Christian

When a person dies, the body is separated from the soul, and the soul must be judged to be in a state of grace or a state of sin. This is the Judgment, which determines where the person will go be forever. If the soul is in a state of grace, it goes to Heaven to await the Last Judgment. Heaven, the home of the Christian God, is located beyond the skies. Here, surrounded by choirs of angels, happy souls enter gates of pearl and walk golden streets.

However, punished souls await the Last Judgment in Hell, located below the Earth. Here the leader of the fallen angels, Satan, lives in exile from heaven, flapping vast bat wings. Hell is a pit of darkness where the damned are punished in fiery heat or intense cold. They may be lashed by horned demons, rolled over sharp stones, etc. Above all, they are reminded that if they had lived a better life they could have gone to Heaven and lived happily.

Some groups of Christians believe that some souls, probably the vast majority, who die in a state of grace but still sinned, will be sentenced to a term in Purgatory, a place or state in which the soul can be pay for things they did wrong until it is ready to dwell with God. In Purgatory, suffering is intense; souls are deprived of God’s presence and suffer the sensations of physical tortures.

On the day of the Last Judgment, four angels standing at Earth’s four corners will sound trumpets to initiate cataclysmic events. Christ (the son of the God) will descend from Heaven in triumph to judge all people and nations in the presence of one another. In many versions, only Christians will share in the reign over Earth.

Egyptian

The God Atum, or Ra, Lord of the Universe, was the first of a divine line that produced two couples: Osiris and Isis, and Seth and Nephthys. Isis and her brother-husband ruled Egypt during a golden age, protecting human beings. Seth, their brother, married to their sister Nephthys, became insanely jealous of Osiris and sought to destroy him. He lured Osiris into an open coffin, nailed it shut, and cast it into the Nile River. Sad, Isis searched everywhere for the coffin, finally finding it hidden in a tree in Phoenicia. When she returned with the coffin to Egypt, Seth seized the body of Osiris, cut it up into 14 pieces, and scattered the fragments. Isis, however, found them and, with the help of Anubis, the jackal God, put them back together, thus creating the first mummy.

Osiris’s son, Horus, was hidden from Seth by Isis. After he grew up, he avenged the death of his father by fighting Seth but lost an eye in the struggle. Thoth, the bird-headed God of wisdom and writing, intervened to heal both opponents, who were then summoned before a court of Gods to determine their guilt or innocence. The deities found Horus in the right and ordered Seth to return his eye. Horus gave the eye to Osiris, who was then magically restored to life. Osiris, the first being to undergo death and resurrection or be born again after death, gave the crown of Egypt to Horus and retired to the underworld, Amenthe, to rule over the dead. Spirits of the dead, who have been mummified after the example of Osiris, also may live forever beyond the grave of Amenthe. The entrance lies in the extreme west beyond the sea where the sun descends over the earth.

Before arriving at Amenthe, the soul must successfully complete a dangerous journey. The Book of the Dead, which relatives leave in the tomb along with food and other necessities, will guide the soul and ward off evil. With its help the deceased may elude demons and monstrous monkeys that lie in wait with nets to catch traveling souls. The dead must cross snake-infested plains and a body of water stretching to Amenthe. To reach Amenthe she must ask the ferryman Face-Behind (so called because he always faces backwards) to row her across the water.

At Amenthe’s gate sits a hybrid monster, part crocodile, part lion, part hippopotamus, who warns that he will tear out the heart of sinful travelers. Inside the gates, the soul wanders through magnificent halls until it comes to a place where there are 42 judges, who initially hear its case. To them the soul must make the Declaration of Innocence, saying, " I have not killed a human, I have not robed, I am pure," etc. Then comes the awesome final trial in the Hall of the Two Truths (approving and condemning) before Osiris and a tribunal of deities. Here three deities, Horus, Anubis, and Thoth, supervise the weighing of the heart of the deceased on a scale balanced against a feather, symbol of Maat, Goddess of truth. Anubis adjusts the balance carefully while Thoth, inventor of writing, sits ready to record the result. If the heart and symbol of Maat exactly balance, it proves the sincerity of the dead person’s Declaration of Innocence. Thoth’s report is then given to the divine tribunal and the deceased advances to the throne of Osiris to receive the verdict and sentence.

If the soul is condemned, it is either sent back to earth to be reincarnated as a vile animal or plunged into the tortures of fire and devils. Alternatively, it might be driven up into the atmosphere to be tossed by violent storms until its sins are cleansed. The ruler of this zone is Pooh, overseer of souls who are punished. Then the souls are granted probation through another life in human form.

The blessed soul lives eternally with the Gods in Amenthe, where it may encounter its parents, offspring, friends, and lovers. The blessed hunts and fishes, plow and sow, reap and gather in the Field of the Sun on the banks of the Heavenly Nile. She will receive her reward in inexhaustible crops of beans and wheat, with bread from divine granaries and figs and grapes to eat.

Buddhist (Tibetan)

Buddhists believe in reincarnation and karma, as well as the notion that the ultimate goal of the religious life is to escape the cycle of death and rebirth. Buddha asserted that what keeps us bound to the death/rebirth process is desire, desire in the sense of wanting or craving anything in the world. Hence, the goal of getting off the Ferris wheel of reincarnation necessarily involves freeing oneself from desire. Nirvana is the Buddhist term for liberation. Nirvana literally means extinction, and it refers to the extinction of all craving, an extinction that allows one to become liberated.

Everyone returns from death. Although they have no memory of their other lives, they do not doubt that they were alive before. The goal is to not be reborn, but to join with the Universal Mind of Buddha. This happens when one understands that the world is an illusion, that it is not real but in the mind. This knowledge liberates one to join with the Universal Mind, the divine mind of Buddha, in the state of enlightenment known as Nirvana.

