

Life and Death Across Religions: A Bio-Psycho-Social Perspective

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Introduction

Social scientists recognize that religion exists as an organized and integrated set of beliefs, behaviours, and norms centred on basic social needs and values. Moreover, religion is a culture universally found in all social groups. For instance, in every culture, funeral rites are practiced in some way, although these customs vary between cultures and within religious affiliations. Despite differences, there are common elements in a ceremony marking a person's death, such as announcement of the death, care of the deceased, disposition, and ceremony or ritual. These universals, and the differences in how societies and individuals experience religion, provide rich material for research.

Concept of death across different religions

For Christians whose lives are guided by the Bible, the reality of death is acknowledged as part of the current human condition, affected by sin. Although eternal life is a gift that is granted to all who accept salvation through Jesus Christ, faithful Christians await the second coming of Jesus for complete realization of their immortality. While waiting for Jesus to come again, Christians may be called upon to care for the dying and to face personally their own death.

Among Muslims, when death approaches, close family and friends try to support and comfort the dying person through supplication as well as remembrance of Allah and His will. The attendance is to help the dying person to iterate his commitment to unity of God. The family of the dead has a responsibility to fulfil any debts he had as soon as possible. They have the commitment to maintain contacts and courteous relationships with close relatives and close friends. They frequently pray and supplicate for him. Charity, fasting, prayers, and pilgrimage are often performed on behalf of the dead. Visiting the graves is recommended for the living to remember death and the Day of Judgment.

Hinduism believes in the rebirth and reincarnation of souls. Death is therefore not a great calamity, not an end of all, but a natural process in the existence of soul as a separate entity, by which it reassembles its resources, adjusts its course and returns again to the earth to continue its journey. In Hinduism death is a temporary cessation of physical activity, a necessary means of recycling the resources and energy and an opportunity for the soul to review its programs and policies. When a person dies, his soul along with some residual consciousness leaves the body through an opening in the head and goes to another world and returns again after spending some time there.

The Bhagavad Gita describes two paths along which souls travel after death. One is the path of the sun, also known as the bright path and the other is the path of the moon, also known as the dark path. What happens to a soul after the death of a mortal being on earth depends upon many factors, some of which are, his previous deeds, his state of mind at the time of death, the time his death, the activities of his children, that is whether they performed the funeral rites in the prescribed manner and satisfied the scriptural injunctions. Hinduism believes in the existence of not one hell and one heaven but in the existence of many sun filled worlds and many dark and demonic worlds. *Vaikunth* is the world of Vishnu, *Kailash* is the world of Siva and *Brahmalok* is the world of Brahman. *Indralok* is the standard heaven to which those who please the gods through their activities upon the earth go. The standard hell is *Yamalok*, which is also ruled by a god called Lord Yama, who is also the ruler of the southern quarter. In the ultimate sense, the purpose of these worlds is neither to punish nor reward the souls, but to remind them of the true purpose of their existence.

Is there life after death?

Most of the world's religions believe in some sort of life after death. These fall into four broad categories.

- **Reincarnation:** With its Hindu roots, reincarnation is the cycle of a person, after dying, returning as just about anything cow, crow, or cockroach or as another person. The Western version has rewritten the concept into a kinder, gentler form, in which people only come back as people.

- **Universalism:** In modern culture, many people assume they will go to heaven after they die. One of the evidences cited for universalism is the peaceful “near-death experience” that some describe. Most of these episodes involve a person whose heart stops for several minutes, then is restarted. Following recovery, the person usually describes having seen a tunnel with a light at the end.
- **Divinity:** Mormonism teaches that people can become gods after they die. Despite historical evidence which argues strongly against its authenticity, Mormonism retains millions of followers today. They have no evidence whatsoever to support their belief in people becoming gods.
- **Judgement:** The thought of standing for judgment can be delightful or frightful, depending on the place towards which a person seems to be heading, because of the permanence associated with the outcome. As taught by Christianity, it is resulting in heaven and hell as eternal dwelling place, that is,. Jesus said that he came from heaven and would return to heaven. He said that those who believe in him and follow him would spend eternity in heaven, while those who donot will be tormented forever in hell.

Death - Different Perspectives

Medical Terms

In plain and simple medical terms, death is the end of all the biological functions of a living organism. It could be either the breakdown of the functions of the heart, the brain or both. This could be either in natural circumstances or man-made circumstances - wars, murders, capital punishment and so on.

Religious and Spiritual Interpretation

On a very general note, there are views that death is actually the death of the body and not of the soul. The body becomes a part of this universe and it returns to the original elements of which we are made. The Bhagvad Gita, the holy scripture of the Hindus, also proposes the same thing. Death is the ultimate end.

According to The Bible, death is a result of sins, rather the wages of sins is death. It believes that physical death is the separation of the soul from the body and spiritual

death means that the soul is separated from the almighty. Similarly, there are numerous other interpretations and connotations attached to death.

