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Funerals and Death Rites

Honoring the Departed

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The King Fahad Mosque (KFM) in Culver City is one of the largest mosques in southern California, with over a thousand people gathered together every Friday afternoon for the congregational prayer.[1] Following the *khutba*, or sermon, and the *salah*, or daily prayer, come the usual community announcements about upcoming events, and then an unusual request for those remaining to perform the funeral prayer, called the *salah al-janaza*, for a brother who passed away the night before. The request is unusual in that this mosque, like the large majority in North America, does not have a mortuary attached to it. However, bodies are sometimes brought to the mosque if someone died in the vicinity. In this case, the person was an elderly man who died as he wanted to at home, surrounded by his family who prepared his body in an appropriate Islamic fashion.

A few minutes later, a hearse pulls up and negotiates the usual chaos of cars and people that is the crowded parking lot at KFM. A simple wooden coffin—really no more than a rectangular rough plywood box—covered by a cloth embroidered with qur'anic verses is brought out on a trolley, and wheeled up to the front of the main prayer area. This mosque is gender segregated, with the men praying in the large main prayer area on the first floor, and the women praying upstairs in a balcony that overlooks part of the men's prayer space. What strikes me first as a witness to this scene is the number of men who rush to help move the coffin from the hearse to the main prayer space. Most of them, like me, don't know the deceased since the KFM congregation is so large, but we are all willing to help. We know that by definition, this is not something that the deceased will be able to do for us. Instead, it is

his last right on us as members of the Muslim community. We will pray for him, perhaps out of the hope that someone will pray for us when our time comes. Technically, there is an obligation on some in the KFM community to perform this ritual—what is known in Islamic law and ethics as *fard kifaya*—a duty that is obligatory on some members of the community, but one for which all members of the community will be held responsible if the duty is neglected.

The salah al-janaza is unique in that the congregation remains standing without the bowing or prostration that is characteristic of the daily prayers. Since the performance of this prayer is uncommon, the imam reminds us of the steps involved in the way that he will lead the prayer according to the Hanafi school, including not raising our hands up to our ears any time after the first *takbir* or call of *Allahu akbar*, "God is greater." With the short funeral prayer completed, the body is placed back in the hearse and taken to a cemetery in Westminster. This is the closest cemetery to the KFM that has a section for Muslim burials.

I am a Muslim and also a scholar of Islam. For twenty years, I have lived in Los Angeles and worked with various Muslim communities here. I have created and taught courses on death and dying in the world's religions. I have prayed the salah al-janaza several times at mosques in Los Angeles. Yet until I began doing the research for this chapter, I had never been to a Muslim burial service. I had never visited a Muslim mortuary, nor spoken with a Muslim funeral director or anyone who was involved in the rituals of Muslim funerals or burials. In this chapter, I discuss Muslim funerals and burials, and in so doing illustrate the issues that are important for Muslims in the United States about death rites and funerals.

Islamic Understandings of Death and Resurrection

The Islamic understanding of death, introduced to seventh-century Arabia by the Prophet Muhammad, represented a dramatic shift from pre-Islamic Arabia. In pre-Islamic Arabia, there was a notion of fate, with time (*dahr*)[2] being the determining agent of a person's life and death. This is reflected in the Qur'an, where the pre-Islamic Arabs say: "There is nothing but our life in this world. We live and we die and nothing destroys us but Time" (45:24).[3] To this, Muhammad is commanded

to say: "It is God who gives you life, causes you to die, then gathers you together for the Day of Resurrection, of which there is no doubt" (45:26).

In the modern United States, there is a significant change in the rites and rituals of death and dying for Muslims. In the premodern world, the majority of people died at home, and so family members by necessity had to be familiar with the rituals surrounding the dead. In that way, the prayer service described above is anomalous, since the person died at home of natural causes and his family members were able to prepare his body for burial. In the modern world, the majority of people die in hospitals or other institutions, creating a distance from traditional rituals since they are now usually handled by funeral professionals or volunteers and not family members. In addition, American Muslims live as religious minorities and have to negotiate U.S. laws about the disposal of the dead.

