Life into Death

or

Death into Life?

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Humans are relational beings. They spend their lives searching for friendship and love, acceptance and affection. The human brain, although fascinating and magnificent, falls quite short of being able to process all of life. It is estimated that for every few billion bits of information that are processed by the unconscious, only a few thousand, at best, are brought into consciousness (What the Bleep Do We Know?). The mind is constantly filtering out information so that the self doesn’t go into “overload.” Even with the filtering that occurs, most human beings seem to feel an innate desire to search for more in life. They find themselves striving to achieve this sometimes indescribable concept of “more” in response to a feeling of lack; incompleteness. If love can spawn feelings of great happiness even with the majority of its experience being filtered by the subconscious, imagine what it could be if people were able to experience it completely; fully. Thus enters the concept of the Ultimate Love: God. However, in the same regard, everyone suffers loss in his lifetime. Imagine how great loss would be if one was truly aware of its being. The ultimate loss, logically, would be losing the Ultimate Love: hell. But can a person lose something if he has never truly known it? And can anyone truly know anything while he is human?

Since the beginning of human life, man has been faced with his own mortality. As a result, there is evidence that the question of what happens after death has plagued the world for as long as there are written records. For those who choose to follow the Epicurean view “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die,” the answer is simple: nothing. Death is the ultimate end. When bodies die, they rot or are burned and return to the earth; there is no afterlife. If there is a separate spirit, it is entwined within the bodily nature and dies with the last beat of the heart; the last breath that is taken. Some choose instead to believe in a type of dualism in which the body may die, but the spirit lives on to participate in another realm which cannot be
defined by space or time. Still, for others, there is a belief that the spirit or the soul exits the body upon death only to be reincarnated in another form, be that another human, an animal, a plant, or a god. Perhaps the soul leaves the body at death only to be reunited with it at the end of time.

Humanity has been, and continues to be, fascinated with death and the afterlife. This fascination is evidenced by the many books and movies portraying views of heaven, hell, and God. *The Great Divorce*, by C.S. Lewis, offers the idea that each person’s current life is his own version of hell, yet often he chooses to prolong that suffering, because it is familiar, rather than take a chance and trust God to lead him along the path of righteousness which will ultimately lead to eternal happiness. *The Lovely Bones*, by Alice Sebold, offers a distinct view of heaven in which one merely watches over loved ones left on earth and forms new bonds with people whose experience in life has overlapped his own. Everyone’s heaven, like everyone’s life, is unique. Visions of God also enter pop culture through movies as diverse as *The Passion of the Christ* and *Bruce Almighty*. Whatever the ultimate concept, the starting point is the same: there must be more than what a person can see, perhaps even more than he can possibly image. After all, science continues to tell society more and more about particles and concepts which elude the senses every day.

People seek order in their lives and many choose, perhaps even need, to believe that there is life after earth. As they turn on the news to hear reports of murders and deaths in war; famine and natural disasters, many people turn to a higher power for comfort. They need to have hope; to believe, as Anne Frank once said, that “despite everything, people are really good at heart,” and that goodness will be rewarded and evil punished. These people find solace in their faith.
“Religion is the product of humanity’s struggle with finitude, its struggle to overcome suffering and death, to find stability and lasting satisfaction in a world of change” (Lester 12). Each religion has developed its own way of explaining what happens to the body, the spirit, or the soul after death. Despite their varying names and concepts, which on the surface may seem very different, many of the well known religions share a sense of hope and striving for a higher existence in which everything is comprehensible; an existence after this earthly one which will give meaning to the lives of their followers; will give reason to the sense of responsibility felt for the well being of others. Religions have developed teachings which the faithful are to follow in anticipation of an eternal reward or at the risk of facing eternal punishment; what many know as heaven or hell. Though the Epicureans of the world may choose not to believe in an afterlife, for those who do, the beliefs are not as varied as they might appear upon first glance. One should not be deceived by what is merely a difference in language and custom when the overall goal is very similar. Despite their differing means, most major religions have the same end in sight: release from the bodily bounds of earth into a greater spiritual enlightenment; a higher form of self that is beyond the grasp of the average human mind.

**Catholicism’s Heaven:**

Catholics compose the largest denomination within the Christian Church and, as Christians, Catholics believe that Jesus Christ was sent down from heaven by God the Father to save humanity from its sins and open the doors of heaven to the faithful. Jesus was sent to save the world from sin, to be a mediator between God and men; “the founder of a new race of men and women who are no longer destined to die, but will live eternally with God in heaven” (Schreck 192). Through Jesus’ death, the need for a mediator between man and God is erased. Catholics believe that at the end of time, their bodies will rise to eternal life and they will join
God in heaven as full humans in a transformed world. They will experience the beatific vision; the vision of God that brings perfect happiness. In seeing God, they will be transformed into His image.

But what exactly is heaven and how does one get there? According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “‘heaven’ or ‘the heavens’ can designate both the firmament and God’s own ‘place’-‘our Father in heaven’ and consequently the ‘heaven’ too which is eschatological glory. Finally, ‘heaven’ refers to the saints and the ‘place’ of spiritual creatures, the angels, who surround God” (326). Baptism into the Church seals one’s faith and leads to the true freedom of heaven while Confirmation furthers one’s commitment to Christ and to the Church as a whole. However, even someone who has not been sacramentally initiated into the Church can enter heaven. “Those who die for the faith, those who are catechumens, and those who, without knowing of the Church, but acting under the inspiration of grace, seek God sincerely and strive to fulfill his will, are saved even if they have not been baptized” (Catechism 1281). “Those who die in God’s grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. They are like God for ever, for they ‘see him as he is,’ face to face” (Catechism 1023).

Surprisingly, there is not much in scripture about heaven. Much of what Catholics have come to accept as the “truth” about the afterlife has just been inferred or gathered from the saints, mystics, and church traditions. When scripture does attempt a description, it is often in metaphorical terms such as a “joyous wedding feast” (Mt 22:1-14, 25:1-13), a “great banquet” (Lk 14:16-24), or “marriage of the lamb, Jesus Christ, to his bride, the church” (Rv 19:7-9 qtd. in Schreck 192). “This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise: ‘no
eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Corinthians 2:9)” (Catechism 1027). In heaven, “He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4 qtd. in Wilhelm 420).

Catholics believe that God “desires all men be saved and come to the knowledge of truth” (1 Tm 2:4 qtd. in Schreck 192). “Heaven is eternal life with God. It is the goal of human existence, the purpose for which God created all mankind” (Schreck 191). In heaven, we will love and be loved with an unimaginable, ever-increasing love. We will be fully possessed, continually overwhelmed by God’s beauty and goodness, and yet we will go on thirsting for more-even as we are filled to perfect contentment we yet seek and find still more and more. God will be able to totally give himself to us. No longer shall we have to intuit or reason to him from his works, speculate about him, or catch fleeting, unsatisfying ‘glimpses.’ We shall see him as he is, his very self, ‘face to face’ (1 Corinthians 13:12). Each of us will know God and be loved by him in the most intimate way possible, in a way no one or nothing in creation is or ever will be. This will be an incredible, unimaginable happiness (Wilhelm 420).

“The beatific vision, in which God opens himself in an inexhaustible way to the elect, will be the ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace, and mutual communion” (Catechism 1045).

“In this heaven-state there will be no sorrow, no pain, no hardship, no struggle or temptation of any kind. We will understand everything we have ever wanted to- the secrets of the universe, the mysteries of our faith. We will have everything we want, and we will be secure in this eternal happiness, knowing that there is no possibility of ever losing it” (Wilhelm 420).

