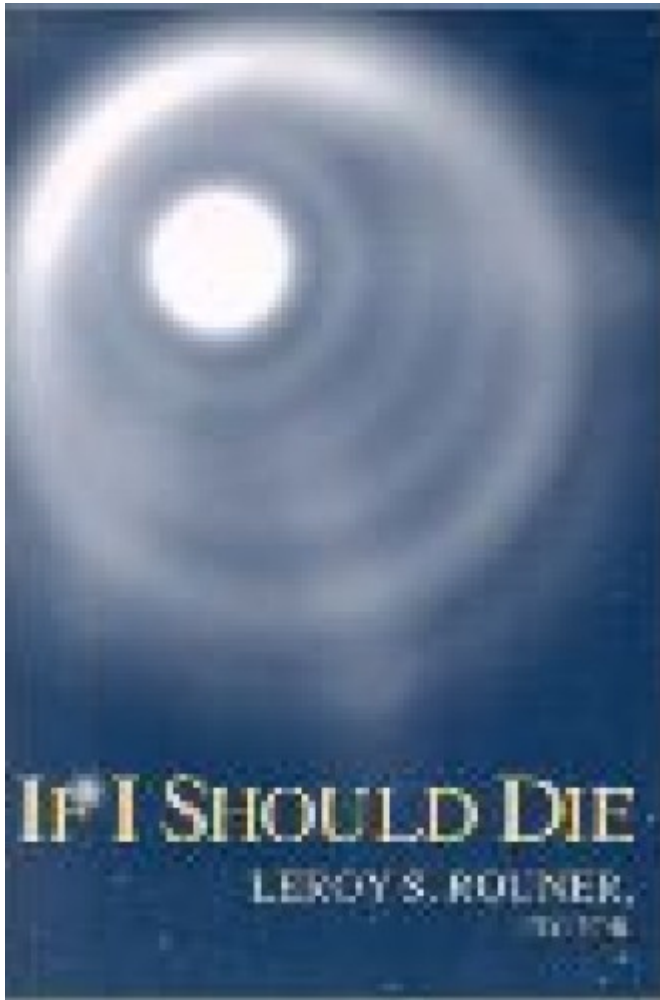


Stairways to heaven

By [Lucy Bregman](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

In Review



If I Should Die

Leroy S. Rouner, ed.

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The essays in this anthology are loosely linked around the topic of death and afterlife, but there is no dialogue between the various points of view presented. The

editor notes that there is a gap “between the philosophers . . . and the storytellers, theologians, and poets,” and adds: “We miss the presence of a thinker like Paul Tillich” who could build a bridge between these groups.

Lacking a Tillich to do the job, I will try to comment on a book that ranges from a light-hearted survey of myths in which mortality is preferred to endless eternity (Wendy Doniger’s article) to a serious study of Locke and Spinoza (Aaron Garrett’s). Only two essays are paired: an appreciative account of Buddhist teachings about death and the afterlife by Malcolm Eckel and a somewhat superficial critique of Buddhist no-self doctrines by Brian Jorgensen.

The latter essay usefully raises the important question of what in each tradition or outside it is to be compared and contrasted with what else. Is the child’s prayer “Now I lay me down to sleep . . .” from which the book’s title is taken comparable to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or is the vision of the latter best measured against Dante’s *Divine Comedy*? And what do Locke and Spinoza have to do with the two religious visionary texts, or a bereaved mother’s contemporary poems? The sum total is not so much an example of apples and oranges as of apples, screwdrivers, oranges and laundry detergents.

This is itself an important clue to the situation many of us face when speaking about the afterlife. We have lost much of our sense of how the language of “eternity,” “immortality” and “resurrection” ought to work. Add “reincarnation” to this trio, and the plot thickens. To argue that our language about the afterlife is philosophically incoherent, as contributors John Lachs and David Roochnik do, is one way to disregard the topic altogether. But religious people have used and continue to use some of this language; it appears not just in funeral liturgies but also in greeting cards and in obituary pages, where letters and poems addressed to the beloved dead by the bereaved are standard fare.

Moreover, even the psychologically oriented death and dying movement has found space for certain forms of afterlife images and ideas, although these are not the primary concern of those working in that field. If anything, the choice of this topic for a volume in the Boston University Studies in Philosophy and Religion series shows that the subject itself is not dead, but newly intriguing. Not one of the previous 21 volumes in the series covers similar material.

