

BOOK REVIEW

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Life After Death, by Tom Harpur. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, 1991, 295 pp, Can. \$27.95 (Distributed in the U.S. by Firefly Books, U.S. \$19.95 hb, \$14.99 pb)

A country parson asked an affluent member to fund a fence for their church cemetery, as the crumbling tombstones had become a spooky eyesore and scapegoat for the shrinking membership. At first the man listened. Then he stared, gaped, and howled like a catamount.

"Reverend, you and some other pious idiots may think these old gravestones are scaring off the newly-wed and nearly-dead, that hiding 'em behind some barrier is money well spent. Well, to me, putting a fence around a cemetery is 'bout as smart as bringing a chicken to Sunday School."

The pastor was stunned. He managed a quivering, "Why?"

"You mean you can't figure it out?" the old man barked. "It's simple. No graveyard on earth needs a fence, 'cause the people in there can't get out and the ones outside don't wanna get in!"

But, with *Life After Life* in hand, Tom Harpur might well reply: "Not necessarily sooooo . . ." This is indicated by the book's three agenda: Harpur's religious perspective, his comparison of diverse attitudes toward postmortem survival, and the use of his reflections on the near-death experience (NDE) to knit everything together. His narrative implies that both contemporary science and religion suffer a kind of institutional glaucoma, a woolgathering recognized by the playing to galleries, the blessing of mischievous generalizations, and the tailor-

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ing of concept and practice to prevailing political winds. A caveat floats like a descant over these afterlife propositions: beware of gurus bearing gifts, whether spectral or material . . . and hold on to your wallet.

For the most part, Harpur has little stake in squabbling with either Jacobean debunkers or the honk-if-you've-found-it crowd. He wants a "rational foundation" for afterlife beliefs, one based on sensible "trust" and not "blind faith." So, in his closing chapter, one finds neither haloed harpist nor post-Darwinian nothingness:

8 million North Americans who have experienced an NDE have experienced the threshold of another mode of being . . . [which] suggests very strongly that the glimpses and hints of an afterlife in the great religious literature of the world may well be based not upon flights of fancy but upon a kind of knowledge we are only now beginning to understand. (pp. 256-257)

Following an evangelical childhood and a decade of Classics and Ancient History at Oxford University, Harpur entered the parish ministry, taught New Testament, translated Scripture, and wrote books. In the early 1980s, he began a syndicated Sunday religion column, traveled worldwide, and became the host of a controversial Toronto TV talk show. His reputation grew as a sweaty, outspoken foe of any fundamentalist deodorant from Biblicism to scientism, from pyramidology to windy math. His critiques splashed opinions against an Anglican theological grid of tradition, Scripture, and reason. Any argument, including his own, *must make sense*, and must balance the subjective with the real.

Accordingly, evidence of belief is not synonymous with evidence of reality. Nor does such evidence equal scientific proof. But since humanity has both divine and human dimensions, the discounting of one for the other violates our distinctively human creatureliness.

Increasingly troubled by gullible Western appetites for noncorporeal transcendence, Harpur began arguing like the late Arthur Koestler that "one should either write ruthlessly what one believes or shut up." He informed, engaged, and provoked followers; confronted the new densities of the post-1960s; and insisted that tabloid spectacles posed thorny challenges to anyone presumptuous enough to claim to have tamed reality. He read *Life After Life* (Moody, 1975). He learned from an Andrew Greeley survey that 35 to 40 percent of NDErs had been clinically dead; that 75 percent of Americans believe in an afterlife, while their churches lose members; that a third of the *nonbelievers* claim contact with the dead; and 40 percent of his fellow Canadians

also believe in such contact. Indeed, 38 million Americans actively believe in reincarnation and make life decisions on such bases.

Intrigued by contradictions between belief and experience, Harpur polled his readers to get a live (not scientific) sense of this arresting array of spiritual commotion. By 1987, he disclaimed objectivity, personal paranormal experience, certainty, and simply queried:

Do you believe in life beyond death? Have you ever experienced anything that amounts to solid evidence for this as far as *you are concerned*? Please write briefly . . . (p. 25; Harpur's emphasis)

Of 200 respondents, 40 reported an NDE. Further research, interviews, and reflection led the author to affirm the NDE's validity and the public authority given to unusual, mystical realities; which led to: how did these findings relate to an afterlife? and how did they jibe with the declarations of scientific and secular testaments, major religious creeds, and his own Christian tenets? This book gives Harpur's answers.

A sample of his reader reports is offered as a prelude to his NDE accounts. He observes the NDE's culture-specific aspects, the woolly medical-ethical definitions of death, and the NDE's common core experience regardless of time or locale. Here, he uses Zaleski's (1987) work as his conceptual guide, and takes a passing shot at Carl Sagan's militant scientism as, itself, patently unscientific.

