THE TRIPWIRE TO MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

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Introduction

The concept of ‘life after life’ cannot be considered in theological, scientific or philosophical isolation. There has been no consensus or spontaneous knowledge of the possibility or the reality of ‘life after life’ within or between any faith communities. Traditional beliefs have not kept pace with scientific discoveries or an understanding of human history, and they must be reviewed in the context of the origins of life, whether there is an external force that had, or has, a role in those origins, and whether there is an ongoing relationship between living creatures, both human and non-human, and the creative force.

The founders and leaders of world faiths and philosophies have approached questions of life, death and existence after life, or reincarnation, from different points of view. Most, but not all, of the Holy Books currently in use contain explanations or teaching concerning life after life, but there is no uniformity of belief within any one faith or philosophy. Some make only a passing reference to an implied assumption that a form of life may continue after mortal bodily life, while others teach doctrine that is presented in creedal declarations and imposed with dogmatic fervour, and the notions of power to create and power over life and death are not always credited to one entity. Some consider these matters relevant only to humans. Others consider non-human creatures also, while some consider believe there are links between human and non-human creatures, and transmigration of souls from one to another. ¹

Starting from scratch

The progressive revelation of the nature of divine covenant can be demonstrated through a series of defined stages,² but a progressive understanding of the nature and implications of life after life cannot be so confidently established. However, the starting point must be same: what is known about the origins of human life.

The first Hominids walked the earth about 2.3 million years ago. After a series of evolutionary stages our current Homo species appeared about 200,000 years ago. Its progress was probably inhibited by the series of glacial periods, the last of which began about 110,000 years ago, but it is believed its people began migrating out of Africa between 50,000 and 100,000 years ago. ³ At the end of that glacial period, about 10,000 years ago, its population is estimated to have been about four million persons.
The population is thought to have only reached about 27 million at the time of Abraham, and by that time there had been a number of streams of religious activity, but of those streams only one has remained and become the basis of a major world system of faith: Hinduism based on oral Vedic traditions. Gavin Flood identifies a series of five millennial stages in the history of that process, and because Vedic Hinduism is the oldest extant faith system, those stages provide a framework to consider concurrent developments in beliefs about life after life in all major religions, and to do so without an undue emphasis on developments in the Western world. For this paper I simply add an additional period prior to Flood’s five.

The Prior Period – General

The notion of ‘soul,’ or dual parts of human existence, might have occurred to early humans as a result of dreams being perceived as a reality. Edward Tylor proposed that they experienced one reality while awake and a second while asleep; that they gave them the same value, and saw them as controlled by separate parts of their ‘being.’ This phenomenon is quite different to the earliest known religious activity, recognition of an iconic symbol of the community in association with its god in some way – a totem – with a charismatic leader involved in totemic celebrations. It is likely that totemic phenomena morphed into priestly practices through a stage in which the totemic leader was a sorcerer or shaman who demonstrated mystic capacities.

Indigenous religious practices are known to have evolved in several regions early in the post-glacial period, including the upper Indus Valley, where the Vedic oral traditions that were to become the basis of Hindu beliefs were taking root, Mesopotamia, and Australia. Aboriginal rock art in the Kimberley region establishes that people reached Australia at least 40,000 years ago. Their paintings depict human-like beings, and recent ethnographic studies show that religious consciousness with shamanistic belief systems was well developed from c. 17000 BCE. In the vast sparsely populated area there was a wide range of beliefs, rites and practices. They included a system of totemic tribal leadership, regional gods, strong belief in the immortality of the soul, iconography that related to things in regular use and not separated from their setting, rites of initiation, fertility, circumcision and, in one or two regions, mortuary cannibalism. Death was accepted as an inevitable transformation, and beliefs about whether the spirits were static, or roamed, or went to the land of the dead, varied from region to region.

However the most significant aspect of their belief system was an awareness of a covenantal relationship between humans and God that involved obligations. This was established c. 4000 BCE, long before divine commands to Abraham triggered similar awareness in Canaan. Aboriginal Dreaming indicates that humans were obliged to a superior being to care for their environment and if they refused, or failed, they had to expect a penalty that could be deprivation, sickness or possibly death.
Flood’s First Period: The Indus Valley Civilization c. 2500 -1500 BCE

During this period the Indus Valley Harappan civilization was apparently centred on Mohenjo-Daro with a state religion that involved temple ritual bathing for purification, and possibly animal sacrifice. Vedic knowledge, revered as sacredly revealed to the sages, was being gathered and relayed from generation to generation as dharma, oral codes of ritual, social and ethical behaviour. This was associated with bhakti, devotion to deities mediated through icons and the sages in the hope of refuge in times of crisis and possibly liberation from adverse actions, karma, and in anticipation of a cycle of reincarnation involving the notion of either continuation or transmigration of the person’s spirit or soul from one bodily existence to another.¹⁰

According to Karel Werner¹¹, Vedic writers saw humans as a complex of elemental and dynamic forces combined and endowed with intrinsic intelligence to produce individual beings with a three-tiered personality structure. Tier one is a transcendent creative and supporting force of universal reality as a whole, aja; tier two, the tanū, possessed by both gods and deceased persons that may be said to have the likeness or character but not the form of body¹; and tier three, sārīra, a physiological organism equating to ‘body’ and combining four elemental forces given unity and likeness by tanū.

