Life after death

There are many different ways of understanding life after death in religious tradition. Often the religious views of the afterlife may conflict with one another or there may even be disputes amongst the believers of a particular religious tradition themselves. The notes below present four different ways in which life after death is understood in religious teaching alongside criticism of these ideas.

Resurrection

There are many ways in which resurrection has been understood within Jewish, Islamic and Christian traditions. These notes focus on the Christian tradition, but you could of course use material drawn from the Islamic or Jewish tradition in an examination.

The belief in the resurrection originates from the accounts of Jesus’ followers and disciples concerning his resurrection as recorded in the Four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the writings of St Paul. Read any of these accounts and a number of points are immediately striking;

1 Jesus’ followers at first do not recognise Jesus; Jesus was at one and the same time the same and different. He was transformed by the resurrection event. Also Jesus’ resurrection was physical; resurrection in the New Testament is not just concerned with the survival of the soul in a disembodied afterlife.

2 The New Testament refers to the afterlife as a paradise, a state of continued existence with God after death (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14) and the afterlife is describe as ‘we will see [God] face to face’ (1 Corinthians 13:12). In Christian belief the situation of seeing God face to face is later called the Beatific Vision.

3 In his teaching as recorded in the New Testament Jesus states that God offers forgiveness if people really repent, and also that God judges people after death. (Matthew 24-25).

Within Christianity, whether resurrection involves a bodily life after death is debated. In general term Catholicism has traditionally believed in the resurrection of the person’s body and soul:

We firmly believe, and hence we hope that, just as Christ is truly risen from the dead and lives for ever, so after death the righteous will live for ever with the risen Christ and he will raise them up on the last day

However, some branches of Protestant thought have suggested that life after death refers to the survival of the soul and not the physical body.

The appeal of physical resurrection is that it corresponds with our understanding of a person as a physical as well as a spiritual being. Secondly, some philosophers have suggested that the only way to speak meaningfully of life after death is in physical terms because existence as a disembodied soul would not be recognisable as meaningful human life in the way that living human beings understand it. The philosopher Peter Geach has suggested that meaningful talk...
of life after death would involve the reuniting of the soul ‘to such a body as would reconstitute a man identifiable with the man who died’ because it is only through the resurrection that it is meaningful to talk of an individual continuing to live or living once more.

**Challenges to belief in the Resurrection**

Many challenges to belief in resurrection have been offered over the centuries. All of them centre on the fact that there is no available way to falsify claims concerning life after death, and verification is only possible in the weak sense of eschatological verification suggested by John Hick in his Celestial City analogy. The lack of evidence to suggest people do survive death is a case in point.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell rejected belief in the afterlife as a product of human wishful thinking, arguing that at death a person’s memories, that make the person the individual character they are, are lost, since the memories and thoughts of the person are inseparably linked to the brain. When the body and brain rot the memories and identity of the person is also lost. Ultimately, Russell suggests that the universe is indifferent to people and, furthermore, that when you consider the wickedness of many people who have lived would anyone really want them to live forever?

**A Modern Approach to the Resurrection**

John Hick’s Replica theory is perhaps the most well known modern defence of resurrection. Hick rejected dualism, arguing that human beings are a ‘psycho-somatic unity’.

Hick suggested that resurrection is best understood as a divine action in which God creates an exact replica of people in a different place. The replica would not be observable by us but would be observable by God.

Hick used the word replica to highlight the fact that God was not just creating a copy of the person who died; instead the resurrected person is an exact replica of the person who died. Hick used the analogy of a person disappearing in London and reappearing alive in New York to suggest that if a person is an exact replica of the original it would be recognised as the original. Resurrection, according to Hick, could take pace instantaneously at death or after a time lapse determined by God.

**Challenges to Replica Theory**

1. A number of challenges have been made to Replica theory. Many philosophers have questioned how the Replica is to be identified with the original. What is the continuity between the Replica and the original person such that they are the same person?

2. An alternative challenge is that there could be multiple replicas. Hick himself rejected this suggesting that unlike a photocopy, replicas are limited to one.

3. The nature and state of the resurrected body has also been disputed, particularly the age in life at which the replica body is made and whether the body would be suffering from any terminal illnesses from which it died.
Reincarnation

Reincarnation is the belief that a person consists of a body and a soul (subtle-body). The soul that a body contains is eternal; it is not created and then implanted in a body. Within the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita for example, Arjuna is told by Krishna not to weep at the death of a friend because death is not the end to the circle of reincarnation.

