

**Nicolae Sfetcu**

# DEATH

**cultural, philosophical and religious aspects**

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## Cultural, philosophical and religious aspects

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BOOK PREVIEW

## Death



*(The graveyard from Poiana Mare, Romania)*

Death is a concept for the state of a biological organism having ceased to live (although this term is also used figuratively for the degeneration of a star, or a language that has lost its last speakers). This state is characterized by a definite break in the consistency of vital processes (nutrition, respiration ...) necessary for homeostatic maintenance of the organism, that distinguishes the death of a temporary alteration as in the case of hibernation or some freezing.

At the cellular level, death means the cessation of the basic functions of a cell. In multicellular communities, this may be accidental death (necrosis) or controlled or programmed death (apoptosis). However, there are sometimes disorder that challenge this common death: the cell is then said to be immortal because it can be split into daughter cells an unlimited number of times. Unicellular organisms that reproduce by fission are only immortal principle, although after marking it appears that these cells are also aging, which alters their homeostatic and reproductive capacities. In multicellular organisms, sexual cells, called germ, are potentially immortal, unlike their somatic cell envelope eventually die hopelessly under the influence of external pathogenic factors, or because of the phenomenon of aging. Somatic envelope then form what is called a corpse, which then decomposes under the action of oxidation, bacteria and various scavengers and organizations contributing to the recycling of organic and inorganic material.

At the organism level, death can be seen as the end of life as opposed to birth, or as the absence of life. In the first case, the fact that the heart may stop beating for a while before being revived rises the question of the boundary or transition between life and death. Addressing this issue, the World Organisation for Animal Health considers death as “the irreversible loss of highlighted by the loss of brainstem reflexes brain activity ” and it adopts a definition of death as that brain death, as distinguished from a simple cardio-circulatory stop, condition called “clinical death”.

At a broader, historical and biological spatiotemporal scale, if the individual disappears as a single entity at the time of death, part of his genetic heritage persists in its progeny (if it exists) and the life of the species and ecosystems in which it integrates continues while evolving.

## **Philosophy of death**

In paleontology, the discovery of funeral rites is an important factor in determining the degree of social awakening of a hominid.

This awareness of death is an engine of social cohesion (uniting to resist disasters and enemies) and action (to do something to leave a trace). It is an important element of metaphysical reflection. This is also what gives the symbolic power to acts such as homicide and suicide.

The Enlightenment in Europe, prompting the mastery of nature, suggests the emergence of a rule of the degradation of the body of man.

According to Plato, death is the separation of soul and body. Finally freed from his fleshly prison, the immortal soul can freely reach the sky of Ideas, Eternity, the domain of philosophers. (cf. *Phaedo*)

According to Epicurus, death is nothing because "as we exist death is not, and when death is we are not. Death is, therefore, no relation either to the living or to the dead, given that it is nothing for the former, and the latter are not." (*Letter to Menoeceus*).



The

*Triumph of Death, painting of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1562)*

Jankélévitch, in *Death*, itself offers a reflection on the death from a grammatical point of view: "Death in the third person is the death - in - general, abstract and anonymous death" ( this is the impersonal death), "the first person is certainly a source of anxiety [...] In first person, death is a mystery for me and my very intimately, that is to say, in my nothingness" (the death of the "I"), "there is the intermediate and special case of the second person; between the death of another, which is far and indéfférente, and death-esteem, which is even our being, there is a proximité of the death of close"(this is the death of "you").

## **Religions**

### **Animism**

In animism, death is seen as a continuation to the point that we can say that there is not really dead in the animistic language and that the dialogue of "dead" and living continues without interruption.

A famous poem entitled *Breaths*, by Birago Diop, summarizes this view:

"Those who are dead are never gone / They are in the Shadow (...) / The dead are not under the earth: / They are in the Wood (...) / in the Water (...) / in the Crowd (...) / The Dead are not dead."

## **Atheism**

For atheists, death holds no metaphysical mystery. It is no more difficult to understand than the deep sleep, and there is no more life after death before birth.

One for example can quote the Greek philosopher Epicurus:

"The most frightening evils, death, is nothing to us, I said: when we are, death is not, and when death is there, we are no more".

We still can quote Wittgenstein in the same spirit, but two millennia later:

"Death is not an event in life. We do not live death. If we mean by eternity not the infinite duration but timelessness, then eternal life is the one who lives in the present. Our life has no end, as our field of vision is boundless."

## **Buddhism**

Death is only a passage from one life to another in Buddhism, which recognizes neither the concepts of god, nor soul. Anatta:

"There are two ideas, psychologically rooted in the individual: self-protection and self-preservation. For self protection, man created God which he depends for his own protection, safeguard and security, as well as a child depends on his parents. For self-preservation man has conceived the idea of an immortal soul or Atman who will live forever. In his ignorance, his weakness, his fear and desire, man needs these two things for reassurance and comfort; that is why he clings to it with bigotry and harassment "

*Bardo Thödol* (Tibetan Book of the Dead) describes the different stages of this transition from one life to another life and is a sort of guide providing various boards (abandonment of the ego, etc.) to make this transition.