The ultimate individual experience of reality, identical with brahman, and not to be confused with either “soul” or the transmigrating personality, is explained as ātman, and liṅga śarīra as a lower order entity which survives the physical body, carries within itself the personal characteristics and future destiny shaped by past deeds of the deceased individual that preserves personal continuity throughout successive lives.¹²

Concerning theism and creation, Gavin Flood notes that many gods are acknowledged by the Rg Veda, that many of them relate to natural phenomena while some are related to areas of responsibility, and although the goddess Aditi is credited with being the Mother of the Universe, none is recognized as supreme deity or the initiating creator. Four gods are relevant to consideration of life after life. Agni pervades the world as sacrificial fire and is identified with the sacred cow, Pṛśni, transports the dead to the realm of the lord of death, Yama, and also transports and purifies all offerings to the realm of the gods. Soma intercedes between men and gods, is regarded as a link between the human and the divine.¹³

However Flood also notes that “many Hindus believe in a transcendent God, beyond the universe, who is yet within all living beings and who can be approached in a variety of ways.”¹⁴ This indicates that some people who accept Hindu culture are either monotheist or ‘modified polytheists,’ who allow other gods subordinate or limited intercessory roles somewhat akin to saints in Roman Catholic culture.

¹ Werner suggests this is the “phenomenal self” which passes from life to life.
There are some similarities between that situation and the concurrent developments in Mesopotamian city or community-based polytheism of Sumer, Akkad, Assyria and Babylonia that included priest-led pagan worship and exaggerated devotion, the construction of Ziggurats, and obedience (rather than ethical behaviour) that was ensured by fear of particular gods, some of which were ranked. The god-fear factor was offset in some regions by the promulgation of imperial codes for conduct, and there was apparently a general belief in an afterlife in a land below our world where everyone went after death without regard for either social status or the person’s conduct during life.\(^{15}\)

Abraham’s migration, marking the point of origin of the now-dominant triangle of Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is thought to have coincided with the decline of both the Harappan and Assyrian civilizations, c. 1800 BCE. The Patriarch is said to have been influenced in his decision to respond to a divine command to leave home and establish a new community in an unknown destination by the religion of the Sabians who believed there were no gods other than the stars, and that the sun was the supreme God that “governs the upper and lower worlds.”\(^{16}\) However the primary influence was probably the abuse of human values that Abraham experienced and the brutality, beastliness and sadism that sustained imperial powers.

In the early stages of their religious experience, Abraham’s successors strayed at times from instructions their patriarch had received under divine influence, and suffered trauma during an extended domicile in Egypt. Then, because of successive periods of punishment and reconciliation with their God, Yahweh, under the leadership of Moses during and after the Exodus, they soon concluded that the Throne of Glory is perpetual and that Yahweh would protect Israel in perpetuity as a community charged under covenant with a particular task. There is no evidence that they discussed the fate of individuals or whether their souls or spirits would cease to exist after death, or the relationship between body and soul.

**Second Period: The Vedic 1500 -500 BCE**

While Vedic traditions, beginning with the Rg Veda, were being committed to writing the Harappan-Indus Valley civilization declined and the Aryan culture became dominant.\(^{17}\) Concerning death inflicted on an unborn human, the Atharva Veda Samhita, c. 900 BCE, regards abortion in the same light as incest, murder and adultery.\(^{18}\)

Because the Torah, expanding with the age and size of the Hebrew community and the trauma it was experiencing, was still being transmitted only orally, changing Hebrew beliefs and the life of the community can only be known from written records produced since late in the 10th cent when the written Torah and the Major Prophets entered circulation. These conveyed the paramount Hebrew belief that Yahweh was exclusively the God of their community and assured it of protection under covenant.
The notion that Yahweh could influence the lives of other communities and could isolate them in death was a much later development that remained current until the Babylonian Exile of 586 BCE. Psalm 115, which illustrates this, is thought to date from the monarchy before the exile of 586 BCE. It says that people, while alive, stayed in the realm of the earth to which they were allotted; that heaven was reserved for God and angel-like messengers, that ‘the dead,’ meaning those who did not praise Yahweh, remained in Sheol with no prospect of returning to an earthly existence or of being elevated to heaven, while “we” who fear and trust the Lord “will bless the Lord from this time on and for evermore.”

The thinking of three other writers of this period is pertinent to life after life. I Samuel 28, concerns Saul’s attempt to ‘call up’ Samuel to intervene with God to reverse his condemnation for having disobeyed God’s command. It illustrates the Hebrew belief at that time that the dead still exist but the living should not attempt to consult them as in a séance or look for them to come back, but should talk to the living. However that book, based on oral traditions from the 11th century, was composed or edited either c. 610 BCE or during the Babylonian Exile c. 560, so there is no certainty whether it is a record of conversation at that time, or was written in the 7th cent and attributed to the people identified.

The writer of two portions of Isaiah, 57:1-2, 12-13 and 51:6-8, anticipated that the righteous will be secure in a relationship with God and that the wicked will be rejected. He alluded to the destruction of earthly physical things, but it is not clear from the passages whether he was referring to the soul or the body, or both, or whether the destruction of the earth is to be expected, and if so, what “deliverance” and “salvation” mean. These passages are from the Babylonian Exile but, as with I Samuel, portions known to be the work of the prophet have been dated earlier, c. late 8th cent.

