

Having Faith In Death

Ruby W.



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The notion of death and the unpreventable mortality of humans is a looming concept that shapes the lives of the living. With nearly two people dying each second, every human experiences the loss of someone dear to them, and it is an unavoidable aspect of our existence. In my research, I sought to explore the psychology behind grief, what it is, and how we as humans naturally cope with it. I then used an exploration of my own grief to begin to form an idea of the relationship between spirituality and death.

This collage is a reflection of the research I have done, depicting a woman ascending from her “life” on earth into the “afterlife.” With each of her limbs, heart, and face layered upon a darker shadowed version, she pulls away from her living body, leaving her ribs exposed, dripping from the recent removal from the rest of her physical self. To her right is a color-blocked section depicting warm colors, red and orange, which are often associated with energetic feelings of chaos and anger. She leaves this portion behind in her ascent, and moves into shades of blue, which literally mirror the sky, but also depict tranquility and calm. Her movement ultimately ends in the upper section of the piece, the depiction of the afterlife. The outer rim of the “cloud” is bordered by words, depicting the teachings of six different religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Radha Soami Satsang Beas, summarizing their views of life after death. This was a prominent part of my research; I looked into the major religions of the world, their beliefs, and included Radha Soami Satsang Beas (RSSB) as well, because my grandmother practices it, and it has been an influence upon my own life. The gold strokes in the “cloud” are a reflection of wisdom, and also reference the “golden stream” featured in the RSSB belief systems. However, layered atop darkness is a level of power and strength represented by the two colors to depict the way religion provides a sense of comfort alongside death. Once she reaches this realm of passing, her spirituality will provide a cathartic outlet.

From this analysis and artwork, I began a journey to explore my own belief in faith, and have found closure in my experiences with death. This installation depicts this journey. It encompasses the beliefs found in several religions and the ways in which they intertwine to create a general “whole” of spirituality to reflect our instinctual state through bereavement.

Ruby W.
California

The notion of death, and the unpreventable mortality of humans, is a looming concept that shapes the lives of the living. Accordingly, theological, philosophical, and religious disciplines centrally focus upon death as a prevailing theme, and have looked upon how to deal with, and move on from, the encumbrance of grief.¹ With nearly two people dying each second², every human experiences the loss of someone dear to them, and it is an unavoidable aspect of our existence³, but it is spirituality and belief, that shape one's sense of grief, and molds our world after a death. I wanted to observe the relationship between religion and grief, how one's sense of spirituality, or lack thereof, alters the process after bereavement, and additionally how this spirituality has been involved in my own experiences of loss.

I began my research by looking into the physicality of grief, what it encompasses and the psychology behind it. The term grief has been used in the English language for over eight hundred years, and the Latin roots of the word date back even further⁴. Despite only being a cognizant word for this period of time, the feeling of grief is one that is simply human nature, a part of life that we all must experience.

Grief refers to the despair following a notable loss, the experience of mourning. This burden is the "psychological weight experienced by the loss of a loved one, the loss of identity or status, the loss of relationship, the loss of place or thing, and the loss of capacity".⁵ Grief is the reaction we have, and the coping itself that we experience once we begin to move forward from a loss, both of which often encompasses a combination of the following: shock, denial, numbness, anger, yearning, searching, disorganization, despair, and potential reorganization⁶. It can be either a mental process that carries with us throughout life, or a more singular experience that is brief, and when resolved, allows one to feel a sense of mental catharsis. In our modern western world, we are taught to maintain control, taught that life will remain predictable and in our control, if only we try hard enough. We ignore death, pain and illness, isolating those who do not fit into our docile lives, in attempts to pretend these incredibly real situations are not crumbling the picture of our existence. Death shatters these attempts. It is an unpredictable raging wildfire, we are unable to control it, and the chaos it leaves in its wake is a mess of heartache, loss and grief. In attempts to maintain any sovereignty, we cling to this grief, keeping it like a possession. However, humans are mortal, inevitably to be lost, as we live our lives in this all-too transient world⁷.

When I was eleven, my maternal grandfather had a fatal heart attack. Prior to this, death had been a concept that I was keenly aware of, I had several family members die, but no one's passing had had such a vital effect on my being. I was saddened by his death, and often confused as to why he had to leave. I was perfectly aware of what physically happened to a body when someone died, but I did not want to believe that the hardened man with such a deep capacity for love was just a decomposing body, the memories of his piercing soft blue eyes, and strong hands that used to pull me into his lap, the fingers that turned the pages of the books he read, and the songs he used to hum all gone with the last heartbeat. I was not raised religious, and as a (then) young self-declared atheist, I was anti any kind of afterlife. Therefore, it was my firm belief that

¹ (Park & Halifax, 2017)

² ("Birth & Death Rates | Ecology Global Network", 2017)

³ (Park & Halifax, 2017)

⁴ ("Finally! A Grief Definition That Makes Sense", 2017)

⁵ (Park & Halifax, 2017)

⁶ (Park & Halifax, 2017)

⁷ (Park & Halifax, 2017)

death was the end. However, this made the grief hit harder. Without the crutch of the belief in a better life after death, my grandfather was gone, forever.

