

*Editorial*

## **LIFE AFTER DEATH**

### **Quest for Meaning of Life before Death**

Life after death is the concern of all reflective human beings, even though the contemporary culture dominated by science and technology seems to deny or avoid the topic. As we raise the question regarding the meaning of life, we also ask the question on what follows death. The various answers to the question given by philosophy, religion, mythology, and fiction maintain that an essential element of human beings survives death and the kind of existence depends on the life before death. From this perspective, death is not the end of life; rather a birth into a new form of life. There is a break as well as continuity of life; the continuity is in the moral and spiritual realm rather than at the physical level. Immortality of the soul, rebirth and resurrection are different answers provided by various cultures and belief systems. The Semitic traditions speak of continued existence in a spiritual realm; the Indian traditions in general speak of cycles of birth and death until final liberation. Christianity seems to present a unique view with the doctrine on the resurrection of the body. The Semitic views include a judgement by God whereas the result is entirely the fruit of one's actions in the Indian traditions.

Human soul, the root principle of life, is believed to be immortal, meaning that the soul not only survives the bodily death but also is indestructible by nature. A number of popular arguments are often given based on common consent, human desire for happiness and ethical life; they seem to offer a cumulative force in establishing the immortality of soul.

Argument from the common consent of humankind is a popular argument. People of all times and places, by and large, believed in the survival of human person after death. This is evident from the burial rites. Only human beings bury the dead and many primitive tribes provide them with food and tools for use in the afterlife. When palaeontologists wonder whether some fossil remnants belong to animals or humans, the discovery of burial rites settles the question. It is argued that if there is order in the universe, and if life is meaningful, human beings should not be holding on to a universal false belief. The argument is further strengthened by the belief in a good God, as God will not leave us to live with a false belief. It is objected, however, that human beings in the past held on to many false beliefs like geocentric vision. The proponents of the argument would point to the difference in the nature of the beliefs. The belief regarding the

afterlife is not based on the interpretation of sense data, as was the erroneous common belief in the movement of the sun around the earth. Unlike the difference between geocentric and heliocentric vision, belief in the immortality affects human life most profoundly, since it is associated with the moral life of humankind. If life makes sense, it is difficult to suppose that the immense majority of humankind should be wrong in their fundamental belief in afterlife.

Human beings are moral beings as they make a difference between what is the case and what ought to be the case. Life is lead by not only facts but also values. The first principle of ethics states that good is to be done and evil is to be avoided. If human life has meaning, it follows that the good is to be rewarded and the evil is to be punished. Often it is our experience that good people suffer and the evil people prosper; that is, good is not sufficiently rewarded and evil is not appropriately punished. Justice seems to be not done. Human consciousness demands that this bad state of affairs should be rectified. This is possible only if the person or the essence of person survives physical death. Again, it is argued, if there is order in the universe, if life is meaningful and if there is a good God guiding human life, justice should prevail and afterlife provides a possibility to maintain justice.

A third similar popular argument is given by the universal human desire for happiness. Human beings have a natural craving for happiness which is not fulfilled often. If human beings believe that death is the end of their quest for happiness, most lives will end up in unhappiness rather than in happiness. Since such a craving for happiness is deep rooted in human nature, it is argued that its realization should be possible, if there is order in the universe, meaning for life and a good God. It would be contrary to God's wisdom and goodness to put into human beings a craving whose realization would be impossible. Therefore, human soul, the seat of perfect happiness, must survive death.

Besides the popular arguments, there are many other arguments for the belief in afterlife. Different religious traditions and belief systems provide their own unique views on afterlife. The present issue of the *Journal of Dharma* on "Life after Death: Outlooks" is an album of such views, collected from different peoples and cultures and presented systematically and critically by eminent scholars. In spite of the differences of their views, there is enough family resemblance to show that belief in the afterlife is a universal belief, held dear by most people most of the time in most places.