In our heavenly state we will also know all those we have known and loved in this world, the saints and all the great people of history- in fact we will be strangers to no one, and we will delight in one another’s perfections and in our mutual love. There will be no distracted turning away from God to others, or vice versa…but rather we will then clearly see God in them, acting through them, giving himself and revealing himself through them (Wilhelm 422).

“Heaven is perfect union with God and one another forever. It is not a place, not ‘here’ or ‘there,’ but a state in which, while yet retaining our individuality, we will be caught up into the infinite God” (Wilhelm 419-420). “Our present life is, by comparison, like a dream, a
‘shadow life,’ a tiny foothold on what life really is” (Wilhelm 421). When people die and are brought to new life through Christ,
then we will have our full personality, alive to the depths of our being, fully ourself, and have perfect love and friendship with others. We will be beyond time and space, able to transcend the whole universe in an instant, be wherever we want and do whatever we want. We will be glorified like the resurrected Christ who is ‘the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep’ (I Corinthians 15:20) (Wilhelm 421).

Despite the perfect picture often painted by human artists of heaven and eternal life with God, it is still viewed as the reward for living a “Christian life;” seeing Christ in all those whom a person meets and using his skills and gifts to make the world a better place by helping his “brothers and sisters in Christ.” As such, “there will be degrees of love and happiness in heaven: the more we have loved in this life, the more God’s grace-presence we have with us now, the greater will be our love and happiness forever” (Wilhelm 422). Humans were created in the image and likeness of God. Unlike other creatures on the Earth, they are able to understand long term consequences and strive for long-term goals on the basis of delayed gratification. Heaven offers a great incentive for Christians to be on their best behavior much like the idea of Santa Claus offers huge motivation for young children to stay on the “nice list” around Christmas. Catholics believe that “the resurrection of all the dead, ‘of both the just and the unjust,’ (Acts 24:15) will precede the Last Judgment” (Catechism 1038). At the end of time, Jesus will separate the saved from the unsaved and those who are truly worthy will join God in His heavenly kingdom for all eternity.

There is no “proof” of heaven just as there is no “proof” of God. No one has come back from the dead to tell the world about the afterlife or even if there is an afterlife. Christians believe that Jesus descended into the realm of the dead and delivered the righteous to heaven to be with His Father before resurrecting to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament. Although there are accounts of these events occurring in the Gospels, which are believed to have been
divinely inspired, there is obviously no hard evidence. Just as one today must have faith in God without seeing, so too must one believe in the reality of heaven based solely on faith.

**Purgatory:**

Unique among Christian teaching is Catholicism’s concept of purgatory. The belief was affirmed and placed into Catholic dogma in the 15th and 16th centuries at the ecumenical councils of Florence and Trent. There it was defined as the way in which salvation through Jesus comes about. “Christ has made up for our sins, and now accepts us totally, but we still have the need of doing something about them ourselves, as when we hurt anyone we love. We experience this painful purgation because we have not loved enough” (Wilhelm 414). Catholics believe that God is too holy for mere humans to stand before Him with sin in their hearts. As a result, they must first be cleansed before they can enter His holy kingdom. Purgatory is the “stopping point” on the way to heaven where this cleansing occurs.

Evidence of praying for the dead has been found back as far as the Roman catacombs.

The concept of purgatory as a place of purification by ‘fire,’ before entering heaven, has been prevalent only since the thirteenth century. Archaeology, however, shows that the earliest Christians prayed for their dead who were sometimes said to be in a ‘place of tears’ or a ‘place of darkness.’ The ancient liturgies of both East and West contain prayers for the dead, as in our Mass today (Wilhelm 414).

These prayers suggest a belief in a stopping point; a purgatory, between death and the afterlife. If the deceased had already entered the kingdom of heaven or had been sentenced to hell, there would be no reason for offering prayers; they would be futile. The ancient people, as well as those of today must have believed that their prayers could influence God’s ultimate decision to let their loved ones enter His home.

Parts of the Christian Church almost from the beginning believed in a state of purgation after death where the dead could not help themselves but could be helped by prayers of those on earth. God’s people of the Old Testament had only a vague notion of this, but a widespread Jewish tradition of the century before Christ held that it was a ‘holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins’ (2 Maccabees 12, 46) (Wilhelm 414).
“Those in the state of purgation cannot help themselves, but we can help them attain heaven by praying for them, offering Mass for them, offering our sufferings, good actions, etc” (Wilhelm 415).

Out of these beliefs grew one source of corruption in the Church- the selling of indulgences. “No one knew precisely how time was calculated in the afterlife, but relative assessments could be made, and the common calculation in Frederick the Wise’s day was that even a forgiven sin required the equivalent of seven years of suffering in purgatory before one’s soul qualified for admission to heaven” (Deedy 96). Many people could not bear the thought of their loved ones suffering for such a long time before being able to see God. They would like to believe that after death, there is new life with Christ. Many believe that the time they spend on Earth is a long enough wait and yearn only to see God face to face. As a result, many did not hesitate to buy an indulgence- “the remission before God of the temporal punishment due in the afterlife for sins committed and already forgiven on earth as far as guilt is concerned. An indulgence can be gained for oneself or can be applied to one of the faithfully departed” (Deedy 96).

Purgatory is not a second chance for salvation for those who have rejected God or have lived evil lives. Neither is it a safety net for people who hope that God will overlook serious sin in their lives if they die unrepentant. Rather, purgatory is a sign of God’s mercy on those who have honestly sought to know God and to do his will in this life, and yet who die in some degree of bondage to sin or the effects of sin… Catholics believe that God chooses to purify repentant sinners even after their death so that they can enter into the full joy of heaven (Schreck 195).

This stop on the way to heaven is an attempt to express our need of eventual ‘purification’- the growth in needed love we must undergo before attaining union w/ God, who is Limitless Love, forever in heaven. This is essentially a way of saying we are responsible beings, ultimately accountable for our free actions and choices. Purgatory is perhaps best described as the painful state or experience of encountering God after death, when we see him as he really is ‘face to face’ (I Corinthians 13:12), and, by contrast, ourselves as we really are, as sinful humans (Wilhelm 413).

By entering and remaining in purgatory for a time, the souls of the faithfully departed are “growing in love by submitting [them]selves to the burning, penetrating, purifying power of
God’s love. We realize clearly our immature self-love, our ingratitude, sloth, and attachments to sinful habits. We ‘grow up’ in love and break away from our childish self-centeredness. Our real self then emerges, perfected, totally absorbed in God, totally in love” (Wilhelm 415). “We see clearly God’s infinite goodness and our own faults by contrast—like a piercing ray penetrating and revealing the depths of our being. Seeing our miserable state, we want to be purged, purified, and yet we ache and burn with desire to be with God. The pain is simply that we cannot be united with him quickly enough” (Wilhelm 415).

Although it would seem that humans are sinful beings and, as a result, no one can go straight to heaven and everyone must pass through some amount of time in purgatory before being holy enough to experience God, in reality “we need not go through this purgatory state after death if we have loved sufficiently in this life. Some people by their great suffering surely seem to be going through their purgatory here” (Wilhelm 416). “A ‘purification by fire’—a purgatory—would [only] come upon those Christians whose lives and works were imperfect in God’s sight, although they themselves would be saved. The image of fire connected with purgatory shows that this ‘purgation’ is painful, yet also cleansing and purifying” (Schreck 197).

Despite its painful description, purgatory is still merely a stopping point on the way to heaven. “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but are still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven” (Catechism 1030). “Those passing through this purgatory state know clearly they are saved, God’s love overwhelms them, and they have a joy far more intense than anything on earth” (Wilhelm 415).