When a Muslim dies, the corpse is treated with great respect. Ideally, the dying person will have asked for God's forgiveness, prepared a will, performed the ritual full-body ablution before prayer, and recited the *shahada* or profession of faith before his or her death.[4] The body is then washed (a ritual known as *ghusl*). Traditionally, this would be done by members of the family, with males washing the body of males, and females washing the body of females (spouses are allowed to wash the bodies of their partners). In the contemporary world, where family members may have no familiarity with this washing, or the deceased may die in a hospital where washing is not possible, the washing is usually done by volunteers in a funeral home or mortuary. These volunteers can also guide family members who wish to do the washing themselves. Rkia Cornell has a moving description of doing this washing as a volunteer at the Islamic Center of Southern California.[5]

Once the corpse is cleaned, it is wrapped in a shroud consisting of five pieces of clean white cloth for a female, or three pieces for a male. The pieces of cloth contain no sewn seams or knots, and if the person has performed the Hajj or pilgrimage, his or her Hajj garments may be used for the shrouding. As noted above, there is a special funeral prayer for the deceased (salah al-janaza) which is unique in that the congregation remains standing without the prostration that is characteristic of the daily prayers. The corpse is then buried, ideally within twenty-four hours of death and without a coffin. A grave is dug deep enough to

cover the body (usually at a level of six feet), which is buried lying on its right side with the head facing in the direction of Mecca (as in salah, or daily prayer). The grave is then filled in with earth, usually resulting in a mound that is above ground level. A simple headstone may be erected, but elaborate memorials are not recommended.

For most observant Muslims, the physical death of the body is not the end of existence. There is a developed understanding of judgment in the grave, a waiting period until the Day of Judgment, and a final reward or punishment in heaven or hell. The Qur'an is clear about the idea of a resurrection after the end of this life. This is expressed succinctly in 22:66: "It is God who gave you life, will cause you to die, and will again give you life: Truly the human being is ungrateful!" Another verse from the Qur'an, 22:7, was popular on tombstones as early as the ninth century in Egypt: "And because the Hour (of judgment) is coming, there is no doubt about it; and because God shall raise up those who are in the graves."

The Salah al-Janaza in Sunni Islam

One evening, I came back to my office from teaching a night class to find an email from a friend that the father of a mutual friend had passed away that afternoon while on a business trip. Instead of driving home, I drove to the King Fahad Mosque. It was after the *'isha*, or night prayer, but I was hoping some people would be around, so that we could pray the funeral prayer for my friend's father. Unfortunately, when I got to the mosque, it had already closed for the night, and the security guard had finished his shift and locked the doors, so I couldn't enter the building.

In the Hanbali and Shafi'i schools of Islamic law and ethics, one can pray the funeral prayer in absentia, making the prayer without the actual body being present.[6] In the Maliki and Hanafi schools, this is not permitted, and the corpse must be present for the prayer to be valid. Since my friend's father had died on a journey and might not be returned to his Muslim community for several days at least, I thought it was important to offer the prayer for him. However, I could not enter the mosque to do the prayer. Instead, I performed it outside, on the marble floor that leads to the main doors of the mosque. This was the first time I had performed salah al-janaza outdoors, and it made me appreciate a benefit of

there being no prostration in the prayer. To perform the regular prayer on a cold outdoor marble floor, without a prayer mat, would have been difficult. But the salah al-janaza has no prostration, and one remains standing throughout.

I thought of the funeral prayer that I had performed a few months earlier, which I noted at the beginning of this chapter. There, once the coffin was brought to the front of the men's prayer space, the imam told us the name of the deceased and we lined up to pray the funeral prayer. Over half the congregation had left by that point, since it was after the conclusion of the Friday afternoon prayer. However, several hundred of us remained to perform the prayer.

The imam reminded us of the requirements of the prayer, that there would be four takbirat, or recitations of "God is greater," with no bowing or prostrations in between, no call to announce the prayer, and only bringing our hands up to our ears on the first cycle of prayer. The imam led the prayer according to the Hanafi school of Shari'a; had it been performed in accordance with the other schools there would have been slight differences, such as raising the hands up after the first cycle of prayer, or the wordings of the prayers recited in the last two cycles.

The prayer began with the intention to make the salah al-janaza for the deceased, who was named by the imam so that we could remember him by name in our prayers. The imam raised his hands to his ears and recited aloud the first takbir, which is the phrase "Allahu akbar," literally, "God is greater." We followed him, and then with our arms folded in front of us, recited silently along with the imam the first chapter of the Qur'an. This was followed by a short prayer in praise of God: "Glory be to you, O God, and all praise is due to you, and blessed is your name and exalted is your majesty, your praises are elevated and no one is worthy of worship but you." This ended the first cycle of prayer.

