither the Christians, not till thou followest their religion.

Because they will not believe what God reveals through Muhammed, neither Jews nor Christians can appeal to Abraham as their ancestor, because Abraham was a Muslim, not a Jew or a Christian. By refusing to believe Muhammed, Jews and Christians do not share the faith of Abraham.

People of the Book! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham? The Torah was not sent down, neither the Gospel, but after him. What, have you no reason?

3:60 No; Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was a Muslim and one pure of faith; certainly he was never of the idolaters. Surely the people standing closest to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet, and those who believe; and God is the Protector of the believers.

However, the Quran also shows a surprising amount of respect for the two other people of the Book, the Jews and the Christians. It can appear at times as though God intentionally sent the Torah to the Jews, the Gospel to the Christians, and the Quran to the Muslims, so that each might obey the teaching they received from God and compete with one another in works of righteousness, so that they all might stand before the judgment of God on the last day.

To every one of you We have appointed a right way and an open road.

If God had willed, He would have made you one nation; but that He may try you in what has come to you. So be you forward in good works; unto God shall you return, all together; and He will tell you of that whereon you were at variance.

There seems to be no way of resolving the dialectical tension one sees in the Quran between the negative and positive things it says about the people of the Book. However, the upshot of its message seems clear: if Jews and Christians truly held to the revelation that came down to them from God, they would believe the revelation that came down to all of them from Muhammed, for the Quran claims that what God reveals through Muhammed confirms what God revealed through Jesus, even as Jesus confirms what God revealed through Moses.

It is clear that the Quran shares with the Talmud and the Gospels the belief that God will raise the dead and judge all people at that time, rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. However, it is illuminating to me to see the way the Quran is often at pains to highlight the boundedness of human life by death. Unlike the book of Genesis, the Quran does not see death coming on humanity as a result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Both life and death come from God. “There is no god but He. He gives life, and makes to die.” There are several truths that the Quran wants us to learn from this claim. First, and perhaps most importantly, we should “Believe then in God, and in His Messenger, the Prophet of the unlettered folk, who believes in God and His words, and follow him; haply so you will be guided.” Since God gives life and makes us die, we should realize that God is powerful over everything, so that we see that we have no other protector besides God. We also learn that we shall all be judged by God, while knowing that God is all-forgiving, and that we all will return to God.

One of the most interesting claims made by the Quran is that God takes our souls every night when we sleep. If God returns them in the morning, we continue to live, but on the day God does not return our soul, we die. “It is He who recalls you by night, and He knows what you work by day; then He raises you up therein, that a stated term may be determined; then unto Him shall you return, then He will tell you of what you have been doing.” We hear this also in the prayer Muhammed prayed every morning when he awoke. “Praise be to the One who brought me back to life after causing me to die, and to God is the Resurrection.” We also learn from the Hadith that angels come to the righteous when they die and take their souls through the seven heavens to Allah, whose abode is above the heavens, so that the name of the soul may be recorded for the Day of Resurrection. Then the soul is brought back to the earth to await the time of its resurrection, “for I created them from [the earth], and I shall return them to it, then I shall take them out from it again.”

This could mean that unlike the Rabbis, there is no intermediate state for the soul either in the Garden of Eden or in Gehenna, for the Quran says the reward and punishment of souls will take place when soul and body are raised and judged by God. “Every soul shall taste of death; you shall surely be paid in full your reward on the Day of Resurrection. Whosoever is removed from the Fire and admitted to the Garden, shall win the triumph. The present life is but the joy of delusion.” Another passage not in our

reading makes it sound as though the dead sleep in the grave until they are awakened by the trumpet blast on the Day of Resurrection. “And the trumpet will be blown. Then, behold, they will rush forth from their graves unto their Lord. They will say, ‘O, woe unto us! Who has raised us from our place of sleep?’ This is that which the Compassionate did promise; and the message bearers spoke true” (36:51-52). However, the Muslim tradition takes a very different view of this question, based on Surah 3:168:

Count not those who were slain in God's way as dead, but rather living with their Lord, by Him provided, rejoicing in the bounty that God has given them, and joyful in those who remain behind and have not joined them, because no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow, joyful in blessing and bounty from God, and that God leaves not to waste the wage of the believers.

This idea is echoed in another passage of the Quran: “And say not of those who are slain in the way of God, ‘They are dead.’ No, they are alive, but you are unaware” (2:154). We also see this thought in the Hadith about martyrs: “No soul that has a good standing with Allah and dies would wish to go back to the life of this world, except for the martyr. He would like to be returned to this life so that he could be martyred again, for he tastes the honor achieved from martyrdom.”

It becomes very clear, then, that for the Quran it is not enough to say that God gives us life and makes us die. Rather, we must say that God gives us life, death, and life. “Surely God is All-gentle to men, All-compassionate. It is He who gave you life, then He shall make you dead, then He shall give you life.” This is succinctly stated in the blessing given to John the Baptist: ‘Peace be upon him, the day he was born, and the day he dies, and the day he is raised up alive!’ Or in the words of Mary: ‘Peace be upon me, the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive!’ And the Quran even has Jesus say, “Peace be upon me for the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I am raised alive” (19:33).

There are many other issues that arise in the reading for tonight, but I want to break off now so that we have time to discuss these issues together.