

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

THE REALMS OF POSTHUMOUS BECOMING

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

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

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

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

and broad, and those whose evil deeds outweighed the good slip and fall into the pits of hell. Not all who fall stay, however, because God asks for intercession on their behalf. The prophets step forth and intercede for their communities, and then all those who had safely crossed the bridge are given a chance to intercede. Finally, the "Most Merciful of the merciful" steps forward and removes from the fire a handful of souls burnt like cinders, who "had never done any good whatsoever." He casts the cinders into paradise, and people spring up like herbs after a desert flood.

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

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

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

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