

The Positive Role of Religion to Cope with Death

Agnes Lee

JOUR 390

Prof. Candy Lee

Humans are the only creatures known to be hyper aware of their fate – death. This inevitable demise is arguably what every person ends up working toward in their life. Darity (2008) found that philosophers go as far to propose that civilization itself had been created in order to help humans face this horrible truth. Although death may not be solely responsible for the creation of civilization, it is evident that death has called upon a need to cope with the unpredictable. As a result, people have looked toward religion as the answer because religious belief systems have proven their ability to lend themselves into creating frameworks of thought that allow humans to cope with existential topics (Dezutter 2009). Due to their differences in origins, beliefs and rituals, world religions uniquely approach death in order to guide their followers to best understand and cope with loss, as exemplified by the Hinduism, Judaism and Buddhism religions.

According to Davies (2005), the creator of Mormonism founded the religion to be fundamentally concerned with death after being especially moved by his brother's loss. No matter what the origins of religion actually are, religion has consistently become the prime method used to explain and cope with death. Death and religion are so closely interconnected that philosophers link the two phenomena by saying that without death, there would not have been religion (Davies 2005). Thus, since the relationship between the two is so clear, it is significant to evaluate how belief in specific religions can guide the believer to manage such a heavy topic like death.

First, the living and dead are thought to share a more intimate relationship in Hinduism. Among the world religions, Hinduism stands out because it does not have a founder, authoritative text, single deity or institutional hierarchy (Garces-Foley 2006). Furthermore, there is much variation within the religion since traditions differ depending on the time and location, especially with the ancient caste system in place that affects how conservative one holds the religion to be. For instance, those at the top of the hierarchy perform elaborate rituals and are more strict about perfection or purity within rituals and sacrifices. Despite this overwhelming diversity within Hinduism, all Hindus share an acceptance toward death. It is not something that particularly evokes anxiety or fear but rather something that evokes laughter. Such a reaction is due to the Hindus' set of beliefs that encourage death by continuing the living's contact with the dead so death can be seen as something close to the person rather than something apocalyptic.

The Hindus' beliefs are performed in order to facilitate repeated communication between the living and dead; such beliefs include karma, samsara (or transmigration), dharma (or personal duty) and kismet (or fate). Samsara refers to the process of the Self going through different states from birth to death to rebirth to death again. With gods also being subjected to this transmigration, it reveals that death is just one phase that needs to be passed through before reincarnation, even though reincarnation is not their final goal and moksa is instead. To achieve moksa, or liberation from samsara, one looks deeply into their Self and reflects on the karma they may receive based on their past actions. In order to offset any negative karma, Hindus look toward dharma in which they perform good deeds to increase their chances of directly receiving the positive effects for their afterlife. In fact, karma can affect their kismet when the judgement on their life is finally made, but most are forced to spend time in different hells, depending on which best addresses the sins they've committed in their previous lives. In addition, karma can be dependent on how one cared for the dead when they were living. As Hindus are emphasized to closely interact with the dead, one must visit relatives, chant texts or travel to sacred places when a loved one has a physiological death. No matter the choice, ensuring a safe passage for the living to pass onto the dead through strict adherence to the rituals, cremation rites and sacrifice and offerings is imperative for both the living and especially for the dead.

Second, in comparison to Hinduism, Judaism emphasizes the idea of an afterlife much less and focuses more on receiving an honorable, good death. Judaism combines God, the followers and the Torah all together with their religious belief system (Garces-Foley 2006). The religion puts God at its forefront, but the Jews believe that the religion has no meaning without the community. According to Garces-Foley (2006), a leading Jewish writer Joshua Heschel states, "The community can survive the life of the individual. The individual, however, cannot survive the life of the community," demonstrating that the past and future and the dead and living are connected through the strength of the community. As a result, Judaism exhibits the need for a shared level of suffering to fully understand the meaning of the religion and address the question of human existence. Therefore, in response to death and grief, Judaism concentrates on the ability to transform the community and individuals alike.

The 2,000-year-old history of Judaism has been preserved by the Torah, sacred readings that include the prayers and rituals that the Jewish people live by to this day. However, Jewish rituals regarding death have changed from what is written out by the Torah in the sense that

rituals that are currently performed would not be recognized in the past and rituals from the past have become too outdated to be used today. Furthermore, the discrepancies between what is written out in literature and what has actually been practiced reveal that the Jewish people more or less have some free rein with how the rituals are now performed. For example, the concept of afterlife is debated amongst the Jewish community because once again, there is a discrepancy with the text and actual practice. Yet, a majority of Jewish people believe in some interpretation of an afterlife, especially one that is affected by good deeds and the fate of the Jewish community, and such a recognition of the afterlife greatly affects Judaism's approach to death and grief. Due to the religion's emphasis on community, many find that dying in one's community is the Jewish way to die. A death that is painless, at the end of one's long life, surrounded by family and loved ones and occurring at home instead of the artificialness of the hospital is most coveted by the Jewish people, especially if it happens at a spiritual time that represents a meaningful day for the religion. To honor the dead, the aspect of community is taken even further as the rituals are directly performed by family and loved ones to show reverence for the body, such as the ritual washing of the body to purify the soul and standing guard over the body until the body is laid to rest. Family members are even asked to shovel earth onto the coffin after burial, in order to symbolize the community accepting the finality of the relative's death and for the dead to feel the protection of their community once more.