Purgatory is a concept unique to the Catholic Church, yet even within the Church, “many scholars today do not accept the traditional notion of purgatory as a post-death state, but see it
rather as something undergone in this life- unequivocal, painful times of facing and making up for our sins. Perhaps this takes place in the experience of dying. The concept of accountability after death, however, is an ancient one” (Wilhelm 414). It is this idea of accountability that leads also to the ideas of heaven and hell and atonement for sin in exchange for forgiveness by God. It is every Catholic’s goal to enter the kingdom of heaven and reducing time in purgatory by taking responsibility for one’s actions on earth and helping God’s creatures can only expedite the fulfillment of that desire.

Hell:

For Catholics, the ultimate punishment is banishment to hell upon death. This belief is new to Christians; Israel had no concept of an “eternal, personal punishment after death” (Wilhelm 280), but unlike purgatory, hell, as a concept, is not limited to the Catholic faith. Hell was originally believed to be the place where all the souls of the dead went to await their savior. When Jesus died, He descended to hell, bringing with Him the Good News and delivering the righteous to heaven. He did not, however, deliver the damned or destroy hell.

Despite the continued existence of hell, God is merciful and offers many opportunities to resist such a punishment. He wants His creation to enter new life in Him and wishes upon no one the “ultimate death of eternal separation from God” (Schreck 192). “No one will go to hell except one who, with full awareness, fundamentally and permanently rejects God with his total being” (Wilhelm 281). In the Catholic tradition, “God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end” (Catechism 1037).

In addition to the sacrament of reconciliation which offers Catholics absolution for their sins if they are truly sorry, anointing of the sick is available. This sacrament is complete with
prayers, anointing, and a (sometimes last) chance to ask God for forgiveness of sins committed on earth. It also provides a chance to receive communion; to imbibe the body of Christ. Even one who dies without having received the sacrament, if he dies with God in his heart, will not go to hell. Only one who turns knowingly away from God through mortal sin and denies Him will suffer eternally in the afterlife.

The New Testament describes this place of eternal separation from God as the outer darkness, where men will “weep and gnash their teeth” (Mt. 22:13, 24:51, 25:30) and as an “unquenchable fire” (Lk. 3:17, Mt. 3:12, 13:30 qtd. in Schreck 193). “Jesus often speaks of ‘Gehenna,’ of ‘the unquenchable fire’ reserved for those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe and be converted, where both soul and body can be lost. Jesus solemnly proclaims that he ‘will send his angels, and they will gather…all evil doers and throw them into the furnace of fire’ (Mt. 25:41)” (Catechism 1034).

From these images it is easy to understand the common depiction of hell as a fiery pit in which the devil burns souls for all eternity and the only thing they know is suffering. While hell is indeed a place of suffering, “perhaps the greatest pain of those who are condemned to hell is their hopeless awareness that they are forever separated from God, and their knowledge that they are fully responsible for having brought this fate upon themselves” (Schreck 194). “One in hell is seen as eternally alone. It is complete alienation. There is no sympathy, no sense of companionship, only emptiness and hatred- of oneself, of the other damned, of all creation, of God. One ceaselessly turns within himself, finding only emptiness and an endless, frustrating restlessness. He fully realizes that he is utterly rejected by the good God” (Wilhelm 280).

As Christians, Catholics believe that it is their duty to love their Creator; God. They can show this love by living a moral, just, and merciful life and using the gifts they have been given
by God to help their fellow created beings. God understands that human beings are fallible, but if they live life to the best of their ability, He will still welcome them into His kingdom with open arms. However, “we cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor, or against ourselves” (Catechism 1033). “The only thing that can keep us from heaven is deliberately turning away from God. If we fully reject God by choosing a condition of mortal sin, we have cut ourselves off from him, from happiness, and have isolated ourselves forever in hell” (Wilhelm 422). For those who truly reject God, He does not hesitate to turn them away from heaven. “Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, ‘eternal fire.’ The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs” (Catechism 1035).

Some modern theologians question the existence of hell, but the Catholic Church still supports its existence and affirms that those who freely choose to reject Jesus will suffer eternal separation from God.

Some wonder how a merciful God could send anyone to hell eternally. It would seem that, if anyone is in hell, he has put himself there, and God only respects his free choice. One who has made himself totally the center of his world, who refuses to love anything beyond and greater than himself, could not be happy in heaven, for heaven is giving totally in love and being loved. God would not force such a one to love, since love cannot be forced. At death he would have for all eternity what he wanted- himself and only himself- and this would be hell (Wilhelm 280-281).

“Many scholars, and ordinary people as well, feel that no one is damned; they cannot conceive of a person choosing with full knowledge and deliberation to be cut off from God forever. Nor can they conceive of a loving God damning anyone forever. Some people believe they make their hell here on earth, through their alienation from God, others and even themselves” (Wilhelm 281).
Whether or not human beings are currently in hell, whether or not hell as a place exists, even beyond time and space such as heaven, the fear it instills in the faithful is enough to motivate them to live a more “Christian” life. Every person has experienced human love and human loss through his relationships on earth and he knows the pain caused by the death of, or the separation from, a loved one, either physically or mentally. He can only imagine how much worse it would be to lose the Ultimate Love, the Platonic perfect Form. There are no words which can truly give justice to such a loss, so society is left with the concept of hell; an idea which spurs them to love more and love better in the face of losing eternal love to eternal loneliness.

**Buddhism:**

As Christianity is divided into numerous denominations, of which Catholicism is the largest, so too is Buddhism composed of many sects. These sects have somewhat varying beliefs as do those in Christianity. “Pure Land Buddhism focuses on the Buddha not as a guide, but as a savior. Zen focuses on the Dharma [the path taught by Buddha] as essentially meditation-an instrument of enlightenment. Nichiren appeals to the Dharma as power not as the result of practice but by simple invocation. Theravada Buddhism centers itself on the Sangha [the community of monks]” (Lester 144). Throughout these sects, however, the three characteristics of life are constant: impermanence, suffering, and no-self.

All religions wrestle with the finitude-the impermanence and imperfection of human existence. In a word, Buddhism describes this problem as suffering (*duhkha*). Being born is suffering; growth is suffering; experiencing disease is suffering; growing old and dying is suffering. Subtler than physical pain is the suffering of dissatisfaction, the unhappiness occasioned by not having what we want and having what we do not want. There is anxiety (mental suffering) even in the experience of pleasure and satisfaction- the knowing or at least apprehension that it will not last. There is fear of failure, loss of status, loss of self-worth, loss of loved ones, loss of property. Deep down, there is a vague and gnawing anxiety about death- not only the prospect of life ending but of ultimate meaninglessness. It is anxiety about death that motivates human striving, that makes the world run (Lester 75-76).
Despite this anxiety about death, which can be attributed to the imperfection of humans, Buddhists believe that “ultimately, there is nothing that dies, since neither self nor mind have true existence” (Kongtrul 26). “There is no unchanging personal identity, no self (atman) apart from the constantly changing aggregates. This is the teaching of ‘no-self’ (anatman): not no self at all, but no permanent, underlying selfhood or soul. The interplay of the aggregates creates the illusion of a self-an agent underlying and experiencing materiality, sensation, consciousness, perception, and volition” (Lester 76-77). “Birth and death, samsara and nirvana, and so on, are all projections of mind, and that mind itself does not exist as anything” (Kongtrul 26).

