

# Near Death Experiences and World View Concerns: Addressing Difficult Questions

by Gary R. Habermas

Philosophers, theologians, and apologists often argue for the truth of Christianity at two levels: natural and revealed. The first category may involve religious considerations of a more general nature, regarding the existence of God, absolute morality, or an afterlife. Thus, these arguments may actually be shared by members of non-Christian religious traditions, who often encourage belief in these subjects, too. For example, the Kalam Cosmological Argument was explicated by Medieval Muslim philosophers before Christian philosophers pursued it.

The second level encompasses arguments for specific doctrines like the reliability or inspiration of the New Testament, Jesus' incarnation, miracles, or His resurrection from the dead. With few exceptions, these approaches are usually employed by Christians alone.

This essay concerns a topic within the first category, namely, the afterlife. We will discuss a particular argument for life after death, derived from the phenomena of near death experiences (NDEs). Though we will begin by mentioning briefly the evidential question, the majority of the essay will address difficult world view questions that often arise when studying NDEs from a Christian perspective.

## Evidence for Near Death Experiences

Before moving to our chief topic, we need to mention a crucial issue that will have a central affect on the remainder of our treatment. When treating NDEs, it is important to understand that we are not simply embracing experiences due to their acclaimed commonality, such as an individual coming near to death's door, followed by traveling down a dark tunnel, being accompanied by angelic beings, seeing an intense light which seems to be a person,

perhaps encountering deceased loved ones, and so on. While these are intriguing reports, these descriptions are generally not overly evidential.

However, NDEs sometimes present some strong evidence for an afterlife by reporting events that are later corroborated. Individuals who are near death have reported afterwards that, while hovering over or near the area of their incapacitated body, have observed an event (or several of them) that can be verified or falsified by others who were involved. Examples might include claiming to witness a strange occurrence, people doing or saying things in nearby rooms or down the hall of a hospital, intricate descriptions of the emergency room, and so on. More evidential cases may involve verified reports of incidents a fair distance away from the scene or congenitally blind persons seeing for the first time ever.

Occasionally the report is exceptionally specific, such as the correct number on the top of an ambulance, what a loved one is doing at home, or certain very odd events that were nonetheless confirmed, where these details could not have been seen from the position of the physical body. Further, there are a number of these evidential reports during a time when the near-death individual had no heartbeat or brain waves.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, there are important evidential and world view issues to be discussed here,<sup>2</sup> but even superficially, a number of cases exist where evidence for consciousness after a state very near to death seems to be evident.

The data behind such evidential cases<sup>3</sup> will be assumed throughout the remainder of this essay, though the case will not be made here. I have argued elsewhere that they present very strong evidence for at least initial consciousness after death.<sup>4</sup>

## World View Challenges

Again, the majority of this essay will address questions that express concern for the direction in which some of the NDE data point. Initially, it should be noted that such questions regarding NDEs are not unique in the category of natural arguments. Since these are more general arguments, they tend to lend themselves to broader interpretations. For example, when the Kalam argument surfaced among evangelical philosophers a few decades ago, some complained that the argument actually seemed to favor a pantheistic perspective. But admittedly, few of these natural topics have the numbers of questions surrounding them as do NDEs.

### Multiple Religious Interpretations

Many NDErs or others who experience similar phenomena such as deathbed visions claim to have encountered a light, which is often identified as a person. When the figure of light is specified as a religious figure, Christians often make the identification of God or Jesus. Jews often opt for an angel, and Hindus have identified these figures as Shiva, Rama, Krishna, or other religious messengers. If these identifications are taken in a straightforward manner, they raise intriguing questions. For example, are we justified in concluding that these beings were actually seen by the experiencers? Did Christians really meet Jesus or did Jews really see angels? Did Hindus encounter Shiva or Krishna?

Furthermore, do such identifications of these personages provide some sort of argument for syncretism or even for universalism? Or could they indicate that the religious figures are really manifestations of the same God? While it seems that these might be very popular conclusions regarding these NDEs, perhaps largely because it fits the contemporary ethos, I think

such moves would be shortsighted. Too much data are left unexplained by these overly-easy suppositions.