The second cycle began with the imam again saying the takbir aloud. This was followed by the silent recitation of the praise of the prophets Muhammad and Abraham which typically come at the end of the daily prayers: "O God, shower your mercy on Muhammad and the family of Muhammad as you showered your mercy on Abraham and the family of Abraham. You are the one worthy of praise and glory. O God, bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad as you blessed Abraham and the family of Abraham. You are the one worthy of praise and glory."

The third cycle began with the imam saying the takbir aloud. This was followed by the silent recitation of a prayer for the deceased: "O God, forgive our people who are still alive and those who have died, those who are present here and those who are absent, those who are young and those who are elderly, those who are male and those who are female. O God, let the one from among us that you want to keep alive live according to Islam, and let the one from among us that you want to die die in a state of faith." Then came a personal prayer for the deceased, mentioning him by name, and asking for God's forgiveness and mercy on him.

The fourth and final cycle began with the imam saying the takbir aloud, followed by saying aloud the blessings that conclude the daily prayers, turning to the right and then the left while saying each time: "Peace be upon you and the mercy of God."

Having prayed this prayer a number of times, I needed to take the next step, which was to observe a funeral and burial. For this, I needed to go to another mosque in Southern California which had an Islamic mortuary.

The Islamic Society of Orange County: Funerals and a Burial

The Islamic Society of Orange County (ISOC) is the largest Islamic center in Southern California. Located in the city of Garden Grove in Orange County, about an hour's drive from Los Angeles, it was founded in 1976. In 2005, a mortuary was added, making it one of the few mosques in the area with an onsite mortuary. I met with Goulade Farrah, who is the funeral director. He said that the ISOC Mortuary averaged about twenty funerals per month. As a full-time funeral director, Farrah also works with the Jewish community, which has similar funeral rituals to Muslims, as well as with members of other faith communities—there is a large Vietnamese population in Garden Grove. Having been in many other funeral homes, I was struck first by the simplicity of his operation at the ISOC Mortuary. His office was not much bigger than a small closet, with only one small window in the door. His desk and chair were on one side of the space, and there were two chairs for people to sit on beside him. Farrah said that the average non-Muslim funeral he did in the area would cost around $18,000, while the basic funeral at the ISOC

would average less than half that, at $8,500. The non-Muslim funerals would average about twenty-one days from the date of death to the actual burial, while the Muslim funerals would ideally happen within twenty-four hours of death.

Farrah then took me into the working area of the mortuary, which had one station to wash and shroud bodies. Behind this was the cold storage for corpses, with shelves on one side for women, and on the other side for men. Since the mortuary did not use any chemicals or do any embalming, it was considered a Green mortuary. In the mortuary, I met a staff member, Abu Ahmad. He was one of the people who would wash the bodies if it could not be done by family members of the deceased. The ISOC Mortuary had a list of volunteers they could call upon to do this, men who washed the bodies of males, and women who washed the bodies of females. Normally, it took three people to do the washing, since the corpse would often be rigid and slippery, requiring two people to hold it while the third person did the washing. There are similar volunteer societies across North America, with my mother belonging to one in Toronto at the mosque of the Islamic Society of North America.[7]

We then went across the hall to the other side of the mortuary. This consisted of the family lounge, as well as an area where people could view the body of the deceased once it had been washed and shrouded. The day that I was there, there were two funerals. One was a woman from Burma, the other a man from Jordan. What was striking to me was the gender breakdown of the two funerals. For the Burmese woman, a number of women were present to view the body. However, when it came time for the Jordanian man to be brought into the viewing room, there were no women present. This illustrates the differences in practices of different ethnic communities of Muslims.

Once each family had finished in the viewing room, the respective corpse was placed into a plain white panel van. This was one of the ways in which the ISOC Mortuary kept the costs down, with hearses being available at an extra charge. The van was driven by Farrah's son, who is another employee of the mortuary. The van drove around the property to the back entrance of the ISOC mosque, Masjid Al-Rahman. There, the two corpses were taken out and placed in a room that was screened off from the main prayer room in the mosque with a sliding door. They were lined up, with the head of one corpse next to the feet of the other

corpse. The usual practice for funerals through the ISOC Mortuary is to pray the *dhuhr*, or noon prayer, and then pray the funeral prayer immediately afterward. The sliding door separated the corpses from the living during the noon prayer, and then the door was opened during the funeral prayer.