His death was the first of several events that sent my childhood world crumbling, leading to the onset of depression that I would battle on and off for years. Although I cannot be certain that my bereavement was a direct parallel to the alterations in my life, it certainly had a huge impact, and has shaped who I am as a person. However, as I have grown older, my memories of him have begun to fade, and although he is still a very important emblem in my life, the direct effects of his passing have dwindled.

Whilst I have grown out of feeling the constant grief of his death, I still see the reflection of his loss in my mother. His passing certainly affected my life, but it deeply changed her, which then began to affect our relationship. When this project began unfolding I talked to my mom, asked her to think back to her memories with him, and how she felt her life, succeeding his death, was altered. The subject clearly saddened her, a wound still fresh some 7 years later. She told me about how much of a true loss it was for her, how he grounded her in a sense that no one else did, providing care and love, whilst teaching her dignity as a woman. I saw all of these things in the brief time that I shared with them, his tough demeanor diminished with love for his daughter, but with his passing I saw these traits crumble within my mother. She told me this, "I think when dad died the world started looking like a sadder place to me in the face of mortality, and without his heart there was a void."⁸ I believe his death shaped the way in which she interacted with others, especially me. Just like me, her relationship with religion was limited. She believed in some sort of higher order that we as humans cannot quite comprehend, but was unsure of an afterlife, and so her father's being was gone, and without him she has been lost, searching for someone with a reflection of his strength and belief of importance, but no one was ever quite enough, not even herself, and as a mother she was adrift without his guidance.

Despite leaving his descendants in a state of grief, afflicted with his loss, whilst he was alive, my grandfather did not fear death, but rather welcomed it. He was a very religious man, always within inches of his bible, it's pages worn from constant reference, and his strength and loyalty was a reflection of his faith. He believed in salvation by the Lord Jesus Christ, and knew that he would travel onto heaven, a world deemed better than life on earth⁹, by those of the Christian faith. I firmly believe that it was this Christian belief that guided him to salute death. It provided him with a future, dying was not the end, and although his time on earth would be over, he would journey onto a better chapter.

At the time of his passing, I did not have much regard to this parallel between the deceased and those affected, and their level of spirituality. I was fixed solely upon how it altered my own pre-adolescent life. Recently however, my great uncle and aunt, and their adult son passed away, all within relatively a year of each other, the most recent being a month ago. This rather sudden domino of deaths brought me back to the loss I felt when I was eleven, and sent my mind spiraling into questions about grief, loss, and how spirituality shapes each, causing me to want to explore how we approach our own death, and the onset of mortality, and how those facing bereavement are affected in the time after death, and how each is altered by the accompaniment of spirituality.

As such, I have begun on a journey that explored the ways in which several religions view death and the afterlife. I started with Christianity, as it had been the main basis of faith for

⁸ A quote from my mama, texted to me after our conversation had ended... I think this was her summary of how she felt with his loss, attempting to put how she felt into one phrase.

⁹ ("Our Best Life Yet to Come: The New Earth, Our Eternal Home - Blog - Eternal Perspective Ministries", 2017)

many around me. Although I was not raised in any religion, my grandfather was Christian, and my father was raised catholic, as were both his parents. Therefore, the biblical influence came from both sides of my family, playing a key role in my life. In addition to the relationship between death and Christianity that I saw through my grandfather's passing, I have seen it in my paternal grandmother's deteriorating health. A devout Catholic, my nearly 95 year old grandmother has been ready to pass on for years, undeniably unafraid of death, and rather completely ready for its onset. Living with her since I was eight, I have seen her mind begin to unravel, her memories crumble, and her will to maintain a purpose for staying in this life slip away. She is tired of her life here on earth, and wills the Lord to grant her passage to a better place, heaven. Her faith provides her comfort in her relationship with death, allowing her readiness and ease. Although most of her family is not religious, there is tranquility in knowing that when she passes she will be moving on in a state of peace.

