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THE RELEVANCE OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES TO RELIGIOUS BELIEFS  
ABOUT A FUTURE LIFE

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## **THE RELEVANCE OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES TO RELIGIOUS BELIEFS ABOUT A FUTURE LIFE.**

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Near-death experiences are relevant to religious beliefs about a future life in three ways. First it seems increasingly likely that past NDEs might be the source of much religious thinking about a future life. Second NDEs appear to provide evidential grounds for thinking that a dualist understanding of what it means to be a human being might be true. And thirdly NDEs convince most of those who have them, and many of those who study them that life after death happens.

When consciousness of NDEs burst upon the world in 1973 with the publication of Moody's book Life after Life<sup>1</sup> they appeared to be a wholly new phenomenon. Earlier that year I had completed my doctoral dissertation on beliefs about life after death,<sup>2</sup> and my supervisor, John Hick had completed his magnum opus on Death and Eternal Life.<sup>3</sup> Yet neither Hick nor I had come across any references to NDEs in our researches. It seemed initially as if NDEs were a new phenomenon arising out of the ability of modern medicine to resuscitate people. At a mass level this is certainly true. Yet once NDEs came to be studied more closely it became apparent that they had much in common with elements in religious and mystical experiences reported throughout the ages in

connection with religious figures in many human cultures.

Mircea Eliade suggests that some ideas about after life after death may have originated in Shamanistic trances which characteristically include a notion of the Shaman leaving his body.<sup>4</sup> Daniel Van Egmond argues that "it is highly probable that some types of experience suggested to man that he is able to exist independently of his physical body. For instance, the so-called near-death experiences, out-of-the-body experiences and Shamanistic trances are easily interpreted this way. Indeed, the occurrence of altered states of consciousness is such a common feature in most cultures that it is very probable that such experiences were interpreted as perceptions of so-called 'higher worlds.'"<sup>5</sup> Dean Shiels' research into out-of-the-body experiences in primitive cultures showed that sixty-four of the sixty-seven cultures investigated believe in the reality of such states. He tested the conventional explanations given for such phenomena by western scholars and found that they did not apply in these cultures. His conclusion was that, "When different cultures at different times and in different places arrive at the same or a very similar out-of-the-body-belief we begin to wonder if this results from a common experience of this happening."<sup>6</sup>

Most OBEs occur near the point of death. One therefore wonders whether it is the fact of such reported experiences which have given rise to the traditional description of death as "the moment when the soul leaves the body." The experience of simply watching a person die leads to a much simpler picture of death as "the moment when the person breathes-out (expires) for the last time". The fact that this description has been felt to need supplementation suggests that other facts of

human experiencing have been given weight as well as what is most immediately apparent.

However it is not simply in primal religions that there seem to be elements suggestive of foundational NDEs. They also appear to have played in key role in shaping belief in a future life in some of the major religious traditions. Ancient Judaism is notable for the absence of any belief in a future life, yet later Jewish Mystical writings came to take the belief for granted. Early biblical texts are explicit in their denial of immortality: "Human beings perish for ever like their own dung", they are "of dust and will return to dust". In the grave they rot away with "maggots beneath and worms on top". "In that same hour all their thinking ends."<sup>7</sup> Of course like many other cultures the ancient Israelites recognised that the dead do live on in a shadowy half-life in the memories of those who knew them and John Bowker suggests that such memory traces gave rise to poetic talk about an abode of the dead in Sheol (or Hades). But John Bowker argues that such ideas had no real substance. "For our ancestors there was definitely no future in dying."<sup>8</sup> However despite all this many centuries later Jewish mystical texts came to speak unequivocally of a real future life which commences when, at the moment of death the soul leaves the body and sees deceased relatives and friends greeting it into a new life. As the Zohar puts it: "We have learned that at the hour of a man's departure from the world, his father and relatives gather round him and he sees and recognises them...and they accompany his soul to the place where it is to abide."<sup>9</sup> The question arises, how did they "learn this"? One possible answer might be from reported NDEs. For modern NDE experiencers frequently report precisely such "meetings" with deceased relatives and hence an early NDE account may have been the source of this "learning".

Other authorities suggest that belief in a future life entered Judaism from Zoroastrianism. I do not propose to enter into the mine-field of interpreting the fragmented Zoroastrian texts except to make the point that the name of their deity, "Ahura Mazda" literally means "The Being of Light". This almost inevitably suggests that something akin to NDE experience gave rise to this tradition.

