BOOK REVIEW

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Since childhood, I have had two interests: science and the paranormal. I would often sneak away into my school library to read books ranging from ecology to séances, astronomy, and ghosts. My interests were varied, and I never saw a contradiction between them. Eventually, when it came time to go off to college and choose a career path, I went the route of science. I studied biology and eventually went on to graduate school to study biology and science education, which was followed by a few years teaching freshman biology at Baylor University and then on to working in the publishing field working on science education products and tests. But I never lost my interest in the spiritual and paranormal, and I believe that this interest was part of my reason to change my career path to become a psychotherapist specializing in spiritual therapy. Some of the work that I do is to help clients reconcile their powerful spiritual experiences with their previous experience or lack thereof. Because of this work, I was interested in writing a book review for the Journal of Near-Death Studies, as some clients are likely to have a near-death experience (NDE) that is outside their spiritual beliefs and experiences.

I believe my background in both science and psychology was the reason I was asked to review Chris Carter’s book, Science and the Afterlife Experience: Evidence for the Immortality of Consciousness. Until I received this book, I had never really thought much of near-death or afterlife experiences nor had I heard of this author. I suppose

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I always assumed that an afterlife was a given fact and not in need of study. But I was excited to receive this book, as the title suggests scientific evidence in support of an afterlife. Unfortunately, I was initially disappointed in the book, though ultimately I also found considerable value in it.

Carter, by his own description, is not a scientist but a philosopher. I think that this difference is at the core of my initial disappointment. This book is the third of a trilogy in which Carter discussed various psychic or paranormal phenomenon, and I agree with his statement that it is not necessary to have read the previous books in order to follow this one. The author stated that “the purpose of this book is to examine the most convincing ancient and modern evidence for the existence of the afterlife; to carefully consider all the skeptical objections; and finally, to arrive at a solution to the deep and ancient mystery” (p. 5). He also listed many practical benefits to belief in an afterlife, including overcoming fear of death, strengthening courage to fight for freedom and social justice, and helping to counter the extreme materialism of modern Western society.

I appreciate and agree with Carter’s position that belief in an afterlife can have practical benefits through a spiritual awakening that can help people cope with many challenges of modern civilization. However, to the purposes of this book, I feel that the author did an excellent job examining evidence for the existence of an afterlife and considering the skeptical objections but fell far short of arriving at a solution to the mystery of an afterlife. This book contributes to the study of an afterlife by being an excellent sourcebook of case studies and counterarguments to skeptics, but it does not add any new evidence or theories concerning an afterlife.

The contents of the book comprise an excellent summary of various cases concerning the afterlife. Carter began with background information on psychic phenomena and NDEs. This introductory section focused on the basis of the controversy surrounding psychic phenomenon, mainly the pushback of scientists after the Catholic Church’s suppression of scientific research. Carter also pointed out that modern physics does not prohibit consideration of psychic phenomenon; however, neither does it necessitate it. In part one, Carter addressed the topic of reincarnation and provided a series of case studies that appeared to me to be credible evidence for the possibility of reincarnation, a list of characteristics common to most cases of reincarnation, and a variety of alternative explanations for reincarnation evidence. In part two, Carter addressed the topic of apparitions, various case
studies of apparitions of the living and the dead, and the characteristics and theories of apparitions. In the final part three, he discussed messages from the dead, including mediums, the work of the Society for Psychical Research, and many case studies of one-way and two-communications with spirits.

Throughout all parts of the book, Carter repeatedly did an excellent job of providing a case study, examining it from various angles, and explaining why this case should be considered evidence for an afterlife of some kind. I appreciated the way he presented the information without making any absolute statements beyond the facts of each case. He never tried to present a case as evidence for a particular afterlife or as support for a particular spiritual tradition.

My primary complaint about this book is that it contained so little of what is generally considered science. When I began reading, I expected to encounter experimental research that pointed to the existence of an afterlife or some kind of scientific explanation of what an afterlife might be that could be explored through experimental research. There was, however, none of this. The book consisted almost entirely of case studies. The author would present the details of a case study and explain how the existence of an afterlife was the most reasonable explanation for the events in the case study and that all other explanations required a form of mental gymnastics if not contortion. When the author was presenting a case study, he was usually being critical of the skeptics of an afterlife or paranormal phenomenon.

Unfortunately, case studies provide only anecdotal evidence—the weakest form of scientific support. Perhaps the greatest problem with anecdotal evidence is that it is based solely upon eyewitness testimony, and as extensive systematic research indicates, eyewitness testimony is highly prone to error. From what I gather, Carter is a philosopher who has not conducted experimental research. He provided a logical argument with anecdotal evidence, but such arguments and evidence have misled humanity in the past. For instance, before humans had circumnavigated the globe, there was a good solid argument, even supported by empirical data, that the Earth was flat and did not move. Despite the quality of the argument and the data, that hypothesis was wrong.

I would have been satisfied if Carter had presented some kind of theoretical framework of what the afterlife is or how it functions that could conceivably be researched experimentally. It does not matter if that research can be conducted this year or even this century. Democritus developed the hypothesis that all matter was composed of indi-
visible particles around 400 BCE, but the technology to support his hypothesis did not exist until over 2,000 years later. However, Carter did not give even a hint as to what consciousness is or what the nature of afterlife might be.

If the word ‘science’ had not been in the title of the book and Carter had instead called it *The Case for an Afterlife*, then I would consider this book a great success. Despite my criticisms of its relatively weak science, Carter made an excellent case that there must be some form of afterlife and that human consciousness persists even after the death of the physical body. I feel that he has presented enough case studies with adequate explanations that for a skeptic to simply “wave away” the notion of paranormal experiences would be a display of arrogance and narrow-mindedness. However, I believe this book is most useful for people like me who believe that there is an afterlife but lack the means to make a coherent argument for that belief. The long sequence of case studies and the thoroughness with which Carter dissected them provides an excellent resource for those who find themselves on the losing end of an argument with a staunch but less well-informed skeptic. I would also hope that some budding scientists out there would pick up this book and realize that there is enough of a logical argument and preliminary scientific support for the possible existence of paranormal phenomena that these phenomena are truly worthy of experimental study—whatever form such research might take.