

Death in world religions

Human responses to the inevitable

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Terje Oestigaard

To Gro

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	6
<i>Hinduism</i>	18
<i>Buddhism</i>	42
<i>Judaism</i>	64
<i>Christianity</i>	84
<i>Islam</i>	104
Acknowledgements	125
Literature	127
List of illustrations	129

Introduction



Introduction

It is birth, not the end of life, which is death. If one is born, one has to die, and when born, the process of dying has started because to be a human is to live a non-eternal existence. Everyone is dying and nobody can escape death. The awareness of one's own death and the inevitableness of dying make death both frightening and uncertain, but also intriguing. One reason is that the dying person is deprived of his or her own death. At the final end it is the relatives who take care of the dead and hand him or her over to the

Naraharinath, renowned yogi in Nepal, died at the age of 92, Feb. 26, 2003.

gods, who will judge and decide the deceased's destiny.

Death is the only feature which unites humans all over the world. But even

though every human being faces the same destiny, the understandings and responses to death vary greatly. In some cultures mortuary rituals are community festivals whereby the deceased is celebrated and venerated. In Western societies death is intimately associated with anxiety and grief, but even fear and sorrow are culturally dependent.

Everyone has feelings for the beloved who has departed regardless of how the person died, but it is culturally dependent where and when it is possible as an individual to express such personal emotions. During a funeral there are certain inauspicious times and places where an individual engagement may interrupt the divine interference on earth, which eventually will influence the deceased's destiny in a negative way.

Death involves different spheres of interaction between humans and gods, and one has to distinguish between the soul and the dead, the corpse and the burial, and the living and the mourners. Conceptions of death reflect religious and cosmological ideas of the great Beyond and the soul's afterlife. These ideas are explicitly or implicitly manifested in the funeral rites. Mortuary rites are a part of a set of rituals by which the living deal with the dead. The dead are important for the living, and not only as individual souls which will either ascend to Heaven or descend to Hell.

When a person dies the dead body will start to decompose, and this practical problem has to be solved in one way or another. The deceased as a corpse might be buried, cremated, mummified, or chopped up in small pieces and given to vultures. Today, the dead body might even be frozen in nitrogen, in the belief that one day science may restore life to the body. The way the descendants take care of the dead body is not, however, only a practical concern.

Cremation has been the common mode for disposing of the body in Hinduism and parts of Buddhism. Christianity forbade cremation up until the nineteenth century, today some Jews may cremate, but the Muslims still prohibit the practice because God will then not be capable of restoring the body at the Day of Resurrection. Thus, the mode by which the body is ritually decomposed has cosmological significance. The flesh of the body is invested with moral qualities. The consequences of our actions – either sins or good deeds – have materialised in the flesh and the body.

Therefore, a common feature in all world religions is that the soul or the mind is somehow embodied, and the way the soul is released from the corpse is of uttermost importance to the deceased and the descendants. Beliefs regarding the meaning of life and death are intimately connected to the qualities of the flesh. In a strict sense, the funeral in itself is the practical way in which the flesh is ritually decomposed.

However, obsequies and mortuary rituals may continue for days, years, and even for the whole of one's life after the problem of the deceased's flesh has been solved and taken care of.

The funeral in a narrow sense is the exit from this world and the entry into the Otherworld defined by the way the deceased's flesh is treated. Hence, the way the corpse is disposed of is a mode by which the relatives give the dead to the gods.

The spiritual essence of a being is eternal, and later mortuary rites are concerned and engaged with immaterial dialogues with the dead. The major and the most important transference of a person from life to death, and further on from death to life, is related to how the flesh of the body is taken care of. Therefore, as will

be seen, the type of funeral that the descendants perform is part of a religious worldview and relates to notions of eternity defining the deceased's destiny and their own view of what religion is.



Human skull, Nire cemetery, Nepal.

Death is life – it is intensified life, it challenges life, and it is the entrance to either heaven or hell, or different realms of being. If one aims to explain death one is entering an at least three thousand year old philosophical and religious debate concerning what the soul is. Is there a soul? Is the soul eternal? What happens with us after death? What is being? These questions probe into the very heart of all religious quests because they cannot be answered without including the various divine galleries and eschatological conceptions of what the Otherworld looks like. The existential notion that there is nothing outside or external to humanity and the body is a recent and highly Western belief. In world religions the soul is always superior to the body, and it is the current bodily being which separates

humans from the gods and the divine spheres in one way or another.

What distinguishes life from death is not straightforward. At the first look death seems to be

obvious: the absence of life, but this is too simple. Medically, death occurs in two ways, which illuminates the dilemma. If the heart stops, the brain may still work and a person is not technically dead, but also the other way around, when the brain dies the bodily functions may continue. By using respirators the body might be kept alive for years even if the person has no consciousness.

A person may die, mechanically speaking, when the doctors switch off the respirator. Is it the body or the consciousness which defines life, and by that, death? Thus, the boundary between life and death is not clear-cut, and it emphasises that a human consists of both mind and matter – the soul and the body. Hence, to study death is to explore how the soul and the body constitute each other, and how these inseparable spheres of being a human defining both life and death, are separated when the body becomes a decomposing matter. When the life of the body ends, the problem regarding what happens to the soul or mind becomes urgent. The separation of the soul and the body



happens at the funeral, and it is the descendants who perform the rituals which release the soul and unite it with the gods.

The dead is dependent upon his or her relatives in death, and therefore, to study what the descendants actually do with their deceased is a way of understanding religion, beliefs of life, death and

**Corpse before the cremation
pyre is lit, Nepal.**





Møllendal Crematorium, Bergen, Norway.

cosmos, and the afterlife. In a cosmological perspective the most important a person does in his or her life is to die because the stakes are so high; it invokes the divine spheres and includes eternity. Will the dead go to Heaven or Hell; will the person attain a favourable incarnation, what happens?

Defining religion is difficult, but all religions focus on answering three main questions. Firstly, what is death and what happens with us when we die? Secondly, what are ethics and the right moral way to live? Thirdly, how and why were the universe, life, humans, and gods created, and how are they related? By approaching religions from this set of questions, it becomes clear that religion frames a way of living which unites humans with the gods in a cosmic whole. Thus, religion deals with the ultimate concerns regarding life, death, and suffering, or being in a very broad sense, including both this world and the worlds to come.

Crucial in the world religions is the concept of sin. To sin is to conduct actions and behave in a way which deviates from the path and laws laid down by God. Every human has a free will because he or she may choose to oppose god's laws, but if a person does so, it has Otherworldly consequences, and he or she will be faced with a trial and subsequent judgement after death.

The world religions have developed particular places where the dead is either rewarded or punished; which are Heaven and Hell. Within the religions there are qualitative differences between these heavens and hells, but they are all working in accordance with theories of sin and retribution.

Thus, what happens to an individual soul after death is dependent upon at least two factors. Most importantly, the deceased's destiny is determined by his or her own actions when he or she was alive. If the person committed good deeds, he or she will be awarded by the respective god and elevated to the different heavens, but if the person committed heinous sins, he or she will be punished in Hell for eternity. However, the further life of the dead is not solely a consequence of his or her own deeds, but also the outcome of the descendants' performance of the funeral rites. If the relatives fail in the obsequies, the deceased may not be awarded with a place in Heaven even if the person's own actions would have qualified him for eternal joy. Therefore, a funeral is a dangerous interaction between impermanence and eternity.

Death unites society and cosmos, and it establishes an intimate and close relationship between humans and gods. The way dead people are taken care of in world religions is an entry to understanding religious beliefs, cosmological principles, social structures, and mundane matters. Death defines what it is to be a human.

Nevertheless, even though death is crucial in the constitution of society and cosmos, it does not mirror either of the realms. The way people engage in death is an active process whereby the devotees negotiate and recreate their relations with the gods and reconstitute social relations. Religion and gods are most often perceived as external and eternal to the believers, but by examining what the devotees do in their rituals, one finds that rites are transformative actions and open fields of practical considerations within an overall set of premises, which the believers perceive as divine and static. A religion is something

one acts upon, it is an ideal state of being which is negotiated, challenged, and manipulated.

Nobody can know for sure what is Beyond before one is eventually dead. There is always an uncertainty among devotees about what happens after death, no matter what or how hard one believes. Therefore, the emphasis is put on funerals as practices stressing what the descendants do and believe when they conduct the mortuary rites. Death involves eternity and the ever returning questions of the meaning of life, but it is also a highly practical concern and emotional setting for the relatives. The totality and the pervasiveness of these mutually opposing fields of life make death an entry into any kind of realm belonging to humans and humanity.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are world religions. They exhibit different practices and beliefs. Within the respective religions there are enormous differences, and local traditions have interpreted the high religion's texts and practices in numerous ways.

It is impossible to give an account of all the variation among billions of people, and a solution to the problem is to present and analyse part of the religions as they are presented and understood at the respective religions' most sacred places. In some cases this involves looking at the funerals of the major gods or prophets in the actual religions, for instance Buddha, Jesus, or Mohammed, but it is also important to see how the funerals of ordinary people differ from the funerals of the prophets. The reason why common people are treated in a different way than the prophets reveals insights into how the religions work.

Dead sadhu, Faridpur, Bangladesh.



In Hinduism the main importance is put on where the gods created the world and cosmos, and these places have ever since been the most sacred and preferred spots to die and to become cremated. In Buddhism the emphasis is laid on Buddha and one of the most renowned yogis, as well as current practices in the high Himalayas. Regarding Judaism, the emphasis will be put on Jerusalem and the Jews since they have a special role in history according to the Bible.

Judaism gave rise to both Christianity and Islam, and an archaeological perspective looking at funerals of Jews in the formative period of the Bible enables an understanding of how a religion develops, but also how the society it works within influences the development of eschatological beliefs.

Christianity is, like any religion, diverse, but the crucifixion of Jesus and the subsequent changes in the religion and its practices illuminate some of the meanings of death in Western cultures, which in turn may explain why atheism became an offspring of Christianity. Islam was founded by Mohammed, but also the Muslim religious world is manifold and



Descendants carrying the dead.

contains a variety of beliefs and practices regarding death.

In religions there is both unity and diversity. Although there are some practices which are more common than others, within each of the world religions there are multiple local traditions.

Priests and laymen discuss among themselves, within the respective religions, what the most auspicious funeral rite is supposed to be and which internal ritual parts it should consist of. There might be a mainstream funeral type, or certain practices or traits which are common in the majority of the funerals within a religion, but what happens in the end is what the descendants perceive at that time to be the most auspicious rite they can give the deceased. Thus, there will

always be smaller or greater variations, which may or may not develop into separate traditions evolving for centuries or even millennia within the religions.

Regardless of what was perceived as the most preferred funeral type at a certain time in history, since every culture and religion changes, it is the totality of all the various practices and beliefs which constitute the religion.



Hå cemetery, South-Western Norway.

This becomes a particularly difficult problem when approaching beliefs regarding the Otherworld. To a devotee the divine revelations of what is to become are seen as the truth. Whether it is the Bible, Qur'an, or other holy scriptures, the problem is that none of these texts deal extensively and systematically with these issues, and hence, after the primordial revelations there are a lot of commentaries trying to solve and explain the inconsistencies or the unanswered questions in the original scriptures. If one believes that God knows everything regarding what happens on the Other side, the problem then becomes that the seers, sages, holy men, bishops or laymen, who try to elaborate the incomplete picture presented by God concerning the Otherworld, have never been there. By definition, since they are alive, they cannot know, and the ones who have departed

have never reported back, although this is the situation that the seers present; they have got reports from the Other side. Thus, there will always be a lot of opinions and contradicting views regarding Otherworldly issues, which have given reason to the separation of the world religions into different branches.

To present ideas of death in world religions is therefore a complex task. One approach to such an undertaking could have been to put emphasis on the same patterns or thoughts in each of the religions. The problem with such an approach is that even though the same features appear in all the religions, they do not have the same importance in the various cultures, rituals, and religions, and hence, it would not have encompassed the essence of the various

practices and beliefs regarding death. Each practice is culturally constituted and has a particular history.

Therefore, some case studies will be presented, and although not representative for every death ritual that is conducted, they express some central thoughts and beliefs in the respective religions. The examples give clues to how and why death is solved. The wide range of people and their respective deaths presented cover funerals of gods and prostitutes, laymen and sages, children, and people who died of contagious diseases, and many more. They cover a wide selection of humans and what they have done in life which affected their afterlife, which in the end is what religion is about.

The advantage with this approach is that one is able to meet a lot of people and witness and participate in a great number of funerals. It will not be the same people one meets in the different world religions, but the diversity of funerals explores parts of the role of death in society, namely that each human is unique and the funeral is of particular importance for those who cared for the departed. Still, since we all live in societies where we share ideas and conceptions, there are some general traits which unite and relates the individual funeral to the rest of the community, society, cosmos, and finally, God.

One feature which characterises world religions is their corpuses of sacred, written texts. The emphasis here will not be the Holy books in themselves, although it is necessary to refer to parts of them when elaborating the various eschatological beliefs of heaven and hell, or places where Otherworldly rewards or punishments are given. As indicated, regarding these issues there will be a lot of contradicting opinions, and therefore, the versions

being presented are at a general and common level, with some exceptions.

Funerals are practices performed by the devotees and the descendants. Death matters, particularly for the living, and the aim is therefore to illuminate how people react and respond to the same problem: death. The descendants have ideas of how the afterlife is when they conduct the rituals, but even while sharing the same eschatological beliefs, one may handle death and the decomposing corpse in numerous ways. Shared and common ideas of the Otherworld do not by necessity imply a prescribed way of disposing of the corpse, although in some cases it may.

Therefore, even though the high religion prescribes a “standard” type of funeral in a certain epoch in history, which will be discussed, examples that deviate from the orthodox practice will also be presented to illuminate the diversity of practices within world religions and the same eschatological beliefs.

By comparing the five world religions together, all these examples will show that even though cultural expressions, practices, and beliefs differ, the rationale and the logics behind the various practices share many common features. And more importantly, all the responses are logical and equally representative for the religion, given the cultural premises and the historical context from which they originated.

This is not surprising since, after all, they are solutions and human responses to the eternal question: what happens after death?

Since the topic of this book is death in world religions, the common and Christian dating system will not be used. Within the religions there are different reference points regarding what is *the* most important event in history. The year when Jesus was born is only one of several points of departure which could have been used as a reference point relating all other historical events to a single event. Dating events in terms of Before Christ (BC) and Anno Domini (AD), which means “in the year of our Lord”, would be biased, and therefore, although following the same chronology, the more neutral terminology Before Common Era (BCE) and Common Era (CE), will be used. Although this terminology is also biased since it is identical to the Christian chronology, it is difficult to avoid such a dating problem, and it illuminates the pervasiveness and impact thousands of years with religion have in culture and society.

**18th century burial of woman,
Sura Old Church,
Västmanland, Sweden.**



Hinduism



Hinduism

Rebirth and karma

According to Hindu tradition, a soul or an individual self has to be reborn 8,4 million times before it eventually attains salvation and reaches heaven. This circle of birth and death is called *samsara*. The soul is eternal but in this world it takes numerous bodies. Reincarnation is the process by which a soul leaves one body to take residence in another body. The death of a body is therefore the moment when this transference and replacement of the soul take place. The soul is eternal and superior to the body, and the body is seen as a material prison which limits the soul's spiritual capabilities. To be born as a human being implies limitations because every living being will eventually die, and dying means non-permanence. A bodily reincarnation can never be

Manikarnika ghat in Varanasi, India, where funeral pyres burn continuously. In between 30,000- 40,000 corpses are annually burnt in Varanasi. Hindus believe that everybody cremated here are released from the eternal cycle of millions of reincarnations.

perfect because the body will one day or another start to become sick, old and weak, which can only end with the body's death.

The ultimate aim is never to be born again

because then one is eternal, which means divine. This eternal state is characterised by being united with the cosmic energies. If one is able to escape an incarnation involving a material body or prison, it is impossible to die. It is the body which eventually will

die and decompose, not the soul since it is eternal. The only things that separate this world and Heaven are materiality in general and the body in particular, which hinder the soul's spiritual unity with the gods. Heaven is perfect; the body is not since it is mortal.

A soul can be reincarnated into any kind of material prison. The more sinful a person has been during his or her lifetime, the worse a reincarnation he or she will attain. Being born as a human is the most preferable body and way of being one can aspire to, because as humans one can pray and improve one's own spiritual path. If one is born as a dog or rat; or even worse – as an insect – the material condition of the body puts severe limitations on the soul's spiritual possibilities.

The soul is a divine component embodied in any kind of living being, and it has the size of a fingerprint on a thumb. The "fingerprint" is a record or history which the soul keeps with it while being reincarnated millions of times. It is a record of what the soul has done, for instance when it was reincarnated and lived as a human with free will to do good deeds and pay homage to the gods. After death one brings along merits or demerits from previous lives which will determine what kind of being one will become in the next life, or in other words, what type of body the soul will gain, for instance a human body, a donkey body, and so on. This process, whereby one is penalised for bad actions and rewarded for good deeds in terms of different bodily incarnations, is the doctrine of karma.

Karma is an ethical law combining microcosm and macrocosm. This means that this world is identical to the world of the gods, and what one does as a human is a part of, and affects, the divine worlds.



Cremation at Pashupatinath, Kathmandu, Nepal.

If one sins on earth, then the divine realms suffer or deteriorate also. What one does on earth affects the whole cosmos. Therefore, a morally right or wrong action becomes a religious right or wrong action, which determines the deceased's destiny and future lives.

What a person does as a human being is evaluated by the gods when he or she dies. This is common for all

religions, but the doctrine of karma presents a particular solution to the problem of awards or retribution for good or bad actions. The karma theory contains both rewards and penalties in a heaven and hell *and* a good or bad reincarnation.

Thus, karma operates at two levels. Firstly, a person's deeds are judged and the soul might be sent for a temporary stay in either Heaven or Hell. The

importance is that this stay is not eternal, and all the rewards or penalties are not completely exhausted in these realms. This relates to the second level, because after a stay in either Heaven or Hell the soul is reincarnated again and hence attains a material body.

These two levels of ethical recompense open up a vast field of possibilities, and karma is therefore not identical with reincarnation.

A simple reincarnation would bypass the rewards or retributions in Heaven and Hell, and the soul would have attained a direct incarnation in accordance with the sins committed, for instance that adultery classifies as a rat, rape classifies as an insect, manslaughter classifies as a malignant ghost, and so on.

This is not the case, because with karma theory one is not punished or rewarded totally here and now (or in the next reincarnation), and a bad person has always done some good or bad deeds in his or her previous lives which he or she suddenly can be awarded or punished for. This solves the problems with for instance the lower realms such as Hell. Even if one is reborn in Hell, this is only a temporary stay, because sooner or later one will benefit from

previous good actions and attain a more fortunate incarnation. Similarly, even if one lives a highly pure and auspicious life, one may not attain the divine realms immediately because there might be unexhausted bad karma from previous lives which one has to erase before one ends the circle of birth and death.

Thus, the aporias – the time intervals between when a person conducts a deed and when he or she will be rewarded or punished for it – make the karma doctrine highly flexible and non-predictable. In other words, one cannot know what the next reincarnation will be.

Therefore, if the soul has attained a human body, this is the most precious bodily constellation one may attain before one becomes liberated, and this valuable condition should not be wasted. Being born as a human implies the possibility to devote oneself to the gods and to improve the next reincarnation with prayers and penances.

In short, by being a human one has the possibility to prepare one's own death by devotions and penances, and thereby erase as much sin as possible, and hence, one may have the chance to get the most fortunate destiny ever; liberation.



Karma, the law of ethical recompense. Good actions are rewarded and bad actions punished in another life.

Varanasi – the cosmic origin and end

The holiest place in the Hindu world and cosmos is Varanasi in India, which is also called Kashi or Benares. The town is located along the river Ganga where she flows northwards. The three most dominant and important gods in Hinduism are Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Shiva has numerous incarnations and materialisations, but the most common and potent is the *linga* or the phallus. Kashi literally means “luminous”. One of the primordial lingas – the linga of light – resides in Varanasi, and it gives the city the luminosity that reveals untruth and darkness.

Harischandra ghat, Varanasi. The second cremation ground where corpses burn continuously throughout the day.

In Hinduism it is believed that there are 330 million gods or facets of the divine – all of these are present in the city – and they can be unified and approachable by worshipping the linga. Varanasi exists in a constant stage of purity, whereas the rest of the world is decaying and deteriorating. The city exists beyond time – it is eternal. Varanasi was the place where the world and cosmos were created for the very first time, and ever since it has been as pure as it was during the primordial origin. The city stays in the Age of Perfection, whereas everyone else lives in the Age of Destruction, which is characterised by impurity, greed, and lust; in short, human imperfection.