“Now and Hereafter: The Psychology of Hope from the Perspective of Religion” by Sahaya G. Selvam and Martin Poulosom explores the different dimensions of hope as it is conceptualised and empirically researched within positive psychology, a branch of psychology that focuses on wellbeing than on pathology, with three objectives: expound the dimensions of hope as it is explored within the domain of psychology by working within the theoretical framework of positive psychology, consider how hope, as measured by psychology, is seen to contribute to wellbeing and evaluate the psychology of hope from the perspective of religion, particularly Christianity. Hope is a permanent force in every human being, a driving power as long as we are alive and it is argued that faced with the reality of death, human beings have often drawn a sense of hope from a belief in life after death. Though the hope of the individual for participation in eternal life was more and more undercut by the present understanding of our world through science and philosophy, it is observed that optimistic people are so highly goal-oriented that they are able to distance themselves from negative outcomes and to lead a meaningful life. The authors also observe that while the words used may be the same, the meanings they carry for scientists interested in Positive Psychology and for those pursuing spirituality may diverge considerably, essentially because psychology is rooted in an appeal to reason, whereas authentic Christian spirituality is grounded in a recognition that all depends on God.

Maheshvari Naidu, in her well-researched paper, “‘Transcendent’ Genealogical and Kinship Relations: Afterlife in African Traditional Religions,” presents an African worldview where there are levels of involvement and genealogical linkage between the living and the dead, as well as the world of the living and the world of the dead. In this perception, the dead do not go to another world but change their physical mode of existence to that of a spiritual one. There is no polarising dichotomy between the world of the living and the world of the dead. In the network of relationships, God, the deities, ancestors, the lineage, the clan, the ethnic group, etc., are interconnected to each other. It affirms the inner coherence of African religious worldview where the person is central and remains also a prominent figure after death, as an ancestor. Such a notion stresses also the role of the community, and one’s life on earth as being defined through belonging to a community. As an ancestor, one continues to be useful to the community, because he/she remains a part of that community, even as a dead person and is able to be called upon to mediate between the descendent and God.

Vivian Besem Ojong explores a contemporary belief and practice in “The ‘Working-Dead’ in Nyongo Occult Economy in Cameroonian Society.” Nyongo refers to a kind of witchcraft where occult powers are used to enslave others to amass wealth, power and social status. It would appear that those sold to slave labour are not dead but are ‘living people’ waiting for death. The author places nyongo discourse in its contemporary context in which the ethnography collected and the stories told are embedded. The ethnography consisted of interviews conducted among twenty Cameroonians. The article is based on fieldwork conducted in South Africa among Cameroonian migrants. It probes through the use of the perception-based method to capture their perceptions and experiences of nyongo. Interesting questions on life, identity and death are raised and explored in this article based on the beliefs and perceptions held by the people who are interviewed. Through the claims and accusations of nyongo, the boundary of life and death is stretched, creating possibilities for new forms of identity.

Maja Milčinski discusses the notions of impermanence and death as treated in the Chinese and Japanese philosophical traditions, particularly in connection with the Buddhist concept of emptiness and void and the Daoist answers to the problem, in her paper, “Impermanence and Soteriology.” When approaching the question of human impermanence, the Sino-Japanese models begin with the mystical experience of the cosmic void. The second phase is the endeavour to formulate the experience into words and concepts which are used to describe this state to people who have not had the chance to experience it directly. Such experiments, however, remain at the margin of its essence, on the level of metaphor. She concludes with an interesting discussion on “Ego Emptiness versus the Void in Sino-Japanese Buddhism.” The ego is afraid of being swallowed by the void, but at the same time it wants to master it; therefore, it builds around its axis a structure made up of scientific proofs and experiments with which it attempts to master the reality of life and, thus, to penetrate the void. In the Sino-Japanese tradition of void and silence, the search for and the finding of ways to come closer to the ineffable, through words and images, is the essence of its meditative-mystical search. The switch of consciousness is suggested as an essential condition for liberation of the Ego and its illusions. Impermanence is a didactic tool for spiritual evolvment and Asian cultures have traditionally been more accepting of the void and have encouraged self-cultivation techniques that open the doors to the void without the fear of it.