Concept of Afterlife

When one talks of afterlife, there are basically three major viewpoints from where the concept of afterlife or life after death, has been derived. They are Religion, Esotericism and Metaphysics. To add to the popular notion of afterlife, after someone dies, he or she is believed to go on a particular plane of existence, decided by god, based on his or her deeds during their lifetime. Those who are lucky enough, achieve 'Moksha' or freedom from this cycle of life and death, as believed by the Hindu religion. Islam's concept of afterlife is similar to some extent, to that of The Bible and Christianity, that life after death and where the person goes after death, depends upon his or her sins. This comes close to the Hindu religion's concept of 'Karma', that the way you lead your life and deeds you do in your life have an impact on your afterlife.

One of the empirical views of life after death is the concept of reincarnation. It is a major aspect of Hindu religion's description of afterlife, especially in the Upanishads. Reincarnation too, has two meanings. One is the preservation of the 'essence' of that being or being born in some other form.

Then, there are atheists who believe that there is no life after death. On the other hand, in many religions, and as scripted in the Bhagwad Gita, the soul is believed to be immortal. The spirit lingers, as believed in Zoroastrianism. Egyptians on the other hand, were amongst the first to believe in life after death and so is the practice of mummification and keeping the Book of Dead, food, jewellery and curses for the body.

Contemporary Perspective of Afterlife

Most psychologists are known to have voiced their opinions regarding the issue of soul and rebirth. Parapsychology and a few other branches have tried to unravel the secrets of this mystical process and related paranormal phenomena, but there have been no concrete conclusions.

In the modern era, what can be related most to, rather than the soul and rebirth, are the near death experiences and stories narrated by people who have been in such experiences i.e. from the occurrence of an accident, till the person is taken to the hospital and the vitals were taken care of, the experience the person felt in those few minutes. That could probably explain what a near death experience is. Then, in relation to this, the issue of what is an out-of-body experience also comes to the fore i.e. a human heart which has stopped beating for a few seconds during a surgery or any medical condition and then after a shock treatment, it starts beating again. A great majority of Americans believe that there is some sort of afterlife, or a “continued existence” after death. Studies show that people hesitate to name others they believe are bound for hell, even “extremely heinous historical figures.” Many Americans believe that their spirits will continue into the afterlife instead of their physical bodies.

Forms of Immortality:

Robert Lifton has identified five forms of Immortality namely:

- Biological immortality – Living on through ones offspring; contributions
- Theological immortality – Spiritual, religious continuation of existence
- Creative immortality – Living on through “works of achievement”
- Nature immortality – Living on because of being intertwined with nature
- Experiential transcendence – Mystical immortality

Theological immortality is the most common understanding of afterlife among traditionally religious people in America. This mode was also found to counter a fear of death and the loss of control after death, unlike the other forms. Age does not seem to be a predictor of belief in an afterlife, although studies amongst religious believers show that those between the ages of 30 and 69 are more prone to believe in an afterlife.

Demographic information such as gender, education, and socio-economic status seems to correlate with belief in the afterlife. Women are more likely to agree to the existence of heaven and hell than men, which may be affirmation of the fact that women tend to be generally more religious than men. There is a drop-off of believers among those with some college experience, and especially among those with four

or more years of college experience. This trend continues in the socio-economic demographic, with lower levels of believers in the afterlife among the upper class, with highest levels in the working and lower class.

Religion and Anxiety about Death

Some researchers believe that belief in an afterlife should correlate with anxiety about death. While most data have shown inconclusive results regarding this matter, a study by Osarchuk and Tatz shows that making believers aware of the imminent threat of death increases their faith in the existence of an afterlife. Similarly, many people may be inclined to alter their behaviour based on the prospect of life after death.

Near-Death Experiences

15% of Americans allege to have experienced a so-called near-death experience (NDEs), while this number rises to 23% among those with religious identification. This also seems to correlate with belief in other “extraordinary phenomena”. Many believe cultural influence to play a significant role in the amount of NDE experiences in a certain area.

Contact with the Dead

Another way to assess a belief in an afterlife is the prevalence of reported contact with the deceased, or as some have called it, “idonecrophany.” Research varies on the issue, and the percentage of those with a recent death of a loved one who claim to have had contact with that person ranges from 40% to 90% and corresponds highly with cultural and demographic differences. Still, it is difficult to separate “obsessive thinking” from actual belief of contact with the loved one. Almost all widows report feeling their late husbands’ presence, and one study shows 64% continue to think about their husbands a great deal a year after death. A rift appears in a study that shows that while 40% of those interviewed claim to have contacted the dead, only 24% believe that such contact is even possible. Moreover, religious

affiliation does not seem to play a role in whether someone is more or less likely to have a contact experience.