The holy Ganga.

The preferable death is a matter of where and when. Varanasi is the most auspicious place for a Hindu to die due to the sacredness of the city and the holiness of Ganga. Each year some 30,000-40,000 Hindus are cremated at the two ghats in Varanasi – Manikarnika ghat and Harischandra ghat. If a person dies in Kashi, then he or she may cross the river of samsara. The holiness of Ganga is so powerful



Harischandra ghat.

that even the smallest drop of her water in Kashi cleanses and purifies the living and liberates the dead. Numerous pilgrims and old people come to Varanasi spending their last days of life waiting for their death to come. The preferred way of dying is with one's feet immersed in Ganga, and dying at an astrologically auspicious date increases the positive merits. Ganga is the ultimate crossing-point between this and the Otherworld, and she ends the cycle of birth and death. A cremation at her banks whereby the ashes are immersed in the river ensures salvation.

Manikarnika ghat is perceived as the most holy place for a Hindu to be cremated. According to myths, Shiva cremated his wife Parvati at this very spot, and the original cremation fire from this pyre has been continuously burning ever since. In the temple just above the burning ground the fire is kept and guarded by an undertaker whose job is to

superintend this primordial fire. It has never extinguished, and approximately each two hours left-over wood from cremations is brought to this fire, and hence, it is fuelled by cremations.

The deceased's son collects a fire from this temple by which he light his father's pyre, and each cremation is thus lit by the very fire with which Shiva cremated Parvati. The

cremations burn continuously all day and night without interruption, and it is believed that if the cremation fires extinguish and there is an abrupton in the cremations, then the world will collapse and a new world order will appear.

Cremation, corpses, and sins

Burning the corpse is the fastest way to solve the problem of the decaying flesh. In the Hindu cosmology man is a miniature replica of the gods, and this world is a small replica of cosmos. This is a part of the doctrine that microcosm is identical with macrocosm, and everything consists of the same elements. There are five elements in Cosmos: fire, water, air, earth, and ether. The body is also made of these elements, and during a cremation the fire dissolves the elements so the air goes back to the air, the earth to earth, water to water, and so on.

Sons mourning their father.





The elements return to their cosmic pool from where the gods redistribute them into other bodily constellations.

For ordinary people cremation is the best way to dissolve the elements in accordance with the cosmic laws. If the deceased is buried, the elements dissolve

**Ram ghat with seven
cremation platforms,
Pashupatinath,
Kathmandu, Nepal.**

in a different way,
which is slower and the
corpse is eaten by
worms and decomposed
in a negative manner.

The mode by which the soul is stripped of its flesh influences the way it attains a new bodily suit. The way the corpse is treated therefore has cosmological significance influencing both the next rebirth and the gods. The flesh of the body consists of divine elements, which are precious and should not be wasted. The flesh is a bio-moral substance, which means that the flesh possesses spiritual qualities. The body and mind are identical. The body – the fleshly prison – limits the spiritual development of the soul. The flesh is an intellectual and spiritual prison for the soul, and it is impossible to attain a spiritual state of purity unless the body is equally pure. Hence, the aim is to purify the body through penances and practices.

A sinful person is impure, and the sins are manifested or inflicted in the flesh. When a person dies, the cremation is a purifying process which cleanses the deceased. Thus, the cremation fire purges away the sins in the flesh, and the more sinful a person has been, the longer time the cremation takes. Being cremated is therefore a painful process, and intimately connected to the sins committed during the lifetime.

**A son conducting the funeral
of his mother. The burial of a
96-year old Magar woman
from Rhesa village at Nire
ghat, Nepal.**



Ritual obligations

In Hindu funerals it is important to have a son to conduct the death rituals, and there is no salvation without a son. It is a part of the son's moral and religious obligations to cremate his father. If the parents only have daughters, it is interpreted as a kind of retribution for sins committed in previous lives, because without a son to conduct the funeral the parents will not attain salvation, and hence, they will achieve a less auspicious incarnation.

Thus, it is not only the personal deeds which determine the next rebirth, but also what type of rituals that are performed and who conducts them. Even though the deceased may have lived a moral life, without the proper rituals he will not attain the deserved state and preferred rebirth in the next life. If the son is sloppy and ignorant while performing the funeral, it is a double sin. First, the father will suffer for the misconduct, and thereafter, the son will be punished when his time comes for not fulfilling his ritual obligations. The importance of the son in the funeral and the cosmic consequences of conducting the rituals properly have to be understood in light of what the cremation represents. Strictly speaking, the deceased father is not dead before his son cremates him. The soul still resides inside the skull when he is carried to the cemetery and placed on the pyre.

The corpse, which has started to decompose, contains the soul. It is only when the soul is released and set free that the person is dead, and it is at that moment the wife becomes a widow. The son's main ritual obligation is therefore to release his father's soul from the body, which ensures the father another fortunate reincarnation. Ideally, this is done by the

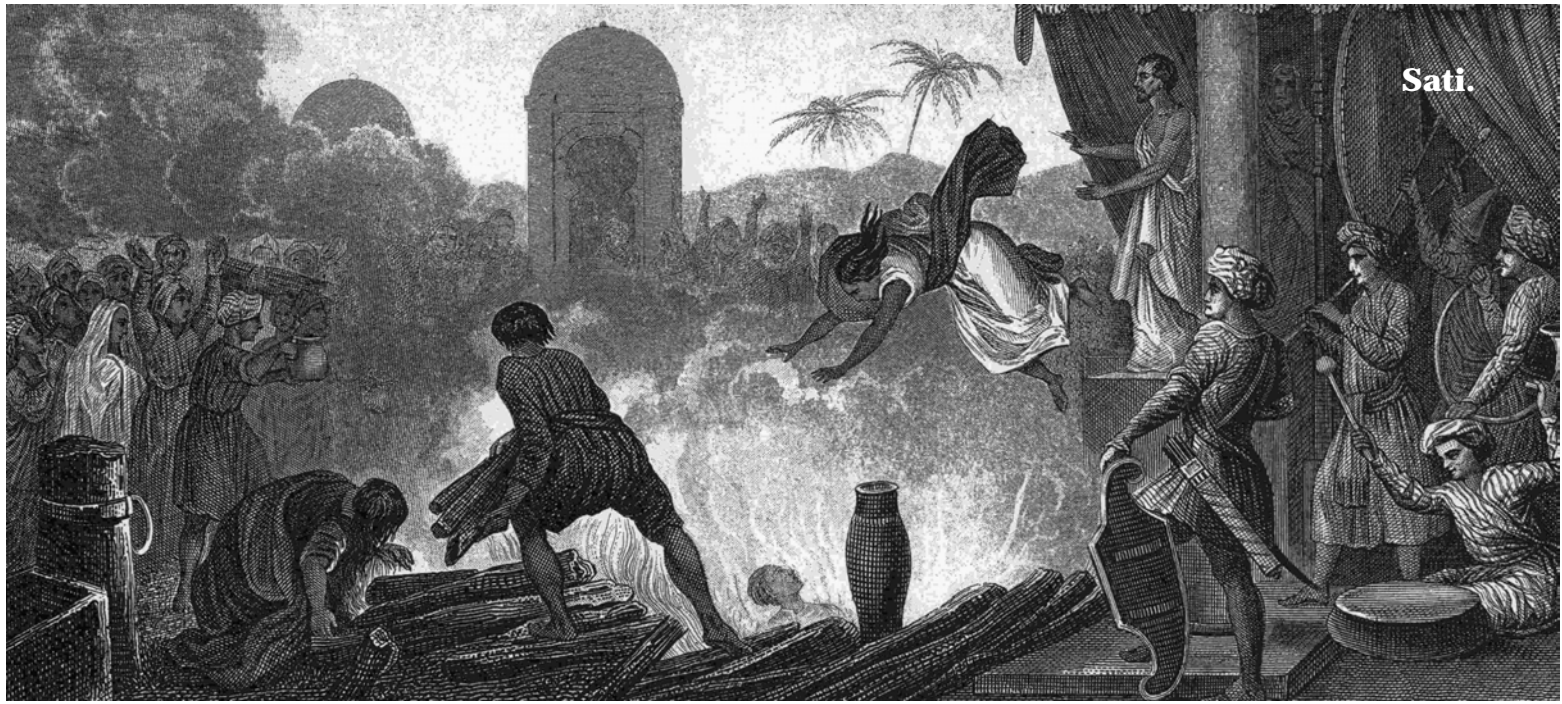
son cracking open his father's skull with a bamboo pole on the funeral pyre. When the skull cracks, the soul is released. Due to emotional reasons this is not always done physically by the son, but during the cremation the skull will crack open by itself and the soul is released through the funeral rite.

Since the soul leaves the body as a consequence of the death rituals conducted, the son commits a symbolic homicide by killing his father on the pyre. Because of the burning of the flesh the son has to observe a period of mourning afterwards in order to purify himself. This period normally lasts between eleven or thirteen days, and can be seen as penalty for the ritual killing of his father and the sins of burning flesh. However, a cremation is also procreative. The son may liberate his father from the bondage of being reincarnated again, and the father is sent forward to his forefathers and ancestors, and possibly he becomes united with the divinities. The son attains the social roles and positions in the family and society which his father had, and hence, the funeral is not only dangerous and polluting but also a "double birth"; both the father and the son attain new social positions, defined by religion. And since social status has a cosmological origin, these transitions affect the bodily and spiritual qualities of both the father and the son in a fortunate way.



Dagbatti – the lighting of the pyre.





Although the son's role and obligations are the most important nowadays, particularly widows have had more sincere religious commitments. The most extreme form of ritual obligation in the Hindu history has been the practice of widow-burning – or the practice of *sati*. It has been believed that the widow was morally obliged to sacrifice herself on her husband's funeral pyre to ensure both her husband's salvation but also her own ascendance to Heaven.

Although the widow-burning was prohibited by law in India as early as 1829, the practice has prevailed up to today. Due to the asymmetrical gender relations, it has been believed that if the husband died before the wife, his wife was partly guilty of his death because she had not been obedient and devoted enough to her husband; she had neglected to conduct religious penances which would have

secured his life. Her social status in society became stigmatised if her husband died before her, but if she immolated herself on the pyre she was rewarded with eternal life in Heaven, and thus, she would end the circle of birth and death.

The most "famous" widow-burning in modern times was the one of the eighteen year old girl Roop Kanwar who committed suicide on her husband's pyre September 4th, 1987, in Rajasthan, India. This widow-burning caused a stir and a heated and intense debate in India, and it revealed that although the sati-ideology proclaims a glorious future for the widows who volunteer on the pyre, the bitter truth was something different.

Roop Kanwar was forced against her will by her relatives to become a sati, and although nobody was

punished for the crime, the widow-burning was more a murder than a voluntary act. After her death in 1987, there has on several occasions been widow-burnings in India, but these were old widows and the funerals did not cause huge public debates. Although one cannot morally defend widow-burning, the resilience of the tradition illuminates the role and impact death has in society. More than one and a half century after the practice was forbidden by law, it still prevails both in actual life and certainly as an ideology of the chaste wife who offers herself on her husband's pyre.



Status and flesh

Cremation is the most common mode of disposing of the body, but there are other types of funerals as well. The different funeral practices are dependent upon the deceased's social status, which is a matter of the spiritual character of flesh. A funeral is first and foremost a matter of solving the problem of the flesh, and since both sins and spiritual qualities are embodied, the process whereby the flesh is decomposed is not arbitrary. Depending upon which life cycle rituals a person has undergone, there are various types of funeral rituals.

There are several life cycle rituals in Hinduism, but the two most important regarding both social and religious status are *bartamande* and marriage.

The *bartamande* ritual is an initiation ritual for boys aged between eight and twelve years. This ritual transforms the initiate from being a boy to a man. From a religious point of view, it is only after this ritual that a person is allowed to read the sacred scriptures, basically the *Rig Veda* and the

Widow-burning in India.

Bhagavad Gita. By being initiated into the holy books and the sacred world, it implies new religious obligations in society. After the ritual the person is totally responsible for his own purity, and he has to live in accordance with the cosmic laws and take care of his karmic residue.

Since the holy texts are the pathway to spiritual enlightenment, the new knowledge transforms and purifies the flesh of the person, but at the same time he also becomes more vulnerable for pollution. The ritual "activates" karma, and by the ritual the initiated one has fully entered the circle of birth and death.

There is no *bartamande* ritual for women, and they attain the same ritual status through marriage. When the karma is "activated" the prescribed funeral practice is cremation. Thus, boys without the *bartamande* ritual and unmarried women are not cremated, but given burials on a cemetery.

Decaying corpse.





Without this ritual initiation the flesh is not properly and spiritually prepared for a cremation. When both men and women are ritually responsible for their own purity, cremation as a funeral practice guarantees another reincarnation.

Thus, depending on the spiritual quality of the flesh, the modes of disposing of the body differ. After marriage the man as a householder has a duty to produce offspring, particularly sons, which will mourn him when he dies. Still, there is another religious stage which further enhances the spiritual

Naga-sadhu preparing for penances transcending the gross body at Pashupatinath, Shivaratri 2002. By doing the impossible he proves his immortality.

awakening, and that is the status of a holy man. In theory, every householder shall leave his house and family when he becomes old, and he shall start to prepare his own death. Not

everybody becomes a holy man, but the institution is wide-spread. In India it is estimated that approximately five percent of the population consists of holy men, meaning that there are several million wandering ascetics in the country.

A holy man devotes his life to religious penances and practices, aiming to transcend the bodily limitations. Holy men conduct their own funerals prior to their deaths, and hence, they are buried and not cremated. Cremation ensures a new rebirth, but the aim of holy men is to break through the cycle of birth and death and ascend directly to Heaven, and therefore they cannot be cremated.

There are basically two ways a holy man may prove his holiness; either by doing miracles or by doing the

Tyaginath, Aghori-sadhu,
Pashupatinath, Nepal.



impossible. This holds true for most religions, and for instance Jesus cured people suffering from fatal diseases, walked on water, and made other miracles. The same do the holy men. Some walk on fire, other hang themselves in hooks, or they may commit themselves to stand upright for fifteen or twenty years (they never sit; they sleep standing, eat standing, and after several years the legs start to suffer from gangrene).

There are endless ways to prove one's holiness. The naked sadhus do not wear clothes and by this they show their indifference to the world. Others may lift heavy weights with their penis, also called "the eleventh finger", because by doing the impossible they prove that they are made of something else than common people. Whatever one does – Jesus walked on water – others may do more extreme things, the underlying logic is nevertheless the same: one proves the spiritual victory over the body and its material limitations.

The rationale for doing these penances is that the materiality of this world is what separates humans from the divine realms. The materiality of the world represents impermanence, and the only way to ascend to Heaven is to transcend the materiality by any means. One holy man said that if truth could be said, it would not have been true. Similarly with materiality, it is not eternal. Therefore, holy men lay emphasis on practice, and by showing that they are beyond human suffering and bodily limitations they are by definition holy. By transcending pain and the body they are eternal and cannot die. They are immortal.

As a part of their rituals and penances they conduct their own mortuary rituals, and they are beyond and

behind death. The soul has conquered the body; they only have to wait until the body disappears and then they attain Heaven. The individual path is identical to the cosmic laws and the lives of the gods.

Pashupatinath and cosmogony

Funerals have to be seen in relation to cosmogony – the continuous recreation of society, world, and cosmos. Varanasi is such a place where cosmogony takes place, but another important place is Pashupatinath in Kathmandu, Nepal. Pashupatinath has a special religious grandeur among Hindus. Shiva was apparently born at five places simultaneously. The "birth" of Shiva is a cosmic event, and on earth this is a matter of where and when he materialised in the form of the linga. Mythologically, the head of Shiva was born or materialised in what became the Pashupatinath temple, and hence, for many devotees this temple is more important than other Shiva temples since the head is the most vital part of the god.

Bagmati River flows next to the temple, and in some of the sacred Hindu scriptures the river is compared to, and even seen as identical to, Ganga. Mythologically, Bagmati River appears from Shiva's head, from which it flows into Ganga. Being cremated at the ghats along Bagmati River is the most important place for a Hindu in Nepal. Thus, Pashupatinath can be seen as miniature of Varanasi.

The importance of death in society and the cosmic consequences of the funeral necessitate that the right people are conducting the auspicious rites. Although the sons are responsible for the cremation of their fathers, at the most holy places such as Varanasi and

Funeral priest at Pashupatinath.



Cremation at Ram ghat, Pashupatinath.



Pashupatinath, there are separate Funeral priests and undertakers who conduct the actual cremations. The son lights the pyre and he is ritually responsible for the funeral, but the practical and technical aspects of the cremation are taken care of by others.

At Pashupatinath there are currently nine cremation platforms and between five and six thousand people are cremated each year. The priests who cremate are high ranked Brahmans. It is, however, expensive to hire professional priests to cremate the deceased, and the relatives may conduct the ritual themselves if they cannot afford employing a priest. Still, most people prefer that the priests cremate their deceased because the rituals are complex and the stakes are high if anything goes wrong.

Ghost cannot harm the deceased when the dead are lying with their feet in the Bagmati River while the pyres are built. Ram ghat, Pashupatinath.

The funeral pyre consists of five layers of wood, and each of the layers symbolises one of the elements. Thus, the pyre is made of the same elements that constitute the body, and when the pyre is burning, each of the elements is united with its respective element. Before the pyre is lit, the son carries the fire three times around the pyre clockwise, symbolising the three main gods; Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. The cremation is lit in the deceased's mouth since it was here the last breath left the body, and it is through the mouth that the breath will come and ignite the next life when he or she is reborn.

The deceased's flesh is sinful, and, metaphorically, it has female connotations. The bones are seen as having male qualities and they are associated with sperm. Thus,



the cremation gets rid of the polluted, sinful, and female flesh, whereas the bones which contain the male reproductive quality of sperm, is used to create new life. The ashes and the bones are immersed in the holy Bagmati River, and rivers in general are seen as mothers. Therefore, the male productive capacities are injected into the feminine river, and a complete cremation is a kind of symbolic copulation between a man and a woman creating new life. This is the outcome of the doctrine that microcosm is identical with macrocosm. The human birth is a part of the cosmic principles governing all kinds of existence. The actual funeral is a procreative ritual which creates new life, and that is the essence of reincarnation.

Differences and divinities

In Baglung District in Western Nepal some three hundred kilometres West of Kathmandu, there are numerous cemeteries located along the holy Kali Gandaki River, which is perceived as the second most holy river in Nepal after Bagmati River. In Kali Gandaki River the ammonite fossil known as *saligram* is found. The saligram stone is believed to



Ashes immersed in the river after cremation.

be the materialisation and incarnation of Vishnu in a physical form, and it is only in this river that this particular manifestation of Vishnu appears.

Nire ghat is the largest cemetery in the district, and the funerals take place on the riverbed. Each year after the monsoon the river will wash away all the remains from the funerals.

Since all rivers join Ganga later, it is believed that the

deceased will be carried to Varanasi and attain salvation. Although a lot of people are cremated at this cemetery, the majority is buried in small cairns in the riverbed. Orthodox Hindu priests claim that this is inauspicious since they should have been cremated, but common people have other eschatological explanations. Due to the sacredness of the Kali Gandaki River they believe that the deceased's bones will turn into the ammonite fossil saligram in the due course of time, and hence, a burial at Nire ghat ensures that the deceased will become an incarnation of Vishnu. Since Vishnu is one of the three main gods in Hinduism, the local beliefs have given legitimacy to changes in the funeral practices. Attaining a divine reincarnation is highly propitious, and by burying the dead at this cemetery the deceased may ascend to Heaven.

Husband cremated with his wife's jewellery at his chest, Nire Ghat, Nepal.



Even though there are a lot of practices which deviate from the orthodox and prescribed way of conducting the proper funerals, most of the descendants perceive their own ways of doing the rituals as the most auspicious and preferred rites. In general, they believe that the deceased will go to Heaven and they never see their own practices as a heresy or misconduct. Everyone performs the rituals which they believe will secure the departed the most fortunate prospects.

