3.7 Death and the afterlife

Do not stand at my grave and weep

by Mary Frye

Do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there, I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glint on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the soft starlight at night.
When you wake in the morning hush,
I am the swift, uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the soft starlight at night.
Do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there, I did not die!

I am not there, I did not die!
Do not stand at my grave and cry.
I am the soft starlight at night.
I am the swift, uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the soft starlight at night.
Do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there, I did not die!

How important is a belief in the afterlife?

For many people, the thought of death is very frightening. We all know we will die, yet we do not have answers to questions such as these:
- Is death the end?
- What happens after we die?
- Are heaven and hell real places?

The afterlife is very important to many religious believers. It is a reminder that what they do in this life (good or bad) may affect their eternal lives (what happens to them after they die). Some religious believers would argue that reaching the afterlife is their end goal, and they must therefore always be aware of how they live life now.

What do Muslims believe about life after death?

Muslims believe that they are responsible for, and will be judged on, their actions on earth. Islam teaches that Muslims have both a physical body and a soul. The soul lives on after death and waits to be judged. Akhirah is the Muslim term used for life after death.

Muslims believe that, on the Day of Judgement, they will be judged for their actions in life. They believe the soul is released immediately after death and goes to the Angel of Death to wait for the Day of Judgement. The actions and deeds of each individual are recorded by two angels. The Qur’an teaches that, on the Day of Judgement, the righteous will go to Jannat (Paradise) and the unrighteous to Jahannam (hell).

A description of Jannat (Paradise)
This is often portrayed as a garden where people will be young again and able to enjoy all its pleasures. Muslims believe that Paradise is so wonderful that no one can truly understand the reward that waits there.

A description of Jahannam (hell)
This is portrayed as a place of intense heat and torture where the fires are never put out. It is a place of great suffering.

What do Hindus believe about life after death?

Hinduism has very distinct teachings about life after death. Hindus accept reincarnation – the belief that, after death, the atman (soul) of a person passes into a new body and life. This new life depends on how the person lived their previous life. Hindus believe in karma, which is the sum of the good and bad actions taken. Good karma helps with a better rebirth.

As all living creatures are part of the process of reincarnation, Hindus believe it is possible to be reborn as animals, insects or plants. Humans are viewed as the highest form of life, but the ultimate goal of a Hindu is to break the cycle of reincarnation they are in and achieve Moksha. When the atman is free from the cycle, it is believed that the person returns to be with Brahman.

I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.
John 11:25–26

I think you go to heaven to be with God.
I think we would all like to believe there is something, but it’s just wishful thinking.
I believe in heaven and hell. Good people go to heaven; bad people go to hell.
I don’t know, but I don’t think death is the end. There must be something else.
I think there has to be something else after death in order to make sense of this life.

You need to keep an open mind; there is no real evidence either way.

Activities

1. In pairs, reread the poem above. Explain what you think it says about death.
2. Read these statements about life after death.
   a. Write down whether you think they are religious or non-religious ideas.
   b. Which statements do you think they are religious or non-religious ideas.
3. Draw a picture of what you think Muslims might believe heaven and hell look like.
4. Write down why you think Muslims might believe there is nothing else.
5. Imagine you are a Christian, Muslim or Hindu. Write a letter to a friend explaining your beliefs about death and the afterlife. Make sure you explain your views clearly and give reasons for your actions in this life.