The so-called human person, which in reality is an aggregation of energies and processes arising and decaying every moment, is said to be ‘empty’ (shunya), that is, empty of self, having no enduring nature. The same may be said of the entire phenomenal world; it is everywhere and completely in process and therefore devoid of an unchanging core (Lester 45).

In Buddhism, the ultimate goal is to realize that the universe is one. Despite the many varying natures, all of creation is the same. Man cannot be separated from beast, nor beast from plant, nor plant from rock.

If, in a series of factors identifying a phenomenon (e.g., the twelve factors of the Wheel of Becoming), the first factor causes the second, the second causes the third and so on to the last factor, which causes the first, than the existence of any factor depends upon another factor- it has no existence of its own, no existence apart from relationship; it is empty of self-nature; it has only relational nature (Lester 87).

To see the world as it really is, the goal of moral discipline and meditation, is to realize its emptiness (shunyata). This does not mean to see that the world does not exist; it means to see that everything that exists exists in a relation of dependence and, therefore, in an essential unity. Nirvana is not a negation of the world, but a seeing of the world such as it is, without the imposition of personal selfhood upon it (Lester 86).

“In a universe in which life forms are totally interdependent there is no release for one without the release of all. They also see that the means must be compatible with the end. If the end is selflessness, then the means must be an emptying of self for others, existing only for others. Those who strive only for their own happiness will never attain selflessness” (Lester 87).
All Buddhists have the ability to attain Buddhahood; full enlightenment, but to achieve such a goal, one must be willing to give selflessly throughout life without want of recompense. This is something few people can achieve and so they enter samsara, the wheel of rebirth. This ongoing cycle gives Buddhists many opportunities to perfect their lives with the eventual hope of entering nirvana; freedom from rebirth. “In light of emptiness, samsara- the world of individual existence in bondage to karma- and nirvana are the same, that is, this very phenomenal world is nirvana when emptiness is realized” (Lester 45).

**Life into Life: Merit and Demerit:**

‘If there is no self, no soul, what is reborn?’...the Five Aggregates that are constantly arising and ceasing, like a flickering flame. Each flicker is momentary, arising out of the previous flicker and giving rise to the next by its own extinction. Birth and death occur at every moment in what we call life; the final flicker of the present gross body is no different from any one moment in the life of this body (Lester 80).

The most important thing to comprehend when attempting to interpret Buddhist beliefs is this continuity of life. There is a six fold hierarchy of beings: gods, humans, demons, hungry ghosts on the Earth, animals, and hell-dwellers below the earth. The realm of the gods is pure pleasure while the four realms below human are painful, increasing in intensity as you descend the ladder towards hell. Humans experience mixed pleasure and pain and are the only form of life in which merit and demerit can be built. The effects of karma built in human life are experienced in the other realms.

Buddhists build up merits and demerits through their actions and thoughts.

Demerit is the result of action motivated by selfishness, merit the result of action motivated by unselfishness. Selfishness is characterized by lust and hatred and is ultimately rooted in delusion, in ignorance of the true nature of the self and the world. Unselfishness shows itself in sexual restraint, nonviolence, nonpossessiveness, and deeds of charity. Moral virtue leads to tranquility and clarity of mind, qualities conducive to meditation. By meditation, one may attain a state of selflessness or self-negation and know the self and the world as they really are. This is enlightenment (bodhi), the result of which is nirvana (Lester 14).
For those who do not achieve enlightenment in this life, the merits and demerits they accumulate will determine where they are reborn when the time comes for their current earthly lives to end.

Demerit earned as a human leads to rebirth as a demon, a hungry ghost, an animal, or an inhabitant of hell; merit leads to rebirth as a god or, again, as a human being. Those who grasp for power are condemned by such karma to a life as a powerful demon. Those who are unduly attached to family, money, and possessions are reborn as hungry ghosts—invisible beings that roam and haunt the earth suffering insatiable hunger. Preoccupation with food and sex leads to life as an animal; and a life dominated by violence, hatred, and anger leads to the most extreme punishment—life beneath the earth in hell. On the other hand, generosity, morality, and meditation result in rebirth in the happy realms as a god or return again to the human realm in a position more favorable for the achievement of nirvana. These nonhuman forms of existence may last millions of years; still, like human existence, they are temporary. When a being’s store of merit is exhausted as a god, he or she returns again to the human realm with another opportunity for merit and nirvana; or, perhaps, if there is sufficient demerit remaining from the former human existence, he or she falls to a realm of punishment to work out this demerit. Likewise, when demerit is exhausted, a hungry ghost, for instance, may revert to human form or rise to a realm of pleasure (Lester 37).

“Making and sharing merit is ultimately for the sake of achieving nirvana—the transcendence of time and space” (Lester 17) and the making and sharing of merit cannot be separated. “The living make merit for the dead in reciprocation for the merit that the dead relatives brought to their lives while they were alive” (Lester 122). This “law of karma necessitates belief in more than just one life; indeed, a series of lives, ended only by the cessation of desire” (Lester 14).

Participation in community events is often the source of gaining merit in Buddhist cultures. “Ordination…brings merit to the community in which it occurs, especially to the parents of the ordained and those of his ancestors who may be suffering in hell or as hungry ghosts” (Lester 93). Supporting someone striving for ordination is a burden shared by the community as they lose a worker, but not a mouth to feed. However, the merit of offering food to monks outweighs the demerit gained by procreation or killing creatures out of necessity, so it is a task gladly undertaken. The rules of ordination vary with culture and sect, but in many, it is a right of passage for young men, much like the Catholic Confirmation or Jewish Bar Mitzvah.
In those cultures, a man can leave the monastic life at any point, but his participation in the ritual and lifestyle will have earned merit for himself along with his parents and family. Women can also receive lower ordinances in which they generally perform services for monks in order to gain merit.

When a member of a Buddhist community dies, a ritual occurs which is an occasion for merit making by those who participate. The body of the deceased is burned with money which is seen as an offering to Buddha and a way for the deceased to buy his way into heaven. In addition, the community says prayers that the person will be reborn a human, have a family, and lead a good life. To remind themselves of the impermanence of life, Buddhists make offerings of flowers which will wither and die without a source of nourishment. They light candles to symbolize the enlightenment which they wish to achieve and to serve as a reminder to remain faithful to the dharma; the path to enlightenment.

**Nirvana and the Pure Land:**

Since Buddhists do not believe in an unchanging soul as Christians do, there is not a distinct heaven and hell, nor a purgatory in the sense of Catholic belief. All of these are merely illusions and the world and all ideas are one continuum. However, Buddhists still strive to live a good life in order to create merit for themselves and their family so that they may enjoy rebirth in the realm of the gods, or achieve the ultimate goal of awakening in nirvana. Worldly prosperity is viewed as a positive attribute in many of the sects because it is believed to be a result of a previous life lived well.

Nirvana, the ultimate goal, is the negation of worldly existence conditioned by karma. But worldly existence for Buddhism is the instrument for the achievement of nirvana as well as the context for suffering. Specifically, in the Buddha’s path to nirvana, worldly prosperity and the opportunity for rebirth, along with renunciation, are the means; they are the short-range goals and, indeed, the effective functional goals of most Buddhist striving. Social harmony and the accumulation of wealth are strongly and positively motivated by the fact that their existence is indicative of past merit and the foundation for present merit making (Lester 145).
However, a prosperous person must remember to remain selfless if he wishes to continue on the path to enlightenment rather than be reborn in a lower form.

