

January 2006

Philosophical, Psychological & Spiritual Perspectives on Death & Dying

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Recommended Citation

San Filippo, David Ph.D., "Philosophical, Psychological & Spiritual Perspectives on Death & Dying" (2006). *Faculty Publications*. 31.
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**PHILOSOPHICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL & RELIGIOUS
PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH & DYING**



R. David San Filippo, Ph.D.

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Published by: Kimball Publishing – 2006
Orlando, Florida U.S.A.

**To those who I have known and who have died. You taught me to look at
this final stage in life through the eyes of the beholders.**

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Introduction

This E-book reviews the philosophical perspectives on death, the psychological perspectives on death and the fears of death and some religious perspectives of death. The philosophic section will review perspectives of death from ancient Greece through modernity. The psychological section will review death, and the fear of death, from the perspectives of psychoanalytic, humanistic, and existentialist theories. The religious section will provide a brief overview of Prehistoric, African, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, and Christian religious beliefs concerning death and afterlife.

Philosophical Perspectives on Death

Since ancient Greece, philosophical reasoning has been a part of the human dynamic of thought and attempt to understand our existence. According to philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, "the fear of death is the beginning of philosophy, and the final cause of religion" (Durant, 1977, p. 328). From a human science perspective, a review of philosophical reasoning concerning death is important to provide a complete interpretation of the human experience of death. The human science approach of studying human experiences encompasses more than just the natural scientific approach. It also requires the reasoning of philosophy.

Ancient Egyptians focused a great deal of time, energy, and resources in order to prepare for the next life. They perceived life as a dream that was quickly over and thought that death was eternal. Ancient Egyptians believed that in order to enjoy eternity in another life, the body of the deceased had to survive into eternal life. Therefore, careful embalming techniques were used to prepare the corpse. Bodies were wrapped in bandages and buried with food, drink, and personal possessions to be used in the next life. Bodies were either buried in the ground or in elaborate tombs. The Egyptians believed that the dead crossed the river of death to the Kingdom of Orisis, the god of the dead, where they were to spend eternity. To guide the dead on their journey to the Kingdom of Orisis, the Book of the Dead was buried with the deceased. Entrance into eternity was dependent on judgment of Orisis of the individual's life.

Ancient Greeks viewed religion more as a matter of ritual than morality. Buildings and statues were built to honor the Greek gods. Greeks perceived death as a release of the soul from the body. The soul, which was considered to be part of the mind, was believed to be immortal. It was considered that the soul lived before the body and would live again in another life.

Socrates' death provides an example of how Greeks wanted to view death as the end of this existence and not to be afraid of when it happened. When Socrates was condemned to die for supposedly corrupting the young by asking too many questions, he accepted death gracefully. In the dialogue Phaedo Plato recorded Socrates' final evening with his friends. After ingesting the poison hemlock, Socrates commented to his friends, "And therefore I go on my way rejoicing, and not only, but every other man who believes that his mind has been made ready and he is in a manner purified. And what is purification but the separation of the soul from the body . . . I have been told a man should die in peace" (Plato, 1976, p. 277). Socrates then lay down and covered himself with a sheet. Just before he died, thinking of the life he was leaving, he sat up and addressed a friend, "Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?" and then he lay back down and died (Plato, trans. 1976, p. 278). This readiness and matter-of-fact approach to death by Socrates illustrates how ancient Greeks considered death to be a passage to greater existence than this life, and that one should prepare for death just as one would prepare for any journey. Socrates' remembrance that he owed Asclepius a debt is similar to how one may remember an unfinished task before one embarks on any journey.

Ancient Greeks believed that the transition from life to death was considered to be a journey across the River Styx. When a Greek died, coins were placed over the corpse's mouth to pay the boatman, Charon, to take her or his body across the river to the underworld of the next life, a place called Hades. Bodies were sometimes buried but most often were cremated and the ashes were then buried with the person's possessions, to be used in the next life.

Early Roman beliefs were similar to Greek beliefs. The dead were either buried or cremated. Poor citizens were often buried in a common grave, without a ceremony, and at night. However, the more prominent citizens were mourned with style and pomp. Their bodies were

laid out for people to come by and pay their last respects. The Greeks and Romans shared the belief in the dead souls being ferried across the River Styx. The Romans also placed coins on the dead person's mouth to pay the boatman. In formal Roman funeral ceremonies, along with the mourning family and friends, professional mourners were hired to promote the solemnity of the occasion. However, clowns were also hired to make jokes about the dead person in order to remind the mourners that no matter who the person was, she or he was still human and ultimately died.