For an enlightened being, death is not a transition from one life to another: it is the end of conditioning, so the end of any possible existence (parinirvâna).

## **Christianity**

For Christianity, only the body can be affected by death and it is temporary.

The consequence of the death of the body is the separation of the latter with the soul that is immortal. The body, meanwhile, has to resurrect to rejoin the soul, in the End Times that is the return of Christ (resurrection of those who died in Christ, the Blessed) or at the end of the world , resurrection of those who died without Christ (Damned) for the last judgment that is the final triumph of God and life.

After the death of the body, the souls of the dead go where they deserve their places, those who die in Christ go up to heaven, some go down to purgatory to cleanse their venial sins, and those who die without having repented of their "fatal" sins descend into hell.

For Catholics, it is during the earthly life we have a choice to follow or not to follow God. God gives us the chance to the last breath to repent and follow him, once dead we can no longer choose (see the parable of Lazarus), our fate will be sealed.

The souls that go to Purgatory are like the damned, they are deprived of the vision of God (the "beatific vision") and feel the regret of not doing all the possible good. Once purified, these souls leave Purgatory to Paradise and finally can "see God" (the damned will never see God). Only the perfectly pure people can go straight to Heaven: Jesus, Mary, for example.



*(The Resurrection of Lazarus, painting by Leon Bonnat, France, 1857.)*

Protestants do not believe in the existence of Purgatory. For Protestants, the man chooses to live or not in accordance with the divine will, recognizing Jesus as his Savior and Lord, and this before trial or seeing God face to face.

The Christian eschatology reflected on the meaning of death and the Last Things. There is an immediate judgment of the soul and a final collective judgment that the merits of each are known to all.

## Hinduism

Hindu believes in a life after death - the body is only a temporary material envelope. When the time comes to leave the life, it is said that all the faculties of action and excitement fold in the mind (*manas*) and mental folds in the breath (*prana*) and breath in the individual soul or *Jivatman* and finally it returns to Brahman and attains *moksha* or liberation.

However, if his karma has accumulated the result of too many negative acts (evil deeds), the *atman* incarnates in a new body on a planet like the Earth (or inferior, which is hell), in order to undergo the weight of his evil deeds. If karma is positive, he will live like a god or demigod, on one of the heavenly planets (superior to the Earth, or heaven).

Once exhausted its karma, the soul returns to earth in another body within a caste.

This cycle is called *samsara*. To break this perpetual cycle, the Hindu should live so that his Karma is neither negative nor positive, according to this verse from the Bhagavad Gita (II.11): "While speaking learned words, you are mourning for what is not worthy of grief. Those who are wise lament neither for the living nor the dead." At the time of death the mind is separate from the body. The uninitiated will be taken by an irresistible urge to regain one, and this is what he will do. For cons, the initiate will find the door of liberation.

## Islam

In Islam, the consequence of the death of the body is the separation of the latter with the soul (which is the angel of death, named *Malak Al Mawt*, who is responsible for this task). The body, meanwhile, must resurrect to rejoin the soul to the end of time when the Last Judgment. The Qur'an describes in detail and mentions many times the resurrection and the Last Judgement.

According to Islam, all beings are destined to die, as shown in Sura 3 - Ali 'Imran (*Family of Imran*), verse 185: "Every soul will taste death." Including the angel of death itself, which will be the last to die, but with the exception of God, which is eternal.

From the perspective of the ritual, when a Muslim is at the threshold of death, he must pronounce the last time the *shahada*, the testimony of Faith. Those who assist in agony should make him repeat it and read Sura 36 YA-SIN at the bedside of the dying because it encourages the soul to not be tempted by the Devil in the throes of death. After death, the body is washed and wrapped in pieces of white cloth (*Al Kafn*), the shroud, subsequently Muslims tell the funeral prayer *Salat Al Janaza*, preferably in the mosque, after which they proceed at the earliest possible funeral. The body is buried face towards Mecca or, if in a coffin, it is positioned such that Mecca is located to its right. The funeral rite consists of throwing earth on the shroud (if there is no coffin), while those present pray and invoke God to help the deceased to answer the questions of Monkar and Nakir, the two angels that question the dead in their graves.

## **Jainism**

In Jainism, as in Hinduism, the soul is subject to the cycle of birth and death. The soul is therefore a separate entity that travels beyond the limits and the disappearance of bodies.

## **Jehovah's Witnesses**

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that at death the soul dies together with the body. The body and soul are all, one can not exist without the other, "and man became a living soul" (Gen 2: 7 TDMN). Jehovah's Witnesses believe that some of the dead will be resurrected in a physical way on Earth (transformed into paradise) without pain (eg John the Baptist will have its head), and others (anointed Christians, the 144,000, the faithful apostles. ..) will be resurrected to heaven (spiritual) with a totally different spiritual body from the physical body (eg no sex male/female).

