The terms of the Ingersoll Lecture do not require that there be any sequential connection between them, but Carol Zaleski’s lecture last year, “In Defense of Immortality,” sets the stage for mine so perfectly that in my credulous moments I could be led to believe that, unbeknownst to her, that was the hidden intent behind the matters she chose to deal with. And if she would like to join this fanciful game she could with equal right claim that I have chosen my topic to complete what she began, thereby making of our lectures a brace. Our lectures work the same street: eschewing proof, which is impossible in this area, they both seek to remove obstacles to believing in immortality. At the same time they complement each other by working the two sides of the street, hers the theoretical and mine the empirical.

There is a second way our two lectures can be paired—we both spin off from William James’s 1898 Ingersoll Lecture, while again in different ways—she from his “will to believe” and I from the “radical empiricism” that his exceptional generosity of mind led him to. He titled his Ingersoll Lecture “On Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine,” and I have already mentioned that Professor Zaleski continued that trajectory by unmasking the shallowness of some theoretical objections to immortality that have gathered force in the century that separates us from James. Specifically she showed that those objections have been accepted by the media makers more for psychological than for logical reasons; immortality has been deemed improbable because science disallows it. The unexamined premise here, which dominated the twentieth century but is now becoming more untenable by the hour I am tempted to say, is that science discloses the whole of reality. This pithy epitomization of Professor Zaleski’s lecture does not do justice to the subtlety with which she deals with her important theme, most importantly and courageously the black eye she gives twentieth century theologians for going along with this cultural trend instead of opposing it. But I must stop talking about Zaleski and get on with what I myself have to say.

Intimations of Mortality: Three Case Studies
The Ingersoll Lecture for 2001–02
by Huston Smith

Huston Smith has taught philosophy and religion at MIT, Syracuse, and Berkeley. His most recent book is Why Religion Matters (Harper San Francisco). This lecture was given at HDS on October 18, 2001.
At the age of 56 Swedenborg turned inward to explore his dreams, and he ended up leaving us what may be the largest and oldest series of interpreted dreams. In his day the spiritual practices of Hinduism and Buddhism were unknown in the West so he developed his own spiritual practices based on reduced breathing and intense concentration. It was in the midst of all this that God—he was a devout Christian and took the Bible as his rule of life—came to announce that he was going to actually show him the afterworld. For the next 27 years he visited Heaven and Hell daily.

O n the second point, which concerns verification, it is true that Swedenborg’s visits to Heaven and Hell are not open to public verification. Still, some of his paranormal sightings were checkable. To mention only three of these, at a social gathering 300 miles from his home in Stockholm, he became visibly agitated. When asked what was wrong, he said that a fire was raging in Stockholm. The fire was brought under control only two doors from his house, just as he had reported. Second, he predicted months in advance while he was in perfect health, the day and hour of his death. These two cases show only that Swedenborg was clairvoyant, but the third bears directly on his claim to have been in touch with the other world. A widow who was being charged for an expensive set of silver that her husband had left her asked Swedenborg to contact her deceased husband. He did, and her husband told her that the receipt showing that he had paid for the set was in a hidden compartment in his desk, which proved to be the case. In this case the deceased husband was the only person in existence who knew where the receipt was.

Turning now to what Swedenborg reported concerning the afterlife, I must be distressingly brief. This is what he saw:

The moment the heart stops we enter the spiritual world. There we have

(Continued on next page)
things. Those in Hell can visit Heaven, but they are uncomfortable with the light of understanding there and return to what they are accustomed to.

Obviously the temporary stop in the World of Spirits is highly psychological because it involves discovering what we really are. We have all seen people who think of themselves first and foremost. This is the mark of Hell. And we have also seen people who consider and enjoy other's the mark of Heaven. Actually we have seen people who consider and enjoy the love of their friends.

Smith (Continued from previous page)

In Heaven people gather to do—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. In Heaven there is work being done in the sphere of what we enjoy doing. As to where that happens to be—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. Those in Heaven can visit Heaven, but they are uncomfortable with the light of understanding there and return to what they are accustomed to.

Obviously the temporary stop in the World of Spirits is highly psychological because it involves discovering what we really are. We have all seen people who think of themselves first and foremost. This is the mark of Hell. And we have also seen people who consider and enjoy other's the mark of Heaven. Actually we have seen people who consider and enjoy the love of their friends.

In Heaven people gather to do—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. In Heaven there is work being done in the sphere of what we enjoy doing. As to where that happens to be—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. Those in Heaven can visit Heaven, but they are uncomfortable with the light of understanding there and return to what they are accustomed to.

Obviously the temporary stop in the World of Spirits is highly psychological because it involves discovering what we really are. We have all seen people who think of themselves first and foremost. This is the mark of Hell. And we have also seen people who consider and enjoy other's the mark of Heaven. Actually we have seen people who consider and enjoy the love of their friends.

In Heaven people gather to do—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. In Heaven there is work being done in the sphere of what we enjoy doing. As to where that happens to be—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. Those in Heaven can visit Heaven, but they are uncomfortable with the light of understanding there and return to what they are accustomed to.

