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Review: Life after Death: A Study of the Afterlife in World Religions

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BOOK REVIEWS

Jesus in the Koran. Geoffrey Parrinder. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1965, 1995.

Brief mention should be made of a volume that first appeared in 1965 but was copyrighted again in 1995. Having written well over a dozen volumes on the world religions, Parrinder has long been recognized as one of the foremost scholars in this field. Combine this with a seldom-treated subject of much interest to apologists and missiologists alike, and we have the makings of a text with ongoing appeal.

Jesus ('Isa) is mentioned in fifteen chapters (suras) in the Qur'an, in a total of ninety-three verses. The Qur'an speaks of Jesus' virgin birth, sinlessness, and miracles such as raising the dead, as well as saying many lofty things about him, like the affirmation that he is the Messiah. Parrinder provides a commentary on each of these verses, including providing many interpretations by Muslim interpreters who even discuss both the death and resurrection of Jesus. Parrinder's effort has even been recognized by Muslims as a fair treatment.

One might charge Parrinder with making overly easy interpretations in order to serve as common ground between Christians and Muslims, as well as seeming to downplay some of the unique aspects of orthodoxy, such as Jesus as Son of God, the Trinity, and the nature of the Gospel message. Yet, his knowledge of Muslim interpretation and the comprehensiveness of the volume, along with many surprising truths that he does point out, make this book an invaluable tool for studying Islam or dealing with Muslims.

Reviewed by: Gary R. Habermas, Liberty University

Farnaz Ma'sumian, *Life After Death: A Study of the Afterlife in World Religions.* Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 1995.

The author studied in both Iran and the U.S., and is currently teaching world religions at Austin Community College. In this volume, she presents an overview of seven religions (Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Bahai), summarizing key aspects in the eschatology of each. In particular, Ma'sumian concentrates on concepts of the soul, heaven, and hell. She asserts that life after death is a "fundamental principle of most religious systems" (p. 138).

Attempting to do a little more than just write in generalities concerning a single issue, the author also includes a brief introduction and overview of the classical scriptures of each religion. Apparently revealing her own convictions concerning the centrality of these religious texts, she surprisingly states: "To obtain a holistic view of reality, therefore, we should supplement scientific knowledge with revelatory knowledge given to us in the scriptures." (p. 138)

She ends the volume with a one chapter treatment of reincarnation and transmigration, followed by two chapters on near death experiences and what they may tell us about comparative afterlife claims. One gets the impression that the author is using near death experiences to serve as a point of integration between the different religious traditions on the afterlife, uniting them in some undefined sense (pp. 138-146).

Along the way, Ma'sumian explores several areas of interest to the evangelical reader, such as the following:

There is no concept of either reincarnation or karma in the earliest Hindu texts (the Vedas), while several early passages do point to a single earthly life, followed by eternity (pp. 5-9; cf. 12-13, 114).

The most sacred Zoroastrian scriptures (the Avesta) were written almost 1000 years after Zoroaster lived, with oral teachings being the norm until then (pp. 17, 25).

The Buddhist conception of Nirvana (pp. 48-53; 115-117) does not involve the extinction of all personal qualities (p. 50). In fact,

Buddha's teachings even seem to allow for the Western, more personalized view (pp. 116-117).

This book also raises a few eyebrows. For example, the same point mentioned earlier concerning Zoroastrianism's chief text also appears to be problematic with regard to one of Ma'sumian's own, often-repeated assertions. Since the Avesta was not written until 1000 years after Zoroaster's death, one wonders at the common assumption that Judaism borrowed its "later" Old Testament concept of the resurrection of the body from Zoroastrianism, as Ma'sumian herself states several times (pp. 16, 18, 25, 39). But how can such a belief be held so widely and firmly when such an argument seems to rely in some sense on oral tradition from ten centuries earlier? How firm can we be concerning the resulting contention?

While the chief integrating principle in this work is the phenomena of near death experiences, yet this is also a troublesome area. One concern is the author's constant reliance on older material. Almost one-half of her references are to Raymond Moody's initial 1975 volume *Life After Life*, while none of her other sources in two chapters are more recent than 1989. It is no wonder that outdated statements are the result (pp. 142, 145). Studies in the field have moved far beyond this early data. And while she is correct that corroborative NDEs provide evidence for these events, the mere mention of this (p. 134) is far too brief and unsubstantiated to help very much.

Overall, Ma'sumian's volume is usually quite general, although it imparts a few outstanding morsels in the process. Taken as a whole, it would probably serve as a good textbook in a comparative religions course, not only for the subject matter itself, but for the way it is integrated with the respective holy books of each religious tradition. There are several areas where there are opportunities for evangelical interaction and/or objection, but these are (perhaps surprisingly) not overly common.

Reviewed by Gary R. Habermas, Liberty University