Initially, although we have mentioned the presence of strong evidence that some NDErs have really experienced consciousness beyond a near-death state, none of this sort of evidence verifies the real appearances or identifications of these religious persons. As noted, the evidential claims concern almost entirely data derived from the physical world. Therefore, we basically only have the NDEr's interpretation of whom they thought they saw. This is a huge problem for those who would take these identifications at face value.

Further, a lesser but still worthwhile issue to note is how these near-death patients would know the identity of these religious personages, *even if* they really did engage them? But what if the person of light provided the identification? This would simply remove the problem a step. What indication is there that this was correct rather than a figment of the NDEr's imagination? Not only do these particular heavenly encounters with spirit beings lack any measurable evidence, but there would seem to be no grounds for asserting that these identifications were accurate.

In other words, since most everyday observation is a mixture of verified and unverified, even incorrect, experiences, the veridical reports about the physical would be at least potentially corroborated, whereas these religious identifications would at least be unverified, if not mistaken. At the very least, there seems to be no way to know for sure regarding the accuracy of the latter.

It seems to make much more sense that such identifications are likely drawn from the patient's theological and other intellectual commitments, arising from their own background. Not surprisingly, the cross-cultural research of deathbed visions of Karlis Osis and Erlendur

Haraldsson backs up this contention in several ways. For example, no Americans reportedly saw Shiva, Rama, or Krishna.<sup>5</sup> Also, Americans claimed to have seen more than five times as many deceased as religious figures (66 percent to 12 percent, respectively), whereas those from India, conversely, saw almost twice as many religious as deceased persons (48 percent to 28 percent, respectively).<sup>6</sup>

Further, social factors seem to figure prominently with regard to the gender of those who are reported. While Americans claimed to see 61 percent female figures, Indians claimed only 23 percent females. Even the Indian women themselves reported twice as many male figures as female ones! This may well be due to the apparently lower status of women in Indian culture.<sup>7</sup>

Yet another difference concerns how the patients responded to the experience. While Americans often construed the episode as positive, Indian patients often reacted quite negatively.<sup>8</sup>

Of course there can be good reasons for these differences that do not necessitate subjective, error-prone reports. But the chief point here concerns the perspectives from which the interpretations are apparently launched. It would seem to be more than coincidental that the reports of religious versus formerly living persons and the significant differences among the numbers of women reported simply fit the respective cultural views, as they clearly appear to do. Again, at the very least, there is an absence of any clear verification in these religious identifications.

So it would appear that one's previous religious, cultural, and sociological beliefs affect the wide differences of interpretations with NDEs and deathbed visions, including the way that religious figures are identified. Osis and Haraldsson agree that inhibitions regarding "nationality

and culture” contribute to the types of phenomena reported especially by the Indian patients,<sup>9</sup> but of course anyone can misinterpret data.

Therefore, it seems more than clear that one’s religious beliefs, society, and culture play a huge background role in interpreting these multiple religious perspectives. Where we lack appropriate sorts of evidence, as with the specific identity of the reported religious figures, we have serious grounds on which to question the claims. This is especially the case when the differences are the sort that we have mentioned here, which are best explained as being colored by one’s surroundings, background, and subsequent religious interpretations. And we note that this is the case regardless of which religious figures are reported, whether Christian, Jewish, Hindu, or Muslim.<sup>10</sup>

We also draw the additional conclusion that NDEs or deathbed visions seem to be incapable of determining the truth or falsity of particular religious world views. While particular evidential factors may indicate the existence of consciousness after death, they present no real grounds for judging between the various religious options, since this is precisely where the evidence is lacking. In other words, NDEs appear to be non-world view specific.

No Judgment?

It has been reported that even atheists and other admitted non-Christians frequently experience a beautiful heavenly environment during their NDE. What about more regular reports of judgment and punishment for wrongdoing? We will respond from several angles.

