

Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell

Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell: A Christian Perspective

In Christian tradition, death is the end of individual life on earth, but not the end of personal consciousness, which survives the death of the body as the soul. Death, then, is the separation of the soul from the earthly body. However, the whole Christian tradition hopes for reunification of the soul with a resurrected and transformed body at the end of history, so the soul will, once again, be embodied in the resurrection.

The process of death is difficult for most people. Not only does it entail pain, but increased dependence on others. Consequently, many people hope for a quick and painless death. But in Christian tradition, a sudden and unexpected death is not a good death. This is because Christians believe that at death one comes into the presence of God, and therefore of judgment. For this one needs to be prepared. Jesus teaches that we must repent (Mark 1:14), learn to love one another (Matthew 22:36-40) and forgive those who have wronged us, otherwise we ourselves will not be forgiven (Matthew 6:14-15). The time of dying therefore is an extremely important period in which to forgive others, say goodbye to loved ones, settle one's material affairs, and most importantly make one's peace with God. Death is the end of our earthly journey, but is the beginning of the much longer journey in the afterlife. In Christian teaching, this afterlife journey can be a beautiful and fulfilling experience or it can be traumatic (see Matthew 5; 25: 31-46).

Final Judgment

The New Testament is clear that at the end of time all human beings will be judged. Jesus' well known parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25: 31-46) depicts Jesus returning at the end of time as the judge of all people (the Last Judgment). Those who have fed the hungry, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited those in prison, will inherit heaven. But those who have not cared for the poor and unfortunate will be condemned to eternal punishment. Similarly, many passages in the New Testament state that human beings will be judged according to their works. In the Book of Revelation we read: "And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done" (Rev. 20: 13). Even Paul writes: "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil." (2 Cor. 5:10). Further: "He will repay according to each one's deeds.... For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Romans 2: 6-13).

However, there is a strong tradition in Christianity that deeds alone are not enough to obtain salvation; faith in God and in the saving role of Jesus Christ is also necessary. No one states this more emphatically than Paul: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith

apart from the works of the law” (Romans 3:28)... “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand” (Romans 5:1-2). Paul’s argument is complex and has been the source of much controversy in Christian history (see “Faith, Belief, and Works”). Simply put, Paul argues that no one can fulfill the law; all are sinners. Only Christ fulfilled the law. In dying for our sins, he took upon himself the punishment for sin. If we put our faith in him as savior, we obtain the righteousness of God through this faith. But this faith is not just verbal confession; for Paul, we have to live in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, above all, the gift of love (I Corinthians 13:13). If we do not live in the Spirit, we are living in the flesh (Galatians 5:16-25) and cannot please God.

Christians agree that faith in God and in the saving work of Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation. But they differ on how important good works are. Lutherans and Calvinists traditionally have held that Christians are saved by faith alone; Catholics, and many evangelicals hold that works also count in the judgment.

Personal Judgment

Besides the judgment at the end of time, most Christians hold that those who die are judged immediately after their death. The righteous go to heaven; the wicked go to hell. Roman Catholics hold that there is also another after-death state, Purgatory. Purgatory is actually a part of heaven—all those who go to Purgatory eventually will reach heaven. But because their love of God and others was imperfect, these souls need a further purification after death. Actually, according to Roman Catholicism, this may be most of the dead. Very few, after all, die with a perfect love of God and neighbor, or with a perfect faith in Christ; most do not. At the same time, only those who have irrevocably decided against God find themselves in hell. Most persons who die are neither perfect in faith and love, nor resolutely opposed to God. Therefore, it may be the case that for most of the dead there is an opportunity for further purification in love after death. Protestants, however, typically deny this belief, and hold that faith in Christ is sufficient to reach heaven. But ‘faith’ in this sense does not mean simple verbal confession of belief in the Lordship of Jesus. Jesus himself explicitly states that verbal confession is not enough: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). In any case, though there is disagreement on the existence and nature of Purgatory, most Christians do agree that there is a personal judgment after death, such that the righteous will be with God after death and the wicked will be cut off from God by their own choice. The nature of the state of the soul after death, however, is not very clear in most Christian traditions, nor is it widely discussed.

Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the model and reason for the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead at the end of history. Resurrection is not a resuscitation; it

is the elevation of the physical body to a transformed state which is not limited to our space-time universe (see I Corinthians 15). The resurrected Jesus, according to the accounts in the gospel, appeared to the disciples after his death; ate with them, and could be touched by them; his body not that of a ghost (Luke 24: 39-40). But at the same time he appeared and disappeared in front of them, indicating that his resurrected body transcended our space and time (Luke 24:31; John 20:26). Almost no one thinks that the resurrected body of Jesus can be found somewhere in our universe. Therefore, if the resurrected Jesus exists now, as most Christians believe, he must exist in a state which transcends this universe.

Christians believe that at the end of time all the dead will be resurrected as Jesus was. Where will this occur? Probably not on this earth, as we know it, because it seems well established that this earth will be incinerated when our sun cools and expands, about five billion years from now. Nor will the solar system or our galaxy be immune from destruction--most likely, the universe will keep on expanding and the stars will eventually run out of fuel, cool, blacken, and die, leaving an empty, black, and cold universe in which life could not exist. But Christian hope in the resurrection does not depend on the ultimate fate of this universe, but on the faithfulness of God, and on God's ability to raise the dead in another kind of environment which is suitable to resurrected life. Like the resurrected state of Jesus, it will be a material existence which transcends this universe, this space and time.

Heaven

Theologically, heaven is the fullness of the presence of God (Psalm 16:11: "In your presence there is fullness of joy.") But heaven is also the experience of community, the community of all the saints or the blessed who are at one with God in the afterlife. Finally, Romans 8 (and Revelation 20) offer us the hope of a resurrected creation "for the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). Heaven, then, will not just be a state of the soul, but of the soul embodied in a resurrected body, within a resurrected environment. That is the heart of Christian hope.

Hell

Hell is simply isolation from God, who is the source of all blessings. Those in hell, by their attitudes and their deeds, have chosen to turn against God. God is still present in hell, however, but those in hell have effectively tuned God out, so that, while God is present to them, they are not present to God. In traditional Christian teaching, hell is eternal--Jesus speaks of "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25: 46). However, there is a good deal of debate among contemporary Christian theologians as to the existence and eternity of hell. Many would argue that condemnation to an eternity of punishment is excessive cruel, and incompatible with a God of love.

Dr Terence Nichols

Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell: A Muslim Perspective

The Qur'an reminds us that every soul will taste death (21:35) and that it is a fate that no one can avert even if a person were to hide in lofty towers (4:78). The Islamic view of death is overall positive. Death is seen as a return to the Lord. Hence, when someone dies, Muslims quote a verse from the Qur'an stating "from God we come and to Him we shall return."

Death is also part of the broader Qur'anic vision of the purpose of God's creation of human beings. They are tested in this world; death signifies the end of the testing period. Death is also a manifestation of God's power for He decides the appointed time (*ajal*) for every person. He also decides when the day of judgment (*qiyama*) will take place.

In the Islamic understanding, death is not the end of life but only the end of the appointed period during which human beings are tested. It is a transitional phase in which the spirit (*ruh*) is separated from the body. Thus, death is an essential part of Allah's creation and signifies the continuation of a different form of life. To signify this transition from a physical to spiritual form of life, the Qur'an talks of the dead being received and interrogated by angels (4:97). The term *barzakh* (barrier) is used to refer to purgatory (the period between death and the day of judgment) although the term is used in a different context in the Qur'an.

Having tested human beings, it is part of God's justice that He holds them accountable for their deeds. Hence, judgment (*qiyama*) is an integral part of the Qur'anic ethos and intrinsically linked to creation. God, who is the sole source of creation and sustenance, is the master of the day of judgment. For the Qur'an, eschatological judgment is inevitable (3:9) for God is swift in dealing with the account (*hisab*). Belief in the last judgment, with the concomitant belief in paradise (*al-janna*) for those who performed good deeds and in hell (*jahanna*) for those who did not believe in God and did evil is one of the pillars of faith.

In 75:26-8 there is reference to an initial judgment occurring immediately after death, while other passages in chapter 56 (*al-Waqi'a*, "The Event"), speak of the inevitable event, alluding to the hour of judgment, when each soul will be evaluated according to what it has earned. The rendering of accounts - required from all people - is to be given to God alone (13:40; 26:113). God is "prompt in demanding an account" (2:202, 3:19 and 199) of each person's actions, which will have been inscribed on a "scroll." The day of judgment is described as the day when the world will be rolled up like a scroll; an atom's weight of good will be manifest and so will an atom's weight of evil.

