

BOOK REVIEW

by Dr. Ken R. Vincent

Conceptions of Afterlife In Early Civilizations: Universalism, Constructivism, and Near-Death Experience by Gregory Shushan (2009)
London: Continuum International Publishing Group

Conceptions of Afterlife in Early Civilizations is a very well-written book by a consummate scholar. Each of Gregory Shushan's sentences is pregnant with facts. The book does pre-suppose a working knowledge of comparative religion, but it should be accessible to most readers because of its clarity.

Shushan begins with an attack on the excesses of post-modernism. In his defense of comparative religion and the quest for universalism within religions, he makes 3 points:

- 1) There is a remarkable consistency among largely unconnected cultures and times regarding belief in life after death.
- 2) The core elements of these religious beliefs are largely similar to the core elements of the near-death experience (NDE).
- 3) These consistent beliefs in life after death contrast with the widely divergent creation myths of different religions.

Next, he makes the case for independence of the ancient cultures included in his study, namely, 1) Ancient Egypt (Old and Middle Kingdoms) before the Hyksos invasion, 2) Mesopotamia prior to the foreign invasion by the Kassites, 3) China prior to Buddhism, 4) Vedic India before Buddha, 5) Mesoamerica prior to the Spanish conquest. Zoroastrianism is excluded because of its relationship to pre-Hindu religion; Judaism is excluded because of its relationship to the old Canaanite religion.

Shushan then makes the case for the universality of the NDE from ancient times to the present. He notes the cultural variance of NDE accounts but defends the idea that there is a common core in NDEs across cultures and times.

The author then proceeds to look at the afterlife accounts in each of the five civilizations listed above. He analyzes their universal similarities, as well as

their differences in relation to the NDE; he concludes that the differences between the afterlife experiences in ancient texts and the NDE accounts are predominately on the symbolic, culture-specific level but that, “the NDE itself appears to be a collection of subjectively experienced universal phenomena.” Shushan then lists 9 key elements in the NDE that form the basis for afterlife conceptions in the early civilizations that he has analyzed. They are: 1) OBE / Assent, 2) Corpse Encounters, 3) Darkness / Tunnel, 4) Deceased Relatives / Ancestors, 5) Presence or Being of Light, 6) Conduct Evaluation / Life Review, 7) Barriers / Obstacles, 8) Divinization / Oneness / Enlightenment, and 9) Other Realms / Origin Point.

Shushan reasserts that others have maintained that mystical experiences are the basis of religion and that the ancient texts of the five independent civilizations discussed and the NDE all share William James’ core aspects of religious experience. He goes on to state that the NDE and the texts not only share a phenomenological consistency, but also a common metaphysical meaning and that they point to a, “single experiential ‘reality’ which may or may not indicate a single transcendental reality.”

While Shushan’s case regarding darkness and negative NDEs could have been bolstered by Nancy Evans Bush’s masterful analysis of 21 studies of distressing NDEs (covering 1829 cases) presented at the 2006 International Association of Near-Death Studies Conference at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, his conclusions are entirely consistent with its content.

In conclusion, Shushan’s book is a major contribution to the field of comparative religion and near-death studies. It is a “must-read” for students of religious experience.

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