Coping and Fear of Death

Does having a religion reduce one's fear of death and dying? Research problems such as confounding measures and weak experimental designs challenge the empirical study of this question. However, large multi-study surveys point towards the probability that religious commitment does in fact play a role in mollifying a fear of death. Intrinsic religious observers tend to have less anxiety about death than extrinsic observers; that is, those who are more internally religious have less anxiety about death, and those who practice religion for the social or economic benefits have more fear of death. Research consistently shows that those who are intrinsically religious report more successful coping habits than nonreligious or extrinsically religious individuals. However, religion's role in coping from the death of a loved one may be an indirect one. Some psychologists claim that instead of directly positively effecting an individual's mental understanding or rationalization of the death of a loved one, religion works to strengthen social bonds in times of need, which in turn work towards facilitating the individual's coping ability. Still, others believe that coping success comes from religion's offering of a promise of an afterlife, where people can be reunited with ones they have lost. Religion can also offer meaning to mourners by suggesting death serves a greater purpose or even because it is the result of punishment.

Religion and Death in the Elderly

Many studies have shown that religious people over the age of 65 have less anxiety and concern about death. In those that are both religious and disengaging later in life, religion may replace lost contacts or activities. Whether religion actually plays a role in longevity is a controversial topic. One study found the 1-year survival rates of 1,300 octogenarians to be unrelated to religion. Follow up studies confirm this finding. However, other researchers claim that chronically ill patients who were religious lived longer. Since then, others have pointed out that those who died sooner also were in poorer health, a factor that may account for their counterparts' report of religiosity. The stress of impending death can bear down on the elderly. For those who are religious, the traditional religious coping mechanisms come to play a major role in their everyday

lives. Prayer is the most popular of these mechanisms. Altogether, researchers across the board admit that the happiest of the elderly are also the most religious. Few psychologists doubt the power of religious faith later in life.

Beliefs about death and dying

Beliefs about death and dying vary greatly up a person's culture, religion, social awareness, and transpersonal belief systems. Many people in western society feel threatened by the awareness of death and often cling to cultural values (without deeply investigating the values) in an effort to find an authentic meaning and significance to their eventual death and the importance of their life (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Death used to occur in a person's home or a close family member's house but, due to the advances in medicine and life sustaining procedures that can only be managed in a hospital, most deaths now occur in an unfamiliar and sterile environment (Coppola, 2002). Psychologically this can result in feeling an even greater anxiety or threat surrounding death for the terminally ill patient rather than presenting an environment that facilitates a transpersonal investigation about the meaning of death and a spiritual awareness of the transformation to a different state of being. Sadly, this is not available or discussed in the hospital environment even with the inclusion of chaplains (Coppola, 2002).

Although many people who followed classic psychologists such as Freud had, dismissed the incorporation of death into psychological research (although acknowledging it in biological research), Grof (2000, p. 220) has been able to demonstrate an alternative way to understand and investigate the experience of death and dying by researching traditional cultures. Grof (2000, p. 225) noted that traditional cultures have books of the dead, rites of passage (that may or may not include Western traditions such as applying make-up to the deceased), shamanic methods, spiritual practices, and stories surrounding mysteries of death and rebirth. Grof (2000, p. 228) found that many traditional cultures practice and experiment with holotropic states so that when they find themselves experiencing death they are better prepared to manage the different realms and inner territories of the psyche. The ignorance, educational suppression, and misinterpretation of holotropic states by Western cultures is considered to be one of the greatest failures of Western society with regard to preparing individuals for the experience of death (Grof, 2000, p. 229).

However, there are many reports from people in Western cultures who state they have had spiritual emergencies such as near death experiences. These individuals report that they see their deceased relatives, spirits, alternate universes, or supernatural beings; however, these experiences are often dismissed by the biomedical community as synapses firing irregularly or the presence of hospital lights (Grof, 2000, p. 165). Western cultures have systematically removed the rituals that were prevalent in what was considered to be more primitive societies such as specific rites of mourning, the participation in the transfer from the land of the living to the land of the dead, or food and clothing rituals that represent the loss of the loved one but also represent the cycle of death and rebirth (O’Gorman, 1998). However, holistic psychology has brought back interest in the incorporation of death and dying concepts, education, and rituals to modern health and healing perspectives, often with the incorporation of traditional cultures into current religious and health practices (O’Gorman, 1998).

Conclusion

There are numerous perspectives and interpretations of death and afterlife. These perspectives and interpretations develop in the individual based upon the influences of one’s culture and social structure. This paper aimed at providing an insight into the biological, philosophical, psychological, socio-cultural and religious perspectives that affect an individual’s view of their own death and the death of others. The path that eventually one chooses to interpret the final stage of life and existence after death and to cope with one’s mortality, is her or his own path.

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