Time of the Last Judgment

The Qur'an has a variety of allusions to the time of the day of judgment: (a) nobody, including the Prophet, can anticipate when it is expected to happen: only God knows its exact date (7:187; 31:34; 33:63; 41:47; 43:85; 79:42-4); (b) "the hour" (*al-sa'a*) maybe very close (33:63; 42:17; 54:1; 70:6-7; it is "as a twinkling of the eye or even nearer 16:77; 54:50); (c) it will occur suddenly (*baghtatan*, 7:187; 12:107; 22:55; 43:66; 47:18).

A number of preliminary "signs of the hour" are enumerated in the Qur'an. Most of these signs are natural catastrophes and some of them appear collectively. In 81:1-14: the sun will be darkened, the stars will be thrown of their course, the mountains will be set moving, the pregnant camels will be neglected, the savage beasts will be mustered, the seas will be set boiling (or will overflow), the souls will be joined (with their bodies), the buried female infant will be asked for what sin she was slain, the scrolls will be unrolled, heaven will be stripped away, hell will be set blazing and paradise will be brought near. The mountains (will fly) like "tufts of carded wool" (101:5) and graves will be overturned.

Later hadith literature added other signs like the rising of the sun from the West; the appearance of the Antichrist (*al-dajjal*); the descent from heaven of the Messiah Isa (Jesus) son of Mary who will fight the Antichrist, and break the crosses. Verses 39:67-75 contain a detailed description of the events of the resurrection. The entire earth will be grasped by God's hand and the heavens will be rolled up in his right hand. The trumpet shall be blown and all creatures will die, except those whom God wills. Then, it will all be blown again and they will be tending and looking on. Every soul shall be paid in full for what it has earned.

After the accounting is done, the disbelievers shall be taken to hell until, when they have come forth, and its gates will be opened... It shall be said, 'Enter the gates of hell, do dwell therein forever!'... Then those that feared their lord shall be driven into paradise, until, when they have come forth, and its gates are opened, and its keepers will say to them: '... enter in, to dwell forever'... And you shall see the angels encircling about the throne proclaiming the praise of their lord and justly the issue shall be decided between them. Thus, it is correct to say that the hereafter, which includes the day of judgment, heaven and hell are all depicted graphically in the Qur'an.

Dr. Liyakat Takim

Points of Agreement

Muslims and Christians agree that death is the end of life, and a time in which the soul separates from the body, returns to God, and is judged. Preparation is important for death therefore. There is agreement on a general resurrection at the end of time, a general or last judgment, when all souls will have to render an account of what they have done, and will be rewarded with heaven or hell. There is debate in both traditions on whether hell is eternal, or whether some might be released from hell at some point. Also, it is held in both traditions that no one knows the time of the impending general judgment, except that

it is held that each soul is judged upon death. Even so, no one knows for sure when he or she will die, so the usual teaching in both traditions is that we have to be prepared for death at any time.

Points of Disagreement

Muslims hold that Jesus was not crucified (and that another died in his place), but was taken up into heaven. Therefore he was not resurrected. Muslims hold that God alone is our judge; Christians hold that the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ will be our judge.

Christians hold that no one can be righteous by following the law, or, what is the same thing, no one can be accounted righteous simply on the basis of his or her deeds. Therefore everyone needs an intercessor, and that intercessor is Jesus Christ. There is dispute in the Islamic tradition about intercession; some hold that Muhammad might intercede on the last day, others dispute this.

Again, Christians typically insist that the just are saved by faith (in God and in Christ), there is dispute among Christians as to the extent that we are rewarded for good works. Generally, Lutherans and Calvinist Christians deny that merit is attached to good works, and most mainline Protestants have followed this position.

Belief in the imminence of the day of judgment has attenuated among most western Christians. Likewise, among many denominations, there seems to be some uncertainty about afterlife. Generally, Muslims seems to be much more certain about the existence of afterlife, and about the judgment on the Last Day.

Points for Further Discussion

The reality of afterlife, the nature of heaven and hell, and the role of both faith and works in salvation are all points where fruitful discussion can be had among Christians and Muslims, especially since the very reality of afterlife tends to be challenged in modern contemporary settings by the assumption that nature is all that exists, and that the mind (and therefore the soul or spirit) cannot exist apart from the brain.