

# Afterlife

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The enlightenment, with its emphasis on the importance of human reason, philosophical reflection and scientific knowledge raised serious questions concerning the authoritarianism of Scholastic theology and the dogmatism of revealed religion. Charles Guignebert has noted that the Enlightenment is not a movement opposed to religion, nor even to its ecclesiastical forms sanctioned by tradition and custom, but of a more and more effectually concerted resistance of the spirit to the letter, of life to formula, of tolerance to compulsion, of individual initiative to the obligation of a collective obedience.

For this reason the domination of the Church was subjected, in this "age of enlightenment," to an assault which shook it to its depths. (*Ancient, Medieval and Modern Christianity*, pp. 417f) Clearly, the shaking has not ceased. It continues today. It impacts on traditional beliefs in the afterlife. Catholic theologian Hans Kung, in a single extended sentence, put it this way:

*That is to say, we are raising the question of eternal life at a time when a completely new scientific world vision has come to prevail and the blue outer wall of the heavenly halls as the scene of eternal life has begun literally to dissolve into the air; when the postulates of the Enlightenment has penetrated everywhere and there is no longer any eternal truth that can evade the critical judgment of reason by an appeal merely to the authority of Bible, tradition or Church, while belief in eternity can no longer be imposed by authority or taken for granted as part of an ideology; when ideological criticism has laid bare the sociological misuse of belief in eternity, so that the latter can never again be made to serve as an empty promise of a hereafter or as a means of stabilizing unjust, inhuman conditions; when the politico-cultural predominance of Christianity has ceased, with the result that the denial of an eternal life no longer involves mortal danger and the all-embracing secularization process has produced a shift of consciousness from the hereafter to the here and now, from life after death to life before death, from yearning for heaven to fidelity to earth. (Kung, *Eternal Life?*, 6)*

It is my purpose to trace and seek to understand the origins of beliefs in the afterlife and to evaluate the beliefs in the continuing spirit of the Enlightenment.

## **The Sources of Beliefs**

No one knows just how or when beliefs in an afterlife arose. One may conjecture that there was a time when our most primitive ancestors did not believe in any form of existence beyond the present. The dead were dead. As with animals, so with humans; bodies were left where they fell. Perhaps, like some animals, primal humans mourned the loss, but life was for the living and the existence of the family or the group was of greater significance than the care of the dead. If one assumes that the dead were buried, then it must be acknowledged that due to the migratory life patterns of early humans and the impermanence of camping sites, archaeologists have not been able to uncover any solid evidence of burial customs.

When humans began to live in settled communities, it is clear that they buried and protected the bodies of the deceased. For example, some fifty thousand years ago in Palestine, cave-dwelling Mount Carmel humans buried their dead beneath the floors of the caves in which they lived. Later, in communities such as that found at Rehov har Bashan in Tel Aviv, burials were made beneath the floors of dwellings. One might speculate that the purpose was to keep the dead family member close to the living. There is some evidence that food was shared with the dead, so perhaps the dead were considered to have an existence or a life of their own within the grave while maintaining links to the world of the living. Ultimately, places of entombment were located away from the homes of the living and the cemetery, the necropolis or city of the dead, became a reality that is still with us.

Just how notions of the continuing existence of the dead came into being can only be matters of conjecture. It has been suggested that perhaps the source of beliefs in the afterlife is to be found in dreams. The records of our human history, from the third millennium to modern times, provide numerous reports of dreams about death or about those who have died. The dream may include conversations with the dead. Sometimes the dead person informed the dreamer that she is not dead, but just in hiding. In other instances, the dead may invite the living to join them. The dreams represent the dreamer's attempt to cope with loss through denial, inasmuch as in the dream the person is not truly dead. Even today, there are those who repeatedly experience dreams in which dead friends or family members are envisioned. Some become convinced that the dead are not truly dead and are seeking to communicate with the living.

Of course, a dream is just a dream, but our ancient ancestors may not have been able to distinguish between the dream and reality. When a deceased family member appeared during sleep and seemed to be communicating with the dreamer, our forbears had no way of knowing that dreams, in all their details, are the products of our own minds. As individual creators of the dream we are, in truth, all parts, all roles and all conversations in

the dream. For our ancestors, the dream and reality merged. J.S. Lincoln in his study of 'The Dream in Primitive Cultures' has noted that what the dreamer "perceives in the dream, is not recognized as images created by his own mind, but is regarded as having a reality of its own and an existence which is independent of the dreamer".

The dream may feature images of the afterlife. For example, the Sumerian-Babylonian story of Gilgamesh related a dream of the afterworld portraying commonly held notions concerning what lay beyond this earthly existence. Some modern dreamers envision an afterworld and they too accept what they dream as a relatively accurate portrayal of an existence beyond death.

Perhaps early beliefs in the afterlife grew out of hallucinatory experiences. All of us know that on occasion the mind seems to play tricks. We conjure up an after-image of something that has been seen earlier. For example, recently I spent a weekend with friends in a mountain condominium. They own a large dog, part wolf, named Kenzie. In the evenings, Kenzie would stretch out in front of the fireplace - a huge mound of flesh and fur with those magnificent pointed ears alert and eyes watching every move. Upon return to my home, there were several occasions as I was seated by the fireplace, reading, when out of the corner of my eye I could almost see Kenzie lying in about the same location he would have been had we been in the mountains. Of course there was nothing there. The flickering shadows produced by the fire apparently triggered memories of the mountain sojourn. The powerful mental imprint of the animal produced a recollection of an experience and for a moment the experience was relived.

There is nothing particularly supernatural or uncanny about this sort of remembering. Many people have it. Quite often after some loved person has died, they imagine they hear a familiar voice and, because the recall pattern is so vivid, they are almost persuaded to respond. Indeed, out of emotional need or out of habit some do respond. A few years ago, I conducted a grief seminar in which an attending psychiatrist shared his reactions following his wife's death. At certain moments, when he was alone and relaxed, he would be startled by what he thought was her footstep or the sound of her voice. In his loneliness and almost out of habit, he would call out to her. Of course he knew that there was no one there but he refused to ignore the power of past associations. At times he held one-sided conversations with her just as if she were present. The one-sided conversations helped him cope with his loss.

