Death is one of the most terrible things we humans have to go through. Where do we go after death? Is there a Hell or a Heaven? These are questions that still remain without answers. Since remote times, men have wondered about this, but not even technology has helped us to find answers. Some people are said to have answers; it is true they do have answers, but answers that mainly fix their religious beliefs. Almost all religions have a theory about death, but they vary from one to another, and sometimes the difference is big. But have we ever wondered: How long have cultures and religions proposed theories for life after death? The answer is, since millions of years ago. If we go to ancient cultures, like the Greek or the Aztec cultures, we can recognize their theories to be really close to our own. The idea that there is a hell and a heaven, and after death you are judged --if you were good during your life you go to heaven; if not, you are punished in hell-- still remains in present cultures. Even though the theories may have many similarities, there are a few aspects related to death in ancient culture that we see as obsolete and horrifying. An example of this is sacrifice. In today’s society, sacrifice is not legal, and it is considered cruel and barbarian. This is the way most people view animal sacrifices because we do not even consider human sacrifices to be possible. In ancient cultures, both animal and human sacrifices were normal. For many cultures it was an absolute necessity for human survival because if food was not offered to the gods then they could not keep the world going. If we analyze some of the oldest cultures like Greece and the Aztecs, we can see that even though they both practiced sacrifices, the way they did it and to what extent, varies considerably. For example, the Greek practice both animal and human sacrifices, but not so often; while in the other hand, the Aztecs practiced mainly human sacrifices and very often.

The Greeks have a long history with sacrifices: "We see in Greece a society in which the basic ritual acts in daily practice are of a sacrificial type. For nearly ten centuries, guided by immutable cultic statutes, the Greeks never failed to maintain relations with the divine power through the highly ritualized killing of animal victim, whose flesh was consumed collectively according to precise strictures" (Detienne and Vernant 1). There also were restrictions on the kind of animal that could be sacrificed. Even though some gods preferred some special sacrifices --such as Demeter preferring swine, and local and special rules prescribing certain victims for certain places and time-- some animals such as oxen and sheep were always welcome. Nevertheless, "the general principle seems to have been that the victims should be edible food for men; and Suidas mentions as the regular ones sheep, swine, goats, fowls and guse" (Rouse 298). These animal sacrifices had special purposes, which sometimes were political. For example, to ratify a pact:

The Decrees of the Greeks states did not adopt the votive formula, but often when they recorded an alliance they adopted the scheme of the sacrificial votive relief: The personified figure of the contracting states joining hands, with an altar beside them. A sacrifice ratified the treaty as a matter of course. The gesture is more than a mere greeting; it is the solemn symbol of friendship or pact; and the scene is the memorial of the solemn libation and sacrifice done to ratify the pact. The course or sanction is usually recorded in them."(Rouse 340-341)

Another common situation when sacrificed was after marriage. "We know that sacrifices where customary before marriage, and where there is sacrifice there may always be votive offerings. In some places, initiation formed part of the wedding ceremony, and the priestess of Demeter officiated at weddings." (Rouse 245-246)

In the Greek culture, animal were not the only one sacrifices; humans where also sacrificed. For example, this has been reflected in myth the Orphic account of the death of Dionysus. "The plot is simple. A god in the form of a child is jointly slaughtered by all the Titans, the kings of ancient times. Covered with gypsum and wearing masks of white earth, the murders surrounded their victim and while the child Dionysus contemplates his own image captured in the circle of polished metal, the Titans strike, dismember
him, and throw the pieces in a kettle. Then they roast them over a fire" (Detiene and Vernant 1). Among all the Greek population, slaves were people commonly sacrificed. "At Labeedia, the slaves were dedicated to Zeus the king and Trophonius, whose priests were charged to make good the act against aggression"(Rouse 21). A curious aspect in the Greek culture is their discretion when it comes to animal sacrifices: "The act that opens up the passage to the animal’s death is never represented. The blade approaches, sometimes very near, but the deed that actually drenches the blade and altar in blood is never pictured. Whenever the sacrificial meaning has departed form the image and we no longer witness to a sacrifice by human hands" (Detiene and Vernant 91). On the other hand, they show no repugnance at representing human blood spurting from a slit throat to water the gods’ altar in a horrible sacrifice. It is better to show human sacrifice in the realm of the imagination. For example, it is Polyxena’s blood that is seen splashing up in a sacrifice, no that of pigs or sheep.

