



INTERFAITH COMMUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE (ICD)

FAITH AND CULTURE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Session #3: Death and the Afterlife: Influence of Views on Our Values and the Way We Live Our Lives

In the third session, held on May 7, 2023, the speaker was Dr. Jetsun Deleplanque, Postdoctoral R and T Fellow, George Mason University. Dr. Deleplanque's presentation focused on how our views about death and the afterlife may influence our values and the way we live.

Dr. Deleplanque began his presentation with two questions: How often do you contemplate your own mortality? How often do you actively think about your life and life goals in the light of the imminence of your death? In our society, death has become something from which we try to hide. Denying the reality of death is a relatively new development in society. Historically, faiths and cultures have thought deeply and developed extensive customs around death. Due to the medicalization of death in American society, we have regressed in our interpersonal skills regarding how we approach death. It is more lonely, mechanical, and deeply dehumanizing. The solution, suggests Elizabeth Kubler-Ross¹, is to break the silence around death, to reintegrate death into our lives, and to give a voice to the dying. Through the language of religion, we have developed a complex and rich vocabulary to conceive of death and its aftermath.

The Dharmic (or, more broadly, the Indic) faiths, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, are death-affirming religions. While the Abrahamic traditions have a linear perspective of life in which there is a beginning, a progression, and an end, the Indic religions (excluding Sikhism) view time as cyclical. In this view, there is no beginning and no end, for we are caught in a cycle of rebirth: we are born, exist, die, and the process begins again. The seeds we sow through intentions, wants, and actions in this life set in motion consequences for the next life. We continue to be reborn because we haven't yet realized oneness with the universe. Achieving that enlightenment would lead us to cease our "cravings" and, therefore, to have no further need to be reborn. Accordingly, death is not the opposite of life; it is the opposite of birth. Rather than being final it is a transition, a moment of opportunity. An ideal death is one that has 3 qualities: to face death without fear; to be fully conscious of the opportunity to break free of the cycle of rebirth; and to be fully focused on the divine.

Among the Abrahamic traditions, Judaism has the most varied views of death and the afterlife. The focus is on life and how to live it well – on practice more than on dogma. Very little is written in the Hebrew scriptures about death other than "from dust you came and to dust you will return". The religion is based on a covenant entered into with God – a partnership in which the Jewish people agree to worship God, follow His commandments, and live a righteous life and, in return, God will preserve the world, guarantee the continuation of the Jewish people and bless them with prosperity. However, in the years before the common era, the Jewish experience of persecution and diaspora, while those who betrayed the covenant prospered, led to the development of a belief that the righteous will eventually be resurrected and enter the world to come. The implication for funeral practices is that care of the body is very important because it is God's creation, and it is from the remains of the body

¹ Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth, *On Death and Dying*, Scribner, 2014 (50th Anniversary Edition; originally published 1969)

that resurrection will take place. Judaism also has a powerful way of processing grief through the tradition of sitting shiva, in which the entire community shares in the grieving process for seven days.

Christianity and Islam share the belief in resurrection and eternal life but with a pronounced shift from a focus on the body to a greater focus on the soul. Islam places beliefs about death at the center of religious practice. Death is the transition from this world to eternity and judgment is paramount. Therefore, life is lived with a focus on justice that aims to best prepare one for entry to paradise and a joyful reuniting of the soul with the creator.

Christianity emerged when Jewish Messianic beliefs were at their peak. Ideas about resurrection, death and the afterlife are at the core of Christianity. Death is seen as the opposite of life and is associated with sin. Overcoming sin is overcoming death. Jesus's resurrection is God's final victory over sin and death. The act of conversion through baptism imputes life to the soul; the body is unimportant.

In both Indic and Abrahamic religions, death achieves meaning through life and life achieves meaning through death. The ideal death is to face the moment, welcome the opportunity it gives, be aware of what is happening, and be able to fully focus on the divine. What religion can teach us is how life and death are entirely interdependent. Thinking and talking about death is really a way of thinking and talking about and valuing life.