The philosopher Schopenhauer believed that phenomena exist only insofar as the mind can perceive them as concepts. In his speculation concerning the fear of death, he stated that due to our inability to conceptualize our own death and afterlife, we formulate philosophies and theologies:

The average man [woman] cannot reconcile himself [herself] to death; therefore he [she] makes innumerable philosophies and theologies; the prevalence of a belief in immortality is a token of the awful fear of death. (Durant, 1977, p. 328)

According to Martin Heidegger, death demonstrates that there is no hope in becoming what we are essentially because we eventually cease to exist in physical form. He thought that we should not place hope for our eternal existence in our accomplishments of life. Accomplishments in life, according to Heidegger, have no effect on one's assurance of an existence after death. This awareness can cause an individual to become fearful and anxious since many people judge the value of their lives, and their expectations of life after death, by what they have accomplished and how we are remembered. Heidegger's perspective supports two of the common themes of the fear of death, that is, that death is a threat to the meaningfulness of life and to the realization of one's goals in life. Tomer (1992) states,

Heidegger's position implies that death is on one hand a threat-the threat of nonexistence. On the other hand, according to Heidegger, a realization of our future nonexistence is a precondition of a fuller understanding of our life and, eventually, a precondition for freeing ourselves from anxiety. (p. 478)

The fear of death can therefore be reduced by the acknowledgment of our eventual nonexistence and the acceptance of death's inevitability.

Krishnamurti's thoughts parallel some of Heidegger's opinions. He comments that the fear of death is a result of our preconceived notions of death. Krishnamurti (1969) suggests that we shun our preconceived ideas of death and be open to the entire experience of death without expectations:

In order to meet it [death] in such a way all belief, all hope, all fear about it must come to an end, otherwise you are meeting this extraordinary thing with a conclusion, an image, with a premeditated anxiety, and therefore you are meeting it with time To discover that nothing is permanent is of tremendous importance for only then is the mind free, then you can look, and in that there is great joy. (p. 75)

Krishnamurti believes the human fears associated with death are caused by our separation of life and death into two distinct states. He believes that to overcome the fear of death, we should view life and death as together forming the complete cycle of human existence: "We have separated living from dying, and the interval between the living and dying is fear" (Krishnamurti, 1969, p. 76). By considering life and death as integrated aspects of our entire human experience, we can overcome the fears of death.

Psychological Perspectives on Death and the Fears of Death

Psychological perspectives on death provide insight into why humans fear death and how they deal with its inevitability. This section reviews some of the psychoanalytic, humanistic, and existential perspectives of death and the fear of death. These perspectives provide an understanding of the fear of death and of how to accept death's finality.

Psychoanalytic Perspectives

According to Freud's psychoanalytic theories, defense mechanisms are employed by the ego to guard against internal and external stimuli that might invoke fear and anxiety. Denial and illusion are cognitive defense mechanisms used by many to deal with the fear of death. Denial allows individuals to avoid thinking about death until its reality renders denial no longer possible. The creation of illusions allows the individual to avoid considering an unpleasant situation such as death, by creating an acceptable illusion such as life after death. Creating illusions allows for the individual not only to deny an unpleasant situation but also create an acceptable alternative. Although people are aware of death and that they will eventually die, many continue to deny its existence. Human beings cannot conceive of their own deaths: "Whenever we make an attempt to imagine it we can perceive that we really survive as spectators Our unconscious does not believe in its own death; it behaves as if it were immortal" (Freud, trans. 1959, pp. 305, 313). Some people can discuss and theorize about death. They can also accept the deaths of others. However, they cannot conceive or accept their own mortality. Breznitz (1983) states,

Denial itself can be particularly effective in view of the fact that death is a single-

trial experience, and as long as we are alive we have been through false alarms only. The many threats that did not materialize encourage the illusion of invulnerability so necessary to one's psychological security and well being. (p. 233)

Another effective method of denying death is to repress awareness of its reality. By repressing the consciousness of their mortality, individuals can subjugate their fears of death. Pushing the thought of a fearful or unpleasant experience, such as death, into the future is another form of denial. The reaction of Scarlett O'Hara to the unpleasantness of the Civil War, in Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind, provides an example of pushing unpleasantness into the future. Instead of dealing with her current unpleasantness, Scarlett chose to wait until "tomorrow." When considering death, many people also try not to think about it until "another time" or "not now."