Some have echoed my experience with the dog, Kenzie. Out of the corner of their eye, they think they see the familiar form of someone who recently died. When they look directly at the place where it is supposed to be, there is no image. The response is a normal grief reaction of denial. For a moment, memory or recall takes over the mind and for a second

or so it is as if death has not truly happened and the person is still present. In some touching and rather pathetic instances, individuals have refused to acknowledge that the experience is simply a mental flashback to a past experience. They insist that the dead person actually appeared and is trying to communicate. Endless hours can be spent in fruitless efforts to establish contact with the dead.

Our ancient ancestors may also have experienced afterimages. Perhaps, because they were not always able to distinguish between what they fancied they saw and reality, they truly believed that the dead were still alive or at least had power briefly to manifest themselves. If such a power was attributed to the dead, it is not surprising to discover evidence of beliefs that the dead could have influence or power in the world of the living. Consequently, there was fear of the dead. Efforts were made to please the dead and to thwart any mischief an unhappy dead person might seek to bring to the living.

Another source for belief in an afterlife is related to the fear of dying and death. Death means the termination of all that has been experienced in life. The notion of not-being can be frightening. Belief in an afterlife represents a denial of and resistance to the finality implied in dying and death. If there is a life beyond this life, then what we do in our lifetime and what we experience may have meaning. Without such a belief, life itself can be construed as ultimately meaningless.

Often we think in terms of rewards and punishments, and we may ask what is the reward for having lived, for having struggled through infancy toward maturity, for having grappled with disease and misfortune, for having achieved successes and contributed to human welfare? What is the importance of life if it is simply a momentary spasm in the endlessness of time and space? It was this sort of question that prompted the writer of *Ecclesiastes* to declare that existence was meaningless (Heb. hebel). This same attitude is expressed in the writings of modern existentialists. Afterlife beliefs provide answers. Despite the fact that there is no proof that life-beyond-death exists in any form, physical or spiritual, many find comfort in believing that there is life beyond death. Afterlife beliefs ease the sting of death and may imply rewards for enduring the burdens of mortality by suggesting that there is meaning to human existence. Promises of rewards and punishments for what is done in this life provide solutions (simplistic though they may be) to issues of injustice, poverty, suffering and class discrimination. To believe, despite the lack of evidence, that cosmic justice or divine justice is operative in the universe, can induce individuals to endure and accept their lot in life no matter how mean and inadequate that lot may be. If one can assume, that provided one lives as a decent human being despite poverty, disease, unjust treatment and deprivation of essentials for a good life, that in another existence one will be rewarded for that behavior, and if one can believe that the cruel, the unjust, the manipulators of a society that deprive others of their full

status as humans will be punished, then one can argue that somehow life is fair. When the problem assumes theological dimensions, as it does under the title of "theodicy" or the justice of god, the believer proclaims trust in a just god who will somehow set the balances straight. One lives in trust and by faith.

Of course, there is absolutely no evidence to support such a belief. There is no proof that evil that is not identified and dealt with in this life is punished in an afterlife. There is nothing to demonstrate that human decency earns approval or merit for the future. Good and evil are social and personal realities that require recognition and reward or punishment or curtailment in our present existence.

The great danger in belief systems that promise rewards and punishments in the afterlife is that they tend to support the status quo. Some argument could be made that the organizations that teach and encourage beliefs in an ultimate justice are really concerned with maintaining present injustice inasmuch as they discourage social rebellion against discrimination and maltreatment. By persuading believers that evil will be punished in a future existence, religious dogma may discourage some from indulging in evil and destructive behavior. At the same time, such teachings promote attitudes of resignation to the divine will by suggesting that behind evil and misfortune, there may be a divine plan whose nature is hidden from humans. Beliefs in an afterlife may give solace to the underprivileged, the undernourished, the oppressed and the enslaved as they hope for freedom in another dimension. At the same time, these same beliefs discourage efforts to effect the changes that can eliminate poverty and mistreatment of minorities or handicapped persons. They encourage and indeed produce an apathy that is nothing more than an easy escape from reality.

### **The Locale of the Dead: the Earliest Beliefs**

A perfectly normal question arising out of a belief in afterlife is: if the dead continue to exist beyond this life, where is the locale of that existence? The fact that in some cultures food offerings were made at the grave of the dead suggests that those people believed that the burial place was where the dead remained after life ended. For example, the Egyptian belief in afterlife developed around the myth of Osiris, the divine son of the sky goddess Nut and the earth god Geb and the first ruler of Egypt. Osiris was murdered and dismembered by his jealous brother Seth. Isis, Osiris' wifesister, reconstituted and mummified his body and through sacral rituals enabled Osiris to become king of the underworld. His reconstituted body was now immortal. Horus, his son, became king of Egypt and like subsequent pharaohs, claimed the divine status of Osiris. At death, each ruler was mummified. Magical empowering funerary rituals performed at the tomb. enabled the pharaoh and perhaps certain nobility to enter an afterlife associated with the

gods. The pharaohs were believed to become immortal and one with Osiris. Rulers could be imagined riding in the divine sun-boat, or dwelling among the stars or in some ideal paradise. Their mummified bodies remained in the tomb, but the spiritual self, the ka was able to experience the wonders of the afterlife. The cave tombs of Egyptian nobility contain wall paintings portraying life in ancient Egypt and it has been suggested that the ka of the dead could enter the scenes and enjoy the portrayed activities. Despite the beliefs of identity with Osiris, the dead pharaohs required nourishment. Food was entombed with the mummies. From the earliest times, food offerings were made outside the tomb by relatives or priests. Indeed, as E. Wallis Budge has pointed out, there is clear evidence in the mastaba (pre-pyramid) tombs, that out of fear of lack of food and water for the dead, funerary offerings were regularly presented at the tomb site by paid clergy. If the offerings were not made, the dead might cause suffering, disease and death in neighboring villages. Just how the deceased were supposed to consume the food is not known. Perhaps the ka of the dead could absorb the ka of the offerings.

