

**What is the religious attitude to members of the faith who, if faced with an unpleasant hospital procedure to extend their lives, decided to just lie down and die to get to heaven more quickly?**

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The answer very much depends on the concept of afterlife and the beliefs that each religion holds.

My research into this matter found that all main religions hold the concept that, after life, there is an abstract element of one's being that keeps on living after the body ceases to exist and to function, *ie* it dies and decomposes. This gives the believer the idea that the individual will live eternally, albeit not in the present human form and not on earth, but in a different form and place, often unclear.

The religions I looked into are: Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Judaism, Islamism and Christendom (collective noun for the hundreds of so-called Christian religions).

My research revealed that all of these religions inherited such view of the soul from Greek philosophers such as Plato, but the concept of immortal soul began much earlier, stemming from ancient Babylon and Egypt.

Thinking that you may find this subject interesting, I attach a document that discusses the origin of this concept and its adoptions by the above-mentioned religion.

Whatever the religion, it's human nature to want to live forever, but doing so in another form, or a "spirit" form, means that no-one really knows what to expect for sure, what the feelings, sensations and thoughts will be living as a "soul", stuck in an unidentifiable place, whether it be "heaven", "hell", "limbo", "karma", "nirvana" etc.

This uncertainty may create, for certain believers, a certain degree of fear of death (the only exception being extreme Islamist terrorists that give their life to kill other people). Such fear may cause a believer to want to hang on to dear life no matter what. My personal experience, being brought up in the Catholic dogma, confirms such fear.

This, coupled with the fact that life is sacred and must never be ended willingly (that is, apart from religious wars and only if the clergy deems it necessary to kill others or to make their life hell!) means that anything that can be done to extend life should be carried out, even if it makes someone's life more painful and destroys his or her dignity.

For instance, my Catholic brother decided that my father, with terminal liver cancer, be administered really painful enemas on a daily basis for 2 weeks, just to prolong his life for a little longer. He also forbade my father to drink a little wine and eat a bit of salami (his before-death wishes) just to see him live for another day. My brother also admitted that he would have done all in his power to make my father live longer, even if that meant seeing him live like a vegetable or making him suffer longer.

On the other hand, other believers may regard death as a friend, to be welcomed and perhaps even to be hurried. This means that a hurried death is justified to reach the 'better' life quicker and no repercussion will there be upon the believer on the part of the clergy and no punishment by God.

In most cases, the preacher or priest will be the one imparting guidelines on beliefs and views onto the believer.

Whilst all religions of Christendom claim to follow the Bible to a certain degree, but in reality their dogma is dictated by various elements of philosophy and paganism, true Christians (ie Christians that follow the Bible in its entirety and who base their beliefs and life on the teachings of Christ and not on pagan ones), hold a totally different view of death, ie that the body simply shuts down, all its functions cease to operate and exists and that there is no abstract part that leaves the body and that continues to live on in a different form.

In fact the Bible clearly states, in various Scriptures, that the body, feelings and thoughts (all possible elements of life) cease totally to exist at death. For example:

**(Ecclesiastes 9:5-6)**

5 For the living are conscious that they will die; but as for the dead, they are conscious of nothing at all, neither do they anymore have wages, because the remembrance of them has been forgotten.  
6 Also, their love and their hate and their jealousy have already perished, and they have no portion anymore to time indefinite in anything that has to be done under the sun.

On the other hand, the Bible assures, again in many scriptures, that there will be a resurrection and that people will live forever on a paradise earth, in human form (like now), free from death, illness, pain, fear, and where peace, love and happiness will abound. Please find some examples of these scriptures as follows:

**(John 5:28-29)**

28 Do not marvel at this, because the hour is coming in which all those in the memorial tombs will hear his voice  
29 and come out, those who did good things to a resurrection of life, those who practiced vile things to a resurrection of judgment.

**(Psalm 37:11)**

But the meek ones themselves will possess the earth, and they will indeed find their exquisite delight in the abundance of peace.

**(Isaiah 35:5-6)**

5 At that time the eyes of the blind ones will be opened, and the very ears of the deaf ones will be unstopped.  
6 At that time the lame one will climb up just as a stag does, and the tongue of the speechless one will cry out in gladness. For in the wilderness waters will have burst out, and torrents in the desert plain.