In Greek thought Plato played a decisive role in establishing dualist thought and in arguing for the possibility of a future life. What is intriguing is that in the Republic, Plato makes clear that the source of his belief in life after death is a story he had been told of a soldier from Er who was thought to have been killed in battle but who just before his cremation had "come back to life and told the story of what he had seen in the other world." <sup>10</sup>

Within Christianity the peak of mystical experience has always been described in terms of "ecstasy" which of course literally means "out-of-the body". When St. Paul found his religious authority challenged by the Corinthians he rested his claim to their respect explicitly on an experience which reads very much like a contemporary NDE.

"I know a Christian man who fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of the body I don't know God knows) was caught up as far as the third heaven . And I know that this same man, (whether in the body or apart from the body I don't know God knows was caught up into paradise, and heard words so secret that human lips may not repeat them . About such a man I

am ready to boast."<sup>11</sup> St. Paul was speaking autobiographically here as a few verses later he laments that "to keep me from being unduly elated by the magnificence of such revelations I was given a thorn in the flesh...to keep me from being too elated."<sup>12</sup> St. Paul's experience included out of the body experiences and visions of paradise, both of which are key features of the near-death experience.

Commenting on these verses, St. John of the Cross, the great sixteenth century mystic, remarked that such experiences normally only occur when the soul "goes forth from the flesh and departs this mortal life." But in St Paul's case he was allowed these visions by special grace. Such visions however occur "very rarely and to very few for God works such things only in those who are very strong in the spirit and in the law of God."<sup>13</sup> St. John of the Cross almost certainly had a comparable experience himself as evidenced by his poems where he speaks of "living without inhabiting himself".. "dying yet I do not die" and as "soaring to the heavens".<sup>14</sup>

In Islam it is clear that a strong ecstatic element was present in all Muhammad's revelatory experiences. He said that "Never once did I have a revelation without feeling that my soul was being torn away from me."<sup>15</sup> More significantly his "Night Journey" in which he ascended through the seven heavens has been interpreted in the Sufi tradition as an "annihilation" (fana) followed by "revival" (baqa) in which Muhammad passed through death to the vision of God, and was then restored to life with a greatly enhanced spirituality.<sup>16</sup>

Turning to Mahayana Buddhist traditions the influence of Near-death experiences are even more explicit. As Carl Becker makes clear in his paper the introduction of the pure-land tradition to China "clearly depends on the remarkable death-bed and visionary experiences" of Chinese religious authorities from the fourth to seventh centuries, just as the Japanese doctrines about Amida greeting the dying person are based on the visions and experiences of Japanese monks from the tenth to twelfth centuries.<sup>17</sup> Likewise Sogyal Rimpoche has shown that in Tibetan Buddhism NDEs have long been acknowledged as religiously significant in that "returnees from death" (deloks) have for centuries been regarded as important witnesses concerning the reality of the "bardo world".<sup>18</sup>

The contemporary importance of such traditions can be seen if one compares what Tibetan and Pureland scriptures say with what contemporary experiencers report. For example many near-death experiencers report looking down on their bodies, observing the distress of their relatives, and the activities on the medical staff. So too in the Tibetan Book of the Dead we read that when the person's "consciousness-principle gets outside its body " he sees his relatives and friends gathered round weeping and watches as they remove the clothes from the body or take away the bed."<sup>19</sup>

Seventy-two per-cent of contemporary near-death experiencers report seeing a radiant light which they often describe as a loving presence and sometimes name in accordance with a religious figure from their own traditions. A few experience a review of their past life and many experience

a range of mental images which have led many commentators to suggest that the next stage of existence could be a mind-dependent world. Once again this is precisely what the Tibetan Book says for it speaks of the dying person seeing the radiant, pure and immutable light of Amida Buddha before passing into what is explicitly described as a world of mental-images, in which whatever is desired is fulfilled, and in which everything that is seen is in form an hallucination reflecting the karma of the percipient.

Concerning the Being of Light which contemporary experiencers see and name in accordance with their own tradition, this also is in accord with the Tibetan Book of the Dead where we read, "The Dharmakaya of clear light will appear in what ever shape will benefit all beings." Commenting on this verse for his English translation Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup says, "To appeal to a Shaivite devotee, the form of Shiva is assumed; to a Buddhist the form of the Buddha Shakya Muni; to a Christian, the form of Jesus; to a Muslim the form of the Prophet; and so for other religious devotees; and for all manner and conditions of mankind a form appropriate to the occasion."<sup>20</sup> A similar consideration applies when thinking of the vivid imagery which abounds in the Tibetan Book. These mental images are not thought of as universalisable. Rather as Lama Anagarika Govinda points out in his introduction, "The illusory Bardo visions vary, in keeping with the religious or cultural tradition in which the percipient has grown up."<sup>21</sup>

When we examine contemporary near death accounts this is precisely what we find. What is seen appears to be cross-cultural, but how it is named depends on the religious or non-religious



background of the believer. Thus it is only to be expected that a Christian evangelist in the Anglican "Church Army" would say that he had seen Jesus,<sup>22</sup> whereas the notable atheist philosopher A. J. Ayer said instead, "I was aware that this light was responsible for the government of the Universe."<sup>23</sup> What matters is that both contemporary observers seem to have had an experience which had at least something in common.