The variation within Hinduism has led scholars to challenge the notion that there is a unified Hindu religion, and the use of the word "ism" might be deceiving. There are an endless number of traditions which have their own concepts of how the world and

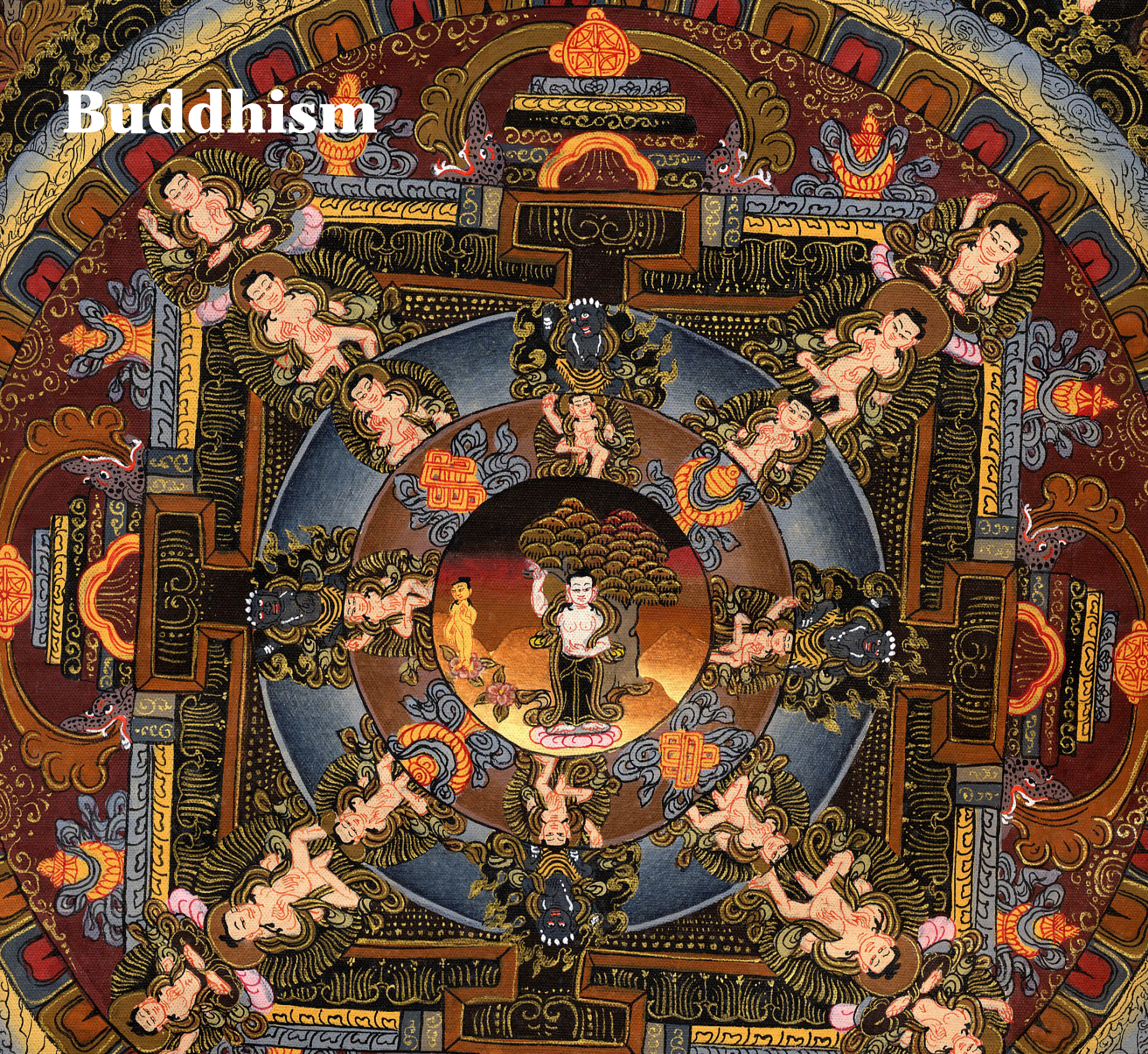
cosmos are constituted, and even though there are many shared features and beliefs, each of the particular traditions has the same right to be labelled "Hindu" as any other.

Nevertheless, the variation within Hinduism and the inherent contested hierarchies regarding what the most appropriate rites are, the questions of which gods are the superior ones, and which religious guidelines are the best, have not only led to great local variations and traditions on the Indian sub-continent. The religious conflicts and contested ideas have also made separate religions, and the most prominent religion which divorced from orthodox Hinduism and Brahmanism, was Buddhism.

Cremation patch, Nire ghat.



Buddhism



Buddhism

Siddharta Gautama and philosophical doctrines

The historical Buddha was a prince of the Sakya tribe in Northern India. Siddharta was born in Lumbini in Nepal, and although the exact dates of his birth and death are uncertain, he is often assumed to have lived from ca. 566 to 486 BCE. As a prince he lived a life in luxury protected from the real world, but at the age of 29 he renounced the worldly life. Buddha chose to be king of the religious world instead of the profane world.

Buddha rejected parts of the Hindu philosophy and particularly the Brahmins' elaborate rituals and sacrifices. He established a monastic organisation and "distilled" and perfected the Hindu religious thoughts and doctrines.

Buddhist thangka – a religious and devotional painting.

Although the Buddhists do not deny the role of gods, they occupy a significantly smaller part in Buddhism than what they do in Hinduism.

Buddhists believe in karma, but in a slightly different way than what the Hindus do. The Western concept of an individual soul or "I-personality" does not correspond to the Buddhists' ideas of a "soul". In Buddhism the universe is seen as a constant flow of movements regrouping. There are five basic categories of cosmic "energies"; physical phenomena, emotions, sensory perceptions, responses to sensory perceptions, and consciousness. Any human being is only a temporary combination of these categories. Compared with Hinduism, from a philosophical

point of view one may say that a rebirth in Buddhism is more "impersonal" since this is a consequence of the five categories which are regrouped; it is not the same "soul" which re-enters new bodies. It is, however, the consequences of previous actions that result in new constellations of the cosmic energies.

In other words, actions produce reactions, which are cosmic in their nature. Since actions or constellations of energies regroup, and because mind and matter are identical, former actions take other forms which include new births of humans and beings in general. Hence, the regrouping of the cosmic energies is determined by what other people (and creatures) have done previously, and the new constellations re-materialise into humans, rats, insects, and so on. Thus, it is not an "I" who is reborn in a strict sense, but the next rebirth is a result of previous actions which I and others have done, recreating cosmos and the world.

The Buddhist Nirvana has to be seen in this light. Nirvana is enlightenment, but it is not a "heaven" in a traditional understanding of the term, but more a state of "nothingness". Since former actions cause reactions – according to the karma doctrine – the aim is to exhaust all karma, meaning reactions from what has happened earlier and what people have done. Only by doing so one may attain an eternal state of "being", which is "nothingness".

The "heaven" in Buddhism is therefore a mental state where there is no pleasure or pain; it is nothing but the state of complete zero. It is the total dissolution of everything. Anything else will imply some kind of matter or action, which again is not eternal because it will cause reactions. It is only the state of zero which can be eternal. Nirvana is



therefore a cosmic dissolution of the consequences of every kind of action, because they will by necessity cause impermanent reactions. Therefore, the enlightened state of being does not correspond to become a god in Hinduism, but it is a state of “nothingness” where the five categories or cosmic energies are not regrouped anymore. Only a place where nothing happens can be eternal.

This is a philosophical explanation of the religious order, but most often common people have a more direct feeling of the relation between former actions and future rebirths, and conceptions of heaven and hell as physical places are common. Therefore, the term “soul” will still be used since it makes

A thangka has a deep spiritual meaning and it is a visual representation of the meditations.

comparison possible, and because it is commonly understood to signify the spiritual essence which is reborn. Moreover, in practical and daily life among Buddhists there are explicit beliefs emphasising that one is punished or rewarded according to what one does in this life and what one has done in former lives.

There is an old Tibetan saying which says, “Don’t wonder about your former lives; just look carefully at your present body! Don’t wonder about your future lives; just look at your mind in the present!” Thus, there is a difference between the high and the low religion. Among common people there are ideas of the same soul being reborn, and some say that a soul takes 8,4



Ashoka pillar, Lumbini, Nepal. An inscription on the pillar identifies the holy site as the birthplace of Buddha.

million reincarnations, others say 840,000, before it attains Nirvana.

The crucial concept in Buddhism is Buddhahood, or the fully enlightened human being. In order to reach the state of enlightenment or Nirvana, one has to realise the Four Noble Truths: 1) Life is suffering, which means that being a human involves pain from the very first day one is born until the day one dies. 2) The cause of suffering is ignorance. 3) Suffering can be overcome, and 4) the path to end suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path, which implies right views, right intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right efforts, right-mindedness, and right contemplation.

As in Hinduism, microcosm or this world is identical and linked to macrocosm or cosmos as a whole. The only thing which differs between this world and the Otherworld is ignorance, basically caused by the fact that our souls are incarnated in material prisons – bodies – which limit and hinder the spiritual clarity that sees through the impermanence of this world. The impermanent is materiality; substances which are not eternal and therefore subdued to death and destruction.

There are two major branches of Buddhism; Theravada or The Way of the Elders, and Mahayana or the Great Vehicle. The emphasis here will be put on the latter tradition for several reasons. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* belongs to the Mahayana path, and this book is important in death rituals in the Tibetan tradition in the high Himalayas. Furthermore, in Mahayana Buddhism the concept of *bodhisattva* or enlightened beings was developed. A bodhisattva is a human who has attained enlightenment, but he delays to enter Nirvana



The bath pond at Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini. The Ashoka pillar is in the background.

because he wants to enable salvation for other beings as well. Those who know the truth have an obligation as good persons to convey the eternal essence of cosmos to those who do not know, because if you have the knowledge and keep it for yourself, it is selfish, which is a bad action according to the karma doctrine.

Questions concerning life and death – or the truth of being and existence in general – are therefore the core of Buddhist philosophy. Death does not end the suffering because one is inevitably born again. The ultimate goal is to renounce from the circle of birth and death, which is suffering, and the only way to achieve this is to become enlightened.

To reach this state one has to pass beyond every kind of worldly matters, words and language included, and it is only possible to attain and reach such a spiritual level by years of contemplation and meditation.

It is therefore of interest to see how a person who has attained Buddhahood dies and how his bodily remains are disposed of. One of the most special burials in history is that of Buddha. When he felt that he was to be near the end, he told his disciples and followers what was to come. One of them, Ānanda, was concerned about the funeral of the King of Kings, and Buddha described his own funeral and method of disposal of the body in this way:

**Sarnath, India. Some
of Buddha's cremated
remains are buried in
the stupa.**



They wrap the body of the king of kings, Ānanda, in a new cloth. When that is done they wrap it in carded cotton wool. When that is done they wrap it in a new cloth – and so until they have wrapped the body in five hundred successive layers of both kinds. Then they place the body in an oil vessel of iron, and cover that up close with another oil vessel of iron. Then they build a funeral pile of all kinds of perfumes and burn the body of the king of kings. And then at the four cross roads they erect a dâgaba (a mound or barrow) to the king of kings.

The funeral practice which Buddha described is a combination of mummification and cremation, and this type of funeral of royals is also described in some of the Vedic scriptures. Buddha was the King of Kings, and before the body was cremated, it was embalmed with clothes and then soaked in oil. The embalming restored the body, but it was the cremation which revitalised it and released the soul. After Buddha was cremated, the ashes from his funeral were collected and carried to different places. Buddha's remains were then buried in mounds as he prescribed, and one of these stupas which contains Buddha's remains is found in Sarnath close to Varanasi. Sarnath was the place where Buddha preached his first sermon, and hence, it has a special religious role for Buddhist pilgrims. Still, there are differences between how the bodies of bodhisattvas and the enlightened ones are disposed of.

The funeral of the sage Milarepa

Milarepa (ca. CE 1052-1136) was a famous yogi and poet in the Buddhist world. He was the greatest of all the Tibetan Buddhist sages, and Milarepa founded one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, which is the Kagyu school of Buddhism. This school

of thought is a part of Mahayana Buddhism, and it emphasises meditation as the path to enlightenment. Milarepa himself meditated for twelve years in a cave close to Manang village in the high-Himalayas in Nepal, living on nothing but nettles. By these penances he was able to transcend his body and let the soul fly away. Milarepa himself said,

I was actually able to fly through space, so I flew to the Cave of Eagle's Shadow, where I meditated. Then an intense Fire of Tummo radiating warmth and bliss arose in me, immeasurably superior to any such experience I

The renowned sage Milarepa.



had in the past. As I returned to the Horse Tooth White Rock, I passed over a small village called Langda, where a man was ploughing with his son...The son saw me and cried out, "Father, look at that fantastic thing! A man flying through the air!" .

Escaping the materialised prison, which the body reflects, is truly a sign of divine status. The transcendence of the body is one physical consequence of the spiritual Enlightenment and Buddhahood. Regarding Milarepa's own funeral, when he was requested about the mode of disposal of his body, he said:

With the guidance of the Compassionate Marpa, I have completed the work of liberation. It is not at all certain that an awakened hermit, whose body, speech and mind have attained to the highest state, will persist in the form of a corpse. Do not cast figures or build a stupa...Rather than moulding figures, meditate four times a day. Rather than building a stupa, develop higher perceptions of the cosmic universe and raise the banner of meditation. The best commemoration of my death is to have veneration for your lama.

Even though the relics of Buddha were buried in mounds, Milarepa prescribed his followers not to search for the bodily remains but to meditate instead. The reason is found in Milarepa's body, which resembles the Hindu holy men who transcend their bodies by meditation and penance. Due to the purity or the enlightened state he had transcended the body, which is evident in the fact that he was able to fly while meditating, and hence, there was no corpse left when he ascended to Nirvana.

Milarepa died at the age of 84 at sunrise on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month under the ninth lunar constellation, and he passed directly into

Nirvana. When the body finally was placed on the funeral pyre and the ceremony began, the body would not receive the fire. The Master instructed the participants to delay the cremation until after the arrival of the devotee Retchung, who resided in a monastery in Southern Tibet. In a mixed state of contemplation and sleep, Retchung had seen signs and set off in hope that the Master was not already dead. When Retchung arrived, the body of Milarepa started to burn by a fire which merged form. The funeral pyre was transformed into a celestial mansion, and the flame at the base took the form of an eight-petaled lotus blossom. The sparks took the form of goddesses bearing many offerings, and the smoke permeated everything with the fragrance of perfume.

The cremation was completely transparent. Some saw the relics of the corpse as a huge *stupa* of light standing in the cremation cell, some saw sacred implements, golden rays, offerings beyond imagining, yet others saw an expanse of empty space. The *dakinis* – beings which can be compared to angels – carried away all the sacred relics, including the ashes, leaving nothing to the humans but spiritual awakening; the most important of all relics.

Due to the holiness of the yogi, there were consequently no remains left from Milarepa's cremation. His body turned into spiritual awakening for the devotees who took part in the enlightenment through the participation in the funeral. They saw the bliss of Heaven and Nirvana.



Tore cemetery in front of Gangapurna Mountain, Manang, Nepal.

Air-burials and recent changes

The funerals of those who have attained Buddhahood have defined how the most pure Buddhists are treated in death. Lamas are in general cremated when they die, and the remains are buried in stupas. In Tibetan Buddhism there are, however, other funerals for the lay people, and apart from cremation, the other modes of disposing of the corpse have been air-burials, water-burials, and inhumation or earth-burials. The practice of air-burials is declining, but it has been the common method of handling the problem with the dead body.

Milarepa stayed and meditated in a cave close to Manang. To exemplify the Tibetan tradition, death rituals in Manang may illustrate some of the different practices within Tibetan Buddhism. Today, the common funeral practice in Manang is cremation, but traditionally it has been air-burial. Air-burial as a phenomenon is mainly practiced in the high Himalayas. Manang is located at an elevation of 3,500 metres above sea level in a harsh, mountain environment. The annual precipitation is between 200-600 millimetres each year, and the inhabitants are dependent upon rain for a successful harvest.

Until two-three decades ago air-burials was the most common funeral practice for the common people. An air-burial is a special way of solving the problem with the deceased's flesh. A lama normally appointed one or two persons who chopped up the corpse into small pieces while the lama himself called upon the vultures in the valley by using ritual drums. This was done by volunteers, due to emotional reasons, and those who committed themselves to this task were



not a part of the deceased's family. They would start by chopping off the head, which was then placed on a rock in the vicinity. The head would keep the vultures at a distance while they were cutting up the rest of the body. The corpse cutters would cut up the body in a certain order, and then end with the head. The pieces of the dead were given to vultures to consume, and the birds were believed to be creatures particularly created for this cosmic process of annihilating the deceased's flesh.



The pieces of the flesh could also be given to the river instead of the vultures, and lamas decided according to the deceased's horoscope and the astrological calendar which type of funeral would be the most auspicious. In Manang they have stopped performing water-burials since the inhabitants are upstream people living in the high Himalayas, and the practice will contaminate the water in the rest of the river.

Air-burials and water-burials were seen as equally auspicious funerals whereas inhumation was reserved for people who died a less preferable death. People who died of contagious diseases, those who committed suicide, and so on, were given inhumations or earth burials. Thus, the way you die influences the type of funeral you are given, which again has consequences for the next incarnation.

There are several reasons why air-burials have been the prescribed funeral practice. From an ecological point of view this is the most efficient and economic way of disposing of a dead body in a harsh mountain

Chorten used as crematorium.

environment. To use wood from the forest for a cremation would be a waste of valuable resources, but the choice of funeral practice cannot solely be explained by external economic or ecological factors. The inherent qualities of the flesh are seen as a valuable resource for the vultures, which subsisted on this flesh. The former precious matter – the body – can be a life-giving substance for others. Death and the destruction of the flesh are intimately connected to the recreation of new life and to the reconstitution of society and cosmos, and this includes the vultures as well.

Air-burials have been incorporated into the hydrological circle, and the funeral type was also a special form of rainmaking ritual. When the deceased was given an air-burial, it created rain which the people needed for a successful harvest. It was believed that if they cremated common people the smoke from the pyre would reach the gods, who would become angry and insulted, and then they

would penalise the inhabitants with the absence of rain. Therefore, air-burials were conducted during the spring, summer, and autumn, but during the wintertime everyone was cremated. This had its reason in that by insulting the gods there would be no precipitation during the winter, which would have come as snow. Since they lived in a harsh mountain environment the aim was to procure as much rain during spring, summer, and autumn, and as little snow as possible during the winter.

Today, the majority of the Manangians live in Kathmandu and not in the village. In the urban capitol they cannot conduct air-burials, and now they cremate the dead in their own crematorium. The change in practices in the town has influenced the mortuary rites in the village, and cremation is currently the most common funeral type in Manang. The change in funeral practice is also a consequence of increased tourism, and one of the most popular mountain treks in Nepal passes by Manang village.

When a person dies nowadays he will be cremated in a special stone construction. This “crematorium” is a half-built *chorten*. A chorten is a small replica of a stupa, and hence, all funerals refer back to the original one which Buddha conducted. The deceased sits in the lotus- or Buddha position when he is cremated, and afterwards the ashes and bone relics are collected. The burnt human remains are mixed with bark of juniper and ingredients like garlic, wheat, buckwheat, chilli, and rice, and grinded into a fine powder, which is then mixed with clay. Some relatives of the deceased make 108 small statues of this clay, which are called *chatafars*. The chatafars are symbolising small chortens, which symbolise stupas. The clay figures are distributed at different places in the village.



Chatafars.



Chatafars inside chorten.



Some are put into a family chorten, which works like a memorial, other chatafars are placed in nature behind cliffs or next to holy trees, and some are placed by the praying-walls.

The symbolism unites the deceased with Buddha. Three chortens in a row symbolise the Three Jewels in Buddhism; Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Buddha is the Enlightened one, and he was buried in several stupas. Dharma is the essence of Buddhism or the teaching of how to achieve the state of Enlightenment, and Sangha is the monastic organisation of monks and nuns established by Buddha himself. Thus, the funeral rites employ the most fundamental symbols in the religion, and it illuminates the meaning of death: Nirvana.

The transformation during death may enable one to attain a better incarnation or even to attain Nirvana. This transformation process only starts with the actual funeral; it does not end with it. After the corpse is decomposed the soul stays in an intermediary state for 49 days before it may attain another bodily reincarnation. This is a very dangerous stage because the soul is vulnerable to any kind of temptation or deceptions and it may even get lost, and it is therefore of uttermost importance that the soul is guided by a lama through all these dangers and pitfalls. And the guide which explains the path of the deceased on its way to the next reincarnation is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead

As a part of the Hindu funerals, the emphasis was put on the importance of having sons who conducted the obsequies in the auspicious manner. In the

Buddhist tradition it is also important that the right persons conduct the proper rituals, but the deceased is responsible himself for what happens after the funeral even if the obsequies were not performed accurately.

