



The Afterlife

What happens after we die?

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From burial sites dating back to the Neanderthals and Cro-Magnon times we know that even early humans cared about death and dying. Instead of just leaving the body behind to decay or be scavenged by animals, we started burying our relatives in marked graves with flower petals, jewelry, pottery and food, sometimes in fetal positions or facing the direction of the rising sun, even before there is evidence of organized culture. Uncovering what our pre-literate ancestors believed about a possible afterlife is somewhat more difficult. But by the time we learned how to write it appears that the answer to the question, *What happens after we die*, had long before been addressed.

Perhaps the best known or most studied cultural practices related to belief in an afterlife are those of the ancient Egyptians. The early Egyptians believed that survival in the afterlife depended on the preservation of the physical body. Consequently, an entire industry was developed around the practice of mummification and many people labored for an entire lifetime to assure that at least some people experienced a pleasant life in the next. People like Nefertiti, and Tutankhamun have achieved a sort of lasting immortality, although perhaps not the one for which they had hoped.

What happens after we die? Responses vary across the cultures of the world, however there are some

similarities. Many cultures teach that there are two distinct destinations for people; one being a place of reward for the good and a separate place of punishment for the bad. Many cultures locate the next world

underground and arriving there often involved a perilous journey. The degree of difficulty or the distance traveled might also explain why we can not go there to visit and why the dead cannot return. The Greeks imagined that the deceased would have to cross the river Styx to an underground land known as *Hades*. They buried a coin with their dead to pay for the river crossing. The Greeks imagined the underworld as both a place of reward for the good and punishment for the bad. Across the globe, the Maoris of New Zealand also believed the dead had to cross a river as part of a perilous journey in order to reach the land of the ancestors. Once there, they would be greeted with a celebration. They believed the spirits of the dead could travel back and forth between the two worlds for a period of time, but once they had eaten of the food of the dead, the spirit would be bound to the land of the dead forever. The Native American Paiute's of the desert SouthWest tell the story of how the Grand Canyon was formed as a passageway to the underworld. The god, Tavwaots, having observed that one of their great chiefs was unconsolable after the death of his wife, offered to create a passage between this world and the next so that the chief could see how happy she was in the next life. Upon their return, Tavwaots made the chief swear not to tell anyone else how to get there and subsequently rolled a raging river through the gorge that would engulf anyone who attempted to enter through it.

Some cultures described more than two destinations for the dead. The Nordic belief system proposed that heaven, *Valhalla*, is the abode of brave warriors who die in battle. *Hel* is the abode of those who have neither excelled at being good or bad and *Niflhel* is the destination of suffering for those who have done vile things. The Aztecs believed that the dead would abide in one of four different locations. Warriors, and sacrificial victims would travel to the Eastern paradise and become followers of the Sun. Women who died in childbirth became hummingbirds and travel West. People who died by drowning and fever would travel to the Southern paradise and spend eternity in a luscious tropical garden, free of sorrow. The majority of the population however, would travel to the Northern land which required a four year journey through nine subterranean realms. They would face all sorts of stormy weather and obstacles before they could reach their final destination. The Aztec's had a custom of sacrificing the person's dog so that it could travel with them on their journey through the underworld.

Still other cultures proposed that the next life is not under the earth but above it, out amongst the stars. Heaven, is regarded by many religions as being the abode of the gods or God who dwells above the dome of the sky.

Humans continue to ask the question, "what happens after we die?" As our world view changes from one time period to another our understanding of an afterlife also changes. Both religion and science have attempted to answer the question in various ways.