The imam explained that there were two funerals that day, and he gave the names of both of the deceased. Like the KFM, the ISOC mosque is gender segregated. In the case of Masjid Al-Rahman, there is one large prayer space on the main floor, with the men on one side of the room and the women on the other side of a glass wall that separates the two prayer spaces. The immediate male family members were invited to come to the front of the men's prayer area to be closest to the corpses of their deceased, and the imam led everyone in one funeral prayer for both deceased. In another situation, a family member might lead the funeral prayer. After the prayer the imam gave a short sermon about death in the Islamic tradition. This was not particular to either of the deceased, but a general reminder to the community that death will come to all of us, and a reminder to all of us to repent before we returned to God.

Once the funeral prayer was over, the body of the man from Jordan was taken and put in one of the white vans and driven by Abu Ahmad to the cemetery in Westminster, about two miles away from the mosque, for burial. Unfortunately, there was a delay in the burial of the woman from Burma. The electronic death certificate had not been entered into the California Electronic Death Registration System by the hospital where the woman had died. Without the proper registration of this death certificate, the woman could not be buried in the cemetery. Farrah had to call the hospital and ask the hospital staff to resend the certificate. This took two attempts, as the first time the fax transmission to his office from the hospital wasn't clear enough to be accepted. Another complication was that the health department was closed for their daily lunch break from noon to 1 p.m., so nothing could be done until the appropriate person returned to his office. This was particularly ironic as it was during the month of Ramadan, so the family members of the deceased, who were unable to eat lunch, had to wait until someone else's lunch hour was over before they could proceed with the burial. This is one of the issues that arises with trying to bury the body within twenty-four hours of death. Had it been a non-Muslim funeral taking

place more than a week after the death, there would have been ample time to make sure the paperwork was properly filed and to correct any errors. Thankfully, the issue was resolved with a delay of only an hour. Farrah's son then put the woman's corpse into another van and drove it to the cemetery where she would be buried. There are five cemeteries that are used by the ISOC Mortuary.

I was able to go to the burial of the man from Jordan, who had been a member of the congregation at the King Fahad Mosque. The Westminster Memorial Park cemetery had a large section for Muslim burials. By 2013, the first 2,000 plots that had been purchased were already filled, and so space for another 3,500 plots was purchased. There were about 300 completed graves in that new section, with another 80 or so still unfinished, in two rows of 40. These were graves where people had been buried over the previous six months, with a mound of earth to mark their burial. Once the two rows were completely filled up, they would be finished like the other graves behind them, with a cement border between the graves, white gravel on top of them, and a simple headstone to mark each one.

When I arrived at the cemetery, Abu Ahmad was waiting to finalize the paperwork for the burial. There were approximately 150 men present, with no women in sight. I was told that this was the custom in Jordan, where women aren't present at the burial. There are also hadith, or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, that discourage women from attending a burial.[8] Still, it was the first graveside service I had ever attended without any women present.

The workers at the cemetery had already dug out the grave and lowered a concrete vault into it. Since the deceased was to be buried without a casket, the cemetery required a concrete liner to comply with health regulations. Abu Ahmad opened the rear doors to the van and the immediate family lined up in two rows behind it to carry the bier to the grave. The bier was metal with a plastic backboard on the bottom where the shrouded corpse rested, covered by a cloth embroidered with Qur'anic verses. The man's family took turns carrying the bier to the gravesite about one hundred yards away, which had been fenced off with a temporary plastic fence.

Abu Ahmad and the cemetery workers lowered the body into the grave using the standard strap and automatic pulley system employed

for this task. Once the straps were brought back up, a ladder was lowered into the grave. Abu Ahmad and two members of the deceased's family descended into it. They brought out the plastic backboard on which the corpse had rested. They also made sure that the body was positioned on its right side, oriented to the prayer direction. Finally, they put a few handfuls of earth into the grave, so that even though the corpse would be sealed into a concrete vault, there would be a symbolic amount of earth to which the body could return. With the body properly positioned in the grave, they came up and removed the ladder, and the cemetery workers used a bulldozer to lower the concrete cover down onto the vault to seal it.

