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Summer 1999

Review: Life after Death in World Religions

Gary R. Habermas

Liberty University, ghabermas@liberty.edu

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Recommended Citation

Habermas, Gary R., "Review: Life after Death in World Religions" (1999). *LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 359.

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Life After Death in World Religions. Edited by Harold Coward. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997. 125 pages. \$15.00.

Few subjects have received more attention in recent religious studies than comparative views of the afterlife. It seems that this topic is doubly fashionable, both in today's society at large, as well as being quite advantageous for religious comparisons. And as with other similar volumes, what emerges is often quite surprising.

The different chapters started out as lectures in the annual Distinguished Speakers Series sponsored by the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. All but one of the seven writers are professors in western Canadian universities. Each contribution is written by a specialist in that particular religious tradition. After the editor's Introduction, the next six chapters treat the subject of life after death in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Chinese religions.

Although not utilizing parallel outlines, each chapter contains both historical considerations as well as references to the scriptures of the particular religion being addressed. A few, like the chapter on Islam by Hanna Kassis, include frequent quotations. Each also reflects on the current climate of religious belief. The volume is well-referenced throughout, with endnotes appearing after every chapter.

As is frequently the case in comparative studies of the afterlife, unexpected features abound when compared to popular notions. For example, contrary to the somewhat common idea that only the great monotheisms contain beliefs about Hell, Gary Arbuckle discusses at length the negative aspect of the afterlife as taught in the Chinese religions. This includes dividing the underworld "into the ten courts of hell" (112). Eva K. Neumaier-Dargyay (Buddhism) repeats the better known eastern belief that reincarnation, contrary to its popular presentation in some western venues, is really a curse.

Written at perhaps an introductory college level, the book also contains aspects of critical interaction. Eliezer Segal (Judaism) repeats the commonly heard view that the Jews imported many of their ideas about the resurrection of the body and final judgment from Persian Zoroastrianism, which is not surprising in light of his late-dating of Old Testament books like Daniel. Kassis reports that Muslims perhaps borrowed from both Jewish and Christian eschatological concepts.

Spending more time on critical discussion, Terence Penelhum devotes a section to conflicts in the Christian tradition, opening with the assertion that, "Philosophical difficulties in the Christian view are very great" (44). Accordingly, he comments on different positions like soul sleep, immediate body, and final (resurrection) body views. He sides with the latter, even

while recognizing that a combination position fits better with the sum of the biblical data.

The fascinating issue of the future state of the individual is also addressed by more than one writer. Once again, we find ideas expressed that one might expect, as well as some that will not be anticipated. In the former category, both Coward and Penelhum note the Christian view that believers will be raised in a body like that exhibited by Jesus after his resurrection.

But it does not follow that eastern concepts deny all personal components in the next life. In agreement with the best studies on Buddhism, Neumaier-Dargyay affirms that an essential self survives death. Anantanand Rambachan identifies the chief Hindu view that personal consciousness continues its existence in a "subtle body" (76). Further, both Neumaier-Dargyay and Rambachan point to recent research in near death experiences as possibly shedding light on these concepts.

Perhaps surprising to some, but this last move is consistent with several studies in the last twenty years. One instance is Farnaz Ma'sumian's *Life After Death* (Oxford: One World, 1995), where Chapter 9 is devoted to near death studies. Her conclusion is that these experiences provide the integrative feature that ties together differing religious concepts.

Interested readers should note that claims like these will be disputed in a forthcoming volume written by one of the near death pioneers—cardiologist Michael Sabom. To be released by Zondervan Publishing House, *Light and Death* disputes the claim that the study of near death experiences inevitably leads to an Eastern or occultic concept of the afterlife. This is a welcome addition to the literature and an altogether different point of integration.

Coward's book is a general, introductory effort that may be useful as a text in a comparative religions class at lower college levels. Evangelicals will probably want to offer various rejoinders, perhaps in a cognate text.

REVIEWED BY GARY R. HABERMAS
LIBERTY UNIVERSITY