## **Judaism**

In the Jewish religion, it is considered that death is merely the separation of body (*guf*) and soul (*nefesh*). This soul, once freed from its bodily envelope, goes according to actions performed in human life in different places. If the actions have been good and if the Jewish respected the commandments of the Torah's, soul ascend to heaven in lower or higher degrees and thanks to the lightness of his soul. Unlike a life full of sins weigh down, the soul will be condemned to wander the earth, level 0, and desire perpetually unable to satisfy its lack of material body needs. A hellish state of wandering and suffering.

When a person dies, one must bury him after three days (the soul can return to the deceased's body and can come back to life, within a period of three days. The only reason why they do not bury the dead on the same day is when death occurs just before or during a holiday (Yom-Tov). A man (volunteer of an association, the Chevra kaddisha, the "holy brotherhood") who does not know the deceased, cleanses the body, heals wounds (if the deceased had), dresses in a white robe and covers the deceased's head with his tallit that he wore during his life. Then, the removal of the body takes place in an hour. The body of the deceased, (head covered to toe) is exposed in a coffin in his house or in the hospital. Only family is allowed to stay around coffin. At that time, the person who cleaned the body reads the *tehillim*. Read *tehillim* is supposed to call the deceased's soul, for the soul is seven days after the death, just above the body, and see and hear everything that happens in the room. Finally, the burial takes place. Friends and family go to the cemetery, a deceased tribute speech is delivered and blessings are recited before planting. When they bury the coffin, the mourners (son, brothers and relatives of the deceased) throw dirt on the coffin before the burial. Mourners then tear their clothes in mourning and finally recite *kaddish*.

The Jewish religion attaches extreme importance and a deep respect for the deceased. They then recite the Kaddish at least five times a day for one year from the funeral, in order to allow the soul of the deceased to get into heavenly "levels".



## Latter-day Saints

For Latter-day Saints (Mormonism), the pre-existence, life before birth in the presence of God, life on earth, testing time and experience, and life after death, are part of the Plan of salvation. After death, the spirit world is the place where it is awaited the spirit of man between death and resurrection. It has two distinct parts: the spirit prison where those are received who have not obeyed the gospel or who have not accepted while they were on earth or who have not had the opportunity to hear it, and paradise. The gospel is taught in the spirit prison and those who accept the sacrament of baptism celebrated in their favor in the temples are in paradise. Every human being resurrected (meeting of body and mind) before being brought before God for final judgment which will take into account the totality of the judged person (knowledge, deeds, words, thoughts, desires, repentance). According to these criteria, one of the three degrees of glory, telestial, terrestrial or celestial (in the presence of God) will be assigned.



*of salvation as taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Plan\\_of\\_Salvation.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Plan_of_Salvation.jpg)*

## Spiritism

Spiritualists believe that every individual exists before birth and incarnates on Earth to progress and live an educational experience. The incarnation causing a temporary loss of memory of past lives. The death of the material body releases the eternal spirit of the man, who then returns a "spiritual dimension" corresponding to their level of advancement.

## Symbolism

The high symbolic content of death and the strong emotional charge related to the death of human beings have shaped the imagination of men who have created a character, Death, who picks people at the end of their lives.

Two symbolic representations stand out: the sweet and austere. The first refers to sweet death that releases infinite suffering that life forces us. The second underscores the cruel, cold and irreversible side it can take when mourners mourn.

## Personification of Death



*Reaper is one of the Death allegories.)*

*(The*

Death was represented as an anthropomorphic figure or as a fictional character in many mythologies and popular cultures.

The personification of death as a living entity, conscious and sensitive, is linked to the idea of death and its considerable historical and philosophical weight. According to languages, it is a character sometime feminine and sometime masculine. It is often represented as a skeleton (or squelettoïde with few shreds of skin on certain bones), sometimes wearing a large black hooded cloak.

In the modern Western folklore, Death is usually represented as a skeleton wearing a dress, a black robe with hood, and possibly with a large fake. Death is then known as the "Grim Reaper" or simply the "Reaper."

This symbol of Italian origin is very present throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in the macabre and apocalyptic paintings such as of Pieter Brueghel the Elder (*The Triumph of Death*). At a time when the Black Death was ravaging the reaper was a terrifying coming to snap up living with a blade stroke. Allegories of death were repeated many times in later works, especially related to fantasy, with the same symbolism as their origin.