Admittedly, the majority of NDErs report blissful experiences.<sup>11</sup> Still, a number of persons have also claimed to have witnessed different sorts of hell-like environments. Some of these are characterized more by darkness, fearful anxiety, depression, or exceptional loneliness.<sup>12</sup>

Though not the only researcher to report hellfire experiences, these were largely popularized by cardiologist Maurice Rawlings, who theorized that many of those NDErs who do not remember their experience at a later time may actually be repressing very painful encounters. He provides numerous examples where patients reported that they had been in hell, usually terror-stricken, but very soon afterwards they had apparently forgotten the entire incident.<sup>13</sup>

Rawlings' research has been criticized heavily by NDE researchers,<sup>14</sup> even by Sabom, a fellow Christian.<sup>15</sup> Still, some of Rawlings' cases where the NDEr had no memory of their hell report of just a few days earlier are curious, to say the least. Other researchers have also reported various sorts of hellfire cases, but in lesser numbers than Rawlings.<sup>16</sup>

We have noted above that other negative reports besides the traditional hellfire cases are not quite so rare. In the negatives responses mentioned by Osis and Haraldsson, a large number of Indian patients in both terminal and nonterminal cases reacted negatively to their deathbed visions, and often "cried out for help or tried to hide."<sup>17</sup> Some Indian patients identified the messenger in the vision as the god of death.<sup>18</sup>

Christians may wonder why more judgment cases have not been reported during NDEs, but why should this be the case? On a biblical worldview, since these persons were *near* death rather than biologically (irreversibly) dead, it makes sense that they would not have experienced judgment simply because they had not finally died.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, texts like Hebrews 9:27 would not even apply here.

Intriguingly, NDErs frequently report a line of demarcation or a barrier beyond which the individual knows they cannot pass and still return to their bodies. This barrier might be a river, fence, wall, or mountain range. I have interviewed NDErs who spoke of coming to the edge of a

lake or walking up a stairway. These individuals were convinced that if they had crossed the boundary, they would have died irretrievably, which is a common interpretation.

Even a dying person's positive experience need not be interpreted as a heavenly visit. Rawlings suggests a "sorting ground" or meeting place after death that temporarily separates an individual from their final destination.<sup>20</sup> Possibly, these persons were simply reacting to their bodiless sensation, observing the wonder of a new environment, experiencing the immediate relief of being released from a disease- or injury-racked body, or occupying just such a temporary meeting place.

Recall as well that interpretations of personal experiences can be notoriously tricky, even in everyday episodes. But near death interpretations are often complicated by difficult physical and spiritual surroundings. Of course reports may be correct, especially those that are well-evidenced, but we should still be very careful about reporting all observations straightforwardly, especially when opinions *about* them are the focus of the discussion.

A scholarly study of NDEs across the ages has also provided some further confirmation of the sociological and religious indications already mentioned above. Carol Zaleski notes that medieval accounts of NDEs give an especially prominent place to the torments of hell, probably since that was the central feature of the religious teaching at that time. Today, given the common belief that shuns such judgmental scenes, the typical NDE is more frequently reported in blissful terms. These contrasting interpretations from different eras would seem to argue in favor of Zaleski's conclusion that the reports may be at least partially conditioned by the current beliefs.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned earlier, the lack of evidential considerations regarding the heavenly portions of these near death scenes increases the likelihood of this conclusion.





Accordingly, I would conclude that NDEs should not be used to describe specific details regarding heaven or hell, especially including the type of landscape or the identity of supernatural persons encountered there, since these interpretations have not been verified.<sup>22</sup> This would include Christian NDEs as well as the experiences of other near death persons. But this should not be confused with those other NDE particulars from this present world that have been verified, in the sense of the presence of consciousness beyond near death states.

#### Satanic Counterfeits?

Sometimes the question is raised as to whether NDEs could be satanic manifestations meant to mislead people regarding the afterlife? Is it not enough that we have the biblical testimony?

Certain aspects of NDE studies certainly could be occultic in nature. Given the thousands of testimonies and the backgrounds of many researchers, personal beliefs and practices are not always obvious. One's worldview commitments just normally rise to the surface when we express ourselves. Thus, non-Christian beliefs will certainly be present in samples this large, and on this opinionated topic, as well. We do not want to deny or even underemphasize this point.

Indeed, several researchers have charged that there are specific occultic connections with individual near death researchers, including more overt involvement with the spirit world.<sup>23</sup> Unquestionably, occultic elements seem to be present in the available literature. Moreover, Paul explains that Satan can even disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), presumably appearing in any number of ways, including harmless, inviting, or prophetic guises.

.....