From this personal reference, I looked into the specific beliefs of Christians in regards to what happens after death, seeking information deeper than the simple notion that when someone dies, they go to heaven or hell, dependent on the purity of their actions in life. The first thing that I was struck by was that there are differentiating opinions on whether it really matters if you were a moral person, "The core of Christian belief about the afterlife is that there is an afterlife, that conduct on earth – how we behave - will determine where in the afterlife you will eventually end up. That there is a hell for the wicked ones – especially the Catholic Church still teaches that hellfire is for eternity and there is heaven for those who behaved well"¹⁰, or rather your level of faith and devotion to God, "The traditional Christian view has always been that those who believe will share eternal joy with God in heaven, while those who refuse God's love suffer endless separation from God."¹¹ Additionally, there is some debate between whether or we go straight to heaven/hell upon our death, or whether we remain "asleep" until the final judgment day, when one is resurrected to life or punishment.¹² Within these differentiating opinions I have come to realize that Christianity is such a broad religion that there are bound to be an abundance of perspectives on what the afterlife encompasses, and that is truly one's faith that carries their beliefs.

From Christianity I looked into Judaism, as they are fundamentally parallel and are similar in many aspects. They both believe in one God who is almighty, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, and infinite¹³. However, their views in the afterlife ultimately differ. The traditional belief of Judaism is that that death is not the end of human existence. Judaism primarily focuses upon life in the here and now, and does not specifically address the subject of the afterlife, and leaves a great deal of room for personal opinion¹⁴. However, some Orthodox Jews believe that the "souls of the righteous dead go to a place similar to the Christian heaven, or that they are reincarnated through many lifetimes, or that they simply wait until the coming of the messiah, when they will be resurrected"¹⁵. Similarly, there are some who believe that the souls of those who have done evil are either eternally tormented by their own demons, or that upon death those who have been wicked simply cease to exist. National Scholar Rabbi Hayyim Angel has written and lectured on how the Afterlife features in the Tanakh, stating that, "There is

¹⁰ ("How Different religions view the Afterlife", 2017)

¹¹ (Communications, 2017)

¹² (Communications, 2017)

¹³ ("What is the difference between Christianity and Judaism?", 2017)

¹⁴ ("Judaism 101: Olam Ha-Ba: The Afterlife", 2017)

¹⁵ ("Judaism 101: Olam Ha-Ba: The Afterlife", 2017)

a paucity of explicit references to afterlife—whether a bodily resurrection or a soul world—in Tanakh. The Torah promises this-worldly rewards and punishments for faithfulness or lack thereof to God and the Torah. It does not promise heaven for righteousness, nor does it threaten hell or the absence of heaven for sinfulness. Given the ancient world’s belief in, and even obsession with immortality and afterlife, the Torah’s silence is all the more remarkable”¹⁶. I found it intriguing how though the foundation of Christianity and Judaism is very similar and the majority of the beliefs as well, Christianity relies heavily upon the notion of life after death, and Judaism hardly even addresses it. From here I was curious to see how the other major religions addressed the notion of the afterlife.

Islam is one of the most practiced religion in the world, second to Christianity,¹⁷ and has surprisingly similar afterlife beliefs to Catholicism. Muslims believes in continued existence of the soul after death, with transformed physical existence and a Day of Judgment, deciding eternal destination of human beings to “Paradise and Hell”.¹⁸ Muslims believe that death is the natural threshold to the next stage of existence. Like many Christian beliefs, there is a direct relation between one’s action on earth and the life they are granted beyond death, “The afterlife will be one of rewards and punishments which is commensurate with earthly conduct”.¹⁹ However, despite the similarities to Christian views, Islam is more specific in the acceptance to Paradise, or the damnation to hell. There are six fundamental beliefs required of a Muslim to complete his faith, the primary being faith itself. A lack of belief and faith in God renders all other beliefs meaningless.²⁰ Muslims believe that upon our death, one enters an intermediate phase of life between passing and resurrection. Faith influences whether one will spend this passing period in a place of heaven or hell, but also influences the ultimate judgement during resurrection.

From this I was rapt by not only the similarities between Christian and Islamic beliefs, but how Christianity is often thought to be the basis of heaven in hell, but Muslim beliefs in regards to the two are actually more succinct, highlighting the parallel between the two, which then relates back to Judaism as well. It was at this point that I decided that I should look at the relationship between grief and religion as a whole, rather than touch upon the ways in which individual beliefs affect grief. However, I researched several more religions in order to be learned in a variety of faiths, and to find further parallels between different belief systems.

