

Matters of life and death



Topic 11

Christian and Islamic beliefs about life after death

The question of whether or not there is life after death is one of the greatest mysteries. There are many different viewpoints held by both religious believers and non-believers. The question revolves around what, if anything, survives death and is what survives really us?

Why do people believe in life after death?

All physical life ends, yet, for many people, not just religious believers, this is hard to accept, and the prospect of life after death is very desirable.



Christian belief in the afterlife

Christians usually adopt one of two approaches to understanding the afterlife:

Immortality of the soul

This is the belief that humans have a physical body and a spiritual, **immortal soul**, which is their real self. The soul survives the death of the physical body and goes to exist in a spiritual realm, such as heaven. This idea is known as dualism since it rests on the belief that there are two parts to human nature — the physical and the spiritual.

Such a viewpoint however, does have problems:

- Is the immortal soul really a person? One might argue that a person without a body is not a person at all.
- Where do souls actually go when the body dies? Thomas Aquinas suggested three possible places:
 - hell — a place of eternal punishment for the worst people
 - purgatory — a place where Christians who have lapsed in their faith may undergo a period of punishment and purification
 - beatific vision/heaven — a place of everlasting joy and happiness, where God dwells.
 This is the eternal home for faithful Christians and those who have completed purgatory.

However, many people, including a number of Christians, do not believe in hell, saying that an all powerful, loving God could not allow such a place to exist. Moreover, they claim, eternal life should be available to all humanity, and not just Christians.



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Many people do not believe in hell, saying that a loving God would not allow such a place to exist

Bodily resurrection

The doctrine of **bodily resurrection** suggests that, by an act of God's love, the dead will one day be restored to life again in bodily form. At a future date, there will be the Day of Judgement, when the dead will be raised and God will judge the world. Evil will be banished forever and the righteous will be rewarded with eternal life:

'He will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life.' (Romans 2:6–7)

'I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne...Another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works...and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.' (Revelation 20:12,15)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ himself, who appears to the disciples after his death, is the model for this view of the afterlife. Jesus talks to them, eats with them and they can touch him. 'Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see, a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have' (Luke 24:39). Later in the New Testament, Paul explains that the resurrected body, even though it looks the same as the physical body, is spiritual and therefore cannot die: 'So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable...it is sown in a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body' (1 Corinthians 15:42–44).

There are difficulties with the doctrine of bodily resurrection:

- If a person is resurrected is it still really the same person or something that just looks like the person?
- If God re-creates individuals, what do they look like — do they look as they were at the moment they died or at some other point in their lives?
- What about people who have disabilities on earth — will they still have these disabilities in eternal life?
- Where do all these bodies live? Isn't there a problem with overcrowding?

Islamic belief in the afterlife

Belief in **Akhira**, or life after death, is very important for Muslims. Islam teaches that the soul will be judged and will thereafter be sent to paradise or hell. On the Day of Judgement God will raise everyone from the dead and recreate their bodies to an exact replica of the body they had on earth. Heaven will be a beautiful place of great joy, but hell will be a place of sorrow and torment. To avoid hell, a Muslim must be a faithful follower of the Qur'an and the Shariah law and, although most Muslims believe that all non-Muslims will go to hell, some suggest that non-Muslims who have led good lives will also go to heaven.

Key words

Akhira — life after death

Immortality of the soul — the belief that humans have a body that will die, and a soul or spirit that can live on after the death of the body

Janannam — hell

Jannat — heaven

Resurrection of the body — the belief that God will raise the physical body to life again after death





As with some Christians, not all Muslims believe that these ideas are literally true, but rather understand them as metaphors.

Test yourself

- 1 Explain **three** reasons why people might believe in an afterlife.
- 2 Which of these positions seems most convincing to you?
- 3 Read at least **two** Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. What are their key features? Do these accounts help us to believe in the possibility of an afterlife?
- 4 Are there good reasons to believe that we have a soul? Explain your answer in as much detail as possible.
- 5 What do you think Christians mean by saying that the fact that Jesus rose from the dead means that they can have an afterlife?
- 6 Find out what at least one Christian church teaches about the afterlife. You could start by looking up the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church.
- 7 Explain the differences between Christian and Muslim understandings of life after death. If you find it hard to find any differences, think why this may be the case, then examine the teachings of the two religions again.
- 8 'The idea of heaven is only for religious people.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answers.