Holding a strong belief in the resurrection in human form, on an earth restored to its beauty and free from war, illness, imperfection, pollution and from flora and fauna destruction and exploitation, means that fear of death is non-existent. However, this does not mean that the value of the present life is diminished; to the contrary, life is the most wonderful gift by the Creator and as such must be treated as sacred and must be preserved and respected. This means that use of substances detrimental to health must be avoided (such as smoking and excessive drinking) and that the life of our neighbour must be treated as sacred too (ie no killing, no violence, no abortions etc.).

So, what guidelines could such Christians apply in a situation where a loved one is in a terminal state?

First, they must acknowledge that each situation involving a terminal illness is tragically different, and there are no universal rules. Furthermore, Christians should be careful to consider the laws of the land in such cases and should keep in mind, too, that no loving Christian would advocate medical neglect.

Only when there is undeniable terminal disease (where the situation has been clearly determined to be hopeless) should consideration be given to asking that life-support technology be discontinued. In such cases there is no Scriptural reason to insist on medical technology that would simply prolong a dying process that is far advanced.

These often are very difficult situations and may involve agonizing decisions. How is one to know, for example, when a situation is hopeless? Though no one can be absolutely certain, reason needs to be exercised along with careful counsel. One medical paper advising doctors comments:

“If there is disagreement concerning the diagnosis or prognosis or both, the life-sustaining approach should be continued until reasonable agreement is reached. However, insistence on certainty beyond a reasonable point can handicap the physician dealing with treatment options in apparently hopeless cases. The rare report of a patient with a similar condition who survived is not an overriding reason to continue aggressive treatment. Such negligible statistical possibilities do not outweigh the reasonable expectations of outcome that will guide treatment decisions.”

In such a predicament, the Christian, whether patient or relative, would rightfully expect some help from his physician. This medical paper concludes: “In any case, it is unfair simply to provide a mass of medical facts and options and leave the patient adrift without any further guidance on the alternative courses of action and inaction.”

Of course, the patient and his immediate family must make their own balanced decision in this very emotional situation.

If death does come to a loved one, hard as this is, Christians are not left to agonize and grieve. Rather, they can take comfort that they did the best they reasonably could for their sick loved one and that any medical assistance employed was at best of temporary help.

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### **Immortality of the Soul—The Birth of the Doctrine**

“No subject connected with his psychic life has so engrossed the mind of man as that of his condition after death.”—“ENCYCLOPÆDIA OF RELIGION AND ETHICS.”

A 70-YEAR-OLD scholar and teacher is accused of impiety and of corrupting young minds by his teaching. Even though he presents a brilliant defence at his trial, a biased jury finds him guilty and sentences him to death. Just hours before his

execution, the aged teacher presents to the pupils gathered around him a series of arguments to affirm that the soul is immortal and that death is not to be feared.

<sup>2</sup> The condemned man is none other than Socrates, renowned Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C.E. His student Plato recorded these incidents in the essays *Apology* and *Phaedo*. Socrates and Plato are credited with being among the first to advance the idea that the soul is immortal. But they were not the originators of this teaching.

<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, the roots of the idea of human immortality reach into much earlier times. Socrates and Plato, however, polished the concept and transformed it into a philosophical teaching, thus making it more appealing to the cultured classes of their day and beyond.

### **From Pythagoras to the Pyramids**

<sup>4</sup> The Greeks prior to Socrates and Plato also believed that the soul lived on after death. Pythagoras, the famous Greek mathematician of the sixth century B.C.E., held that the soul was immortal and subject to transmigration. Before him, Thales of Miletus, thought to be the earliest known Greek philosopher, felt that an immortal soul existed not only in men, animals, and plants but also in such objects as magnets, since they can move iron. The ancient Greeks claimed that the souls of the dead were ferried across the river Styx to a vast underground realm called the netherworld. There, judges sentenced the souls either to torment in a high-walled prison or to bliss in Elysium.

<sup>5</sup> In Iran, or Persia, to the east, a prophet named Zoroaster appeared on the scene in the seventh century B.C.E. He introduced a way of worship that came to be known as Zoroastrianism. This was the religion of the Persian Empire, which dominated the world scene before Greece became a major power. The Zoroastrian scriptures say: "In Immortality shall the soul of the Righteous be ever in Joy, but in torment the soul of the Liar shall surely be. And these Laws hath Ahura Mazda [meaning, "a wise god"] ordained through His sovereign authority."

