

Life and Death?

Elena Silvestrini

OS24



I was a self-conscious twelve-year-old, standing at the edge of a sleek wooden coffin and gripping on to the sleeve of my father's starched black suit. The air in the room was cool and dry, despite the humid weather that engulfed the building. Family members and unrecognizable faces slowly swept through the room, each taking their turn to gaze down into the coffin. After gathering the courage inside of me, I slowly inched my way toward the opening, scared yet eager to see the face that I had been thinking of non-stop for the past few days. Still clutching my father's sleeve, I peered into the new resting place of my grandfather. Instead of the bright, lively face I was accustomed to, I saw a transformed being. His face was pale and waxy, his hair combed back in a style he had never worn before. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I gazed down upon this body. I was young at the time, but I still knew that this body was not my grandfather. What I was seeing was just an inanimate object, a being whose personality, consciousness, soul, or whatever you would like to call it, was disconnected. This moment, my first real encounter with losing a loved one where I was old enough to reflect on the phenomenon of death, has stuck with me throughout my life. I will never know if my grandfather was sent to heaven or hell, reincarnated into the ladybug we saw walking across his coffin later that night, or if he simply went back into an unconscious state similar to how it was before he was born. Perhaps it was none of these things. Maybe someday, after my own death, I will meet up with him again, in an afterlife that no human being has ever conceived before.

Despite all of these options, one thing is certain: everyone who lives must die. But what exactly is death? Is it simply the stopping of one's heart and brain, or is it the transportation of one's soul to a next life? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines death as "the total and permanent cessation of all the vital functions of an organism." But can the mind, or human consciousness, function after the brain stops working? These are the questions that humans have been considering since the beginning of time. The recognition of death, and the thought of death as merely a passing on to the afterlife, is one of the essential topics that is addressed by nearly every religion and belief system. Beliefs range from the Buddhist's view on rebirth, to the Christian's certainty on the existence of heaven and hell, to the Atheist's perspective that there is no afterlife whatsoever. However, the most fascinating aspect of death is not where one's soul is transported to, but why humans consistently formulate these beliefs on the afterlife. Even the phrase "life after death" is highly contradictory, seeing as death is the absence of life. What is evidently true about humans is that we are naturally afraid of the unknown. Death, something that cannot be experienced by the living, is the greatest unknown principle of our world, and therefore holds a great amount of fear. We, as humans, do not believe in the existence of an afterlife because of evidence we have of one existing; we believe in an afterlife because it is comforting. Believing that the end of the functioning of our bodies is not the end of our life altogether is an extremely important aspect of society, because no matter the belief, it makes the thought of passing away much less frightening, and calms our race to a point where one must not fear death.

Homo sapiens have considered death and the afterlife since the early evolutionary stages of our species. Death has always been viewed more as a passing on, rather than the complete and total end of one's life. In the *Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol. I: The Way of the Animal Powers*, Joseph Campbell talks of the cave men days, and how skeletal evidence found in burial tombs shows a belief in some sort of an afterlife. In one tomb, the remains of a youth of about sixteen years were found. The skeleton was arranged in a sleeping posture with the head resting on the right forearm. A pile of flints was underneath the arm and head, acting as a pillow. From this evidence we can infer that even in the earliest stages of human life, we thought of

death as a deep sleep in which the individual would eventually wake up. In another tomb, a well-preserved male skeleton was found. The body was laid out in a West-East orientation. Campbell states that “the analogy of death and sleep and the associated thought of a waking are clearly suggested in these finds, while the West-East orientation may have implied some sort of reference to the setting and rising of the sun.” Humans have always believed that there is a continuation of life beyond death, whether the dead will rise again in this world or in some other. The concept of death, and a set belief on the afterlife, is one of the central issues that is addressed by nearly every religion, yet the thoughts on an afterlife have evolved throughout the years with the evolution of our species.

American society in particular is heavily influenced by religious beliefs involving the afterlife. In the book *Heaven – Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife*, Lisa Miller states that an overwhelming 81 percent of Americans believed in Heaven in 2007, a percentage that has increased rapidly since 1997, when only 72 percent of Americans believed in Heaven. It goes without saying that Christianity is the dominant religion of America, but what exactly do the beliefs of the Christian afterlife entail? The vast majority of Christians believe in some form of a heaven, a place of purifying perfection in which the deceased are in the presence of God and are free from sin and suffering. However, not every individual that has passed away resides in heaven; heaven is reserved only for the people who have lived life by the Christian standards, confessed any sins, and found salvation with God. The majority of Christians also believe in the existence of hell, a place where those who have not found salvation through the Christian God are punished for eternity. Christians trust that there will be a judgment, or some sort of life evaluation, when we die. This evaluation, done by God, will determine where ones soul will end up. There are only two different outcomes, heaven or hell, and everyone will eventually end up in one of these places. Some Christians believe in purgatory, a place where Christians who have died with unconfessed sins are punished for some time, but all who go to purgatory will eventually end up in heaven.

