

Death

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Have you heard the saying, “the two things that you can be sure of in life are death and taxes?” This is a seemingly secular view of death. There’s no hint of anything else. It’s a closed door. Or is it? If you can expect a tax refund, can you also expect some kind of refund on life after death? To get into that you have to get into religions, so you’re in the right place. You will look at how some of the world religions consider the relationship between life and death. You will also look at how they view the afterlife.

Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Life after Death](#)
2. [Monotheistic Religions](#)
3. [Buddhism](#)
4. [Indigenous Religions](#)
5. [Transformation](#)

1. Life after Death

The mystery of death has preoccupied the human race since the beginning. This mortal truth is deeply woven through humanity’s collective unconscious.

What do people do with that knowledge? The problem is, it’s not really knowledge. Without some structure for this mystery, the issue—perhaps even the potential knowledge of death—gets avoided. Death gets suppressed and subverted by fear. It gets displaced into other, perhaps dysfunctional, forms of life and behaviors.

One of the many things that the world’s religions have in common is some kind of belief in the afterlife, a vision for life beyond death, and immortality. This vision informs the actions, perceptions, insights, and states of mind of an adherent to a particular religion.

2. Monotheistic Religions

In many branches of Christianity, there's a hopeful vision of everlasting life and the spiritual presence of God. Heaven is a return to paradise, but depending on one's conduct in life, one's future might not bode so well. Vivid stories exist in the Bible of a subterranean realm of further suffering, called Hell.

The monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all have some notion of judgment upon death of the body. It's generally believed to be a time of reckoning when one's soul receives God's mercy and judgment, which determines one's placement in the eternal realms.

3. Buddhism

This vision is not confined to the monotheistic religions. Buddhism considers the hope of **nirvana** the final liberation from the endless cycle of rebirth into the wheel of life's suffering. However, this is also believed to be contingent upon one's actions and conduct in life. Karma plays a big part in determining one's placement in any future realm beyond death of the body.



TERM TO KNOW

Nirvana

In Buddhism, liberation from suffering.

4. Indigenous Religions

In the indigenous religions, too, there is a great reverence for the hope that is offered in the afterlife. This exists in terms of the role that the **ancestors** play in facilitating communications with the living. They're conduits to the supernatural realm.

While death might be equally mysterious and perhaps feared, the hope and possibility of some eternal peace and ongoing connection with loved ones who have crossed over into the spirit world is an important aspect of many indigenous religions.



TERM TO KNOW

Ancestor

In indigenous religions, a deceased member of one's family tree with whom the living may remain spiritually connected.

5. Transformation

With so many religions saying it is your actions in this life that determine your next, what guides someone to live a good life?

Well, in Christianity, it is the life and the presence and the teachings of Jesus Christ, a container for the mystery of life, the mystery of death, and the promise of salvation. Any suffering and confusion along the way are the creative means to a brighter future.

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, he says, "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ." The hopeful Christian message is contained in the life teachings of Jesus Christ, a model of transforming suffering into peace and understanding through love. For many Christians, Jesus Christ is a model of mercy and forgiveness, guiding the transformation from sin to righteousness.



SUMMARY

In talking about death, we pointed to several religious traditions that regard death as an open door, where the believer or the practitioner is invested with some kind of hope in a spiritual continuity beyond death of the body. You looked at the beliefs of the **monotheistic religions** first. Then you learned about the belief in nirvana in **Buddhism**. Many **indigenous religions** believe in connection to the spirit world through their ancestors. You also looked at Christianity and the life of Jesus as a model of **transformation**.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Ancestor

In primal religions, a deceased member of one's family tree with whom the living may remain spiritually connected.

Nirvana

In Buddhism, liberation from suffering.