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Los Angeles, California

Untitled

Fabric, Acrylic Paint, Paper Mâché

Through my research, I found that I was most interested in the ways religions discuss death. I did a great deal of research, and the Aztec and Jewish tactics were the most meaningful to me.

The Jewish and Aztec beliefs correlate in many ways. However, the Aztecs put a greater emphasis on sculpture and visual depictions of their spirituality.

I most greatly appreciated the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, patron of both bountiful harvest and mourning the dead, a symbol of the duality of nature.. The most popular visualization of the goddess is dated to approximately 1500 BCE. She is depicted as dual in many ways; most controversially, the snake hanging down from her skirt, sitting between her legs, has been interpreted as a phallic symbol: even in her divine femininity, she shows masculine imagery. My snake is an homage to this way of understanding life and death.

The vest top in particular reflects masks dated around 1000 BCE, in particular, the Tlatilco mask referred to as duality mask. Half of the mask is skeletal and without flesh, while the other half is sculpted to emulate a distorted grin. The mask is recognised as representative of connectivity between life and death, and I wanted my vest to show that.

Through this project and the thinking and research that I did for it, I have come to an understanding about death that has made me more comfortable with life.

# Death: What Culture Decides



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Death is an inescapable, unknowable fact of life. It is incomprehensible and terrifying. Enough so that the human brain comes up with methods of rationalization. Cultures throughout time and all over the world have come to unique conclusions on how to cope with death as a part of life. However, as I researched these practices, I noted that there are three main views of death that have informed any society's treatment of their dead. The first rationalization is that death is a means of judgement: if you have been a good and moral person as defined by a set of beliefs, then you will be rewarded, or otherwise you will be condemned. The second rationalization of death is the view that it is an inevitable end to life, unchangeable and steadfast, but the most important thing is to keep your eyes on the living and move forward on the road of life. The third rationalization views death as a veil through which any living thing, from a perennial plant to humanity, must cycle through to be born again in some way, whether that be reincarnation or simply returning energy to the universe so that it may be used again. Why are these three views so prominent, and how do they affect the way we practice religion and understand life- before and after death?

## **I. Death as Judgement**

The rationalization of death as a judgement point most commonly appears in Christianity and offshoots of it, as well as in Islam. This rationalization is an easy one to understand and accept, and it allows authority figures to set a standard of behavior which any person must abide by to earn eternal bliss and avoid damnation. It is so common, in fact, that according to a 2014 Pew Research Center Survey, 72% of Americans believe in heaven, or, as defined by the survey, a place "where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded." Interestingly, a similar survey from 2007 shows that belief in a heaven has dropped by two percent. The highest belief in heaven

(95%) was found among Mormons, members of what is widely considered one of the most isolating and strict denominations of Christianity. This correlation does beg the question of whether this belief system is too dependent on the influence of authority, which I will address shortly.

Shared by many religions, this belief manifests itself quite similarly in post-death rituals. In Christian practices, the body is cleaned and prepared for burial in a casket. Traditionally, a wake would occur before the funeral, at which (depending on the family's preference and the state of the body), mourners may be able to see the deceased in order to allow the acknowledgement of death. However, wakes have become more commonly held after the funeral.

Although different denominations may structure funerals differently or perform unique rituals, traditional Christian funerals have the same rites involved. The priest enters first, followed by the pallbearers with the coffin, and finally the mourners. Hymns are sung and prayers recited in order to comfort the griever. The Priest will give a sermon, as well as read from the Bible. Usually, this includes portions of the Old and New Testaments, including the Gospels. Communion will take place, and finally everyone exits in the same order that they entered, heading to the graveyard for burial. This formal practice makes death a difficult taboo, impossible to escape but isolating and difficult to talk about.

When asked about Christian or Catholic teachings on death, ex-Catholic member of the Oxbow Community Sabine Saladrigas described Hell vividly, while expressing that Heaven was much more abstract. Hell was a scare tactic, particularly for people who acknowledged their queer identities young. She described feeling uncomfortable at a funeral, at which there was no way to comfort the grieving family. Rather, she and other mourners were expected to listen to the words of a priest who did not know the person they had lost, and used their death to preach Christian

ideals. When asked about connection versus isolation in this practice, Sabine explained that there was pressure to get over the loss quickly, and that she was even blamed for her feelings by people associated with the Church. All of these things, as well as other personal factors, led her to leave the Church.

