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Jörn Thielmann

## **Irmi Rey-Stocker, *Anfang und Ende des menschlichen Lebens aus der Sicht der Medizin und der drei monotheistischen Religionen Judentum, Christentum und Islam***

Basel, Karger, 2006, 283 p.

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## **Irmir Rey-Stocker, *Anfang und Ende des menschlichen Lebens aus der Sicht der Medizin und der drei monotheistischen Religionen Judentum, Christentum und Islam***

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- 1 This book is the revised version of a Ph.D. dissertation in religious studies, submitted in 2004 to the University of Freiburg, Switzerland. The author is also a physician and has worked as such. She addresses an eminent topic: the beginning and the end of human life as seen by medicine and the three monotheistic religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
- 2 In the first part, I. Rey-Stocker starts with asking what life is about in the view of philosophy, natural sciences, and the three monotheistic religions. Where do we come from? Why do we and other beings exist? In a very brief, but precise style, the author presents the essential features. Philosophy from Greek times until the Enlightenment considered the soul as the source of life, involving a divine power. Then, a mechanistic understanding emerged for which life is a self-organized matter. I. Rey-Stocker gives a short overview of the central explanations and theories in natural sciences about the universe, its beginning, the appearance of life and its evolution and differentiation. Today, the cell is considered to be the smallest unit of life, organised in a three-dimensional space. Life is a physical-chemical process, a contingent development of material. For all three monotheistic religions, God creates life through the power of His word. In the Bible, man is the crown of all creation and a mirror image of God. In the Quran, man is God's deputy on earth. The universe and all life will come to an end, but man will live in eternity in Paradise. For the faithful, the process of life follows a masterly divine plan.
- 3 Part Two of the book traces the emergence of monotheism, starting with the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton in the XIV<sup>th</sup> century BC and the Persian priest Zarathustra in the VI<sup>th</sup> century BC. The central founding figure for Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike is Abraham who experienced and venerated a living personal God. But both Judaism and Islam perceive the Christian idea of one God in three persons (trinity) as tritheism. Islam, however, considers itself as the only pure and uncorrupted monotheism. I. Rey-Stocker informs us about the Holy Scriptures and sources in all three traditions, their place in theology and the life-worlds of believers, and presents the essential principles of each faith. An examination of ethics closes this part. Here, the revealing God encloses all good and is the highest ethical norm. His will is holy and aims at salvation for all mankind. I. Rey-Stocker identifies three different approaches how to confirm to God's will: Jewish ethics follows an *imitation Dei*, Christianity an *imitatio Christi*, and Islam an *imitatio Muhammadi*. Judaism and Islam are both monocentric religions. However, all unite in the golden rule that we should do as we would be done.
- 4 In Part Three, the author questions the beginning of human life and presents the answers given by natural sciences and medicine as well as by the three religions. Conception, pregnancy, and birthing are central issues, related to religious views of sexuality and marriage as the only legitimate form for practising sex. Where in Christianity human life begins with conception – the embryo is considered a person with full rights –, Judaism and Islam propose a steady process of embodiment of the soul during which the embryo acquires after 40 days more and more personality and rights. In Islam, the soul comes into the embryo 120 days after conception. I. Rey-Stocker examines the problematic of sterility and its medical treatments.

Islam and Judaism are less restrictive, it appears, than Christianity, with some differences between the Roman-Catholic and Orthodox churches on the one hand, and Protestant churches on the other. Important for religion is the belonging to it: Every child born to a Jewish mother or converting to Judaism is a Jew. In Christianity, one becomes a member of the church through baptism. For Islam, however, every child is born as Muslim, before its parents give it to a religion. Muslims consider Islam as the natural religion (*dîn al-fitra*) of mankind. The author informs us about all rites and practices (like breast-feeding) to be performed on the child. Concerning abortion, the religions differ significantly while sharing the assumption that God is the Lord of life. Judaism allows it when the mother is in danger. The Orthodox Church holds the same view, but for the Roman-Catholic, abortion is murder. The Protestants make it a personal decision without condemning it in every case. Islam allows abortion in few cases, especially if the mother is in danger. Death and death rituals are the last topics in this part. After examining the biological process of dying and the actual medical definition of death, important for transplantation medicine, the religious beliefs and rituals concerning the dying person and death are presented. All montheistic religions agree that death is not the end and that there is life in the hereafter. The human body will disappear, but the soul lives eternally. The dead has to justify his doings on the Day of Judgement and is responsible for them. In Judaism and Islam, graves shall last for unlimited time.

5 The following, very short parts deal with particularities in the treatment of Jewish, Christian or Muslim patients in healthcare (Part IV) and resume in brief the similarities and differences between medicine and the three religions (Part V). On half a page in German, English and French, I. Rey-Stocker summarizes the intention of the Synoptic tables bring the religious positions to all questions treated in the book under review together (Part VII). In an appendix, all basic religious texts are listed, historical data given, the emergence and relationship of the three Abrahamic religions in a diagram presented, the essential creeds and basic figures given. A detailed bibliography closes the book.

6 The book is well written. It is clearly structured; for each topic, similarities and differences between the three religions are in brief resumed, so that the reader can easily grasp the essential points. Beyond her central theme, I. Rey-Stocker provides the reader with a very concise general introduction into each religion and their positions to specific problems. Her presentation of findings, concepts and methods of the natural sciences and medicine is very clear, too. In short: a book worth reading.

### ***Pour citer cet article***

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