Although Buddhism has developed across various cultures, Buddhists all share the belief that death is merely a fundamental transition in human life. According to Garces-Foley (2006), Buddhism encourages their believers to view death as an opportunity because it presents a chance for both the dying person to transition into rebirth or escape from the cycle of rebirth and for their community to deal with grief. While traditions have been altered depending on which cultural society it resides in, all Buddhists are taught about the significance of impermanence. In fact, the only law in Buddhism is stated to be the fact that all things are impermanent, a realization that has formed the basis of Buddhism. This belief was depicted by the story of Siddhartha Guatama who was able to conquer the king of death through mindfulness, which later influenced the Buddhist tradition that mindfulness of death begins meditation and thus the journey to nirvana. Buddha changed the narrative regarding death by weaving it into his three marks of existence, which include suffering, no self and impermanence, in which death is a part of. With this in mind, Buddhists have been taught that the greatest change in one's existence will

result only through death, as death leads to rebirth or will allow them to break the continuous cycle of rebirth to death so that they can finally recognize nirvana.

Considering this positive understanding toward death, Buddhists are encouraged to use mindfulness to confront death and subsequent grief. The application of mindfulness to address death helps the person observe the passing away of conditions and emotions within the body so that distance can be created between the self and impermanence of reality. For example, at Buddha's impending death in one of the original teachings, one disciple who had yet to reach enlightenment bemoaned Buddha's upcoming loss and begged the Buddha to live longer. Due to this disciple's rash reaction, he was expelled from discipleship but soon reached enlightenment as soon as he was mindful about his grief and understood what the Buddha meant when the Buddha had chastised him for grieving the inevitable. This story of Buddha and his disciple reveals that although death is difficult to accept, it is a real and inevitable part of life that is key to enlightenment and should thus be used as an opportunity to further understand impermanence. Furthermore, karma is also integral to Buddhists' acceptance of death. As mentioned with regards to Hinduism, karma is the law of cause and effect, but Buddhists have combined the idea of merit received by completing good deeds with honoring the dead. Often, karma is acted upon to increase one's chances at a better afterlife. However, the Buddhists use karma to impart their merit onto deceased family by contributing to the dead's journey toward rebirth and creating a new relationship with the deceased.

However, religious practices are constantly changing, and especially in modern society, there is evidently not just one strict way to honor death. According to Garces-Foley (2006), culture, class, ethnicity, education, lineage and gender also influence how people respond to death. Moreover, factors including advances in technology, urbanization, and shifting gender roles contribute to how humans live and die in modern societies. With all these elements in play, some find that religion is just one possible factor in affecting a person's reaction to death. Nonetheless, among these, religion is the one factor that has been shown to reduce death anxiety and increase death acceptance, revealing its importance in expressing healthy reactions before and after death.

A research study done by Feldman et. al. (2016) evaluated this relationship between religious beliefs, grief and attitudes about death. Researchers grew curious about this topic since it is common for people who claim to be religious to behave similarly to atheists when mourning

the death of a loved one. As a believer of whichever religion, the idea that the deceased will go to heaven or is not actually gone forever is shared by many world religions. Still, there seemed to be little difference in the reactions of a devout person and an atheist when mourning a loss even though religion is supposed to aid the person, and the researchers wanted to know why this was the case. The study found that although grief levels were consistent between the two groups, participants who identified as being religious were associated with increased grief-related growth and greater positive acceptance of death. Since many religions imply the concept of an afterlife, people who believe in religion are more likely to have an approach that more often invokes acceptance toward death because they view religion as a route to a pleasant afterlife, which helps to decrease levels of present grief and offer more long-term emotional benefits. On the contrary, those who have more negative views about God were associated with greater death anxiety, higher levels of grief and lower levels of death acceptance, most likely due to their lack of framework to accept death. But there is a caveat – the more committed to religious beliefs, the more acceptance one will have toward death. When comparing extremely devout believers to more casual believers, people who genuinely applied religion to every aspect to their life were more strong believers in afterlife and thus were positively associated with life satisfaction and negatively associated with death anxiety (Chaiwutikornwanich 2015). Hence, to fully receive the positive benefits of the religious framework in regards to death and grief, one must internalize religion rather than solely use religion to receive their primary needs, but just the fact one believes in religion and an afterlife can increase one's inclination to approach death with acceptance.

Overall, religion provides a framework to help its believers conceptualize something as daunting as death. Although world religions like Hinduism, Judaism and Buddhism differ in their origins and beliefs, they all encourage their believers to accept death and approach religion without fear. While various factors in modern society have affected the way humans live and die, research on religion especially demonstrates how significant a religious belief system is to lower one's anxiety about death and increase the possibility of growth thereafter. This link between religious and death attitudes can be generalized to the earlier stages of life as well (Panagiotaki et. al. 2008), indicating how religion can affect the way children conceptualize a concept as difficult as this and can be even utilized to help children reason the harsh reality and inevitability behind death without a need to coddle the youth and to prepare them for the journey ahead.

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