Now that we are aware of what it is like to experience loss as a member of a Church, let's explore the question from before: does the structure of religion that depends so much on authority inherently allow and even encourage abuse of power? Any system with such a concentration of power creates the possibility of the abuse of that power. There has been so much abuse of power in the history of Christianity. The thousands of cases of child abuse and molestation by priests demonstrate this most clearly. In a group conditioned to accept the teachings of one (usually male) leader, too much is let slide in order to avoid the internal doubt of this conditioning. Comparisons have even been drawn between conditioning in religions and Stockholm Syndrome. Whether members of a religion join to find a community or to find reprieve from their monotonous jobs, they may begin to desperately cling to the assumption of inherent benevolence and altruism of leaders within the Church. Although the act of joining an organized religion is clearly quite different from being kidnapped and held against your will, the common thread of fear may be found in both situations. Those who are seeking out religion may fear their own afterlife or the afterlives of their loved ones. Priests and Church leaders have every opportunity to take advantage of this fear and desperation.

In the past few years, there have even been calls to abolish Priesthood and put the power of the Catholic church back into the hands of the worshippers. This abuse of power has become such an issue that even former priest James Carroll advocates for the abolition of priesthood, often referred to as anti-clericalism. He argues that the Catholic belief that priesthood changes the nature

and being of a person and puts them in a position hardly below a cult leader, and that rather than be complicit in the manipulation or even walk away from the church entirely, worshippers must push the Catholic church towards change and betterment, and whether that happens now or in a hundred years, all of society will be better for it (Carroll).

## **II. Death as a Part of Life**

The second understanding of death as an unchanging part of life is quite common as well. This belief states that death is final and does not bring reincarnation or any tangible afterlife. However, there are still many rituals associated with such a belief, whether it be appeasing the dead so that they maintain this barrier between the dead and the living, or taking care of the grieving family. The belief is shared by many cultures. The Navajo Tribe teaches that Coyote the Trickster divined “the fate of people is to die,” and now that he has closed the gate to reincarnation, that means a permanent death which was accepted as final. Similarly, Jewish teachings also acknowledge that death is a permanent and inevitable fact; there is meaning and understanding to gain from it which brings greater knowledge to the survivors of the dead.

In Navajo Rituals, a similar view presents as a four-day mourning ritual, wherein gifts and fine clothes, as well as a horse sacrifice, are placed with the deceased in their unmarked grave — the grave is unmarked so that mourners will not waste away at the site of a burial, consumed by loss. Anyone who has seen or come into contact with the body must self-isolate so as not to bring death upon their families; afterwards, elders of the tribe encourage mourners to end their grieving and look forward to life and remember fondly those they have lost.

Jewish practices have a very similar message. First and foremost, it is a great Mitzvah (an act of kindness) to sit and keep the dying company. In fact, a dying person must not be left alone

on their deathbed. Once the person is deceased, they are to be cleaned and buried, traditionally in a simple wooden coffin in a Jewish cemetery. There is a mourning period of three to seven days depending on the type of synagogue, during which traditional Jews cover all mirrors and sit in the mornings on Shiva benches. Friends and family of mourners will often visit those sitting Shiva, to deliver food, rather than flowers as Christians do. After this mourning period, it is most commonly understood that while it is still acceptable to feel the loss, moving on is important and the community comes together to help those affected by the loss. Every year on the anniversary of the death, referred to as the *yahrzeit*, family returns to the grave and lights a *yahrzeit* candle in honor of the beloved community member who has passed.

In contrast to Sabine's description of Christian funeral and mourning practices, Jewish Napa resident and member of the Oxbow community, Leah Gottfried described the support that she got from the Jewish community after her grandfather's passing. She said: "It depends on the kind of Jew. Half of my family didn't want to talk about death, but my side practices Judaism [In a more spiritual way] through natural resources." She goes on to describe the understanding of death as a beautiful, peaceful passing, rather than a life being taken away. The rituals that her family performed as Jews, such as the singing over the dead and each person putting a bit of dirt on top of the casket, brought closure, and the community formed by Judaism brought food and support. Even the Rabbi and Cantor, important figures in the Jewish community, personally offered their support and compassion.

