

Introduction

For some Christians, belief in life after death has simply evaporated. In part this is due to the overwhelming dominance in our society of a naturalistic interpretation of reality. But also, traditional ways of articulating Christian belief are no longer found helpful. This book is intended to grapple with these issues and to explore arguments for Christian hope today.

Chapter 1 discusses how advances in scientific and medical understanding of the physical basis of personality have influenced belief in life after death. I consider challenges to faith from analytical philosophy and from modern astronomical findings about the vastness of the universe. I also show how evolutionary theory shows us to be part of the natural order. This naturalistic vision is not solely modern. Ancient Israel saw life as having of necessity a natural span. Today, far more of us are likely to live out this span, and this has affected psychological attitudes towards death and dying.

In the second chapter I show how life after death has been central to Christian doctrine, mission and worship. I argue that resurrection and immortality need each other and that both can be defended. I respond to the objections of analytical philosophy and argue that a contemporary dualism of mind and body can fully accept all that modern science tells us about the ways our thoughts and feelings are correlated with physical factors. A strong case for the soul is made on the basis of human free will, religious experiences and near-death experiences.

In Chapter 3 I explore the religious context, starting with how belief in God is consistent with modern physics and noting a revival of interest in the philosophy of religion. I discuss the problem of evil and suggest that life after death is contingent on belief

Introduction

in a Creator God who loves human beings. That people can have a relationship with God is confirmed by religious experience which appears to be a worldwide phenomenon.

Chapter 4 presents the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus that gave birth to Christianity and to the distinctively Christian case for a future life. Secular historical sources confirm that Jesus' disciples were so convinced that he had conquered death, they persuaded others to share this extraordinary belief and were themselves prepared to die as witnesses to it. If Jesus had in fact appeared to his disciples, then all these developments are explicable. Without it, the birth of Christianity becomes a complete mystery. I go on to explore the ways in which the resurrection of Jesus has been understood and argue for an interpretation that is relevant to what we can hope for our own future destiny.

Chapter 5 explores the significance of near-death experiences (NDEs) for religious belief. Naturalistic explanations for NDEs are described and their limitations explored. The primary evidential feature of NDEs is the apparent correctness of observations allegedly made from outside the body. I show that NDEs are described in many religious traditions.

Chapter 6 spells out the horror of belief in hell and what it actually meant to people in past ages. I show why the moral conscience of humanity is revolted by this belief and why mainstream churches have in practice ceased to defend such notions. One important element in this chapter is the discussion of the New Testament and the priority given by Jesus to his message of love and forgiveness.

My final chapter considers heaven. As a result of the Copernican revolution, it has become impossible to locate heaven in the sky immediately above the earth. Alternative interpretations are discussed. The first is that God will bring history to an end and create a new world. Another suggests that God alone has immortality and after death we will live eternally in the mind of

Introduction

God. A third interpretation suggests that at death, we pass from time into eternity and eternal repose. This is contrasted with an interpretation based on the life of the world to come, in which individuals will continue to develop.