bismillah ir-rahman ir-rahim -
In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful

as-salaam alaykum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatahu -
May God’s peace, mercy, and blessings be with you

I would like to begin by thanking Father Ryan for inviting me to give the response, Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse for helping me get here, Fordham for hosting me, and all of you for being here this evening.

Father Ryan outlined an introduction to a Muslim understanding of life after death. It whispered to the theologian in me to engage with speculation on what happens in the life after death. I worked up a short reflection on an unusual moment in Muslim history, when a small community of Muslims, known as the Isma’ilis, celebrated Eid al-Qiyamah, the Feast of the Resurrection. From a Muslim perspective, they acted as though they died that day and the obligations of ritual took on a radically different form. I intersected the conversation of the afterlife with one of predestination, God’s foreknowledge, and the linearity of time. While I was having a wonderful intellectual time, I realized that I may bore you to tears, or be so convoluted as to make you wish you were elsewhere.
The scholar of Religion took over, and realized the ways in which Muslims live their lives, with particular understandings of death that are far more relatable, and reflect on what theology means in practice. As I deliver this lecture, we stand about three weeks after *Eid al-Adha*, the Feast of the Sacrifice, when Muslim re-enact Abraham’s call to sacrifice his firstborn son, and that ends the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. This Wednesday is also the first evening of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar, and begins Ashura, the first ten days of the month that commemorate the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad’s favorite grandson, Husayn, on the plains of Karbala in 680 CE.

These events give us a window through which we can glimpse – not so much conceptions of life after death – but what death in this life means. Working from the aphorism attributed to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad and a person revered by the Sufis and the Shi’ah, that one should die before dying, it would seem that realizing that saying would result in a richer afterlife. In particular, if we take the idea that Islam started as an apocalyptic movement,¹ then we should expect ritual and commemorative life to reflect some notion of living the afterlife now.

**The Hajj**

The Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is perhaps one of the most iconic visions of Muslims participating in rituals. Spanning three days, the believers not only act as Abraham, Ishmael, and Hagar, but act in a liminal state, being neither of this world nor the next. I offer here, not just a description of the days of events, but commentary offered by the great Persian poet-philosopher Nasr Khusraw in his poem called “The Secrets of Pilgrimage.”²
The first step in joining in the Hajj ritual is the donning of the *ihram*, or plain white cloth. This cloth represents purity and the placing of all Muslims on equal footing. It is highly evocative of the burial shroud common in Muslim funerary practices, and the 20th century Persian thinker, Ali Shariati, uses the term *kafan*, or shroud, to describe the *ihram*. Further emphasizing this connection, he states, “[the pilgrim] witnesses his own dead body and visits his own grave…The scene is like the day of judgment.”

The Ka’aba, the cube-like structure that is the focus of the Hajj, is a nexus point, where the connection between heaven and earth is focused. It is believed to have been built by Adam, wiped out in the Noahic Flood, rebuilt by Abraham and Ismaili, and cleansed and rededicated by Muhammad. The precincts around the Ka’aba are sanctified, and the believer enters an altered state of being, with the idea that she will be spiritually reborn at the end of this process. However, this should not preclude the idea of physical death, as historically the journey to and from Mecca was arduous and pilgrims prepared as if they were going to die on the trip.

After the donning of the *ihram*, the days of ritual begin, and Nasr Khusraw, our 11th century poet, describes the physical actions as spiritual actions in heaven. He asks of his friend, returning from the Hajj, if he circled the Ka’aba in the same way that angels circle Throne of God; or, if when he “separated from the Ka’aba…Did you bury yourself there as if you were/already a heap of putrefied flesh and bones?”

The goal of the believer is to enter this liminal area of the Ka’aba, prepared as though she is going to die, and come out of the experience reborn. In the film *Malcolm X*, a voiceover is added to Malcolm’s description of his Hajj experience that paraphrases a lengthier section of his autobiography. The narration has Malcolm talk about “the spiritual rebirth which I was blessed
to undergo as a result of my pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca."\(^5\) This theme of spiritual rebirth is common, and can be witnessed in a fair number of Hajj narratives collected by Michael Wolfe.\(^6\) It is within the sacred precincts that the believer dies, is judged, and is resurrected.

**Sufis, Shi’ahs, and Sunnis, Ya Husayn!**

From a mystical perspective, one does not need to go on Hajj to experience this death before dying. There are ritual practices that help tame one’s soul and increase spiritual growth. In part, there is a strong ascetic element to these practices. In a Sufi saying attributed to Jesus, he says, “Seeing this world is like wanting a drink of sea water, for the more you drink the more thirsty you become until you die.”\(^7\)

This austerity associated with Jesus became a favorite theme, not only among Sufis, but also among more esoteric Shi’ah groups. Ali, the first divinely appointed guide of the Shi’ah and considered to be the first Sufi, says of Jesus

> He used a stone for his pillow, put on coarse clothes and ate rough food. His condiment was hunger. His lamp at night was the moon. His shade during the winter was just the expanse of earth eastward and westward. His fruits and flowers were only what grow from the earth for the cattle. He had no wife to allure him, nor any son to give grief, nor wealth to deviate (his attention), nor greed to disgrace him. His two feet were his conveyance and his two hands his servant.\(^8\)

A later tenth century group, known as the Brethren of Purity, continues with this idea and offers commentary as to how the disciples acted after being in Jesus’ presence. They say:
They saw what Christ (peace be upon him) had told and seen with the eye of the heart and the light of certainty and sincerity of faith, and they sought the other world, abstaining from the pride and allurements of this world, and thus being saved from the slavery of the world and its lusts. They put on patched garments and travelled with Christ from place to place.  