Judaism differs from the other two major monotheistic religions on the issue of an afterlife. In Judaism, rather than speculating on what happens to a person after death, the focus is on this world and living according to God's laws. The major Hebrew religious texts, the Torah and the Talmud, say very little about it, so consequently there is a diversity of opinions about what, if anything, happens after death. Early Biblical themes include the idea that the dead

join their ancestors but the wicked are "cut off" from their people. Another recurring biblical image of a sort of afterlife is called *Sheol*, a place of shadows located in low places. Some of the Rabbis suggest that the soul may survive death although not necessarily consciously. Later biblical themes suggest a physical resurrection of the body. When the Messiah arrives and restores Israel, those who sleep in the dust will arise to everlasting life while the unjust will suffer eternal punishment. Reform Judaism rejects the idea of the resurrection of the body. Today, there remains a broad range of views in Judaism about *Gan Eden*, Heaven and *Olam Haba*, the world to come. Heaven may be a place of physical rewards for the just or it may not be a place of corporeal or material substance at all, but rather a spiritual existence where the righteous attain a realization of the truth that is not possible for the those confined by a bodily existence.

Christianity draws from it's roots in Judaism. Beyond a general understanding of Heaven and hell, Christian beliefs about an afterlife are as diverse as there are Christian denominations. Historically, Heaven is viewed as being located above, and hell below the earth but few take this perspective literally today. Conservative Protestant Christians believe that hell is the destination for most people. Only those who have repented of their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior will share in the reward of Heaven. The Roman Catholic belief system maintains that those who die in a state of mortal sin are destined to go to hell, while those who die in a state of grace will go to Heaven. However, many souls must pass through an intermediate "place," Purgatory, where they must be cleansed and atone for their actions before proceeding on to Heaven. "Time" in Purgatory can be mitigated by the prayers and actions of those here on Earth. Although many Catholics imagine Heaven in physical terms, the official church teaching is that Heaven is not a physical place, but rather a state of being. Although the Catholic church teaches that hell exists, it do not take a position as to if there is anyone there. More liberal Christians may

argue that even non-Christians can attain Heaven. They believe that a loving God's mercy outweighs any human sense of justice, making Heaven accessible to anyone who strives to live according to their own belief system. Other Christocentric groups such as the Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses have their own unique understanding of what Heaven looks like and who can enter God's eternal Kingdom. Mormons believe that there are three Celestial Kingdoms, the highest is reserved exclusively for Mormon couples. Only the *Sons of Perdition*, apostates, and the most serious sinners will suffer eternal punishment in hell. The Seventh Day Adventists' believe hell is a place where the souls of sinners are burned up and annihilated. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that most people will simply cease to exist after death. They believe that the "anointed class," totaling 135,400, have mostly all died and are the only ones who will attain Heaven. Another 8,600 will also eventually spend eternity with God after the battle of Armageddon.

Muslims share a belief in one God, (Allah) and believe that Mohamed was his prophet. The Muslim holy book, the Koran, describes Heaven in worldly terms, filled with physical delights and hell as a place of torments. On the last day every person will be judged according to their behavior and their belief in Islam. Infidels will fall off the bridge, al-Aaraf, into hell while the good will safely cross over to Heaven.

The other major world religions conceive of a totally different kind of afterlife. Hinduism supports the concept of reincarnation. Most Hindus believe that they have many incarnations ahead of them. However, the final goal is to escape from an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Some Hindus believe that the soul will eventually rest in the arms of a personal deity; others believe the individual personality will dissolve into the great abyss of *Brahman* or Ultimate Reality.

Similarly, the Sikhs religion also supports the idea of reincarnation. They believe the soul belongs to the spiritual universe which originates in God and the amount of good done in life will store up blessings which allows for unity with God. Depending on your deeds in this life, you can move up or down between four classes. A soul may need to live many lives before achieving this goal. Once achieved, the soul can stay with God or return to serve other people.

Buddhists also believe in the basic Hindu doctrine that a series of rebirths take place. The type of rebirth will be dependent on the way a person lived their life. A good and generous person may be reborn to one of many heavenly realms or as a human. A bad person can expect to be reborn in a hell realm, as a ghost or as an animal. What keeps humans bound to this seemingly endless cycle of

rebirths is not so much sin as it is desire or attachments. The goal of Buddhism is to experience *Nirvana*, which literally means "extinction." The Buddha taught that humans do not have an eternal soul, instead we are a bundle of habits, memories desires which delude us into thinking that we are a stable entity. This bundle stays together even through different incarnations. Suffering is the result of grasping, holding on. The goal of enlightenment is to dissolve this bundle, thereby experience release from suffering.