What do the contributors willing to use the language of afterlife do with it? One theme that appears across many disciplines and in many individual contributions is the contrast between an idealized, “purified metaphysical me” who might be eternal but is also all but unrecognizable, and the “me I normally recognize,” rich in particularity, idiosyncratic history and sensuous experience. The phrasing comes from Garrett’s essay, but many of the other contributors also rely on some such opposition. Jorgensen dislikes Eckel’s account of Buddhism precisely because “the awakened self” is a purified metaphysical nonentity which appears to trash the lived richness of individual experience and the vitality of creation.

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* retains all of the latter, and so Jorgensen considers it spiritually and morally superior. (This kind of comparison may infuriate many readers, or shortchange both texts, but it is the sole direct comparison in the whole anthology.) Doniger chimes in by pointing to the many Greek myths in which the mortal life is preferred because it is less static and somehow more fully alive than immortality. The immortality of the Greek gods is profoundly boring and trivial, and so, it seems, is the portrait of immortality offered in traditional Christianity. History, individuality and growth aren’t things we must shed to be “eternal.” They are us, they are the stuff of our real lives and selves. On this, Jürgen Moltmann, Doniger and several of the philosophers agree.

But after a while I became suspicious of all this enthusiasm for the “me I normally recognize.” Isn’t a lot of this “me” too trivial and silly to deserve eternalizing, even by very generous standards? When I look closely, what I recognize as “me” is a partial product of the thousands of television commercials I have half-wittingly absorbed. This “normal” me is a conglomerate of consumerist fantasies mingled with the kind of “real” experience that so impresses many of the book’s contributors, and it is beyond my capacities to separate one from the other.

Christians have traditionally been committed to scrutinizing this “me I normally recognize” just as severely as Buddhists do, recognizing that idols and illusions are endemic to what I call my self. The biblical injunction to “set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” is tied to the hidden nature of the Christian self. “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3-4), and this glorified self will not be exactly the same as the person who now is enmeshed in “earthly things.”

Dante's characters are engaged in this purification and transformation, or have completed the process; this gives them a greater distance from ordinary "me-ness" than Jorgensen and several other contributors would like. It is the ones in hell who are caught and enclosed in their own personal histories, trapped forever in a recognizable, deadly and dreary selfhood.

In discussing the drawbacks of traditional eternity, the anthology never mentions that the alleged boringness of heaven is not a recent complaint. In fact, as Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang show in *Heaven: A History* (Yale University Press, 1988), this theme has a long and mixed history. In a process that began late in the 18th century, heaven was recast from a place of timeless contemplation to a place of learning, activity, novelty and continuing human relationships. It became "anthropocentric" rather than "theocentric," to use McDannell and Lang's terms. In "modern heaven" lies the ancestry of Moltmann's and Jorgensen's hopes for history, change and fulfillment in the afterlife through interaction with other humans as well as with the divine. Here too is the wellspring for New Age images of afterlife as continued "learning and growth." (Indeed, the first full-blown portrait of "modern heaven" comes from Emanuel Swedenborg.)

In this version of heaven, the "me I normally recognize" could meet and recognize other newly dead family members, or pursue enjoyable hobbies or even complete its higher education (Walter Rauschenbusch's version of heaven in *A Theology for the Social Gospel* included this possibility). Sexual love could also be enjoyed in heaven, for nothing positive or interesting in this life would be missing. McDannell and Lang tell of the rise and decline of "modern heaven." I wish someone could have reminded the contributors to *If I Should Die* that their love of particularity, change and personal growth has this genealogy. It is not a postmodern discovery, but part and parcel of modernity, especially of modern family life and ties.

Among theologians and philosophers this vision fell out of favor early in the 20th century, giving way to rediscoveries of "biblical eschatology" that seemed to decenter personal death and immortality altogether. A fascination with large-scale history, the struggle with Marxism and fascism, and the need to seek justice for colonized peoples all seemed to make concern with individual death and afterlife seem selfish, narrow and unbiblically disembodied.

But among ordinary people the idea of modern heaven never "declined" in the same way. It was eliminated from ordinary conversation and social space, but it still lives

in the obituary pages, where living family members congratulate Mom and Pop, who are celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary in heaven. Dead children have birthdays and go trick-or-treating on Halloween. Everyone becomes “an angel,” and yet remains the same as when alive. Does anyone actually expect that Mom and Pop will continue to cohabit, joined by their offspring and grandchildren, until they are ready to celebrate a 300th wedding anniversary? Dead children remain children; they do not go from trick-or-treating to obtaining a first driver’s license in heaven.

