The present volume contains contributions considering afterlife descriptions from different ancient cultures, religious symbol systems and communities. Analyses of Jewish and Christian apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature, New Testament writings, concepts from the Graeco-Roman world and late antiquity give a deep insight into a wide range of otherworldly concepts relating to various images of the world to which each belongs. This collection of various articles about different religio-historical sources is presented under the title: “Otherworlds and their Relation to this World.” This format allows a more or less explicit comparison between the afterlife scenes depicted in the different texts.

My contribution is linked to this possible comparative approach and focuses on a few preliminary aspects in approaching ancient imageries of the otherworld. In the context of my discipline, the study of religion, this article remarks upon the opportunities for, and attendant problems of, a comparative approach to such a vast array of conceptions of the otherworld. How might one engage in a profitable exchange with philological, exegetical and theological approaches to this topic? My thoughts on this question are articulated in three interrelated sections. Firstly, I will begin with a few hermeneutical remarks aimed at situating contemporary interest in otherworldly concepts in ancient religions. The second stage will offer some methodological observations on comparative analysis. Finally, attention will be drawn to the various media we are considering to reconstruct religious images on existential and cosmological dimensions of human life.

1. Otherworldly Imagery as a Topos within the European History of Religion: A Few Hermeneutical Considerations

Even if it turns out to be a coincidence, it is very striking to observe that as the scientific interest in ancient concepts of the afterlife grows, the
discourse on the same topic in contemporary art and society is equally marked. Are these different levels of reflection about the otherworld related to each other? It is not possible to answer this question in a univocal way, but it is an essential one to ask nonetheless, since it has a crucial hermeneutical relevance. The interest in interaction among different discourses within contemporary society—for instance among scientific and artistic perspectives—helps to establish and define the point of view from which we are reconstructing aspects of ancient religions. Let me illustrate this with a few selected examples.

Over the last decade, several feature films have dealt with death as a crossing from one form of existence to another. Movies such as “Don’t Die Without Telling Me Where You’re Going” (original: “No te mueras sin decirmee adónde vas”; Argentina, 1995, directed by Eliseo Subiela), “After Life” (Japan, 1998, directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda), or “Volver” (Spain, 2006, directed by Pedro Almodóvar) can be seen as variations on otherworldly conceptions. The aforementioned films transpose the issue of afterlife into an almost secular key, bringing into cinema a topic belonging traditionally to the domain of religion.  

A further illustration of the relevance of the otherworld in social discourse is given by empirical surveys on the impact of religion and religions in western multicultural society. The question about faith in an otherworldly dimension or the belief in the continuation of human existence in a different form after death are seen as significant indicators to delineate a religious orientation. They appear very often in questionnaires within quantitative empirical research projects. In fact, relating monotheistic and other religious systems to an interpretation

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