Similarly, some time after the Exile, the writer of Job expressed belief in the finality of death and that a person’s earthly life may never be restored after death, writing that “mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep.” (Job 14:12) But he then expressed an expectation or his longing for reconciliation with God and security in a continuing presence with God. (Job 14:13-17)

These writings suggest that the Hebrews only seriously considered matters of life after life from the time of the Exile. By that time Vedic influence, better referred to as Hinduism, was spreading and early writings of the Upanisadic evolution were circulating. Some were accepted as revelation but others as the work of human minds, so the Veda became a complex of books with a wide range of beliefs and interpretations. Concerning induced death and the fate of the unborn, Guru Suśruta advised that pregnancy may be terminated to save a woman’s life because it is improper to let the pregnant woman die and therefore proper to induce abortion.

Those developments in both Hinduism and Judaism were concurrent with the foundational periods of Confucianism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism.
Paul Rule says Confucius accepted the Chou belief in a personal God, and *t’ien* or heaven. Personal spiritual development rather than political success was his aim, and the Confucian ideal was not faith in an object of worship, but ‘seriousness’ about living and enquiry into human insights by disciplined reflection for the primary purpose of spiritual self-transformation. This was to encompass all the major historical traditions of the East including the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This experience of immanence rather than theistic transcendence is the Eastern tradition that challenges the validity of the Western transcendence/immanence dichotomy.\(^{23}\)

Buddhism is usually regarded as atheistic because there is no reference to a divinity in its four noble truths or propositions. These are that: first, the existence of suffering is the accompaniment to the perpetual change of things; second, desire is the cause of suffering; third, the suppression of desire is the only means of suppressing sorrow; and fourth, there are three stages through which one must pass to attain this suppression, viz. uprightness, meditation, and wisdom, being the full possession of the doctrine. When those three stages have been traversed, one arrives at the end of the road, at the deliverance, at salvation by the Nirvâna.\(^{24}\)

A Buddhist understands the world in which he lives and suffers, takes it as a given fact and is concerned about how to escape it. However, in work towards salvation, a believer is dependent upon personal effort, having no god to thank or to invoke during his struggle. Instead of praying in the ordinary sense of the term and turning towards a superior being to seek assistance, there is only self-dependence and meditation. A Buddhist is not concerned whether gods exist or not, nor whether they should exist, and may accept the existence of *Indra*, *Agni* and *Varuna* without believing they are owed anything or are superior in any way. Whatever causes the dignity of beings is not the extent of any power they exercise over things, but the degree of their advancement towards salvation.\(^{25}\)

Karel Werner\(^{26}\) says a deeply ingrained Western notion of soul is often contrasted with Buddhism to propose two systems – soul and no soul – or a non-permanent soul in Buddhism and an immortal soul in Christianity. However there is no Indian equivalent of the simplistic notion that “soul” means an immortal part of a human entity that is a combination of an immortal soul and a mortal body. The Christian attempt to relate ‘soul’ to the Upanisadic concept of *ātman* has therefore distorted an apparent dichotomy between the Hindu and Buddhist understandings of personality.

Werner states that there is no *essential* difference between Upanisadic, subsequent Hindu systems, and Buddhist conceptions of the transmigrating personality. The Upanisadic *ātman* is seen as the transcendental agent responsible for structural unity of the living phenomenon, while the Buddhist tradition, with its heavy emphasis on the final or ultimate experience of liberation, does not discuss such a transcendental influence, but as neither Hinduism nor Buddhism posit an abiding unchanging purely individual soul inhabiting the personality structure, there is no
justification for the view that Hinduism believes in a transmigrating soul while Buddhism denies it.\textsuperscript{27} P. 31.

The origins of Zoroastrianism are uncertain. Various traditions place its founding priest or seer, Zarathushtra, between 1400 and 1000 BCE. He sought to eliminate the worship of anthropomorphic deities, replacing it with the worship of the highest principle, \textit{Ahura Mazda}, the uncreated, omniscient and eternal God whose emanations influenced good, truth, power, mind, health and immortality and were in constant opposition to an equally uncreated evil force. In Zoroastrian belief the world had a beginning and will have an end; the role of each human is to work to save the world and, in doing so, save himself or herself in the constant battle between forces of good and evil, the outcome of which is not predetermined and is dependent on human choice. Human fate is quite clear. The souls of the virtuous remain in paradise until the end of time for the final judgement, but the souls of the wicked descend to hell in the centre of the earth for punishment.\textsuperscript{28} Zoroastrianism was at the peak of its influence during the period of the Babylonian Exile when, as the official religion of Persia from 650 – 600 BCE, it was in intimate contact with the Jewish exiles.

\textbf{Third Period: Epic and Pur\=\text{\`a}nic 500 BCE – 500 CE}

Two great epics, the Mah\=\text{\`a}bh\=\text{\`a}rata and the R\=\text{\`a}m\=\text{\`a}ya\=\text{\`a}, together with a series of Pur\=\text{\`a}\=\text{n}as, dynamically re-focused Hindu worldview, thought and practice relating to the notions of gods, soul, time, and life after life. The Pur\=\text{\`a}\=\text{n}as proposed a vast concept of time involving an eternal cycle of manvantara, each of 4.32 million years encompassing four stages during which the world passes from a state of perfection to moral degeneration in which dharma is forgotten.\textsuperscript{29} The Mah\=\text{\`a}bh\=\text{\`a}rata provided a model of sacral kingship that was embellished by the identification of the king with the deity, particularly the Goddess, and by the ideology of the deity’s energy (\textit{\=\text{sakti}) flowing through him so that after consecration the king is no mere human being but a god. This encouraged sectarian devotional worship, (\textit{\=\text{p\=\text{uj\=a})}, of a deity in some form which became the central religious practice of Hinduism and largely replaced vedic sacrifice. The R\=\text{\`a}m\=\text{\`a}ya\=\text{\`a} complemented the Mah\=\text{\`a}bh\=\text{\`a}rata, illustrating the triumph of good over evil.\textsuperscript{30}