*Reaper, by Nikolai A. Tarkhov.)*

*(The Grim*

### **Notable personifications**

- In the Middle Ages, Death is imagined as a mummified or decaying human body, which later became the skeleton wearing a toga which we are familiar.
- Conversely, Death is sometimes depicted as a beautiful woman dressed in black.
- Because of the intimate connection between the Time, Old Age and Death, Time as a mythological figure is sometimes associated with death.
- A psychopomp is a spirit, a being or a deity whose task is to lead the newly deceased souls to the next world.
- The representation of death carrying a scythe back to the image of the Greek titan Cronos. He was often depicted wearing a globe surmounted by a scythe. Cronos is the father of the Olympian gods, including Zeus. However, to escape the curse of

his father Uranus, he decided to eat his children. For the sixth child, his wife Rhea, tired of these infanticide, give him a stone to eat instead of the child Zeus. This last fight against his father by hitting him in the stomach to "vomit" the other children, who will reverse later. Exiled to Earth, as a mere mortal, he founded a farming community designated by the ancients under the name of *Golden Age*. From there come the fake attribute tool that symbolizes the harvest, and in this way the seasons that punctuate the existence, that Cronus believed to manage.

## In mythologies



*(The Triumph of Death, painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, the sixteenth century.)*

There are, in all mythologies, gods who embody the Dead or some of its aspects: Ankou (Breton), Anpu (Egyptian), Anubis (Egyptian), Thanatos (Greek), Azrael (Angel of Death in Islam), Camard, Grim reaper (Anglo-Saxon culture), Hel (Scandinavian), Izanami (Shinto), Mictlantecuhtli (Aztec), Morrigan (Irish), Password (Canaanite), Orcus (Roman), Odin (Scandinavian), Pluto (Roman), Shemal (Semitic), Shinigami (Japan), Sielulintu (Finnish), Yama (Hindu), Yanluowang (Chinese)

## Hindu mythology

In Hindu writings known as *Vedas*, the master of the dead is called Yama or Yamaraj (literally the lord of death). Yamaraj rides a black ox and has a twisted lasso with which he catches the souls to take them into his home, Yamalok. These are his following, the Yamaduts, which carry the souls to Yamalok. Here, the good and bad deeds are recorded by Chitragupta, which then allows Yama decide where will go the souls in their next life, according to the theory of reincarnation.

It is believed that the souls may be reborn on Earth as well as in a heavenly or hellish universe, based on the actions of the past life. Those who can avail themselves of good *karma* and a good *bakhti* in their lives reach *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of birth and death, and the suffering caused by life imprisoned in the body. Yama is also mentioned in the *Mahabharata* as a great philosopher and as a devotee of Krishna.

Interestingly, Yama is also known as King Dharmaraj or Dharma or the righteousness. The reasoning is that justice be done fairly for all - if they are alive or dead, based on their karma or fate. It is more consolidated that Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas, is considered the personification of justice in Mahabharata where he was born, because of the prayers of Kunti to Yamaraj.

### **In Japan**

In the Kojiki, it is said that after giving birth to the fire god, Hinokagutsuhi, the goddess Izanami died, wounded by the fire, and entered the kingdom of perpetual night Yaminokuni. Later, Izanagi, her husband, found her in the land of Yomi while trying to bring her back among the living. Alas, Yomi is located in the underworld, Izanagi and his wife found ravaged by decay. During an argument with him, Izanami proclaimed that taking 1,000 lives each day was proof of its position as goddess of the dead. In popular culture, death is also portrayed as *Enma* (Yama), *Enma Ō* or *Enma Daiō* (*King Enma* - or *Great King Enma*, translation of *यम राज Yama Raja*). The Hindu Yama also inspired the Chinese Yanluo and Japanese Enma. Enma rules the underworld, like the Greek Hades, and decides if the dead go to heaven or hell. The Japanese parents threatened this way their children: if they were lying, Enma would cut their tongue in the afterlife.

There are other gods of death, shinigami, which resemble the western vision of death as reaper. Representations of shinigami are common in the modern Japanese art and fiction, and totally absent in traditional Japanese mythology.

### **Slavic paganism**

The ancient Slavic tribes saw death as a woman dressed in white, holding hand-ups that never faded. Being touched by these shoots was falling into a perpetual sleep. This representation has survived to Christianity during the Middle Ages, and has been replaced by the more common image in the European tradition of a skeleton that coming from the late fifteenth century.

### **Lithuanian paganism**

Lithuanians called the Death *Giltine*, the word "gelti" meaning "sting". Giltine was depicted as an old ugly woman, with a long blue nose and a poisonous tongue. Legend tells that Giltine was a pretty playful young woman who was imprisoned for seven years in a coffin. The Death Goddess was the sister of the goddess of Life and Destiny, Laima, which symbolized the relationship between the beginning and end of life.

Subsequently, Lithuanians adopted the Christian vision of Death, with her black dress.

### In the three monotheistic religions



(The "danzas de la Muerte" are representative for the crisis in Spain in the Middle Ages. They are called "dance of Death" in English. Burning Guyot Marchant, 1486.)

In the Bible, the fourth horseman of Revelation 6 is called Death: The Angel of the Lord mowed 185,000 men in an Assyrian camp (2 Kings; 19:5).

When God decides to kill the firstborn Egyptians, he orders to the "destroyer" (*shâchath*) to save the houses marked with blood on the lintel and doorposts (Exodus, 12:23). The angel of destruction, *mal'ak ha-mashhit*, unleashed against the people of Jerusalem (2 Samuel 24:15).