The common people could entertain no such grandiose illusions. Their graves were simple and the staples buried with them represented that which they possessed in an earthly life. From time to time, family members might visit the graves with food offerings to replenish what was placed in the tomb. I have witnessed Muslim families in Upper Egypt doing that very thing, even though such a custom is not part of accepted Muslim religion. The women gathered at the tomb of a deceased relative, performed mourning rites and poured liquids on the grave. Ancient patterns remain and attach themselves to the new.

In Mesopotamia, the condition of the dead was visualized differently. There the literature depicts the grave as a gloomy, underground environment, presided over by a queen and a king of the dead. The dream in the Gilgamesh epic portrayed the dead as dwelling in darkness, feathered like birds, with clay for food. Those who had held high positions on earth, were slaves in the underworld. Thus, while the body decayed in the grave, the essence of the person continued on in some sort of ghostly way in a not very pleasant environment.

The pre-Israelite Canaanites had developed sophisticated notions about death. The god of the realm of the dead was Mot, a word which is the equivalent of the Hebrew word for death: mawet. During the summer season when the sun blazed down on Palestinian fields, it was assumed that Ba'al, the rain god, the life-giver, was in the clutches of Mot. The coming of the autumnal rains signified the resurrection of Ba'al and the beginning of the new year. The netherworld was a dismal place of mire and filth whose mouth or entrance stretched from heaven to earth, always open and ready to consume (Driver, Canaanite Myths, 105-107).

As in Canaanite thought so in Hebrew thought, both death (mawet) and the place of the dead (sheol) could be personified. Jeremiah wrote:

*"For death (mawet) has entered our windows  
and it has penetrated our palaces" (9:21 )*

A wisdom writer warned his pupils to avoid those who plotted to despoil the rich and who said:

*"Let's swallow them alive and whole like Sheol  
like those who descend into the Pit" (Proverbs 1:12)*

The prophet Isaiah's warnings of disaster were mocked by those who claimed:

*"We have entered into a covenant with death (mawet = Mot)  
and we have an agreement with Sheol  
so that when the overwhelming disaster strikes  
it will not affect us" (Isa.28:15).*

Sheol, the netherworld, comprised a community of those who once lived, but who were now cut off from the living and from their god Yahweh (Ps. 88:3-5). The dead were said to be "gathered to their kindred" (Gen.25:17,35:29, etc.) and excavations of Hebrew cave tombs give clear evidence that from time to time the graves were opened to admit the newly deceased, just as some in Arab countries, familial Muslim tombs are opened and closed for burials.

Sheol was an unpleasant place of darkness (Job 18:18) and decay (abaddon), where the dwellers became the energyless (rephaim) and kings and commoners rested together for eternity (Job 3:13-19), oblivious of the earthly life (Ps. 88:12; Eccles. 9:5).

In a dirge directed toward Israel's enemies, a poet depicted Sheol welcoming a deceased oppressive ruler:

*"Below, Sheol is stirred up to meet you when you arrive  
It rouses the rephaim to meet you, all of whom were leaders on earth,  
It raises the dethroned, all who had been kings of nations  
They all speak and say to you:  
You have become weak as we are, you have become like us.  
Your splendor, the music of your lutes is brought down to Sheol  
Maggots form the bed beneath you,  
and worms are your covering". (Isa. 14: 9-11)*

The shadowy existence in Sheol should not be construed as a meaningful, personal

immortality. The dead in Sheol seem to have been able to retain a recognizable identity -- at least for a time. Their mortal remains decayed and in time they were all but forgotten. The essence of the dead person, which was labelled an *elohim*, a god or power, could be conjured up for consultation by a necromancer or channeler (*I Sam.28:13*).

### **Resurrection and The Locale of the Dead**

After the exile in Babylon (6th century BCE), Aryan ideas from Persia were incorporated into the theology of some Jewish groups. The tomb became a temporary dwelling place for the dead, and there arose a belief in resurrection and in an eternity in either heaven or hell. The revelations of the Aryan prophet Zoroaster, which became the religion of Persia, postulated an end-time for human history together with a belief in an afterlife which included a final judgment when individuals would receive rewards and punishments according to behavior in this life. The concept was adopted by certain Jewish sects. In Jewish scripture it is represented in the Book of Daniel which was written during the Maccabean period, around 165 B.c.E., when Jews were persecuted for their faith by the Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes.

The author of Daniel pretended to be writing during the time of the exile in Babylon (6th century B.C.E.). Consequently, he had little problem in "predicting" historical events that had already occurred up to 165 B.C.E. When he attempted to go beyond his own time he, like other foretellers, failed miserably. He accepted the Persian notion of an end-time, when history would cease and when the dead would be resurrected and judged. He believed that end-time was very near.

*"At that moment your people will be delivered  
Everyone who is written in the book  
Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awaken  
Some to everlasting life  
But some to reproach, to eternal abhorrence" (Dan. 12:1-2)*

For the first time the notion of resurrection and judgment became part of biblical thought.

Some have argued that the idea of resurrection appeared earlier. For example, the prophet Ezekiel developed an allegory based on his vision of dry bones (*Ezek. 37:1-14*). The bones represented the Jews in exile who seemed to think that their identity as a people was dead. The revivication of the bones in the allegory pointed up the hope for the reestablishment of the nation of Judah, and has nothing to do with the resurrection of dead individuals. Jewish beliefs in resurrection and judgment underwent further development during the intertestamental period. For example, the book of *Enoch* prophesied that the righteous would "shine as the lights of heaven" while sinners would enter into "darkness and chains

and a burning flame" (103-104). The *Psalms of Solomon* stated that "they that fear the Lord shall rise to life eternal, and their life in the Lord's light shall never end" (3:16) but the inheritance of the wicked "is Sheol and darkness and destruction." (14:7). Other writers echo similar beliefs. Thus the stage was set for the New Testament where the idea of resurrection from the dead is demonstrated in Jesus whose brief sojourn in the tomb became the model and the hope for Christians.

Ishtar the Babylonian goddess of love and fertility entered the world of the dead. She journeyed to the house from which none who enter ever leave on the road from which there is no return route. Of course during her absence sexuality came to a standstill on earth:

*"The bull does not mount the cow  
The ass does not impregnate the jenny  
Nor does the man copulate with the young woman".*

Fortunately the goddess returned from the underworld and nature was restored to normal.