In the Tibetan tradition, one may follow the deceased on his way after he has departed from the material body. After the rituals have been conducted, the focus changes from the descendants to the deceased himself. In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* it is written that

when death rites, such as exorcistic food-offering rites, or other rites that purify the danger of the horrid states, are performed for your sake, and, with your subtle evolutionary clairvoyance, you perceive the performers being inaccurate, sleepy, or distracted, breaking their vows and commitments, and acting carelessly, and you notice their lack of faith, distorted views, fearful negative actions, and impure practices, then you think, "Alas! These people are betraying me. They are surely letting me down". You become depressed, you become disgusted. You lose your positive attitude and all respect and you become cynical and disillusioned. Conditioned by that you will be reborn in the horrid states, and thus their ancestors, rather than helping you, will harm you greatly. So whatever your surviving relatives perform in the way of incorrect religious rites, you must think, "Well, my perception is certainly imperfect! How can any impurity adhere to the Buddha's Teaching? I see these as a result of my own negative attitude, like seeing the mirror's faults as if in my own form. The bodies of these performers are the Sangha, their speech is the Holy Dharma, their minds are the actual Buddha - so I must take refuge in them!" So you must respect them and project your most positive attitude upon them. Then whatever your dear ones do for you will definitely help you. Such keeping of a positive attitude is very important, so do it without forgetting!

Praying wall.



The *Bar do thos grol* (Liberation from the Intermediary State by Means of Hearing This Lore) is in the West inaccurately known and translated as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It is a very fascinating book which gives a glimpse of the complexity of Buddhist eschatology, the challenges the soul has to pass, and the inner struggles it has to win before it can precede to Nirvana. It aims to prevent rebirth in this world by illuminating both the peaceful and wrathful deities and the primordial luminosity which fosters Enlightenment.

One of the main functions of this spiritual guidance is to tell the dying how to interpret the visions that he or she will see. Even though one has been reincarnated before, one has essentially forgotten everything from the past lives and subsequently the former experiences, and therefore the soul perceives the intermediary state as dangerous and hostile.

All the visions are scaring, terrifying, or tempting, and therefore the lama will guide and instruct the soul on its way through the various realms in the intermediary state. The soul still thinks like a human, but it has no body, and that is one of the things which the soul will start searching for. The lama instructs,

You think, "How nice it would be to have a new body!" Then you will have visions of looking everywhere for a body. Even if you try up to nine times to enter your old corpse, due to the length of the reality between, in the winter it will have frozen, in the summer it will have rotted. Otherwise, your loved ones will have burned it or buried it or given it to the birds and beasts, so it affords no place to inhabit. You will feel sick at heart, and will have visions of being squeezed between boulders, stones and dirt. This kind of suffering is the nature of the existence between. Even if you find a body, there will be

nothing other than such suffering. So give up longing for a body! Focus yourself undistractedly in the experience of creative nonaction!

The visions are not tests in a strict sense whereby the dead is on a trial, but more visualisations of the impermanent and the tempting world of humans. Being in the intermediate state is a highly vulnerable condition. The deceased behaves like a human, although he or she is not, and the soul is tempted by pleasures and scared by awful sights. In this condition the soul

is very naked, so to **Yama – the King of Death.** speak, and it is alone and frightened. It therefore necessitates a lama who can guide it through all the pains and pleasures, fears and comforts, which distract the deceased from the path to Nirvana.

It is very hard to see beyond and behind these visions, which are necessary for spiritual liberation. At the end of the journey the soul will see images of people engaged in sexual activities, which may lead it astray. There are also visions of the horrid states because a pure spirit must have the possibility to transcend the human states of horror and fear. In short, all these visions are facets of the human world, and indeed, possible reincarnations one may become. If one is seduced or frightened by either of them one has not achieved the pure state of enlightenment, which is a prerequisite for Nirvana. The intermediate period is a process in which the soul should not react with anger, hate, lust, joy, greed, or grief to the visions presented. By becoming horrified or passionate when passing by these visions, it is a sign that the soul is still being attached to the material world, which is called Maya – illusion.



On the other hand, if the soul is strong and guided properly, it may bypass all these visions because then it has realised that everything is nothing but Maya – namely illusion, impermanency, or untruth. The person or soul who has such knowledge has attained Enlightenment. Obviously, it is very difficult to transcend and see beyond the visions, and therefore, the majority of souls will be affected by the visions and thus reincarnated when the journey through the intermediary stage is completed.

A funeral functions at several levels. In Buddhism it is concerned with karma and the deceased's destiny, but it is also dependent upon a lama who guides the soul through the intermediary period. The mortuary rites are a part of society, and the resurrection and the welfare of society in general are included in the funerals, for instance when air-burials are incorporated into the hydrological cycle. Cosmos and the divine realms are by necessity involved in the process where a person either attains Nirvana or becomes reincarnated again. There are no contradictions involved in the fact that death operates at several levels, rather the contrary, because the more complexity, the more omnipotent and pervasive the role of death is, and the more complete is the divine intervention in earthly matters.

The Eastern and the Western world religions

Turning from the Eastern world religions – Hinduism and Buddhism – to the Western world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – notions of the eternity of life take different forms. In karmic religions the human (or animal) stage –

basically living as a creature on this earth – plays the major part of the religious existence and it is a part of the total divine plan for cosmos. Eternity is eternity in all religions, but in Hinduism and Buddhism the earthly stay may include up to 8,4 million bodies, periods, or stages. In the Western world religions the stay at the earth is reduced to one; and that is to live as a human being for one life only, and what one does as a human has severe personal consequences for one's destiny for the rest of eternity. Depending upon whether one conducts good or bad deeds, one might forever be sent to either Heaven or Hell. Whereas the karmic doctrine is a meticulous and fine masked system of relative punishments for limited sins and offences, the Western world religions offer only two options regarding the deeds committed: either Heaven or Hell.

Whereas the Eastern religions offer millions of lives on earth with the inherent pain it is to live in materialised bodies, the Western religions offer only one life. The divine system of rewards and punishment therefore differs substantially. Whereas the former religions penalise the souls with endless new reincarnations with all the suffering that implies, the latter religions send them to Heaven or Hell. It is very hard to come to Heaven in the Eastern world religions because one has to exhaust all the karma acquired through numerous lives, which necessitates hard dedication and meditation for years. In the Western world religions the entrance into Heaven seems to be easier since whatever a human is doing – and one has only one life – the possibilities to conduct both good and bad deeds have to be limited.

**Buddha Swayambu,
Kathmandu, Nepal.**



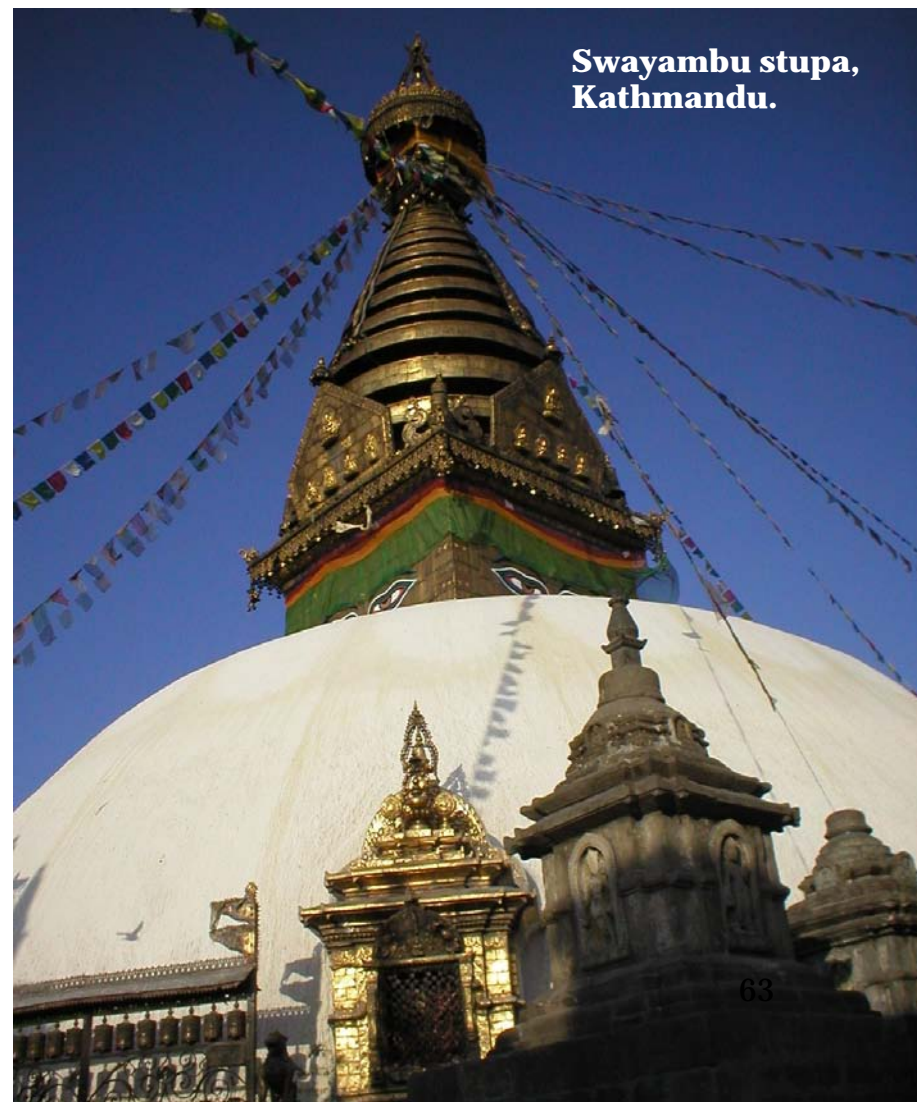
Boudhanath stupa, Kathmandu.



In other words, one is sent to either Heaven or Hell based on relative good or bad deeds. In such religious lifeworlds the concepts and the meanings of death must therefore have attained particular developments compared to the Eastern world religions. Another difference between the Eastern and Western world religions is what distinguishes Gods from humans. The question is whether the differences are a matter of degrees or an ontological separation between humans and gods. In the Eastern religions the difference between God (or eternity) and mankind is basically a matter of time. There are no substantial differences between being a human and a god. The latter is perfect; the former is not. In Hinduism and Buddhism, both cosmological types of entities are composed of the same five elements – or the dissolution of them. In Hinduism the gods represent the universal energy which structures everything. To become a god is to fully become a part of the cosmic forces which penetrate and regulate everything. Whether the final end is a universal energy, as within Hinduism, or the total dissolution of everything into complete nothingness without any changes, as within Buddhism, both religions work according to the same principles.

In the Western world religions there is a qualitative difference between humans and their gods. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monolithic religions, which means that the religion's respective gods are primordial and essentially made of a different stuff than the humans, or even if they are made of the same substance, they can never be identical. The gods have made humans in their best moulds, so to speak, but they can never be assimilated into the Almighty One. In Heaven, they have to live beside their God; they are not absorbed into the divine, cosmic unity.

The reason for this is the belief in resurrection. In the Western world religions heaven is populated by perfect beings in perfect bodies, whereas in the Eastern world religions it is the materiality of the humans which separates them from the cosmic whole. Thus, the Western religions are oddly fleshly in the Otherworldly spheres whereas the Eastern religions are purely spiritual. The belief in resurrection has fundamental consequences for both the development of eschatology and performance of actual funeral practices.



**Swayambu stupa,
Kathmandu.**

Judaism



Judaism

The outcome of 3,000 years history

Throughout most of history Jews have buried the corpses of their deceased. Today the belief in resurrection is crucial in Judaism, and it has implications for the modes by which one may dispose of the corpse in the religion. The belief in resurrection is radically different from the Eastern world religions. In Judaism it is not only the soul which will attain the heavenly sphere, but the embodied being. The dead will attain a new body when resurrected, and whereas the Otherworldly existence in Hinduism and Buddhism is characterised by the spiritual existence only, in the Western world religions from Judaism and onwards,

The Western Wall or the Wailing Wall is the only remaining part of the Second Temple of Jerusalem. This is the most important religious place for the Chosen People and their Promised Land.

both Heaven and Hell are populated by humans with bodies. The spiritual world is not solely immaterial but material and bodily defined. The Western world religions are particularly corporeal and concerned with the body.

Since the dead body will be restored on the day of resurrection, it is of importance not to destroy the physical remains of the body during the funeral. Hence, according to the traditional view, burial is the only sanctioned way to dispose of the dead body among the Jews (although the flesh will decompose in the grave). Cremation would destroy the body, and embalming is also prohibited. When a person dies,

the deceased should preferably be buried on the day of death, and sometimes the funeral takes place only hours after the last breath leaves the mouth. The corpse is never left alone, and there is a person sitting next to the body guarding it in order to protect it from negative influences.

Funerals today are normally fairly simple. Ornamented coffins are not used, and flowers, processions, music, and funeral orations are not part of the mortuary rite. The body is dressed in a simple white shroud and not elaborate garments, and there is no difference between rich and poor. The funeral rituals are always conducted at the cemeteries, and never in the home or in the synagogue. At the cemetery there is a donation box, and the mourners donate some money which is afterwards given to the poor and needy people. Since the Jews have lived in diasporas for millennia, they are buried facing east, which is towards Jerusalem, and the tombstones' front face the same direction.

As will be seen, in the past there have been different practices, and the development of resurrection is a quite late event in the history of Judaism. Therefore, a historical approach to Judaism following the development of eschatological concepts, paralleled with funeral remains as found in the archaeological record, reveal the complexity and dynamics of death in society. To understand the development of the belief in resurrection, a historical introduction to the sacred scriptures is necessary.

Judaism as a term denoting the religion is partly misleading. The most accurate term substituting Judaism is *Torah*.



All forms of Judaism have its origin in the Hebrew Bible, but Judaism is more than the religion of the Old Testament. Judaism in the cultural sense includes a variety of laws, ethics, worships, and beliefs, within an overall religious framework. In a strict sense, the Torah is the most authoritative of the Jewish scriptures, and it is usually designated to those texts revealed by God to Israel through Moses. On the other hand, although “The Five Books of Moses” is the core of the Torah, it also refers to the rich tradition that evolved through the ages including the various religious practices.

When the Old Testament as a text was written and composed is a controversial subject, but it is evident that the Hebrew Bible consists of different texts of various dates. After the Romans destroyed the

Jews at the wailing wall in Jerusalem. Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE Judaism developed in a new direction. Most of the

contemporary Judaism has evolved from the rabbinic tradition that arose in Palestine and Babylon from the first century CE.

The rabbinic Judaism advocates that God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai a twofold Torah; one is the “The Five Books of Moses”, and the other is the orally transmitted Torah which has been passed on in an unbroken tradition from Moses to the rabbis. This knowledge was eventually compiled by the Jewish sages into the Mishnah, the Talmuds – one is Palestinian and the other is Babylonian – and various collections of biblical interpretations. The Babylonian Talmud was probably edited in the 6th century CE, and it became the most important, sacred text for rabbinic Judaism.

Immortality through progeny and collective punishment

During The First Commonwealth (until ca 539 BCE), in the Hebrew Bible the belief in an individual life after death had almost no religious importance. Although there are some references which may indicate an afterlife, there is not developed a system of personal punishments for sins conducted by humans. It seems that God punished the humans' disobedience collectively with plagues, fevers, conquests, famine, and exile, rather than with individual repentance. A collective system of rewards and punishments in this life rather than in an Otherworldly realm cannot imply a heaven or hell. Moreover, it is not mentioned any particular destiny which awaits a person at the moment he dies. In other words, the ethics and the moral codex a person had to obey and follow was not due to Otherworldly penalties but due to the consequences his children, lineage, and society would face after his death. In short, the emphasis was on the lived life and not the life that was to become. It was a vital religion for life and the living. The best thing to do was to live a good and honest life because then the offspring would attain a good life.

Following the early scriptures, immortality therefore has to be seen more as a consequence of the succession of future generations than a belief in a supernatural and personal afterlife. The death of an individual would not bring him closer to God, and there were no places for Otherworldly rewards or punishments. One's social and moral behaviour was not a part of the religious worldview in terms of retributions or awards after one died. They were penalties or prosperities given to the community in general. It was the welfare of society that was at

stake, not the individual's destiny. The righteous man protected his progeny through righteous deeds, whereas evil-doers harmed his posterity and the descendants were punished in future generations. There was no life after death, and immortality was progeny through one's children. God's wrath extended beyond the individual and harmed his family and society.

The Deluge has to be seen in this light. God's divine wrath harmed everyone and erased all humans from earth but with one exception; Noah. In Genesis 6:13, Yahweh warns Noah: "The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth". The Deluge killed everything and everyone who was not onboard the Ark. The Flood cleansed the sins of the world, and some Church Fathers stated the Flood was a "baptism of the world". The world emerged purified from the Flood.

Erasing all life on earth but one pair of each species is a way of harming society in general, and only Noah's progeny continued to live after the flood. Thus, there were no needs for other penalties for the rest of humanity because they were dead and could never be immortal. What heinous sins made God that angry, and why he had to erase all the animals on earth except but one pair of each kind, are other questions. The importance is that God's wrath was solely upon this world, and there were no Otherworldly penalties. After the Flood, God regretted and promised that he would never curse the earth again, and if the human beings in the future became wicked, he would only annihilate the wicked part. Thus, this promise might be the origin of Heaven and Hell. The eschatology of punishment turned from this world to an Otherworld.

The Deluge.



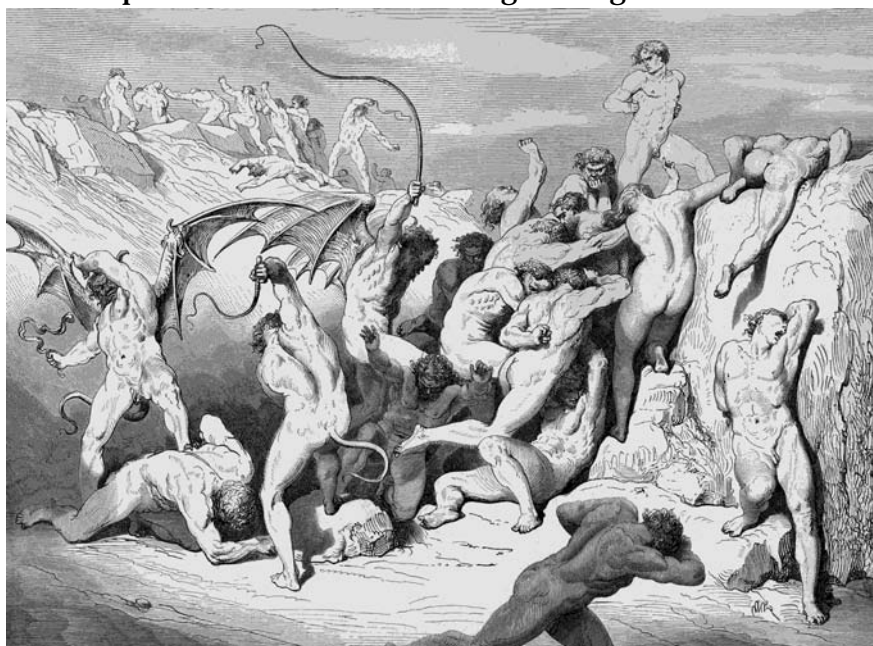
There might of course have been other understandings regarding the relationship between life and death or Otherworldly penalties, but if such beliefs were culturally and religiously important and incorporated in society, one would have expected that references were made to these practices and beliefs in the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, the absence of a heaven or hell does not solve the problem of death. There are some difficulties regarding what happened with the dead at this early stage of the development of the biblical tradition. The Bible speaks of a destiny where the deceased is "sleeping with their fathers". This may indicate that there was a place where the ancestors lived after death, but it may also mean nothing more than that the dead followed their forefathers and that they were buried in a grave.

Another common biblical expression is that the departed "goes down to *she'ol*". The term *she'ol* has normally been designated to an underworld realm, and it has later been equated with Hell. However, in some biblical passages *she'ol* has no associations with death at all, and it may imply that sinners would face an early death rather than being punished after

death. Moreover, the dead were buried beneath the surface of the ground, and thus, it may have indicated a kind of underworld realm without that necessarily implying torments; definitively not eternal torments. Thus, the earliest references may indicate that to die and to become buried was a neutral and natural process rather than a moral process relating these worldly actions to divine realms of atonements or grace.

Still, there are other passages which describe a more frightening realm or state of being, and among them



Later notions of a personal suffering in a separate locale known as Hell.

is 1 Samuel 28, which is a tale describing life after death. Here it seems that there are ghosts roaming around in some lower realms, indicating the existence of different realms which hosted the good and the bad ones after death. Nevertheless, there are lingering doubts about how to interpret such a passage, and overall such beliefs did not play a major part in the Bible.

