

The Now Matters More

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the ways in which people's lives and deeds are influenced by their religious beliefs regarding the hereafter, specifically in the context of Ancient Egyptian, Hindu, and Christian traditions. It argues that living in the present moment is more important than placing the emphasis on an unknown afterlife. The essay emphasizes the significance of living in the present rather than being concerned about the prospect of life after death using examples across different religions.

KEYWORDS: Religion, spirituality, cultural practices, Ancient Egypt, Hinduism, Christianity

INTRODUCTION

Death defines human life, but despite its universality, we know nothing about what happens after we die. No living person can offer evidence of what comes after death, so in the absence of knowledge, the best we can do is speculate. To that end, religion offers explanations. One of the most common concepts prevalent in religion is that of death. With this comes the duality of belief and faith; belief in and hope for life after death are vital reasons for the rise of countless religions. Religion has always been, and will likely continue to be, a prominent part of everyday life. While those who subscribe to certain belief systems may lead subjectively better lives, this adherence can often restrict followers from living life to the fullest.

Throughout history, various myths and beliefs have led much of the world to believe in higher life forms, often instilling hope that living a "good" life will be rewarded but living a "bad" one will be met with punishment. However, as increasingly more people move away from religion (Inglehart et al., 2021), I believe it is important to understand that focusing on the now is more important than dwelling on uncertainty that may come later on. Since we can take steps to change and improve ourselves in the present, we shouldn't focus on an uncertain future.

Numerous religions incorporate beliefs that draw focus away from the present and instead promise paradise in the afterlife. Religious guidelines often strongly resemble laws, requiring followers to follow a set of rules. Such rules may include avoiding certain foods, adopting a certain lifestyle and worshiping a defined higher being. This being is often a god of sorts, believed to be inclined to grant mortals wishes and gifts in return for following a prescribed doctrine and

worshiping the godlike figure. In return for their devotion, believers are rewarded with hope for a future paradise. In some religious traditions, this paradise and access to it are highly systematized and described in extensive detail.

In contrast, other faiths offer few details, and followers may formulate their own ideas of eternal rewards. Either way, belief in an afterlife supersedes the objective, tangible experience of being alive. By downplaying the real freedom and happiness we might enjoy in life, religion can deprive people of the opportunity to live a bountiful, fulfilling existence. Life is something we (as ourselves) will only experience once, and living life within the constraints of various religious laws can be draining, detracting from the very meaning of life. I believe that, whether there is life after death or not, living in the present should be the collective focus rather than pursuing an imagined afterlife.

THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS

An example of a strong belief in the afterlife is the religion of Ancient Egypt. The Egyptians held polytheistic beliefs and upheld practices that focused greatly on life after death. Intensive preparation was believed to ensure that the physical body could return in the afterlife and accompany the soul (*ka*) so that the departed could enjoy the awaited paradise. The *ka* was considered a person's life force, separate from the physical body and detached after death. But, before the soul could enjoy the ultimate reward, it would have to be weighed on a scale by the God Anubis to determine whether the deceased was worthy to pass on. The heart would be weighed against the feather of Maat, the goddess of truth. In the belief that a greater future awaited them, many dedicated much of their time alive to preparing for and ensuring that they would be allowed to "pass through."

One widespread practice believed to guarantee a successful transition to the afterlife was mummification. Mummification was akin to an intricate, multifaceted funeral process in which many steps were taken to guide safe passage of the soul to the afterlife. First, internal organs, such as the liver, were removed and placed in canopic jars; then, the body was placed in a special salt, natron, for desiccation. The heart was left in the body, as the Egyptians believed the heart to contain a person's intelligence and being. The dried body was then wrapped in bandages and eventually placed in a coffin, or sarcophagus. This process would take up to 70 days to complete and was carried out by high priests and embalmers (Faulkner, 2004).

Egyptians believed that the sarcophagus would preserve the mummified body and provide a vessel for the deceased's life force and soul. The materials ranged from wood to stone; only the wealthiest Egyptians could afford a stone coffin. Sarcophagi were highly symbolic, often decorated with hieroglyphic messages and imagery. Common decorations included spells and prayers for use in the afterlife, the visage of the deceased, and images of goddesses like Nephthys and Isis. The coffin was a crucial part of the burial process, as its craftsmanship and decorations were believed to reflect the wealth and status of the person inside. Nowadays, these vessels are viewed as monuments left behind by the Egyptians to help us interpret and understand ancient cultures. Although this may not be the afterlife they imagined, their beliefs and traditions live on.

The sarcophagus would then be buried in a tomb, constructed with multiple chambers and passages. The coffin would be placed in the burial chamber in the tomb's innermost chamber; its surrounding complex passages mainly served as safety precautions. The most extravagant and well-known tombs were pyramids, characterized by their giant size and the extensive manpower that went into building them. Thousands of workers would move massive boulders of limestone, mortar, and granite with simple tools like levers and pulleys. Vast amounts of materials and labor were required to ensure the supposed afterlife of a single pharaoh. This labor-intensive process often required some 15-30 years to complete, depending on the size of the pyramid itself. It's clear that the tons of material and scores of manpower used in a single burial could have very well been put to better uses such as trade, agriculture, or simply improving the quality of life.

