

# **Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses: The Concept of Death and the Concept of Life in Judaism, Christianity and Islam**

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## **I. The Concept of Death**

### 1. The Concept of Death in Judaism (Prof. Dr. David C. Kraemer)

The concept of death in Judaism is subject to immense inner diversity and significant change over time. There is already some shift within the Hebrew Bible, with the (late) book of Daniel anticipating future resurrection, while earlier books do not really have a concept of life after death. This shift led to a less negative view of death, whereas in the earlier paradigm, death was the biggest source of ritual impurity. This is a reason for the purification rituals around dead bodies, although these rituals are also meant for the comfort of the deceased, as until early modern times many Jews believed that the dead are still conscious, merely no longer mobile. This belief in survival after death is shared with Islam. As a result of the confrontation with early Christianity, Jewish thinkers began to pay more attention to the afterlife. Much later, some kabbalistic writings also include a belief in the resurrection. An increase in scientific worldviews in modern times, however, led to a rising tendency to identify the death of the body and the death of the soul. Moreover, the notion of divine justice became difficult to believe in for many due to bitter modern experiences, which contributed to the declining belief in an afterlife. A return to the early Biblical skepticism about life after death can therefore be seen, although there is today a large spectrum of beliefs depending on education and the surrounding culture. There is no agreement among rabbis and scholars about the role of divine judgement after death or of “judgement day”.

### 2. The Concept of Death in Christianity (Prof. Dr. Douglas Davies)

Given that death is a universal human experience and, moreover, that the death of Jesus is at the core of Christian belief, death is naturally a central concept in Christianity. The specific emphasis differs between the various Christian traditions, e.g. the emphasis on Easter/the resurrection in Orthodox belief and ritual, the re-enactment of the sacrificial death and transcendence of death in the Catholic eucharist, and the Protestant theology of the cross. The creeds also have the theme of death and resurrection at their centre. The emotional tone of rituals around death/resurrection varies between guilt, self-reflection, grief, triumphalism, and hope. There are discussions still to be had about what this tonality of hope means for being human in the face of death. Today there is also ongoing debate around death and ecology: While death as it now exists after the Fall is seen as a corruption of an original uncorrupted nature, death is also fundamentally a part of nature as it is now. This tension, as well as the rise of woodland burials and ecological concerns about traditional rites of death (e.g. cremation, land use for cemeteries), raises new questions about conceptualising death theologically and ritually. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified debate around rites of passage, ethics, and the value of life. Both environmentalism and the pandemic create a globally shared experience of vulnerability and humility which can inspire theological answers from all monotheistic religions, whereas beliefs in an afterlife often inspired conflicts, e.g. rooted in disagreement over who has access to that afterlife.

### 3. The Concept of Death in Islam (Prof. Dr. Timothy J. Gianotti)

There is widespread belief in an angelic visitation at death, during which the spirit is taken from the body and interrogated by angels. However, the soul is believed to return to the body and stay in an interim state in the grave until the eschaton. The preparation of the body and other burial rites are seen as a *farḍ kifāya* owed to the deceased. Medieval Islamic philosophers, notably al-Fārābī and ibn Sīnā, held that the only separable part of human nature, which can outlast the body, is the intellect and that the descriptions of the afterlife are therefore at least ontologically – if not experientially in the case of ibn Sīnā – metaphorical. These philosophical theories, however, did not have a great impact on popular Muslim discourse. Mystical traditions, on the other hand, were generally oriented towards the hereafter; worldly experiences were meant to remind one of paradise or hell. According to al-Ghazālī, even being in the garden or the hellfire is an inner state, an idea which has parallels in 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mysticism. In Islamic spirituality, there are many reminders of death (e.g. falling down during prayer, wearing a garment like a death shroud during the pilgrimage, rites of grief around ‘Ašūrā), which inspire a renewed focus on life.