Obviously the temporary stop in the World of Spirits is highly psychological because it involves discovering what we really are. We have all seen people who think of themselves first and foremost. This is the mark of Hell. And we have also seen people who consider and enjoy other's the mark of Heaven. Actually we have seen people who consider and enjoy the love of their friends.

In Heaven people gather to do—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. In Heaven there is work being done in the sphere of what we enjoy doing. As to where that happens to be—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. Those in Heaven can visit Heaven, but they are uncomfortable with the light of understanding there and return to what they are accustomed to.

Obviously the temporary stop in the World of Spirits is highly psychological because it involves discovering what we really are. We have all seen people who think of themselves first and foremost. This is the mark of Hell. And we have also seen people who consider and enjoy other's the mark of Heaven. Actually we have seen people who consider and enjoy the love of their friends.

In Heaven people gather to do—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. In Heaven there is work being done in the sphere of what we enjoy doing. As to where that happens to be—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. Those in Heaven can visit Heaven, but they are uncomfortable with the light of understanding there and return to what they are accustomed to.

Obviously the temporary stop in the World of Spirits is highly psychological because it involves discovering what we really are. We have all seen people who think of themselves first and foremost. This is the mark of Hell. And we have also seen people who consider and enjoy other's the mark of Heaven. Actually we have seen people who consider and enjoy the love of their friends.

In Heaven people gather to do—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. In Heaven there is work being done in the sphere of what we enjoy doing. As to where that happens to be—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. Those in Heaven can visit Heaven, but they are uncomfortable with the light of understanding there and return to what they are accustomed to.

Obviously the temporary stop in the World of Spirits is highly psychological because it involves discovering what we really are. We have all seen people who think of themselves first and foremost. This is the mark of Hell. And we have also seen people who consider and enjoy other's the mark of Heaven. Actually we have seen people who consider and enjoy the love of their friends.

In Heaven people gather to do—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. In Heaven there is work being done in the sphere of what we enjoy doing. As to where that happens to be—some in gardening, some in painting, some in writing. Those in Heaven can visit Heaven, but they are uncomfortable with the light of understanding there and return to what they are accustomed to.

Obviously the temporary stop in the World of Spirits is highly psychological because it involves discovering what we really are. We have all seen people who think of themselves first and foremost. This is the mark of Hell. And we have also seen people who consider and enjoy other's the mark of Heaven. Actually we have seen people who consider and enjoy the love of their friends.
What are we to make of this account, which as I have said I am allowing to double for the whole of its genre? Without going back on my early admission that concerning immortality proofs are impossible, I find myself wanting to confirm the same for the dying. Of Fanning’s account, his grounds that no number of such cases of NDEs, critics tend to dismiss them on scientifically. Presented with reports of empirically, which is to say, hypothesis it must be if the subject is being, and so forth that there be judgment, a day of reckoning, but (as in most NDEs) Fanning experienced it as self-inflicted.

To this summary glance at the NDE phenomenon, I want to add only one more point and it takes the form of a question. Why are university professors, who set the pace for our culture, so close to the possibility that such experiences might be veridical—which is to say, the fastidiousness of their solutions that they present themselves as being? I lean here on an essay by a former MIT student of mine, Neal Grossman, who teaches philosophy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Titling his paper “Who’s Afraid of Life After Death?,” he answers: university professors are, out of all proportion to the general public. And the reason they are afraid of life after death is that they are (in the word he coins for the occasion) “fundamentalists.” To entertain the possibility that NDEs are what they purport to be would be to frustrate the possibility that the materialist worldview that dominates the academy today, together with its corollary that consciousness is an ephemeron, is false. So deeply ingrained is that worldview in the academic mind that the rejection of NDEs, Grossman concludes, has become a dogma or ideology rather than the hypothesis it must be if the subject is be considered empirically, which is to say, scientifically. Presented with reports of NDEs, critics tend to dismiss them on grounds that such cases could prove that there is life after death, which happens to be true but is no reason for disqualifying them from being evidence that bears on the issue, for scientific hypotheses are never proven. Theorems in logic and mathematics can be proved, but in empirical science, hypotheses are never proved. They are rendered more or less probable by the empirical findings that relate to them. Moreover, some deliverances in NDEs, Grossman adds, can be empirically checked. The res extensa

The events of contemporary history have so discredited the presuppositions of modern culture that epistemologically we must almost begin from scratch. Agnosticism has a place in this, for in many areas it is prudent simply to say we do not know. But Pascal is still with us. In the world of action, deeds, and choices, where we must decide, we cannot be altogether neutral. We have to stake out our life trajectories. That’s why religion matters, and in an Ingersoll Lecture it is appropos to ask what religion incrementally wagers on immortality. I have tried in this hour to suggest that there are empirical as well as theoretical reasons for thinking that the wager is not an irrational bet. ❚

I am indebted to Wilson Van Daan for help with the Snowden section of this lecture, to Stephen Fanning and Neal Grossman for help with near-death cases, and to Robert D. Forman for assistance in gathering material on immortality. None of them should be held responsible for the use I have made of their help.

—Huston Smith