The Jesus story differed from the earlier myths in that he was an historical person who, according to kenotic theology, had divested himself of a previously held divine status, to become completely human (*Philippians* 2:5-8). Almost as preparation for the resurrection, the Gospels record stories of the miraculous raising of the dead by Jesus. He restored life to the dead daughter of a synagogue leader simply by taking the child's hand and saying, "Get up, my child" (*Mark* 5:41-42 and parallels). He interrupted a funeral procession, placed his hand on the bier and said "Young man, get up" (*Luke* 7:11-14). Lazarus was dead and entombed for four days. It was assumed that the process of decomposition had begun. Jesus ordered the removal of the blocking stone from the tomb and commanded: "Lazarus, come forth". The dead man came back to life and emerged from the tomb (*John* 11:38-44).

Jesus' disciples also raised the dead. Peter brought a dead woman named Tabitha back to life by praying and saying, "Get up, Tabitha" (*Acts* 9:40). When a boy named Eutychus fell from a third story window and was presumed dead, Paul put his arms around the boy and said that he was still alive (*Acts* 20:8-12). In this instance it could be argued that the boy was simply unconscious and only needed resuscitation. In each story of the dead returning to life, it is assumed that the persons would ultimately die. The death and resurrection of Jesus is something quite different. According to Christian scriptures, he was killed and then came back to life to live eternally. Belief in Jesus' resurrection is central to the Christian faith. The apostle Paul wrote:

*"If there be no resurrection, then Christ was not raised; and if Christ was not raised, then our gospel is null and void and so is your faith, and we turn out to be lying witnesses for God because we bore witness that he raised Christ to life, whereas if the dead are not raised, it follows that Christ was not raised, and if Christ was not raised your faith has nothing in it and you are all in your old state of sin". (I Cor. 15:13-17)*

As one might expect, Paul went on to affirm his faith in the resurrection.

Inasmuch as Paul's letters are the earliest New Testament writings (between 55 and 65 C.E.), his statements provide the first record we have about the revivification of the dead Jesus. He wrote to Christians in Corinth:

*"First and foremost, I transmitted to you the facts which had been given to me: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised to life on the third day, in accord the scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas, and afterward to the Twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred of our brothers at once, most of whom are still living, although some have died. Then he appeared to James, and afterward to all the apostles. Finally, he appeared even to me". (I Cor. 15:3-8)*

Paul's testimony contains much hearsay evidence plus a reference to a personal experience of the risen Jesus. In addition to Paul's list of witnesses, the gospels record reports of the resurrection (omitting *Mark 16:9-20* which was not part of the original text) including that of the women at the tomb (*Matt 28:9-10*), Mary Magdalene (*John 20:11-18*), and two disciples on the way to Emmaus (*Luke 24:13-31*). With the exception of Paul's personal reference, all reports are anecdotal and the accounts of Jesus' resurrection in the four gospels do not harmonize.

Additional evidence for the resurrection, including the empty tomb and the testimony of the Roman guards, is also anecdotal. There are no first hand data. What records we do have were written long after the event. Paul's written statement was composed at least 30 years after the crucifixion. The gospels came into existence some 40 or 50 or 60 years after Jesus' death. Research into oral transmission has demonstrated the ways in which accounts assume new dimensions, added aspects and varying forms. How do we evaluate New Testament testimonies?

Empty tombs abound in Palestine. As one who has participated in archaeological research, I have been in dozens of empty tombs. The style of the tomb or the pottery fragments may help to date the tomb, but they tell us nothing about what happened to the body or bodies. As my Canadian New Testament teacher, Clyo Jackson, said, some 50 years ago, "The

empty tomb proves only that the tomb was empty." The tomb cannot be used to validate Jesus' resurrection.

The testimony of the Roman guards appears only in Matthew's account. The report is not given by the guards. It is hearsay evidence, recorded and perhaps even composed by the gospel writer in response to an accusation that the disciples or followers of Jesus stole the body or moved it to another locale. The account cannot be admitted as evidence of Jesus' resurrection.

Those who went to the tomb following the Jewish Sabbath were supposed to have been accosted by one or more angelic figures or by Jesus himself, depending upon which account one reads. If one believes in angelic extra-terrestrial beings, the accounts may sound reasonable. But angels, do not seem to manifest themselves in these modern times. Despite the insistence of some that they do exist, they are figures that belong to the distant past. The story of Jesus' manifestation of himself to the women (*Matt. 28:9*) lacks completion. Jesus suddenly appeared and, one must assume, as suddenly disappeared. In the Johannine story, when Jesus appeared to Mary of Magdala, she did not at first recognize him (*John 20:14*). The implication is that the form of the human Jesus (the tradition states that his body was resurrected) had somehow assumed new dimensions.

There are variations in the descriptions of the form of the risen body. Paul's vision, despite his claim "Did I not see Jesus our Lord?" (*I Cor. 9:1*) appears to have been of a non-physical Jesus or what many prefer to call a "spiritual" body. The report of his hallucination, written by the author of *Luke* and *Acts*, perhaps as late as 90 CE, describes the encounter in which Paul and his companions saw a light, but only Paul heard a voice and carried on a conversation with the unseen Jesus (*Acts 22:1-11*). In other accounts, Jesus' materialization had physical attributes. He shared food (*Luke 24:30*), showed his crucifixion wounds which could be touched (*Luke 24:30-39*, (although he forbade Mary of Magdala to touch him, *John 20:17*), gave advice on fishing (*John 21:6*) and in other ways manifested a physical presence. He could also suddenly appear and disappear (*Luke 24:15, 31,36,50*). He seemed no longer bound by laws of time, space nor, as we shall note, gravity. If, for a moment, one could accept the resurrection of Jesus as an historical fact, a more serious question arises concerning the ultimate disposition of the risen body. The biblical response is that Jesus ascended into heaven. He simply levitated, defied gravity and rose up into the sky as the apostles watched (*Acts 1:1-11*). It was Paul's belief that Jesus would descend from this same heaven to establish the divine kingdom of believers (*I Thess. 4:16*), and that with Jesus' return, the dead would be resurrected (*I Cor. 15:52*).