## **II. The Concept of Life**

### 1. The Concept of Life in Judaism (Prof. Dr. Gabriel Levy)

Concepts of life are found in any type of expressions of culture just as well as in systematic theological writing. Sources that can inform us about concepts of life in various Jewish traditions therefore include not just Biblical, Rabbinic, and later theological writings, but also rituals around the life cycle, birth, and sexuality, prayers, etc., as well as, for example, folk narratives, poetry, literature, art, and the contributions of numerous Jewish philosophers from antiquity to the modern era. The Biblical concept of life is focused on breath and blood as life force. *Nefesh* and life are nearly synonymous, are both located in the blood and belong to God. The Rabbinic tradition leaves this Biblical anthropology in place and focuses on behaviour rather than reflection on the theoretical concept of life; however, there is a beginning focus on resurrection in this period. This afterlife potentially included non-Jews who follow the Noahide laws. Jewish law also holds life to be supremely precious, as can be seen with the principle of *piquah nefesh*, i.e. the need to preserve a life superceding all other legal considerations, allowing the breaking of other laws if necessary. Jewish poets have also contributed to articulating a concept of life, from medieval poets like Solomon Ibn Gabirol to modern artists like Leonard Cohen. Common features of the concept of life among Jews are a vague concept of the “next life” with an emphasis on this world, a tendency towards monism, a view of life as hard but precious, life as shaped by *mišvot*, and an association of life with the Torah and with learning. While those features are widespread among most Jews, they are not all necessarily exclusive to Judaism.

### 2. The Concept of Life in Christianity (Prof. Dr. Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl)

In the Old Testament, “life” is a theological rather than anthropological concept, with YHWH at its centre as the living God and source of life in all creatures. In the New Testament, the divine gift of life gains in immediacy and a spiritual, rather than biological concept of life is accentuated: Jesus himself *is* the life that human beings are gifted, humans live *through* Jesus. Theologically and philosophically, the principles of reverence and responsibility for all life play a central role in Christian conceptualisations of life. The sanctity of life is an important theme

for the Catholic church, but this particular wording is relatively new, having first been used by Pope John XXIII. This idea is also central in Pope John Paul II's encyclical "Evangelium vitae" (1995), where life is portrayed as a sacred gift from God which therefore ultimately belongs to God – we cannot do with it whatever we want. Thus sanctity can also be in tension with autonomy. Different schools of Christian thought had varying approaches to the concept of life; e.g. norm ethics and virtue ethics are not contradictory but complementary ways to relate to life. The protection of life generally tends to be a point of commonality between religions, although in detail approaches differ; life is what all beings have in common. The fullness and complexity of life is reflected in the traditional image of the tree of life.

### 3. The Concept of Life in Islam (Dr. Muhammad U. Faruque)

The word *ḥayāt* ("life") is mentioned over one hundred times in the Qur'ān, referring both to the life in this world and to the hereafter. The Qur'ānic notion of a "good life" is one of belief and obedience; both whatever is good in this life and the afterlife are given by God – an idea that is also present in the *ḥadīth* collections of Buḥārī and Muslim. The life of this world is an ambiguous concept, being sometimes seen as negative or even illusionary, but also clearly ascribed value and goodness in both the Qur'ān and *aḥādīth*. From a cultural and political standpoint, life in the medieval Islamic world was shaped by numerous cultural influences that left their mark on Arabic/Islamic civilisation. Markets and mosque were at the centre of daily life, which was governed by various aspects of Islamic law, from family law to the regulation of financial transactions. For Arab philosophers such as al-Kindī and al-Fārābī, the soul (*nafs*) was the principle of a natural body which makes it a living thing. The senses of *nafs* and *ḥayāt* are therefore intertwined. According to al-Rāzī, the best thing a person can do is to dedicate their life to the pursuit of knowledge; in fact, philosophy is a way to imitate God as closely as this is possible in a human life. Avicenna thinks along similar lines, placing the status of the philosophical life above that of the ascetic. As one of the attributes of God (*al-ḥayy*, "the living"), the concept of life also plays a large role in *ṣūfī* thought, though in this sense it is understood as the divine light illuminating the human soul. Worldly life, by contrast, is described as a dream. In modern Islamic thinking, there are two major theoretical approaches to the concept of life: The first is exemplified by Mawdudi and focuses on the life of the *sharī'a* and integrates the spiritual with the worldly life. The other, exemplified by Nasr, distinguishes the exterior and interior life and lays a focus on the spiritual dimension.