I find numerous aspects of the Christian concept of the afterlife, the existence of both heaven and hell, to be not only illogical, but disrespectful to all human beings who do not practice the Christian faith. Christians believe that salvation and acceptance into heaven is only available through Christ, and if you reject Christ you will end up in hell. This means that the millions of Buddhists, Hindus, and people of other religions will be rejected by God once they die, and will be punished for all of eternity. On the radio program “Life on the Edge”, it was said that “If you are a Christian, you will go to heaven; if you’re following a different religion, then by default you will go to hell,” (www.religioustolerance.org). The Bible states that “this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. The one who believes in the Son has eternal life. The one who rejects the Son will not see life, but God’s wrath remains on him (John 3:16, 36),” meaning that only those who accept Christ as their savior will be accepted into Heaven (www.bible.org). There is nothing wrong with believing in some sort of an afterlife, but it is wrong to assume that only those practicing the teachings of a certain religion will be placed in the more desirable section of the afterlife. Christians believe that God created human beings to live eternally in fellowship with him, so then why would God send a great number of human beings to live in hell after they die? I believe that if there is a God, he would accept every religion and belief system, and would not discriminate between beliefs.

Hinduism and Buddhism combined are practiced by about twenty percent of the people in the world, and are prominent in parts of Asia, such as India and China

(http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html). When concerning the afterlife, Buddhists believe in rebirth and Hindus believe in reincarnation. While these two beliefs may seem similar, they are in fact somewhat divergent. The Buddhist view on rebirth is similar to reincarnation, but it is not exactly the same. Rebirth is often referred to as walking the wheel of life, or “samsara” (www.thebigview.com). It is the process of being born over and over again in many different times and situations. However, there is no permanent essence of one’s consciousness or self that survives death and is passed on in to the next life. Therefore, nothing is carried over from one life to the next. Buddhists look at death and rebirth as the continuation of a series, in which the last thought moment of one life conditions the first thought moment of the next life. Walpola Rahula, a Buddhist monk, scholar, and writer, explained, “the person who dies here is reborn elsewhere, is neither the same person, nor another,” (www.thebigview.com).

The Hindu belief in reincarnation is somewhat different from this point of view. Hindus believe that after death, a soul is reincarnated, or transported, into a new body. Souls may enter into many bodies, assume many forms, and pass through many births and deaths. They believe that humans are composed of two principles: spiritual, or the soul, and material, the body. Hinduism speaks of two paths along which the soul travels after death. The first is the “path of the sun”, also known as the “bright path” or “path of Gods”, where the soul becomes one with the Gods and never returns again to earth. The second is the “path of the moon”, also known as the “dark path” or “path of ancestors”, where the soul is reincarnated into a new body on earth. While there are some obvious differences in the beliefs of Buddhists and Hindus, both religions believe in the existence of karma, which is generated by delusion, greed, aversion, and passion. In Hinduism, the body your soul is given in each lifetime is dependent upon your karma. In Buddhism, karma is the driving force behind rebirth. As long as there is karma from a previous lifetime, you will be reborn again on earth, and accumulated karma from past lifetimes can take form in a new lifetime. Only when all accumulated karma is released and the generation of new karma is calmed, one can enter Nirvana, the state of liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth.

What I find most fascinating about the afterlife beliefs of both Buddhism and Hinduism is that death is not looked upon as a great calamity in either religion. Death is not a tragedy because death is not an end of all, but a “natural process in the existence of a being as a separate entity, a resting period during which it recuperates, reassembles its resources, adjusts its course, and returns again to the earth to continue its journey,” (www.hinduwebsite.com). This strongly shows that the belief in afterlife serves as a comfort to humans who are naturally afraid of death. When death separates us from loved ones, we naturally experience a variety of emotions, such as denial, anger, and grief. Believing that the soul of our loved one still exists is comforting. I cannot say that I completely agree with the Hindu or Buddhist beliefs on rebirth and reincarnation, but I do believe that they serve the major purpose of a religious belief in afterlife: to comfort human beings to a point where we must not fear death.