<sup>6</sup> The teaching of the immortality of the soul was also a part of the pre-Zoroastrian Iranian religion. Ancient tribes of Iran, for example, cared for the souls of the departed by offering them food and clothing to benefit them in the underworld.

<sup>7</sup> Belief in life after death was central to Egyptian religion. The Egyptians held that the soul of the dead person would be judged by Osiris, the chief god of the underworld. For example, a papyrus document claimed to be from the 14th century B.C.E. shows Anubis, god of the dead, leading the soul of the scribe Hunefer before Osiris. On a pair of scales, the heart of the scribe, representing his conscience, is weighed against the feather that the goddess of truth and justice wears on her head. Thoth, another god, records the results. Since Hunefer's heart is not heavy with guilt, it weighs less than the feather, and Hunefer is allowed to enter the realm of Osiris and receive immortality. The papyrus also shows a female monster standing by the scales, ready to devour the deceased if the heart fails the test. The Egyptians also mummified their dead and preserved the bodies of pharaohs in impressive pyramids, since they thought that the survival of the soul depended on preserving the body.

<sup>8</sup> Various ancient civilizations, then, held one teaching in common—the immortality of the soul. Did they get this teaching from the same source?

### **The Point of Origin**

<sup>9</sup> “In the ancient world,” says the book *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, “Egypt, Persia, and Greece felt the influence of the Babylonian religion.” This book goes on to explain: “In view of the early contact between Egypt and Babylonia, as revealed by the El-Amarna tablets, there were certainly abundant opportunities for the infusion of Babylonian views and customs into Egyptian cults. In Persia, the Mithra cult reveals the unmistakable influence of Babylonian conceptions . . . The strong admixture of Semitic elements both in early Greek mythology and in Grecian cults is now so generally admitted by scholars as to require no further comment. These Semitic elements are to a large extent more specifically Babylonian.”

<sup>10</sup> But does not the Babylonian view of what happens after death differ considerably from that of the Egyptians, the Persians, and the Greeks? Consider, for example, the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Its aging hero, Gilgamesh, haunted by the reality of death, sets out in search of immortality but fails to find it. A wine maiden he meets during his journey even encourages him to make the most of this life, for he will not find the unending life he seeks. The message of the whole epic is that death is inevitable and the hope of immortality is an illusion. Would this indicate that the Babylonians did not believe in the Hereafter?

<sup>11</sup> Professor Morris Jastrow, Jr., of the University of Pennsylvania, U.S.A., wrote: “Neither the people nor the leaders of religious thought [of Babylonia] ever faced the possibility of the total annihilation of what once was called into existence. Death [in their view] was a passage to another kind of life, and the denial of immortality merely emphasized the impossibility of escaping the change in existence brought about by death.” Yes, the Babylonians also believed that life of some kind, in some form, continued after death. They expressed this by burying objects with the dead for their use in the Hereafter.

<sup>12</sup> Clearly, the teaching of the immortality of the soul goes back to ancient Babylon. According to the Bible, a book bearing the stamp of accurate history, the city of Babel, or Babylon, was founded by Nimrod, a great-grandson of Noah. After the global Flood in Noah’s day, there was only one language and one religion. By founding the city and constructing a tower there, Nimrod started another religion. The Bible record shows that after the confusion of languages at Babel, the unsuccessful tower builders scattered and made new beginnings, taking along their religion. (Genesis 10:6-10; 11:4-9) Babylonish religious teachings thus spread across the face of the earth.

<sup>13</sup> Tradition has it that Nimrod died a violent death. After his death the Babylonians reasonably would have been inclined to hold him in high regard as the founder, builder, and first king of their city. Since the god Marduk (Merodach) was regarded as the founder of Babylon, some scholars have suggested that Marduk represents the deified Nimrod. If this is so, then the idea that a person has a soul that survives death must have been current at least by the time of Nimrod’s death. In any case, the pages of history reveal that following the Flood, the birthplace of the teaching of the immortality of the soul was Babel, or Babylon.