In other words, even if such notions existed, they were not fully developed and incorporated into the cultural and religious spheres. Hell may nevertheless have originated from such popular beliefs among common people, and one reason why such beliefs developed is probably the

feeling of unjust among the Jews. Throughout history, the Jews have been one of the most deprived people that has suffered from political and religious harassments and oppressions.

A people that has gone through all the sufferings, humiliations, and catastrophes as the Jews have, would not lose the belief in their god as the guarantee of justice, grace, and welfare for the commons and society. The injustice done to the people may, however, have triggered off new and radical solutions to the questions of how God solved the problems of what was good and bad. Did God collectively punish or reward everybody for the sins some few had done, or was the individual responsible for what he or she had done?

If God will punish the wicked and reward the good, then the problem of resurrection appears.

The development of the belief in resurrection

During the Babylonian exile and The Second Commonwealth (539 BCE to 70 CE) the eschatology of Judaism crystallised, and the ideas of Otherworldly punishments and rewards became more explicit. The Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judea and destroyed Solomon's temple, and the Jews were exiled in

Babylon. These events may have altered changes in the beliefs that history would provide and guarantee justice in terms of the righteous and the wicked ones.

In the post-exile period there was developed a sense of individual responsibility for one's actions which transcends the inter-generational responsibility for good or bad deeds. Particularly Jeremiah and Ezekiel

emphasised that the departed is only judged for what the person has done during his or her lifetime, and not for what the ancestors have done prior to him or her.

Nevertheless, there were still no explicit notions of personal retributions in an Other-worldly Hell, or what Hell would look like. The eschatology was in progress, emphasising that in history there are

some periods that are more formative than others.

From the Hellenistic period (4th century to 1st century BCE) and onwards, the belief in resurrection of the dead and judgement in an afterlife became common among the Jewish people. The beliefs in immortality, particularly for the martyrs in times of persecution, seem to have been a response to the catastrophes and sufferings the Jewish people faced. It is also within this historical context one may understand Messiah. Messiah as the Son of David was believed to come and save the world and in particular the Jewish people.



Jews in the city of Jerusalem.

The Old City of Jerusalem.



Concerning eschatological beliefs, this is the opposite of what happened during the Deluge. Rather than erasing the world due to the crimes, sins, and sufferings caused by some few people, they were now promised a saviour who would come and rescue the chosen ones.

The rabbinic perspectives and the Talmud deal extensively with these topics, and the paradise is described as the “World to Come”. It was made explicit that the dead would be restored in their own bodies, and it was believed that before Messiah would come, the disembodied spirits would live in a supernatural realm.

Some believed that the wicked would be punished in the grave prior to the resurrection and the coming of Messiah. Being buried was nevertheless the intermediary stage where one had to live before resurrection whether one was punished or not. The World to Come was Paradise, and it was seen as identical to the Garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden after having eaten the forbidden fruits which revealed wisdom and knowledge of good and evil, and hence they became mortal. Thus, the knowledge of being – a person or a human with a beginning and an end – implies death and sins, and it represents a disobedience to God’s wish. Also the concepts of Heaven developed. Although the original Garden of Eden has been seen as a place on earth, paradise became seen as a supernatural place in the divine

realms. Thus, Heaven moves from being on this earth as a garden to a super terrestrial realm beyond and behind the human world.

Paralleled with the development of a paradise, notions of Hell became elaborated. Gehenna became the place where sinners were punished. The name Gehenna – or Gehinom – is commonly believed to derive from “Vale [Hebrew: *Gei*] of Ben Hinom”, which was a place south of Jerusalem where a child-sacrificing cult had been prevalent during the First Commonwealth.

Although Judaism developed concepts of both Heaven and Hell, particularly the notions of Hell differ substantially from the later Christian beliefs of this place as a locale for eternal punishments.

The new eschatological beliefs had consequences for the preparation of the dead body during funerals. Since the remains of the deceased would be restored during resurrection, it was important to prepare the corpse in such a manner that God was capable of re-embodiment the soul. Therefore, burial as a funeral custom was the auspicious way to solve the problem with the decaying flesh. The bones would be preserved and God could restore the body at the time of resurrection.

Due to the intricate development of the eschatological beliefs in Judaism, turning to archaeology may reveal how the corpses were



The Wailing Wall.

actually disposed of through the different stages of changing beliefs. Judaism started with the belief that there was no life after death; immortality was gained through one's children, and God's wrath and punishment were inter-generational and harmed society in general through plagues, famines, etc. Then the religion developed the idea of resurrection, which has ever since been the core of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Central to this idea is that Heaven and Hell are not populated by spirits or souls, but beings with bodies. The Otherworld is not only spiritual, but carnal.

The corporality of Western world religions' resurrection prescribes certain particular funeral rites. The flesh of the deceased will decompose, but it has to happen in the right manner in order for God to restore the bodies, which will enable the deceased's souls to enter Heaven. Nonetheless, the reason why paradise should be populated by beings with bodies is not clear. However, as will be seen with Christianity, eternal suffering in Hell necessitated concepts of beings with fleshly bodies able to feel the torturing pains of the fire.

Archaeology of Judaism

Ascribing ethnic identity to archaeological finds is a complex task because social status is not mirrored in a one to one relationship in the archaeological record. Moreover, since the Bible is not a history book describing events in a chronological sequence, one should be very cautious when applying both ethnic labels and the Bible as an interpretative framework for The First Commonwealth. In later periods there are less methodological problems when

assigning ethnic labels to the archaeological material.

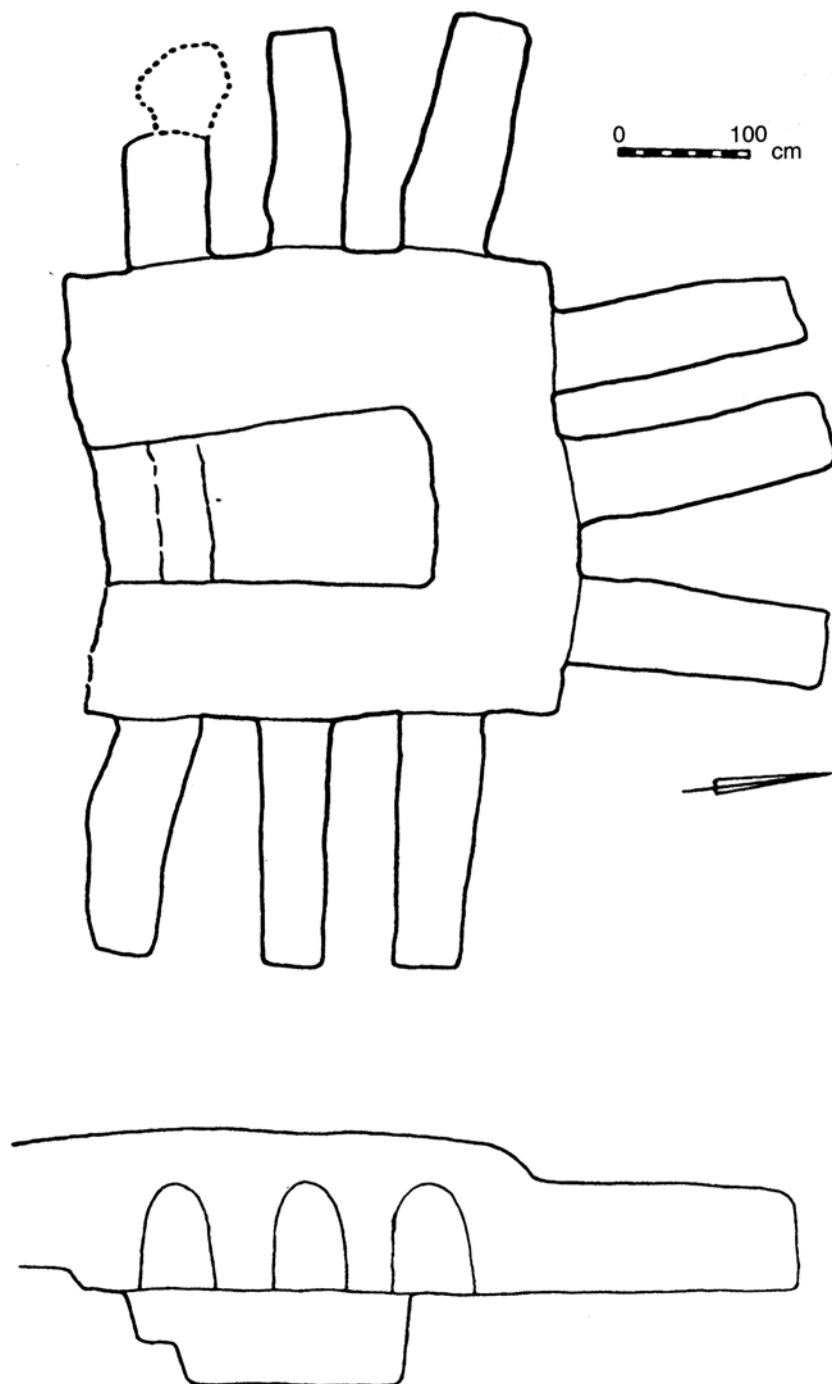
From the Second Temple period Jewish burial customs are known from two excavated cemeteries, one in Jerusalem and one in Jericho. Both cemeteries were located outside the city, and the most common burial monument is the loculi (recesses) tomb. A loculi tomb is a rock-cut tomb, which consists of a shaft, a burial chamber, and loculi hewn into the walls. The entrance is sealed with blocking stones, which can be a stone slab or a stela. The finds from the Jericho cemetery show that the loculi tombs were initially made for burials in wooden coffins. A particularly striking feature is that the primary burials in wooden coffins were followed by secondary burials of collected bones. These bones were either piled in heaps or collected in ossuaries. An ossuary is a container for unburned human bones.

According to theology, burial is the prescribed funeral type. The practice of ossuaries represents another and more complex burial rite. A simple burial in a coffin leaves the dead as they are, and the natural processes decompose the deceased's flesh. The use of an ossuary necessitates that the flesh is taken care of in one way or another before the bones are deposited in the vessel. It represents a secondary burial. The deceased had first to be buried in the earth or in a tomb, then the grave was opened and the bones were collected and placed in an ossuary, and thereafter the ossuary was placed in the tomb. How this has happened is uncertain, and it stresses that the actual funeral rites are complex and include different practices within an overall eschatological framework.

King Solomon's cave, Jerusalem.



Loculi tomb plan.



Since the wooden coffins survived in the Jericho cemetery, it seems unlikely that these primary burials were the ones that were reburied in ossuaries. Thus, the variation in practices may relate to social status, but it may also be a practical solution when the tomb started to be filled up with primary burials in coffins. In Jerusalem, burials in wooden coffins did not survive due to natural processes of decomposition of organic material.

Jews living in diasporas have normally oriented the dead towards Jerusalem, but the orientation of the dead among the Jews in Jerusalem seems to have been without significance since the coffins were placed in any direction. Grave goods were common both in the coffins and ossuaries.

The change from primary burials in wooden coffins to secondary burials in ossuaries takes place in the first century CE. Some of the ossuaries are decorated, and the deceased's name and family relations were often written on the container. The practice of collecting the deceased's bones and piling them in heaps is, however, even more puzzling. The question then is how one may interpret and understand these practices?

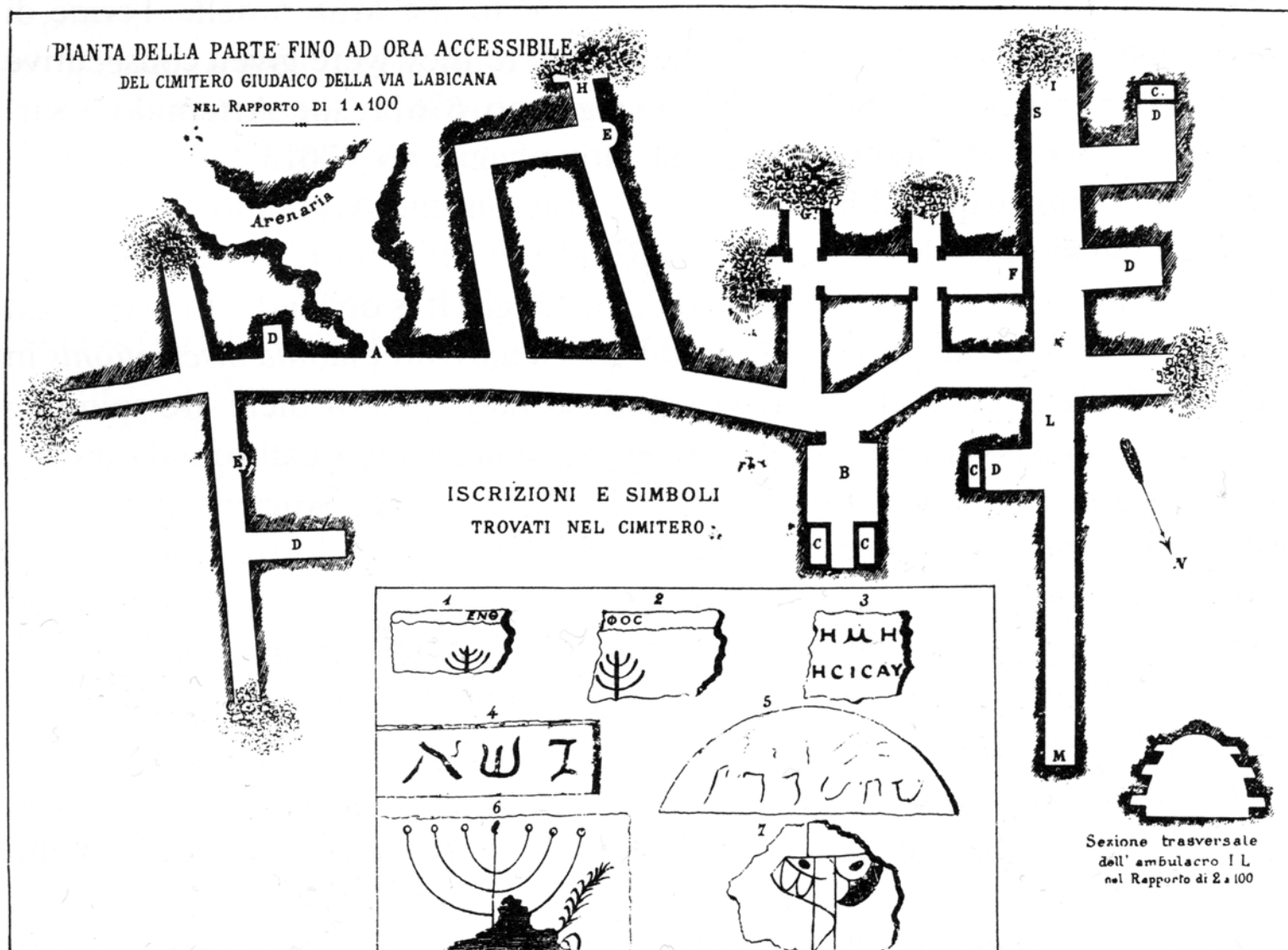
Cemeteries at Qumran give testimonies to the practice that the communities used the exact same individual tomb for all their dead throughout different periods. The loculi tombs may therefore give clues to questions related to eschatology. The plan of the tomb provided each member of the lineage in a loculi a separate place where the wooden coffin or the ossuary was placed, but at the same time it allowed a family to be buried in the same tomb.

Thus, it is tempting to see this practice in light of the early beliefs of immortality through one's progeny. If life is continued through one's children, then the lineage's continuity from the forefathers to the future children guarantees eternal life. A family tomb combining all the remains from the lineage would stress the continuity of life, and the physically deposited remains of the dead manifest immortality even further. It may also explain why piles of bones are collected together in heaps, which one normally would have perceived as perhaps desecrating. If everyone belongs to the same lineage and the aim is to express continuity, mixing the bones is a highly efficacious way of making the forefathers inseparable, and by that, unified and eternal. The burial practice would then have manifested and materialised the eschatological beliefs.

Still, the evident care of the deceased's bones may indicate that the belief in resurrection was established, and since all practices and beliefs develop through time, there are no contradictions between an emphasis on the lineage and resurrection. If both beliefs in immortality through progeny and resurrection coexisted for a certain time, it could explain the funeral practice as evident in the archaeological record.

A religion is always developing from what already exists. The ossuaries are particularly interesting regarding the idea of resurrection. The flesh of the deceased has decomposed in a different place in some way or another, but the collection of the bones, whether they were placed in ossuaries or piled in heaps, may give testimony to the importance of preserving the bones for the future.

The Via Labicana catacomb, Rome.



Hence, the perseverance of the bones seems to indicate that the idea of resurrection was firmly established at this time in actual practice among common people.

Why ossuaries replaced wooden coffins as the dominant funeral type is uncertain, and other mortuary practices could have solved the same problems in accordance with the existing eschatological beliefs.

The sudden change in funeral practices has therefore to be seen in relation to the political changes that occurred at the time. When Judea became a Roman province the external influences altered internal cultural and religious changes among the Jews, and the burial in wooden coffins and ossuaries in loculi tombs were short lived practices, which were replaced by another monumental burial form.

The catacombs

The catacombs may have started as family tombs, and hence, it seems plausible that they are the natural successors of the loculi tombs. When time proceeded, additional tombs were made, passageways extended, and eventually the tombs developed into communal burial sites underground, which are known as the catacombs. The catacombs became the normal cemetery type and structured the Jewish burial custom from the third and fourth centuries CE. There are found catacombs in several places, but the most famous and largest are the ones in Rome.

Altogether it is estimated that the Jewish catacombs of Rome contained some 100,000 graves, but it is

uncertain for how long each of the catacombs were in use. Although this number of graves is high, taken into consideration that it is estimated that the Jewish population comprised some 10 percent of the total inhabitants of the Roman Empire, the number is not overwhelming. What is more surprisingly is that currently there is no evidence for other types of Jewish burials except in catacombs during this period in Rome.

The early Christians in Rome also buried their deceased in catacombs. The word itself is probably derived from the Latin word *ad catacumbas*, which means “at the hollows”. The Christians called the catacombs *koimeteria*, meaning “sleeping places,” which indicates that they believed catacombs were nothing more than a place where the dead were sleeping before resurrection. In times of persecutions the catacombs were places where both Christians and Jews took refuge since cemeteries were initially protected by the law, but later they were ravaged by mobs, and then the haunts were sanctified by the emperors. Thus, Jews and the early Christians shared many features regarding burials and the beliefs in an afterlife. This is of course natural since Judaism spawned Christianity, and the main controversy has been whether or not Jesus was the promised Messiah. Regardless which answer one favours, the most famous funeral in the history of a Jew, is that of Jesus.

The crucifixion of Jesus

The crucifixion of Jesus is not only a religious question, but involves social and political movements and conflicts within the Jewish community.

The crucifixion.





The Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.



The procurator Pontius Pilate asked Jesus if he perceived himself as the king of the Jews, and Jesus replied, "You have said so" (Mark 15:2). It seems that Pilate himself wanted to save Jesus, but eventually he let the mob decide Jesus' destiny. The crowd wanted him executed, and Pontius Pilate fulfilled their wish. A lot has been said about what happened that Friday morning, but of importance here are basically three aspects.

Jesus was the charismatic leader of a religious movement within the Jewish community, which shows that Judaism was a vital religion. As the term religious movement indicates, all religions are in a constant change and the perceptions of the divinities imply creative dynamics and challenging understandings of those who possess the religious knowledge. Even though the devotees believe that religion represents an ontological and everlasting, static truth, the way this eternal essence is understood and grasped by humans is always a matter of dispute. As seen with Buddha, he aimed to perfect the orthodox Brahmanism, and Jesus aimed to perfect Judaism. Later traditions present these movements and prophets as the true representatives of the religious essence, and hence, devotees perceive their religion as a static and everlasting revelation, but from a historical perspective the emphasis is laid on where, when, and why the particular beliefs and practices evolved.

The crucifixion as a method of execution was the Roman penalty for criminals and political offenders, and not a part of the Jewish tradition. Regarding death and religion, this emphasises that the importance may either be laid on the way you die, or the way the corpse is treated afterwards. The Buddhist yogi Milarepa self-combusted on the

funeral pyre because of his inherent bodily holiness, and there were no remains left of him. The crucifixion is for Christians the ultimate symbol of Christianity, but apart from fanatics, this has never been incorporated into the Christian religion as a way of dying. It is the burial of Christ which has continued as a practice. The Hindu practice of widow-burning emphasises, on the other hand, that the way of dying may ensure salvation, not what happens with the bodily remains afterwards.