Once the vault was sealed, the cemetery workers brought up a John Deere Dump Hauler that held the earth that had been excavated to create the grave. Abu Ahmad asked everyone present, beginning with the man's family, to take handfuls of dirt and fill in the grave. As people lined up to do this, he stood beside the grave and repeatedly recited the following words from the chapter of the Qur'an entitled *Taha*: "From the earth We (God) created you, and into it We will return you, and from it We will bring you forth a second time" (20:55). Once people had taken turns putting earth into the grave, using either their hands or shovels, the cemetery workers dumped in the remaining dirt. Abu Ahmad and a few members of the family then used shovels to create the rounded mound of earth on top of the grave.

With the burial completed, everyone gathered under the trees that marked the end of the Muslim section to listen to sermons that concluded the graveside service. Two imams gave short, five-minute exhortations about death and dying, and three members of the family also spoke in Arabic. The five speakers took less than twenty minutes altogether, and gave very little personal information about the deceased. Instead, the exhortations from the imams were similar to those heard in the mosque, reminding people of the inevitability of death and encouraging them to prepare by becoming more observant in their practice of Islam. The prayers by the three family members asked for the deceased's sins to be forgiven, for his good acts to be accepted by God, for him to be steadfast in answering the questioning angels in the grave, for his grave to be a window to paradise, and for the family to have patience and perseverance in the face of their loss. The family of the deceased lined up in

a receiving line and shook hands with everyone who had attended the burial. Since it was Ramadan, there would be no immediate reception. It was about 3:15 p.m. when the funeral concluded, and the time to break the fast wouldn't be until approximately 8:05 p.m. Instead, we were told that the family would be hosting a reception at the mosque after the sunset prayer and the breaking of the fast. People returned to their cars; from start to finish the burial service had taken about fifty minutes.

While the sermons were going on, the cemetery workers had removed the temporary plastic fence around the grave. They helped Abu Ahmad put the metal bier and the coverlet embroidered with Qur'an verses back into the van and he drove back to the mortuary. I was able to wander around the Muslim cemetery to take a closer look at the graves. All the graves were identical in shape and size, with a black headstone that had three lines of text. The first line was either the *basmallah* (In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate) or a line from the Qur'an commonly recited at funerals, "Indeed we belong to God, and unto God we are returning" (2:156). The second line named the person buried, while the third line gave the person's dates of birth and death. Some of the graves were decorated, but surprisingly few with any "Islamic" elements. Some had balloons and others ceramic angels, both decorations that could be found in any cemetery. Some graves had bird feeders installed over them; others had colored glass stones to contrast with the white gravel that covered each grave. A few had Islamic prayer beads or tiles inscribed with Qur'anic verses.

The Muslim section of the cemetery was marked by a large granite stone. On one side was the basmallah, and underneath that was a version of some lines from the funeral prayer, "O Allah forgive our living and our dead, those who are with us and those who are absent, our young and our old, our menfolk and our womenfolk. O Allah, to whoever you give life in Islam and whoever you take away from us, take him or her in a state of iman (faith)." Underneath that was the verse from Surah Taha (20:55) that was recited when people were filling the grave with earth. The opposite side of the marker had alternating text in Arabic and English. At the top was the line from 2:156 of the Qur'an followed by the English translation, and then the following hadith: "Peace be unto you, o people of the graves, may Allah forgive us and you. You are our predecessors and we are right after." These hadith and Qur'anic verses

about death are well known; perhaps this is why there was no information to identify them as such.

The Muslim Mortuary and Cemetery Committee

A few days after the funeral, I was able to meet with Abdul Wahab, one of the directors of the Muslim Mortuary and Cemetery Committee (MMCC). The MMCC was established in 1991, and Abdul Wahab, who had been on the board of the ISOC, was asked to join in 1996. Prior to the establishment of the MMCC, the ISOC had been working with a cemetery in Riverside. However, issues arose because the workers in that cemetery's mortuary were not sensitive to the requirements of the Muslim community. So, for example, if a body was delivered to them, they sometimes left it naked on the trolley once it had been removed from the transportation bag. This violated Muslim understandings of modesty, which apply not only to the living, but also to the dead. The MMCC was formed to provide burials that complied with both Islamic ritual requirements and California law. Abdul Wahab and the MMCC created the forms and paperwork that allowed bodies to be buried within twenty-four hours of death if there was no need for a coroner to intervene.