During a period of political and military turmoil in the Eastern Mediterranean there were philosophical developments in Greece, and religious disputation in Judea associated with the Hasmonean rebellion, 165 BCE. The writings of Homer, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus – notably Plato and Aristotle – had an immediate influence on Jewish thinkers and, subsequently, on both Christian and Muslim scholars, leading to mainstream belief in each of the Abrahamic faiths that souls are held to rejoin their bodies on the day of Judgment or Resurrection.

Plato, writing from 398 – 348 BCE, is widely interpreted as Monotheist but by some authorities as Polytheist, with views similar to Pur\=\text{\`a}nic Hinduism. He said the nature of divine is to be good and gods (plural) should only be portrayed as good. He proposed that the universe was created,
not from a void but out of chaos as depicted in Genesis, and with a divine likeness; that soul pre-
exists body and is the essence of the person and, being immortal, it cannot die even though it is
distracted by conflict. The soul is imprisoned within the body it rules until death separates it
from its ‘prison house’ and it continues towards the attainment of its full, pure and perfect state,
transmigrated from one living thing to another, with reincarnation or rebirth in successive new
bodies. He proposed that the soul retains knowledge accumulated from one life to another, thus
enabling progress. He did not anticipate the evolution of a perfect society because of what he
saw as the soul’s capacity as a free-moving entity to initiate its own changes and to accept or
revert the enlightened person’s moral responsibility to assist those less fortunate. 31 32

In contrast, Aristotle was definitely monotheist. He believed that all happenings in the world
derive from a single supreme principle, God, but that God was only the cause of happenings, not
the Creator, that the world possessed existence without beginning or end, and that the soul was
inseparable from the living organism (the body), being connected to the vegetative and animal
functions. 33 Epicurus took yet another view: that the cosmos is one of many temporary
arrangements of atoms brought into being by purely natural forces, and our souls are also
perishable collections of atoms that perceive the world by means of atoms that emanate from the
surfaces of objects. Gods that are perfect, imperishable and blessed exist, but they cannot have
any projects or concerns and thus do not intervene in our world. Humans are to respect and
admire them but not to expect any rewards or punishment from them. 34

A succession of Jewish writings during this period shows growing awareness of the notions of
immortality of the souls and resurrection, but with sharp disagreements.

Writing about two generations before Plato, Malachi, c. 450 BCE, proposed that God would have
favourable postmortem contact with those who had been obedient, and that “you shall see the
difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who
does not serve him.” (Ml. 3:17-18). Daniel 12, somewhat later, asserted belief in resurrection of
the soul. (Daniel 12:1-3) In Ecclesiastes’ view, still later, c. 260, the fate of humans and of
animals is the same. Humans have no advantage over the animals; all are from the dust, and all
shall turn to dust again, and all spirits go back to God. The writer of Ecclesiasticus, c. 190, was
adamant that a person’s ultimate fate – that is, the fate of the entity that remains at the point of
post-mortal judgement – is totally dependent on the person’s attitude towards God during mortal
existence. (Ecclesiasticus 5:3-8) Then the writer of Jubilees, c. 175, asserted that a Universal
Covenant is basic to Jewish religious belief and obligations, and that the Noahide Laws, which
were Noah’s response, are basic to every system of moral laws which were to follow, and linked
it to heavy emphasis on the requirement for Israel to return to strict adherence to the Law of
Moses. 35

That linkage is also clear in the Damascus Document of the Qumran community, 75 BCE, which
saw itself as the future successor to the decadent Jewish leadership: “Those who ‘did their own
will and did not keep the commandment of their Maker until his anger was kindled against them (and) in it (their own will) the sons of Noah and their families went astray; in it they were cut off. Abraham did not walk in it, and he was accounted as God’s friend.  

In the midst of great trauma the writer of 1st Maccabees, 100 BCE, gave some hope to the martyrs who were being tortured to the point of death for their faith. For them, he said, death at the hands of man would be good: they could look for hope from God and to be raised up again, while there would be no resurrection for the killers.

A later writer, in 40 CE, at first expressed a very pessimistic view: “Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end, and no one has been known to return from Hades. … For our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and there is no return from our death, because it is sealed up and no one turns back. (Wisdom 2:1-5 ) But then he reinforced the message of Malachi, saying: “The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. … Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself.” (Wisdom 3:1-5.)

This period also saw consolidation in Hinduism with the rise of the Gupta dynasty, the establishment of several important kingdoms, the development of three great traditions of Vaiśṇavism, Śaivism and Śāktism, and strengthening of the ideology of renunciation. Although it is concerned with the successful transition, at death, to another life by reincarnation, it is not a creedal religion and there is no clear teaching of transmigration in the vedic hymns. However, an early Upaniṣad, Brhadāraṇyaka, teaches that meritorious action leads to merit, (puṇya), while evil action leads to further evil (pāpa), and that the self (atman) moves from body to body as a caterpillar or leech moves from one blade of grass to another. Later, when a Upanisad, from the period 400-200 BCE, taught that the ‘performer of action which bears fruit’ wanders in the cycle of transmigration according to his actions (karma), the notion of incarnation and transmigration became a matter of doctrine that is now dominant in the majority of streams, but rejected by materialists.