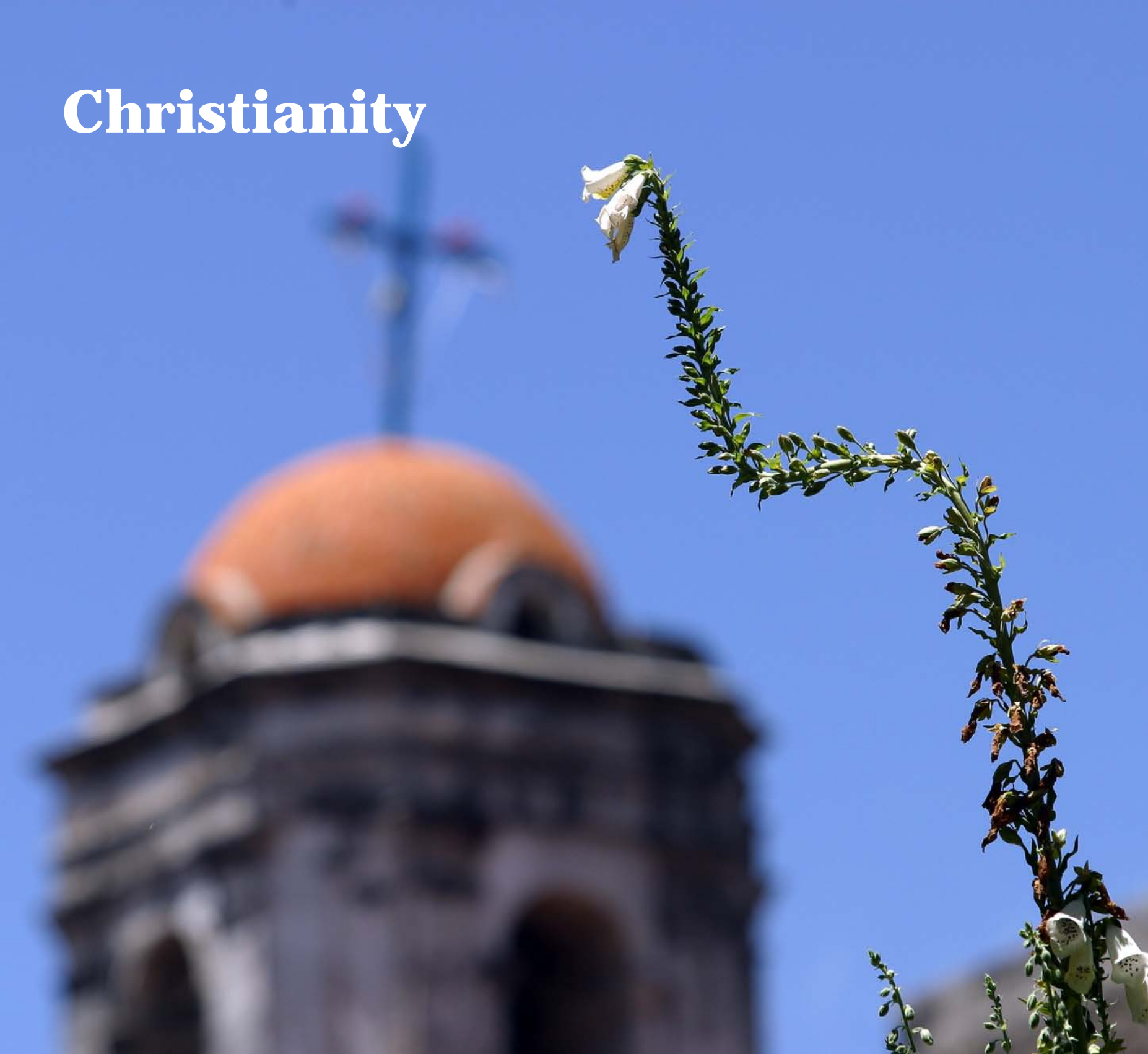
The crucifixion has served other and more important means than merely being a way of dying. It embodies the whole theology of salvation and resurrection. Even though the Jews chose his death, so did Jesus himself. On the cross Jesus died on behalf of all sinners, and since he died for us, according to Christianity, every human has a ritual debt and moral obligation to follow God's law.

This is theodicy. Not only is every human being, according to Christian theology, born with sin, but the sufferings and sacrifice made by Jesus on the cross expiating the world's sins have had severe consequences for the development of the religion. Christianity became a religion of atonement of sins. Jesus as the founder was not merely a teacher, but his death is the path to salvation and resurrection. Christianity is founded on death.

**The ascension.
Acts 1,9.**



Christianity



Christianity

Re-interpreting the Garden of Eden – the original sin

It was Augustine who finally consolidated the idea of original sin after long disputes among the Church Fathers. When Eve tempted Adam and he ate the apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they were expelled from Paradise. The consequence was that not only Adam and Eve became mortal, but so did all their descendants. The original sin was thus the loss of immortality, and hence the original sin was transmitted from generation to generation through procreation. In Genesis (2:15-17) it is written, “The Lord God took the man, and put him

**Desierto de los
Leones, Mexico.**

into the garden of Eden”, saying: “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely

eat: But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die”.

The Apostle says in Rom. 5:12, “by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned”. Wisdom 1:13 says that “God did not make death”, and therefore to die is human imperfection. In this sense Christianity mirrors Hinduism and Buddhism; immortality and eternity are perfection and purity, mortality and decay are impurity and sin. However, this understanding of sin as mortality did not become the dominant one. The doctrine stating that every human being is born with the same portion of inherited sin is unique to Christianity, and the notion

of human imperfection developed into a theodicy of sin and repentance.

Why the eternal Paradise contained the possibility of impermanence and death has never been explained, but the importance here is that death and the Devil are closely related. In one of the classical inquisitorial manuals from medieval Europe, which legitimised the witch-hunt and dominant gender view at the time, two types of sins are described; “for though the Devil tempted Eve to sin, yet Eve seduced Adam. And as the sin of Eve would not have brought death to our soul and body unless the sin had afterwards passed on to Adam, to which he was tempted by Eve, not by the devil, therefore she is more bitter than death”. Thus, there are two processes involved; one is to become inflicted by sin and the other is to deliberately transfer it onto Adam. Regardless of how one interprets the gender roles, or if one emphasises them at all, the importance is that the origin of sin was already planted in Paradise.

The view that humans contained original sin had consequences for the development of the sacraments and how death was perceived, and indeed, Christianity as a religion. Particularly baptism became important in order to rescue and temporarily save the children who were born with sin. During the thirteenth century baptism had to be conducted within the first week. If a child died before baptism, it could never attain salvation and it was doomed to live a life in limbo denied the sight of God. This state was often perceived as a hostile and terrible state where the child was tortured or faced with a terrified life apart from God’s grace.

**18th century burial of woman,
Sura Old Church,
Västmanland, Sweden.**



One may approach baptism in two ways. It is often seen as a ritual which cleanses the child of the original sin, but there are problems with such an explanation. The inherited sins are probably impossible to get rid of. If sin is basically mortality, then it is impossible to erase all of a person's sins in this life since everybody has to die. Therefore, it is possible to argue that rather than to cleanse the initiate of sin the aim of baptism is to admit them into the Kingdom of God. There is no admission into the Kingdom of God without baptism, which John says: "Except a man be born of water, and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Furthermore, it is stated in the New Testament that all men who are baptised in Christ Jesus are baptised in His death (Rom. 6.3-4). By being baptised one has become a part of the cosmological system of sins and atonements, which has Jesus' crucifixion as the ultimate reference point.

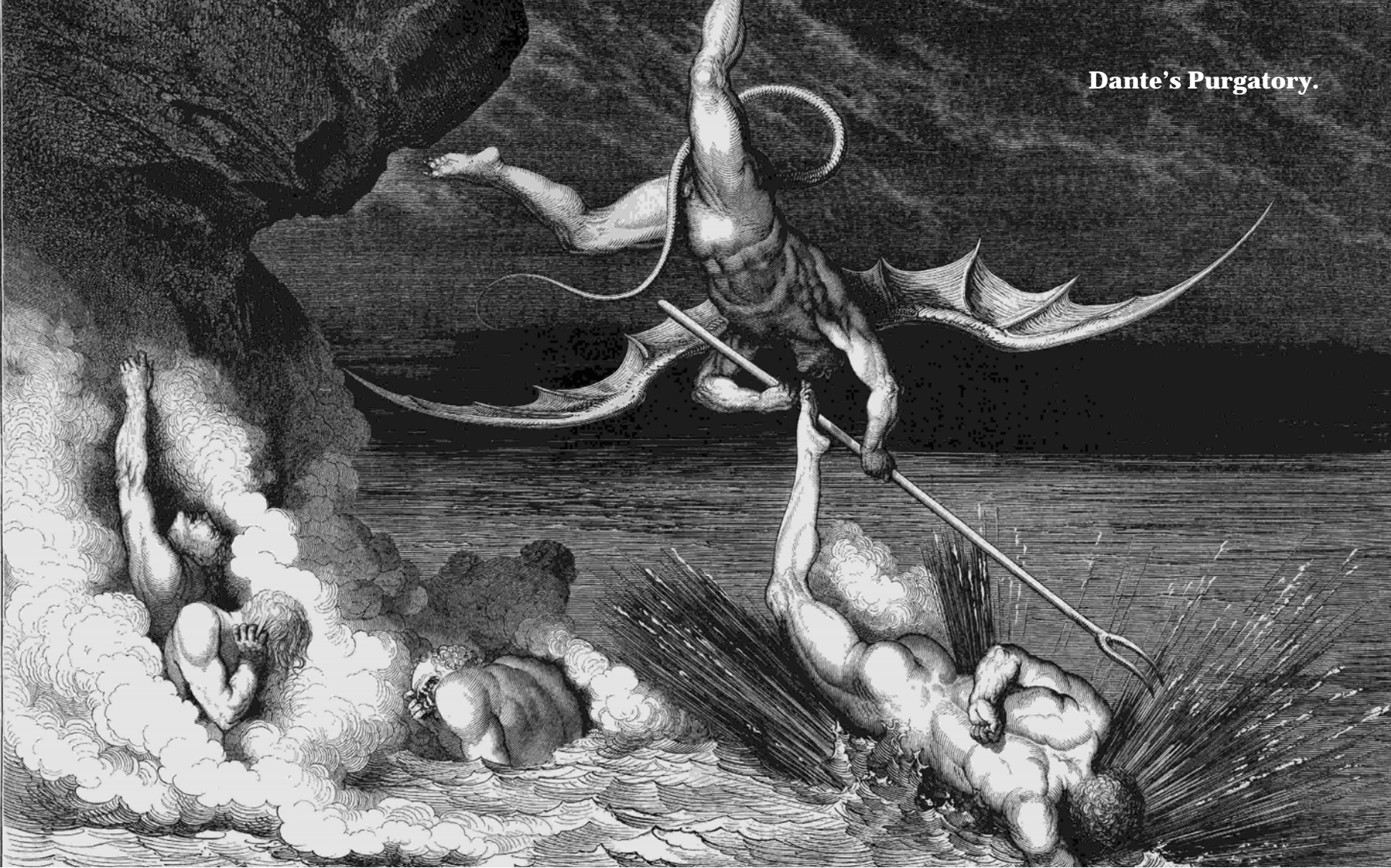
Since sin is such a crucial concept in every aspect of Christianity, in order to understand the role of death and various funeral rites it is necessary to look at the Otherworldly spheres where sinners were penalised, which are Hell and Purgatory.



Hell and Purgatory

Purgatory is a hell of limited time duration and intensity, and the development of Hell and Purgatory are parallel processes. There are several factors which characterise the traditional, Christian Hell. The most remarkable thing is how evil and painful it is. Compared to other religion's places of retribution, the Christian Hell is unique regarding the kind of cruelty and torments the dead suffer. In the history of ideas, it is the world's most perverse and pervasive metaphor. In no other culture or religion has the fear of an Otherworldly penalty played such a role as it has in Christianity.

An important factor in the history of Christianity is the late development of these concepts. These images do not occur with any strength before the end of the twelfth century, and they reach their climax in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As seen within Judaism, the concept of Gehenna is dubious, and it is difficult to pinpoint the exact meaning of it. Even though there are a few references to some kind of a Hell in the New Testament, which basically mentions a "lake of fire" where the wicked will be punished, Hell as it appears in medieval Europe has hardly any scriptural foundation. It was developed by laymen and theologians.



Finally, Christianity is a harsh religion compared to the other world religions. If you are doomed to a life in Hell, this destiny is eternal, and there are no ways to escape it. Although it is said that the doors in Hell are locked from the inside, it is impossible to get out of the furnace. The lack of differential punishment for different actions and various sins is in modern societies seen as unfair, and indeed, irrational. This has been one of the reasons for Christianity's decline

and the rise of atheism or other philosophical and moral ways of living. Why should I be punished in eternity for sins which were both limited in time and extent?

Hell is the logical end to a system founded on sin and retribution. Water as a remedy in baptism cleanses away sin, but fire in the Otherworld purges away the evil; it is a much harder and more efficacious

remedy. As seen, one is baptised into Christ's death, one can only be baptised once, and since humans conduct sins throughout their lives, it seems logical that there must be more powerful remedies in the afterlife to erase sins, which could only be fire. Still, there is a long way from symbolic images of sufferings in an Otherworldly sphere to the belief in the Christian Hell. To believe in an actual trial where the dead were penalised, tortured, and where they suffered for eternity necessitated an idea of a place – a locale. In other words, there was a shift from vague perceptions of a place of retribution to the belief in an Otherworldly three-dimensional crematorium where the sinners were burnt for eternity.

The idea of Purgatory was at least not firmly established before 1170-1180. The belief in Purgatory was a question of a new logic whereby people could believe and experience God's presence and justice. The eschatological development required a physical place – an "intermediary" – a dimension after death that was as real as the world people lived in. The Otherworld had to become a place not only inhabited by souls in a spiritual sphere, but it had to have the same characteristics as this world; a physical place where embodied human beings were living.

In 1253 the church made a formal promulgation of the doctrine of Purgatory in a papal letter, but the intellectual thoughts of Hell were not elaborated thoroughly. Purgatory occupied a central place in the theological works of Thomas Aquinas, who died in 1274, but even the greatest of the theologians of his time could not finish this eschatological construction. Hell and Purgatory, or the ideas of purging by fire, were not even firmly consolidated at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Dante's books on *Inferno* and *Purgatory* give an idea of what the Otherworldly penalties would be like. In his writings it is clear that the retributions will take place in a three-dimensional locale, but Hell as the eternal crematorium was not firmly established as a doctrine. Dante combines both fire and water as purifying and purging elements. The departed one is first penalised by ice cold torrential storms, then some boiling and burning, back to ice, and so forth. In Dante's world both water and fire were Otherworldly remedies for purification and purgation. The developments of the ideas of Hell and Purgatory as crematoriums were in progress, but not finished.

Particularly Hell caused a lot of troubles for the theologians. Fire burns and the flames consume, but if the fire consumed and annihilated the departed sinners, how could Hell be eternal? The solution to the problem was to introduce hellfire, which was distinctively different from ordinary fire. Whereas ordinary fire burns and consumes matters and materiality, hellfire was made only to hurt, not to consume. By this theological redefinition of the physical qualities of fire, Hell could be eternal. This fire – hellfire – enabled that the damned could be punished to eternity. Hell cannot be populated by beings without flesh because then they cannot feel the eternal torments, and then Hell would have been nothing. Hellfire purged without consuming the flesh.

Purgatory was a limited Hell reserved for those who were destined for Heaven; it was for those who had to be cleansed before entering the divine realms. Those who had committed the most severe and grave sins were sent to Hell straightaway, and since every human being is a sinner, Purgatory was the place

where people became purified before gaining heavenly access. Crucial in the logic of Purgatory is the time duration which the sinner has to suffer in the fire. The flesh of a person is infected by the sins he or she has committed. The more sinful the person, the longer the period in the fire. Thus, both Hell and Purgatory are dependent upon the flesh and human bodies. The soul is eventually the entity which will be resurrected in a new body, but in order to feel the pain of the fire in either Hell or Purgatory, it somehow necessitated a body. Thus, the soul as a spiritual entity is most likely not capable of feeling the Purgatory fire unless it is embodied.

The church decided that purgation took only place after death, and hence, it makes sense that the embodied person suffered in Purgatory before resurrection, when eventually God will recreate the departed. On the other hand, the sinners in Hell will never be able to get rid of the physical flesh since the hellfire only hurts, but never consumes. Thus, although the two processes of purging are similar, there are fundamental differences between a person's stay in Hell and Purgatory: the first one will for ever stay in Hell whereas the other will attain Heaven after a horrifying and purifying process in Purgatory.

Luther denied the role of Purgatory in Christian eschatology, but he kept the belief in Hell, and in this way one may say that Protestantism constructed an even more undifferentiated system regarding penalties for sins. There was only Heaven and Hell and nothing else.

Throughout the history of Christianity, even though the belief in Heaven has been crucial, the

**First cemetery of
Athens, Greece.**



elaborations and the vivid imaginations of the divine rewards have been scarce compared to how the eternal penalties have been visualised. In this sense one may argue that Hell has been more important in Christianity than Heaven; it is not good in itself that has been the driving force in emancipating devotees, but the negation: eternal suffering in Hell. This view has led to eschatological changes within the Christian communities.

Recently the Pope and the Catholic Church have abolished Hell as a physical and eternal place of torment, and the new definition of Hell is now “absence of God”. The underlying logic is that the goodness and the greatness of God are so enormous and eternal that a person who is rejected from this joy will perceive the state of nothingness as Hell. Hell is the physical and psychological pains of not being a part of God and Heaven.

With this new definition of Hell, the atonement of sins has changed from active retribution to passive exclusion, and it stresses that no religion works apart or behind the real world and the humans it is supposed to function for. However, even though the eschatological explanations of what happens after death changes, the human responses to death and their subsequent funerals do not adapt statically to a changing eschatology.

**August Strindberg,
Norra Cemetery,
Stockholm.**



Christian burials

After the crucifixion of Jesus, he was buried at Golgotha, which today is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (see p. 80-81), a basilica in Jerusalem. The Roman emperor Hadrian (CE 117-138) tried to destroy the tomb by building a temple at the spot, but Constantine the Great – the first Christian emperor – rebuilt the place in the fourth century. It was later ruined by Persian invaders, but restored again. When Muslims caused severe damage to the Sepulchre at the turn of the first millennium CE, it gave rise to clashes between Christianity and Islam and fuelled the crusades.

However, the Christian and Muslim funeral tombs in Jerusalem bear some striking similarities. The copulas of the Holy Sepulchre and the Muslim Dome of the Rock, the place where Mohammed ascended to Heaven, are identical. This indicates that even if there are fundamental differences between the religions, which have given rise to conflicts throughout history, by the end of the seventh century CE when the Dome of the Rock was built (see p. 112), the intimacy of ideas regarding death necessitated, for whatever reason, that the copula of the latter monument was made identical to, and not larger than, the copula in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Burial as the auspicious funeral type has been the dominant practice throughout the Christian history, and from the third to the nineteenth century the church forbade cremations. This has its reason in the belief that God needed the skull and the femurs for the resurrection of the deceased on Doomsday.

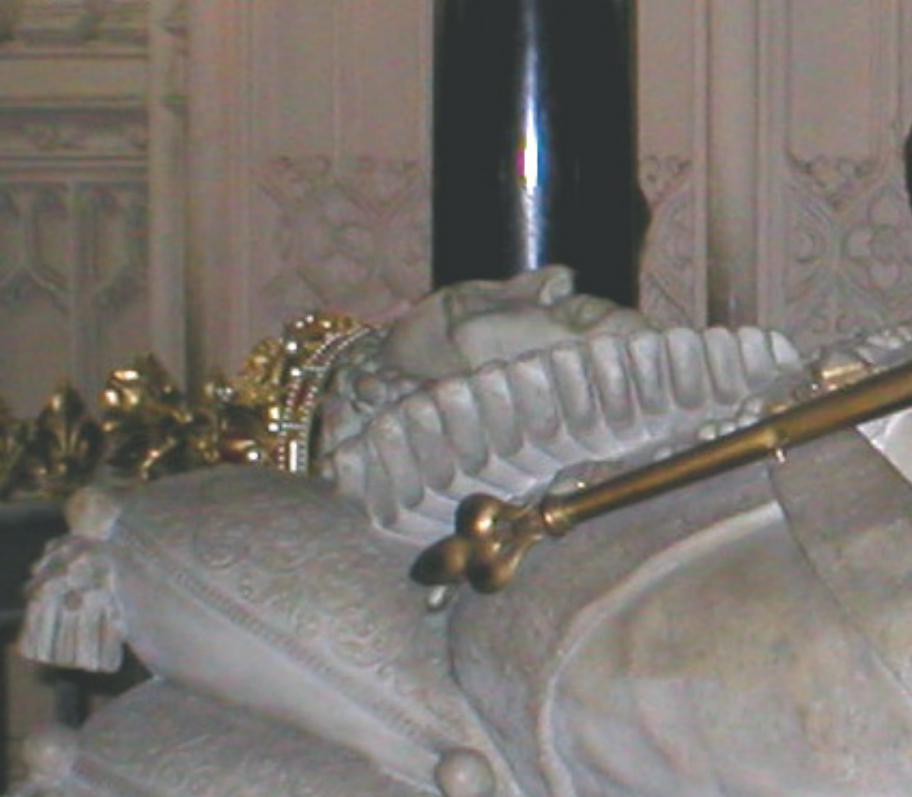
Thus, the common Christian funeral is burial where the coffin is placed in a six feet deep grave.