The notion of a heaven in the sky was an acceptable idea some 2000 years ago during the first centuries of our era. The telescope had not been invented. Copernicus was not yet

born. The probing of space was far off in the future. Palestinian Jews believed what others also believed, that the earth was like a flat disc arched over by a solid firmament and that somewhere above the earth the gods dwelled. Today the notion is simply nonsense. There is no heaven to which Jesus could have ascended. There is absolutely no evidence of his resurrection, except in the minds and faiths of those who choose to believe the gospel stories. The belief is naive and belongs in the category of other ancient myths that told of the comings and goings of divine beings between earth and the heavenly abode of the deities. Resurrection is a faith statement which denies the reality of death.

Paul was absolutely wrong in his belief that Jesus would soon return riding on the clouds of heaven. He was wrong when he foretold the opening of the graves and the resurrection of the dead. If, as some fundamentalist preachers maintain, that event is still to happen, then over the millenia the bodies of believers will long since have disintegrated into dust.. They will have to be miraculously transformed into spiritual entities as Paul claimed they would be (*I Cor. 15:52f*).

Since the time of the New Testament, no other claims of resurrection have been accepted. The dead remain dead. Resurrection remains as a Christian myth.

### **Implications of Christian Beliefs**

Christian beliefs in an afterlife postulate a dualism suggesting that each individual consists of a body and a soul. This notion was not present in biblical thought prior to the acceptance of Aryan theology following the exile in Babylon. Before that time, Jews appear to have accepted a belief in the psychosomatic unity of the person. One was not a body and a soul, one was a soul-body or a body-soul. At death the total unit entered a shadowy existence in the grave. As the body disintegrated, the dead became the energyless. The only immortality was in the continuation of the man's (as opposed to the woman's) family name and his identity as a progenitor. Some Christians argue that when the time for resurrection comes, the physical body, despite having rotted and disintegrated in the tomb, will be rejoined with the soul to constitute a physically identifiable person in the afterworld, which most Christians assume, that for themselves and their loved ones, will be heaven. Others argue for a spiritual existence in paradise. The souls or spirits of evil persons or of those who have not accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior or who have not accepted some particular denomination's peculiar belief system will spend eternity burning in Hell as promised in the Christian book, "The Revelation of John" (*Rev.20:12-15*).

### **Reincarnation**

The doctrine of reincarnation is one answer to the problem of human suffering and to injustice in life. It is a response to the question "if there is such a thing as divine or cosmic

justice, why do some good people suffer and why do some evil people prosper?". One answer lies in the concepts of karma and reincarnation. Each life is trapped in the vortex of a cyclic pattern which is known as the wheel of life. Each life develops along a spiral pattern moving toward personal escape in the absolute or the cosmic whole or the attainment of cosmic consciousness. As each life proceeds on that pathway, what is done in one life affects what occurs in the next, for the individual never loses personal identity. Therefore, what is happening in this life is the result of what the individual did in a past life. Who or what one is in this life (in some beliefs one may be reborn as an animal or an insect) depends upon how one lived in the preceding incarnation.. There is no escape from the pattern. The only escape comes when one reaches nirvana, the state of cosmic enlightenment.

Like many other beliefs in afterlife, the notion is based on an acceptance of dualism, which is to claim that each person is composed of a physical body and a soul or mind or identity. It is possible for a person's soul or spirit or identity to inhabit a different physical form in each reincarnation. When the physical form is discarded, the spiritual self enters a new body. Those religions that subscribe to these notions have developed high ethical principles to guide the individual toward the perfection or completion which is nirvana. There may also be an emphasis upon an austerity that moves one toward the perfect life and away from such harsh realities of this life as lust and greed, which are recognized as destructive or negative qualities. The belief in the rotational pattern of life may give rise to the sanctification of animal and even insect life. For example, among the Hindus of India, the cow and the monkey hold privileged positions that protect them from slaughter as food or nuisances or health-hazards and that permit them to invade the streets and homes.

There is no verification of reincarnation (Edwards, "The Evidence Against Reincarnation"). Claims of memories of past lives and past existences that have been investigated have not been substantiated.

### **Reincarnation in the Bible**

From time to time it is suggested that the concept of reincarnation is reflected in both Jewish and Christian scriptures. The example most often quoted is that associated with the prophet Elijah who was one of two biblical characters who escaped death.

Enoch, the first individual to escape death is mentioned in the genealogical list prepared by ancient Jewish priests (*Gen.5*), where he is the single pre-flood character from Adam to Lamech who did not die. It is written that he "walked with Elohim and he was not, for Elohim took him" (5:24). During the intertestamental period, there came into being writings attributed to the heavenly Enoch which are now published in the Pseudepigrapha. The writings are supposed to represent what Enoch learned and revealed after reaching his

heavenly abode. The New Testament book of Jude contains a quotation from *Enoch* 1:9 (*Jude* 14).

The prophet Elijah is also supposed to have by-passed death and, while still alive, to have ascended to heaven (*II Kings* 2:1-18). The witness to his miraculous translation was his disciple Elisha. The two prophets had just walked dry shod over the Jordan river, a wondrous event made possible by Elijah, who had compelled the river to stop flowing by striking the water with his rolled up tunic (*2 Kings* 2:8). The story continues: And as they continued to walk on and chat, suddenly they were separated from one another by a chariot of fire and fiery horses. Then Elijah was transported by a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha witnessed it and shouted, "My father, my father! the chariots and horsemen of Israel!" Then he saw him no more. (*2 Kings* 2:11-12)

To guarantee that this was truly an ascension and not merely a freakish accident of nature, fifty members of Elijah's prophetic school searched the area to see if they could find his body. They failed, and it was assumed that he was taken into heaven

Jewish theologians reasoned that if Elijah had been physically taken into heaven, then he would not have suffered the fate of entombed bodies. He would not have decayed. He would be a whole person living in the presence of the Jewish god, Yahweh. Whoever added the final appendage to the book of *Malachi* drew on this belief and stated that before the final day of judgment, Yahweh would send "Elijah the prophet" (*Malachi* 4:5). Inasmuch as messianic notions and end of the age ideas were current in Jesus time, it was natural that someone should ask Jesus if either he or John the baptizer were Elijah. Jesus seemed to identify John as the expected forerunner (*Matthew* 11:14). Sherman Johnson has noted:

*"Here and elsewhere Matthew expresses the Christian doctrine that John is Elijah (cf. 17:12-13). He does not necessarily mean that he is identical with the earlier prophet; he simply exercises his functions and fulfills the prophecies regarding him. This suggestion makes good sense in that Elijah was not thought of as a disembodied spirit that could be incarnated in some other life form".*

John was a whole person; Elijah remained in the heavenly environs. On the other hand, the concept of body and soul was a part of the thinking of the Roman world. It is unlikely, but not entirely impossible, that some Jews may have entertained the notion of Elijah being reincarnated as an infant born to Elizabeth and Zechariah (*Luke* 1:57-60) so that he might mature as the forerunner to Jesus who was born to Mary and Joseph and who, in Christian thought, matured as the Messiah. According to the writer of the *Gospel of John*, the Baptizer did not recognize himself as the forerunner (*John* 1:19-21). In any case, the possible relationship of the idea of reincarnation in the Bible to the present day western

fascination with the idea is, at best, tangential.

### **Past-Life Regression**

If one will live in an afterlife, is it not possible that one had a prelife, a pre-this-world-now existence? The idea, found in the reincarnation doctrines of Hinduism, has become part of current New Age thinking. Certain hypnotists claim that they are able to relax patients and by suggestion enable them to recall previous existences. The results of these recall-experiences are singularly unconvincing.

Perhaps the most notorious case of past life regression is that of Bridey Murphy which burst upon the public in 1952. Despite claims that Ruth Simmons (Virginia Tighe) in her recall of her previous life as Bridey Murphy provided testable data concerning Irish customs that she could not possibly have known or experienced from this life (she was born in Chicago in 1923), it has been demonstrated that all that she revealed through her hypnotic regression was actually learned in her present life (cf. M. Harris, "Past Life Regressions"). The explanation for her belief that she was recalling past-life experiences is the phenomenon known as cryptomnesia and refers to information acquired from a wide variety of experiences and sources (including radio, television, overheard conversations, etc) which are stored in memory but are not available for normal recall. When they do surface, sometimes spontaneously, the sources are forgotten. Under hypnosis, a subject can, if asked, recall where the information originated. Subjects who under hypnosis were able to tell a great deal about former lives, were also able, when questioned, to provide the sources for the information. In other words, in the most famous cases of so-called past-life-regression, it has been possible to demonstrate that what the person is recalling is not a former life, but information stored in the mind and reformulated in terms of personal experience. This is cryptomnesia.

New Age past-life regressions seem to be more contrived. In one of the many New Age past-life demonstrations, a hypnotized woman, having been led through various past life regressions, claimed to have lived in ancient Egypt. Interestingly enough, when questioned, she was unsure of the location of the pyramids. During the same interview, an issue pertaining to a European site and a completely different time frame was raised. The woman responded through the personality she was supposed to have been in the European setting although at that moment she was supposed to be in her Egyptian identity. Individuals claim to be able to place themselves in different historical epochs and to talk about their life-situation in those time-frames. What is "relived" appears to be mere fantasy built on fragmentary knowledge. Insofar as I have been able to determine on the basis of talking with those who were supposed to have "regressed" to time periods concerning which I have some detailed knowledge, the regressed person's existence had

absolutely no relationship to documented historical reality. One would expect that if the individual wished to make real and convincing the so-called regression, they would at least take time to do their homework and read up on the epoch!

What appears to be happening in this new wave of past-life regressions is that the hypnotized person, if he or she is truly hypnotized, enters a semi-trance state. The person is keenly aware of everything that is taking place in his/her present place world. What the person describes as a previous life may reflect deep emotional needs, and appears at best to be the product of cryptomnesia, coupled with a more-or-less rich imagination and the ability to fantasize.

Some envision their past life as marked with servitude or unhappiness, which is often very close to the way in which they contemplate their present life. Some with a hunger for authority or power, picture roles in which they were dominant characters. The romantic fantasy adventures of those who live rather prosaic lives, permits the drabness of this life to be enlivened by the imaginary richness of a past life. The results are akin to the fantasies of normal day-dreaming.

Some psychics claim to be able to read the past lives of their clients. They will tell those who come to them about past relationships that may explain present situations. For example, an employee who suffers under a tyrannical supervisor learns that in a past life she was a male, married to this person and their relationship was unhappy because she had been intolerant and demanding. The present situation is simple karma. The wheel of life has rotated and what occurred in past existences has affected what is taking place now. To the outside observer, the interpretation reflects the creative imagination of the psychic rather than any reality.

### **Ghosts and Apparitions**

The word "ghost" refers to an apparition, generally of a person. Belief in ghosts rests upon hallucinatory or misinterpreted experiences of what is believed to be phantom persons that give the impression of form and identity. Usually ghosts are described as wearing clothing. Sometimes the apparitions breathe or speak or make sounds. Many reports of ghostly appearances coincide with fatal accidents, murders and tragic deaths. In the minds of some, the ghost is believed to be the "spirit" of a deceased person freed of fleshly bonds but still retaining an identity with the flesh-form. The significance of ghostly manifestations is variously interpreted. Sometimes they are believed to be warnings from the dead to the living. Some hauntings are seen as reprisals for mistreatment during the ghost's earthly life. Sometimes ghosts appear to be friendly and helpful, at other times they come to harm and are hostile. Still others seem to have neither malevolent nor benevolent intentions

inasmuch as they are completely involved in their own memories.

Ghost stories are found in every culture. Those who claim to experience the apparitional manifestations appear to be mentally and physically healthy; quite often they are dismissed as naive, or dupes, or liars, or as individuals who accept dreams and hallucinations as reality rather than as mental aberrations. On occasion attempts are made to give scientific respectability to phantom appearances by reference to the so-called "personal energy" which remains after death, without, of course, defining just what the phrase means. At other times theological meaning is given to apparitions by referring to them as "souls" of the dead.

