


January 2006

Religious Interpretations of Death, Afterlife & NDEs

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Recommended Citation

San Filippo, David Ph.D., "Religious Interpretations of Death, Afterlife & NDEs" (2006). *Faculty Publications*. 32.
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**RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS
OF
DEATH, AFTERLIFE & NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES**



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Published by: Kimball Publishing – 2006
Orlando, Florida U.S.A.

**To the Priests & Brothers of St. Mary's Abbey and Sister Mary
Francis of St. Mary's of the Spring for teaching me to explore the
realms of our spiritual nature to seek the true nature of God.**

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Introduction

This E-book reviews religious beliefs concerning death, afterlife, and near-death experiences. The discussion will provide commentary regarding the similarities between different religious beliefs and experiences concerning death, as well as between religious interpretations of near-death experiences.

A near-death experience is a conscious experience in which the individual experiences a sense of being detached from the physical world during the process of physiological dying. Individuals may experience their own physiological dyings and deaths and at the same time become aware of their disembodied existences in an altered state where they may experience a sense of peace, a separation of consciousness from the body, entering darkness, seeing a light, meeting spiritual entities, having a panoramic life review, and a sense of judging their lives. Near-death experiencers are generally positively affected by their experiences and their confrontation with death seems to give more meaning to the individual's life. Near-death experiences could be considered "transpersonal" experiences due to their nature of transcending the usual "personal" physical and mental realms of human consciousness. Transpersonal experiences are those incidents that are of the highest or ultimate human potential and beyond the ego or personal self.

In order to evaluate near-death experiences effectively, it is necessary to have an understanding of personal beliefs concerning life after death. The interpretation of the near-death experience may be related to the social conditioning and beliefs of the experiencer, such as interpreting the experience in relationship to the experiencer's cultural and religious beliefs concerning life after death.

Numerous surveys have documented that the majority of people in the United States believe in life after death. Psychologist Charles Tart (1991), in his article, "Altered States of Consciousness and the Possibility of Survival of Death", discusses his belief that humans regain some type of consciousness after death. He states,

The direct experience of existing and experiencing in some form that seems partially or fully independent of the physical body is relatively common in various altered states of consciousness, and this kind of experience constitutes the most direct knowledge of survival an individual may have (p. 37).

Past-life researcher Brian Weiss reports that there are experiences of what seems to be life after death, as reported by many of his subjects, and that the different experiences and concepts of the subject's lifetime, involving religion and death, can influence the individual's understanding of death and afterlife.

Religions involve group practices of similar spiritual beliefs. An individual's personal spiritual beliefs are experienced within the individual's consciousness and may be related to others through various religious practices. Through social participation individual beliefs may be formed and heightened. Religious beliefs may both provide explanations for unexplained phenomena and communicate the essence of human transpersonal experiences. Interpretations of near-death experiences can be influenced by religious beliefs in life after death. The effects of religious diversity may not only influence the interpretations of near-death experiences but also may account for some of the differences in the descriptions of encounters with incorporeal entities, the setting of the experience, and in the activities that are reported during the experience. Religious beliefs can provide references to explain the "difficult to explain" experiences associated with a near-death experience. Most reported near-death

experiences appear to support many philosophical and religious theories of what is anticipated in life after death such as communion with incorporeal beings and the existence of afterlife polar planes of good and bad, heaven and hell.

Religious Interpretations Concerning Death, Afterlife, and Near-Death Experiences

Polls and studies support the assumption that the majority of people believe that death is not the end of one's existence but rather a transition from one life to another. Different religions have provided belief structures that support the religious and social needs of practitioners. Rituals and sacred writings support the various religious interpretations of what death is and what it will be like in the afterlife. However, even with the differences in religious beliefs, there are similarities between many different religious groups regarding afterlife beliefs. One similarity among religious groups is the belief in an afterlife following physical death. Another similarity is the presence of "the two polar images of life after death - the abode of the righteous, heaven or paradise, and the place for the wicked, or hell" (Grof & Grof, 1980, p. 13). These polar images are also recognized by many near-death experiencers.