<sup>14</sup> How, though, did the doctrine become central to most religions of our time? The next section will examine its entry into Eastern religions.

### **The Idea Enters Eastern Religions**

“I always thought that the immortality of the soul was a universal truth that everyone accepted. So I was really surprised to learn that some great minds both of the East and of the West have passionately argued against the belief. Now I wonder how the idea of immortality came into Hindu consciousness.”—A UNIVERSITY STUDENT WHO WAS RAISED A HINDU.

HOW did the idea that man has a soul that is immortal enter Hinduism and other Eastern religions? The question is of interest even to those in the West who may not be familiar with these religions, since the belief affects everyone’s view of the future. Because the teaching of human immortality is a common denominator in most religions today, knowing how the concept developed can indeed promote better understanding and communication.

<sup>2</sup> Ninian Smart, a professor of religious studies at the University of Lancaster in Britain, observes: “The most important centre of religious influence in Asia has been India. This is not merely because India itself has given birth to a number of faiths—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc.—but because one of these, Buddhism, came to influence profoundly the culture of virtually the whole of East Asia.” Many cultures influenced in this way “still regard India as their spiritual homeland,” says Hindu scholar Nikhilananda. How, then, did this teaching of immortality make inroads into India and other parts of Asia?

### **Hinduism’s Teaching of Reincarnation**

<sup>3</sup> In the sixth century B.C.E., while Pythagoras and his followers in Greece were advocating the theory of transmigration of souls, Hindu sages living along the banks of the Indus and Ganges rivers in India were developing the same concept. The simultaneous appearance of this belief “in the Greek world and in India can hardly have been fortuitous,” says historian Arnold Toynbee. “One possible common source [of influence],” Toynbee points out, “is the Eurasian nomad society, which, in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C., had descended upon India, South-Western Asia, the steppe country along the north shore of the Black Sea, and the Balkan and Anatolian peninsulas.” The migrating Eurasian tribes evidently carried with them to India the idea of transmigration.

<sup>4</sup> Hinduism had begun in India much earlier, with the arrival of the Aryans about 1500 B.C.E. From the very start, Hinduism held the belief that the soul was different from the body and that the soul survived death. Hindus thus practiced ancestor worship and laid out food for the souls of their dead to consume. Centuries later when the idea of the transmigration of souls reached India, it must have appealed to the Hindu sages grappling with the universal problem of evil and suffering among humans. Combining this with what is called the law of Karma, the law of cause and

effect, Hindu sages developed the theory of reincarnation whereby merits and demerits in one life are rewarded or punished in the next.

<sup>5</sup> But there was one other concept that influenced Hinduism's teaching about the soul. "It seems to be true that at the very time when the theory of transmigration and *karma* was formed, or even earlier," says the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, "another concept . . . was gradually taking shape in a small intellectual circle in N. India—the philosophic concept of the *Brahman-Âtman* [the supreme and eternal Brahman, the ultimate reality]." This idea was combined with the theory of reincarnation to define the ultimate goal of Hindus—liberation from the cycle of transmigration in order to be one with the ultimate reality. This, Hindus believe, is achieved by striving for socially acceptable behavior and special Hindu knowledge.

<sup>6</sup> Hindu wise men thus shaped the idea of the transmigration of souls into the doctrine of reincarnation by combining it with the law of Karma and the concept of Brahman. Octavio Paz, a Nobel Prize winning poet and a former Mexican ambassador to India, writes: "As Hinduism spread, so did an idea . . . that is pivotal to Brahmanism, Buddhism, and other Asian religions: metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls across successive existences."

<sup>7</sup> The doctrine of reincarnation is the mainstay of present-day Hinduism. Hindu philosopher Nikhilananda says: "That the attainment of immortality is not the prerogative of a chosen few, but the birthright of all, is the conviction of every good Hindu."

### **The Cycle of Rebirth in Buddhism**

<sup>8</sup> Buddhism was founded in India about 500 B.C.E. According to Buddhist tradition, an Indian prince by the name of Siddhârtha Gautama, who came to be known as Buddha after receiving enlightenment, founded Buddhism. Since it sprang from Hinduism, its teachings are in some ways similar to those of Hinduism. According to Buddhism, existence is a continuous cycle of rebirth and death, and as in Hinduism, each individual's status in his current life is defined by the deeds of his previous life.