Folklorist Andrew Lang, writing in 1897 noted that what he called "old ghost stories" were "much more dramatic than the new." The "old" ghost stories had specific characteristics: As a rule their bodies were unburied, and so they demanded sepulture; or they had committed a wrong, and wished to make restitution; or they had left debts which they were anxious to pay; or they had advice, or warnings, or threats to communicate; or they had been murdered, and they were determined to bring their assassins to the gibbet" (*Dreams and Ghosts*, 110).

As Lang and others have suggested, there may be a link between dreams and the experience of ghosts, and as we have noted, our ancient ancestors may have difficulty in distinguishing between fantasy and reality. When the dead appeared in dreams and gave messages, it was believed that the dead continued to exist and were, in reality, communicating. Thus in Egypt, when troubles afflicted the living, messages were left at the tombs of dead relatives warning that tomb offerings would cease if the dead did not do something to relieve the bad fortune of the living.

Obviously, the priesthoods encouraged their followers to believe in an afterlife and to believe that the dead had power in the world of the living. Therefore, when one dreamed of the dead, and the dead addressed the dreamer, the experience was not to be dismissed as meaningless, but as a genuine communication from an inhabitant of the nether world. The proper interpreters of the dream were, of course, the priests. So far, there is absolutely no scientific validation for the existence of ghosts. They exist only in the minds, in the imaginations, in the mental conjuring of those who say they experience the presence of phantoms. Many ghostly appearances that have been investigated are found to be misinterpretations of perfectly natural events including sheets of paper or cloth caught in bushes and disturbed by slight breezes, shadow forms cast by flickering lights and so forth.

## **Near Death Experiences (NDEs)**

During the early 1970s, a wave of public interest and curiosity was engendered by the publication of reports by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Dr. Raymond Moody concerning near-death experiences. Some individuals who were presumed to be dead as a result of accidents, heart failure, cessation of breathing, reported that during the "death" period they had out-of-body experiences that brought them into another dimension of time and space. Some of the "death experiences" occurred in hospital settings where the physicians in attendance believed that the person was dying or dead, but who began resuscitation procedures. Of course the individual was not dead inasmuch as she lived to report on the NDE experience. Although the subject became popular in the 1970s, interest in death bed experiences go back nearly a century. Parapsychologists investigated the subject. Albert Heim, a geologist who had experienced close encounters with death during his rock climbing, studied near-death experiences. More recently Dr. Michael Sabom, a Florida cardiologist reported on NDEs, primarily from a study of cardiac arrests. Dr. Kenneth Ring, a University of Connecticut psychologist reported on the study of 102 NDEs of subjects residing in the New England area.

Kubler-Ross claimed to have talked with more than one thousand men, women and children about their NDE experiences. Moody, whose *'Life After Life'* was translated into more than twenty languages, based his comments on an eleven year study of more than 150 cases. Both Kubler-Ross and Moody imply that their findings suggest the reality of a life after death. Neither Kubler-Ross nor Moody have published their findings in a proper scientific manner that would make them available for analysis. Indeed, most of Kubler-Ross' reports are summary statements. Moody's case studies are selective and the sampling procedure is at best, haphazard. The reports contain amazing similarities and follow, in general, the following pattern. At the moment of "death", the person feels his/her "spirit" leave the body. In many cases, the spirit hovers above the body and views the scene below. Doctors and other health professionals work to restore heart beat and breathing. Relatives weep because the person is presumed to be dead. That is to say, the individual has a sense of being dead or of being considered dead. The awareness has produced mixed emotional responses. For some, watching the efforts at resuscitation are disturbing, frightening. Others report a feeling of intense calm and peace. The sense of being separated from the body also produces mixed emotional responses. In some cases, the farther the individual seems to move from the body the greater the tranquility and the sense of becoming distant from pain. Others report insecurity in separation, as if the body might be taken over by some other spirit. When the individual's name is called by the attending physicians, some claim to hear and to try to respond. Because they feel as if they were in a different world or a different dimension, they cannot communicate. The person

then begins to move through space, which is often described as a dark tunnel or as a void that produces the feeling of being in vast emptiness. For some the vastness is terrifying; for others the sensation is that of isolation. Many hear a soft humming sound.

Some experience a period of life review. It is as if their whole life is rapidly replayed. Because of the awareness of death, some reviews include a preview of one's own funeral and the mourning by family and friends. Others do not have this experience.

A light or lights that become increasingly bright welcome the spirit which senses a warm, friendly atmosphere. The only senses reported were those of sight and sound. Sometimes the newcomer was greeted by identifiable spirit-forms who may be relatives or hero figures or divinities such as Jesus or God. From this point on the stories vary.

Ray Canning, in discussing the environment of this other world with Mormons who have had the experience, discovered that the reports reflect much that is familiar in our present environment, only magnified in splendor. The buildings and the flowers were more beautiful, the singing was superior, and so on. (*Mormon Return*, 32). Often dead family members were greeted. Sometimes the individual claims to have encountered a cultural or religious hero such as Jesus or Moses or God or Joseph Smith, and soon.

Finally, it became necessary to return to the earth body. In some instances, the individual was told that his/her work on earth was unfinished, in other cases the person simply felt that s/he must return. Some left reluctantly. The sensations of returning to the earth body were often rather simple involving little more than feeling warm and taking a deep breath. In other cases, there was a sensation of the return of pain. Some report feeling a physical thump or bump.

Most report a change in attitude towards life and death following the experience. They sense a purpose in life. They are more caring, more compassionate, more empathetic. They move with an assurance they did not have before. Death is no longer feared, for it is recognized as a doorway for transition to another life in a spirit world.

How are these experiences to be understood? Some would argue that they provide definite proof of an afterlife; others categorize them as hallucinations. The similarities in pattern are astounding. Some aspects clearly reflect cultural patterns, and in general they reflect standard beliefs in an afterlife as taught in churches throughout the western world. No satisfactory explanation for what causes these experiences has been found so far. Among those suggested are the possibility that some of the hallucinatory experiences could be caused by therapeutic drugs administered to the patient at the time of physical crisis; that the panoramic life-review is the result of a discharge of neurons in the eye creating an imagery of lights, colors, and dark tunnels; that the tunnel effect is a recollection of birth

experiences when the infant passed through the vaginal canal to enter into a brightly lit room where it was welcomed by caring persons. These suggestions have not been accepted.

