

Death across time

A dense cross-cultural study of near-death experiences and afterlife beliefs identifies underlying and consistent mythemes



Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations

Universalism, Constructivism and Near-Death Experience

Gregory Shushan

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Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations takes on the ambitious project of comparing beliefs about the afterlife in a wide range of historic civilisations and comparing them in order to determine what, if anything, they have in common – and not only that, but then to use those commonalities to try and identify what type of experience might have inspired those beliefs.

Shushan believes that the phenomenon of the “near-death experience” (NDE), a series of sensations or visions which are often reported by individuals who have been unconscious and near death, inspires elements of the afterlife beliefs in many cultures. In order to demonstrate this point, he takes the reader on a tour of afterlife beliefs in five parts of the world: Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt, Mesopotamia during the Sumerian and Babylonian periods, Vedic India, China before the introduction of Buddhism and the Aztec and Maya cultures of Central America.

These five samples are separated by thousands of miles and thousands of years; for Shushan, this is part of the point. Each culture is sufficiently far from the others that the likelihood of cultural influence is almost nil. If, therefore, the beliefs of these cultures are similar, they are more

likely to reflect some kind of cross-cultural universal human experience than the influence of one culture on another.

This type of universal comparative study, Shushan claims, is out of favour in the study of religion at present, and he spends some time defending the theoretical grounds of his work. Although previous comparative studies have often been carried out in the service of universalising agendas, he argues, they need not be – the goal of some previous studies doesn’t invalidate the method.

What follows is a brief but detailed view of the afterlife beliefs of Shushan’s chosen cultures, focusing on their views of the fate of the soul or spirit after death. In some cases, as in Egypt, this comes from texts which explicitly describe the fate of the soul. In other cases, Shushan draws some or all of his information from myths which describe the journeys of heroes into the underworld; these tales are interpreted as allegories of the soul’s progress after death.

By comparing these beliefs, Shushan identifies a number of underlying recurring “mythemes” which appear in most or all of them. Examples of mythemes include the soul leaving the body, an encounter with deceased relatives, the idea that the fate of the soul in the afterlife depends on the deceased’s conduct during life, and other similar broad concepts. Although the mytheme is consistent, it will have different expressions based on the culture relating the myth – thus, for instance, while Egyptian, Indian

and Aztec beliefs all share the idea that the soul’s fate is based on conduct during life, exactly what that conduct should be and how the soul is judged vary between these cultures.

Shushan links these mythemes to elements of NDE, which contains many but not all of the same concepts in many of its modern manifestations. Possible explanations for NDE, according to Shushan, include neurological phenomena and even the possibility of an actual afterlife.

The one area that may give readers pause is Shushan’s interpretation of the religious and mythological material he covers in each chapter. Some of his conclusions rest on readings of the material which he freely confesses are not the only possible ones. Do Assyriologists in general agree with Shushan’s interpretation of Assyrian myth? The text leaves you with an urge to double-check – which is, of course, no bad thing.

Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations is a dense, rich, thought-provoking work that points at some interesting questions while making a good stab at proving the value of this type of comparative study. Even readers who don’t agree with all of Shushan’s conclusions will have to admire his willingness to mount a full-scale attack on some of the big questions, not only of the anthropology of religion, but of human existence in general.

James Holloway

Fortean Times Verdict

TACKLES SOME OF THE REALLY BIG QUESTIONS – THOUGHT-PROVOKING

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