A belief in the immortality of the spirit has been present in most religions for centuries. The belief that there is a life after death is one of the oldest concepts of human history. Proving the immortality of the human soul has been the objective of many philosophers, theologians, and scientists. Freud (1961) stated,

Our own death is indeed unimaginable, and whenever we make an attempt to imagine it we can perceive that we really survive as spectators. Hence the psychoanalytic

school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or to put the thing in another way, in the unconscious everyone of us is convinced of his [or her] own immortality (p. 154).

Many beliefs in life after death have concerned a non-physical transition into a serene spiritual world with encounters with other deceased people and possible religious figures. There may be a judgment or accounting of one's life with a final disposition of the individual spirit following the period of judgment or personal assessment.

Near-death experiences and the reports of a consciousness of life after death have been provided by members of Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Christian, and Mormon religions, among others. Agnostics and atheists also have reported near-death experiences even with their predisposed lack of belief in anything greater than personal self and this life. The following are brief commentaries regarding the beliefs concerning death, afterlife, and near-death experiences within these religious and a religious frameworks.

Agnostics & Atheists:

Agnostics think that it is impossible to know whether there is a God or life after death. Atheists believe that there is no God and no life after death and that death is the cessation of the existence of the individual.

Agnostics & atheists have reported having near-death experiences. These experiences are similar to the reports of individuals who have professed a spiritual belief prior to their near-death experience. Agnostics & atheists report that they achieve an altered state of consciousness in which they have experienced some or all of the traits Raymond Moody and others attribute to a

near-death experience. Most agnostics and atheists interpret their near-death experiences as a glimpse of life after death. Prior to the near-death experience, they did not believe in life after death. As a result of the experience, most agnostic and atheist experiencers eventually move toward a more spiritually guided life with a new found belief in life after death. Maurice Rawlings reported that he did not know of any agnostic or atheist individual, from his research, who after experiencing a near-death experience, remained convinced that there was no God, no life after death, or that there was nothing else beyond the material existence.

Buddhism & Hinduism

Buddhists believe that upon death, there is rebirth to another life. Death is accepted as inevitable and not feared. The believer's actions, in this life, will determine his or her level of rebirth. Karma is the force created by the actions of the individual - the effects of actions. Good karma, which is achieved by compassionate actions in this life, leads to a higher existence in the next life. Nirvana is reached by achieving an understanding of the nature of reality. This must be discovered through the experiences of other dimensions of human consciousness.

According to Buddhist cosmology, numerous, hierarchically arranged heavens exist along with eight hot and cold hells. The individual spirit exists in one of these realms, based upon the karma created in the previous life, until reborn into another life. This cycle continues until the enlightenment of nirvana is achieved. To some Buddhist, death is no more than the dream at the end of time.

In the Hindu religion death comes as a break in the continued events of life and brings about a change in the form in which the spirit resides. Hindus believe that the afterlife is a

passage of time in a heaven or hell, dependent upon the karma built up in life. The judgment about one's life is based upon the karma that the individual created in his or her past lives. The rebirth of the spirit into the next life, through the transmigration of the soul, is determined by the developed karma and the individual's last thoughts in the present life. An individual's search for eternal happiness and immortality results in the rebirth of the spirit in different bodies until the spirit learns that happiness and immortality are not a result of the fulfillment of desires but are attained when all desires and needs are no longer important. According to some Hindus, the various religious faiths are "different paths to reach one and the same goal - union with God as ultimate Reality" (Johnson & McGee, 1991).

There are reports of Chinese Buddhists having near-death experiences. Becker has suggested that near-death experiences may have been responsible for part of the development of Pure Land Buddhism in China. A Hindu report of a near-death experience relates that the experiencer entered into heaven on the back of a cow.