The creation of illusions is an additional psychological method to avoid the fear of death. Tomer (1992) believes that "most people develop and maintain positive illusions regarding themselves, the world, and their ability to control the environment and the future" (p. 488). People may create an illusion of immortality and a belief in an afterlife of "streets of gold" or "a mansion with many rooms" to provide a tangible illusion of what to expect after death. These illusions are reflected in their philosophical and religious beliefs of death and afterlife. The acceptance of these beliefs appears to help reduce many people's fear of death.

Carl Jung, in his autobiography Memories, Dreams, Reflections, views death from the perspective of the ego and the psyche. Jungian psychology describes the ego as the bridge between the outside world and the rest of the individual's personality. From the ego's perspective, "it [death] appeared as a catastrophe; that is how it strikes us, as if wicked and

pitiless powers had put an end to a human life" (Jung, 1961/1989, p. 314). The psyche is considered the part of human awareness that provides insight and knowledge. From the perspective of the psyche, "death appears as a joyful event. In the light of eternity, it is a wedding, a mysterium coniunctionis. The soul attains, as it were, its missing half, it achieves wholeness" (Jung, 1961/1989, p. 314).

Jung advocates that individuals continuously strive to increase their awareness of death to overcome the fear of death. He proposes that we can be more conscious of life by not denying the reality of death. By this increased consciousness of death, individuals can come to know and accept death as a part of human life: "The sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being" (Jung, 1961/1989, p. 326).

According to Becker, the so-called "healthy-minded" argument and the "morbidly-minded" argument propose diverse psychological perspectives concerning the origin of the human fear of death. The healthy-minded argument is that the fear of death is not innate but learned. It supports the theoretical perspective that fear is a learned response, learned through the exposure to other deaths throughout life. The morbidly-minded argument is that the fear of death is not learned but is natural and present in all humans. It supports the belief that fear is innate and based upon the survival instinct of living beings. Becker believes there is no real answer to the argument, yet "nevertheless something very important emerges: there are different images of man [or woman] that he [or she] can draw and chose from" (Becker, 1973, p. 24). The arguments provide for different perspectives for people to consider when dealing with their fears of death, such as, that the fears of death are either learned or innate in humans. Becker believes that regardless of either argument, overcoming fears of death requires the individual to examine her or his fears and find methods to overcome these fears.

George Kelly's personal construct theory provides a model of how people form a belief construct and incorporate these constructs into their lives. In Kelly's theory, constructs are cognitive patterns or paradigms that an individual creates to understand and apply to current and future events. These constructs are created on the basis of the individual's personal experiences and cultural influences. According to the personal construct theory, to deal with the fear of death, an individual may need to modify her or his existing construct regarding death. Individuals who have not come to accept the inevitability of death will consider death to be incompatible with their current core constructs, leading to fearfulness. Krieger, Epting, and Leitner (1974) explain the nature of a threat, which also can be associated with the threat of death:

If a person's identity and understanding of the model [of death] is challenged, he [or she] is said to experience threat. In construct theory terms, threat is said to be the awareness of an inability to accurately predict events in the world along with the awareness of a need to undertake some degree of systematic change in order to do so. Threat arises with a person's realization that he [or she] has lost anticipatory security within the environment. (p. 300)

For some individuals the finality of death, the dying process, and the unknown nature of what happens after death have no place in their existing personal constructs. This lack of constructs can cause fear:

The nature and implication of death are unclear to the person so that death remains an unknown, undefined mystery; the person's expectations and suppositions about the world are not adequate to explain this event. Death simply does not fit anywhere in the person's construct system. (Rigdon, Epting,

Neimeyer, & Krieger, 1979, p. 246-247)

Humanistic Perspectives

Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers have developed humanistic theories that human beings are motivated by a desire to achieve their highest level of innate potential. This achievement is called "self-actualization," the finding of purpose for one's life. Many people fear death because they think that their lives have not been fulfilled or purposeful. Hence, the actualization of one's life can reduce the fear of death. Maslow (1954/1970) theorizes that the more an individual accepts her or his life, the less she or he will fear death. He believes that each human "has an essential nature of his [or her] own" (p. 340). He considers normal human development to consist of the "actualizing" of the "essential nature" of the individual. According to Maslow (1954/1970), the actualized individual develops "into maturity along the lines that [the] hidden, covert, dimly seen essential nature dictates, growing from within rather than being shaped from without" (pp. 340-341). The person matures from internal value motivations and is minimally influenced by outside forces.