In Chronicles (21:16), King David sees "the angel of the Lord standing between heaven and earth, drawn sword in his hand stretched toward Jerusalem."

In the book of Job (33:2), we find the term "destroyer" (*memitim*) that tradition has identified with the "destroying angel" (*mal'ake Khabbalah*), while the Book of Proverbs (26:14) mentions the "death angels" (*mal'ake ha-mavet*). There is also the name of Azrael as the angel of death.

### Judaism

According to the Midrash, the angel of death has been created by God on the first day. His area is paradise, from where he reached Earth in eight days, even though the pestilence sets only one. It has six pairs of wings.

## Christianity



*("The Grim Reaper" on the tombs of the churches,*  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tombe\\_du\\_cardinal\\_Aldobrandino\\_-\\_San\\_Pietro\\_in\\_Vincoli.JPG?uselang=fr](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tombe_du_cardinal_Aldobrandino_-_San_Pietro_in_Vincoli.JPG?uselang=fr))

Death is sometimes mentioned in the New Testament, either in the form of impersonation, or as a statement of fact. She is equated with the evil angel Samael. There is a hint in the Acts of the Apostles (2:24): " But God gave him back to life, having made him free from the pains of death because it was not possible for him to be overcome by it."

After a few passages, however, are more explicit. The Epistle to the Romans 5 speaks of death as being "dominated the period from Adam to Moses," and various passages in the Epistle talk about work of Christ on the Cross and Resurrection as a confrontation with Death. Verses of this sort include the Epistle to the Romans (6:9) and the Second Letter to Timothy (1:10).

The First Epistle to the Corinthians (15:26) says, "The last power to come to an end is death", which implies that Death was not destroyed once and for all, in the sense that every Christian should be taken to overcome death in turn.

### **In Mexico**



*Calavera Catrina*", of José Guadalupe Posada (1913).)

("La

The Christianization of Mexican society was through religious syncretism with the Mesoamerican rituals and beliefs.

The result, in the Christian (and even secular) tradition of contemporary Mexico, that Death is symbolized in forms inherited at the same time by Mesoamerican, Christian and Mexican traditions. For the feast of the dead, in particular, it depicts Death by many performances, such as Catrina or *calaveras*.

### **Islam**

In Islamic tradition, the Angel of Death is called *Malak Al Mawt*.

Al-Ghazali, in his book *The precious pearl (Ad-Doura al-fâkhira)* compiles a set of traditions, from the Koran, the Sunna, spiritual masters sentences reported in symbolic form, on the death in Islam.



# Axiochos

*Axiochos* (Greek *Ἀξιοχῶς* / *Axiochos*) is a pseudo-dialogue (Socratic dialogue) on the death, attributed to Plato. The dialogue dated first century BC, and it is of Neopythagoreanism inspiration.

## The characters of dialogue

- Socrates
- Axiochos, uncle of the general Alcibiades

## Dialogue

The *Axiochos* is one of short apocryphal Socratic dialogues, that the manuscripts associate it with the works of Plato. A dialog of Sphettos Eschine, near Socrates and author of philosophical dialogues, has the same title.

## Prologue

Socrates is walking along the river Ilissos in Athens towards the Palestra cynosarges, when Clinias, accompanied by the music master of Damon Oe, one of the masters of Plato, and by Charmides, comes to tell him that his father, the Athenian politician Axiochos, will die. Philosophizing, Socrates develops an argument not to fear death and narrates a myth told by the Persian magus Gobryas. Socrates's arguments once developed, Axiochos is getting better, becomes serene, Socrates leaves him and resume its course.

## Arguments

- First argument (365d-366b): The human body is source of pains, and the man exists only by his soul.
- Second argument (366d-369b): Life is not worth that pain attaches it; moreover, the gods rush to deliver as quickly as possible to those they love the most. Socrates says this argument belongs to the sophist Prodicus of Ceos.
- Third argument (369b-d): Death can not grieve nor the living, who do not know her, nor the dead, who do not feel it. Socrates says also this argument belongs to the sophist Prodicus of Ceos.
- Fourth argument (370b-e): The human being is associated with the immortality of his soul by his achievements, not his possessions.

Even if the style is neat and the quality of argumentation, *Axiochos* is clearly inauthentic; the arguments are from different philosophical doctrines:

- Cynic (366b-d)
- Epicurean (365d-e, 370b-369B)

- Stoic (370-b-d)
- Platonic (371a-372a)

The dialogue falls on consolation, hybrid literary genre that reflects both the letter of condolences on the death of someone and the treaty of moral practice around the theme of death.