Therefore, vigilance is definitely in order. The presence of numerous occultic overtones, especially with certain well-published authors, indeed does make one wary of this aspect. This is particularly so, given the strong biblical warnings to strictly avoid all aspects of the occult (Lev. 20:6, 27; Deut. 18:9-14; Rev. 21:8). One should even be more wary of being drawn incredibly to these topics, which can be a doorway to the occult. Irresistible curiosity can serve as a real page-turner.

In spite of all these warning signs, it does not follow even here that NDEs are therefore always occultic and unbiblical. As Anderson notes, counterfeit experiences presuppose genuine ones. Besides, more crucially, some NDEs fit a biblical pattern<sup>24</sup> and, while further details cannot be pursued here, it is at least possible that near-death phenomena are reported in Scripture. In Jesus' story about the death of the poor man named Lazarus (Luke 16:22), his post-death experience has similarities to some NDEs. This includes a trip to paradise, accompanied by angels, who carry Lazarus to a state of heavenly bliss. Moreover, the scenario in verses 22-24 regarding the subsequent death of the rich man appears similarly to some hellish NDEs.

Some other instances include Stephen, who witnessed a pre-death vision before he was stoned (Acts 7:55-56). According to the timing parameters that are provided by Paul, his personal experience described in 2 Corinthians 12:1-5 may have occurred after he was stoned at Lystra and left for dead (Acts 14:19).

Wherever the afterlife is evident, tough questions may arise or even persist. But the bottom line is that an additional positive element emerges here, as well. The NDE phenomena indicate that naturalism is mistaken and that this really is a world where life after death exists. This is a severe blow to the most influential philosophical world view of our time.

.....

There are also a couple of last considerations. Going to be with Christ is precisely what the Bible states will happen to the Christian after death (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23). So if believers experience this reality slightly earlier, such as after temporarily having a close call with death, why should we object on biblical grounds? In other words, there often seems to be a curious antipathy towards NDEs among some believers, even on those occasions when these events appear to represent scenarios that very closely resemble what they expect to find after death!

There also seem to be strong reasons for holding that dying children and committed believers are not turned over to Satan and his whims as they leave this world. Psalm 23:4 indicates this hope well—that God does not abandon us in death.<sup>25</sup> Rather, He is there with us and comforts us. Especially when no previous occultic involvement took place in their lives, we are not told to expect strong satanic deceptions during the passage from death to eternal life. Death is a time of victory over Satan for God's children (1 Cor. 15:53-57). Hence, within the parameters of human perception, reporting, and interpretation, it may be that certain near death individuals have been able to, as it were, peer over the edge of the life to come.

So there seems to be little question that occultic tendencies can and do play an important role in the study of NDEs. It is crucial that believers obey the often-repeated biblical commands to avoid contact with occult ideas and events. No biblical room for exceptions exists here. But it still does not follow necessarily that all NDEs are satanic counterfeits. Some of these reports even appear to follow biblical teachings, examples, and expectations. Thus it does not appear that NDEs are *inherently* occultic. Dying is a natural event and does not automatically involve occultic aspects, as certain other activities do. Therefore, there is a need for each NDE to be evaluated according to its own merits.

## Conclusion



Without question, the topic of NDEs raises a number of important worldview concerns. Several of these are worthy of careful study. We addressed three of these general areas here—conflicting interpretations, the typical lack of final judgment, and the possibility of occultic involvement. While our discussion helped to place various guidelines around aspects of this subject, it does not expose anything that challenges the essential facticity and genuineness of at least some of the evidential portions of NDEs. Though we only looked briefly at this last subject of NDE evidence, we close with the hint that some NDEs might just indicate the initial moments of an afterlife.

We concluded that the study of NDEs alone does not distinguish the various religious traditions from each other. In this sense, they are worldview nonspecific. However, we argued that it does leave naturalism as the “odd philosophy out” here, due to the central role that denials of the afterlife play in the naturalistic worldview.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more than a dozen examples of these evidential cases, see Gary R. Habermas and J.P. Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), chapters 7, 9. See also Michael Sabom, “The Shadow of Death,” Part One, *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 26 (2003), especially 19-20.

