

Models of Life Beyond Death: Comparing Concepts

By
Ted Peters

What comes into your mind when you contemplate your own death? Suffering? End of suffering? Darkness? Emptiness? Oblivion? Loss? Loneliness? Judgment? Hellfire? Bliss?

Each one of us exists. Yet, we are aware that some day in the future we will cease to exist. Today we have being. Tomorrow we will drop into non-being. We are temporal and ephemeral. Only God is eternal.

In church we are reminded of our temporariness on Ash Wednesday when the pastor or priest places ashes on our forehead and says something like this: "From dust you have come; to dust you shall return." Also in church, we sing the hymn, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," with this stanza:

Time, like an ever-rolling stream
 Soon bears us all away;
We fly forgotten, as a dream
 Dies at the op'ning day.

We human beings are fragile, temporary, and doomed. That is our lot.

With this in mind, we ask: just what do Christians think about life-beyond-death? If we begin with the heart of the Christian gospel, there is much to say. The gospel is *the story of Jesus told with its significance*. An important part of the story of Jesus is the Easter resurrection. What is significant about Jesus' Easter resurrection is that it anticipates our resurrection. Jesus Christ is the "first fruits of those having fallen asleep," says St. Paul (1 Corinthians 15:20). This means that as Jesus rose on Easter, so also will you and I rise at the advent of the new creation. Jesus' Easter resurrection is a *prolepsis*—that is, an anticipation—of your and my resurrection in the future. As Jesus rose from the dead, so will you and I. This is the essential Christian teaching regarding life beyond death.

In what follows, we will explore a variety of ways in which different philosophies and religions have thought about death and what lies beyond. We will compare and contrast. We will compare this variety of views—what we call mental models—with the core teachings of the Christian faith, with special attention given to what St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44.

We will look briefly at naturalism, otherwise known as atheism, which says that "when you're dead, your dead." Then we'll turn to various beliefs about surviving death with a further life such as the immortality of the soul, which we can find in ancient Greek philosophy and the Hindu religion. The Hindus add a couple interesting ideas: reincarnation and absorption into the infinite. We'll look

also at the idea of the astral body, which might have come from ancient Egypt; but we recognize it as a potent idea in contemporary New Age spirituality. We'll even address briefly the idea of cybernetic immortality now being raised by trans-humanists. Finally, we will return to classic Christian commitments regarding resurrection of the dead, with special attention to the idea of resurrection of the body. The Christian idea of resurrection will be compared and contrasted with other anti-religious and religious ideas.

Two key questions we will pose to each view or model. First, is it monistic or dualistic? That is, does it assume the human person is made up of one or two natures? Second, does it affirm individual existence after death? The Bible's understanding of resurrection is clear on the latter, namely, as individuals we will enjoy a loving community in God's eternity.

Naturalism

"When you're dead, you're dead; and you're going to stay that way." This is the view of modern naturalism, also known as atheistic materialism or secular humanism. Nature is all there is. And, every living thing in nature dies. Death is the natural conclusion to life. Life is fundamentally and exhaustively material in character; and there is no spiritual reality through which we can escape our physical limits. Naturalism is monistic—that is, it says that there is only one reality, material substance; and all material individuals are subject to death.

Singer Peggy Lee once had a number on the Hit Parade that summed up the resulting nihilism. She sang, "If that's all there is, then I'll just go on dancing."

We will now turn to a number of alternative models. In each we find the belief that we can somehow extract a non-physical self or person from the physical body. When the body dies, this extracted self lives on.

Immortality of the Soul

The concept of the immortal soul seems to have arisen in two places, ancient Greece and ancient India. Whether one borrowed from the other may be lost in history at this point. Yet the similarity of the beliefs is remarkable.

The core belief is dualistic—that is, the human person is made up of two different substances, a mortal body (Greek: *soma*) and an immortal soul (Greek: *psyche*). When the body dies, the soul lives on, according to the philosophers of Athens eight centuries after Moses and four centuries before Jesus.

While we are in this physical life, our bodies and souls compete with one another. The body constitutes our lower nature, and our soul our higher nature. Our lower nature riddles our mind with selfish desires and cravings. When you find yourself preoccupied with what you will eat for lunch, keeping to your diet, paying the mortgage, finding new romance, and such, you have allowed the body to pull you down into the darkness of the physical realm. The body is constantly sucking our consciousness down into matters physical such as avoiding pain, enjoying pleasure, accumulating money, seeking fame, groveling for power, and

blinding ourselves to thinking that the physical reality is the only reality. The body wants what Peggy Lee surrenders herself to, namely, perpetual “dancing.”