Most sects of Buddhism view the Buddha as a guide to the achievement of the ultimate enlightenment; bodhi; nirvana. “The *Lotus Sutra* reveals the Buddha as a cosmic being unbounded by time and space who exercises many skillful devices by which all beings may be saved” (Lester 44). Unlike Jesus, they do not view Buddha as a savior who came to open nirvana to the world, but rather, like Jesus, they believe Buddha was an example of how life should be lived to achieve the ultimate goal. The ultimate destination, nirvana, like Catholic heaven, is a truly achievable goal for those who are willing to commit their lives to the path; the way.

“The Eightfold Path consists of three dimensions: Wisdom (*prajna*), which consists of right views and right intent; Morality (*sila*), which consists of right speech, conduct, and livelihood; Mental Discipline (*Samadhi*), which consists of right endeavor, right mindfulness, and right meditation” (Lester 82).

The progress from mindfulness to nirvana is described as a seven-fold attainment: the attainment of mindfulness leads to the investigation of reality, to the rise of extraordinary energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and finally equanimity. Progress on the Path is also described as gradually overcoming ten binding obstacles: the belief in self, doubt, attachment to rules and ritual, sensuous craving, ill will, the craving for rebirth in the formless realms, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance. The one who has overcome the first three obstacles has become a Stream-entrant, that is, one who has definitively entered the stream flowing toward nirvana. A Stream-winner dying at this level of attainment will never again be reborn in a realm lower than a human. A disciple who is nearly free of obstacles four and five-sensuous craving and ill will- becomes a Once-returner, that is, one who will be reborn to this world only once more and in that life attain nirvana. The disciple who is totally free of the first five obstacles is a Non-returner, that is, one who will be reborn in a realm higher than human and will reach nirvana from that realm. One who conquers all ten obstacles attains nirvana in this very life; he or she becomes an *arhat*, a Holy One (Lester 86).

“The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are resources for world prosperity-necessary for the achievement of nirvana” (Lester 16); however, “the lay man or woman may attain the status of a Stream-entrant even in the lay life and someday or in some later life be able to join the Sangha.
In the short run he or she looks to a harmonious and prosperous life and a more favorable rebirth, perhaps in one of the heavens of great enjoyment” (Lester 95).

In addition to prosperity, participation in the Sangha, and following the teachings of the Buddha in the way of the Dharma,

there are other powers that are directly instrumental to cessation of desire and enlightenment. Having attained the highly rarefied levels of consciousness through concentration, one may experience superhuman hearing and sight: the divine ear, the capacity to see into other persons’ minds; and the divine eye, the ability to perceive one’s own former lives and the sufferings and births of other beings. Finally, through applying mindfulness to each of the four absorptions, one may retain the knowledge-power by which to extinguish the three cankers (asavas): sensuous desire, the desire for existence, and ignorance. This is nirvana, deliverance from birth and death (Lester 85-86).

Unlike the Catholic conception of heaven, nirvana is not viewed as the final resting place for an unchanging soul which has inhabited a faithful body on earth and will be reunited with it when the end comes. Like heaven, however, it is an ultimate goal for the faithful and can only be achieved by leading a moral life and being of service to others. It is the end of true earthly life in the Buddhist sense because it is the elimination of suffering.

Nirvana is freedom from future rebirth, old age, and death. It may be said to be blissful, but not in any sense of worldly pleasure or, for that matter, any pleasure defined by other than the absence of suffering. The aggregates may linger, but not with any sense of self, and when one’s accumulated karma finally flickers totally out, one cannot be said to have gone anywhere- to a heaven, for instance. The aggregates simply cease, go out, and do not rise again (Lester 81).

Although Buddhists believe that nirvana is an achievable goal for every person, it may take eons to reach. Just as Catholics believe that humans cause pain by freely choosing to turn away from God through sin,

according to the Buddha, it is people themselves who cause suffering by trying to hold onto what is incessantly changing- their own life and material possessions. Indeed, humans’ belief in a soul and/or a supreme being persisting through time is a self-delusion, a feverish attempt to protect themselves in the face of change and death. To be free of suffering, one must renounce all attachments and break through the illusion of permanence by rigorous discipline of body and mind. Self-denial (refusing to lie, steal, to commit violence or engage in sexual misconduct) and meditation will result in enlightenment (bodhi) - waking up to life as it really is- and therethrough the cessation of suffering (nirvana). Since it is people themselves who, by desire for self-agrandizement, cause suffering, it is people who must conquer suffering by self-control (Lester 12).
Even though Catholics obviously believe that there is a supreme being and an unchangeable soul, many of the other teachings of the Buddha sound very much like that of Christ. As Christians use metaphors of everlasting light and life to describe their God, so too do the Buddhists: “Dharmakara becomes known as Amitabha Buddha, ‘the Buddha of Endless Light.’ According to the sutra, his paradise in the western sphere of the cosmos can be reached by good deeds and meditation on Amitabha and his paradise or simply by praising his name over and over with full faith in his power” (Lester 45).

‘The Buddha of Endless Light,’ presides over Sukhavati, ‘The Pure or Happy Land,’ in the western region. Eons ago he was the monk Dharmakara who, like the Buddha Shakyamuni, heard the preaching of a Buddha and vowed to strive as a bodhisattva to achieve full Buddhahood. He vowed to strive to accumulate the merit necessary to create the most magnificent paradise, a land ‘prosperous, rich, good to live in, fertile, lovely, …rich with manifold flowers and fruits, …adorned with silver and gold gem trees,’ a land rich with every conceivable food, to be consumed simply by the thought of it. There would be no more physical or mental pain and only gods and humans would reside there. By Dharmakara’s vow, men and women could be reborn in this paradise by good deeds and meditating on Amitabha; they may even be received there by simply hearing Amitabha’s name and keeping it firmly in mind for one night. Having arrived in the Pure Land, they may remain there indefinitely or, if they wish, pass easily to nirvana. Striving for many eons, Dharmakara attained his goal and now resides in Sukhavati as Endless Light and Endless Life (Amitayur) (Lester 72-23).

This idea of Pure Land sounds much like the concept of heaven to the Catholics, except that it is not a permanent place of residence after death. In a sense it is a purgatory because it may be merely a stopping place on the way to nirvana, however, it is not a place of cleansing. Some would argue that since all of life is merely a continuum, the Pure Land is not a place which is reached after death, but rather can be realized on earth, just as nirvana and this phenomenal world are in fact one when emptiness is truly realized.

20th century Zen master, D.T. Suzuki wrote, ‘The Pure Land is not millions and millions of miles away in the west, it is right here and those who have eyes can see it around them. And Amida is not presiding over any ethereal paradise but his Pure Land is this dirty Earth itself. Being in the Pure Land is to discover the Pure Land within ourselves. Amida is our inmost self, and when that inmost self is revealed, we are born into the Pure Land. Nothing awakens us into religious consciousness like suffering’ (Lewis).

Not all sects of Buddhism hold the same beliefs about what is needed for the achievement of nirvana or even agree on the existence of the Pure Land.
In Zen, enlightenment is easy, egoless flow or harmony with nature; it is here and now and does not look beyond this world. By reason of the Mahayana emphasis on merit-for-others of those who have realized emptiness, Pure Land Buddhists strive in life-affirming works of compassion and gratitude for Amida’s assurance of release from suffering by rebirth in the Blessed Land. Nichiren Buddhists push the nirvana of world negation into the background in unabashed favor of worldly prosperity through the power of the Dharma (Lester 145).