The intertestamental experience of the people of Israel, from about 200 BCE to about 100 CE, resulted in a new understanding of life and death. While looking for a survival in terms of nation as a whole, they tried also to see a survival beyond death in the form of resurrection. This is the claim of Xavier Terrence, well argued in his article, “Life after Death: In the Intertestamental Palestine Context.” The Book of Jubilees, Ethiopic Enoch or 1Enoch, The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Psalms of Solomon, Qumran Writings, Life of Adam and Eve, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, 4Ezra and 2Baruch are examined to show the development of a belief in the resurrection of the dead. In these works, resurrection could be seen as a precondition of the judgment of humankind. The unjust suffering and the untimely cruel death of the righteous amidst the silence of God inspired the people of God to look for answers beyond the silence of graveyard, argues Xavier Terrence.

“Death and Afterlife” by V. F. Vineeth shares the fruits of his deep meditations on death and immortality, based on Hindu, Buddhist and Christian beliefs and practices. Human life transcends the temporal layers of existence as well as rational level of understanding. In faith level, we understand many things which our mind may initially object. Different forms of life after death appeared in human thinking and writing, especially in religious literature, and Professor Vineeth examines four such perspectives: Rebirth of Hindu Tradition, Sunya and Nirvana of Buddhist Path, Death as a Preamble of Resurrection and as a Call to the Graceful Offering of Life to God, as per the Christian faith. An earth-bound, ego-centred consciousness looks at death as a threat while the doctrine of resurrection presents death as a door to life with God and the people of God. Instead of fear and trembling, the believer longs for the coming of the Lord, as a bride longs for the arrival of the Bridegroom.

This fundamental faith of Christians is further explored by Geo Pallikunnel in “Eschatological Vision of Syro Malabar Eucharistic Liturgy.” Liturgy as one of the main *locus theologicus* of the Christian tradition, the author reflects on the end times and the heavenly realities, based on the Eucharistic Liturgy of the Syro Malabar Church of the East Syriac tradition. After a preliminary examination of Time and End-time in the Jewish Tradition, he affirms that by the incarnation–resurrection Christ becomes the Lord and mediator of time and eternity. The Church as the continuation of Christ, who unites time and eternity, here and now, unites time and eternity in its principal action, the liturgy. The Syro Malabar Eucharistic Liturgy is a liturgy developed outside the Roman Empire in the

East Syriac genre. Since it developed outside the Hellenistic culture it has less influence of Greek thinking and more on the line of Semitic and Asian vision, where Christianity and Bible had their origin. In this tradition, the earthly liturgy is the memorial and celebration of the economy of salvation (*mdabbrānutā*) of God completed in Christ, and the anticipation of the heavenly liturgy. The whole liturgy is considered as an image of what is happening in heaven and its revelation. The whole Eucharistic Liturgy of this tradition reveals an eschatological vision and it culminates in the Communion rite. It is a foretaste of the eschatological life and also a movement towards the final fulfilment. By examining the characteristics of Liturgical Time and Spatial Orientation of the Church building, Pallikunnel brings out worshipping community's movement toward the *eschaton*. He examines also the Eschatological Vision of the Eucharistic Liturgy Proper in the Syro Malabar tradition. It is argued that the Syro Malabar liturgy of the East Syriac tradition has a unique way of expression and celebration of its eschatological vision.

The different outlooks on life after death show that the belief in afterlife is widespread spatially and temporally. Life before death seems to need a life after death for meaning and significance. This belief, however, shall not in any way belittle the life before death; life before death is significant and every effort must be taken for the wellbeing of each individual and community. Human beings, as they are fundamentally believers and truth seekers, cannot deny their beliefs nor stop searching for truth regarding their beliefs. "Life after Death: Outlooks" is a sample of human quests in making sense of life and death, inviting and challenging the readers to thoughts of their own and to make sense of their beliefs rather than denying or avoiding their fundamental beliefs.

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