

AQUINAS AND GHAZALI ON RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

Topic: Life of the Blessed: On Earth as It Is in Heaven
 Convener: Marianne Farina, Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology
 Moderator: David Burrell, University of Notre Dame
 Presenters: Timothy J. Gianotti, University of Virginia
 Marianne Farina, Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology

In a world ravaged by war, kidnappings, and suicide bombers, this session sought to explore the ways belief in the resurrection of the body makes transformative teaching about human flourishing both possible and morally imperative for Muslims and Christians. The session brought into conversation the writings of Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali and Thomas Aquinas concerning the life of the blessed on earth and the blessed state of the embodied afterlife. David Burrell introduced the session noting how this dialogical approach to theological inquiry is critical both to understand and interpret our current realities, as well as to discover those insights that form common ground between faiths. Following this introduction, Timothy J. Gianotti and Marianne Farina explained Ghazali's and Aquinas's teachings about the life of glory with God and the believer's striving for greater holiness. Each presenter, fluent in both Catholic and Islamic virtue theories, clarified key issues pertinent to the topic under discussion.

Marianne Farina began with a brief sketch of the way various historical periods and allegories about the rewards of paradise have served the hegemonic interests of national and religious leaders throughout the world. Farina claimed that it is important to understand the narrative animating suicide attacks, car bombings, and other forms of violence. She suggested that each faith tradition should work toward promoting an authentic account of the life of the blessed in paradise and the guidance that helps believers to attain this fulfillment.

In light of this suggestion, Farina examined Aquinas' teaching about the resurrection of the body and happiness with God. Aquinas believes that the state of the blessed consists in perfect charity, the complete love of God and neighbor, a state in which every aspect of one's life, with its struggles to overcome personal/com-munal weakness and sin, is a life of referring all things to God. Reflecting on both Christ's incarnation and resurrection, Aquinas affirms that Christ bears the economy of new life, the entirety of humanity reborn and moving back to God. Christ is the hope as exemplar and efficient cause of our restored image of God, our own bodily resurrection, and vivified life with God for eternity. The life of the blessed exists here on earth when we cooperate with God's initiatives in pursuit of virtue. She concluded by emphasizing that in today's society interfaith exchange is dependent upon realizing a common call to holiness and eternal happiness with God.

Timothy Gianotti discussed Ghazali's understanding of the life of the blessed. He stated that rather than interpreting "the Hereafter" as temporally posterior to our current life, Ghazali's writings assert that our "Here" and "Hereafter" are better understood as simultaneous states of mind and attributes of heart. In other words,

for awakened servants who have toiled in the way of moral purification and have surrendered their will to God, the next world becomes this world, even though the social theatre of their life remains rooted in the lower world's limitations and challenges. The quest for holiness means living the blessed life in the midst of an imperfect world.

Regarding Islamic belief in bodily resurrection and an eternal, embodied afterlife, Gianotti clarified that Ghazali's theological teachings (exoteric/public) and mystical insights (esoteric/private) seem to diverge. He pointed out that though Ghazali's position on the ontological nature of an embodied afterlife may be questioned, he is clear about embodiment as the personal and social reality connected to the life of glory. Herein lies for him the "all-important emphasis on personal experience and this allows us to ponder the sanctity of embodiment in Islam."

David Burrell moderated the discussion that followed these presentations. Some participants noted that Muslims and Christians share comparable ideas concerning eternal happiness with God and the importance of spiritual practices, such as fasting, in the effort to attain virtue. Questions raised by others further explored the description of the embodied afterlife and how these teachings address the need for conversion of heart and social reform. These comments affirmed that according to Ghazali and Aquinas the life of the blessed is one of encounter: forming right relationships with God, one another, and all creation. Thus, the pursuit of holiness, when shared across religious traditions, can help us to move beyond hatred and violence so that we can develop, and sustain, concrete strategies for reconciliation and peace.

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