In Pure Land Mahayana, there is no monastic Sangha. The way is faith in the power of Amida Buddha who has stored up tremendous merit over the course of eons of time as a bodhisattva and who founded the Pure Land. Since Amida has accumulated enough merit for the salvation of the whole world and this merit is available directly to any devotee, there is no need for monks. One has assurance of being admitted to the Pure Land after death by surrender to Amida, expressed by chanting his name with all one’s heart… Pure Land Buddhists strive to keep the precepts, earnestly desiring to live a life of compassion, but not as a means of making merit. The pure and compassionate life is to be lived simply in gratitude for what Amida has done (Lester 95-96).

Even with the Buddhist teaching anatman; no-self, the ultimate desire is to achieve a state in which suffering no longer exists; a place of bliss and happiness with no worry; a oneness with all that exists. This concept is quite similar to Catholics’ desire to achieve the ultimate oneness with God in heaven. Just as Catholics have no proof that heaven truly exists, Buddhists too must believe that nirvana really is attainable and that those who have gone before them following the Path have reached their final destination and are no longer subject to suffering through rebirth.

Nirvana, like heaven, gives the faithful something to strive for and provides meaning in a sometimes chaotic, confusing, and incomprehensible world.

**Hell:**

The true hell for Buddhists is located beneath the earth’s surface and the inhabitants of hell are the lowest on the six fold hierarchy of existence. This being said, many would still believe that “the fire of hell in this world is hotter than that of the hell in the world-beyond. There is no fire equal to anger, lust or greed and ignorance” (Thera).

Catholics fear hell as punishment for sin; for turning knowingly away from God and as a result, not being able to face Him after death. In the Buddhist tradition however, “wrongdoing is not sin in the sense of being subject to judgment and punishment by another being; it is self-inflicted punishment by the fact of its bringing suffering upon oneself, if not immediately, in
later life or some future existence” (Lester 82). Those who have lived selfish lives or committed heinous misdeeds will be punished by rebirth in hell.

After their lifetime's end they will enter the Avici [un-spaced, no interval] hell for a complete kalpa. Reborn at each kalpa's end, they thus go on revolving unto innumerable kalpas. When they come out of hell, they will degrade into animals such as dogs or jackals with lean-cheeked forms, blue-black with scabs and sores, the sport of men. Moreover by men hated and scorned, ever suffering hunger and thirst, bones and flesh withered up. Alive, beaten with thorns; dead, with shards and stones. 

By cutting themselves off from the Buddha seed, they receive such recompense (Lotus Sutra 3 qtd. in *Hells*).

This self inflicted punishment parallels that believed in by Catholics. Suffering in the afterlife is freely chosen by turning away from the path of righteousness; the path demonstrated by Jesus or Buddha.

Throughout the Buddhist traditions, there are many ideas of hell. Just as the sects do not always agree on the correct path to nirvana or the existence of the Pure Land, neither do they agree on the number of hells with beliefs varying between eight and one hundred and thirty six. In one of the simplest schemes,

the first hell is the realm of murderers… It is the Hell of Repetition where those who kill for pleasure or to fulfill some desire end up. These murders brag about their actions, having no appreciation of the value of life. This is not the destination of those who kill as a consequence of some other goal. 

The next destination is known as Black Rope Hell. Here we find those who have killed during the commission of some other crime… Though people may commit crimes as members of a group, they must suffer the consequences as individuals… Certain types of killing, or stealing along with sexual indulgence, lead to the Crowded Hell.

Having improper attitudes to physical love leads to Fire-jar Hell where self-proclaimed monks, or those who misuse their office are tormented with fire at the organ that caused the wrongful behaviour…

Screaming Hell is the destination for those who misuse intoxicants… for those who seduce people using alcohol or other drugs, who trap animals in a similar way or cause people to be under their power through the selling of drugs. 

The Great Screaming Hell is the place for those whose misdeeds are via sound or the voice, generally. Those who use language to confuse or to sow discord… Here the body may be infested with vipers that need to chew their way out; with each lie, another nest of snakes is created. 

The Hell of Burning Heat is for those holding false views. These beliefs include denial of the law of cause and effect [karma] and denial of the existence of good and evil. In Diamond-beak Hornet Hell, hornets sting so that blood spurts out which the sinner must then drink. This causes great hunger and the victim now has only his own flesh on which to feed.

The seventh Hell is related to the sexual defilement of religion. It is called Burning Hell of String-like Worms. Those who seduce nuns or monks are [punished here]…

The last of the 8 hells is the Hell of No Interval. This is the destination of those committing the 5 most serious crimes: 1. pre-meditated murder of one's mother 2. pre-meditated murder of one's
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father 3. pre-mediated evil intent to harm an Enlightened One and to rejoice in that action  4. pre-meditated intent to harm the Buddhist community or sangha  5. pre-meditated murder of arhats or bodhisattvas (Hells).

Many of the misdeeds for which one suffers in Buddhist hell are the same as or similar to those expressly forbidden in Christian teaching. As in the Catholic tradition, followers are faced with a vision of burning fire and tormenting pain which awaits those who choose to live their lives through misconduct. Unlike Catholic hell, however, banishment to Buddhist hell is not forever, though punishment may last for eons. “It is unreasonable to condemn a man to eternal hell for his human weakness but quite reasonable to give him every chance to develop himself” (Thera). A hell dweller will be reborn again when his demerit is sufficiently diminished through time spent below the earth. If sufficient merit was built up in a previous life, or if family members have accumulated shared merit, a hell dweller may be reborn as a human and through many good deeds and rebirths, eventually have the opportunity to achieve nirvana.

**Hinduism: Birth into Birth into Life**

Buddhism was founded as a reform movement within the confines of Hinduism and today is seen as a heretical religion; an anti-Brahman movement, by many followers of Hinduism. As a result of their common past, Hindus still share many beliefs with Buddhists including rebirth determined by kharma. “Those whose conduct has been good will quickly attain a good birth, the birth of a Brahmin the birth of a Ksarriya or the birth of a Vaisya. But those whose conduct has been evil, will quickly attain an evil birth, the birth of a dog, the birth of a hog or the birth of a Candala” (Chandogya Upanisad qtd. in Organ 120). They believe that man is in a constant state of becoming and as such, he is not a Being.

Just as the Buddhists spend their lives trying to achieve a higher form of existence through realization that the world is merely an illusion and we are all interconnected, so too do the Hindus strive to attain a higher reality.
The Upanishads [one of the Hindu scriptures] teach that the universe and God (Brahman) are one. Only Brahman is really permanent, everything else that appears to be permanent is only an illusion or ‘Maya,’ from which comes the word magic. The universe is believed to be the projection of Brahman, the ‘dream’ of Brahman…The Vedas teach communion with the gods or God through sacrifices and ritual whereas the Upanishads teach oneness of the individual’s soul (Atman) with Brahman through knowledge of the truth and meditation. The attainment of oneness with Brahman is called Samadhi. The superconsciousness of Samadhi enables the person to see that the universe is an illusion, only Brahman and the soul’s identity with Brahman are real (Monestero 156-157).

Despite its many shared beliefs with Buddhism, Hinduism shares one very important belief with Catholicism: within each person there is an eternal spirit; “there is some notion, at times a precise one, of a spiritual principle equivalent to what we call the soul” (Renou 11). Hindus use the word atman, “vital breath,” to describe this principle; however, “atman is more comprehensive than soul; it includes consciousness and, in some contexts, sensations; sense impressions remain imprinted on it from reincarnation to reincarnation” (Renou 62). “The Atman is beyond sound and form, without touch and taste and perfume. It is eternal, unchangeable, and without beginning or end: indeed above reasoning. When consciousness of the Atman manifests itself, man becomes free from the jaws of death” (Katha Upanishad qtd. in Monestero 158).

