

## Concept of Death; Religio-Philosophical Perspective

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### INTRODUCTION

Death is the ultimate critical event. Death: the mystery upon which philosophers have pondered and devised entire systems of approaching life. Death: the impetus for the value frameworks in the world's many religions. Death: the challenge to scientists in a wide range of disciplines.

Once, death was very much a part of most people's daily lives. They expected some of their children to die in infancy or childhood. They saw family and friends succumb to an array of fatal illness. People feared death and yet they accepted its presence, hovering in the corners of their lives.

Recently, people have developed a healthier attitude toward death – an attitude that seeks to understand it, to explore the emotional, the moral, and the practical issues surrounding it and to try to make this inevitable outcome of a person's life as positive as possible. Thanatology – the study of death and dying, is arousing a great deal of interest as people recognize the importance of integrating death into life. Most of us, however, want to learn about death and dying, for the more obvious reason that we have been so ignorant of the death experience. It has been kept hidden from our view. Our image of death has been blurred up euphemistic language. Now, educators have realized the significance of death and dying. The adage "What you don't know won't hurt you" is a fallacy where death is concerned. Avoiding the thought of death does not remove us from its touch.

**Religions and Death:** Religions have made a great contribution in the preparation of a moral basis for human life and at the same time religion is among the most profound forms of human activity. Different religions of the world have different perceptions about death. I shall analyze seriatim:

'Hindu' is a term used originally by others to identify natives of the subcontinent. For religion the Sanskrit word Dharma has been used<sup>1</sup>. In English, it broadly means principles which sustain human life. Therefore, while beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and dogmas are a part of Hinduism, its main emphasis is on righteous living. One of the distinguishing features of Hinduism is the belief in the transmigration of souls; that is, the passing at death of the soul from

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one body or being to another. In the Bhagavad – Gita Krishna tells Arjuna<sup>2</sup>.

For death is a certainly for him who has been born, and birth is a certainly for him who has died. Therefore, for what is unavoidable thou should not grieve.

According to the theory of Karma, each person, animal or god, is a self (atman) which has existed without a beginning. This self is the seat of experiences and the agent of actions. Any action, unless done by a suitably knowledgeable person in the spirit of nonattachment to its results, produces traces, which accrete to that self and are carried along with it. When the organism with which a self is associated in a given lifetime expires and perhaps after an interim sojourn in heaven or hell, a certain portion of the traces acquired by that self become operative. This operative portion of one's Karmic store is responsible for features of the next life to come. It determines one's birth, that is, whether one is born next as an animal, human or god<sup>3</sup>.

Hinduism teaches that we need to become free of the illusion of separate selfhood, with its attendant pain. A liberated being is one who recognizes that life and death transcend such mistaken notions of self – identity and thereby becomes free of the conditioning effects of Karma. The Bhagavad – Gita says<sup>4</sup>:

Worn-out garments are shed by the body:

Worn-out bodies are shed by the dweller.

To be free of death means letting go of attachments to the phenomenal world, releasing the grasp on the false distinctions of a separate self and its unceasing desires. Death is inescapable, a natural corollary of conditioned existence. What is born passes away. Hindus consider it important to have a 'good death' and to feel free from all their sins before they die and this requires spiritual preparation together with a voluntary and peaceful acceptance of death. People nearing the ends of their lives will undertake long journeys to the sacred cities – Benares and Haridwar, on the banks of the Ganges, so that they can wash away their sins in the river.

The banks of Ganges at Benares are considered to be as sacred as the river itself and terminally ill people living nearby will leave their homes and live in huts on the river banks until they die<sup>5</sup>.

For fifteen centuries Buddhism has been a living faith in India and is mingled with the common cultural and social current of the country. Buddhism arose as

a great humanist force affecting the religious and moral ideas of its time and contributed to the process of transforming the existing social conditions.