However, contradiction or overlapping is illustrated by mysticism and appeasement in social practice and different approaches to life and death. On the basis of the Upaniṣads a householder maintains his family and performs his ritual obligations, but on the basis of the śramana tradition a renouncer may abandon social life, be devoted to his own salvation, prepare his own funeral and seek final release from the cycle of reincarnation. This means that both patterns are legitimated by Hindu traditions and a householder may become a renouncer and seek liberation provided three debts, ṛṣa, have been fulfilled. They are Vedic study as a celibate student, ṛṣi; ritual to the gods; and begetting a son to make funeral offerings to the ancestors, pīṭṛ.  

Jewish scholars consolidated and revised their holy books and prepared the Mishnah and the Talmud to be better able to interpret and apply the principles of the Torah to the circumstances of Diaspora. The Bible had no definitive statement concerning ensoulment and induced death of a
foetus, so a Mishna ruling was recorded, (Oholot 7:6), that abortion is permitted to save a woman’s life. However once the greater part of a child has emerged from the womb it would be murder to destroy it, and it is not permitted to murder one human being to save another.

As important as those matters were, the major development of this phase was the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the establishment of the Christian Church, its early promulgation of creeds and doctrine, and its integration with the Roman Empire. Jesus emphasized that the covenantal promise of personal salvation was dependent on acceptance of obligations under the covenant and obedience to the scriptures, that the fate of a person would be determined at the time of divine judgement upon, or subsequent to, bodily death, and that post-mortal existence for both the righteous and the wicked was assured. (Mt. 25: 44-46)

However the writer of the Gospel of John makes salvation dependent on belief in Jesus rather than living on the basis of his teaching. “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.” (John 3:36.)

Concerning life after life through resurrection, the apostle Paul made a claim that “those who belong to Christ” will enjoy resurrection of the body in imperishable spiritual form on the basis that the phenomenon had been demonstrated through Jesus resurrection and appearance before people. (1 Corinthians 15) The clear implication is that Paul is saying the wicked, or those who do not belong to Christ will not experience that phenomenon or the presence of God. As Christianity spread, that view was formalized in doctrine and creeds, the last of which is the trenchantly exclusivist Creed of Athanasius which proclaims that ‘everlasting fire’ will be the fate of the wicked when Jesus comes again to judge ‘the quick and the dead.’

That claim, that salvation was exclusively available, by right, to Christians, was reinforced by the church’s teaching on baptism which is based on the words attributed to Jesus, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.’ (Mark 16:15-16.) By the time of Augustine, 354-430 CE, the church claimed that only those who had been baptised ‘belong to the heavenly kingdom in the body of Christ which is the Church.’ Without baptism men cannot attain the beatific vision and unbaptized infants and stillborn babies go into limbo, ‘since eternal life … is a supernatural gift (and) no one has a right to this gift.’

The church also defined the fate of those who were ‘not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions’ at death (and) temporal punishment is due to sin, even after the sin itself has been pardoned by God.’ They went to a half way house, purgatory, for a stay that, according to Augustine, was temporary and would cease, at least with the Last Judgment. However he qualified that certainty of the Last Judgement with support for priestly intercession and indulgences by declaring that the souls of the faithful departed are not separated from the Church, which is the kingdom of Christ, and for this reason the prayers and works of the living are helpful to the dead. Since “our prayers and our sacrifices” can help
those who are still waiting in purgatory, the saints have not hesitated to warn us that we have a real duty toward those who are still in purgatorial expiation.42

Fourth Period: Medieval c. 500 -1500 CE

Progressive enhancement of sacral kingship encouraged sectarian devotional worship of a deity, (pijā), and this became the central religious practice of Hinduism, especially in Viṣṇavism and other streams in which the guru is seen as imbued with the pivotal power to bestow the Lord’s grace on his devotees as the embodiment of the divine, and this largely replaced vedic sacrifice. Then Rāmānuja’s theism shifted the emphasis in Viṣṇavism from karma and cyclical reincarnation to salvation or liberation in which, upon bodily death and by the grace of the Lord, the soul is united with the Lord in Viṣṇu’s heaven in a relationship in which caste is not an impediment.43

In Ireland bishop Saint Caesraaius denounced ‘pagan magic cures’ as sacrilege, but invited people to attend church, receive the Eucharist, anoint themselves, and receive health for the body and soul, and forgiveness of sins. That practice was soon adapted as a sacrament of penance for the dying: Extreme Unction 44.

The Prophet Muhammad, Islam, and revelation of the Qur’an arrived at that time with teaching that the continued life of a person’s soul after bodily death is not assured, and both the status of the soul and whether it lives or dies are determined by God. “Every soul shall have a taste of death: and only on the Day of Judgement shall you be paid your full recompense. Only he who is saved far from the Fire and is admitted to the Garden will have succeeded,” (S. 3 A. 185), and no soul can die except by Allah’s leave. (S.3 A15)

The Qur’an acknowledges questions about reincarnation into the same or a different form, but refutes them with an observation that nothing is beyond God’s power, and indicates that species differentiation is by Divine Will, as are birth by the process of copulation, and death, and neither will be frustrated. (S. 56. A. 47 and S. 8. A. 5) A person’s post-mortal fate is determined solely by divine judgement and intervention by any person is of no account. “No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another.” (S.17 A.13-15)

The Qur’an does not explicitly refer to, or prohibit, abortion, but a reference to the stage of pregnancy at which a human form can be identified, usually about 120 days, is accepted by many jurists as the time of ensoulment of a new human life. [S. 23. A. 12-14. IFTA] It is generally permissible for a woman to end a pregnancy by taking drugs prior to that, but later only if the woman’s life is in danger, and never to avoid poverty.45 In Rome, although the church did not define ensoulment, it ruled that abortion was not murder until infusion of the soul.