The place where contemporary experience and foundational religious beliefs come closest together are in the scriptures of the True Pureland Sect (Jodo Shinshu Buddhism). First, the Buddha's Pure Land seems to have many features in common with the idea of a mind-dependent world, reflecting the karma of the individual. "All the wishes those beings may think of, they will be fulfilled, as long as they are rightful".<sup>24</sup> This idea spelt out with many examples in the Sukhavativyuha (The Pure Land Sutra) corresponds exactly with some contemporary descriptions by resuscitated people.

The second striking feature is the experience of so many resuscitated people of seeing and being welcomed into the world beyond by a wonderful and gracious "Being of light". They sense that this Being knows them completely and has limitless compassion to them in welcoming them into the life beyond. We have already noted the tendency of those who see this vision to identify this Being with a religious figure from their own tradition like Jesus or Rama. But it is interesting that the descriptions given of the role of this being do not accord with traditional expectations in the Christian or Hindu traditions but do accord with the Pure-land vision of Amida Buddha as "The

Buddha of Infinite Light and Boundless Life" who has vowed to appear at the moment of death. "When they come to the end of life they will be met by Amida Buddha and the Bodhisatvas of Compassion and Wisdom and will be led by them into Buddha's Land".<sup>25</sup> This combination of radiant light, wisdom and compassion correspond precisely to the descriptions given by the resuscitated of their experience of this encounter.

A third common feature is that the imagery in which the Pure Land is described is remarkably similar to the descriptions of the land beyond given by the resuscitated. I am thinking here of the imagery in the Smaller Sukavativyuha-sutra (The Smaller Pure Land Sutra) of a wonderful garden with flowers of intense vividness of colour, of bright jewels and of "the air vibrant with celestial harmonies."<sup>26</sup> This corresponds almost verbatim to a description given on BBC television by a young resuscitated child concerning what she saw, and I was particularly struck by the way she too stressed the intensity of the colouring of the various flowers and jewels.<sup>27</sup> Yet the rest of the description is also very interesting for the imagery of a beautiful garden to describe heaven is common to all religious traditions, as is the notion of celestial music and indeed the word "paradise" was originally the word used for a Royal garden or park on earth.

What I have argued so far is that if one looks back into the Shamanic tradition of primal religion as well as into the testimony of key religious figures of both East and West one sees constant parallels with what is currently being reported by many contemporary near-death experiencers. The big difference is in the relative number of such reports. We noted earlier that St. Paul

regarded his experience as giving him unique insight and authority. St. John of the Cross speaks of the experience as coming very rarely and to very few. And Islam has always treated the experiences of Muhammad as something restricted to a very select group of prophets throughout human history who have had a distinctive call. The same is true in the Far East. NDEs used to happen to relatively few people who often gained religious authority in consequence. What I suggest is that modern medical technology has as it were "democratised," and made available to thousands an experience which has from the beginning lain at the heart of much of the world's religious perceiving and formed an important experiential basis for the future hope.

But what weight can we give to such reports? For most contemporary scientists what we now know of the "intimate unity of psychological and physiological processes" has in the words of Gardner Murphy made "the conception of an independent soul recede more and more into the land of the utterly incredible and unimaginable." <sup>28</sup> Among contemporary philosophers criticism of the intelligibility of the soul and an acceptance of the "logic of mortality" <sup>29</sup> has become so normative that a demolition of the concept of the soul is often seen as a useful exercise for first year undergraduates in philosophy. However if any "out-of-the body" experience could be shown to be a literally correct description of something that had actually happened then the whole debate would have to be reopened.