## Citations

The Iliad of Homer is mentioned three times:

- *"For the gods have spun the unfortunate mortals  
A life of pain."*
- *"The man is the most miserable of beings  
That breathe or move along the earth."*
- *"Whoever is dear to Zeus and Apollo  
Does not reach the threshold of old age."*

A quote from Epicharmus: *"One hand washes the other."*

An approximate quote of Bias of Priene *"The sailor through so many dangers, and is  
neither among the dead nor among the living."*

An approximate quote of Prodicus of Ceos: *"The death concerns neither the living nor  
the dead."*

A verse of the dram *Cresphontes* of the poet Euripides is quoted: *"Let's complain the  
newborn of aches where he will enter."*

## Paradise

**Paradise**, or *Garden of Eden*, is often the final place where humans will be rewarded for their good behavior. This is an important concept introduced at the beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis. It therefore has a special meaning for the Abrahamic religions.

In a broader sense, the concept of paradise is found in almost all religions. Believers also speak of the *"Kingdom of God"* which will be shown at the end of the world. A similar concept, *nirvana*, exists in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, even if in this case represents more a spiritual state than a physical place.



(Paradise, by Jan Bruegel)

## Greco-Roman mythology

Xenophon tells in the *Anabasis* that in Sardis, in Asia Minor, where Cyrus the Younger was concentrated expeditionary force of Greek mercenaries for help to regain power, it makes them visit his garden. The Greeks are dazzled, they know nothing of the kind. To name this splendor, Xenophon used the Persian word for walled garden: *paradeisos*.

The descriptions of the afterlife in the Greco-Roman mythology is not uniform, as it refers to Homer, Virgil ... In general, for the old, the universe of the dead is a negative form of the living world, the underworld (*infern*) or "what's underneath" - where the dead live as impalpable shadows. This is the realm of Hades - Pluto for Roman - oppressive and insensitive ruler, and his wife Persephone - Proserpine for the Romans. The souls of the dead pass before the three judges Aeacus, Minos and Rhadamanthus that decide their fate for eternity.

The convicts are sent to Tartarus. The righteous are the ones directed to a place of bliss, the Elysian Fields or the Islands of the Blessed. The elected are living there in an eternal spring, on a fertile land which produces three crops a year, in the carefree idleness.

According to Virgil, elected share the importance of service to the community and we find among them the city's founders, great warriors, priests, poets or artists. These pictorial visions of the hereafter, however, were far from consensus, as demonstrated for example by the skepticism of Juvenal that speaks of fables which no one could believe except infants.

## **Mesopotamian mythology and influences**

When a Persian king wanted to honor someone who was dear to him, he called him the "companion of the garden," and gave him the right to walk in the garden with him. There are probably an echo of this practice in the Bible, where God is described in the image of the king, "they heard the Lord God walking in the garden in the breath of the day" (Gen. 3: 8). NB: *To compare God to a Persian king may be somewhat strange. The extract mentioned above is somewhat different in the text prepared by the Abbey of Maredsous, "They heard the sound of the Lord God, who was in the garden in the evening breeze."* Gn 3.8.

In the Bible, the appearance of the garden in Eden, although a very sober in its description contrasting with the lush oriental gardens, is due to the Persian civilization: the word *Eden* appears in several Semitic languages to denote a fertile plain or arable land. The Persian term *pairi daesa* designated the park of the residence of Cyrus the Great (sixth century BC.) - which helped ending the Hebrews captivity in Babylon - through which passed the Meander River and where there was a garden, an orchard and an area reserved for hunting.

In Mesopotamian belief, all the dead are found to Hell with no hope of salvation, where they live a dull and shadowy existence, condemned to feed on dust and muddy water, unable to support themselves without the help of living. There seems to be no post-mortem judgment - unnecessary in the absence of soterologic theology - and only the gods escape from the "Country of non-return". There is a notable exception to the fate shared by all humans, that of Utnapishtim, the only human to achieve eternal life through the plant life.

However, oriental myths have always been a great place to gardens and its components, trees, plants and water. Persian mythological ruler of the golden age lies in a garden in height which grow magical trees including the tree of life and from which flows the water of life that makes the land fertile. We find the symbolic representation of mythological gardens in Mesopotamian temples that cap the ziggurats: in a hanging garden which trickles water from a basin next to which stands a snake, trees of various species, including the tree of life, which opens the door of heaven, are part of the nuptial bed of the gods. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Mesopotamian hero, in search of the plant of life, which confers immortality, joined a garden whose leaves are lapis lazuli and ruby fruits.

## **According to Judaism**

The Hebrew book of Genesis speaks only of the "Garden of Eden" (*Gan 'Eden*).  
Ecumenical translation of the Bible, book of Genesis:

2: 8 "And the Lord God made a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had made. And out of the earth the Lord made every tree to come, delighting the eye and good for food; and in the middle of the garden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

3:23 "So the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to be a worker on the earth from which he was taken. So he sent the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden he put winged ones and a flaming sword turning every way to keep the way to the tree of life."

We find the Hebrew word *Pardes*, only in the sense of "orchard" in three occurrences of the Hebrew Bible: Song of Songs 4:13, Ecclesiastes 2:5 and Nehemiah 2:8.