Examination question

- a What is meant by the resurrection of the body?** (2 marks)
- b Do you agree that Christian belief must include belief in the afterlife? Give two reasons for your view.** (6 marks)
- c Why do some Christians or Muslims accept the idea of heaven and hell and others do not?** (8 marks)
- d 'The idea of the afterlife is just for people who can't cope with the prospect of death.'**
- i Do you agree? Give reasons for your view. (3 marks)
 - ii Give reasons why some people may disagree with you. (3 marks)

Exam tip

Christians and Muslims base their beliefs in the afterlife on what the Bible/Qur'an and the Church (for Christians) teach, not on what psychics or mediums claim to prove, so never mention ghosts or even near-death experiences as a reason for Christians or Muslims to believe in life after death.



Topic 12

Non-religious belief in life after death

People have different views on what happens when we die. For those who are not religious believers, there are several possibilities:

- Nothing happens because this life is all there is and when we die we die.
- We become ghosts.
- We join the spiritual world.
- We are reincarnated into another physical life, either human or animal. This view is a very important part of the belief system of some Eastern religions. However, many non-religious believers also argue that this is the most satisfactory way for them to understand an afterlife.

In the modern world, therefore, there are many non-religious views concerning life after death. This might be for some of the same reasons that Christians and Muslims have for believing that life must continue beyond the grave, but without the key idea that it is associated with belief in God, the resurrection of Jesus, or expectation of judgment at the end of time.

Non-religious reasons for belief in the afterlife

Two of the most widespread non-religious reasons to believe in the afterlife are **near-death experiences** and the **paranormal**.

Near-death experiences

Scientists have, in recent years, examined the cases of many people who have died (perhaps during a surgical operation) and later been resuscitated. In a near-death experience the people who had died described a feeling of floating out of their bodies and then travelling down a tunnel to emerge into another world. Here they met Jesus, or a figure associated with their own religious tradition. Non-religious believers claimed to meet a dead relative or friend. Between them and the figure was often a barrier or gate. At this point, they are forced to make a choice whether to cross the barrier, or to return to earth. Obviously, the people describing these experiences opted to return to earthly life.

But are such accounts really proof of life after death? It has been argued that such accounts may be hallucinations caused by a lack of oxygen to the brain. Alternatively, they could be dreams, or lost subconscious memories. In other words, near-death experiences may be interesting phenomena but they do not, of themselves, prove the existence of life after death. However, it is not likely that a religious believer would accept NDE or paranormal experiences as sufficient proof of an afterlife in themselves.

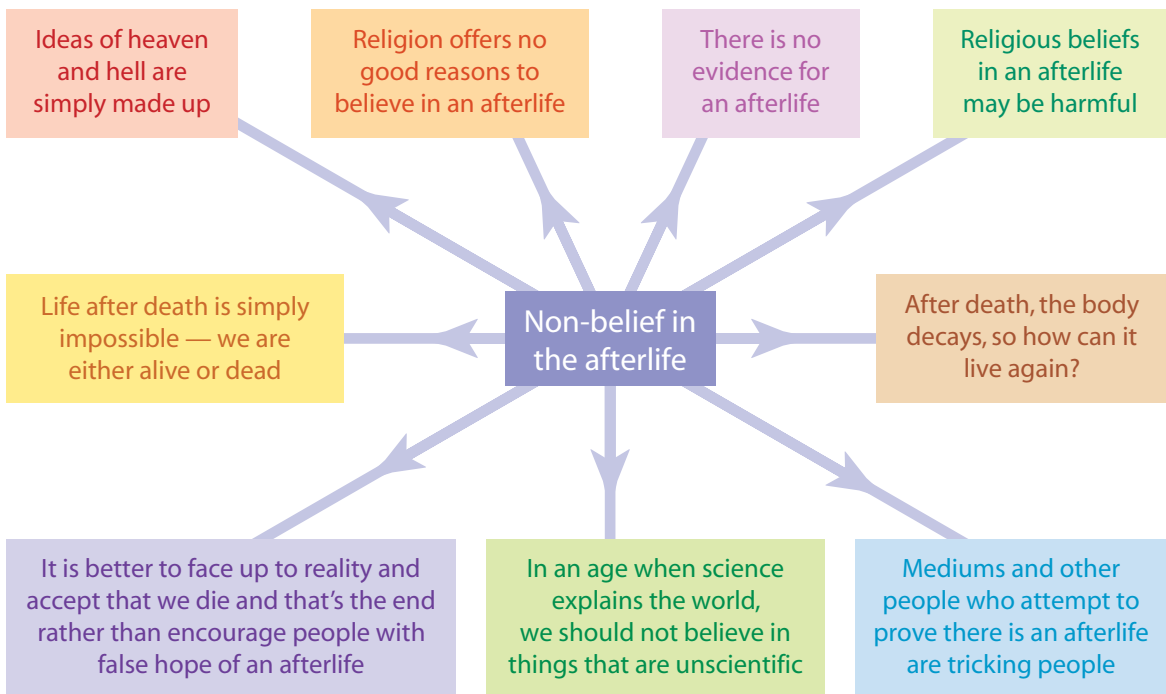
The paranormal (parapsychology)