<sup>9</sup> But Buddhism does not define existence in terms of a personal soul that survives death. "[Buddha] saw in the human psyche only a fleeting series of discontinuous psychological states, which are held together only by desire," observed Arnold Toynbee. Yet, Buddha believed that something—some state or force—is passed on from one life to another. Dr. Walpola Rahula, a Buddhist scholar, explains:

<sup>10</sup> "A being is nothing but a combination of physical and mental forces or energies. What we call death is the total non-functioning of the physical body. Do all these forces and energies stop altogether with the non-functioning of the body? Buddhism says 'No.' Will, volition, desire, thirst to exist, to continue, to become more and more, is a tremendous force that moves whole lives, whole existences, that even moves the whole world. This is the greatest force, the greatest energy in the world. According to Buddhism, this force does not stop with the non-functioning of the body, which is death; but it continues manifesting itself in another form, producing re-existence which is called rebirth."

<sup>11</sup> The Buddhist view of the Hereafter is this: Existence is everlasting unless the individual attains the final goal of Nirvana, liberation from the cycle of rebirths.

Nirvana is a state neither of eternal bliss nor of becoming one with the ultimate reality. It is simply a state of nonexistence—the “deathless place” beyond individual existence. *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines “Nirvana” as “a place or state of oblivion to care, pain, or external reality.” Rather than seeking immortality, Buddhists are encouraged to transcend it by achieving Nirvana.

<sup>12</sup> As it spread to various places in Asia, Buddhism modified its teachings to accommodate local beliefs. For example, Mahayana Buddhism, the form that is dominant in China and Japan, holds a belief in celestial bodhisattvas, or future Buddhas. Bodhisattvas put off their Nirvana for countless lives in order to serve others and help them attain it. Thus one can choose to continue in the cycle of rebirth even after attaining Nirvana.

<sup>13</sup> Another adjustment that became particularly influential in China and Japan is the doctrine of the Pure Land to the West, created by Buddha Amitabha, or Amida. Those calling on the name of Buddha in faith are reborn into the Pure Land, or paradise, where conditions are more conducive to attaining the final enlightenment. What has developed from this teaching? Professor Smart, mentioned earlier, explains: “Not unnaturally, the splendours of paradise, vividly described in some of the Mahayana scriptures, came to replace nirvana in the popular imagination as the supreme goal.”

<sup>14</sup> Tibetan Buddhism incorporates other local elements. For example, the Tibetan book of the dead describes the fate of an individual in the intermediate state before being reborn. The dead are said to be exposed to the bright light of the ultimate reality, and those who are unable to bear the light do not gain liberation but are reborn. Clearly, Buddhism in its various forms conveys the idea of immortality.

### **Ancestor Worship in Japan’s Shinto**

<sup>15</sup> Religion existed in Japan before the arrival of Buddhism in the sixth century C.E. It was a religion without a name, and it consisted of beliefs associated with morals and customs of the people. With the introduction of Buddhism, however, the need arose to distinguish the Japanese religion from the foreign one. And so the designation “Shinto,” meaning “the way of the gods,” sprang up.

<sup>16</sup> What belief did the original Shinto hold about the Hereafter? With the advent of the wetland cultivation of rice, “wetland agriculture necessitated well-organized and stable communities,” explains the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, “and agricultural rites—which later played such an important role in Shintō—were developed.” Fear of departed souls led these ancient people to conceive rites of appeasing them. This developed into a worship of ancestral spirits.

<sup>17</sup> According to Shinto belief, a “departed” soul still has its personality but is stained because of death. When the bereaved perform memorial rites, the soul is purified to the point of removing all malice, and it takes on a peaceful and benevolent character. In time, the ancestral spirit rises to the position of an ancestral deity, or guardian. As it coexisted with Buddhism, Shinto incorporated certain Buddhist teachings, including the doctrine of paradise. Thus, we find that belief in immortality is fundamental to Shinto.

### **Immortality in Taoism, Ancestor Worship in Confucianism**

<sup>18</sup> Taoism was founded by Lao-tzu, who is said to have lived in China in the sixth century B.C.E. The goal in life, according to Taoism, is to harmonize human activity with Tao—the way of nature. Taoist thinking concerning immortality can be summed up this way: Tao is the governing principle of the universe. Tao has no beginning and no end. By living in accord with Tao, an individual participates in it and becomes eternal.

