UNDERSTANDING DEATH
An Introduction to Ideas of Self and the Afterlife in World Religions

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WILEY Blackwell
Understanding Death
To my husband, Zsolt (1945–2010)
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An Introduction to Ideas of Self and the Afterlife in World Religions

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Preface

The meaning of the word “death,” like so many other important words in our vocabulary – life, self, mind, body, love, respect, dignity, honor, grief – differs from culture to culture, from past to present, and even from person to person within one community. The field of death studies, which encompasses academic research, popular literature on death and dying, as well as the teaching of courses on death in colleges and universities, has its roots in a modern North American movement spurred on by the now famous 1969 publication by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross of *On Death and Dying*. The movement has resulted in worldwide studies that investigate and theorize death and dying from numerous perspectives: historical, ethical, psychological, sociological, philosophical, theological, and literary. As an introduction to the views and practices of various religions regarding death and life after death, this book offers the opportunity for a comparative reading in the hope that the reader will gain insight from what Arvind Sharma calls “reciprocal illumination” – the idea that we may find greater understanding of one tradition in the light of others (Sharma, 2005).

One’s first encounter with death may result in childhood puzzlement, shock, or a deep feeling of irrevocable loss. The experience is
intimately related to thoughts and emotions that shape our identity and revolve around a sense of what we intuitively hold to be self or the essence of life. Almost always there are questions. What exactly happened? Why? What do we do now? The book begins with an exploration of the questions that death evokes and that religions aim to answer. Subsequent chapters take the reader through the main responses of several religious traditions. There are nine chapters including one on death in religions of antiquity and seven on living religions. This is not a book on world religions; discussions related to the general belief systems of each religion are oriented towards those aspects that inform perspectives on death. The emphasis in each chapter, therefore, towards history, philosophy, or ritual will vary in order to reflect what is important in understanding the meaning of death in that religion. Throughout, however, notions regarding the self or soul and its trajectory through life and death, as well as the goal or culmination of this journey, will be highlighted. Each chapter will also describe some of the death rituals related to the religion. The ways in which each tradition conceives of the “person” who lives and the “person” who dies will form the central theme and primary organizing principle for the book, whether the discussion relates to primal religious beliefs in many souls, the Biblical view of the person as a holistic body/breath entity, the Hindu concept of atman – the undying, immortal soul – or the Buddhist idea of “no-soul.” Furthermore, self-conceptions are a crucial element in understanding the varied rituals of closure and farewell that are intrinsic to the way in which individuals and human societies deal with the end of life.

The book is organized so that each religion is treated as a discrete unit. It has been my experience that a thematic approach is useful in a classroom context when students are already familiar with the religions in question, otherwise the various texts and teachings are easily confused. I have also found that the interest of students in this subject is very much tied to their interest in the religions themselves. In other words, they want to know specifically what Judaism or Buddhism or Islam teaches about the process of dying, what are the beliefs regarding the afterlife in that tradition, and what rituals are performed for the dead. The conversations recorded at the end
of each chapter are intended to provide the reader with a glimpse of the personal views of people who live and work in the scientific industrialized environment of North America. They come from all walks of life and from all parts of the world. The only criterion for the conversation was that the person be someone who identifies with his or her religion and actively engages with it. Throughout this book, it will become apparent that religion, as it is expressed in texts and canonical interpretations, is diverse and contradictory – how much more so when it is combined with the diverse and contradictory nature of individuals who engage with the textual tradition. Among the interviewees are converts, life-long adherents, devout believers, as well as those who doubt. The conversations are there to offer a personal counterpoint to the abstract concepts and principles discussed in the chapters, and to underscore for the reader that just as human beings live life in a multitude of ways, death is not merely a common event that happens to all; death is interpreted, constructed, one might even say lived, in equally various forms.

I hope that this book will draw the readers’ attention to differences and similarities among religions, as well as to the varieties of expression that can be found within one religious tradition. I aim to highlight the manifold conceptions of self and world that inform the way humans interpret life and personal continuation beyond death, as well as our shared human struggle to discover the meaning of, or assign meaning to, the phenomenon of death – a struggle that is renewed with each personal encounter.

Note

As this book is intended for a general audience diacritical marks have not been used and non-English terminology has been kept to the minimum necessary. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are drawn from the following translations:

Preface


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Acknowledgments

This book has been many years in the writing, and after the death of my husband in 2010, it likely would never have been completed but for the patience and understanding of the editorial and publishing team at Wiley Blackwell who gave me the time to recover myself and encouraged me not to abandon the project. I extend my deepest thanks to them all.

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