There are many forms of belief in reincarnation and there have been a wide variety of understandings of reincarnation presented over the centuries.

The eternal nature of the soul is reflected in the Hindu belief in Nirvana. Nirvana is a state of enlightenment in which the individual’s consciousness is united with Brahma. It is important to understand that Nirvana is not the end of conscious existence it is rather the unity of individual consciousness with the absolute consciousness of existence. This is markedly different to Nibbana within Buddhism which can mark the end of conscious existence, like the snuffing out of a candle.

An important aspect of many people’s belief in reincarnation is the Law of Karma. The Law of Karma underlies justice. It refers to the belief that an individual’s actions will be judged; right actions generate good Karma, bad actions generate bad Karma. The soul of a person carries the Karma that an individual has gained through their actions in life. When the soul is reincarnated it will be placed in a body according to its Karma. The soul with good Karma will end up in a body of a higher social status creature or human; those with bad Karma end up with a lower status body or even in the body of an animal. Hence, within Hinduism, respect for all living things is bound up with belief in reincarnation and the Law of Karma.

For a believer in reincarnation and the Law of Karma morality is objective. Karma accrues to a soul precisely because in any situation there is a right and a wrong course of action. Hence, some believers in reincarnation will explain disability or serious illness as the just punishment for the bad Karma inherited from the previous incarnation of the soul in the body. Reincarnation and the Law of Karma is therefore a retributive form of justice and suffering is explained as deserved punishment. The appropriate response to suffering is thus to accept it stoically as just and live your own life well. Regarding this issue Paul Edwards refers to the example of Christmas Humphreys the founder of the British Buddhist society:

To the question “Who did sin, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” the believer in Karma replies that it must have been the blind man himself who had sinned. In a previous life he had behaved so “as to cause …the effect of his blindness”

Belief in reincarnation and the Law of Karma highlights the importance of moral responsibility for one’s actions.

The Appeal of Reincarnation

There are a number of different ways in which reincarnation is an appealing belief:

1. Reincarnation is the traditional belief of many people from both Buddhist and Hindu traditions.
2 Reincarnation does not have to rely on belief in a state of existence in heaven or hell, as the reincarnated life is continued on earth. Furthermore, some of the challenges to belief in a physical resurrection are perhaps avoided because the reincarnated life is not an afterlife in some other place – life continues in this world.

3 Some philosophers have suggested that reincarnation is superior to belief in resurrection as it does not claim that souls are specially created by God and implanted in an embryo at some point in pregnancy such as conception or quickening as found in Islamic or Christian tradition. David Hume famously pointed out that if the soul does exist, it would be immortal.

**Issues raised by reincarnation**

1 **Is morality objective?**
The Law of Karma relies on morality being objective. If a non-cognitive approach to morality is adopted, the meaningfulness of the Law of Karma is undermined.

2 **Would belief in reincarnation modify behaviour?**
Reincarnation assumes that concern about the future Karma of the soul would be a motive driving behaviour. However, there are two problems: first, the punishment for bad Karma is not necessarily visited on the body and soul of the person who earns the bad Karma. Secondly, is there any reason why the individual person should be concerned about the Karma of the soul in future incarnations?

3 **Moral complexity of some situations**
Paul Edwards has suggested that many moral situations are complex and do not lend themselves to analysis in terms of right and wrong in a clear manner.

4 **The reliance on Dualism and problems related to personal identity.**
Reincarnation maintains a form of Dualism in which identity is solely attached to the soul which continues through different incarnations. The body in which the soul is at any time incarnated is not linked to the identity of the soul; effectively it is the vehicle of the soul. This idea is contrary to more modern notions of dualism or materialist views of what makes an individual; all of which emphasise the importance of the body as part of one’s identity.

5 **The problem of evil**
The Law of Karma and reincarnation in which a person is punished for the bad Karma inherited from a previous generation can be challenged as unjust. For many people, personhood is a matter of body and soul (or just a body). In either case justice entails that moral actions belong to the person who committed the act. The body of a person suffering because of the bad Karma of the soul (subtle-body) can appear unjust.
Rebirth

Rebirth is the term used to refer to Buddhist concepts of reincarnation. Rebirth differs from reincarnation in certain respects.