THE HINDUS

A different take on life after death can be found in Hinduism, one of the world's oldest religions—dating back thousands of years—and based, fundamentally, on belief in the supreme divinity Brahman. Hindus believe in the cycle of reincarnation and *karma*, and their main goal is to escape this cycle by achieving *moksha* and becoming one with Brahman (O'Flaherty, 1980).

Hindus believe that we are all reborn, again and again, in

a cycle called *samsara*. They believe that the *atman* (soul) emerges in various life forms at birth, eventually dies, and is then reborn. Hindus view this process as a prison they aim to escape. We can interpret this belief in many ways because in Hinduism, anything and everything is connected to Brahman. In this religion, Brahman is within all of us, and our goal in life should be to seek and realize the divinity within us.

Achieving *moksha* is no easy task: it requires extreme dedication to the faith and detachment from anxieties and struggles, essentially taking away a significant aspect of what makes us human. In-depth knowledge of the universe and the *atman* is also required. Hindus perform rituals, practice different types of yoga, and engage in meditation to achieve the goal of *moksha*. Many Hindus perform daily *puja*, a type of worship of a Hindu deity at a family shrine or statue. Every day, it is common for the family matriarch to lead a prayer, a ritual that typically requires offerings that could be used for other purposes. It may appear that these aspects of Hinduism siphon time and energy that could be used to enhance the lives of followers; instead, considerable effort must be dedicated to praying and worshiping a god that will grant, essentially, the opportunity of becoming one with it. It may also appear that certain Hindu teachings have logic gaps and inconsistencies; for instance, it is never explained what it really means to become united with the supreme being, Brahman, or how a follower can benefit from this. It is unclear whether a believer can expect something akin to the afterlife so prized by the ancient Egyptians, or a concept of eternity more analogous to the Christian concept of heaven.

THE CHRISTIANS

Christianity, the most popular religion today, has over two billion followers who mainly belong to two branches, Protestantism and Catholicism. At its core, Christianity is grounded in the sacrifices of Jesus, the Son of God, for the salvation of humanity and its eventual resurrection, along with the promise that Jesus (the Messiah) will one day return. Christianity revolves around the teachings and life of Jesus, and through his guidance and lessons, followers are taught the importance of compassion, love, and forgiveness. These fundamental concepts of Christian belief are memorialized in the Bible. It is believed that a single author did not write the Bible; rather, a series of thirty-six authors contributed content that was divided into two parts, the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament appears earlier and covers the creation of the world and how life within it came to be. The Old Testament is also very important to Judaism. The New Testament follows the Old; it depicts the arrival of Jesus and chronicles actions he undertook to save the world. Biblical teachings are often transcribed in other works or excerpted in celebrated quotations. The lessons center mainly around loving all others, especially the Lord (Jesus), exemplified by Mark 12:30-31: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

The status of the Christian afterlife is dependent on the manner in which one lived on Earth. According to Christian doctrine, after the death of the physical body, the soul will either ascend to heaven or descend to hell. The contrast between heaven and hell is clear. Heaven is presented as a paradise, free of all pain and suffering. It is a place only for those who lived a morally correct life, had faith in Christ and repented for their sins. Hell, on the other hand, is a place of eternal pain and suffering, reserved for those who sinned in their lifetimes without repenting. The way souls are judged varies within Christian beliefs but in the end, the afterlife remains a significant part of all Christian belief.

The more tangible representations of Christ's teachings about the afterlife can be observed directly in Christian monuments, artifacts, and traditions. For example, Christian churches are known to be intricately decorated with colorful stained glass and frescoes—but this decor can serve another meaning. Many murals depict heaven with angels and a burning hell with devils, while others present Jesus on a cross, symbolizing the salvation of mankind. Elaborate churches cost a fortune to construct, between \$210 and \$275 per square foot—money that could have been used for charitable purposes like helping those in need, assisting endangered animals or saving the environment. For example, New York's famous Trinity Church boasts a \$6 billion portfolio and took some five years to build. Ostensibly serving the Bible's teachings, these luxurious buildings have come at the expense of enormous sums.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, there is no way for us to know if internally held religious perspectives of the afterlife are accurate or not, but they have survived and endured, giving us much to talk about. In a sense, the religions examined herein—and many others—have created an “afterlife” that physically exists and is observable in reality, quite distinct from the paradisiacal visions embraced by religious adherents. Egyptians have left behind great pyramids and tombs that continue to be studied. Hinduism, among the oldest religions, lives on in ancient temples and extensive texts. Christianity remains one of the largest religions worldwide, and Christian churches are massive monuments of art and architecture. *Our focus* must stay on the present, even if we are forever tempted with curiosity about the future after we die.

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