The soul, in contrast, struggles to think higher thoughts. The soul is capable of pondering eternal wisdom. Wisdom refers to matters that are universal and not limited to the cravings and desires of one person’s flesh. Mathematics and music are such universals. If we think about math and music, we transcend the demands of our flesh. Truth, beauty, and justice appear on this list of universals. Finite bodily cravings keep the soul imprisoned in physical darkness. To contemplate truth, beauty, and justice is to see the light and to liberate the soul. Once we have seen the light and gained *enlightenment*, the soul can escape the body and ponder universal wisdom for all of eternity. Such persons taking up this vocation in ancient Greece gained the name *philosopher*, which means literally lover of wisdom. Philosophy was thought to provide salvation.

The ancient Greek version of the immortal soul was grafted on to the trunk of Christian thought. The Fifth Lateran General Council of 1513 made belief in the immortal soul Christian dogma

However, the trunk of Christian belief is resurrection, as the Bible teaches it. We will look more closely at resurrection later. In the meantime, notice that the hybrid of biblical teaching and Greek philosophy leads to this interesting combination: when we die, the soul departs the body; then, at the resurrection, the soul and body recombine. The shorter Westminster Catechism of 1648 combines immortality of the soul with the biblical notion of resurrection.

Question 37: What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

Answer: The souls of believers are, at their death, made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

Questions 38: What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection?

Answer: At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

Reincarnation and Absorption into the Infinite

In ancient India, the Sanskrit word for what we have been calling the soul is *atman*, which refers to the independent human self. Much of what we said above about the immortal soul in ancient Greece applies here, including the pursuit of enlightenment. However, rather than pursue wisdom through philosophy, the ancient Hindus preferred to discipline the body. This method of discipline is called *yoga*. By gaining control over the body through ascetic practices, the mind can be liberated (*moksha*) from the body’s downward pull toward darkness.

If the soul has not yet attained enlightenment, it is not yet liberated. So, when the body dies, the soul must enter another body through rebirth. Like a football handed by the quarterback to the halfback, the soul is handed from a dying body into one that is just emerging from the mother's womb. The soul rides this cycle of rebirth through numerous incarnations until it attains enlightenment. Then it leaps off the cycle, never to be reborn again.

Our English words come from two sources, Greek and Latin. The Greek term for the cycle of rebirth is *metempsychosis*. We more commonly refer to this with the Latin word, *reincarnation*, where *carn* refers to the body or flesh. To be *reincarnated* means to enter the body again.

Even though early Christians were attracted to the idea of an immortal soul, they rejected reincarnation. The Christian idea became known as *creationism*, still taught by today's Vatican. [Please do not confuse the word *creationism* as used here with Protestant anti-Darwinism.] According to this version of creationism, God creates a new soul when a person is born (conceived, says the Vatican), and this soul proceeds through one and only one incarnation. Each person has only one history in the flesh. No cycle of rebirth is compatible with Christian belief.

Back to the Hindus. When the soul has finally liberated itself through enlightenment and is no longer pulled down into fleshly darkness, it is ready to jump off the wheel of rebirth. Where does it go? It leaps into the infinite. Full enlightenment, for a Hindu, is the realization that one's own *atman* is at one with *Brahman*, the All, the Totality, the ground and source of all being. The finite self becomes absorbed into the infinite reality. Like a drop of water in the ocean, the single person becomes one with the whole of reality. Differentiation of the self is lost to unity with the whole.

This idea of absorption into the infinite stands in marked contrast to what Christians have come to believe. For the Christian, the person we are as an individual is affirmed and celebrated. The key symbol for eternity in the New Testament is the "kingdom of God," or the "city of God." The image this symbol connotes is that of a society of individual persons living in community, in relationship, in peace and harmony. In God's kingdom the individual is not dissolved and absorbed; rather, what we enjoy for eternity is a loving relationship. We do not dissolve into *unity*; but rather enjoy *community*.

Astral Body

The concept of the astral body or star body is distinct from that of the immortal soul; yet, it too is dualistic. The astral body has a shape, the shape of our physical body. But, being made of stardust; it is not solid nor is it ephemeral. It exists in the same space as our physical body. Occasionally in dreams and finally at death it separates from the body. It proceeds then on the path toward eternity.

The predecessor for the idea of the astral body may have come from ancient Egypt. The wall paintings in the pyramids show a second form hovering near the physical body of the pharaoh, the *ka*. The *ka* was an immaterial double

of the physical body. It would be the *ka* who would live on in the tomb to enjoy the *kas* of the toys left there for the after life.

