

A Question of Faith: Life after Death?

New BBC Programmes for Religious Education 2014

Age range	14-16
Topic	Life after death, funerals, religious beliefs about life beyond the grave, atheist beliefs about this life: all we have?
Clip content described	<p>The programme starts with some ideas from around the world about what happens when we die. Although belief in afterlife is held by over three quarters of the world's people, it takes many diverse forms. Reincarnation and rebirth are not the same as heaven or paradise. What questions come up when we consider death, and what may lie beyond? Is the topic scary, or can it be reassuring to believe in afterlife? If there was heaven, would there have to be hell as well? Who goes where?</p> <p>We sent three of our young research team to a Humanist funeral for Bryan. It's a celebration of life (not a service) and Bryan's body was carried in a coffin painted brightly in blue and decorated with planes from World War Two – one of his interests in life. There is music, laughter, tears and storytelling. There are no prayers, religious songs, ideas about afterlife or beliefs about heaven. The three young researchers find the atmosphere surprisingly good, considering Bryan has died and was obviously much loved. They interview the Humanist funeral official and a member of Bryan's family about whether a Humanist funeral is hopeful or not.</p> <p>Back in the studio, Christians explain their beliefs about heaven and trusting in God for the next life. Muslims express their ideas about how the angels will question us about our faith and behaviour after death. But they do not condemn Bryan for not being a believer – judgement is for God / Allah, not for humans. Atheists express ideas about the way this life is to be valued, perhaps even more highly, if it is all we have. And they question the believers: do you ever doubt? Is there any evidence for paradise? Doesn't God look a bit vindictive if he only accepts 'your lot', members of one or more approved religions? The argument, led by Angellica Bell, raises main points and offers three answers each time, but nothing is finally settled – until we die!</p>
Short synopsis	Going to Bryan's Humanist funeral raises big questions about our destiny after death for a Muslim, a Christian and an Atheist. Our studio panel of young researchers picks up the debates: Does the soul live again? Will God welcome you to heaven? When the body dies, does consciousness end?



Possible uses in the classroom	<p>Here are three learning activities to use with this programme:</p> <p>1. Exploring words of wisdom about death</p> <p>Henry Scott Holland was an Oxford Professor of Divinity, 1847–1918. His famous text is often read at a funeral. Give a copy to students in pairs and ask them to highlight any phrases or sentences they disagree with in the text.</p> <p>“Death is nothing at all; I have only slipped away into the next room. I am I and you are you; whatever we were to each other, that we are still. Call me by my old familiar name, speak to me in the easy way you always used. Put no difference into your tone, wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together. Play, smile, think of me, pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without effort, without the ghost of a shadow in it.</p> <p>Life means all that it ever meant; it is the same as it ever was. There is absolutely unbroken continuity. What is death but a negligible accident? Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am but waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just round the corner. All is well. Nothing is past, nothing is lost. One brief moment, and all will be as before.”</p> <p>Discuss the different ways a group of four students have highlighted the text.</p>
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2. **Washing line – strongly agree, totally disagree.** After watching the programme, string a line across the classroom with ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ labels at each end. Sit around it in a circle. Each student makes a name label by folding a strip of paper, to hang on the line. The teacher slowly reads quotes on the theme of the lesson – life after death – to the group. Everyone hangs their name label along the line to represent their view. Discuss views, and then move on to the next quote. Here are nine suitable quotes for this topic. Ask students to agree or disagree with each one.

‘What is the thing you respect above all else? That’s easy; Death. It’s the only thing left to respect. It’s the one, inevitable, undeniable truth. In it lies the only nobility for man, and beyond it the only hope.’ James Dean, Actor	“Near death experiences, where we ‘die’ for a few minutes and then are revived give us some evidence to think about what might be next: bright tunnels and visions of God. But they don’t prove anything.”	‘God has promised to the believers, male and female, gardens through which the rivers flow in which to abide, and good dwellings in the Gardens of Eden.’ The Muslim Qur’an 9.73
This Hindu prayer is good for a funeral: ‘O God, like a ripe watermelon, this fruit was ready to be plucked. When the time is ripe for me, please grant me liberation like this.’	‘On death, the soul leaves the body, and takes on a new one. This process continues until spiritual perfection is attained.’ Sharada Sugirtharajah, Hindu Lecturer	‘When Christians die, we hope to meet our Lord Jesus, to be with him forever, in forgiveness and in love. We hope for these things because Jesus himself went through death to resurrection, and because God is generous.’
‘Life is just the dash between two dates on a tombstone.’	‘As a person leaves old clothes, and puts on new ones, so the soul leaves an old body and moves to a new one’ Hindu Scripture, Bhagavad Gita 2 (22)	Do not believe the lies of the religious. When we die, we are finished. This is not nice, but it is true, and it means we must live every day we have with love and passion.”

Key words	Atheism, Humanist, Celebrant, Christianity, Islam, religion, spirituality, afterlife, heaven, hell, paradise, rebirth, angels, discussion, opinion, thinking skills, debate, evidence, possibility, probability
Take note	There is no more sensitive topic on the curriculum than death. Our culture shies away from the idea, and many are spooked by thinking about it. But RE should not duck the issue: be sensitive and alert to students’ own circumstances but make the discussion calm and your students will thank you.

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