But in the Septuagint it becomes "*a paradise in Eden*," and so on.

In the literature of the Second Temple period, paradise is sometimes likened to the *third heaven*. For example in the Apocalypse of Moses.

*Sheol* is a place mentioned in the Jewish Torah and where stay the souls of believers, to their final disappearance in recent times.

## **According to Christianity**

In Christianity, there are two paradise: the earthly paradise and the heavenly paradise.

### **According to Catholicism**

#### ***The earthly paradise***

The "earthly paradise" expression does not exist - as such - in the Hebrew text of *Genesis* (the first book of the Old Testament).

The term is used in chapter titles added in some editions (like the *Vulgate*), to make the original text easier to read. The original text of *Genesis* is written without a chapter heading (see for example the *Jerusalem Bible*) and does not mention any earthly paradise. On the merits, the term means the place God created for Adam and his wife (the man appointed her by Eve, since she gives life to his descendants: Eve would mean Life) and where they should live as well as their descendants.

According to the first book of the *Bible*, the book of *Genesis* describes a *garden of delights* or *Garden of Eden*, a wonderful garden with all kinds of trees and plants, delicious fruit, and where coexist in harmony all animals under the direction of Man.

The *tree of knowledge of good and evil*, present in Paradise is an allegorical picture of the *Book of Genesis* according to which God planted in the Garden of Eden "two mysterious trees":



(*Adam and*

*Eve in Paradise in a painting by Lucas Cranach*)

"And the Lord God made a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had made.

And out of the earth the Lord made every tree to come, delighting the eye and good for food; and in the middle of the garden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

- (Genesis 2:8-9)

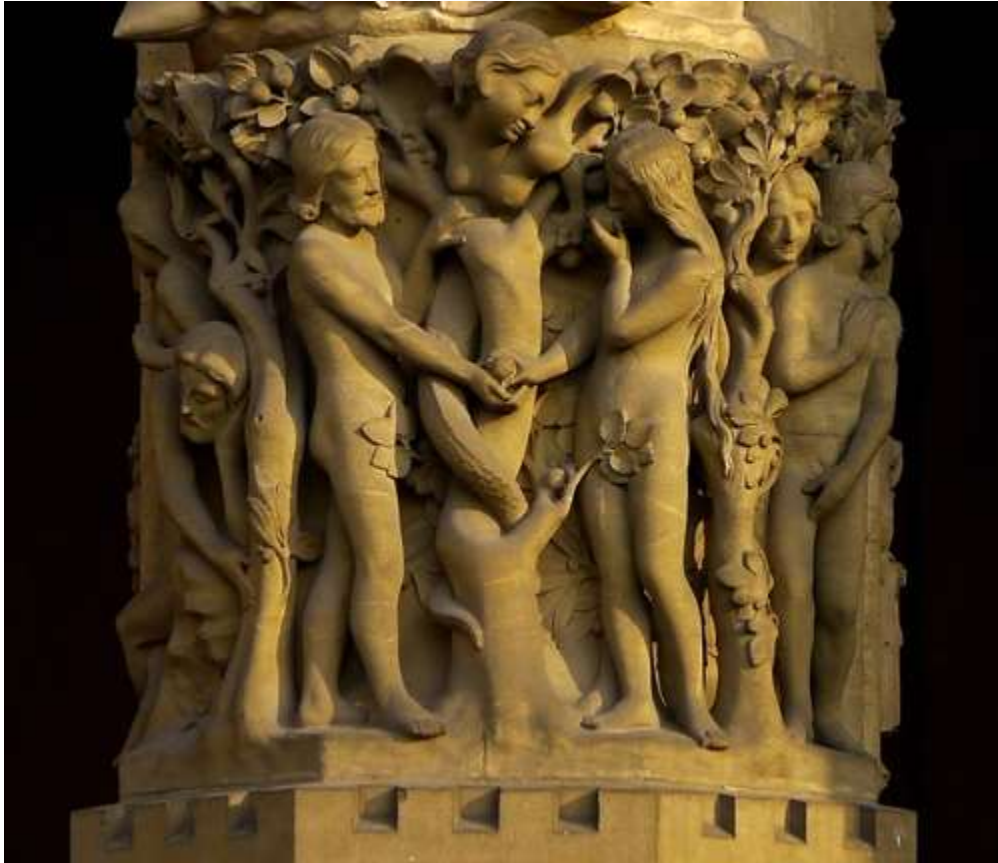
However, the snake, later understood as Satan (see (Rev 12:9), convinced Adam and Eve to be emancipated. This emancipation led them explore and experiment their human nature, made of "good" but also "evil".

Consequently :

- They lose their status as first innocence: they discover they are "naked" and out of the illusion of the "primeval perfection";
- They discover that they are not God. This decision leads to bitter consciousness conscience, guilt, original sin. The downgrade is symbolized by the fact that they feel "expelled from paradise";
- The snake (symbol) of evil at work in themselves and the world is "cursed";

- The experiment of the reality principle, in the form of finitude, scarcity and the need, is experienced by them: "Now you will work with the sweat of your brow."