<sup>19</sup> In their attempt to be at one with nature, Taoists in time became especially interested in its agelessness and resilience. They speculated that perhaps by living in harmony with Tao, or nature's way, one could somehow tap into the secrets of nature and become immune to physical harm, disease, and even death.

<sup>20</sup> Taoists started to experiment with meditation, breathing exercises, and diet, which supposedly could delay bodily decay and death. Soon legends began to circulate about immortals who could fly on clouds and appear and disappear at will and who lived on sacred mountains or remote islands for countless years, sustained by dew or magical fruits. Chinese history reports that in 219 B.C.E., the emperor Ch'in Shih Huang Ti sent a fleet of ships with 3,000 boys and girls to find the legendary island of P'eng-lai, the abode of the immortals, in order to bring back the herb of immortality. Needless to say, they did not return with the elixir.

<sup>21</sup> The quest for eternal life led Taoists to experiment with concocting immortality pills by alchemy. In the Taoist view, life results when the opposing yin and yang (female and male) forces combine. Thus, by fusing lead (dark, or yin) and mercury (bright, or yang), the alchemists were imitating the process of nature, and they thought that the product would be an immortality pill.

<sup>22</sup> By the seventh century C.E., Buddhism made inroads into Chinese religious life. The result was an amalgam embracing elements of Buddhism, spiritism, and ancestor worship. "Both Buddhism and Taoism," says Professor Smart, "gave shape and substance to beliefs about an after-life which were rather sketchy in ancient Chinese ancestor-worship."

<sup>23</sup> Confucius, China's other prominent sage of the sixth century B.C.E., whose philosophy became the basis for Confucianism, did not comment extensively on the Hereafter. Rather, he stressed the importance of moral goodness and socially acceptable behavior. But he had a favorable attitude toward ancestor worship and placed great emphasis on the observance of the rites and ceremonies relating to the spirits of departed ancestors.

### **Other Eastern Religions**

<sup>24</sup> Jainism was founded in India in the sixth century B.C.E. Its founder, Mahāvîra, taught that all living things have eternal souls and that salvation of the soul from the bondage of Karma is possible only through extreme self-denial and self-discipline and a rigid application of nonviolence toward all creatures. Jains hold these beliefs to this day.

<sup>25</sup> India is also the birthplace of Sikhism, a religion practiced by 19 million people. This religion had its start in the 16th century when Guru Nânak decided to fuse the best of Hinduism and Islam and form a united religion. Sikhism adopted the Hindu beliefs of immortality of the soul, reincarnation, and Karma.

<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the belief that life continues after the body dies is an integral part of most Eastern religions. What, though, of Christendom, Judaism, and Islam?

### **The Idea Enters Judaism, Christendom, and Islam**

“Religion is among other things a way of reconciling people to the fact that some day they must die, whether by the promise of a better life beyond the grave, rebirth, or both.”—GERHARD HERM, GERMAN AUTHOR.

IN MAKING a promise of an afterlife, virtually every religion depends on the belief that a human has a soul that is immortal and that upon death journeys to another realm or transmigrates to another creature. As noted in the preceding section, the belief in human immortality has been an integral part of Eastern religions from their inception. But what about Judaism, Christendom, and Islam? How did the teaching become central to these faiths?

### **Judaism Absorbs Greek Concepts**

<sup>2</sup> The roots of Judaism go back some 4,000 years to Abraham. The sacred Hebrew writings began to be written in the 16th century B.C.E. and were completed by the time Socrates and Plato gave shape to the theory of the immortality of the soul. Did these Scriptures teach the immortality of the soul?

<sup>3</sup> Answers the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: “Only in the post-biblical period, did a clear and firm belief in the immortality of the soul take hold . . . and become one of the cornerstones of the Jewish and Christian faiths.” It also states: “The personality was considered as a whole in the biblical period. Thus the soul was not sharply distinguished from the body.” The early Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead, and this “is to be distinguished from the belief in . . . the immortality of the soul,” points out that encyclopedia.

