BOOK REVIEW

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*Life After Death* presents a treasure of information regarding the afterlife by drawing on two impressive sources: sacred literature of the world's major religions and studies of the modern near-death experience. In just 175 pages, Farnáz Ma'súmián provides the reader with a concise but comprehensive overview of her topic. First published in 1995, the book has been recently reissued. In the first seven chapters, she presents ideas of afterlife in Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í faiths, using a distinctive compilation of "chapter and verse" quotations from the sacred texts of each religious group. In the final three chapters, the author goes on to discuss reincarnation and transmigration, the near-death experience (NDE), and religion and the NDE phenomenon.

Ma'súmián is careful to use the universally accepted scriptures of each faith, while remaining mindful of the divergent and sometimes conflicting views of the different sects and denominations within each religion. Her crisp summations of the vast and complex literature of the world's major religions are brilliant. More importantly, she treats each faith group with respect, possibly because of her personal belief as a Bahá'í that all the religious literature she examines is Holy.

The chapters focusing on a religion include the major writings of the religion, the primary concepts that relate to afterlife, and the influence

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and/or similarities of that religion in relationship to other religions. Ma'súmián points out, for instance, that some concepts within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam appear to have been influenced by Zoroastrianism, such as the struggle between the forces of good and evil (God versus Satan), belief in individual judgment after death, and, at the end of time, resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Additionally, she cites the overlapping traditions and teachings of all three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Conversely, she points out that religions can develop religious beliefs and practices that vary widely from their origins, as in the case of Buddhism and Hinduism. The most significant differences between Eastern and Western religion, she writes, involve the concepts of reincarnation and transmigration, which form the cornerstone of Eastern belief but remain largely esoteric ideas in the West.

The chapter on the near-death experience presents a standard and basic overview. The author concludes that the most plausible explanation for NDEs is that they are “universally available mystical experiences” (p. 134).

The final chapter, “Religion and the NDE Phenomenon,” is an excellent integration of the NDE into the literature of the world’s religions. For example, the author notes the parallels between the NDE and the intermediate or Bardo state described in the classic Buddhist work, the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Evans-Wentz, 1957/11th century). Within this text is a judgment by Yama, the King and Judge of the Dead, who reviews the life of the deceased; in Hinduism, Yama is the Judge of the Dead and King of the intermediate state between death and rebirth. This phenomenon of judgment and life review has a definite parallel in religions of the West, where a similar judgment of the dead plays an integral role in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Interestingly, each religion has its own name for the “Being of Light” present during the life review.

Anyone who is a student of comparative religion will be reassured that the author does not overlook the minor discrepancies between NDE accounts and religious writings. I personally am not troubled that the two constitute an “off-the-rack” fit rather than a “tailor-made” fit. While a blissful NDE generally resembles descriptions of Paradise in the world’s religions, the life review of NDErs sometimes varies from the judgment stories in the world’s religions. For example, the Tibetan Book of the Dead mentions only negative life reviews for the sinful. Also, most NDErs who have had a blissful experience feel that it is the beginning of eternal life, whereas Hindu and Buddhist texts
maintain that these Heavens are transitory and present prior to rebirth. And in the Bahá'í view, there are countless spiritual realms through which souls can progress.

Ma'súmián notes that whether there is a temporary nature to the particular Heaven the NDEr is experiencing is not easily verified by NDE accounts. She states that the traditional Hell with "fire and brimstone" is not mentioned by NDErs and that the afterlife torments of NDEs have a positive outcome. This is one of the few points in the book that is dated, in view of the recent research on unpleasant NDEs (Greyson and Bush, 1992; Rommer, 2000).

Overall, Life After Death is an outstanding presentation of both ancient and modern views of the afterlife. In my view, Ma'súmián's compilation of specific verses that address the afterlife from the world's sacred scriptures provides an excellent resource that alone would be worth the price of the book. Added to this is her careful analysis of the concepts and contradictions both within and between the various religions. This book is a "must" for all students of life after death in general and the NDE in particular.

References