Second were the Aztecs, whose sacrifices were mainly human sacrifices. The world and man have been created several times according to the Aztecs, and each creation was followed by a cataclysm that has destroyed mankind. "Because the universe had been destroyed four consecutive times in the struggles of the gods, they began to concern themselves with terminating such unfortunate occurrences. Thus they met in a mythical Teotihuacan to settle their jealousies and begin a new era: the fifth age which was that of the ‘Sun of Movement.’ It had its beginning thanks to a voluntary sacrifice of all the gods, who their blood caused it to exist and to be inhabited again."(Leon-Portilla 28). The Aztecs believe that since man was created by the sacrifice of the gods, he must reciprocate by offering them his own blood in sacrifice. For this culture, human sacrifice was essential, for if man could not exist except through the creative force of the gods, the gods in turn needed man to sustain them with human sacrifice. Man must nourish the gods with the magic sustenance of life itself, found in human blood and in human hearts. "If through the sacrifice of the gods the existence and motion of the sun is made possible, only through the sacrifice of the man would the present age be preserved. The ‘People of the sun’ undertook for themselves the mission of furnishing it with the vital energy found in the precious liquid that keeps man alive. Sacrifice, and ceremonial welfare to obtain victims for the sacrificial rites, were their central activities, the very core of their personal, social, military, and national life."(Leon-Portilla 28). In contrast with the Greeks who balance their victims between human and animal, but mainly animal, the victims used by the Aztecs were in almost every case humans and rarely animals. The Aztec culture practiced human sacrifices in various forms and with different purposes. Many of their sacrifices were dedicated to specific gods, in which the sun is the most important. For example, they offered sacrifices to the goddess of earth in which rite the victim was flayed and the priest dressed in his skin; and they also offered to the god of fire to whom one of the cruelest ceremonies is dedicated to by burning men in his honor. However, the ceremony offered on honor of the sun was particularly notable. It fell on the day called "Movement" or "Earthquake" and commemorated the day the sun was to be destroyed by earthquakes. This ceremony was offered during a festival:

This festival probable took place before the stone we now know by the name of Aztecs Calendar... One of the prisoners of war, whose body was painted like that of the stellar gods, white with red stripes was given a staff, a buckler, and a bundle containing eagle feathers and white paintings.... On his arrival at the summit of the temple he was sacrificed by the priests, who tore out his heart and offered it to the sun. On that day all the people practiced the rite of self-sacrifice by pricking blood from their ears or from other parts of their bodies and observing a rigorous fast until midday.(Caso 67)

This idea of a festival seem to be pretty common among the Aztecs. Besides the festival mentioned before, they also had the Toxcatl Festival, which was held in the fifth month and was the most remarkable festival in connection to Tezcatlipoca. On the day of this festival a youth was slain who for an entire year previously had been carefully instructed in the role of victim. He was previously selected form the best war captives of the year. He assumed the name, and attributes of Tezcatlipoca himself, and during that year was treated a god. Later in the year he was mated to four beautiful maidens of high birth, who were supposed to do anything he want them to. At last the fatal day upon which he must be sacrificed arrived. He took a tearful farewell of the maidens whom he had espoused, and was carried to the teocalli of sacrifice, upon the side of which he broke the musical instruments with which he had beguiled the time of his captivity. When he reached the summit he was received by the high-priest, who speedily made him one with the god whom he represented by tearing his heart out on the stone of sacrifice.
The Aztecs had some special names and purposes for some sacrifices. For example, the gladiatorial sacrifice. "Gladiatorial sacrifice was reserved for those who had distinguished themselves by their valor. It consisted of a real duel between a prisoner captain and several of the most distinguished Aztec warriors.... The captive fought with a knight at a time. If the first should be defeated, another would take up the battle. If, in spite of his inferior weapons, the captive succeeded in vanquishing the fourth knights, a fifth who was left-handed, generally killed him."(Caso 73). Women seem to have had a special place in sacrifice too. The Aztecs had what they call "The Sacrifice of the Dancer," which was performed during the Xalaquia festival:

Hilarious dances were nightly performed in the teapon (temple), the central figure in which was the Xalaquia, a female captive or slave, with face painted in red and yellow to represent the colors of the maize-plant. She had previously undergone a long course of training in the dancing-school, and now, all unaware of the horrible fate awaiting her, she danced and pirouetted gaily among the rest. Through the duration of the festival she danced.... When daybreak appeared the company was joined by the chiefs and headmen, who, along with the exhausted and half-fainting victim, danced the solemn death-dance. The entire community then approached the teocalli (pyramid of sacrifice), and, its summit reached, the victim was stripped to a nude condition, the priest plunged a knife of flint into her bosom, and tearing out the still palpitating heart, offered it up to Chicomecohualt. In this manner the venerable goddess, weary with the labor of inducing growth in the maize-plant, was supposed to be revivified and refresh. (Spence 87)

Third, we have the Vedic culture. In this case, creation is attributed either to the cultural work, or to the gods, or even to men. In the Vedic culture, "the sacrifice is to such an extent the principle par excellence that one ascribes to it not only the origin of the man, but even that of the god"(Aguilar 18). In the Vedic culture, just as in the Aztec culture, we see the principle that the world as well as humans were created from the sacrifice of a god. "O All-Maker, help your friends O recognize them in the oblation. You who follow our own laws, sacrifice yourself, making it grow great. All-Maker, grown great through the oblation, sacrifice the earth and sky yourself"(Penguin 35). Such as the other two cultures mentioned before, we can say that the Vedic people also practiced human sacrifices. The sacrifice of man in the Vedic culture follows that of the gods, but it is not as widely practiced as in the Aztecs culture. Just as in the other cultures, the Vedics sacrifice humans to the gods, and one of them is Agni, the god of fire. Since this culture believes that in order to travel to the life after death, the body of the deceased had to be burned we can assume that Agni is a very important god. "It is said besides in proper terms that Agni has been established by the gods as sacrificer of all sacrifices of the human race... that shining first among those who have a vast abode... he has been kindle by them as bearer of the offering of the human race"(Aguilar 82). A curious aspect of the sacrifice in the vedic religion, in contrast to the Aztecs who practiced most of their sacrifices during festival, is it secret nature. Which makes it even more confusing to understand because the sacrifices were also associated with the idea of traveling. "The sacrifice is the replecent cart that circulates through the world pouring down the divine riches. Its course, however, takes place in the mystery. Hence, the insistence of the Brahmanas on the invisible, secret character of the sacrifice, which correspond wholly to the invisible and mysterious character of the gods themselves"(Aguilar 86). Analyzing the sacrifice aspect in the Vedic culture, we can see that this was not as popular as in the Aztecs. While the Aztecs sacrificed to the gods to keep them happy, the Vedic sacrificed to the gods to ask for help, for example, to help a deceased get to the next life. In this principle, it is closer to Greek culture, who often made sacrifices to ask the gods for something.

In conclusion, it is amazing how many different views of sacrifice there were many years ago. It seems ancient cultures could kill people or even animals without a problem. Did they do it because they were evil, cruel people trying to show power or to have fun by killing? No, they did it because they were afraid of the "gods," something not too many of us are afraid of now. They did not have the knowledge we have to explain why things happen in life, so they used supernatural beings as explanation. Supposedly these beings gave life to mankind, so in the same way we believe we have to love and show respect to our parents because they brought us into the world, ancient cultures believe that humans had to love, respect and worship the gods because they had created mankind. A way to show this was through sacrifices. Even though we try to understand these ancient cultures beliefs, they are something of a big mystery to us and do not always have a logical explanation. For example, the Greeks were ashamed of killing an animal; therefore never in their art or literature was described. They were not however ashamed to show or describe
a knife entering a woman’s throat and splashing her blood. In any event we can only hope that some day we can find something that would allow us to understand facts like these a little better, but for now they will remain a secret of those who lived in those times.

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