Carl Rogers, in his humanistic approach to death, believes that individuals cannot really know whether they fear death until they are actually faced with their own deaths. He relates the fear of the dying process more to the circumstances surrounding the individual's dying than to the process itself:

I think that no one can know whether he or she fears death until it arrives. Certainly, death is the ultimate leap in the dark, and I think it is highly probable that the apprehension I feel when going under an anesthetic will be duplicated or

increased when I face death. Yet I don't experience a really deep fear of the process. So far as I am aware, my fear concerning death relate to its circumstances. (Rogers, 1980, pp. 87-88)

Rogers never came to a clear affirmation of a belief in life after death: "I consider death with, I believe, an openness to the experience. It will be what it will be, and I trust I can accept it as either an end to, or a continuation of life" (Rogers, 1980, p. 88).

Rogers believes that humans develop "toward constructive fulfillment of [their] inherent possibilities" (Rogers, 1980, pp. 117-118). Although this development may be affected by situations in life, most people continue to strive toward their highest potentials. Rogers believes that the person will continue to grow and enhance her or his self-esteem unless life situations overpower the individual. By helping people to find "constructive and growthful changes in [their] personality and behavior," they can be guided toward actualized lives (Rogers, 1980, pp. 133-134).

The idea of self-actualization is a response to the theme that death is a threat to the realization of life goals. Maslow and Rogers believe that their interviews and empirical work support that self-actualized individuals are satisfied with their lives and do not fear the end of their lives. According to Maslow and Rogers, the awareness of death for individuals who have not self-actualized can be threatening. To protect themselves from this threat, illusion and denial may be used. However, by being open to the experience, the fully functioning individual might even find the prospect of death an interesting experience.

Rollo May believes that fear strikes the core of an individual's self-esteem and sense of value. According to May (1988),

The critical question is how he [or she] relates to the fact of death: whether he [or

she] spends his [or her] existence running away from death or making a cult of repressing the recognition of death under the rationalizations of beliefs in automatic progress or providence, as is the habit of our Western society, or obscuring it by saying 'one dies' and turning it into a matter of public statistics which serve to cover over the one ultimately important fact, that he [or she] himself [or herself] at some unknown future moment will die. (pp. 106-107)

May considers death an inseparable part of living. He postulates that by confronting the reality of one's eventual nonbeing, and finding meaning in her or his life, the individual can be more attuned to the immediacy of her or his life. This heightened sense of consciousness and meaning can provide vitality to life and a reduction in the fear of death.

Existential Perspectives

An important life task for many individuals is to find value and meaning for their lives. As previously noted, one recurrent theme is the threat death poses to life's meaningfulness. By finding meaning in life, individuals develop values, goals, and priorities. To accomplish these tasks, according to Schuster, requires a recognition and acceptance of death. According to Kastenbaum, death can provide meaning to life by guiding us to clarify our values. Finding meaning in life can help to reduce the fear of death: "Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual" (Frankl, 1968, p. 122). Search-for-meaning theories relate to the human process of reformulating "perceptions, life schemes and attitudes" to make sense of life (Tomer, 1992, p. 482). Thompson and Janigian comment that meaning can be found in life

schemes that consist "of both order (of the world and one's place in it) and purpose (of one's life)" (Tomer, 1992, p. 483). Viktor Frankl theorizes that all reality has meaning, dependent on an individual's perceptions and attitudes, and that life never ceases to have meaning.

Search-for-meaning theorists postulate that by finding meaning and purpose in life one can accept the inevitability of death. According to Taylor (1983), meaning may be found "by such cognitive processes as finding a causal explanation for the experience and restructuring the meaning of one's life around the setback [death]" (p. 1170). To overcome the fear of death, one should accept life's suffering and attempt to find the purpose of the fear of death. The finding of purpose of and meaning of the fear of death can lead to an acceptance of the inevitability of death.

To help an individual to reduce her or his fear and anxiety about death, a reconstruction of personal constructs that deny death is required. The development of new personal constructs that accept death and one's mortality is needed. Philosophical, religious, and psychological teachings may help to restructure new personal constructs.

Religious Perspectives on Death

Perspectives from religious traditions provide a wealth of human wisdom concerning death. According to Smith (1991), “When religions are sifted for [their] truths, a different cleaner side appears. They become the world’s traditions. They begin to look like data banks that house the winnowed wisdom of the human race” (p. 5). A review of religious beliefs concerning death complements the philosophical and psychological interpretations of being human.