Although atman is essentially unchangeable, it does exist within many different bodies over time as the Hindu seeks to be liberated from samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth, into everlasting freedom; moksha. Life on earth is to be appreciated, but Hindus wish to be delivered, not to die and be born again on earth. They seek this deliverance by building good kharma through works and development of their knowledge of spiritual truth. The ideal life is believed to last one hundred years and Hindus ask for nothing beyond this life because they have no conscious knowledge of rebirths: “only a few privileged individuals remember their previous incarnations” (Renou 67).
Even without explicit knowledge of the soul’s rebirth, the doctrine of kharma (karma, karman) remains central to the Hindu belief system. “Every action and every intention imprints on the inner personality an effect that matures either in this life, or more frequently, in a future one, and that constitutes the destiny of the individual” (Renou 64). “The soul comes back to earth with residue of karman that affects it and determines the precise conditions in which the individual will undergo his next reincarnation (‘in whatever state of mind one performs an action, one reaps the harvest of that action in a body corresponding to the state of mind,’ says the laws of Manu)” (Renou 66).

A soul assumes a body determined by its unfulfilled desires and the results of its past actions. An animal or a celestial body is for reaping the results of past karma, not for performing actions to acquire a new body. Performance of karma to affect any change of life is possible only in a human body, because only human beings do good or evil consciously. Human birth is therefore a great privilege, for in a human body alone can one attain the supreme goal of life (Adiswarananda).

As in the Buddhist tradition, it is only through human life that one can develop the kharma necessary to reach the final destination of deliverance. However, having the soul reborn into human life is a long process in the Hindu belief system.

In the systematic expositions that occur in the later literature the scheme is as follows: the soul will be granted a human body after undergoing 84 lakshas of preliminary reincarnations (1 laksha=100,000 times); 20 lakshas as a plant, 9 as an aquatic creature, 11 as an insect, 10 as a bird, 30 as some kind of cattle, 4 as a monkey; it must then undergo 2 lakshas of rebirths in the various estates of man, from the lowest to the highest, before it is liberated from samsara (Renou 67).

As a rule the soul is introduced to a new body after a certain length of time and thus lives again on earth. This return to earthly life is made by way of the rain that makes the plants grow; from these plants the soul is transferred into the creatures that feed on them and thus into the sperm from which the new life is to begin. While a soul is awaiting its new fate it is known as preta and is reduced to the status of a wandering ghost; there is another kind of disembodied soul, the pitars or ‘shades,’ whose relations with the living are pleasing and helpful (Renou 64).

No matter what form the soul takes, it is still believed to be the life force within each living creature. The belief that every creature has a soul that may have once been, or may someday be, a human leads to a certain sense of respect for all life forms. The soul cannot be seen, nor can it be separated from one’s being.
The *atman* is far from being as abruptly differentiated from the body as is the soul in our own conception of the matter; a continuous gradation, without difference of kind, leads from material to psychic processes, the later being dominated by *manas*, an internal sense controlling the mental faculties. In some branches of Hindu philosophy, souls, under the name of *jiva*, ‘vital principle,’ are portrayed as monads having neither origin nor ending, abstract and invariant entities now active and now inert (Renou 62).

A distinction is also made between the gross body, which is connected with the soul by means of *prana*, or ‘breath,’ and the invisible subtle body, which includes the subtle organs of the senses, the inner sense…and the energies on which the organic functions depend. It is this subtle body that, at death, accompanies the soul after the destruction of the gross body and continues to support the tendencies arising from *karman*.

At the moment of death all the faculties are withdrawn into the soul, which escapes from the body by one of the nine orifices (Renou 63).

**Life into Death or Death into Life?**

But where does this infinite, unchanging soul go if it is not destined to be reborn on earth?

The cosmic egg (*brahmanda*) contains in its upper half seven celestial layers or stories, beyond which there is nothing but empty space; the topmost of these is the dwelling place of Reality or *brahman* (neuter). The bottom half contains seven subterranean stories, the *patala*, which is the home of the Nagas and other fabulous beings; in the lowest part of the patala is hell, properly called *naraka*, the place of punishment, itself often divided into seven stories or a multiple of seven (Renou 59-60).

**Svarga, Moksha, and Patala:**

Souls “still in bondage to *samsara* are distinguished from those that are ‘delivered’ and therefore eternal, that is to say exempted henceforth by their nature from further reincarnation” (Renou 62-63). After death of a human body, souls that are not destined to remain on earth in their next life are confronted with Yama, the first man to die and who, according to Hindu myth, now rules over paradise.

The soul appears before the god Yama for judgment. If the balance of its deeds is to its credit it goes to paradise by following the sunbeams, the ‘road of the gods.’ Paradise is pictured as a place of sensuous pleasures, situated variously in the sky or among the gods at the summit of Mount Meru, or in a heaven called Vaikuntha, which is sometimes specifically conceived as a spiritual abode. If the balance is on the debit side the soul is dragged off to hell; vivid descriptions are given of the various punishments, which are graded according to the gravity of the soul’s offenses. But neither heaven nor, more especially, hell is envisioned as being eternal (Renou 63).

“There is no fixed, definite image of hell, but paradise is fairly clearly defined as the world of ‘pious actions’; man ascends to it by ‘the way of the gods.’” It lies in the third heaven
and the joys it promises are exclusively material” (Renou 11). The Hindu version of heaven is sometimes described much as the Catholic version, using images of light and banquets:

Sometimes they dreamed of a heaven (*svarga*), a place of the departed forefathers (*pitr-loka*) where the sensuous delights would be forever enjoyed, ‘where light is perpetual,’ ‘where wishes and desires are,’ ‘where food and delight are found,’ and ‘where there is happiness, pleasures, joy and enjoyment.’ There they would enjoy the music of the heavenly pipes. *Svarga* was the reward of those who practiced *tapas*, who died in battle, or who made large offerings (Organ 118).

Even with this promise of paradise, the true desire of a Hindu lies not in entering *svarga*, but rather in achieving moksha. “Deliverance (moksha, mutki, and several other words)…consists of escaping from the bonds of karman, of freedom from the necessity for rebirth” (Renou 74). “The goal…consists in perceiving that the individual soul (atman) is really and essentially identical with the universal soul (brahman)” (Renou 12-13). “The Katha Upanishad says: ‘When all the desires that dwell in the heart fall away, then the mortal becomes immortal and here attains Brahman’” (Adiswarananda).

From the Limited point of view the attainment of *moksha* is a creative achievement by which the finite self through proper techniques reaches an identity with the Supreme Reality. From the Unlimited point of view *moksha* is the removal of confining perspectives which prevent the self from an existential awareness of its true nature. *Moksha* from the second point of view is the transcendence of phenomenalism (Organ 68-69).

When a Hindu achieves moksha, he is eternally united with God, much as a Catholic soul which enters into God’s kingdom is able to see its full reality for the first time in His light. Catholics, however, do not make allocations for different degrees of relation with the Ultimate Reality once the final resting place of the soul is reached as Hindus do:

The delivered person is “someone whose thought is directed toward no object and causes no effect; in other words he is unconscious. According to the account given by theistic doctrines, he either remains passive, knowing and willing nothing, or else, as is more usual, he is united with God in a relationship that allows of different degrees in different cases, from companionship to complete incorporation (Renou 74-75)

Hinduism offers many descriptions of the way in which to achieve deliverance of the soul to moksha.