Near-death experiences are crucial here, for while "ordinary" OBEs generally lack any evidential qualities and can be therefore be regarded as "only" psychologically real, the OBEs that occur

near death seem in a different category because what the near death experiencers report having "seen" while "outside their bodies" corresponds to what they would have seen if they really had been outside of them. According to R.A. Moody, "Physicians have reported to me that they just can't understand how their patients could have described the things they did about the resuscitation efforts, unless they really were hovering just below the ceiling."<sup>30</sup> The impact of such reports can be very strong on the physicians concerned. For example in the earliest BBC Documentary on near death experiences in March 1982, Dr. Peter Fenwick, as a leading neuro-psychiatrist argued that NDEs could readily be explained away as malfunctions of the dying brain.<sup>31</sup> However subsequent discussions with his patients convinced him that while near the point of death they really had seen things which could only be visible to them if they were viewing from a vantage point other than that of their bodies. Consequently he is now open to the possibility that the soul might be a reality.<sup>32</sup>

What has to be established is whether or not these reported observations really do correspond with reality. At one level they undoubtedly do. Even Dr. Susan Blackmore, the most sceptical of all NDE investigators, found herself forced to acknowledge that "there is no doubt that people describe reasonably accurately events that have occurred around them during their NDE." However she suggests that a combination of "prior knowledge, fantasy, and lucky guesses and the remaining operating senses of hearing and touch" may provide the information for the images seen which are viewed autoscopically from above because that is the perspective from which we see ourselves in memory.<sup>33</sup> A similar view is expressed by Antony Flew who suggests that while

there is no reasonable doubt that these experiences happen they should be assimilated to the categories of imagination or imaging "for what is in dispute is not what experiences are had or what images are formed, but how these experiences and these images are properly to be described." <sup>34</sup>

In my own work Immortality or Extinction? I suggested that as an alternative to supposing that OBEs near death were "real" we could posit the possibility that "a patient's knowledge of the hospital set-up and of his physical state, stimulated by subconsciously perceived sense impressions and auditory cues, might enable him to visualize a picture of what was going on which was impressively correct." <sup>35</sup> However Michael Sabom has tested this hypothesis and found it lacking. He invited a control group of twenty-five seasoned cardiac patients with at least a five year history of very serious illness to imagine themselves watching a medical team revive a person whose heart had stopped beating. They were asked to describe what they would expect to see. Almost all of them made major errors in describing resuscitation techniques. This contrasts strongly with the near death experiencers whose reports of what actually did happen were astonishingly correct. Sabom's experiment shows that imagination does not suffice as an explanation of correct observation in the NDE state.

This does not mean however that we are necessarily bound to conclude that the concept of the soul can be reinstated. Linda Badham in her "naturalistic case for extinction" makes the point that to take paranormal data as support for the belief in the existence of non-material entities (like

souls) may solve one explanatory difficulty, but only at the expense of raising a host of other problems. For the scientific view that all events happening in the world are dependent on underlying physicochemical mechanisms is extremely well-founded.<sup>36</sup> Her conclusion is that of C.D. Broad:

"It is certainly right to demand a much higher standard of evidence for events which are alleged to be paranormal than those which would be normal...For in dealing with evidence we always have to take account of antecedent probability or improbability of the alleged event, i.e. its probability or improbability relative to the rest of our knowledge and well founded belief other than the special evidence adduced in its favour."<sup>37</sup>

The present grounds for taking NDEs as evidence for dualism is that some doctors and nurses are impressed by the apparent accuracy of the observations made in the near-death state from a vantage point other than that of the unconscious body. However this is all somewhat subjective. Moreover as Susan Blackmore has shown,<sup>38</sup> some of the most striking instances of surprisingly correct observation are dependent on "hear-say" evidence. If we accept with Broad that we need harder evidence, then what is needed is a prospective survey of future NDEs which will enable such evidence to be found.

To meet this need Dr. Peter Fenwick and I are setting up a project into NDEs in hospital contexts to seek to establish on a non-anecdotal basis whether or not correct observation actually takes place of a kind that cannot be accounted for by any "natural" means. We have obtained the

collaboration of medical staff and hospital administrators in the placing of objects in cardiac wards and casualty units which can only be seen and described by agents actually looking down from the ceiling. In the intensive care units every patient is constantly monitored for heart-rate and level of consciousness so if any NDE is reported we will be able to correlate it with all physical conditions. Our project is fully scientific in that it offers a proposal that is in Popperian terms falsifiable. Fenwick's postulation is that on average 10% of people admitted to a cardiac ward can be expected to have a near-death experience and well over half of these will report an autoscopic experience. If out of a hundred such patients none mention seeing the objects we will conclude that "seeing" from out-of-the-body does not occur and that NDEs are only subjectively real. But if a number of cases of correct "seeing" can be proven beyond dispute the principle that consciousness can exist outside the body will be established, and the truth of dualism thereby vindicated.

So far our findings have clarified only two issues. The first is that our supposition that 10% of sufferers from cardiac arrest will have NDEs may be too high and Carl Becker's estimate of 1% may be nearer the truth. Second we have had abundant confirmation of the sad fact that the overwhelming majority of those who are resuscitated die again without ever regaining sufficient strength to be interviewed about what if anything they experienced. We remain optimistic however that over the next five years we will obtain firm data on this central issue of human concern.