According to Mauro (1992), "East Indians [Hindus] sometimes see heaven as a giant bureaucracy, and frequently report being sent back because of clerical errors," whereas Japanese experiencers report seeing symbolic images, such as "long, dark rivers and beautiful flowers" (p. 57). During the near-death experience, the Buddhist experiencers have reported seeing the personage of Buddha, and Hindu experiencers report seeing Krishna. The difference in Buddhist and Hindu reports of near-death experiences is predominately associated with the afterlife setting and the personages that the experiencer reports encountering.

Buddhist and Hindu near-death experiencers may report different interpretations of the specifics of their experiences; however, the experiences are consistent with other stages, traits, constellations, and group types reported by near-death experiencers in other cultures and

religions. Some members of the Buddhist and Hindu religions interpret near-death experiences as providing afterlife visions that are similar to visions ascribed to some Eastern religious experiences associated with death and afterlife. Becker (1984) comments "that ancient Japanese Buddhist meditative and deathbed visions closely parallel modern American near-death and deathbed visions" (p. 51). The Tibetan Book of the Dead (1973) describes the Bardo, the three stages of the transitional "disembodied state" following death. In the first stage, the departed have visions of the "Blinding Clear Light of Pure Reality." In the second stage, the departed encounter a succession of "deities." In the third stage the departed is judged based upon past deeds by the "Dharma Raja, King and Judge of the Dead." These stages are similar in content to other reported near-death experiences from other religions and cultures. These similarities include a movement through levels - such as passing through a tunnel, visions of pure light, meeting incorporeal beings, powers of astral projections or out-of-body-experience, and a judgment about one's life.

Islamic

Death, in the Islamic faith, is the cessation of biological life and the resting of the spirit, in the grave, until the Judgment Day. Some Muslims believe that the "good souls" see visions of God, and the wicked see the hell that awaits them. From the time of death to the time of judgment, Muslims believe the spirit remains in a state of "dreamless sleep," with the exception of possible visions of eternity.

Faith in an afterlife is based upon the belief in the oneness of God and the belief in a day of resurrection and judgment for all regardless of religious belief. At that time, the spirit will be

judged, based upon its deeds in life, and allowed either to enter into Paradise and be with God, be thrown into the Fire for a period of purgation, or condemned to everlasting punishment in the Fire. Most Muslims believe that non-Muslims can reach Paradise only after a period of purgation.

Muslims have reported having near-death experiences. Muslim near-death experiencers report seeing and meeting recognizable spirits. This conforms with the Islamic tradition that the souls of the faithful, in paradise, welcome the "incoming souls" and with other reports of visions of people awaiting the newly deceased. In Muslim near-death experiences, the Being of Light is identified as Allah, whereas in other religions the light might be identified as God.

Some Muslims interpret the near-death experience as a possible glimpse into life after death due to the similarity of the experience with the religious visions of Muhammad and their expectations of life after death. An Islamic myth describes Muhammad's "Night Journey" as his experience of passing through the realms of the afterlife where he encounters spirits who have died, has a vision of heaven and hell, and communes with Allah.

Judaism

The Jewish religion generally emphasizes the current life and not life after death. Although Judaism recognizes that the life of the spirit does not end at the point of bodily death, it is the Jew's responsibility to focus on a meaningful life and not speculate on life after death. The Jewish religious texts state that the actions taken in the present life will reward the righteous and chastise the wicked. It does not specifically address the concept of an afterlife. Even though the Jewish religious texts do not directly address immortality, traditional Jews believe that

immortality will bring the resurrection of the body and soul, followed by the judgment of the worth of their lives by God. The Reformed Jew believes that resurrection involves only the soul. Jews believe they live and die only once.

Since there is no discussion, in the Jewish religious texts, of afterlife, there is no official Jewish religious opinion regarding life after death. However, many Jews believe that human souls will be held accountable before God for what has been accomplished in the current life. After death, many Jews believe that they will be reunited with family members in heaven. Their belief in God's caring nature disavows a sadistic punishment in hell. Entrance into heaven is accomplished by righteous living and repentance. Heaven is considered a place where anxiety and pain is ended.

