
Introduction to the First Volume

Brian Morgan

As John Morgan points out in the general introduction to this series, “death is a fact.” Therefore, it is not difficult to figure out where we will end, only the road we take to get there. This volume indicates the paths that the major religious traditions teach. The paths pointed out by these religions deal little with “known reality,” and much more with faith, based “after death” descriptions of those paths’ goals. The Christian religions discussed in this book speak of resurrection as the pinnacle moment in a person of faith’s life. Yet, resurrection happens after death. Death, the opening to the afterlife, is, therefore, the defining moment in the life of a person who belongs to a Christian faith. We will find that several other belief systems focused at the moment of death as well. For this reason, when life and faith are defined at death, it seems that this would be the time when religion would be most meaningful to a person.

It is at the moment of death that religious people cease to be part of the known and prepare to be part of the unknown. It is here that religion is used as the road map that travels from life to death, to the afterlife, or at least to the unknown. It is by the hopes and expectations of these same religions that grieving families travel through their grief. This book, an in-depth look at the faiths and religions that dying people and grieving families use to travel, is then an appropriate and valuable guide for care givers.

Each of the chapters provide, while discussing death through religion, insights into the people themselves, their history, politics, and hopes. The traditions are strikingly similar and noticeably different. All cultures have developed symbolic systems or religions that incorporate the experience and understanding of death into a larger whole that gives meaning to life [1]. As Gerry Cox writes, “By studying the health practices and the burial and mortuary customs, one can learn much of the philosophy and religion of a people” [2, p. 161]. Pittu Laungani makes this same point, telling us that in researching his chapter

about the death rituals of the Hindu faith, how much he learned about the faith of his childhood and culture. These chapters give us insight, not only about the death customs and practices of a particular religion, but also into the people themselves.

Not every religion uses death as the defining event in the life of a person of faith—there are exceptions to this, and these are attended to as well in the book. The notable example of a different approach is that of Buddhism. Dr. Kawamura writes of Buddhist tendencies not as being goal oriented, where “if one can find a response to the question of death and dying, then one can lead a meaningful life in accordance with that response” [3, p. 40]. But Buddhism is, in Kawamura’s terms, “an instamatic response to the moment” [p. 40], not concerned about death.

In Judaism and Islam, the rituals of death are focused on life: first of all, a commemoration of the life of the deceased, and secondly practical help with the lives of the bereft. In these traditions, the body is treated minimally and quickly, with a funeral service happening within 24 hours with little fanfare. As Salim Mansur stated simply “the story for this person is over” [4].

The afterlife is not always something wished for, as Cox points out from the perspective of Native American views of death [2, p. 167]. Death and afterlife are not goals to be attained but events to be feared. Large rocks are moved on top of grave sites so that the restless soul cannot come out.

One of the great debates of religious history is the role that the afterlife takes in Judaic thought. Judith Hauptman’s chapter on the Jewish rituals of death shows how little the afterlife actually plays in Jewish thought. Ronald Trojcek, however, holds that the Christian belief in an afterlife is based in Jewish philosophy, and afterlife is a large part of the Jewish belief system. Ms. Hauptman’s chapter is Talmudic, that is rooted in the first five books of the Bible. Dr. Trojcek takes his thesis from later developments.

The Hebrew Bible begins with an affirmation that the world came from God and is good. At the moment of death, a witness to that death in the Jewish tradition would recite “blessed is the just judge,” an affirmation of the goodness of reality. Death rituals in Judaism are created to help the grieving, not the deceased. This would confirm Hauptman’s point of “Judaism being a joyful and life-affirming tradition” [5, p. 76].

Christianity has taken a different emphasis. The Christian views discussed in this volume differ greatly from Judaism and Islam. Koop’s chapter about the Mennonite tradition, John Chirban’s chapter about Greek Orthodox traditions, Edward Jeremy Miller’s chapter about Catholic traditions, and Dennis Klass’s chapter about Protestant traditions, all emphasize that death is the moment at which a person of faith is defined. That there is an afterlife and a reward for life. As John Chirban states in his opening paragraph, quoting St. Paul, “if Christ had not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” [6, p. 103]. Judaism offers practical help to the bereaved; in Islam, excessive grief is a sign of

lack of faith; in Christianity, grief is a part of life that must be accepted in the manner of Christianity's source: "Jesus wept" [7].

All cultures have developed ceremonies and rituals that convey these realities to the living and the dying. It is helpful to remember the points Edgar Jackson made some years ago about the value of religion to the dying:

- It helps them control their fears and anxieties by revealing not only the tragedy and sorrow of life, but also its blessings and rich experiences.
- It emphasizes those events in the history and experience of humanity that make life seem more understandable and give more people a sense of changelessness in the midst of change, of the eternal in the midst of time.
- It helps them to turn their best thoughts and feelings into constructive action.
- Those of faith are inspired to act as they believe, to fulfill their aspirations in life.
- It allows them to transform the tragic events of life through the direction of its hope and the power of its love.
- It leads to deeper sensitivity of the spirit, higher aspirations of service, and a firmer conviction that the cosmic purpose is best understood as creative goodness. Therefore, although grief is painful and disappointing, it does not lead to despair.
- When it contains a belief in immortality, it relieves some of the guilt and sorrow that would be present if it were thought that at no point in time or eternity could wrongs be righted or injustices rectified.
- It highlights tradition, giving people a longer view by allowing them to tie present sufferings to time-honored sources of spiritual strength, and thus transcend current pain.
- It gives courage in the present and direction for the future.
- It moves attention away from death and tragedy, not by denying them, but by fitting them into a larger perspective.
- Through community religious rituals, it provides evidence of group strength and comfort, and recognizes the dignity of life and the validity of feelings prompted by facing death [cited in 1, pp. 316-317].

The religious traditions in this volume have been presented more or less historically. We begin with Hinduism, then move to Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Protestantism, the Mennonite Tradition, Islam, North American Native traditions, and finally Paganism. Paganism probably predates all the others, but it is listed here last because the resurgence of it as a popular religion is new.

The history of religion is fascinating. Ernest Becker states that the confrontation with death is the most important thing that we do. There are, he says, three responses to the knowledge of universal death: denial, neurosis, and heroism. Religion for Ernest Becker is the highest form of heroism. For most people, the urge to immortality is a simple reflex of anxiety about death, but for the religious it

is “a reaching out by way of one’s whole being toward life” both for the self and for the universe [8, pp. 152-153]. In its ideal form, religion satisfies both of the individual’s fundamental needs: It provides affirmation of one’s uniqueness since God knows and loves the individual in his uniqueness; and it provides consolation for death in the promise of an eternal life. For Becker, religion is the highest form of creativity, an “outgrowth of genuine life-longing, a reaching out for a plenitude of meaning” [8, p. 153] allowing one to be “open, generous, courageous, to touch others’ lives and enrich them and open to them in return” [8, p. 258]. The most remarkable achievement of the great religions has been that persons of all social or economic classes, “slaves, cripples, imbeciles, the simple and the mighty” [8, p. 160], could become heroes. The world may be “a vale of tears, or horrid sufferings, of incommensurateness, of tortuous and humiliating daily pettiness, of sickness and death, a place . . . where man could expect nothing, achieve nothing for himself. Little did it matter, because it served God and so would serve the servant of God” [8, p. 160].

All wars are ultimately religious wars, fighting over the truth that sets one free. It is important that we take this opportunity to learn more about the spiritual roots of those with whom we are privileged to work.

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