We accept that however positive our findings not everyone will be convinced by them. Some will always prefer the hypothesis that any correct observation reported was the product of some form of extra-sensory perception by the unconscious body on the bed. Against this one can argue that ESP on the scale required would be at least equally incompatible with a physicalist position. For we would have to suppose that the deeply unconscious brain of a dying person is able to perform feats of ESP far beyond that of the most brilliant ESP experimenter in good health. And consider what it would mean for a brain to use resources which were by definition extra to its sensory equipment for perceiving in order to see objects out of the range of its normal viewing powers. When spelt out in full it seems hard to see any substantive difference between the two hypotheses. In either terminology the self succeeds in perceiving from a different vantage point from that of the body and if this is conceded talk of "out-of-the-body experience" is the simplest and clearest account of what is happening. If the self can perceive at a distance from the body, then it is reasonable to distinguish the self from the body. And if this can be done even for only a matter of seconds near the point of death the principle has been established that mind and brain are separable and hence that dualism is true.

I now turn to the most impressive feature of the NDE which is the profound effect it has on the majority of those who experience it. Long ago William James argued that religious experiences are real because they have real affects. In the case of the NDE this is particularly noticeable. In a survey of over three hundred British cases Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick found that 72% felt their lives had been transformed by it.<sup>39</sup> Bruce Greyson, Editor of Near-death Studies and a Professor



of Psychology claims, "It is the most profound experience I know of, ...nothing affects people as strongly as this".<sup>40</sup> This is further endorsed by Kenneth Ring in his Life at death: A Scientific Account of the Near-death experience, which shows that the most impressive feature of the near-death experience is the impact it has on the beliefs and attitudes of those who have them.<sup>41</sup>

The most significant change in beliefs and attitudes concerns death itself. In the Fenwicks' survey 82% said they had less fear of death as a result of their experience and indeed most no longer felt any fear of death at all. From a sociological perspective Allan Kellehear observes that "most clinical NDErs are convinced that their experiences are a glimpse of life after death," and he also found that one of the most important features of the NDE in society is that "it put the idea of personal survival of death back on the religious agenda."<sup>42</sup> R.A. Moody made an even stronger claim about his own original sample asserting that, "After his experience a person no longer entertains any doubts about his survival of bodily death. it is no longer merely an abstract possibility to him, but a fact of his experience."<sup>43</sup> Most recently Molly Cox-Chapman found similar convictions in all fifty-one subjects of her American survey.<sup>44</sup>

However in Britain where (unlike the USA) belief in life after death has largely faded from public consciousness the impact is much more ambiguous. According to the Fenwicks only 48% of their sample said they believed in personal survival, but some who said this also believed that some important part of them, - their consciousness or soul might yet continue, while many affirmed a total conviction of a life beyond. What this suggests is that having an NDE strongly encourages

belief in life after death but does not override deeply held philosophical convictions. For example A.J. Ayer's initial response to his own NDE was "on the face of it, these experiences are rather strong evidence that death does not put an end to consciousness." However after rehearsing some of the philosophical problems associated with life after death his conclusion was more modest, namely that "my recent experiences have slightly weakened my conviction that my genuine death, which is due fairly soon will be the end of me, though I continue to hope it will." Later he retracted even this, but from a person with his long and carefully thought-out position his testimony to the power of the initial experience remains striking.<sup>45</sup>

Among NDE researchers the impact of hearing so many people affirm the power of the experience can have a significant impact, particularly among those who have gathered accounts from their own patients. Thus Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross claims that, "Before I started working with the dying, I did not believe in life after death. Now I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt."<sup>46</sup> We have already noted that both Peter Fenwick and Michael Sabom moved from fundamental scepticism to a generally positive attitude as a result of their patients' testimony and this was also true of R.A. Moody. According to Moody, "There is something very persuasive about seeing a person describe his experience which cannot easily be conveyed in writing. These experiences were very real events to these people and through my association with them these experiences have become real events to me".<sup>47</sup>

In modern western society religious authority has increasingly fragmented, and a this-world only

attitude become dominant in much European Christianity. At this stage in history it is ironical that developments arising from one of the most materialistic of sciences, medical technology, should have led to a renewal of interest in mystical experience and to a non-dogmatic approach to religion. Experiences of a kind which in previous ages had touched the lives of a handful of religious figures have now been democratised and become shared by millions of people throughout the world. This has led to a new age of experientially based awareness of transcendent Reality and of hope for an eternal destiny.

#### NOTES

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