<sup>4</sup> How, then, did the doctrine become “one of the cornerstones” of Judaism? History provides the answer. In 332 B.C.E., Alexander the Great took much of the Middle East in lightning-quick conquest. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, the Jews welcomed him with open arms. According to first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, they even showed him the prophecy from the book of Daniel, written over 200 years earlier, that clearly described Alexander’s conquests in the role of “the king of Greece.” (Daniel 8:5-8, 21) Alexander’s successors continued his plan of Hellenization, imbuing all parts of the empire with Greek language, culture, and philosophy. A blending of the two cultures—the Greek and the Jewish—was inevitable.

<sup>5</sup> Early in the third century B.C.E., the first translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, called the *Septuagint*, was begun. Through it many Gentiles came to have respect for and familiarity with the Jewish religion, some even converting. Jews, on the other hand, were becoming conversant with Greek thought, and some became philosophers, something entirely new to them. Philo of Alexandria, of the first century C.E., was one such Jewish philosopher.

<sup>6</sup> Philo revered Plato and endeavored to explain Judaism in terms of Greek philosophy. “By creating a unique synthesis of Platonic philosophy and biblical tradition,” says the book *Heaven—A History*, “Philo paved the way for later Christian [as well as Jewish] thinkers.” And what was Philo’s belief about the soul? The book continues: “For him, death restores the soul to its original, pre-birth state. Since the soul belongs to the spiritual world, life in the body becomes nothing but a brief, often unfortunate, episode.” Other Jewish thinkers who believed in the immortality of the soul include Isaac Israeli, the well-known 10th-century Jewish physician, and Moses Mendelssohn, a German-Jewish philosopher of the 18th century.

<sup>7</sup> A book that has also deeply influenced Jewish thought and life is the Talmud—the written summary of the so-called oral law, with later commentaries and explanations of this law, compiled by rabbis from the second century C.E. into the Middle Ages. “The rabbis of the Talmud,” says the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, “believed in the continued existence of the soul after death.” The Talmud even speaks of the dead contacting the living. “Probably on account of the influence of Platonism,” says the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, “[rabbis] believed in the pre-existence of souls.”

<sup>8</sup> Later Jewish mystical literature, the Cabala, even goes as far as to teach reincarnation. Regarding this belief, *The New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* states: “The idea seems to have originated in India. . . . In Kabbalah it first emerges in the book *Bahir*, and then, from the Zohar onward, was commonly accepted by mystics, playing an important role in Hasidic belief and literature.” In Israel today, reincarnation is widely accepted as a Jewish teaching.

<sup>9</sup> The idea of the immortality of the soul, therefore, entered Judaism through the influence of Greek philosophy, and the concept is today accepted by most of its factions. What can be said about the entry of the teaching into Christendom?

### **Christendom Adopts Plato’s Thoughts**

<sup>10</sup> Genuine Christianity began with Christ Jesus. Concerning Jesus, Miguel de Unamuno, a prominent 20th-century Spanish scholar, wrote: “He believed rather in the resurrection of the flesh, according to the Jewish manner, not in the immortality of the soul, according to the [Greek] Platonic manner. . . . The proofs of this can be seen in any honest book of interpretation.” He concluded: “The immortality of the soul . . . is a pagan philosophical dogma.”

<sup>11</sup> When and how did this “pagan philosophical dogma” infiltrate Christianity? The *New Encyclopædia Britannica* points out: “From the middle of the 2nd century AD Christians who had some training in Greek philosophy began to feel the need to express their faith in its terms, both for their own intellectual satisfaction and in order to convert educated pagans. The philosophy that suited them best was Platonism.”

<sup>12</sup> Two such early philosophers wielded a great deal of influence on Christendom’s doctrines. One was Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-254 C.E.), and the other, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.). Regarding them, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* states: “Only with Origen in the East and St. Augustine in the West was the soul established as a spiritual substance and a philosophical concept formed of its nature.” On what basis did Origen and Augustine form their concepts about the soul?