However, nowhere is Harpur's polemic more intense than in his assault on New Age channelers. With barely-bridled scorn, he exposes the mediumistic industry as a commercial rip-off, saturated with "downright nonsense" (p. 68) and "unmitigated pomposities" (p. 69). Allowing that some channelers are sincere and fulfill a need, he determines that their evidence for contact with the dead is unconvincing. This chapter is short. And while my witch-hunting self was left begging for more, dues-paying disciples of Shirley MacLaine may wish to skip this part.

With Ian Stevenson he agrees that past life accounts of children include causation possibilities other than reincarnation, such as crypt-amnesia: "DNA impressions, especially in our youth, can flash into consciousness much as do the images of dreams" (p. 81). Too, Harpur concedes that, despite his objections, a Christian case for the transmigration of souls is unassailable.

But, as with channeling, so with reincarnation: Harpur is left dissatisfied. For instance, karmic logic dictates a linear human spiritual progress. But if former personalities and memories are necessarily

forgotten, then how, asks Harpur, do successive lives rectify leftover sins? Given modern global disasters, one could easily make a case for the accumulation of bad karma. One's grocer could be Hitler reborn, and not even know it!

With closer scrutiny, Harpur examines the death-dream interpretations of Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz and the mind-body neurology of Wilder Penfield, and then presents the book's *pièce de résistance*: the Christian witness to afterlife. It is here that Harpur's scholarship beams: Old and New Testament evidence for soul immortality (there is none!); the controversial resurrection of the body; eternal life; Hell as place (only figuratively); the Apocalypse; Purgatory; and reincarnation (nowhere to be found unless by reader predetermination).

Persuasively, he demonstrates how modern Biblical literalism stunts the salvific challenge that lies at the heart of Scripture. This discussion becomes the roadbed for Harpur's later conclusion that NDErs "have experienced the threshold of another mode of being" (p. 256), one that is consistent with plausible religious and scientific evidence.

The afterlife doctrines of Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, and Christian Scientist sects are followed by perhaps the book's weakest presentation: summaries of seven major world religious teachings on death, soul, and the afterlife, a feat attempted in 75 pages. While admirable in effort, one wonders if the author settled for brevity after opening the Pandora's box of this undertaking. Encapsulating 2500 years of Buddhist doctrine in eight pages is ambitious to say the least; Hindu complexity is covered in six pages. Yet to his credit the author sustains narrative continuity here without being antiquarian, pedantic, or showy; and he brings forth highlights from these traditions (for example, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*) that link with other configurations later. One learns, for example, that religiosity varies because people aren't experiencing the same world.

Harpur's conclusions in Part Five connect spiritual traditions of death and dying with NDE features, most prominently the Being of Light. Since Harpur is a Universalist, or one who accepts eternal life as a theological given for all, religious canons on postmortem judgment are, for him, compatible with the NDE life review and reported reunions with predeceased loved ones. Insubstantial evidence exists for both Hell and hellish NDEs. So while postmortem life reviews may be trying and ineffable, they will also be replete with love, mercy, and forgiveness—for everyone.

Finally, we are trapped, warns Harpur, in linear time-space-linguistic categories that impair our capacity to correlate religious

belief with NDEs and afterlife. Cynosure by example is the NDErs' awareness of a "body like a cloud of light." Taught that corpses decay, we either believe bodily resurrection as a faith statement or relegate it to pre-Copernican superstition.

Harpur insists that while historical time ends at death, corporeal uniqueness survives in some modified form. Put simply, we live, die, and survive as creatures of form and function. Interestingly, the denial of such creatureliness not only lies at the center of some of our most epidemic psychogenic disorders, but constitutes nothing short of a rank Christian heresy (Sabom, 1987). Again, a narrow view of immanence and carnality hampers our structuring of a thoughtful view of post-mortem existence.

As Harpur reminds us, Genesis "says plainly that Adam (which means simply human beings) *became* a living soul. People don't have souls in the same way they have arms and noses. *We are* souls. We are living centres of energy, thought, and personality" (p. 270, Harpur's emphasis). And it is this tie-in with the consistency of NDE accounts of "bodily" perpetuity, including that of animals, that may prove to be the book's most enduring contribution to our religio-spiritual engagement with NDEs.

So in the spirit of Harpur's conclusions and his yeoman efforts, which have yielded one of the best theological afterlife-NDE inquiries in print today, go ahead and take your chicken to Sunday School. And while you're at it, think twice about those fences around graveyards.

References

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