Abdul Wahab explained to me that they had to wait at least three months for the earth in fresh graves to settle before they could be finished. Once the rows of graves were ready to be finished, they would add a cement border between the graves, so people could respect the dead and walk between them without having to step on any of the graves. This was also the reason for putting gravel over the graves. If the graves were covered with grass, the cemetery would go over them with mowers and tractors. The gravel prevented this from happening. The MMCC also made an effort to keep all the plots identical so that there would be no differentiation between rich and poor. Interestingly, in the Westminster cemetery, beside the plots managed by the MMCC, there were about twenty-five other assorted Muslim graves, some with more elaborate headstones or gravestones. So, those who wanted something other than what the MMCC offered had the option of working with another funeral director. Those who wanted to be buried beside loved ones could purchase adjoining or family plots. Otherwise, people would be buried in a grid in the order in which they died.

There are other rituals that take place after the funeral. Many families may gather to recite the Qur'an in its entirety, dividing up the chapters among them. Often there is an event to mark the fortieth-day anniversary of the death and another one to mark the one-year anniversary.

My conversation with Abdul Wahab also raised some issues specific to Muslim funerals in Southern California. One was the need to create a system whereby people could sign off on the appropriate paperwork to bury someone within twenty-four hours of death. Another was the need to bury indigent people. This had happened twice at the KFM in the past year, when they got calls from the coroner about people who had died with no next of kin and whose names indicated that they might have been Muslim. The KFM paid for these funerals through donations solicited from the congregation, another aspect of their communal obligation or fard kifaya. Another issue was to ensure that those who wanted to could receive an appropriate Islamic burial. For this purpose, the MMCC created and distributed cards that people could keep in their wallets, which declared them to be Muslim and asked that they be buried according to Islamic law and not be embalmed or autopsied. The cards also had information about the MMCC so that people could contact them to make arrangements (or ideally, prearrangements) for burial. The need to accommodate Islamic law to California law was demonstrated in the need for concrete vaults to line the graves since the bodies were buried in a shroud and not a casket.

Often, the issues for Muslims come from outside the Muslim community. There may be opposition to Muslim cemeteries due to Islamophobia. For example, in June 2016 the town of Dudley, Massachusetts, denied the local Islamic community the opportunity to build a cemetery on land that they had purchased. This was particularly ironic as the Islamic community in question, the Islamic Society of Greater Worcester, had founded one of the first Muslim cemeteries in the country almost a century earlier, in 1918.[9]

There may also be issues with Muslims who have family members who are Christian, and who may want the person buried with other family members in a non-Muslim part of the cemetery. Or issues may arise because the traditional Muslim funeral takes place within twenty-four hours of death, thus not allowing people to attend, as they might have done if it were a Christian funeral that would have taken place a

week later. Christian family members might also want the body to be embalmed and have an open-casket funeral, which conflicts with Shari'a for Muslims.

Muslim American Variations

Abdul Wahab mentioned that the MMCC was open to both Sunni and Shi'a Twelver communities. Given the large number of Shi'a Muslims in Southern California, it is not surprising that they have their own exclusive Shi'a organization, the Muslim Burial Organization of Los Angeles (MBOLA), which buries people according to the Ja'fari school of Shari'a. The MBOLA manages two cemeteries of its own: Wadi-us-Salaam in LaVerne, whose plots sold out in 2010, and Wadi-e-Hussain in Pomona, which had 750 plots remaining. There are slight differences between the Shi'a funeral prayer and the Sunni version described above. The main difference is that the prayer consists of five takbirat and not four, with the added cycle being another prayer of forgiveness for the deceased. After the fourth takbir, the following is recited before the pronouncement of the fifth takbir: "O Allah, indeed this is Your servant, son of Your servant and son of Your maidservant. He has become Your guest and You are the best of the hosts. O Allah, we do not know except good from him and You are more knowing than us. O Allah, if he had been a doer of good, increase his good deeds and if he had been a sinner and an evildoer, forgive his sins. And gather him on Judgment Day with the Prophet and the purified and chaste Imams."[10] Then the congregation raise their hands to the ears for the fifth takbir, ending the prayer.