In today's New Age spirituality, spiritual technicians teach methods whereby one can detach the astral body and fly from one geographical location to another. Astral travel saves on air fares. When we die, the astral body makes its way up the ladder of being, passing through each of the seven heavens until it attains an immortality that is similar to the absorption into the infinite of Hinduism. Becoming a drop in the ocean of being is attractive to New Agers.

Both Hinduism and New Age spirituality could be considered dualistic regarding the separation of the body from our true self; yet they could be considered monistic at the point where the self dissolves into the whole of reality. This is a spiritual monism, not a material monism.

Cybernetic Immortality

A new form of disengaging the human soul from the body has appeared in our modern technological society. It is called *trans-humanism* or *post-humanism*. Life beyond death will be attained by downloading our brain activity into a computer.

A key assumption made by trans-humanists is that who we are as persons is centered in brain activity. Trans-humanism assumes that intelligence as a pattern of brain activity is the home of our personhood. It is the cognitive code or information pattern that is definitive. We are what our brains think, so to speak. Can we transfer cognitive function into a machine? Perhaps. The goal of trans-humanism is to download the contents of human consciousness onto a vast computer network and, via the network, achieve a kind of disembodied yet intelligent immortality. As a machine, we could enjoy perfections that the limits of biology prevent us from attaining.

Here is what the story of our post-human future looks like to a trans-humanist. At stage one, Artificial Intelligence (AI) researchers will simulate human intelligence in a computer, in a robot. At stage two, humans and machines will merge step by step, replacing portions of our brains with mechanical parts. At stage three, AI researchers will reduce existing human intelligence to a pattern of information processing and download this into a computer or a robot. This will lead to an evolutionary advance, actually a leap forward that could lead to cybernetic immortality—that is, immortal intelligent life in a machine that gets constant backups.

Note how similar this is to the ancient concept of the immortal soul. Yet, it is materialist in its assumptions—that is, minds are only information patterns produced by brains. The end product is a combination of naturalism and dualism.

Is somebody's cybernetic immortality likely to happen before you finish reading this lesson? No, not likely. No need to rush to your computer store for a new body.



Photo in Santa Barbara Mission by Ted Peters

Resurrection

When it comes to the trunk of the tree of Christian beliefs, we turn to what St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul believes that we will confront total death. No immortal soul escapes the body. All of who we are—body, soul, and spirit—will die. He likens our death to that of a seed buried in the ground. The seed looks dead when we bury it. Yet, later, it sprouts up again. When we sprout up, however, a transformation wrought by God will have taken place.

^{NRS} **1 Corinthians 15:42** So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable [corrupt, *phthora*] is raised is imperishable [incorrupt, *aptharsia*].⁴³ It is sown in dishonor [*atimia*], it is raised in glory [*doxa*]. It is sown in weakness [*astheneia*], it is raised in power [*dynamei*].⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body [*soma psychikon*], it is raised a spiritual body [*soma pneumatikon*]. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

By resurrection, Christians mean that God transforms our dead physical body into a living spiritual body. But, let's pay close attention what St. Paul says here. Note how the body that dies is called "physical body" in English, but the original Greek is *soma psychikon*. This is not literally the physical body. This is the body with its soul. The soul dies with the body. What is raised is not an immortal soul. Rather, what is raised is a spiritual body, a *soma pneumatikon*. That is, God raises us in a totally transformed state.

There is no substance dualism here. Curiously, what St. Paul says is compatible with monistic naturalism, where only a material reality exists. Yet, this is by no means the main point. The main point is that who we are in the resurrection will be the result of God's action. Nothing in us right now is capable of transcending death. Only God can overcome death with new life.

	<i>Monism or Dualism?</i>	<i>Individual Eternal Life?</i>
Naturalism	monism	no
Immortal Soul	dualism	yes
Reincarnation	dualism	yes
Absorption	monism	no
Astral Body	dualism	yes
Trans-Humanism	monism + dualism	yes
Resurrection	monism or dualism	yes

Conclusion

The human imagination draws many mental pictures of what might happen after death. Key to understanding what Christians believe is the Easter resurrection of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus died. On Easter Sunday, God raised Jesus. Jesus was not raised to return to Nazareth to continue his career as a carpenter. No. Jesus was raised for all of eternity.

So also, the New Testament promises that you and I will be raised by God to live with the resurrected Jesus in the everlasting kingdom of God. We will be citizens of this new reality. And, it will be a genuinely new reality, where our individual bodies will be fully transformed and we will enjoy a spiritual unity with God, with one another, and with all other things in creation.

Adapted from W/JK *Thoughtful Christian*
www.thoughtfulchristian.com

For More Information

Ted Peters with Robert John Russell and Michael Welker, *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*,. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 2002.

Ted Peters, *GOD—The World's Future*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2nd ed., 2000.

N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Volume III of *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.