

Zombies and Angels: A fascination with the afterlife

So many movies and books which focus on the afterlife seem to be popular at present, especially with young adults and teenagers. What is this fascination with life after death and is it a new phenomenon or something within our psyche as humans?

Anthropology considers the human condition across time and cultures, so, in researching this topic, I began a journey that has taken me into the deep past and across many cultures. The afterlife and notions of transitions between the living and the dead are referenced through traditions and experiences in a range of societies and my own cultural experiences are also linked to a belief in an afterlife and connections between the living and the dead.

One of the most interesting aspects of these beliefs is the opposing positions of evil and good that appear in a range of embodiments; generally in the forms of zombies and angels. These both have close links with the living, but are not living as we know it; both have influence on the destiny of the living and both seem to need the living to achieve their own destiny. They seem to be two sides of the same idea that there are 'creatures' who are not fully dead or alive and that they are trapped in some sort of transitional dimension.

Both zombies and angels seem to have a similar task to achieve power through interacting with the living. In the case of zombies they seem to need to torment and kill the living to gain more power, and in the case of angels they seem to need the living to repent their wrong doings and be purified so they can share in the everlasting joy of heaven. This of course is the perennial war between good and evil which is so bound up in the experiences of humanity

So what purpose do these transitional 'creatures' serve in the experiences of humanity and why are they so popular? It has been suggested that humans need a sense of danger, enjoy the thrill of the unknown and gain a sense of their own power through 'encounters' with good and evil. Through overcoming evil, as in the case of the popular fantasy games, young adults, in particular, form ideas about their own power and force for good.

Angels as a force for good share their power with humans to achieve their ultimate goals of attaining heaven where as zombies are a force for evil, but are usually a bit stupid and tend to fail in their ultimate mission through really clever teenagers who have more technical and intellectual tools to outwit the zombies who then return to their underworld or coffin or smelly, spidery place. So zombies seem to be caught in a place between life and death that they cannot escape from until they have achieved some sort of task. They continue to interact with the living until free to move on in their spiritual journeys and leave their decaying bodies behind.

So the idea of zombies and angels seems to mirror a transition in the lives of young adults, especially those who are testing out what power they may have in the world and also those who are looking for some answers to universal questions about life- is there more after death or is this all there is?

But, you may say, zombies are not part of every human cultural experience over time and so are not part of the human condition. You are right in that zombies may not be evident in human anthropology, but communication between the living and the dead and transitions in the afterlife certainly are.

At this point I am reminded of the importance of November being significant to some of my own experiences when I was young.

In the Roman Catholic Church November 2nd is dedicated to the dead and is particularly important in the Liturgical Calendar. It is recognized among the 'Holy Days of Obligation', a day when we are expected to go to Mass to pray for the 'holy souls' and to visit the graves of deceased family and friends. I always enjoyed this day as I believed that we could truly communicate with the dead and assist those waiting to go into heaven where they would be with God, other deceased family and friends and the angels. I was intrigued with the rituals which were around the remembrance of the dead. Even as young children of five, we were familiar with special days dedicated to the Holy Souls. This belief in an afterlife is repeated at every Mass in the 'Creed' which ends: 'I believe in the ...resurrection of the dead and life everlasting".

Several religions also believe that there is a transition period between our earthly life and the final stages of our ‘spiritual’ progression to heaven. In the Catholic tradition this is known as ‘Purgatory’, where ‘souls’ (our spiritual being) departed from the body wait to atone for their misdeeds or sins while alive, and move towards the “Kingdom of God”. It is during this transition period that the realm of the ‘holy souls and the undead’ dwell.

While my belief and experience of communication with the ‘holy souls’ has been through the Catholic Church there is a long history in many religious and secular domains that recognizes the transitional nature between life and death and the possibility of communication with the afterlife. There are many references from ancient times. For example; Ovid’s “Myth of Prometheus”, on which Mary Shelley based “Frankenstein” in the 19th century; Milton’s “Paradise Lost” and Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’1

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So what is the basis of this interest or belief in the afterlife? It depends who you ask! Religion obviously has a particular range of theology on the subject. 4

The notion that there is a transition time between the living and the dead where ‘souls’ remain and are able to communicate with the living also begs the question “what are they supposed to do”? Zombies it seems are particularly angry about their past lives and seem stuck in the transition stage, possibly only free to move forward through the actions during their lives. 5

This notion is encompassed in the belief that the living can influence the fate of the dead through intercessions to God and the saints through prayer. Within many cultures and religions people consider that they can have an influence on their own afterlife and that of those already dead, but in the transition phase between life and death. As a child I remember giving up sweets for Lent and offering up prayers at particular times in order to help the “holy souls in Purgatory”. There are even special prayers said regularly for those recently deceased beseeching assistance for them towards heaven. I also believed that if I

did ‘good works’ while alive it would shorten my time in purgatory. Within many religions there is a complicated system of ‘spiritual banking’ towards this end!

However, communication with the afterlife, may well serve a purpose for the living. We may, as many societies have, interact with the dead as a fundamental security or some way to maintain control over our spiritual future. When we remember the dead we not only enhance the notion that we can interact with them, but we ask them to intercede for us throughout our lives and after our death.

One of the most recognized cultural remembrance practices is “The Day of the Dead” in Mexico. 6

These sort of traditions are practiced in many places the world and have their origins far back in their history, long before Christianity . 7

I have mentioned transitions after death, but there is yet another transition in the afterlife, a sort of promotion! Once the spirit has achieved a ‘state of grace’ it may become an angel and once again there is a task that is related to communication with the living. 8

I said at the start of this talk that I thought that the notions of an afterlife and transitions between the living and the dead was evident throughout history and in many cultures so is part of anthropological study, but I still ask the question of you “is there a basic human need for a connection with the afterlife”? Who really knows the answer?

Thank you

