

A Third Definition of Death? An Investigation into the Implications of Advanced Medical Technology on Death in the Islamic Tradition

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ABSTRACT: Muslims are not in agreement about when death is. Human judgment is inherently flawed, so Muslims defer to Islamic texts on issues of ethics. Medical technology has advanced so fast, and the universe of Muslims and Islamic thought is so wide, that there is no agreed upon standard for death. Determining the time of death is of utmost importance from an Islamic legal perspective. The death of an individual triggers many different legal processes and creates an obligation for a community to bury the body. Physicians with ulterior motives, such as organ transplantation, have entered the discourse on the Islamic definition of death in lieu of Islamic scholars. A return to classical Islamic rulings on responsibility for murder reveal that Muslims have confronted complex issues of death before, and are directly analogous to current biomedical issues. Although there is no consensus definition of death in the Islamic tradition, adopting a third category of life and death based on accepted historical rulings wherein one is "alive but legally dead" shows promise as an Islamic definition in light of recent advances in medical technology.

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