Branching away from Abrahamic religions, I began looking at Hinduism, the oldest known religion in the world.²¹ Death, according to Hinduism, is a series of changes through which an individual passes. Essentially, one’s body leaves in pieces beginning with the passing of the soul, followed by one’s last breath, their organs, the soul becomes “endowed with particularized consciousness and goes to the body which is related to that consciousness”, and then their knowledge and past experiences, leaving behind a body which is then discarded, only to be replaced by a new vessel, one suitable for the next step of the journey. This body’s fate is a reflection of action, “by doing good it becomes good, and by doing evil it becomes evil - it becomes virtuous through good acts and vicious through evil”.²² Though this moral sentiment in theory is very similar to the basis of beliefs in Western religion, they differentiate in regards to

¹⁶ ("Heaven, Hell, and the Afterlife in Jewish Thought | jewishideas.org", 2017)

¹⁷ ("World's Muslim Population Will Surpass Christians This Century, Pew Says", 2017)

¹⁸ (Berry, 2017)

¹⁹ ("Belief in Life after Death - The Religion of Islam", 2017)

²⁰ ("Belief in Life after Death - The Religion of Islam", 2017)

²¹ (Berry, 2017)

²² ("Hinduism: Death and Life Beyond Death", 2017)

life after death. The way in which western culture, and religions, romanticize the concept of leading a life after death, is in direct opposition of the beliefs within Hinduism, Buddhism, and other southern Asian religions that the Samsaric process is one of unhappiness, “life in this world means suffering”.²³ The law of karma keeps one trapped in a Samsaric cycle. This law operates by impersonally ensuring that every “good or bad deed eventually returns to the individual in the form of reward or punishment commensurate with the original deed. It is the necessity of "reaping one's karma" that compels human beings to take rebirth (to reincarnate) in successive lifetimes”.²⁴ This is compelling because it is very similar to the sentiment behind the other religions, one’s after life is based upon their actions on earth, yet in Hinduism there is basis upon true fact rather than faith. One’s worship towards God has no influence upon how they end up. In addition, rather than eternal damnation, there is room for a reflection of forgiveness, chances to improve one’s life until they successfully fulfill good character.

Hinduism led me to Buddhism, the second major religion of eastern Asia. The two parallel one another in doctrines of reincarnation and karma, as well as the notion that the ultimate goal of the religious life is to escape the cycle of death and rebirth.²⁵ Though there are many varying sects of Buddhist belief,²⁶ the unified notion states that what keeps one stuck in this cycle is desire, and once that desire is freed, so will the individual. “Nirvana is the Buddhist term for liberation. Nirvana literally means extinction, and it refers to the extinction of all craving, an extinction that allows one to become liberated”.²⁷ However, Buddhism majorly differs from Hinduism in regards to souls. Rather than eternal souls, Buddhists believe that one’s self is made up habits, memories, sensations, desires and similar such emotions. In order to be released, one must let go of this false sense of self, leaving nothing left to reincarnate.

Although all the other religions I researched are major, widespread, practices, I wanted to include a lesser known eastern religion, Radha Soami Satsang Beas. My maternal grandmother has actively been practicing RSSB for many years, and it was the first religion I was exposed to as a child, reading the book, *The Journey of the Soul*, written and illustrated by Victoria Jones. RSSB differs from the others in the sense that it is less an organized religion, but rather a philosophical organization based on the spiritual teachings of many other religions, focusing on a process of inner development under the guidance of a spiritual teacher. At the heart of the RSSB philosophy, is the belief that there is a spiritual purpose to human life, experiencing the divinity of God who resides in all of us.²⁸ According to *The Journey of the Soul*, it is the RSSB belief that every living thing is a part of God, each containing a soul crafted by God.²⁹ When we die, it is simply our body that is gone, our soul passes onto a new “part” in God’s play of life. “The play of life is like a great circle. The soul actors journey round and round, from body to body, costume to costume, playing different roles, for millions and millions of lifetimes.” Through these lifetimes, the human body is the most important because it is the only one from which a soul can leave forever, and return to God. With the assistance of a Living Master, a spiritual guide who shepherds souls on the path to God, when one really desires to return to the land of God, they will do so, travelling through the stream that flows all the way back to the Lord. In

²³ ("How Different religions view the Afterlife", 2017)

²⁴ ("How Different religions view the Afterlife", 2017)

²⁵ ("How Different religions view the Afterlife", 2017)

²⁶ ("Buddhist Views of the Afterlife | Immortality Project", 2017)

²⁷ ("How Different religions view the Afterlife", 2017)

²⁸ ("Radha Soami Satsang Beas", 2017)

²⁹ (Jones, 2004)

learning more about the belief system of my childhood, I found it interesting that one's time on earth is not a reflection of one's actions, as seen in all the other religions I addressed, but rather simply a cycle that is fated to happen, until one becomes human, and decides they are ready to return to the Lord. It is a much simpler view, there is no punishment or blessing, everyone is inevitably equal in their return to God. Though clearly different in the basis, there are still many similarities to the other religions in practice, so grouping them as one bracket of spirituality is still feasible.