First, since there is no concept of self in Buddhism, there is not a centre of identity based on the soul that continues from one life to the next. Instead, when one life ends the next life continues on from the stage reached by the previous life. In effect a new life is another chain in a long chain of lives that follow on one from another. Rebirth is often identified with reincarnation but it should not be confused with it.

Within Buddhism itself there is no actual concept of rebirth, instead the concept of rebirth is understood as a process of ‘becoming’. This reflects the Buddhist belief that life is a process of unceasing change.

However, within Buddhism there are a variety of different understandings of rebirth. All views emphasise the process of constant change. However, Tibetan Buddhism allows for the continuation of life for up to 49 days before rebirth in a different state, whereas Theravada Buddhism holds that rebirth is immediate.

Reference to the Buddha being reborn is not understood as suggesting a soul or self is reborn. Rather, the rebirth is a new link in the continuing cycle of change of life stretching back to the Buddha.

Issues raised by rebirth

Some of the challenges to reincarnation also relate to rebirth. However, an additional problem arises in relation to rebirth. How is continuity established between the old life and new life if there is no soul? In Theravada Buddhism this is perhaps easier to address as rebirth is immediate suggesting some form of continuity. On the other hand, the different state before rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism raises the question of continuity between the old life and the new life.
Life after Death: Exam technique

Hints for examination success:
Make sure that you can distinguish resurrection from rebirth and reincarnation and that you can explain the differences between these concepts.
Be specific when you refer to the beliefs of different religions. For example, within Christianity there are a wide variety of ways in which resurrection is understood.
Make sure that any answer in which you consider resurrection clearly explains what you mean by resurrection.

Examination question practice

Life after death and the issues that surround it are a common topic for examination in Advanced level. The examination question below is followed by some hints about how to complete it successfully:

Examine different religious beliefs about life after death

There are many ways to tackle a question such as this but some of the following ideas may help:
1 Make sure you define what life after death refers to. For example does it refer to the survival of a soul, personal identity, a subtle body, or physical resurrection?
2 The question uses the word ‘Religious’. Make sure that your answer focuses upon examine and assessing religious belief, and not just on philosophical issues concerning life after death.
3 There are a number of different concepts which you could examine in relation to this question. For example, you could examine the different ways in which Christian tradition has understood resurrection, such as Biblical views or John Hick’s Replica Theory. One tension with Christian teaching concerns whether resurrection is physical as well as spiritual. Alternatively, you could examine Hindu or Buddhist understanding of Nirvana/Nibbana and the end of physical life, as well as the cycle of reincarnation or rebirth.
4 Since the question refers to ‘different religious beliefs’ concerning life after death it is important that you do examine and contrast different understandings of life after death. While you do not need to consider every different interpretation of life after death it, it is important that you do examine at least two understandings of life after death in detail.

‘The prospect of life after death has an effect on the way people live.’ Discuss.

This type of question is a typical example of a question on philosophy of religion. First, you need to think carefully about what areas of your studies to bring in to your answer. In this case, you could think about the moral motivations that drive people in daily life. You could also consider what are the promises, threats and comforts of any possible afterlife that might function as a motivating factor in people’s daily lives.

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As usual with A2 questions there are a large number of ways to answer a question such as this and there is not a single right answer. A wide variety of answers will be accepted if they are supported by reasoning and demonstrate a secure knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and values, their strengths and weaknesses:

1 Examine what motivates the moral behaviour of people. You could consider whether people are driven by self interest as Hobbes suggested, or whether people are Utilitarian or Kantian in their moral decision making. Whichever view you examine you could consider whether belief in an afterlife would affect the moral decision making of the person.

2 Consider belief in punishment after death for wrong doing, such as in Christian or Islamic teaching. You could evaluate the significance of these beliefs for the believer and consider whether these beliefs have a demonstrable effect on the behaviour of believers. One interesting area to consider is the actions of religious believers who commit, for example, acts of terrorism or genocide in the name of God. How do these actions relate to judgement in an afterlife by God?

3 You could assess whether belief in an afterlife does affect behaviour by considering the fact that atheists as well as theists act both morally and at times immorally. Consider what this suggests about the moral motivation of people, whether they are atheists or not.

2 The concept of a virtuous life could be examined and consider the inspiration for developing a virtuous character. This could provide with an opportunity to relate work on Virtue Theory to beliefs in an afterlife and/or judgement post mortem.

References:


If you would like to review the wide variety of beliefs in reincarnation see Paul Edwards (2002) *Reincarnation: a Critical Examination* (New York: Prometheus Books)