Although death is a common experience, interpretations of death and life after death vary among different religious traditions. A belief in the immortality of the spirit has been present in most religions for centuries. The belief that there is a life after death is one of the oldest concepts of human history.

Many beliefs in life after death have concerned a nonphysical transition into a serene spiritual world with encounters with other deceased people and possible religious figures, although afterlife existence might also be painful. There may be a judgment or accounting of one's life with a final disposition of the individual spirit following the period of judgment or personal assessment. This final disposition may be heavenly or hellish depending on the final judgment. The following review will provide a brief overview of prehistoric human, African, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, and Christian religious beliefs concerning death and afterlife.

Pre-Historic & Ancient

Cro-Magnon humans had a concept of death and an anticipation of life after death. They

buried their dead in or near their caves or huts along with the dead person's tools, weapons, jewelry, and other favorite possessions. The dead were also attired in the favorite formal clothing. The burial of the person, along with her or his belongings, are considered to be prehistoric humankind's anticipation of needing these things in life after death. Ancient cultures incorporated beliefs in life after death as civilization advanced. The cultural belief of what type of judgment might follow death was based upon the standards of right and wrong that were established according to cultural customs.

African

Traditional African religions have been influenced by the advent of Christianity and other religious beliefs. However, some beliefs have survived. Most African religions believe in a supreme God who is unique and transcendent. A belief in life after death is incorporated into the myths and funeral practices of Africa. Religion, to many Africans, is part of one's life and "there is no dichotomy between life and religion," (Horsey, 1997, p. 1). Death is accepted as a normal end of life. The sacredness of religion and funeral practices are preserved in ritual dress and practices. The invisible world of spirits and ancestors is always present and part of everyday life. Many Africans perceive death as a departure of the person and not the annihilation of the individual. The dead person is believed to move to another state of existence in the company of other departed spirits. Many Africans do not visualize any geographical separation between the living world and the afterlife. It is believed by many African religions that "as soon as a person is physically dead he arrives 'there' in his [or her] spirit form" (Mbiti, 1970, p. 209).

In African societies corpses are usually buried. Depending on the society, different burial

locations are chosen. Some bury their dead in the home of the dead person, or in the compound where the person lived, or in a place behind the compound. People are buried in graves of different shapes and sizes. Some graves are circular, others rectangle, and some “cave-like” at the bottom. In some societies the dead are buried in a big pot. Many societies bury the dead with food, weapons, stools, tobacco, and clothing. In some former African societies the dead person’s wife or wives were also buried with him. All of these items were intended to be used by the dead person in the next life and his wives were to accompany him into the next life. In other societies the dead are thrown into a bush or river and left to be eaten by wild animals or birds. Some societies also have a special hut in which the corpse remains for months and years, at which time the remains are removed and buried. Some families keep the skull or jaw of the dead member in order to remind the family that the deceased lives on in the hereafter.

Buddhism & Hinduism

Buddhists and Hindus believe that upon death, there is generally a rebirth to another life. Buddhists and Hindus believe that life and death are experiences that lead to spiritual growth. For the sages of these traditions, death is inevitable and need not be feared unless one has not lived a good life. The believer's actions in this life will determine his or her rebirth. Karma is the force created by the actions of the individual-the effects of actions. Good karma, which is achieved by compassionate actions in this life, leads to a higher existence in the next life. For Buddhists, nirvana is reached by achieving an understanding of the nature of reality. This must be discovered through the experiences of other dimensions of human consciousness.

The Tibetan conception of death is a little different from early Buddhist teachings in its

relationship to life and the value of karma. According to Tucci (1958), “Death is not merely a question, as in earlier Buddhism, of the consequence of the process of maturation of karma which has effect at a particular time and in a particular manner, it is also a separation of the life-principle, from the body, which can be traced back to factors which are fortuitous rather than karmic in a strict sense” (pp. 193-194). Tibetans do not believe that the separation of body and spirit at death is permanent. They believe that the spirit can be called back to the body, or in case of permanent death lead the spirit on its journey to a better form of existence, through recitations from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Tibetan Buddhists also believe that nirvana can be reached in one lifetime. They believe that this can be accomplished by using all the latent energy of the human being in service of the spiritual goal. The teachings of the Buddha support the focusing of energy on spiritual development. Upon death, the Buddha states, “All compounded things decay. Work out your own salvation with diligence” (Smith, 1991, p. 88).