Deliverance is won in some cases step by step and in others at a single stroke. According to some schools it takes place only at death, but most thinkers allow the possibility that a man can be
‘delivered-in-life’ (*jivanmukta*), in which case he is a privileged being, a saint in some sort, subject only to the inescapable effects of such *karman* as he has accumulated in the past. He has no desires, nothing is real for him any more; everything on the practical plane has become meaningless and superfluous (Renou 74).

Some of the Hindu scriptures suggest that mere devotion to God (Brahman) is all that is needed to achieve oneness with Him after death: “Whoever has Me in all of his actions, and sees in Me his highest goal, and gives up his life to Me- he it is who finds Me” (*Gita* qtd. in Renou 73); “‘To carry the Lord in one’s own heart is the only way of salvation.’ Some doctrines maintain that the Lord recompenses this outpouring of emotion by dispensation of grace (*prasada*) to his elect” (Renou 73). These teachings sound very much like the teachings of Jesus, “seek and you shall find” (The New American Bible Lk. 11:9) and “as often as you did it for the least of my brothers, you did it for me” (Mt. 25:40). The idea of grace given from on high relates very strongly to the forgiveness given by God in the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation. Hinduism introduces us to a personal, forgiving God, much like the one seen in Christianity: “The Bhagavad-Gita taught, for the first time in Hinduism, that besides the sacrifices and rituals of the Vedas and the philosophy of the Upanishads, one could find God and be saved through loving devotion to a personal God (bhakti yoga)” (Monestero 159).

In addition to holding God in your heart at all times, Hinduism offers other paths to deliverance. “In the *Bhagavad Gita* reference is made to two paths which the liberated may take, the path of the gods (*devayana*) and the path of the fathers (*pitryana*). The soul choosing the former does not return to earth; the soul choosing the latter does return. (Organ 119). “There is the path of action: ritual and other observance, pilgrimages, private prayer; this is an extension of Vedic teaching, yet it came in time to be regarded as the lower path, at least insofar as it was concerned with outward worship. A higher form of it was that offered by asceticism” (Renou 68). “There is also the path of knowledge, an inheritance from the Upanishads: a conviction,
deliberately established in the mind, that the individual soul and the absolute are essentially identical” (Renou 68).

In addition to the paths of knowledge and action, the Bhagavad-Gita introduced yoga as a way to attain oneness with the Ultimate Reality:

Besides pursuing simple hygienic and therapeutic objectives, Yoga, when carried to extremes is applied to the acquisition of supernormal physical powers; finally and above all, to absolute mystical attainment, perfect transcendental union. It is a conscious, voluntary technique the aim of which is to dominate all the inferior planes of existence in a human being by concentrating the energies of the vegetative nervous system (Renou 70).

Not all souls that are greeted by Yama have karma in their favor. Those who have lived a life full of sin are sent to the netherworlds. “Hell… [is] referred to as a deep pit, a place of darkness where the wicked fall down headlong into caverns to be crushed in *soma* presses” (Organ 118). “Patala, the lowest of the seven nether worlds, is the realm where wicked souls sojourn after death and reap the results of their unrighteous actions on earth. Thus, from the viewpoint of Hinduism, heaven and hell are merely different worlds, bound by time, space, and causality” (Adiswarananda).

As with the celestial layers, there are different levels in the underworld and different paths which the soul can take in route to its destination.

The third course, which leads to hell, is followed by those who led an impure life, performing actions forbidden by the scriptures. They are born in sub-human species. After expiating their evil actions, they are again reborn on earth in human bodies. The fourth course is for those who are extremely vile in their thoughts and actions. They are reborn again and again as insignificant creatures such as mosquitoes and fleas. Eventually, after the expiation of their evil actions, they too return to human bodies on earth. When a soul assumes a human body, it takes up the thread of spiritual evolution of its previous human birth and continues to evolve toward Self-knowledge. According to Hinduism, all souls will ultimately attain Self-knowledge (Adiswarananda).

Just as Buddhists, Hindus do not believe that the soul will be punished for all eternity, but rather that the ultimate destination of moksha is an achievable goal for all souls though it may take many, many reincarnations to discover how to live life on the correct path. Hindus do not
have a figurehead like Jesus or Buddha who came to show them the way to deliverance, but they
do have the figure of Vishnu, one of the many faces of the Ultimate Reality, Brahman.

Vishnu does more than merely preserve the physical universe in existence from moment to
moment, He also works to preserve the spiritual among humankind. To this end, whenever the
human race is in spiritual decline, Vishnu becomes incarnated on earth … According to Hindu
belief, Vishnu has become incarnated nine times and will appear a tenth time to usher in the end of
the world (Monestro 159).

In this regard, Vishnu is similar to Jesus who came to save the human race from its sinful ways
and whom Catholics believe will come again at the end of time.

Conclusion:

Hinduism, Buddhism, and Catholicism may at first glance appear to be very different
religions, but they are united by a common purpose. People look to their faiths; to their religions
to give them guidance in a world that often seems to be beyond reason. Whether their religions’
philosophy carries the message of an eternal heaven and hell, a transitory purgatory, or rebirth to
higher or lower realms, all of the denominations offer human beings something to strive for, a
reason to be good to others in this life and to avoid evil. All religions have a code of morality,
which when followed leads to reward: rebirth as a higher form; liberation from rebirth in nirvana
or moksha; or eternal heaven.

Joseph Campbell, a modern day scholar, devoted his life to studying the myths of varying
cultures.

He was convinced that the common themes or archetypes in our sacred stories and images
transcended the variations or cultural manifestations. Moreover he believed that a re-viewing of
such primordial images in mythology as the hero, death and resurrection, the virgin birth, and the
promised land--the universal aspects of the soul, the blood memories--could reveal our common
psychological roots. They could even show us… how the soul views itself (Cousineau).

He reasoned that different cultures, which had never come in contact, showed surprising parallels
in their myths and their religious stories because all humans share some common psychological
past. Hindu scripture points to a similar idea: “Beyond the senses are their objects, and beyond
the objects is the mind. Beyond the mind is pure reason, and beyond reason is the Spirit in man” (Katha Upanishad qtd. in Monestero 158).

Whether or not Joseph Campbell’s theory is correct, there are surprising parallels among religions which differ greatly in rituals and dominate entirely different countries. Societies have always functioned by rewarding good deeds and punishing evil, so it is not surprising that the religions which developed within these societies would share these characteristics. Followers of all faiths believe in some concept of consequence: man will answer for the actions of this life in the next, whether through time spent in purgatory; in a lower life form on earth; or in hell. All religions also show hope that humans can choose the righteous path in life and be rewarded after death.

“Religion is the product of humanity’s struggle with finitude, its struggle to overcome suffering and death, to find stability and lasting satisfaction in a world of change” (Lester 12). Few people enjoy thinking about the end of life. They find solace in the belief that life will go on, in some form or another, even when their hearts have stopped pumping and their lungs have stopped breathing. Religion offers them an escape; a place to put their faith and hope to good use. It offers too, reasonable arguments built through years of re-examination and questioning as heresies arose and traditions fragmented.

There is an enormous number of “religions” in this world, but, for the majority, there is only one purpose. No matter which path each individual chooses to follow, in the end they are all striving for the same goal. Every person wants to achieve that “more” they innately desire, often without knowing why. Religions offer the path to just that with promises of other worlds; other realities that are beyond imagination. Just as all humans share over ninety-nine percent of their DNA (Pickrell), yet vary remarkably in appearance, so too do various faiths share the same
core despite their diverse outward appearances. Regardless of their differences in language and customs, ultimately, the teachings of Buddhism, Catholicism, and Hinduism can all be summarized with one simple, or not so simple, belief: life into death into new life.
**Works Cited**


