



Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions (Contributions to the Study of Religion)

By Hiroshi Obayashi

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Major religious traditions of the world contain perspectives of perennial importance on the topic of death and afterlife. Such concepts and beliefs are not only reflected directly in mortuary and funerary practices, but also inform patterns of beliefs and rituals that shape human lifestyles. Though evidenced in sacred texts, they cannot be fully understood in isolation by textual study alone. Rather, they must be explored in terms of a comprehensive understanding of the given religious system as rooted in an overall culture. Here thirteen scholars, each a specialist in a particular religious tradition, outline the beliefs, myths, and practices relating to death and afterlife. The volume introduction provides a framework for understanding the evolutionary relationships among world religions and the unity as well as the diversity of their quest for overcoming death.

Part I comprises chapters on African religions representing the nonliterate religious experience and on ancient religions of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece. Studies of these religions serve as background for comprehending concepts relating to death and afterlife in the major world religions, which are dealt with in Part II, on Western religions, and Part III, on Eastern religions. The particular method of approach to each tradition is determined by the nature of the material. With death and afterlife as the common focus, this group of scholars has brought to bear its diverse expertise in anthropology, classics, archaeology, biblical studies, history, and theology. The result is a text important for comparative religion courses and, beyond that, a book extending our understanding of human thoughts and aspirations. It offers a global perspective from which an individual can ponder his or her own personal issues concerning death and afterlife.

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Review

"The 13 short and necessarily selective, but nevertheless substantial chapters of this ably edited cross-cultural survey are to be recommended for being both authoritative (each contributor is an expert) and engagingly and enlighteningly written. The work is quite comprehensive, encompassing preliterate African, ancient Mediterranean, and the mainstream Western and Eastern traditions. It utilizes a variety of approaches--historical, sociological, anthropological, theological, etc. It intersects most notably with both *Religious Encounters with Death*, ed. by F.E. Reynolds and E.H. Waugh (CH, Apr '78) and *Death, Afterlife, and the Soul*, ed. by L.E. Sullivan (1989). In format, it is more akin to the former, but it differs from it in at least two main respects: (1) here the focus of each chapter is generally broader, less specialized; and (2) proportionately more attention is given to the major Western traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The new volume thus augments and complements its predecessors. Useful chapter notes, bibliography, and index. Appropriate for graduate students and upper-division undergraduates."-Choice

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About the Author

HIROSHI OBAYASHI is Professor and former Chairman of the Department of Religion at Rutgers University, where he teaches a course on Death and Afterlife. He is the author of numerous books and articles in English and Japanese, including *Ernst Troeltsch and Theology of Our Own Times* and *Agape and History*.

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