In interviewing Rabbi Leder, Head Rabbi at the Los Angeles Wilshire Boulevard Temple, many of these ideas held true. He elaborated even more deeply than the articles that I read on Jewish mourning rituals and maintained a very interesting perspective. He explained that most Jewish laws of mourning are there not to appease the dead, but to protect the hearts of those

experiencing the loss. There is a year-long period after the death of a loved one, *Shneim Asar Chodesh*, that does not restrict the mourner, but rather provides them an ability to restrict themselves. They have what is basically a free pass to avoid social gatherings at which they would feel isolated from the crowd in their state of mourning.

Additionally, he spoke in depth about the community that Judaism creates and the support that he has both given, as a Rabbi, and received, as a son grieving the loss of his father. “The prisoner cannot free himself,” he said, and mourners cannot comfort themselves. “Community makes our suffering more bearable.”

### **III. Death as Cyclical**

The final understanding I have found through my research is most prominent in Aztec and other indigenous beliefs. This is the belief that death is just a part of a cycle of life, through which any living thing must pass to be reborn. Death is just continuation into another stage of lived experience. “[T]ime was a never-ending succession of cycles separated from one another by death and the destruction of the world, the order of which could only be restored through sacrifice” (Kelly 517). Aztec remains have been found from as early as 1500 BCE where the skeletons are posed in the fetal position to represent rebirth, and between 200 and 700 years later, there are remains posed near figurines of female figures. These figurines are encrusted with amulets in locations that accentuate their femininity, such as the breasts, hips, and navel, and are often split down the middle in color, with one side being red and the other being grey. Some are split in other ways, such as being two-headed. These tokens symbolize duality and rebirth through their coloration and exaggeration of features associated with fertility. Another thing found with bodies was a mask dated at 1500-200 BCE. Half of the mask is a human face, lifelike and flesh-covered,



while the other half is skeletal, showing the close-knit relationship between life and death(Kelly 519).

The recurring theme in Aztec burials and death rituals is duality and the number two, which corresponds to the Aztec Goddess Coatlicue (Koh-at-li-kway), who is often depicted as a woman with two snake heads, wearing a skirt made of snakes. Coatlicue is a goddess of duality: she represents earth and bountiful harvest as well as death and mourning (Kelly 522). One well-known statue adds to this duality by showing a snake hanging down between her legs, often interpreted as a phallic symbol; it serves as a reminder of the masculine even within the feminine. Her son, Huitzilopochtli (Weet-see-luh-powch-tuh-lee), is the god of the sun, and can be represented both by the hummingbird and the eagle. Even he, in being represented by such different birds, shows the connections and duplexity of nature. In this connectedness to duality and the understanding of life cycles, the Aztecs showed that they saw the cyclical nature of life and death, and are more in tune with it than most cultures, grounding them deeply and connecting them to their inner selves and each other.

According to a survey by the Office for National Statistics in the United Kingdom, after adjustments for location, sex, and age, Hindus were the second most satisfied overall with their mental health, after Sikhs. The fascinating fact is that both of the two top religions in mental health in the United Kingdom believe in reincarnation. From this statistic one might conclude that people who participate in religions that believe in reincarnation and self-betterment live more fulfilled lives.

To return to the three-view system, it is clear through these examples of different cultures' interpretations of death that the way we see death and practice rituals surrounding it has a large effect on our world view. Death is such an inherently upsetting part of life that the way we

rationalize it within our cultures deeply affects the way we live. In Chapman University's 2020-2021 survey of American Fears, 58.5% of responders said that they are either "Afraid" or "Very Afraid" of loved ones dying, and fear is a major influence on human behavior. The ways we rationalize and soothe those fears change the way we view the world. When the largest authority on death and the afterlife comes from Christianity and other authoritarian entities, death becomes a threat, and a means to force conformity. When the instruction on death is to find and heal the community, the living are able to seek comfort in each other and acts of service. Finally, when death is accepted as a natural part of life, mourners have the most control over the way they process death, and can find deep connections to both themselves and the people and environment around them. Death is inescapable and the way we either fruitlessly run from it or accept it thoughtfully builds a great part of our lives.

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