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*Tales of Lights and Shadows: The Mythology of the Afterlife*

Robert Ellwood. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010.

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Richard Greydanus, McGill University

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‘When a man dies, there is this doubt: Some say, he is; others say, he is not. Taught by thee, I would know the truth.’ (37)

Robert Ellwood’s *Tales of Lights and Shadows: The Mythology of the Afterlife* opens with an arresting summary of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*: the progress of a spirit departing the body, unable to slip the surly bonds of flesh, to await its return and wind its way once more around this mortal coil. The first of many accounts drawn from hoary tomes recounted in the following pages, Ellwood draws the reader’s attention to its narrative form. ‘[W]e are likely to find ourselves most engaged by *stories*, whether we believe them literally or not,’ Ellwood begins, ‘...because our *lives* are stories, not abstractions.’ (5) Mythic projection from past through present into the future, common to pre-modern religious narratives, must supplement statements of fact and scientific formulas in order to render intelligible the impenetrable time of human life, which remains in our common experience, as yet, incomplete.

*Tales* is a broad survey of statements made about the afterlife, touching major literary traditions, religious, philosophical, and otherwise. Ellwood demonstrates his scholarly versatility by drawing on the wide body of pre-modern literature—Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, etc.—dedicated to exploring the questions about the afterlife, interspersing throughout the book references to more familiar, recent attempts to paint on the canvas of a future beyond the immediately familiar. Alongside underscoring the themes common across traditions, an inch-deep, mile-wide comparative approach serves the purpose of highlighting the many possible, even contradictory, conceptions of the afterlife between differing traditions and within specific traditions. Is the afterlife simply more of the same or is it an utter break with the present experience of life? Does personal identity persist? or more to the point, is the afterlife personal or impersonal (and what would the latter entail)? Will the afterlife be pleasant, blissful, or will it contain suffering and torment? Which naturally raises a further question: Is death to be embraced or feared? Beneath these direct attempts to engage with the question at hand, Ellwood also draws the reader’s attention to a small number of traditions, including certain versions of Judaism, that appear more or less unconcerned with life after death.

Consistent answers found across religious traditions are therefore not forthcoming. As is characteristic of his body of scholarship, Ellwood again draws attention to the way questions about the afterlife are asked, which seem to evolve and focus more insistently on the ability of believers to actively contribute to, or participate in, the cosmic process of salvation, especially after the so-called 'Axial Age' of human history. Instead of being subject to a seemingly indifferent divine order, humanity now finds itself able to cooperate with the ultimate source of its existence. Suffering and death are no longer integral to human life, but are transient realities belonging neither to its original make-up, nor to its ultimate end. The way in which questions about the afterlife are asked, the implicit suggestion would seem to follow, is focused around a very general conception of the divine order, differentiating animistic, polytheistic, world-religious, and modern-scientific outlooks.

Ellwood closes *Tales* with a comment on the relationship between conception of the afterlife and the culture in which those conceptions take root and flourish. Throughout the book references are made to the correspondence between sets of religious beliefs and particular social orders, a confirmation of the initial thesis mythic narratives are not merely abstractions, but provide the temporal template on which human life is lived. It is commendable, in my own estimation, that he avoids engaging in contemporary discussions about how one might identify tolerant faith against intolerant varieties of faith and chooses instead to point out the shortcoming of 19th and early 20th century critical assessments of religious faith. Illuminating as psychoanalytic or socialist readings may be, these by no means possess the final word on questions that are no less perplexing today than they were for pre-modern thinkers. 'More questions can be asked, and stories told, about the meaning and backstory of human consciousness on this planet than have easy or complete answers.' (144)

Commendable though his studious avoidance of superficial questions may be, one has to wonder about what Ellwood hoped to accomplish by writing the sort of book he did. If the point of his broad survey of conceptions of the afterlife is merely to engender a deeper understanding of the claims made within differing religious traditions, he seems to have set up an abstracted end-goal understanding for its own sake. The near-infinite potential for the human mind to conjure up myths in response to perennial concerns upon which his conclusion rests likewise belies his initial concern for a storied life that must be lived. Indeed, Ellwood presents his readers with a series of statements about the afterlife, whose storied character is analyzed, broken down to their manifold constituent parts, and finally set aside.

How Ellwood addresses the truth status of claims about the nature of the afterlife, in this regard, is particularly illuminating. The truth status of any claim he regards as only having an eternal or ultimate referent; whether or not personal identity



persists after death, per the initial quotation taken from the *Katha Upanishad*, is the sole consideration. All other more worldly considerations are dealt with through analytic methodological strategies for getting at the elusive object. However, there would be a truth found in the way humanity deals with questions of ultimate destiny of the person, had Ellwood followed his suggestion about the narrative character of human life. After all, our present human experience of life's incompleteness, that time has not yet finished with us, inspired in many ancient thinkers a pious disposition towards something Other, in which or whom we live and move and have our being.

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***Secularization and Its Discontents***

Rob Warner. London and New York: Continuum. 2010.

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Jon Waind, McGill University

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*Secularization and Its Discontents* represents Rob Warner's contribution to the growing number of sociological challenges to classical secularization theory in recent decades. The main thesis of the classical theory, according to Warner, is the "long-term, unidirectional and increasing marginalization of the Christian religion" (14). With this statement Warner locates the scope of his analysis to be primarily Western, beginning first with Britain but then expanding for comparisons with secularization in Europe and North America. He observes that many classical secularization theorists interpret sociological evidence gleaned from the West as pointing towards a cultural and religious departure that can only be described as post-Christian (14).

Without denying that something "seismic" has happened to religion in the modern West (37), Warner seeks to temper the classical theory's dismal assessment of the present and future of the Christian faith. His main claim is that religion has not been fated to an irreversible and terminal decline, but is instead going through a transformation. "Religion in the twenty-first century," Warner contends, "has become more contested, complex, diverse and inclined to subjectivized hybrids" (181). The difficult labour pains of secularization, modernization and globalization have resulted in a transformation such that both religion's power and significance have been radically altered today. While contemporary religion might be almost unrecognizable to those who pine for a return to some "golden age" of belief and practice, "global religion in all its proliferating diversity appears to be in vibrant good health, rapidly evolving and recruiting, in Asia, Africa, Latin America and North America," with signs of life evident even in Western Europe (181–182). Religion,