Some fundamentalist Christian denominations prefer to focus on less symbolic visions of Paradise and favor stricter interpretations centered on ideas of punishment, drop, and original sin.



(The serpent tempting Adam and Eve (Notre-Dame de Paris), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:P1330790\\_Paris\\_IV\\_Notre-Dame\\_facade\\_ouest\\_Adam\\_et\\_Eve\\_rwk.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:P1330790_Paris_IV_Notre-Dame_facade_ouest_Adam_et_Eve_rwk.jpg))

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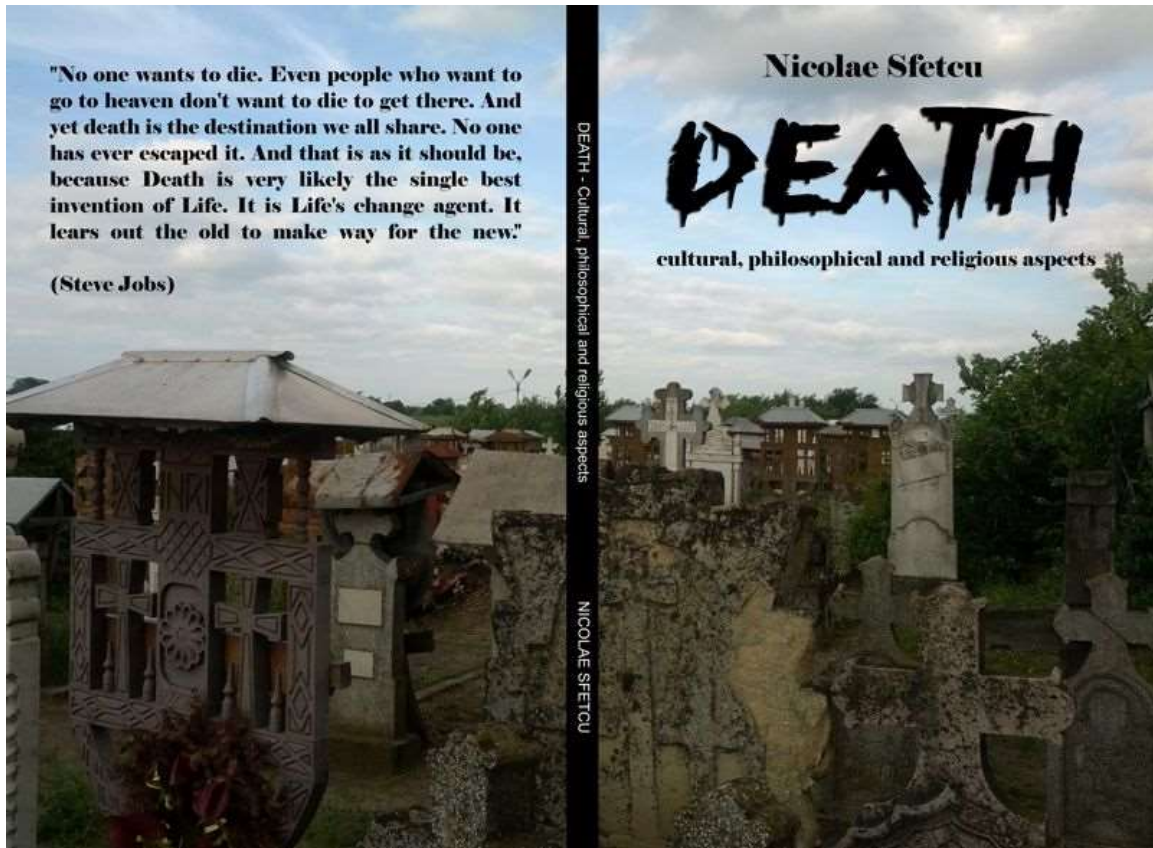
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## About the author

### Nicolae Sfetcu

Owner and manager with MultiMedia SRL and MultiMedia Publishing House.

Project Coordinator for European Teleworking Development Romania (ETD)

Member of Rotary Club Bucuresti Atheneum

Cofounder and ex-president of the Mehedinti Branch of Romanian Association for Electronic Industry and Software

Initiator, cofounder and president of Romanian Association for Telework and Teleactivities

Member of Internet Society

Initiator, cofounder and ex-president of Romanian Teleworking Society

Cofounder and ex-president of the Mehedinti Branch of the General Association of Engineers in Romania

Bachelor of Science in Nuclear Physics. Master of Philosophy.

## Contact

Email: [nicolae@sfetcu.com](mailto:nicolae@sfetcu.com)

WhatsApp: +40745526896

Online Media: <https://www.setthings.com/>

Facebook/Messenger: <https://www.facebook.com/nicolae.sfetcu>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/nicolae>

LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/nicolaesfetcu>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/c/NicolaeSfetcu>

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