While the rejection of attachment to the world is clearly an important part of spiritual discipline, it is not the only part, or the most important part. The early Shi’ah Imams would act in such a way as though they were attempting to bring the afterlife here. Their prayers and sermons are littered with references to feeling the heat of hellfire, as though they wish to be judged and forgiven in this world, so that their afterlife is a resurrection that is bountiful.

These prayers and sermons determine a participatory culture, where believers can seek to emulate the judgment part of the afterlife in this world. Perhaps nowhere is that more evident than in Ashura, the first ten days of Muharram, which mark the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad’s favorite grandson, Husayn. By engaging in sessions known as majalis (s. majlis), believers are transported to the ten-day attack on Husayn and his small band of loyalists, including his infant son. The believer hears how the compatriots are denied water; how they are constantly harangued by a barrage of arrows; and ultimately, how Husayn is slaughtered, as his ill baby son is saved by Husayn’s sister, Zaynab. The listener, for lack of a better English word, is redeemed by sharing in the suffering of the Imam and his family.

However, this poetic culture, while deeply embedded in Shi’ah ritual life, is not limited to that community. The famous Sunni Sufi singer, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, sings a marsiya, a poetic genre designed to tell the story of Karbala. The opening line is:
When believers remember the Martyr of Karbala
The world becomes upset
Blood flows as tears
Oh Husayn!¹²

The listeners, regardless of the community to which they belong, cannot help but be moved by the tale of suffering, and suffer with Husayn by proxy.

**It’s the End of the World as We Know It…**

From the Hajj to Muharram, we see the different ways that Muslims engage with conceptions of death and dying in this world, as though it were possible to die in this world. The logical extension of these practices is to live as though it were possible to have the afterlife in this life; a move beyond simply “dying,” or removing undesirable aspects of one’s personality. I began talking of a group that, for a brief period, recognized the *qiyama*, or resurrection, as happening on earth.

The thirteenth century Shi’ah polymath, Nasr ad-Din Tusi, argues that Prophet Muhammad brought a religious system (*shari’ah*) that, when prophethood turned into Imamate, was wedded to *qiyama* through Ali. Ritual action became a way of expressing Divine realities in this world.¹³ Of course, what is important in this construction is that for the Ismaili community of Alamut, where this was happening, there was a belief that the *qiyama* is a spiritual resurrection, not a bodily one.¹⁴ Jalal Badakhchani, in commenting on this theory, states, “Tusi interprets the *qiyama*…as a call to the faithful to secure their spiritual resurrection and salvation here and now in the present world…[which] requires a radical transformation of one’s life….”¹⁵

Of course, Tusi argues that the experience of *qiyama* in this world is not the end goal. There is still work for a believer to do. In fact, Tusi argues that believing that the *qiyama* is the
aim is a form of idol-worship that distracts one from God.\textsuperscript{16} This mirrors early Sufi thought, like that of the ninth century Rabia al-Basri. There is a story that says she was seen running through the streets of Basra with a bucket of water in one hand, and a torch of fire in the other. When asked what she was doing, she said she wanted to put out the fires of hell and burn down the gates of heaven. She did not want to love God from the fear of hell or the promise of heaven, but for the sake of God alone.

**Conclusion**

This approach to death and afterlife in this world is the natural philosophical continuation of Muslim ritual life. The Hajj brings a Muslim into closer proximity to her own mortality, and the idea that it is possible to be in a direct, powerful relationship with the Divine. There are ritual practices and approaches that serve to make the past present, and the other world manifest in this world. This makes the approach of “death before dying” something that is accessible to everyone at every time. However, the focus still needs to be on God, rather than on Paradise or heaven. Tusi, in explaining the *qiyama*, argues that to die willfully now, in a spiritual sense, is to awaken to the true nature of God, and provide the true purpose of life.\textsuperscript{17}

We move from the basic understanding of life after death, to sophisticated ritual development that creates a virtuous philosophical cycle for the understanding of what an afterlife in this world could mean. Once the *qiyama* comes, we are left with a community of the walking dead. Perhaps not the brain-eating zombie types so prevalent in our culture now, but dead nonetheless, who attempt to redefine what life after death could look like.
NOTES

1 See, for example, the works David Cook, Fred Donner, and Abbas Amanat.


4 Hunzai and Kassam, Shimmering Light, 73.


8 Oddbjørn Leirvik, Images of Jesus Christ in Islam (New York: Continuum, 2010), 75.

9 Ibid., 78.


12 From the 5-volume Concert in Paris series, published by Ocora France.


16 Ibid., 32, 39.

17 Ibid., 56.