This important world religion and philosophy is named after the title, the Buddha or Enlightened one, given to its founder, Siddhartha Gautama (563–483BC). According to tradition, Siddhartha was born in Kapilavastu, near the present Indian – Nepalese border. He was a son of ruler. Raised in a life of sheltered luxury, he married early and had one son. But he became disillusioned with the worldly life which he renounced to wander as a mendicant. After a period he practiced Yoga and engaged in radical asceticism.

The foundations of the Buddha's teaching are found in the Four Noble Truths. First, all of life is suffering, dukkha. Second, the cause of suffering is craving, tanha. Third, the end of suffering is getting rid of craving and grasping. Fourth, the method to use in overcoming suffering is the Eight fold Path: (i) Right view (ii) Right aim (iii) Right speech (iv) Right action (v) Right living (vi) Right effort (vii) Right mindfulness (viii) Right concentration<sup>6</sup>. The Buddha developed his basic teachings similar to the way a physician diagnoses an illness.

The Buddha agreed with the Hindu idea of Samsara, (the Hindu concept of the wheel of rebirth that turns forever. Souls are reborn until they reach perfection), in that he believed that birth follows death. Like the Hindus, he saw the cycle of rebirths as a prison to be escaped. Karma (action) is accepted as an article of faith by all the main systems of religion and philosophy in India. Karma, in Buddha's understanding is psychological instead of physical. Desires and intentions bind the psychological processes. In Buddhism, Nirvana, as the ultimate ideal, requires constant spiritual exercise and contemplation. State of nirvana implies absence of passion, destruction of pride, freedom from attachment and destruction of all sensual pleasures.

From the Buddhist perspective there are two kinds of death: Continuous and regular. Continuous death is the "passing show" of phenomenal experience, constantly arising and passing away, moment by moment. Regular or corporeal death pertains to the physical cessation of vital body functions at the end of a lifetime<sup>7</sup>.

Christianity stands in a historical continuity with Judaism and accepts the monotheism of the Hebrew Prophets. Christianity has been appropriately called "the religion of redemption." This is a title well earned. For no religion has emphasized the need for redemption nor satisfied that need more than Christianity<sup>8</sup>.

Christianity is a religion centered around the person and work of Christ and Christ is seen as the

liberator of mankind and the mediator between God and man. Christianity is a monotheistic religion. Monotheism implies faith in the existence of one God who manifests himself through the character of Christ. Under monotheistic faith, Christians believe in three things: Fatherhood of God, Divine dignity of Christ and religious experience of Christians. Immortality of the soul, the soul's living on without need of any physical manifestations, is a belief from Greek thought that has been shared by many Christians. Some early Christian writers entertained possibilities that the soul may be reincarnated in another human body. These ideas are overshadowed by the belief in the resurrection of the body held by a majority of Christians.

Therefore the Christian belief in the resurrection, as distinct from the Greek belief in immortality, is tied to a divine total process implying deliverance. Sin and death must be conquered. We cannot do this. Another has done it for us; and he was able to do it only in that he betook himself to the province of death – that is, he himself died and expiated sin, so that death as the wages of sin is overcome. Christian faith proclaims that Jesus has done this and at he arose with body and soul after he was fully and really dead. Here God has consumed the miracle of the new creation expected at the end. Once again he has created life as in the beginning. At this one point, in Jesus Christ, this has already happened! Resurrection, not only in the sense of the Holy spirit's taking possession of the inner man, but also resurrection of the body. This is a new creation of matter – an incorruptible matter. Nowhere else in the world is there this new spiritual matter. Nowhere else is there a spiritual body—only here in Christ<sup>9</sup>.

Islam is a monotheistic religion based on firm faith in the existence of God, teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and is one of the four great religions of the world with an elaborate system of theoretical and practical principles. Islam means faith or iman: obedience to God and His law; faith in the teachings of Muhammad (PBUH) and accepting him as the last Prophet of God. For Islam, faith is always accompanied by righteousness in thought and action. A man of strong faith always has the right perspective and pursues the right goals.