Maimonides, one of Judaism’s foremost scholars, declared that the standard of righteousness required for personal admission to eternal life was very high, the purpose of the entire Law was the welfare of both the soul and the body, and perfection in both respects is, alone, the cause of
everlasting life. Only Moses, Aaron and Miriam had achieved this, he said: not even other prophets and people of virtue. However he said that once a separated soul has entered upon eternal life, the intellect remains permanently in one state, for the obstacle which separated it at times from its object is now removed and its eternal survival is in a state of immense happiness which is not comparable with the pleasures of the body.”

When that teaching was taken up by many Christians who began to see limbo as the fate and temporary resting place of even ‘holy people’ who died before the resurrection of Jesus, Thomas Aquinas, introduced a different notion: the “limbo of children,” he said, was an “eternal state of natural joy” in which unbaptized children were unaware of the greater joy of Heaven. The combined impact on the church of the writings of Maimonides, Aristotle and the Muslim philosopher Averroes was such that Aquinas was then called on to provide a series of books to counter their arguments and influence.

Concerning death, he said the necessity of death comes from matter and from the combination of contrary components and it is absolute because nothing can impede it.” He agreed with Aristotle that a soul is that which all living things have in common; in this all are alike and when the soul departs from the body, the same specific body no longer remains, and the soul’s essence is not its power, for nothing is in potentiality by reason of an act as act. Concerning resurrection as exclusively for Christians, he began by noting that the life of Christ, rising again, is poured forth for all men in a common resurrection, but qualified that by saying that when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, they that hear shall live, for as the Father has life in himself, so he hath given to the Son also to have life in himself and therefore the principal cause of human resurrection is the life of the Son of God. (Jn. 5: 25.)

Fifth Period: Modern c. 1500 CE to the present

In 1452 and 1455, Pope Nicholas V relied on statements attributed to Jesus that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and his instruction to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all of his commands, to justify granting the kings of Spain and Portugal and other Catholic monarchs full and free permission to invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be, as well as their kingdom and other property, and to reduce their persons into perpetual slavery. There is no indication that he considered matters of salvation, except for the prevailing church teaching that it is not accessible without Christian baptism, life after life, or divine judgement for the course he was initiating, as he condemned the people of Africa and the New World to a living hell.

The Reformation that soon followed was actually triggered by matters of life, death, immortality and salvation. The Roman church’s determination to raise funds to build St. Peter’s basilica by the sale of indulgences incensed many clergy. Those who sought reform rejected the notion of priestly intercession, penance and indulgences because it made belief in a communal and
personal covenantal relationship with God either redundant or irrelevant. The Church resisted major theological revision and its Council of Trent, 1547, ruled that a person’s individual relationship with God is within the constraints of predestination and a response to the church’s practice of penance. It reinforced the sacrament of Extreme Unction, insisting that while its principal special effect is to confer on a sick person a sense of security it can remove all his sins and all temporal punishment due for sins and enables him to escape purgatory entirely. It also determined that the priestly act of absolution in the case of a person offering penance, but not on a death bed, is similar, and mortal sins for which absolution has been pronounced cannot be revived even if mortal sins are subsequently repeated.  

Various reformers introduced revised doctrinal statements relating to salvation but John Wesley, who insisted that doctrine must be defensible on a rational basis, rejected election and predestination as blasphemous. He insisted that God willed all men to be saved through prevenient grace, described the concept of apostolic succession as a fable, established evangelism and pastoral care services with non-ordained preachers, and drafted general rules for conduct instead of canon law.

Reform movements in Islam encouraged more active responses to the covenantal relationship between humans and God in *al-amānah*, trusteeship, and *khilafah* (khalifa), vice-regency, as a bridge for God’s moral values, and in a push for puritanical militancy and rigorism through Wāhhabism.

The messianic aspirations of Shabbethai Zevi blurred the distinction between Christian and Judaic theology, and challenged Rabbinical spiritual leadership, approaches to education and community participation. His death in 1676, raised the spectre of incarnation theology, divided the Jewish community for several generations, and contributed to a resurgence of spirituality, mysticism and reform movements in Judaism.

India’s Hindu community, wedged between the collapse of the Mughal Empire and the oppressive dominance of the British Empire, also entered a period of Renaissance. Ram Mohan Roy taught that God, whose essence is unknowable, is the transcendent, immutable creator of the cosmos, and Hinduism moved towards “an ethical spirituality equal or superior to Christianity and Islam.” He rejected idolatrous icon worship, caste, child-marriage and widow-burning, and maintained that the doctrines of karma, reincarnation, atonement and the theology of trinity surrounding Jesus should all be rejected on the basis of reason and rationality.

