The Afterlife: Perspectives from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Reflections from the May 6, 2026 Tri-Faith Dialogue

May 12, 2026

On May 6, 2026, the First Analysis Institute of Integrative Studies (FAI), with co-organizers Rabbi Wendi Geffen and the Othman family, convened a Tri-Faith Dialogue at the Islamic Cultural Center of Greater Chicago in Northbrook on the topic *The Afterlife: Perspectives from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Three speakers — one from each Abrahamic tradition — were invited to address a question every faith must answer and, paradoxically, none can fully describe: what becomes of us when we die?

The evening sat within a longer arc. For more than twelve years, FAI co-organized the *In Good Faith* seminars with the Catholic Theological Union, and today the work continues as the Tri-Faith Dialogue with the Islamic Cultural Center of Greater Chicago, North Shore Congregation Israel, and Divine Mercy Parish. The underlying premise of this work is that the three Abrahamic traditions form a triune — three complementary emphases on a shared inheritance, more often (across centuries) read as the source of friction than as the parts of a single pattern they more truly are. The afterlife is a particularly searching test of that premise, since each tradition has thought about it deeply and, on its own account, no tradition has thought about it completely.

A Jewish reading: Olam Habah experienced now

Rabbi Michael Balinsky opened by singing in Yiddish a short song attributed to Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, an early-19th-century Talmudic scholar: *The world to come is a good thing, but learning Torah is a better thing*. The song is unusual. It does not deny the world to come — *Olam Habah* in Hebrew — but it ranks the study of sacred tradition in this world above it and then ends by affirming the world to come a second time. The tension between an emphasis on this world and the next is, on Balinsky's reading, a tension at the heart of Jewish thought on the afterlife.

The affirmation of an afterlife runs throughout Jewish liturgy. The Amidah, the central standing prayer recited three times daily, blesses God as the one "who revives the dead." The memorial prayer recited at funerals asks that the soul of the deceased be sheltered in the divine presence and bound in the bond of life. And yet much of the rabbinic tradition has debates telling us what the world to come is like. Some early rabbinic voices, while in no way denying the world to come, counsel serving God and performing commandments without a motivation of any expectation of reward. Others affirm that the reward of the righteous lies in the age to come. Maimonides, the great medieval philosopher and codifier, places the highest service of God not in fear of punishment or hope of reward but in love — "the level of our patriarch Abraham." The Talmud itself records a view, which while affirming a world to come, adds it cannot be depicted even by prophecy.

Balinsky's culminating insight grew out of this restraint. Why, he asked, would Rabbi Chaim insist that learning Torah in this world is *better* than the world to come? His answer, offered tentatively,

was that the act of Jewish sacred study has its own form of resurrection within it. When one studies Torah in the traditional way, one does not merely read what Rabbi Akiva said, or what Maimonides said. One enters a conversation in which they are present and answerable in the present — "It's not what Rabbi Akiva said, it's what does Rabbi Akiva say now." Sacred study, on this reading, is a form of *Olam Habah* experienced now, the afterlife of the sages being lived within the ongoing study of the tradition itself.

A Christian reading: Paul's "third thing" and Augustine's restless heart

Dr. Richard Rosengarten of the University of Chicago Divinity School organized the Christian perspective around two triple structures: the three divine activities — Creation, Providence, and Eschatology — and the three sources of Catholic belief — Scripture, Tradition, and Experience. From each source he chose a representative text.

From Scripture he chose Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15. The early Christian community had a pressing question: would believers be resurrected in body and soul as Jesus had been? Paul's answer, Rosengarten suggested, is more radical than the question. "What is sown is perishable," Paul writes; "what is raised is imperishable… It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body." The resurrection is not, on Rosengarten's reading, a reconciliation of body and soul. It is the production of something genuinely new — what he called a "third thing," neither body alone nor soul alone, but a new mode of being. "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

From Tradition he turned to Question 69 of Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, where Catholic doctrine sorts souls after death by their state of merit — into paradise, hell, purgatory, the limbo of children, and the limbo of the Fathers. Catholic theology, on this reading, has to think carefully about how the way we behave in this temporal world connects to our status in eternity. The connection, in Aquinas, is intrinsic; what happens here meets an accounting there.

From Experience he chose the opening of Augustine's *Confessions*: "Our heart is restless until it rests in you." Augustine feels trapped in time and unfulfilled by it; the first nine books of the *Confessions* are the story of his struggle to understand why he must be trapped here, and his eventual conclusion is that he is trapped in this world precisely so that he can return to God in eternity. The *Confessions* itself is, in Rosengarten's reading, "one long letter written to God."

Rosengarten closed by extending the conversation beyond Catholic authority. He cited Voltaire, who when asked on his deathbed if he wished to renounce the devil, answered: "Now is not the time to be making new enemies." Even for those outside the tradition, he observed, the questions the tradition takes up have "an enormous purchase." And he closed on what he framed as a Catholic humility: the funeral mass does not specify the geography of the afterlife but expresses our wishes and hopes for it. "We speak for perpetual light. We speak for rest in peace. We speak of the faithful departed. And we call on the mercy of God."