Through my research I was able to dive deeper into religions whose beliefs I had previously only begun to learn about. I began to see similarities and repetitive underlying themes, paralleling each one to the next. It has become evident that as a whole, the basis of religion is often the same, particularly in the belief in the afterlife. As they are relatively similar, categorized together, the question of how these belief systems reflect upon grief prevails. Bereavement is a life experience that everyone must go through, along with the positive and negative implications left with those who remain behind. Religious and spiritual answers are universally applied to the problems presented by bereavement³⁰. However, there is limited research addressing the actual role of religion, and or spirituality in the face of loss, despite the consistent evolution in science and technology, and the clearly prevailing cultural significance of secularity, religion and spirituality.³¹ This is due to the fact that this is not a tangible subject in terms of data. It is very difficult to produce conclusive data that clearly states that religion eases bereavement, as it is often more emotional than physical.

Though there is little data on the relationship between bereavement and religion, there is information on the importance of religion today, illuminating its continuous importance. According to a 2016 study, when asked if they personally believed in God, 89% of the participants stated that yes, they do in fact believe in God. Additionally, 53% of people feel as though religion is *very important*, and 22% stated that it is *fairly important*. Also, in response to the question, "*Do you believe that religion can answer all or most of today's problems, or that religion is largely old-fashioned and out of date?*," 55% stated that *yes, it could answer all or most of today's problems*.³² This highlights how the presence of religion and spirituality over time has been continuously steadfast. It is presumably due to the comfort it provides, particularly in times of high stress, allowing the believer a sense that life is in the hands of a higher power, and providing answers for the existential questions of life and death.³³ Despite this prevailing existence, and cultural influence, research on the subject of the way in which religion influences the lives of its believers has only recently begun to truly unfold.³⁴

Currently, the nearly all of the literature which addresses religious and spiritual influences on one's state of grief and mental state following bereavement must be interpreted with caution because many of the studies are retrospective. However, without stating that any results are concrete, one can look at them objectively, seeing their general outcome. One such study, a prospective cohort study of people about to be bereaved with follow up continuing for 14 months after the death, performed in a Marie Curie centre for specialist palliative care in London, displayed results that mirror the notion that religious habits affect one's period of grief. In this study, "People reporting no spiritual belief had not resolved their grief by 14 months after

³⁰ (Wuthnow et al., 2017)

³¹ (Park & Halifax, 2017)

³² (Gallup, 2017)

³³ ("Spiritual beliefs may affect outcome of bereavement: prospective study", 2017)

³⁴ (Park & Halifax, 2017)

the death. Participants with strong spiritual beliefs resolved their grief progressively over the same period. People with low levels of belief showed little change in the first nine months but thereafter resolved their grief. These differences approached significance in a repeated measures analysis of variance ($F=2.42$, $P=0.058$). Strength of spiritual belief remained an important predictor after the explanatory power of relevant confounding variables was controlled for. At 14 months the difference between the group with no beliefs and the combined low and high belief groups was 7.30 (95% confidence interval 0.86 to 13.73) points on the core bereavement items scale. Adjusting for confounders in the final model reduced this difference to 4.64 (1.04 to 10.32) points³⁵. This data clearly reflects a notion of how religion and spirituality affect bereavement. Within the experiment one is able to predict one's recovery of grief in reflection of their spirituality. However, we are still unable to completely rely upon it, and other studies, due to the subject matter being relative and based upon the unreliable concept of human emotion.

The inevitable mortality of humans is a looming concept that shapes the lives of the living. It is an event that every human experiences, and the unavoidable loss of someone dear to is a key aspect of our existence. Through all of this, I have come to see that, though not exactly verifiably proven, or even provable, there is certainly a relationship between religion and the way in which those involved are affected. Through my own experiences I have seen how spirituality aids or augments the notion of death. Through my research I have found data that is relatively conclusive, showing that spirituality certainly affects one's view of death and bereavement process. I believe that religion is something that humans rely upon to seek comfort in all aspects of their life, and the death of those we love is one of the most difficult occurrences we ever experience, making it only understandable that the belief that one will be in a better place after death provides comfort in their absence.

³⁵ ("Spiritual beliefs may affect outcome of bereavement: prospective study", 2017)

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