There have been a number of reported near-death experiences by members of the Jewish faith. Barbara Harris, a practicing Jew, reports having had several near-death experiences since 1975. Harris and Bascom's book, Full Circle - The Near-Death Experience and Beyond, is a narrative of Harris' near-death experiences. Jewish people who have had a near-death experience relate similar observations and experiences as the experiences of other religious-spiritual believers. During the near-death experience, the individuals report being in the presence of the Being of Light and judging their own lives. This experience is similar to the Jewish belief that what is important in life is the attending to the responsibilities of living a meaningful, productive life. Many near-death experiencers report being met by family members. These reports are consistent with the Jewish belief that after death they will be reunited with family members in heaven.

Christianity

Modern Christians are united in their belief that Jesus is the son of God and that there is an afterlife, based upon the claims of the Holy Bible and the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and his disciples. Upon death, Christians believe that they come before God and are judged. According to Smith (1991), "Following death, human life is fully translated into the supernatural domain" (p. 355). Fundamentalists and conservatives interpret the Holy Bible literally and believe that there is a specific heaven and hell and that only Christians are admitted to heaven. All others are condemned to hell. Other Christians interpret Biblical scripture more symbolically, taking into consideration the language and culture of the time when the Bible was written. Heaven and hell are viewed as a "condition," such as happiness or peace, rather than a specific place. Regardless of whether the afterlife beliefs are interpreted conservatively or liberally, the Christian believes that he or she dies only once and that after death, the spirit is judged, and then exists in an afterlife for eternity. According to scripture, "It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

Near-death experiences appear to be familiar para-normal occurrences to Christians. Bechtel, Chen, Pierce, & Walker reported that 98% of the clergy that they surveyed were familiar with near-death phenomena and that almost half of them have counseled parishioners who had a near-death experience. As with other religious interpretations of the near-death experience, Christians also report encounters with religious beings such as Jesus, Mary, or angels. Experiencers report similar out-of-body experiences, meeting recognizable spiritual entities, movement toward a bright light, and a sense of being in the presence of an energy of "unconditional love" while the experiencer judges his or her life.

Some Christians refute the near-death experience as being a demonic deception. They believe that the entire near-death experience is a trick of Satan to pull believers from the teachings of Christianity and lead them into sin. Other Christians interpret the near-death experience as a glimpse of an after death state that may exist prior to the after life judgment by God. Near-death experiences and experiences similar to the altered state of the near-death experiences are recorded in the Christian scriptures. These experiences are not reported as being evil or sinful. The scripture writers have recorded visions of bright lights, life reviews, the presence of the unconditional love of God, and visions of heaven and hell from biblical individuals who have been close to death. In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians, II Corinthians 12:1-10, Paul records a "vision" he had. This vision resembles the content of a near-death experience. It involved Paul being "taken up to heaven for a visit" and "hear[ing] things so astounding that they are beyond man's power to describe or put in words." Near-death experiencers consistently report the difficulty of verbalizing what they experience. The effect of this experience, on Paul, was a personal confirmation and assurance of his work.

According to Flynn (1986), to many experiencers, "the near-death experience affirms the uniqueness and centrality and indispensability of Christ, but in a universalistic way that does not negate or diminish the value of other religious traditions...[It will] break through sectarian and other barriers and shine a laser beam of Light on the true essence and meaning of Christ for all people" (p. 80). Ring (1985) supports Flynn's comments, in his conclusions regarding the universalistically spiritual orientation of experiencers following near-death experiences. He found that following a near-death experience, the Christian experiencer "gravitated towards a religious world view that may incorporate and yet transcend the traditional Christian perspective" (p. 147).

Mormonism

Death in the Mormon religion is not considered to be the end of existence of the individual but the beginning of a new existence as the same person. Mormons believe that they have always lived and will always live as the same individual, "never as someone else or in another life-form" (Eyre, 1991, p. 139). Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints are saddened by the death of a loved one but are comforted in the belief that upon death the spirit is united with God in a spirit world, continuing to progress in knowledge, and await the coming of other family members, the resurrection of the physical body, and the final judgment. A belief in an afterlife is an essential part of the faith of the members of the Church of the Latter-day Saints.