Scientists have also tried to answer the question, what happens after we die? But since science is based on empirical evidence and according to them there is no verifiable evidence of an afterlife, most scientists conclude that it does not exist. According to one study published in 1999 by *Scientific America*, while 90% of the general population believes in an afterlife, only 10% of those who are considered "eminent" scientists profess belief in a personal God or an afterlife. This does not mean that there have been no attempts by science to prove or disprove some form of continued existence. In 1907 Dr. Duncan Mac Dugall did an experiment where he weighed tuberculosis patients at the time of death. He concluded that the soul weighs 21 grams. Subsequent attempts to duplicate his research were mixed. Many critics claimed experimenter bias and questioned

his methodology. Most people today, skeptics and believers alike, would argue that by definition the soul is spirit or energy, not matter, and therefore would not have mass or weight.

Interestingly, science has furthered the debate in perhaps an unintended way. With advances in medicine, doctors have been able to bring an increasing number of people back to life after they have been pronounced clinically dead. Resuscitated patients report phenomena such as; an awareness of being dead and a sense of well being or peace, levitation, seeing and conversing with deceased loved ones, and traveling through a tunnel toward a bright light. The field of *Near Death Experience*, has emerged to study these experiences. Those who believe in an afterlife see these stories as proof, but skeptics argue for a neurological base for the phenomena. At the moment, the possibility of downloading our memories into a mainframe computer might fall into the category of science fiction, but who is to say what may be possible in the future?

There are still other ways to describe what happens after we die, some say our essence is energy and that after death that energy is merely transformed after we die. New Age religious perspectives on the subject appear to offer a blend of various belief systems and present new concepts as well. Our consciousness may return to some

greater cosmic consciousness, or be transferred to another plane of existence. Atheists, Agnostics and Humanists generally believe that there is no afterlife. They would maintain that any discussion about an afterlife is misdirected and steals energy from fixing the problems of this life.

While there is no consensus on what happens after we die, it is possible that we all can agree on what might be called a *symbolic existence* after death. Some people will pass on their genetic material to future generations. We also continue to live on in the memories of those who are touched by our lives. As long as someone remembers us, we do not die. For most people this might last only a generation or two, but for the famous or infamous, they may achieve some kind of immortality. One could also say that as long as there is a record of our existence, a birth certificate, marriage license, tax record, photograph or computer file, we will all achieve some degree of immortality as well.

What happens after we die?

Alan Wolfelt, PhD., one of the leaders in the field of death education says that, "Grief is fundamentally an existential question." What he means is that the experience of loss invites us to explore our beliefs about this life and the possibility of an afterlife. It forces us to ask, "Do I really believe what I thought I did?" For members in a religious group, the answers are

readily available. These answers may be a source of great comfort and offer the promise of a joy-filled reunion. Other members may experience some anxiety as they reevaluate what they now believe in light of the traumatic event. For those who do not belong to any faith group or have not felt the need to ask these types of questions before in any substantial way, they might expect some anxiety as they begin to look for answers. However, it should be understood that **to question, doubt, or wonder about what happens after we die, is common to the experience of loss.**

Instead of being seen as a bad thing, it should be viewed as an opportunity to move to a deeper level of understanding. Grief takes time; much more time than we normally think it takes. Grief is also more complex than simply the sad feelings we feel following a death. It involves all of the emotions, **thoughts**, and physical sensations that we associate with death and dying. Most people need to move through the more

distressing emotional reactions before they are able to explore these deeper questions. It may even take you a lifetime to sort out what you believe regarding what happens after we die; perhaps never knowing exactly until you experience it for yourself.