Groups such as the Spiritualist Movement have claimed that there is a spirit world beyond this one, where people's spirits live on after death and which can be reached through séances and mediums. A problem with this is that the Spiritualist Movement has, over the years, been the subject of much ridicule, and many hoaxers have made it appear bogus. Moreover, what is the point of the spirit world? Is it just to continue life as it is on earth, or is there something more?

An account in 1 Samuel 28 tells how the witch or medium of Endor communicated with the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel even though the Law of Moses in the Old Testament expressly forbids people to become mediums: 'A man or woman who is a medium or spiritualist among you must be put to death' (Leviticus 20:27).

Non-belief in the afterlife

Many non-religious people do not believe in any form of the afterlife.



Some of these ideas are based on quite sophisticated philosophical problems, such as the question of whether we have any personal identity after we have died. If so, then what is it that survives — the soul or the body? If both ideas seem unconvincing, then we cannot talk of an afterlife.

Some atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, have genuine concerns about the way in which teaching about heaven and hell can alarm or control believers. Some churches, particularly in the USA, put on productions called Hell House Outreaches, plays that show non-believers going to

hell because they have done supposedly terrible things. The plays show people suffering pain, torment and terrible unhappiness in hell, and it is suggested that this may distress people who see them. Christians who put on these productions might argue that it is better to be frightened now than risk going to hell.

Key words

Near-death experience — an unusual experience occurring when someone is on the verge of death, and recalled afterwards; often a vision of light, a tunnel or out-of-body experience

Paranormal — events or experiences presumed to be beyond normal scientific understanding

Test yourself

- 1 List all the reasons you think may support life after death and those that count against it. Decide which view you think is more convincing and explain your answer.
- 2 Is it a satisfactory view to say that this life is all there is and there is no good reason to hope for the afterlife? Explain your answer.
- 3 Could science ever prove or disprove the claim that there is life after death? Give reasons for and against both views.
- 4 Do you think that life after death is an exciting prospect? Explain your answer.
- 5 Do you think that it is possible to believe in the afterlife without believing in God?
- 6 If it were possible to prove the existence of ghosts, would this prove the existence of an afterlife?
- 7 Do you agree that belief in the afterlife is only for those who aren't prepared to face up to the truths of human existence? If so, how would you try to persuade them that they are wrong?

Examination question

- a What is a near-death experience?** (2 marks)
- b Do you agree that there are no good reasons to believe in an afterlife? Give two reasons for your view.** (6 marks)
- c Why do some non-religious believers accept the possibility of an afterlife?** (8 marks)
- d 'The evidence of parapsychology for an afterlife is very strong.'**
- i Do you agree? Give reasons for your view. (3 marks)
 - ii Give reasons why some people may disagree with you. (3 marks)

Exam tip

This is quite a sophisticated topic as it deals with philosophical questions about what is reasonable to believe based on our regular experience of the world. It could be a chance for you to shine with your understanding of these views.