Is this the kind of particularity, of recognizable selfhood, that the contributors to *If I Should Die* want to see restored to cultural prominence? No, not exactly. They are not really enthusiasts for modern heaven or its remnants. Nor am I. It is cluttered and too much like a retirement village in Florida. There is a world of difference between Dante’s heaven, whose inhabitants comment on their lives and on the problems of Italian politics, and these fragile attempts to construct a heavenly continuation of a family-based neighborhood. Dante’s Beatrice finally turns her face toward God and away from the poet, a step which even the most vigorous advocate for this-worldly selfhood, history and change must admit is fitting.

It is easy to reframe the popular contemporary language of the afterlife into the contemporary idiom of bereavement, where the real “survivors” of a death are those left behind to mourn. That’s what is really happening in the pages of the local newspaper, and the portrait of a heavenly afterlife is a kind of by-product of families’ needs for public expression of their loss. Side by side with obituaries that address the dead and imagine their afterlife are those that simply state: “Nacho, we miss you on 2nd Street,” or “Nicky, I’ll always be grateful that you were my daughter.”

Curiously, only one of the essays in *If I Should Die* takes up the question from the perspective of the bereaved. Rita Rouner’s poems and reflections, “A Short While toward the Sun,” on the death of her 19-year-old son, shows images of the afterlife—very positive ones—emerging at the same time as the mourner-poet herself is stuck “in death,” in numbness and hopelessness. Note that it is the death of the other, not one’s own impending or imagined death, which is the occasion. Classic meditations and preparations for death, along with the older funeral liturgies of Christianity, focused on the death-to-afterlife transition rather than on bereavement. Contemporary energies and imaginations seem to begin with bereavement, in which the experiences of the dead beloved are a minor and peripheral concern.

This shift is itself significant, but it is not attended to by most of the contributors to the anthology. Focused on more traditional arguments and images of death and the afterlife, they do not draw attention to the recent emergence of mourning as a spiritual concern. This occurs at a time when public conventions of mourning have been rapidly vanishing. How rapidly? One elderly man I know who was shocked by his brother's funeral asked a group of us middle-aged folks, "Is it customary now to come to a family viewing in shorts?" Both his nieces had appeared so attired, and one had her hair in curlers.

These mourners may have felt it important to remain "the me I normally recognize" even under the most solemn and formal conditions, but their casual approach to mourning marks a cultural shift that puts theological and philosophical claims in a rapidly altering context. At the same time, there is a new openness toward memorialization, public acknowledgment of "the grief process" and finding venues to convey this process.

This shift toward a focus on bereavement as a starting point has not entirely cut out interest in images of afterlife. It has, however, taken attention away from the problem of one's own fragility and vulnerability to sudden death. Should we be focusing more on this problem? The contributors to *If I Should Die* are not agreed on this. None wants a return to exaggerated fear of death or preoccupation with sin, guilt and judgment. But what seems "exaggerated" to some may seem a minimal realism about mortality to others. And should the emphasis be on our own mortality, on God's protection in life and death, or on the "me" of relationships, possessions and activities? Is a fascination with a self not immediately recognizable as "me" a sign of Buddhist or New Age contempt for history? Or is it a necessary dimension of Christian faith in a God who promises to make all things new, rather than to replicate or restore the old?

I am not sure how much Tillich's presence would have helped the writers of this book. Wherever Tillich is now, his theological solution to the problem of "afterlife" was to redefine eschatology existentially, so that "last things" became "most ultimate things," without necessarily focusing on personal death. If Rouner regrets that this kind of solution no longer suffices, that itself may be a sign of the reinvigoration of Christian reflection.

The philosophers and systematic theologians have been caught by surprise by a mass movement of concern with soul, spirituality, death and afterlife questions—as evident in the fascination with the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Buddhist meditation

and contemplative prayer. Though this concern swirls around Rouner's volume, it is not directly addressed. Even less connection is made to issues of hospice and end-of-life medical care. For all the enthusiasm for history, individuality and lived experience voiced in this volume, it fails to place "the me I normally recognize" in the context of these realities.