Early Taoists attempted to avoid death by using meditative breathing techniques, special diets, magic, and drugs. During the time of Confucius the Taoists began to change their concept of death as being exclusively physical, and began to look for life after the death of the body. They believed that a good afterlife was a reward for good behavior in life. When Buddhism infiltrated Taoist China, people learned that they could reduce the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth by selfless behavior.

In Hinduism, death is considered “a series of changes through which an individual passes” (Adiswarananda, 1991, p. 169). Hindu teachings describe ultimate reality as Brahman. According to Adiswarananda (1991), “Brahman is non-dual pure consciousness, indivisible, incorporeal, infinite, and all-pervading like the sky” (p. 159). Death is not feared but an event that one prepares for during life. According to the scriptures of the Hindu Sikhs’ holy book, Sri

Guru Granth Sahib (trans. 1985), "Death is not bad if one knows how to die" (p. 579). The Hindus, when confronted with death, have a ceremony that is designed to help celebrate its inevitability and prepare for its coming. When considering what happens after death, the Sikhs believe that it is not what happens between dying and being reborn that is important. It is one's actions and thoughts in this life that will determine the nature of the next life. The issue of the next life is believed to be determined at the moment the present life ends. To Hindu believers, dying is the fulfillment of life.

Islam

Death, in the Islamic faith, is the cessation of biological life and the resting of the spirit, in the grave, until the Judgment Day. According to Islamic belief, God gives and takes away life. Parents do not give life and the events of life do not cause death. All actions on behalf of the parents or events are acts of being intermediaries of God's will. Funeral practices by Islamics reflect the belief that angels of God will come and ask the dead to comment on her or his life. Therefore the dead are usually buried in trenches with a slab of stone to cover the grave. Earth is not to press against the body in order for it not to restrict the body from sitting up and meeting the angels of God. Some Muslims believe that at death the "good souls" see visions of God and heaven, and that the wicked see the hell that awaits them. From the time of death to the time of judgment, Muslims believe, the spirit remains in a state of "dreamless sleep," with the exception of possible visions of eternity.

Judaism

The Jewish religion generally emphasizes the present life and not life after death. Jews believe they live and die only once. Although Judaism recognizes that the life of the spirit does not end at the point of bodily death, it is the Jew's responsibility to focus on a meaningful life and not speculate on life after death. The Old Testament states that the actions in the present life will reward the righteous and chastise the wicked. It does not specifically address the concept of an afterlife other than the one will be with God in heaven or in eternal damnation. Although the Old Testament does not directly address immortality, traditional Jews believe that death will bring the resurrection of the body and soul, followed by the judgment of the worth of their lives by God. Reform Jews believe that resurrection involves only the soul. The Old Testament, in the writings of Solomon, states that God made man [woman] imperishable. Job comments, "For I know my Redeemer lives, and the last day I shall rise out of the earth, and I shall be clothed again in my skin, and in my flesh shall I see my God: whom I myself shall see and my eyes shall behold, and not another: this my hope is laid up in my bosom" (Job 19: 25-27). A judgment and separation of the dead, at death, are commented on in the book of Daniel, "And many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some unto life everlasting, and others unto reproach, to see it always" (Daniel 7: 2).

Christianity

Most modern Christians share the beliefs of Judaism, but further believe that Jesus of Nazareth lived, was crucified, arose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and lives forever as God.

Christians believe that Jesus is the son of God. Christians believe that, through the force and example of Jesus' life, His death, and His resurrection, there is life after death for all believers. Christians believe that, upon death, they come before God and are judged. According to Smith (1991), "Following death, human life is fully translated into the supernatural domain" (p. 355). Fundamentalists and conservatives interpret the Holy Bible literally and believe that there is a specific heaven and hell and that only Christians are admitted to heaven. All others are condemned to Hell. Other Christians interpret biblical scripture more symbolically, taking into consideration the language and culture of the time when the Bible was written. Heaven and hell are viewed as a "condition," such as happiness or peace, rather than a specific place. Regardless of whether the afterlife beliefs are interpreted conservatively or liberally, many Christians believe that a person dies only once and that after death, the spirit is judged, and then exists in an afterlife for eternity. According to the Holy Bible, "It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Hebrews 9: 27).

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 E-book provided insight into the philosophical, psychological, and religious perspectives that affect an individual's view of their own death and the death of others. The path that 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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