Dayānanda Sarasvatī, a renouncer, abandoned his quest for personal liberation, rejected reverence for the Epics and Puranas and argued for a return to the revelation of the Veda with its focus on an eternal, omnipotent and impersonal God. In contrast, Rāmakrishna and his Renouncer-disciple Swami Vivekānanda urged tolerance, declared the unity of all religions as aspects of one truth: that Hinduism is pluralistic, and that value in diversity should be recognized.
During this period of exponential population growth, commercial pressures, developments in science, challenges to civil and political structures, foment within Judaism continued and resulted in the establishment of a new stream of Reform Judaism and the Zionist Movement. These factors led to wars associated with interreligious conflict, and a series of renewed challenges to the Christian church and its theology, including various notions of life after life.

Charles Darwin did not challenge the concept of a Divine Creator, but publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 was a direct challenge to the notion of a fixed-and-final-form creation and much Christian theology that was based on it. If humans evolved progressively there was no single first couple, Adam and Eve, and no “Original Sin”, so the Biblical stories of the Garden of Eden and the Great Flood must have been myths. If there was no original sin to be offset by divine administration of election and predestination, those concepts were unsupportable. Notions of racial superiority had to be rejected, together with literalist reading of the book of Genesis, and Biblical Inerrancy which had been adopted as a basis to reject church authority as the only acceptable interpreter of text. 57

Karl Barth challenged the churches to revise theologies of Supersessionism and Dispensationism, saying the risen Lord is no founder of a new religion, and Israel and the Jews had not been cast off. Salvation, he said, “concerns all Israel, the whole church, every church” as the fulfilment of prophecy, and the “elect” do not come from any particular school of thought or group of men, and cannot be identified. 58 59

Subsequently a series of scientific discoveries have added urgency to the challenge to reassess teachings about life and life after life.

Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity established that space and time are not absolutes but dynamic quantities shaped by the matter and energy in the universe and that the concept of time before the universe was irrelevant and the age of the universe had to be reconsidered. Theories were proposed in attempts to show either that the universe had existed forever in a ‘steady state’, or that there had been a point of creation and it would be followed by the eventual decay of the material that had come into existence. Neither theory explained how life came into being or resolved arguments between creationists and evolutionists, doubts about the reality of the relationship between body and soul, the fate of the soul, or concepts of immortality and resurrection.

When nuclear fission was confirmed in 1938, scientists proposed many beneficial uses for it from energy production to medical and industrial applications including explosives for mining. However, Hitler’s campaign to force the Jewish community out of Germany converted many eminent physicists into refugees. A number fled to the USA and approached President Roosevelt, through Einstein, on the outbreak of World War Two, to propose the development of nuclear weapons to shorten the war. Their motive was to secure the safety of Europe’s Jewish communities.
Roosevelt took up the matter, but it was six years before two bombs were ready for use. When they were finally dropped it was not on the target that had been intended. Germany has already been defeated. They were dropped instead on Japan even though surrender negotiations were already advanced, as a demonstration of US power.

The devastation and loss of life raised the possibility of either the destruction of human habitat or humanity’s total self-destruction – and many questions. Was the development of the bomb legitimate use of scientific knowledge? Was it consistent with the theology of the people on the delivery end: Christians and Jews? Was manipulation of created material in that manner consistent with concepts of human stewardship of resources? On what basis could mass human slaughter on such a scale be reconciled with the teachings of any world faith? What was the fate of the souls so catastrophically separated from their bodies? How could this be reconciled with concepts and beliefs in predestination, divine judgement for the victims and the perpetrators, retribution for such abuse of humanity, the immortality of the soul, resurrection, intercession, penance, the concepts of preferential election, salvation, supersessionism, dispensationalism, Jewish or Christian covenant theology, and the fate of the unbaptized?

Furthermore, at the immediate practical level, would the rest of the world either be cowered into submission, or be content to allow one country (or two because Britain had a hand in it) to have exclusive control of such technology and weaponry? Would God, or whatever non-divine power had brought the world and humanity into existence and had provided humans with the capacity and the resources, both of which, it can be argued, had been abused, to continue unrestricted? Were there not matters of covenant to be recognized and honoured?

By 1965 there was sufficient evidence to eliminate the steady state theory for the origin of the universe, leaving only the big bang theory as a prospect, but it was another 27 years until it could be confirmed that the Big Bang did occur, about 15 billion years ago, and because it has no boundary and is continuing to expand it is expected to be much more than the 15 billion years to date before it decays totally.  

The occurrence of a strange factor in human cells, DNA, had been foreshadowed in 1860, but it was not until 1953, and later, that further research identified its structure, occurrence and functions in both humans and non-humans; that it is unique in each body, providing a means of personal identification, and has many potential uses in body and criminal investigations, medicine, manipulation in breeding programs, and even cloning of humans and animals – alive or dead. In 2010, following the cloning of a number of animals, scientists produced a living bacterium with no ancestor by manipulating the structure of a DNA molecule from inert material.  

Now, in 2013, there has been another discovery that stretches our understanding of life and challenges our perception of what organism might have a soul, what constitutes it, what was its origin, and what is its fate. It has been shown that Malaria parasites are able to send messages
and communicate with other malaria parasites in an infected body. They do so, apparently, to determine whether their concentration is sufficient to be infectious if transmitted via a mosquito to another body. When it is found to be so, the minute immature organisms change to a sexual form in which they can live and replicate in a mosquito and be transmitted successfully. 62

**Discussion**

In the matter of life after life, what have we to contend with?