A cerebral anoxia theory suggests that a failing heart rate, lack of oxygen to the brain could induce visionary experiences. Not enough subjects entered hypoxia to support this idea. Another physiological hypothesis proposes that a massive release of endorphins, triggered by the closeness of death could produce relaxed, peaceful feelings. This proposal has remained no more than a proposal.

Psychological explanations have not fared well including the theory that the near-death-experience represents "depersonalization" by which the prospect of death induces a defensive psychological reaction. This reaction produces feelings of well-being, of bodily detachment, panoramic review and mystical transcendence, all of which are to be recognized as ego defences insulating the individual from the harsh reality of immediate annihilation. A psychological expectation theory suggests that the death visions reflected an anticipation of imminent death and afterlife. It becomes clear that no single hypothesis serves to explain near-death-experiences. The subject remains under study.

We know that imagery is not absent from the death bed. Kubler-Ross reported the words of a man who described his fight to stay alive for a few more days in these terms:

*Last night I put up a fight for several hours. There was a big train going rapidly down hill toward the end, and I had a big fight with the train master. I argued and fought with him. And I ordered him to stop this train one tenth of an inch short. (Kubler Ross, "What is it Like", 59)*

Ross interpreted the experience as a form of bargaining for more time. In another case, a woman suffering from a serious kidney ailment related her experience:

*A big cloud came over me and I had the idea that I had a kidney operation and didn't need those doctors. When I woke up they were gone. (Ross, "What is it Like", 59)*

Ross recognized that this visionary experience reflected the woman's fantasy that she did not need the doctors to save her life. Ross wrote "Considered to be psychotic and hallucinating, she was rejected for dialysis. "

In these two cases, the ailing body and the mind cooperated in making real the fact that an illness was terminal, and that the time of death was near. The posture of denial, which is recognized as a legitimate coping stance, could no longer be maintained. Body and mind, through a visionary experience, forced the confrontation of the reality and proximity of death. There was nothing supernatural in either situation.

What the mind fantasizes is always an individual experience. Coincidence of visionary content may be partially explained by cultural conditioning or perhaps genetic memory, although there is no scientific evidence to support the latter.

What is not verified is the existence of an afterlife. Our culture is dominated by religious beliefs that project a hope that often becomes an assurance of afterlife but which constitutes a denial of the finality of death. For those who choose not to live with unsubstantiated hope, and who find no assurance in near-death-experiences or past-life-regressions, existence is oriented towards life in the present, not in a post-life future.

### **Living Without Belief in an Afterlife**

She was an elderly woman, in her early 70s. She had been raised as a Methodist and her question was asked with timidity and yet with intensity, "Do you think there will be harps in heaven?" For once I gave the proper response: a question rather than a statement. "Why do you ask?" She replied, "Well, I hate harp music and I don't want to go there if that is what they are going to be playing!" What boredom! An eternity of harp music when you hate the instrument and its sounds! She was a good woman, kind and thoughtful and caring, but the reward for her Christian belief and decent life-style threatened to be an eternal punishment. I explained to her that this is what people believed who lived 2000 years ago and for whom harp music was the best they knew. She seemed satisfied.

Qoheleth, the teacher, found the endless routines of life boring and meaningless: "Emptiness of emptiness, everything is empty (of significance). What gain does a man have for all of his labor under the sun?" (*Eccles. 1:2-3*). How would he have dealt with eternity? Perhaps much the same way as the Methodist woman: "If that is what it is going to be like, I don't want it." Afterlife beliefs are responses to human fears about death and personal annihilation. They also serve as social controls, warning that what one does in this life has implications for the life to come. Therefore to do evil and to escape judgment today could result in an eternity of punishment after death. Notions about reincarnation provide the hope of some possible variation in the next incarnation, but even here, the idea of an endless procession of rebirths before one can escape the cycle and be absorbed into the whole also becomes a punishment-reward concept destined to control human behavior with warnings that what one does in this existence determines one's fate in the next.

### **How Does One Live Without Belief in a Hereafter?**

If one observes everyday existence, the non-believer lives a life not too dissimilar from that of a believing neighbor. Non-believers make the same sort of choices in terms of life style. It is often assumed that without the restraints of the threat of punishment in an afterlife

that a person would probably live a to-hell-with-everything-and-everybody life, greedily absorbing pleasures, ruthlessly exploiting others, indifferent to the future of humankind and the environment. Of course anyone can choose such a way of life, whether or not one believes in an afterlife.

On the other hand, a non-believer, a Humanist, can also choose to live this life to the full, seeking that which enhances the human spirit and contributes to the future. Art, music, the dance, the theater, great literature, glorious sunsets, magnificent forests, amazing wild life, beautiful fauna, and so on enrich the soul and the mind. Warm companionship, love and friendship, work that contributes to human welfare enliven and give meaning to the precious moments of existence. Where there is pain and suffering, the caring person, whether or not s/he entertains belief in a future life, reaches out in compassion. Where others hunger and are in poverty, the full human responds as best s/he can. Morals, values and ethical principles are drawn from the highest and noblest dreams of philosophers, psychologists, poets and painters, realists and dreamers, theologians and skeptics, and, most of all, lovers. The non-believer, the Humanist, chooses, not out of fear of punishment but out of love of and commitment to life, to living so that one feels within the self a sense of achievement and fulfilment, believing that because one is here and is committed, the world will, at death, be just a little better than it was at the individual's birth.

Such a commitment to life, to justice, to decency, to human betterment, to self-fulfilment can be identified as the Christian way, the Jewish way, the Buddhist way, the Muslim way, the Humanist way and so forth. What is different is that although the Humanist path parallels that of the highest ethical concepts entertained by the great religions, the path is freely chosen because it is good and satisfying, rather than out of fear of consequences. In other words, one may live a fine, meaning-filled life without belief in a hereafter. One chooses so to live with the only reward being an internal awareness and satisfaction experienced in the here and now.

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