Judaism is a fascinating religion when compared to others, because the texts have little to say on what happens after death. This religion is much more focused on actions than beliefs, and feels that the life you lead while living is much more important than the afterlife. The Torah and Talmud focus on the purpose of earthly life, which is fulfilling one’s duties to God and the fellow man. When one succeeds at this, they will be successful in life, but when one fails, they will be punished in life; whether this reward and punishment continues after death is not important. However, the Torah vaguely describes the afterlife as rejoining one’s ancestors. These early Biblical descriptions of death seem to indicate that the soul continues to exist in

some way after death. These beliefs have evolved over the years, and current, traditional Judaism includes the belief in both heaven and hell, similar to the Christian belief, (www.religionfacts.com). I feel that Judaism is the most logical of all religions when concerning the afterlife, but I still do not agree completely with all of the teachings. I do believe that our life on earth is what matters the most, because we cannot prove the existence of an afterlife. I think that it is impractical to lead your entire life according to what will happen when you die; we should focus more on the present situations in our lives rather than what will happen to us after we die. In this sense, I agree with the early concepts of Judaism. Nevertheless, current Jewish beliefs on the afterlife include the existence of a heaven and hell, despite what the ancient texts say. I think it is illogical to assume that our bodies or souls will be transported to another world after death.

There are various different religions that hold beliefs on what happens after death, but Atheism, the rejection of belief in the existence of a God, also has beliefs on the afterlife. Similar to Judaism, Atheism celebrates life, but knows death is a reality. Atheists believe that there is no afterlife other than the legacy, or memory, you leave behind in the people who have been affected by your life. Contrary to the majority of religions, Atheists do not believe humans have souls. Therefore, ones soul or consciousness cannot be transported to a next life after one's death. A common belief shared by atheists is that "we weren't alive before we were born and we're not going to exist after we die," (www.death.findyourfate.com). Humans have a greater consciousness than all other animals, and we are therefore more able to reflect on and worry about the dilemma of death. Atheists believe that there is no reason why a greater consciousness should mean we do not really die the way other animals do. It is believed that consciousness ceases once the brain stops functioning, and the end of our consciousness is similar to our lack of consciousness before we were born. In other words, death is simply returning to the unborn state once again, the state where we are not alive or conscious. While this may be the most pessimistic of opinions on the afterlife, it makes the most sense scientifically. There is no evidence that supports the existence of an afterlife; even the extraordinary "near death experiences" that some people have can be disproven by scientists. Many atheists admit that they are not happy about the views they hold, but they are willing to accept that death is the end of everything.

I believe that humans should focus on making our life on earth more fulfilling, but I do not agree with the belief that death is the end of everything. I do not believe in heaven or hell, I do not believe in reincarnation, and I do not believe in rebirth, but I respect and understand all of these beliefs. I do not know what will happen after I die, and I think it is illogical to assume that there is only one possibility. If there is an afterlife, I presume it is nothing like any living human being has ever been able to conceive before. In essence, I think that focusing on earthly life is much more important than focusing on the afterlife, but I understand that the belief in some sort of an afterlife plays a major role in nearly all religions and societies. I can comprehend the importance of these beliefs; I know that they comfort our race and make death appear less frightening. Many people feel that our lives are purposeless if there is no afterlife; if our lives do not have a God given purpose, then why should we have the motivation to keep on living? But maybe our lives do not need to have a higher purpose. The purpose humans put into life is much more important, and much more realistic, than any God given purpose. We can create meaning or purpose for our own lives without the will of God, therefore giving our lives a clear intention based on our own principles. Our lives do not become meaningless if there is no afterlife. Everything we do in this life affects the world and the people surrounding us in some way, and

that is meaningful enough. I do not know if there is an afterlife; I will not know until I die, but that does not make my life unimportant or meaningless.

Bibliography

- “Beliefs By Christian Groups about the Afterlife.” Religious Tolerance. www.religioustolerance.org/heav_hel.htm. 15 April 2010. Web.
- “Buddhist Beliefs About the Afterlife.” Religion Facts. www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/beliefs/afterlife.htm. Web.
- Campbell, Joseph. *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*. Vol. I, Pt. 1. New York: Harper & Row. Print.
- Campbell, Joseph. *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*. Vol. II, Pt. 1. New York: Harper & Row. Print.
- Cohen, David, ed. *The Circle of Life – Rituals from the Human Family Album*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991. Print.
- Googan, Michael D., ed. *The Illustrated Guide to World Religions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Print.
- “Karma and Rebirth.” The Big View. www.thebigview.com/buddhism/karma.html. Web.
- “Life after Death.” Find Your Fate. www.death.findyourfate.com/life-after-death/lifeafterdeath.html. 2011. Web.
- Litke, Sid. “What the Bible says about Hell.” www.bible.org/article/what-bible-says-about-hell. Web.
- Miller, Lisa. *Heaven, Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010. Print.
- Prothero, Stephen. *God is not One*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010. Print.
- Salvo, Dana. *Home Altars of Mexico*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1997. Print.