It has challenged scholars and leaders of every religious faith since their foundations. They have adapted doctrine from time to time in response to changing circumstances, interaction with other faiths, and sometimes to encourage social change, but there is no common understanding or consensus about how to approach the problems of division, either within or between faiths.

Historically, conflict has occurred from situations as diverse as the sacrificial slaying of specially selected persons who were thought to join the gods, or hostages in cannibalistic rites to appease or seek blessings from deities, or when communities have been subject to syncretism, all the way to massacre for refusal to accept particular interpretations of salvation. In the modern era conflicting beliefs in life after life have been a factor in inter-religious conflicts in Myanmar, the Middle East and Africa, and are the curse of many mass refugee movements.

There has been no steady evolution in religious belief about life after life, and in current circumstances in which belief in a divine creator is being challenged on many bases, the notion of life after life is similarly challenged. Some changes in belief and religious practice are prompted by theological reflection, cross-cultural and inter-religious contact, while others are the result of changing social and economic circumstances.

Research in a nearby region of southern Kerala by Jacob George has shown that 'Sanskritization' and 'Westernization' are inadequate to explain fully the changes in the life of the Ilavas in a rural area, and that the teaching of the late Narayana Guru included reorientation of values, enhancement of the remaining rituals, and retention of honour, respect and recognition for ancestors while providing a dynamic force that kept the members of family together, strengthening social and communal bonds and providing greater freedom and appreciation of individual dignity and responsibility for the living. According to George, Narayana Guru taught concern for the living and higher values of life rather than reliance on ritual, and said that "Whatever be one’s religion, it is sufficient that man be good." 63

There are questions raised throughout this paper, but here are some we can focus on together.

If, as Plato suggests and some religions believe, the soul pre-exists the body, is immortal and cannot die, it avoids the question of how it originates, whether there is a finite number of souls, and what their status is when not ensouled in a body. Where and in what form are those souls that are not yet ensouled, and what are they doing?
Can we be sure which functions are attributable to the soul, or whether it is a passive presence that in some way conveys our characteristics and our record to the Divine at the time of Judgment? What responsibilities, characteristics? Cognition? Control? Mind? Morality? Justice? Courage? Regulation or control? What distinguishes animate from inanimate living things?

If ensoulment occurs at conception or at a later stage, is it a function of DNA, and what does it mean that DNA can now be synthesized? Can we be sure at what level of species development a living creature has either a soul or a spirit? An elephant, a dolphin, a snake, a wasp, or a malaria bacteria? Does it matter whether we are able to answer these questions or not? Can we not just focus on God and place our trust in the Divine Creator?

While there is no clear doctrine of transmigration in the Vedic hymns, and the notions of transmigration from one life form to another, and reincarnation, are complex and very varied from one religion to another, certain aspects of the concept of reincarnation bear a remarkable similarity to Christ’s teaching on the last judgement (Mt. 25: 31-46), and on leading others astray (Lk.17: 1-3), and the Qur’anic teaching of judgement, in the Night Journey (S.17 A 13-15). Those Abrahamic passages are very definite that divine judgement and a person’s post-mortal fate is dependent upon his or her conduct in life.

We can consider these matters on our own, ignore the fact that disputation and antagonism resulting from them have caused tensions and partition of communities, cling to our own deep-seated beliefs and do nothing about it. We can organize to reflect, research and plan together for such things as educational materials, and communal dialogue programs. Or we can go a step further and recognize that this is only one of many related theological and religious concepts that require cooperative consultation and fieldwork that could best be conducted through a multi-religious university.

The challenges and the need for careful collaborative reassessment are great. It is time to sit together at a round table and consider these things very carefully, prayerfully.
End Notes

1 Ian R. Fry, "Dialogue Between Christians, Jews and Muslims: The Concept of Covenant as Basis" (Practical Theology Research, MCD University of Divinity, 2012). Charts 1 (Humanity in Universal Existence), 2 (Hominid Evolution) and 3 (Evolution of Systematic Region and Revelation of Divine Covenant) may be an aid in considering these matters and can be downloaded using links to the thesis in the website www.ianrexfry.com

2 Ibid.


10 Flood, An Introduction to Hinduism. Pp. 28, 44-47


14 Ibid. P.10


17 Earlier theories of superior Indo-European influence through Aryan incursion from Central Asia are now challenged by the view that Aryan culture and Hinduism developed in the Indus Valley through interaction involving the Dravidian culture of South India, Indo-European language influence, and the Vedic beliefs and teaching of that time. Flood, An Introduction to Hinduism. Pp. 27-32.


22 Potts, Diggory, and Peel, Abortion. P. 9.


25 Ibid.

26 Werner, "Upanisads and Buddhism."

27 Ibid. P. 31.


33 Ibid. p.11.

34 Smith, "Zoroastrianism." P. 341.

35 Crawford Howell Toy and Kaufmann Kohler, "Book of Jubilees," in Jewish Encyclopedia.com (West Conshohocken, PA JewishEncyclopedia.com, 2002). The authors assert that:


43 Flood.


The main works were Summa contra Gentiles; Summa theologiae; De unitate intellectus, contra Averroistas (On the Unity of Intellect, against the Averroists); De virtutibus and De aeternitate mundi; and Contra errores graecorum.


Summa of Theology I, q. 77, a. 1 from Commentary on Soul I, lect. 1 and Soul II, Lect. 1.

Exposition of Job XIX, lect. 2


McAuliffe, Sacraments. Pp. 320-33, 293