In Mormonism, only "sons of perdition" - former believers who betray the church - are destined for eternal punishment. All others are assured at least an entry into a lesser Paradise, called the "telestial kingdom," where one spends eternity apart from God. The most faithful attain the "celestial kingdom," where they commune directly with God and eventually may themselves become gods and populate new universes with their own spiritual offspring. The Mormon church is the only church that has a "safety net." Any spirit that has not heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ in life will, before Judgment Day, will be given a chance in Paradise to hear it, and if the spirit accepts the teachings, it will receive equal blessings from God.

The judgment reported by Mormon near-death experiencers is essentially a self-judgment. This self-judgment is similar to the reported life reviews and self-judgment that are reported in near-death experiences. Experiencers report that they see a panoramic review of their entire life and then judge their own actions while awash in the "unconditional love" of the Being

of Light. After the judgment, the spirit dwells with others that are most like it. As with many other religious groups, Mormon near-death experiencers consistently report meeting with deceased family members, and being in the presence of a being of light which they call God. However, some Mormon near-death experiencers report two events that appear to be uncommon with non-Mormon experiencers. They report that they are requested to do something in the world, when they return to life, by the personage(s) they encounter during their experience. They also report that they receive religious and other types of instructions from the "other world" beings.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints report a high number of near-death experiences per capita of their religion. The high number of reported near-death experiences is probably due to the social values of the Latter-day Saints which encourages individuals to share their near-death experiences much more openly than most other social groups. Mormons interpret the near-death experiences as part of their religious beliefs and a glimpse of life after death.

Conclusion

All religions have an interpretation of death and afterlife. Each conform, with the acceptance of atheists and agnostics, that there is an afterlife of some type. The consistency between numerous reports of near-death experiences, regardless of religious beliefs, and the similarity of the near-death experiences to reported religious experiences, provide plausible arguments for the transpersonal theories of this experience.

Throughout history Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Mormons have all reported having near-death experiences. These experiences are similar to some of the visions or journeys into the afterlife that are described in some of the sacred texts of their religions. The descriptions of the near-death experiences by members of these religious groups are believed, by many, to be a glimpse into life after death, and appear to be consistent with each religious group's interpretation of the afterlife. However, there are some religious leaders who do not believe that the experiencer has been indisputably dead and returned to life when he or she reports having a near-death experience. These leaders interpret these experiences as being pre-death visions of a transitory state prior to the individual's final death and judgment.

The near-death experiences of individuals of various beliefs are consistent with many religious beliefs concerning life after death and do not compromise the foundations of their religious traditions. The descriptions of the mystical, depersonalization, and hyperalert constellations of near-death experiences and the autoscopic and transcendental grouping of these experiences appear to closely relate to the levels of heightened sense of consciousness associated with some religious rituals. However, the shift from an organized religious practice to a universalistically spiritual orientation may have an effect on the religious practices of some experiencers. Many choose to practice their new sense of universal spirituality within their earlier religions; however, many near-death experiencers move toward a religion that is more congruent with their new found knowledge, or choose to practice their spirituality through religious rituals and practices.

Many near-death experiencers attempt to incorporate their new sense of spirituality into their lives. This removes some of the limits of religious parochialism. To many experiencers it becomes less important to be a member of a specific religious group than to practice a more

spiritual life not based upon specific religious doctrine. However, some experiencers chose to remain or become active in an organized religion in order to practice their new spirituality. It is therefore important for there to be an openness by religious groups towards individuals who report near-death experiences and not condemnation of the phenomenon as religious heresy.

Due to the subjective nature of near-death experiences there can be no conclusive proof that these experiences provide visions of life after death. However, the reports of out-of-body experiences, the near-death experiences of children, and the notable changes in the near-death experiencer's life following her or his experience, and the similarity of these experiences to spiritual visions and religious belief of an afterlife, support the possibility of the validity that near-death experiences are neuro-biological, psychological, and transpersonal experiences that give the experiencer a glimpse of a possible reality between death and afterlife.

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