Islam believes in life after death. Each person will be resurrected to appear before God and judged according to his or her deeds on earth.

And those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness – we charge not any soul, save according to its capacity; those are the inhabitants of Paradise, therein dwelling forever; we shall strip away all rancour that is in their breasts; and understand them rivers flowing and they will say, "Praise belongs to God, who guided us unto this; had

God not guided us, we had surely never been guided indeed, our Lord's Messengers came with the truth." And it will be proclaimed: "This is your Paradise; you have been given it as your inheritance for what you did." The inhabitants of Paradise will call to the inhabitants of the Fire: "We have found that which our Lord promised us true; have you found what your Lord promised you true?" "Yes", they will say. And then a herald shall proclaim between them: "God's curse on the evildoers, Who bar from God's way, desiring to make it crooked, disbelieving in the world to come." (Quran 7:40-44)

In short, western religions have also often associated an afterlife with the concepts of heaven and hell. These concepts are remarkably fully developed in Islam. According to Islam, if a person behaved in ways acceptable to God, rewards will be waiting after death. If a person behaved in unacceptable ways, punishments will be waiting.

**Western Philosophical Thought and Death:** It is not an exaggeration but a fact that philosophers have always been aware of death, though the extent of their interest and concern has varied from individual to individual and from age to age. Special problems concerned with death have arisen from time to time and even changes in social, political and economic conditions and in religious, artistic and scientific outlook have thus affected attitudes toward death<sup>10</sup>.

The ancient Greeks of the Hellenistic Age did not perceive death in the same way as many people do today. Among the pre-Socratic philosophers, speculation about the afterlife generally conformed to the popular beliefs of their culture. Pythagoras and his followers believed that one's conduct during life determined the destiny of the soul after death. Pythagoreans believed in the transmigration of the soul.

Socrates favoured the notion that the individual soul would survive after the death of the body. He describes his sense of anticipation at the prospect of communion with the spirits of the great in the afterworld. But he also describes death as either eternal bliss or dreamless sleep<sup>11</sup>. The drama of Socrates' trial and execution is central to Plato's discussion of death though the Apology, Crito and Phaedo can be supplemented by references in other dialogues included in the Republic, Gorgias, and Symposium. Another view of the "immortality of the soul", appears in the writings of Plato who advances a number of proofs that the soul is eternal and is released from the body at death. Thus, the concept of the immortality of the soul is an idea that pervaded orphic thought in ancient Greece and was further refined in Plato's writings. The following table presents some philosophical views of death and hereafter; in brief, we see here the wisdom of the ages.

Some Philosophical Views on Death<sup>12</sup>

Philosophy	Definition of Death	Basic Assumptions	Implications
Idealism (Plato)	The body dies, but the soul is released	Soul existed before birth and lives on after death.	In life, we should seek to understand the great and eternal ideas. At the highest levels, death is to be pursued for only then can the beauty of truth be found.
Realism (Aristotle)	The body and most of the soul (emotions and dispositions) die; only reasoning, which is divine, lives on.	The "reasoning" soul is immortalized as it is passed on to our children.	It is best to live a "life of reason" and to pass on this excellence to our offspring.
Religious (Old and New Testaments)	Body and soul cease to function temporarily	Body and soul will live again forever on the Last Day of Judgment	The good life requires belief in God, good deeds and words, and / or belief in Christ; if so, eternal life in Heaven is assured
Pragmatism (William James)	Body dies but the soul is immortal.	The soul is best represented by idealized social self.	Be true to the "inner voice which guides our behavior; it represents our soul and only God can be its judge.
Existentialism (Sartre)	All mental and physical existence ceases.	Death is a means of asserting freedom of choice; it is an alternative to life.	Voluntary death allows us to decide when and how; if not then we must seek new meaning in life.

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