Memorial to Lady Diana and Dodi Al Fayed in the basement at Harrods, London.





Norra Cemetery, Stockholm.



Tomb effigy of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603), Westminster Abbey, London.

The deceased is facing the east, or to Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This is the same direction which every church is directed towards.

Most cemeteries are located outside the church, and the closer one is buried to the most holy part of the church, the better. It has been a common practice that the most prominent persons in a society are buried within the church, particularly within cathedrals. Kings and bishops have often elaborated and decorated stone sarcophaguses inside the cathedrals, as close as possible to the altar, or in separate basements.

Being buried in a cemetery or on sacred ground was mandatory for resurrection and salvation, and un-



Tomb of King Gustav Wasa (1496-1560), Uppsala Cathedral, Sweden.

baptised children, murderers, and those who committed suicide, were buried outside the sacred ground, and hence, denied the possibility of attaining the Kingdom of God.

A religion consists of diversity within an overall unity of beliefs and practices. Christianity comprises of three major branches; the Roman Catholic Church, Protestantism, and the Orthodox Church, and there are numerous minor branches. Within all these religious communities there are local and traditional funeral practices.

Resurrection is crucial in all branches of Christianity, but there are some ways of expressing such beliefs in funerals which are more explicit than others.

Westminster Abbey, London.



MEMORIAE
EDUARDO EX INCLYTA TALBOTORVM
FAMILIA OCTAVO COMITI SALOPIE
WELSHFORDIA ET WATERFORD DOMINO
TALBOT COMINI DE BADENHAGH VALENCIE MONT
CHENCY STRANGE DE BLACKMERE GIFFORD DE
BRIMESFELD CLIFFORD DE CORSHAM FVRNEVAL
VERDON ET LOVETOFT

VIRO
OMNIBVS TUTVLIS VNDEQVAQVE
PARI
MORIBVS ETIAM ADEO INTEGRIS
IVXTA AC SVAVISSIMIS
VT
EORVM LAVDI
NIHIL OMNINO DETRAXERIT
TITVLORVM MAGNITVDO
CANDORE
ET
PIETATE
HABVIT MNVS QVAM GENERE
FVIT INSGNIS
NEC VLO PROCLAVM SOLENNI VITIO
TINCTVS
SINE FASTV NOBILIS
SINE IACTANTIA POTENS
SINE SVPERSTITIONE RELIGIOVS
MENTE AC MANV MVNIFICVS
FORTVNA SEMPER SECVVS
TOTA ILLI VITA FVIT SEMITA RECTI
ET
INNOCENTIA
QVALIS PER INVIDIAM EMERSIT
NEC METAM NEC TERMINVM RECEPIT
ITA DEMVM POSTERTATIS CERTVS
PER CONSCIENIAM DVN VIATOR ERAT
ET LA POST VITAE ARVMNAS RQVIE
CVIVS EL PARTICIPEM IN HORAS EXOPTAT
MOESTISSIMA CONIVX
IANA
CVTHBERTI BARONIS OGLE HEREDVM
PRIMOGENITA
QVE LACHRYMIS IMMER
PIL MONVMENTVM
P
OBIT DIE VIII FEBRVARII CHICAGO XVII
ANNO ETATIS LVI

Particularly rural Greek Orthodox funeral rites reveal some challenging practices of resurrection and beliefs in the afterlife. The Orthodox Church derives its name from the Greek “right-believing”, and they base their faith and practice upon the apostolic truths.

Greek Orthodox reburials

The Greek Orthodox and rural funerals emphasise the importance of the deceased’s flesh and bones for the resurrection of the deceased. When a person dies he is washed and the body is dressed up in new clothes within the house. Icons of the resurrection of Christ, Maria, and other saints are placed on the deceased, together with coins and flowers. Relatives and villagers arrive continuously to pay the dead their last respect.

If the departed is an unmarried man, his funeral might be celebrated as a wedding. In such cases a white wedding crown is placed on the deceased’s head and the mourners sing wedding songs over his body. The funeral procession moves slowly through the village while they carry the coffin to the church where the priest holds the funeral service. After the service is completed, the mourners pass by the open coffin and place some coins on the body before they kiss the icons and the deceased’s forehead. Then the coffin is

carried to the cemetery. The priest will pour red wine in the pattern of the cross over the body when he lies in the grave, which will purify the deceased and cleanse him of his sins. Before the grave is covered, everybody in the procession tosses a small amount of earth on the body, symbolising that the community members have done their obligations and provided the dead with a proper funeral. But this is only the beginning of the funeral rite and not the end as within the Roman Catholic Church and Protestantism.

Those who are wealthy build elaborate marble monuments to honour their relative. If such monuments are built, they have to be completed within forty days after the deceased has passed away, because after this period there is a memorial service for the dead. In the deceased’s house an oil-lamp is kept burning twenty-four hours a day throughout these forty days. As long as the candle burns the person is somehow alive or within the grave, but when the flame goes the

soul departs and the person dies. On the last Saturday evening before the fortieth day the lamp and a photography of the deceased are moved from the house to the memorial monument on the cemetery. It is believed that the soul lingers on earth for forty days before it ascends to Heaven, where it will be judged by God, in a similar way as Jesus



Cemetery, rural Greece.

Ossuary with bones.



ascended to Heaven on the fortieth day after resurrection.

Three, five, or seven years later the grave will be opened and the bones exhumed. It is believed that the flesh of someone who has committed sins or whose sins are not forgiven will not decompose, and when the grave is reopened, the exhumed bones will then be covered with flesh. In such cases the grave is closed and reopened some years later. Exhumed, white, and pure bones are taken as visual evidence that the deceased's soul has entered Paradise. If the sins are forgiven and the dead ascends to Heaven, the flesh decomposes. If the body has not decomposed properly, his sins are not forgiven, and he will have to stay in the grave until the bones are bare.

There have been beliefs that if the flesh was not decomposed, it was a bad omen. It meant that the soul was not at peace, but rather a wandering vampire. This required an exorcism by the priest while the remains were carried three times around the church before the bones eventually were reburied. If the flesh is completely decomposed, then all the bones are collected. The skull is particularly taken care of, and it has an important role in the obsequies. The skull is passed from one relative and villager to another who greets the dead, or kisses the forehead, and welcomes him to the world of the living. Thus, if the exhumation is a return of the dead, this process is a reversal of the burial. However, it is not a joyful return because the dead is not really returned to the world of the living, but as a symbol of the inevitable.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, in Greek villages in Macedonia there was another local

practice, which illuminates the deceased's power over society. After the grave of the dead was reopened and the bones collected, the skull was turned upside down like a chalice. Red wine was poured into the cranium, and each member of the family and those who attended the funeral had to drink from the deceased's skull if they feared that the dead might have cursed them when alive. By drinking from the cranium they expressed that they had nothing undone or unsaid with the deceased and he or she could rest in peace, and the ritual consumption erased any curse.

After the skull ritual, the priest washed the skeletal remains in wine, and the bones were placed in a village ossuary or a family ossuary, where they would rest for eternity. The deceased's bones were not placed in the marble monument where the name and photo of the deceased are exposed, but in a small bone house in the corner of the cemetery. Whereas the soul "sleeps" in Paradise before resurrection, the bones "sleep" in the ossuary. Therefore, the deceased does not "sleep" completely before the exhumation has been conducted and the departed incorporated into the Otherworld. The exhumation is only a partial and uncompleted resurrection.

Christian cremations

Even though cremation was initially prohibited among the Christians, today the practice is common and widespread, particularly in towns. There are both economic and sanitary reasons for the change in the funeral custom from burial to cremation. With industrialisation and urbanisation the number of people increased, and at the end of the nineteenth century cremation was a hygienic way of disposing of

**Møllendal Crematorium,
Bergen, Norway.**





Burnt bones after a cremation. Bergen.



**Cemetery where the ashes
after cremations can be
spread by the wind. Norra
Cemetery, Stockholm.**

dead bodies. Moreover, burials take up huge areas of land, and a place at a cemetery for a grave in a metropolis is more expensive than being stored in an urn.

Still, many Christians are reluctant to become cremated. The belief that God needs the bones for the resurrection prevails, and Jesus was originally buried and had a body when he ascended to Heaven on the fortieth day.

On the other hand, the flesh of a buried body decomposes as well, and the omnipotent and omnipresent God, who is capable of restoring the flesh from nothing but bones, should also be able to restore humans from ashes; after all, he created cosmos and the world within six days and rested on the seventh. And finally, as it is recited from the Book of Common Prayer at the grave; "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend the Almighty God our brother [name of dead]; and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and to be gracious unto him and give him peace. Amen."

**Karl Marx' grave.
Highgate Cemetery,
London.**





The famous Swedish archaeologist, Oscar Montelius (1843-1921), is buried in a copy of a dolmen (prehistoric grave). Norra Cemetery, Stockholm.



Islam

Islam

The prophet, places, and principles

The prophet Mohammed (570? –632) is the founder of Islam. He was born in Mecca, which is the holiest place in Islam. In Mecca the Kaaba is located, which is the holiest shrine for Muslims. It is believed to have been built by Abraham, and in the southeastern corner is the Black Stone, which is believed to have been given to Abraham by the archangel Gabriel. In 622 Mohammed emigrated and took refuge in Medina, which is the second holiest place for Muslims, and this event marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. It was in Medina the prophet died

and his tomb is located in **Al-Azhar mosque,** the Mosque of the Prophet. **Cairo, Egypt.** The third holiest pilgrimage site in the Muslim world is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which is believed to stand on the ruins of Solomon's temple, or the First temple. The Dome of the Rock houses the stone from where Mohammed ascended to Heaven and Allah.

There are two main branches in Islam; Shia and Sunni. The different branches represent the constitutional crises which emerged after the death of the prophet: how should the successor be chosen?

The Shia Muslims claimed that the successor should come from the bloodline of the prophet, and that he should descend from Ali who was the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed. The Sunni Muslims argued that the caliph should be chosen through election.

As with all religions, there is variation between the different branches, and only some general outlines will be mentioned. Islam as a religion shares many of the same beliefs and moral codexes, which are common in Judaism and Christianity, and Islam departed from this origin. Although Muslims believe in the original messages as given by God to the Jews and the Christians, they claim that both Judaism and Christianity as religions distorted the original knowledge which was revealed by God. Hence, God sent another prophet to reveal the truth one more time – and for the last time – and that was Mohammed. The Qur'an is the sacred book which contains these truths as revealed by Allah through Mohammed; the Qur'an is truly God's own words.

The Muslims also believe that humanity descends from Adam and Eve, but their view differs substantially from the Christian ones. Although Adam ate the apple and committed sin in paradise, from where Adam and Eve then were expelled, in Islam God has forgiven their sins after they made repentance. It is believed that the expulsion was a result of satanic deception rather than a deliberate disobedience of God's laws. In Islam God created humans with the best means possible in cosmos, and they are his viceroys on earth. Humans are therefore not born with sin, but as humans they have the possibility to commit sins. Hence, as creatures of Allah humans have a moral duty to serve their God. This is imperative, and disobeying this obligation is a heinous sin, which has severe consequences in the Otherworld.

Nevertheless, there is no original sin in Islam, and descending from Adam and Eve is an honour and



Muslim women in Jerusalem.

grace, and not a fall as within Christianity. Thus, the notion of original sin differentiates the religions, and although the Islamic Heaven and Hell bear resemblances to the Christian ones, the Islamic conceptions also have other particular characteristics, which will be described.

The only prescribed and auspicious funeral rite in Islam is burial, but the Qur'an has nothing to say about the funeral in itself. Nevertheless, the grave has a special importance in the after-worldly process leading towards Heaven or Hell.

The time duration from death to resurrection plays a fundamental part in the Muslim eschatology, and during this time interval the premises for the Otherworldly resurrection or redemption are laid. However, even though this period is crucial for the resurrection, the Qur'an does not elaborate this intermediary state, and it has been a major source of dispute among scholars in the later Islamic traditions.

The intermediate state between death and resurrection

Allah is the Creator and Originator of everything, and God has the complete authority and autonomy of his creation. Therefore, it is God who determines the lifespan of each individual being. God knows when each life starts and ends.

From death occurs to the arrival of the Hour, which announces the final judgement, the departed lives in an intermediate state called *barzakh*. It is a common belief that the deceased is somehow alive in the grave, and therefore the *barzakh* has to be understood as a time, the duration from death to resurrection, but also as a place, where the waiting takes place.

One of the first things which happens after death is a journey through the seven heavens accompanied by the archangel Gabriel. The deceased gets a foretaste of the divine pleasures. What happens when the deceased returns to the grave is more uncertain. A debated issue is whether or not there is a preliminary reward or punishment during this phase prior to the Hour and the final judgements. Common belief, nevertheless, stresses that there is some kind of punishment or reward taking place in the grave.

**Al-Azhar mosque,
Cairo, Egypt.**

Some passages in the Qur'an itself suggest a kind of punishment in the intermediate state. The most common belief is that two angels – Munkar and Nakir – will come to the deceased in the grave questioning him about his faith.



Lalbagh Fort, built late in the 17th century, mausoleum of Pari Bibi. Dhaka, Bangladesh.





Muslim graves, Faridpur, Bangladesh.



They are described to appear in black clothes with green eyes, they are fearsome and their voices are like thunder and the eyes are lightening. Some descriptions do not mention these fearful details whereas others emphasise that the angels appear only in this manner in front of the sinners who are destined to Hell.

It is believed that the dead is ordered to sit up when the angels enter the grave. They ask him who or what is his Lord, his religion, and his prophet, and the correct answers should be God, Islam, and Mohammed. If the deceased answers correctly, the angels will open a door through which the dead can see Heaven and feel the comforting and sweat

breezes from Paradise. If he answers wrong; the door to Hell is opened and the wicked starts to feel the pains from the lower realms, or the angels may even start to beat the wicked with iron rods. After the initial retributions or awards the dead fall into a state of unconsciousness until the final day of judgement.

How the spiritual realms are during this stage is not clear. There are many stories suggesting that the dead is met and welcomed in the tomb by other departed souls. This may suggest that there is a separate spiritual world existing after death but before resurrection. Thus, there are uncertainties related to whether the soul alone, the soul and the body, or only the body, reside in the grave until resurrection. What happens at the final end is clear: the bodies will be resurrected before entering Heaven or being punished in Hell.

When resurrection is approaching, an angel will blow a trumpet signalling that the Hour is about to come.

This is a dramatic period in cosmos. Each person carries a personal record for his deeds. The righteous ones carry it in the right hand and the sinners in the left or they try to hide it behind their backs. On the Day of Reckoning God asks each and everyone to read his record and the humans will be judged in accordance with their actions. Good actions are weighed against bad actions, and if one has conducted more good than bad deeds one may go to Heaven.

At the Hour there will also be temptations. Anti-Christ or Satan will appear, and he will whisper in the deceased's left ear, promising all kinds of pleasures which will lure the dead astray. His resemblance to Christ and Messiah will enable Satan to control the entire world except from Mecca and Medina for forty years. Then the true Messiah will return and fight Satan and destroy anti-Christ, and this cosmic battle will take place in Palestine or Syria. After Messiah has defeated Satan, the victory will be announced by one or two blasts of the trumpet.

What seems to happen after the judgement is that all the dead – both the saved and the condemned – have to cross a bridge called *sirat*. The crossing of the bridge seems to verify the deceased's destiny since it appears after the final judgement. The bridge crosses over Hell and the lower realms. God facilitates the passage over the bridge wide and easy for those who are destined for Heaven. For the sinners the bridge is very small and they will fall from it into the abyss of Fire. According to the degree of heinousness and severity of the sins that have been committed, the bridge becomes thinner and thinner until it is thinner than a hair but sharper than a sword.

Heaven and Hell

Both Heaven and Hell consist of seven different layers or realms. Starting with Hell, the uppermost level is the least torturous, and then there is an increasing degree of torment the further down in Hell the wicked descend. Some of the lower realms are characterised by scorpions as big as mules and snakes the size of camels which torture the damned, and all suffer by fire. Thus, there is an elaborate system of relative punishments relating to the seven layers. The *sirat* bridge crosses over the shallowest level at the top of Hell, and there are numerous beliefs that those who are destined for the uppermost levels in Hell after a certain time may re-enter the bridge and eventually pass on to the other side.

The Qur'an is explicit regarding which deeds will result in the Fire; lying, corruption, adultery, murder, etc, but the most heinous of all sins is the denial of God, his prophet, and the reality of Heaven, Hell, and the Hour. Hence, the questions by the angels Munkar and Nakir in the intermediary period check whether the deceased deny the existence of God or not.

The most intriguing aspect of the Muslim Hell compared to the Christian Hell is that the degree of punishment is meticulously adapted to the heinousness of the sins. In Islam there is a kind of calibration of the different deeds and sins, and the atonements and rewards are reflected in the eschatology in both the lower and upper realms.

Heaven, too, is characterised by seven levels, and Paradise is normally referred to as Gardens in plural. The internal order of the different gardens is disputed, but according to some, the Garden of Eden

**The Dome of the Rock. The place
where Mohammed ascended to
Heaven, Jerusalem.**



is directly under the throne from which the four rivers of Paradise flow. The joys awaiting the departed in the Gardens are elaborately described in the Qur'an; delicious food and wine, companionship of young virgins for males, and so on. Whether these joys are meant to be understood carnally rather than in a spiritual way is uncertain, but at least the punishments in Hell are undoubtedly connected to the physical bodies and flesh.

Moreover, there are uncertainties regarding the eternity of the punishment in Hell. It is commonly believed that particularly Muslims, who have testified to God but have committed sins and evil during their lifetime, will not be punished for eternity. The merciful God will not punish the faithful ones forever, and consequently the stay in Hell is only temporary. There are certain passages in the Qur'an which may suggest that even Hell is temporary, and that the torments are expressions of God's mercy, which will enable the departed a place in Heaven afterwards. Still, there are lingering doubts regarding those who have denied faith in God and even the existence of God, and the lowest Hell may persist whereas the other wicked ones are annihilated and admitted a place in Paradise.

There are two ways of solving the problem of mitigation of sins: divine mercy and human repentance. Whereas Christianity has emphasised human repentance – even to eternity – Islam has put much more emphasis on divine mercy. Allah is good and merciful. In Christianity the judgement is rather static and mechanical without any interference by God – what humans have done is done, and they have to suffer for their deeds – but in the Muslim eschatology it seems that Allah plays a more active

role executing his Almighty powers to save even the wicked ones who suffer in the lower realms.

Muslim burials

Throughout the world Muslim funeral rites show a high degree of uniformity. The funeral practice is rather simple and rapid, and there are small variations between the funerals of men and women.

When a person is born, the first words a Muslim hears are the invocation of the Divine Name, and this is also the last thing a person says or hears when dying. The face of the dying person is turned towards Mecca. After death occurs the body is washed. A ritual prayer is given on the cemetery or in the mosque, and sometimes it is uttered in the home where the relatives mourn the dead. The deceased is carried on a bier by men, and the funeral procession follows afterwards.

The corpse is placed in the grave, and most often a coffin is not used. The grave is normally directed towards Mecca. Although the normal way is to direct the head towards the east, among some Shia Muslims the feet have sometimes been directed towards the holiest place in Islam. The depth of the grave is usually not very great. On the one hand, the deceased should be able to hear the prayers from the mosque, but on the other hand, it must be deep enough for the body to sit up during the interrogation of the angels Munkar and Nakir. A commemorating stone should only be placed at the spot where the deceased's head is laid, but in practice there is a great variation regarding where the grave markers are placed.