At the moment of death, the deceased enters the Bardo state for 49 days between death and rebirth, which has 3 stages. The first stage, the deceased learns the truth that life is an illusion. But the dead person, unless trained in yoga or meditation, will not be able to stay here. Only those who know that everything is an allusion can enter Nirvana.

During the second stage, the deceased see the karma of their pass lives. The deceased will experience a vision of judgment and punishment. Dharma-Raja, King of the Dead, holds a balance scale on which are placed black pebbles (evil deeds) and white pebbles (good deeds) to be weighed. Supervising the weighing is the monkey-headed god Shinje. Also present is a jury of Gods, some with animal heads, some with human heads. Dharma-Raja holds up the Mirror of Karma, in which the naked deceased person is reflected. Devils wait to conduct evildoers to the hell-world. None of these deities or demons are real. They are also illusions. If the deceased could realize this, s/he would enter the Nirvanic state.

In the third stage, the Sidpa Bardo, the deceased descends back to the world to be born again. Although the deceased might have taken rebirth in a nonhuman world or one of the Paradise realms, human life alone generates the karma that makes it possible to end the rebirth cycle.

Islamic

Allah, a supreme, personal, and unknowable God, will punish those who turn to other Gods and fail to recognize his chosen messenger, Mohammed. A drop of blood shed in the cause of Allah, a night spent in his defense, is of more important than praying and fasting. Whoever falls in battle will be forgiven for his sins.

At death, the soul in the tomb is visited by the Examiners, Munkar and Nakir, two black angels with breath like violent storms and eyes like lightning flashes. They question the terrified soul concerning its faith. If its answers are satisfactory, sweet breezes from paradise will blow upon the soul and its tomb will be filled with light until the Final Judgment. (Souls of prophets and martyrs are admitted to Paradise directly.) But it its answers are unsatisfactory, the walls of the tomb will close in to crush the soul; it shall await the Final Judgment while being stung by scorpions and beaten with an iron mace.

On the day of the Final Judgment, the angel Israfil will blow a warning blast upon his trumpet. At a second blast all creatures will die, and the material world will melt. At a third blast the souls of all humankind will issue from his trumpet like a swarm of bees to be reunited with their bodies made new. They will stand before the divine tribunal, waiting in silence before Allah as He sits in judgment, for no one may speak without Allah’s permission. Mohammed, advancing immediately to the front of the assemblage, will be permitted to speak for those who profess Islam.

The angel Gabriel will hold up an enormous scale, half of it covering Paradise, the other half covering Hell. Every person’s deeds will be weighed, and exact justice will be done. To each person will be given a book, the record of her or his life. Those whose books are placed in their right hands are blessed, while those whose books are placed in their left hands are damned. They await sentencing in shoes of fire, their skulls boiling like pots. At last, Allah passes sentence upon the righteous and the wicked.

Now all the souls must cross the Bridge of Sirat, which spans the distance from Earth to Paradise, passing directly over Hell. Although this bridge is hair-thin and razor-sharp, it will broaden out beneath the steps of the faithful. Infidels will lose their balance and topple into the abyss.

Hell has seven levels. The first and mildest is for sinners among the true believers, who will enter Paradise after purification. The second is for Jews, the third for Christians, the fourth for Sabians, the fifth for Magians, the sixth for abandoned idolators, and the seventh and worst for hypocrites of all religions. In Hell the damned will suffer various tortures. True believers, lying on couches in Paradise, will see the damned suffer and laugh at them scornfully.

Dividing Hell and Heaven is an impassable wall, al Araf, covered with contemptible beings whose good works exactly cancel out their evil ones, thus fitting them for neither place.

In Paradise every desire of soul and body shall be satisfied.

Hindu

Hindus believe in the idea that souls may be reborn in the body of other animals or humans. The reason for rebirth is one facet of the law of Karma -- that a soul must keep returning to mortal existence until it has learned all the lessons of spiritual evolution.

All space is located within the Cosmic Egg, which contains the seven heavens and the seven underworlds. Between these two regions lies the earth. In addition, there are as many as 8,4000,000 hells, located in a lower realm.

The individual soul can never die but must constantly be reborn. A human soul evolves gradually from lower forms, starting with minerals and vegetables, and then progressing upward through lower animals and then higher animals before attaining the human state. This state, highest of all, is the only one that allows escape from the everlasting round of births and deaths. When the soul can eliminate desire and become aware of the unity of the self with Brahman, rebirth will cease. This is not the end of being, but perfect bliss. All will attain it in time.

When a person dies, the soul goes to the land of the dead, ruled over by Yama, the first of mortals to die and enter that other world. Yama is green in color, wears red robes, and has a flower in his hair. He rides a buffalo and carries a lasso. Yama does not judge; he is merely an executor who assigns the region in the hells or heaves where the soul is to stay for varying lengths of time and where the fruits of its past actions (karma) will determine its state or situation. It is karma itself which constitutes an unceasing judgment within each person.

The soul assigned to a heaven may reap the rewards of its good actions, but many sages, given a choice, refuse to enter heavens because they are mere way stations on the path to the Infinite. Eventually the soul will return to the earthly plane to resume its spiritual labors.

If the soul needs to be punished for evil actions (such as neglect of family obligations, lack of respect for teachers, and incorrect bodily habits, as well as murder, theft, lying, etc.), it may be assigned to one of the various hells. Punishments may include being boiled in oil, pecked at by birds, encircled by snakes, and worse. After the required time in hell, the soul returns to earth in a lowlier status than before. If the crimes were serious, it is sent back to be reincarnated as a worm, insect, cockroach, rat, or bird. If it has committed a crime causing defilement, it returns as an untouchable. If it has been a criminal of the worst sort, it must return as a plant.