If the funeral is for a female, the following prayer is recited after the fourth takbir:

> O Allah, indeed this is Your maidservant, daughter of Your servant and daughter of Your maidservant. She has become Your guest and You are the best of the hosts. O Allah, we do not know except good from her and You are more knowing than us. O Allah, if she had been a doer of good, increase her good deeds and if she had been a sinner and an evildoer, forgive her sins. And gather her on Judgment Day with the Prophet and the purified and chaste Imams.

It is also notable that the Ja'fari school of Shari'a recommends the recitation of instructions to the corpse, reminding the deceased of the forthcoming visit by the angels who will ask him or her questions of faith. The Ja'fari school also recommends several prayers for the family and the community of the dead person. These prayers, which are also recited in Sunni traditions, include supplications asking God for forgiveness and to provide patience to the relatives of the dead. Family and friends gather to provide support and to ensure that the family is supplied with food for three days.

The Shi'a Isma'ili community has its own particular rituals. The body is washed and shrouded and if the services are not held in a funeral home, it is taken in a coffin into the Jamatkhana, or Isma'ili prayer space. There the community offers its own prayers, Qur'an recitation, and devotional hymns called *ginans* for the deceased before the coffin is taken to the cemetery for burial.[11]

The Nation of Islam (NOI) has a small presence in Southern California. NOI beliefs differ from those of other Muslims in that, according to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, there is no life beyond the grave or spiritual resurrection after the death of the body. Instead, Elijah Muhammad taught about the "mental resurrection" that needs to take place while the person is still alive. It was the NOI that provided the United States with its most famous Muslim, the Greatest of All Time.

The Greatest of All Time

The first Muslim funeral most non-Muslim Americans have probably seen is the public funeral for Muhammad Ali. It was held during the first week of Ramadan on June 10, 2016, in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. Ali's funeral showed people's outpouring of love and support for him. This was a beloved American hero returning home. The funeral was by Ali's own design an interfaith event, featuring remarks by religious leaders, family members, celebrities, and politicians, concluding with a eulogy by former president Bill Clinton. The service began with a procession through the streets of his hometown that ended with his Muslim burial in the Cave Hill Cemetery. However, a day earlier, Ali had also had a traditional Muslim funeral service. At his passing, his body was washed and shrouded and prayed over in

accordance with Islamic customs. Muslims across America and around the world were encouraged to pray the salah al-janaza for our deceased Muslim brother.

The Muslim funeral service prayer for Ali, held on June 9, 2016 at the Kentucky Exposition Center in Louisville, was extraordinary. The venue was next to Freedom Hall, where Ali had fought Tunney Hunsaker in his first professional fight on October 29, 1960. It was broadcast live across the country, and on the drive home I heard part of the Qur'an recitation from the funeral on CBS radio, the first time I ever saw or heard coverage of a Muslim funeral on the daily news.

The service was led by Imam Zaid Shakir, a noted American imam from California and the cofounder of Zaytuna College, the first accredited Muslim liberal arts college in the United States. Among the pallbearers who brought in the coffin was Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, another cofounder of Zaytuna College, and international recording star Yusuf Islam (the former Cat Stevens). Imam Zaid explained to the crowd what would happen during the salah al-janaza. The funeral prayer was performed, followed by a Qur'an recitation and a translation of the words recited by Shaykh Hamza. Then three people were invited to address the crowd in short sermons. They were Sherman Jackson, a professor at the University of Southern California and one of the most important Muslim scholars in the United States; Dalia Mogahed, the former director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies; and Khadijah Sharif-Drinkard, a lawyer who oversees business and legal affairs for the New York offices of Black Entertainment Television (BET).

Sherman Jackson's short sermon captured the intertwining of American and Muslim identities in the body of Muhammad Ali:

> As a cultural icon, Ali made being Muslim cool. Ali made being a Muslim dignified. Ali made being a Muslim relevant. And all of this he did in a way that no one could challenge his belongingness to or in this country. Ali put the question of whether a person can be a Muslim and an American to rest. Indeed, he KO'd [knocked out, eliminated] that question. With his passing, let us hope that that question will now be interred with his precious remains. . . . Ali helped this country move closer to its own ideals. He helped America do and see some things that America was not quite ready to do or see on its own. And because of Ali's heroic efforts,

> America is a better place today for us all. And in this regard, Ali belongs not just to the Muslims of this country, Ali belongs to all Americans. . . . If you are an American, Ali is part of your history, part of what makes you who you are, and as an American, Ali belongs to you, and you too should be proud of this precious piece of your American heritage.