先母馬門黎蓉之

生於一九二零年農曆五月十八日
終於一九五六年農曆正月初五日

男 嚶 女 端
富 艷 清 艷 芳 媳
坤 芬 君 美 嬋 同

The simplicity of the burials has its reason partly in the fact that during death everyone has to face the same destiny, and it is God who is in charge of what will happen with the departed. Hence, praying for, and offering to the dead is prohibited, and the grave shall not be a place of worship. The relatives cannot influence the deceased's destiny after death; that belongs to the realm of God's justice.

Funerals basically belong to the domain of men, and women may stand at some distance from the grave when the deceased is buried. Still, ritual wailing and laments are important, and this is a part of the women's obligation during the funerals, and it may

Muslim grave, China. include tearing off one's clothes, throwing dirt on one's head, and throwing off all of one's jewellery. The laments and wailing, which also include songs, take place immediately following death and last for a few days, and sometimes even longer.

The holy and the harlots

Martyrdom plays an insignificant role in Christianity even though Jesus was crucified. In Islam, however, the idea of martyrdom has an intrinsic vital role in the religion, but there are various types of martyrdom. The historical origin of martyrdom goes back to the separation between the Shia and Sunni Muslims after the Prophet's death.

The Shia Muslims claimed that the successor of Mohammed had to come from his bloodline. Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed, was assassinated after becoming the fourth caliph. He had two sons, Hassan and Hussein. Hassan was

poisoned, and Hussein was invited by the Shia Muslims to come to Kufu, a town close to contemporary Baghdad, to become their leader. The Sunni caliph Yazid came to know about this through his spies, who made reports about the plans, and Yazid sent his military troops after Hussein.

In 680 Hussein and his group were encircled by Yazid's military forces at Karbala before they reached the Euphrates. Yazid's military commander tried to make Hussein pay homage to the caliph, which he refused to do, since, according to the Shia doctrine, the caliphate should have been his own. After ten days of siege, Hussein and all the members of his group were shot with arrows and their bodies were cut to pieces by the enemy's swords. The bodily remains were trampled on by the hooves of the horses and left in the desert, apart from their severed heads which were brought to Yazid in Damascus. Hussein's female relatives who survived were brought in chains to Damascus.

Hussein's martyrdom in Karbala expresses the highest ideals of the Shia religious culture. Martyrdom is hence seen as the ultimate personal act of redemption, and the martyrs immediately gain a place in Heaven.

Still, this martyrdom is different from the one which is a result of *jihad* or holy wars. Whereas most branches of Islam emphasise the inner jihad, it is the Sunni Muslims who believe in honourable deaths in holy wars. The Shia Muslims are forbidden to participate in such jihads. It is only their spiritual leader, the imam, who can conduct such a jihad, and the state of martyrdom among the Shia Muslims is mainly believed to be achieved in self-defence, such as with Hussein.



The jihad or the protection of Islam is an intrinsic part of the religion for the Sunni Muslims, but it contains four approaches; one is by the heart, another by the tongue, the third by the hand, and the last by the sword. Thus, the traditional jihad comprises inner beliefs, preachings and instructions, good deeds or practices, and self-defence during times of war.

Muslim activists and militants have extended this notion to include wars against non-Muslims. By dying in war against the unfaithful ones, they believe that they will not stay in the grave during the

**Tomb of Abdur
Rahim Khan-i-
Khanan, (1556-
1627), Delhi,
India.**

intermediary period before the Hour which is to come, but proceed directly to Heaven. Nevertheless, religious beliefs can be a doubled-edged sword. Particularly rebels, terrorists,

or separatists who believe their suicide missions will entail immediate access to Heaven, may have forgotten some minor, but important, details.

In October 2002 Muslim Chechen separatists held over 700 people as hostages in a theatre in Moscow. After a dramatic rescue operation the Russian security forces released the hostages, but all the separatists and more than 120 theatre-goers died. There are reasons to believe that these jihad martyrs descended to Hell rather than to Heaven. The Russian security forces buried the Chechen separatists' bodies in pigskin body bags, and placed them in unmarked graves. In Islam there is an explicit belief that those who are buried in pigskin will descend straight to Hell and the filthiness of the pigskin will deprive them the possibility of entering Heaven for eternity.

By turning the eschatological belief against the martyrs the Russian authorities aimed to prevent further attacks by sending a signal to the martyrs: you are not safe even in death. The use of pigskin to intimidate the deceased is not, however, a recent invention. During the Spanish-American war in 1898 most of the fighting took place in the Spanish colonies on Cuba and the Philippines. At the Philippine island of Mindanao US soldiers wrapped at least six Muslim rebels in pigskin shrouds and buried them with their face down so they could not see Mecca, and afterwards they poured the entrails of the pigs over them. To fulfil the humiliation, they forced other Muslims to watch the desecration. Whether or not such practices should be employed today is debated within the American military circles regarding Muslim terrorists, and apparently the Israelis have also used this desecrating funeral practice as an ideological weapon against the Palestinians. If these humiliating funerals serve their purpose is another question, since the practice of martyrdom prevails.

The example of burials in pigskin illuminates that the eschatological conceptions are not independent of practice, and there might be contradictory beliefs regarding what happens after death. Thus, at death there are always two processes involved regarding the deceased's destiny: the way a person dies, and the way his body is taken care of afterwards. Even the most glamorous death might be distorted if the bodily remains are not treated in the proper and prescribed manner afterwards. Moreover, the auspiciousness of the burial rite is not only a question of what is being done, but equally important is where it is done, and this puts the emphasis on cemeteries as sacred grounds.



Ambikapur Shashan ghat, Faridpur, Bangladesh.

Faridpur town is a small town in Bangladesh located some 130 kilometres southwest of the capital Dhaka. The majority of the population in the town is Muslim, but there is a minority of Hindus who have their own separate ghat for cremations and inhumations. The cemetery is named Ambikapur Shashan Ghat. Although the cemetery is mainly for Hindus, there are a few Muslims who are buried there as well.

Prostitutes are socially deprived and stigmatised in the Muslim community, and they are perceived as impure and unholy. The family members of a prostitute never allow her to be buried at a Muslim cemetery when she dies, and by excluding them from the Muslim sacred ground, the prostitutes are also denied the sight of God.

In Faridpur there is a high degree of communal harmony between Muslims and Hindus, and the Muslim prostitutes are therefore buried at the Hindu cemetery. When a prostitute dies, other prostitutes conduct the ritual. The cemetery is located according to Muslim prescriptions so the Muslims who are buried there are not intimidated or humiliated. The Hindu cremation committee, which runs the cemetery, believe that even prostitutes are humans with dignity, and in front of God everybody is equal regardless of whether one was a Hindu or Muslim in this life, and hence, they are obliged to serve everyone.

What is a common trait among people is that they all believe or at least they hope that they will ascend to Heaven after death. Despite that life on earth might be a misery, as with the prostitutes, faith might be put in a prosperous afterlife. Regardless of the orthodox and religious scholars, who may explain

certain rituals as desecrating and wrong, for instance being buried at a Hindu cemetery, those who perform such rituals experience these rites as the most fortunate possible given the actual circumstances. For the faithful one the rites which are conducted are always believed to be the most auspicious.

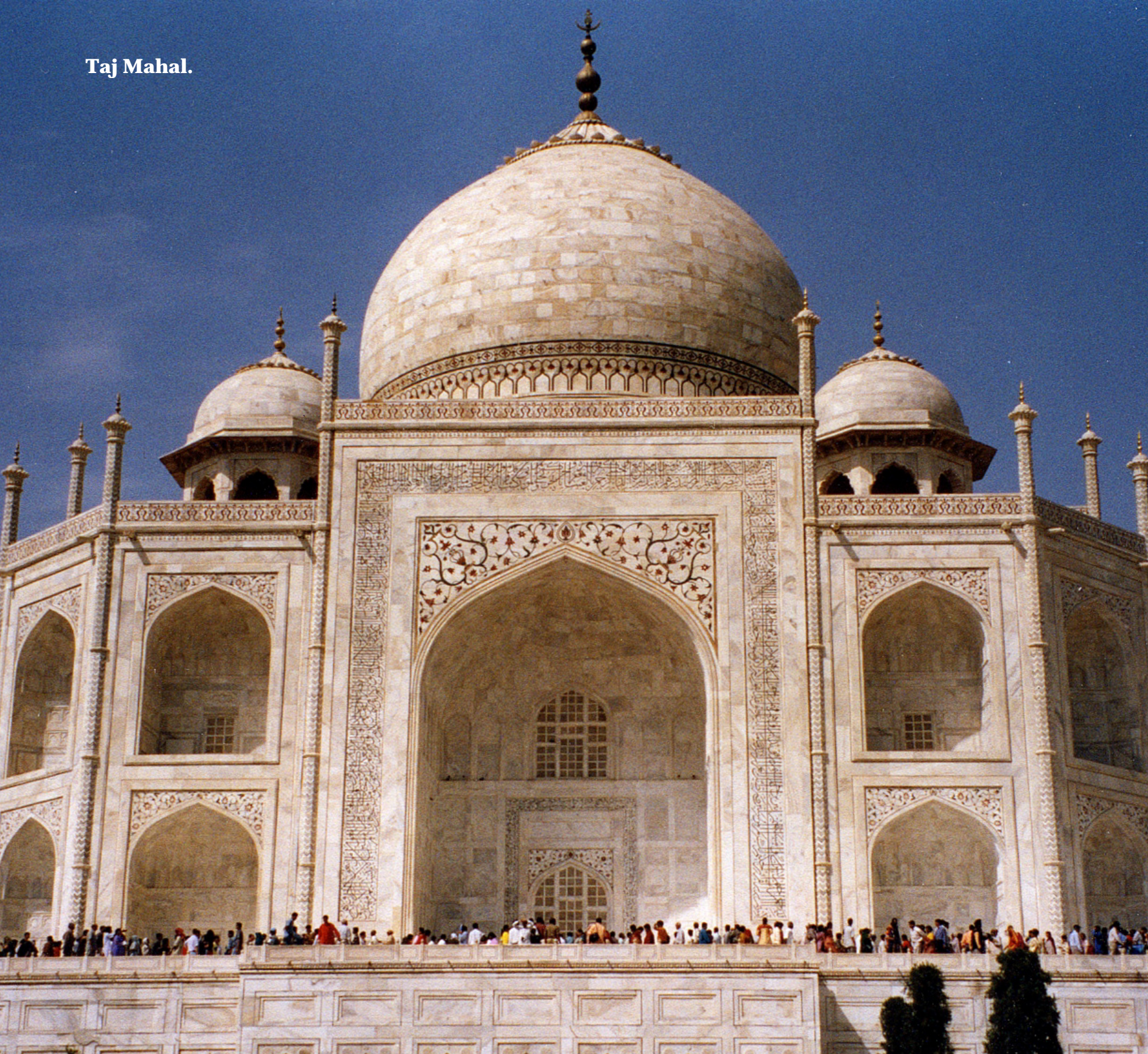
Religious experience is first and foremost a personal relation with God within an overall framework of shared concepts and beliefs. Therefore, the belief in personal salvation in Heaven might be strong even though others condemn a person to the lower realms due to what they have done in this life, for instance being a prostitute. The belief in Paradise may give hope in this life. But what does the Muslim Paradise look like?

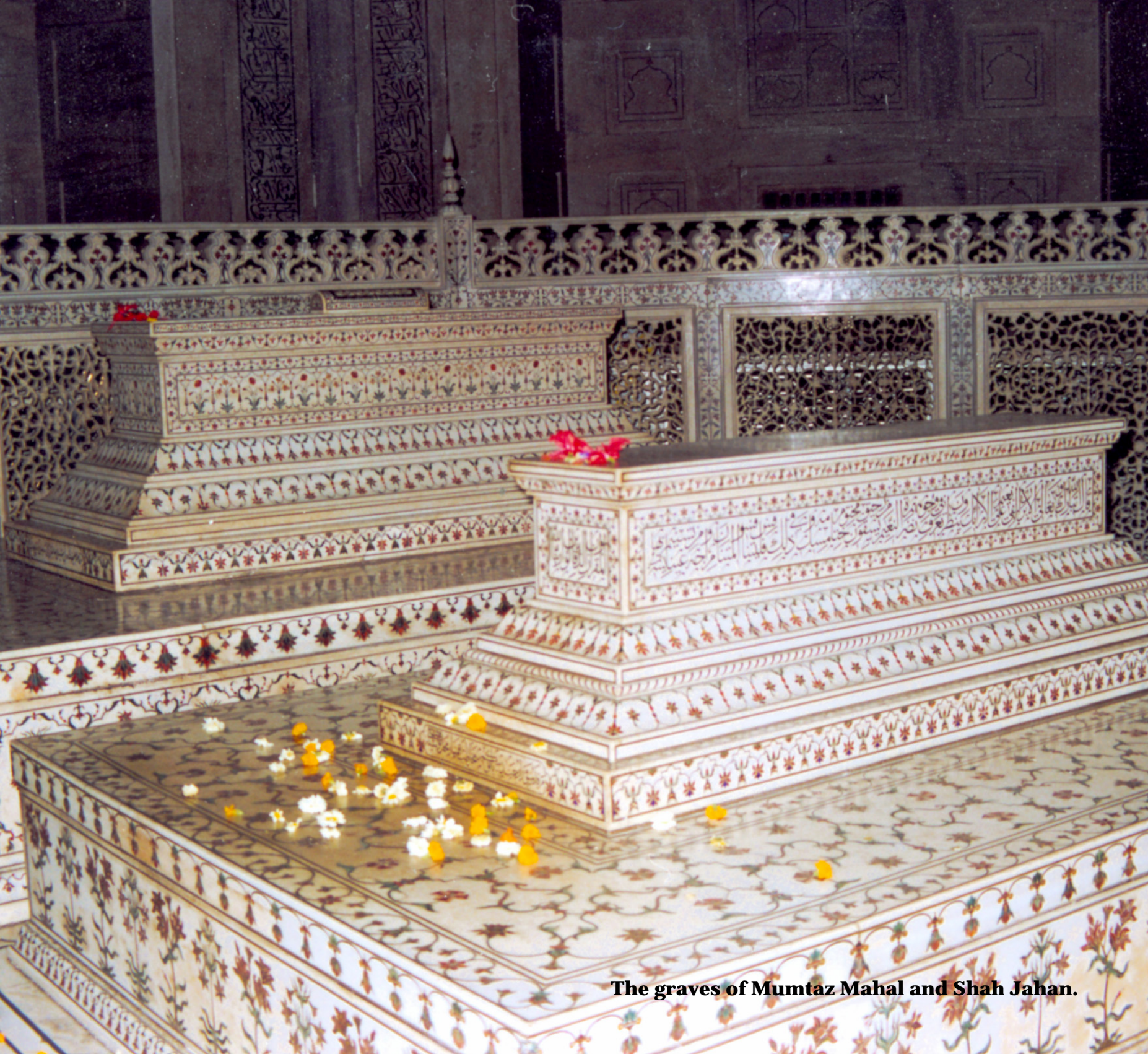
Heaven on earth

The most spectacular manifestation on earth of the divine beauties in Heaven is Taj Mahal in Agra, India. The splendour of the white marble monument, which shines in different colours throughout the day, makes the Taj Mahal mausoleum one of the wonders of the world situated in the middle of an enormous garden. It is perceived to be the most beautiful building ever built, and it was made out of love and devotion.

The Taj Mahal was built between ca. 1632-1654 by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his deceased wife. His beloved, Arjumand Banu Begam, better known as Mumtaz Mahal, died in 1631, and the emperor grieved for years due to the loss of his wife.

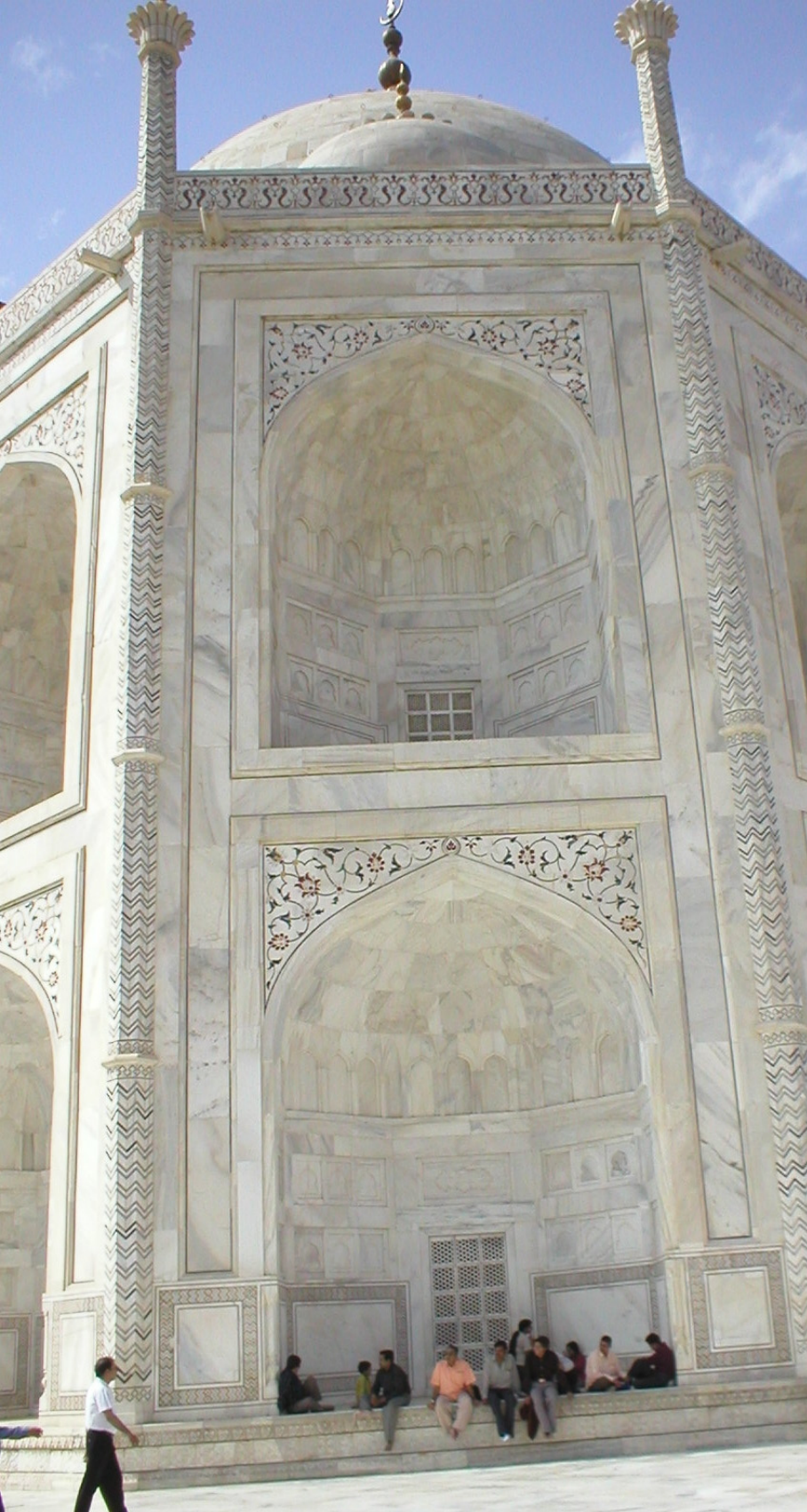
Taj Mahal.





The graves of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan.





Her sarcophagus is located in the centre of the octagonal hall whereas the sarcophagus of Shah Jahan, who died in 1666, is located next to it.

An enclosed garden surrounds the mausoleum, which is a Muslim symbol of Paradise. The pathways which lead to the Taj Mahal is centred around a large pool surrounded by fountains, flowers, and symmetrically aligned cypress trees, which are symbols of death. The Muslim love of gardens may stem from the desert environment in which they have lived, where aridity and water scarcity were the greatest threats to life.

In the Qur'an Paradise is described as bountiful gardens with shade and water everywhere. In one medieval text the Heavens were described as such:

There are seven gardens. The first of them is the abode of the garden and it is of white pearl. The second is the abode of peace and it is of red sapphire. The third is the garden of refuge and it is of chrysolite. The fourth of them is the garden of bliss and it is of white silver. The sixth is the *jannat al-firdaws* and it is of red gold. And the seventh of the gardens is Eden and it is of white pearl. This is the capital of the Garden and it is elevated over all the gardens...

The Gardens of Heaven are beyond human comprehension, and even the most spectacular monuments on earth cannot visualise the splendour of Heaven. However, the symbolic intimacy of life, death, and Paradise, which is expressed in the Taj Mahal monument, gives a glimpse of what the Otherworldly life in paradise must look like.

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Coffin before cremation, Møllendal Crematorium, Bergen.