An Islamic reading: revealed structure, beyond comprehension

For Imam Hazim Fazlic of the Islamic Cultural Center of Greater Chicago, belief in the afterlife and the resurrection of the dead is among the foundational beliefs of Islam. The Qur'an, he observed, "repeatedly emphasizes that this life is temporary, and that ultimate justice occurs in the Hereafter, where all actions are judged and recompensed with perfect justice and mercy." The Islamic word for this life, *ad-dunya*, names what is close and lower; the word for what comes after, *al-Akhira*, names what is elevated and lasting and ultimately more valuable.

Fazlic began with a story that conveyed something essential about how Islam handles the afterlife. An imam preaching on a Qur'anic verse promising believers "whatever you desire forever" in paradise was asked by a man in the congregation whether they would have cigarettes in paradise. The imam, who opposed smoking, replied: "Yes, you will be able to smoke in paradise, but you have to go to hell to light your cigarette." The anecdote, Fazlic noted, illustrates two things at once. First, the Qur'an and the hadith — the recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad — describe the next life in unusually vivid and specific detail. Second, Muslim scholars and teachers have an interpretive tradition of remarkable ingenuity in how they handle that detail, both to picture the next life and to encourage moral life in this one.

The Islamic afterlife is structured. Death is caused by God and carried out by the angel of death, *Azra'il*. The soul ascends through the seven heavens and is shown its eventual place. It is then returned to the body for questioning in the grave by two angels — *Munkar* and *Nakir* — about faith, God, revelation, and the Prophet. Those who have already died wait in an intermediate state called *Barzakh*, literally a barrier, until the final resurrection. (Islam, Fazlic noted, "completely rejects the idea of reincarnation.") At the appointed time, the cosmos will be destroyed, the angel *Israfil* will sound the trumpet, and every human being will be raised. Each will stand at the day of judgment with his or her own book of deeds, in which every action small or great is recorded. Deeds will be weighed on the scale called the *Mizan*, and the soul will be sent to *Jannah*, the garden of paradise, or to *Jahannam*, the fire. Yet judgment is not the end of the story: one of the attributes of God in Islam is mercy, and Muslims hope for forgiveness of all but the gravest sin. The doctrine of intercession — *shafa* — holds that the Prophet himself, and even martyrs, may intercede on behalf of believers.

Fazlic drew the talk to a close with a personal reflection that gave the framework its weight. As a college student during the Bosnian war, with tens of thousands of his people being killed, he was steeped in the Islamic teachings about death, resurrection, and judgment. Yet nothing, he said, disturbed him more or kept him awake at night than the concept of *time* in the afterlife — the idea of eternity. "This prospect of living forever, even after trillions of years, made my mind go blank and brought my thoughts to a standstill." His resolution came in two parts, and they offered the closing thought of the entire evening: the concept of time in this world is not the concept of time in the afterlife, and our finite minds find it difficult to imagine the infinite, whether in time or in space. Despite all the vivid images, the Islamic attitude toward the hereafter is that "it is beyond human comprehension, beyond time, and… the Qur'an only alludes to it by analogy."

Reflections

It has long been a working premise at FAI — and the thread running through our broader work on Triune Consciousness — that the three Abrahamic traditions form a triune of complementary emphases on three central themes: the well-being of all creation, redemptive love, and revelation. Each tradition weights the three differently; the differences themselves are the substance of the larger pattern, and each tradition's distinctive emphasis takes on its full meaning only in relation to the other two.

Each speaker drew on all three themes and emphasized them differently. Rabbi Balinsky's reading gave the most weight to the covenantal life of this world and the value of sacred study, with Maimonides on service from love opening the door to redemptive love. Dr. Rosengarten's Catholic presentation moved most centrally through redemptive love — Paul's victory over death, Aquinas's sorting of souls, Augustine's restless heart. Imam Fazlic's presentation foregrounded revelation in two senses: the structure of his talk was given by the Qur'an and elaborated by the classical commentators on revealed knowledge, while what was revealed pointed beyond itself toward what cannot be fully grasped.

The evening's clearest moments of agreement, fittingly, were not in the prepared remarks but in the exchanges that followed. When an audience member pressed Rabbi Balinsky on whether the Talmudic "fear of the Lord" should be heard as *awe*, the rabbi invoked Maimonides on the dialectical movement of *yirah* — the soul approaching God in love and then stepping back in awareness of its finitude. Another audience member asked all three speakers how afterlife judgment relates to the messianic expectation in each tradition, Rabbi Balinsky's brief answer — that there is no single Jewish view, and the relationship is contested even within the tradition — drew agreement from Dr. Rosengarten, and the host concluded the moment with the observation that all three speakers were in agreement.

The May 6 dialogue is one of more than twenty seminars in the In Good Faith and Tri-Faith Dialogue series since 2008. We are presently undertaking a closer look across the entire corpus, asking how the patterns we observed on May 6 hold across the years and the speakers, and we will share that analysis in a forthcoming essay. The Tri-Faith Dialogue is itself one element in a broader FAI effort. Our Tri-Abrahamic Dialogue on the Climate Crisis, organized with the Parliament of the World's Religions, is a five-part webinar series that brings the same Jewish-Christian-Muslim conversation to bear on what our faiths ask of us in a warming world. Different topics, the same posture: three traditions, each with their own deep account, together forming a triune of perspectives on the questions none of them can answer alone.

For more on the In Good Faith and Tri-Faith Dialogue series, see our educational programs.