At another funeral service over fifty years earlier, on February 27, 1965 Ossie Davis gave the eulogy for Malcolm X. There, he famously said, "Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood! This was his meaning to his people. And in honoring him we honor the best in ourselves." Ali, as Professor Jackson pointed out, wasn't just for *his* people, but for all people. If Malcolm was our manhood, then Ali was our humanity, with a life lived for all the world to see. A life lived in complexity and contradiction, triumph and tragedy. A life of change and metamorphosis. A life which gave the lie to F. Scott Fitzgerald's line about there being no second acts in American lives, by living out its successful second and third acts. A life which showed us, in the words of the old cliché, that it's not about how many times you get knocked down, but whether you get back up, and what you do when you get back up, that truly matters. An iconic American life, lived by an iconic American Muslim.

Conclusion

For Muslims around the world, the most important Muslim building is the Ka'ba in Mecca. The second most important is the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, which also contains the grave of the Prophet Muhammad. For non-Muslims, perhaps the most famous Islamic building is the Taj Mahal in India, which is also a mausoleum. Muslim burial sites, then, are important to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Perhaps the funeral of the most famous American Muslim, Muhammad Ali, helped to shed light on the practice of contemporary Muslim funerals. But his funeral also evoked the presence of our Muslim American ancestors, who have been buried in North American soil since at least the 1600s.

In 1991, the African Burial Grounds were discovered in Lower Manhattan. The African Burial Ground National Monument on

Duane Street was proclaimed a national monument in 2006 by President George W. Bush and dedicated in 2007. In July 2010 the remains of a ship were discovered nearby during the construction of the 9/11 memorial to the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. That September, at the New York Academy of Sciences, researchers described the boat as a sixty- to seventy-foot Hudson River sloop from the first half of the seventeenth century (1727–1760, based on a coin found on the ship), which "may have traveled up and down the Hudson River and perhaps the Atlantic seaboard, ferrying goods like sugar, molasses, salt and rum between the warm Caribbean and the uniting colonies to the north."[12] That is a lovely pastoral image, until one remembers the Middle Passage, and that the "what" that was exchanged for the goods on that Hudson River sloop was not a "what" but a "who," slaves from West Africa. Some of those enslaved people were Muslim, and some of them were buried in the soil of Lower Manhattan. Muslims, it is important to remember, have for centuries been buried in America.

NOTES

1 My thanks to Shakeel Syed, the executive director of the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California, for helping to connect me with the relevant people responsible for Muslim burials in the greater Los Angeles area. Thanks also to the people interviewed for this chapter. Thanks to Edward Curtis and the authors who participated in the workshop that he organized for their feedback and comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

2 Also known as *zaman* or *al-ayyam* (the days).

3 I have consulted the Qur'an translations available on the quran.com website (especially those of Yusuf Ali, Marmaduke Pickthall, and Sahih International), but all translations are my own.

4 See Amir Hussain, "Death," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, Vol. 2, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 47–49.

5 See Rkia Elaroui Cornell, "Death and Burial in Islam," in *Voices of Islam*, Vol. 3, ed. Vincent J. Cornell (Westport: Praeger, 2007), 151–172.

6 On the differences between the schools, see Yasir Qadhi, "The Funeral Prayer in Absentia," available at muslimmatters.org.

7 For those interested in the details of the washing, this website provides an animated guide to the process: en.islamway.net.

8 For a discussion of these hadith and the permissibility of women visiting graves, see imamluqman.wordpress.com.

9 See Karen Smid, "Cemeteries," in *The Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History*, Vol. 1, ed. Edward Curtis IV (New York: Facts on File, 2010), 96–98.

10 I am grateful to Dr. Husein Khimjee for his help on this section, and for providing the texts of the prayers.

11 I am grateful to Dr. Hussein Rashid for his help on this section. There is also material on Isma'ili funerals available at this website: www.ismaili.net.

12 For more on the ship, see www.livescience.com.