<sup>2</sup> See Habermas and Moreland, chapter 8. Much of this article is an edited version of a discussion from this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> More recent cases and discussions may be found in Janice M. Holden, “More Things in Heaven and Earth: A Response to ‘Near-Death Experiences with Hallucinatory Features,’ ” *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, Vol. 26 (2007), 33-42; Bruce Greyson, “Comments on ‘Does Paranormal Perception Occur in Near-Death Experiences?’ ” *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, Vol. 25 (2007), 237-244; cf. also Michael Sabom, *Light and Death: One Doctor’s Fascinating Account of Near-Death Experiences* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), chapters 3, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Besides the chapters above, see Gary R. Habermas, “Near Death Experiences and the Evidence—A Review Essay,” *Christian Scholar’s Review*, 26:1 (1996), 78-85; “Paradigm Shift: A Challenge to Naturalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 146:584 (1989), especially 444-449; *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 60-62.

<sup>5</sup> Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson, *At the Hour of Death* (N.Y.: Avon, 1977), Table 2, 218.

<sup>6</sup> Osis and Haraldsson, 91-92.

<sup>7</sup> Osis and Haraldsson, 59, 92-95, 98.

<sup>8</sup> Osis and Haraldsson, 87-88; Table 1, 217; Table 5, 221.

---

<sup>9</sup> Osis and Haraldsson, 92.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Sabom agrees in his article, "The Shadow of Death," Part Two, *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 26 (2003), 42-51.

<sup>11</sup> Ken Ring reports that feelings of peace were reported by 60 percent of his NDErs (*Life at Death* [N.Y.: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1980] fig. 1, 40). Michael Sabom found that 100 percent of his nonsurgical NDE cases experienced "calm and peace" (*Recollections of Death: A Medical Perspective* [N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1982], Table IX, 206).

<sup>12</sup> Examples include George G. Ritchie with Elizabeth Sherrill, *Return from Tomorrow* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978); Burris Jenkins, "I Was an Atheist--Until I Died," *The Vestibule*, edited by Jess E. Weiss (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), 35-36; Raymond Moody, *Reflections on Life After Life* (N.Y.: Bantam/Mockingbird, 1977), 18-22; Osis and Haraldsson, 167; cf. Bruce Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush, "Distressing Near-Death Experiences," *Psychiatry*, Vol. 55 (1992), 95-110.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Rawlings, *Beyond Death's Door . . .* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), chaps. 1, 7, for examples; Rawlings, *To Hell and Back* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993). Rawlings also mentions cases where people became Christians during a hellish NDE, including Rawlings himself after witnessing these testimonies (*Before Death Comes*, 19-25)!

<sup>14</sup> Ken Ring refers to Rawlings's thesis as "*not proven*," taking the position that these hellfire cases were more likely hallucinations. Ring still concludes that Rawlings's examples cannot be dismissed, that hellfire NDEs "sometimes do occur," though much less frequently than Rawlings asserts, and notes some other negative cases, as well (Kenneth Ring, *Life at Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience* [N.Y.: Coward, McCann, & Geoghegan, 1980], 192-199, 248-250).

<sup>15</sup> Sabom, *Light and Death*, 65-169.

<sup>16</sup> One popular account is by Irwin Fisher, "I Died for 20 Minutes and Went to Hell," *Weekly World News* (4 Oct. 1988), 33.

<sup>17</sup> Osis and Haraldsson, 87; Table 1, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Osis and Haraldsson, Table 2, 218.

<sup>19</sup> J. Kerby Anderson makes the same point. See his *Life, Death and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 110.

<sup>20</sup> Rawlings, *Beyond Death's Door . . .*, 53, 88, 92, 100, 102. Anderson agrees (*Life, Death and Beyond*, 140-141).

<sup>21</sup> Carol Zaleski, *Other-World Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experiences in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> Other researchers have also confirmed the little or no evidence pertaining to identifying these religious persons or the particulars of the heavenly afterlife scenery (Ring, *Life at Death*, 238-239; Sabom, *Recollections of Death*, 185).

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, 120-126; Mark Albrecht and Brooks Alexander, "Thanatology: Death and Dying," *SCP Journal*, vol. 1 (1977), 4-11.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, 126, 135-144.

<sup>25</sup> Many other relevant passages include Heb. 2:14-15; 13:5 as well as the texts above, 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23.