<sup>13</sup> Origen was a pupil of Clement of Alexandria, who was “the first of the Fathers explicitly to borrow from the Greek tradition on the soul,” says the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Plato’s ideas about the soul must have influenced Origen deeply. “[Origen] built into Christian doctrine the whole cosmic drama of the soul, which he took from Plato,” noted theologian Werner Jaeger in *The Harvard Theological Review*.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine is viewed by some in Christendom as the greatest thinker of antiquity. Before converting to “Christianity” at the age of 33, Augustine had intense interest in philosophy and had become a Neoplatonist. Upon his conversion, he remained Neoplatonic in his thinking. “His mind was the crucible in which the religion of the New Testament was most completely fused with the Platonic tradition of Greek philosophy,” says *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* admits that Augustine’s “doctrine [of the soul], which became standard in the West until the late 12th century, owed much . . . to Neoplatonism.”

<sup>15</sup> In the 13th century, the teachings of Aristotle were gaining in popularity in Europe, largely because of the availability in Latin of the works of Arab scholars who had commented extensively on Aristotle’s writings. A Catholic scholar named Thomas Aquinas was deeply impressed by Aristotelian thinking. Because of Aquinas’ writings, Aristotle’s views wielded a greater influence on the church’s teaching than Plato’s did. This trend, however, did not affect the teaching about the immortality of the soul.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle taught that the soul was inseparably connected with the body and did not continue individual existence after death and that if anything eternal existed in man, it was abstract, nonpersonal intellect. This way of looking at the soul was not in harmony with the church’s belief of personal souls surviving death. Therefore, Aquinas modified Aristotle’s view of the soul, asserting that the immortality of the soul can be proved by reason. Thus, the belief of the church in the immortality of the soul remained intact.

<sup>17</sup> During the 14th and 15th centuries, the early part of the Renaissance, there was a revival of interest in Plato. The famous Medici family in Italy even helped establish an academy in Florence to promote the study of Plato’s philosophy. During the 16th and 17th centuries, interest in Aristotle waned. And the Reformation of the 16th century did not introduce a reform in the teaching about the soul. Although Protestant Reformers took issue with the teaching of purgatory, they accepted the idea of eternal punishment or reward.

<sup>18</sup> The teaching of the immortality of the soul thus prevails in most denominations of Christendom. Noting this, an American scholar wrote: “Religion, in fact, for the great majority of our own race, *means* immortality, and nothing else. God is the producer of immortality.”

### **Immortality and Islam**

<sup>19</sup> Islam began with Muhammad’s call to be a prophet when he was about 40 years old. It is generally believed by Muslims that revelations came to him during a period of some 20 to 23 years, from about 610 C.E. to his death in 632 C.E. These revelations are recorded in the Koran, the Muslim holy book. By the time Islam came

into existence, Judaism and Christendom were infiltrated with the Platonic concept of the soul.

<sup>20</sup> Muslims believe that their faith is the culmination of the revelations given to the faithful Hebrews and Christians of old. The Koran cites both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures. But on the teaching of the immortality of the soul, the Koran diverges from these writings. The Koran teaches that man has a soul that goes on living after death. It also speaks of resurrection of the dead, a judgment day, and the final destiny of the soul—either life in a heavenly garden of paradise or punishment in a burning hell.

<sup>21</sup> Muslims hold that a dead person's soul goes to the *Barzakh*, or "Partition," "the place or state in which people will be after death and before Judgment." (Surah 23:99, 100, *The Holy Qur-an*, footnote) The soul is conscious, there experiencing what is termed the "Chastisement of the Tomb" if the person had been wicked or enjoying happiness if he had been faithful. But the faithful ones must also experience some torment because of their few sins committed while alive. On the judgment day, each faces his eternal destiny, which ends that intermediate state.

<sup>22</sup> The idea of the immortality of the soul in Judaism and Christendom appeared because of Platonic influence, but the concept was built into Islam from its beginning. This is not to say that Arab scholars have not tried to synthesize Islamic teachings and Greek philosophy. The Arab world, in fact, was greatly influenced by Aristotle's work. And noted Arab scholars, such as Avicenna and Averroës, expounded and built on Aristotelian thinking. In their attempts to harmonize Greek thought with the Muslim teaching about the soul, however, they came up with differing theories. For example, Avicenna declared that the personal soul is immortal. Averroës, on the other hand, argued against that view. Regardless of these viewpoints, the immortality of the soul remains the belief of Muslims.

<sup>23</sup> Clearly, then, Judaism, Christendom, and Islam all teach the doctrine of the immortality of the soul.