

BOOK REVIEW

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What Is It Like to Be Dead? Near-Death Experiences, Christianity, and the Occult by Jens Schlieter, Oxford University Press, 2018, 344 + xxxii pp., \$34.95 hc (ISBN 9780190888848); Kindle ed. \$23.99 e-book.

It is surprising that in over four decades since the field of near-death studies was formalized, so few authors have addressed near-death experiences (NDEs) in historical or cross-cultural contexts. Any contribution to this particular area of the field will therefore be of great interest. Jens Schlieter, a professor of the Systematic Study of Religion at Bern, Switzerland, has made an important contribution to this area of NDE research, focusing on NDEs in Western Christian and occult traditions between 1580 and 1975. The rationale for this time frame is that 1580 marks what Schlieter considered to be the earliest known autobiographical NDE—that of Michel de Montaigne—whereas 1975 marks the advent of modern near-death studies with the publication of Raymond Moody’s *Life After Life*. It should also be noted that Schlieter’s book picks up roughly where Carol Zaleski (1987) left off in her classic on Medieval NDEs, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*. Between Zaleski, Schlieter, and recent contributions dealing with NDEs in earlier Western and Christian contexts, such as Pilch (2011) and Pothoff (2017), this particular area of study is making great advances.

Schlieter’s approach was to conduct a “historical discourse analysis, pursuing the question of how texts present these experiences and the situations in which they occur” (pp. xxix-xxx), with particular em-

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phasis on how they reflect the religious and occult traditions of their times. Analyzing NDE narratives within their cultural contexts and viewing them as literary artifacts as much as experiential accounts is an admirable task, similar to that taken by Zaleski. Neither Zaleski nor Schlieter were particularly concerned with the veridicality of NDEs, though both attempted to understand general aspects of the phenomenon by closely reading accounts within a specific cultural-historical milieu. As a historical study of how NDEs have been received in Western Christian, esoteric, and scientific traditions over the last four centuries or so, I found that Schlieter's book succeeded admirably. His arguments concerning the religious and spiritual functions of NDEs within the Western strands of thought with which he was concerned are interesting and well-researched.

Readers interested in historical Western NDEs will be fascinated to read the summaries and quotations from the examples Schlieter discussed. Most of these accounts will likely be unfamiliar to general readers and even to NDE researchers who have not focused on the historical material. Although many of these accounts have been discussed within the near-death literature, they have appeared in widely dispersed books and articles. Having them summarized together in one book makes for a valuable reference tool, particularly given the way Schlieter contextualized them in relation to the shifting intellectual and spiritual/religious landscapes of the times. I found that in section 2.3, "The Integration of Theosophical Narratives on Travels of the 'Spiritual Body,'" his exploration was knowledgeable and astute regarding how 19th century "Occultists and Spiritualists" drew upon scientific theories of NDE phenomena to help legitimize their teachings. Equally astute were section 2.5, "The Theosophical Discovery of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*" and other discussions in this vein. The (more or less) chronological treatment enables the reader to follow the development of NDE discourse alongside the changing religious and occult fashions. Indeed, the social-historical treatment is overall exemplary and is the main strength I found in the book. Another important feature is the discussion of 18th to mid-20th century German medical and occult literature dealing with NDEs (e.g., pp. 69–71, 179–180), which will likely be wholly unfamiliar to Anglophone readers and researchers. Given the unfamiliarity of these German accounts, full translations rather than summaries would have been welcome, and I would hope that Schlieter will publish them separately—perhaps in the present *Journal*. These "new" NDE accounts and the discussions of their scientific and occult contexts

form a densely packed treasure trove of information that will surely inspire other scholars to follow Schlieter's leads and engage with the primary material in new ways.

From the standpoint of the historiography of NDE studies, Schlieter made some intriguing and compelling connections. He sought to explain the codification of NDEs alongside their increase in incidence and in popular and scientific interest. He pursued this goal with reference to a number of factors, both cultural and biomedical, including advances in resuscitation techniques, New Age and spiritualist philosophies, and psychedelic drug use. One of the main points of the book is that as with any experience, NDEs are inextricable from the experiencer's cultural and religious background. This assertion is, in itself, uncontroversial and has been noted by most writers on historical and cross-cultural NDEs.

However, Schlieter's study followed the postmodernist-influenced constructivist paradigm that all experience is not just culturally influenced but culturally *constructed*. He expressed skepticism of the "historical independent emergence" (p. xxiv) of NDEs, and though he occasionally cited cross-cultural examples, he did not accept the phenomenon as a universal experience type. Sections with titles such as "The Formation of Near-Death Experiences" and "The Final Configuration of Near-Death Experiences" reflect the constructivist stance Schlieter took throughout the book. He suggested that NDE reports may be examples of cryptomnesia, in which alleged experiencers only *believe* they have had an experience when in fact it is a case of "unintentional plagiarism" of things read or heard about in the past (pp. 6, 9). He continuously framed NDEs as specifically "religious" phenomena, even stating that their occurrence is evidence against secularization theory, arguing essentially that reports of NDEs show that religion is not in decline (p. 252).

Although Schlieter asserted that "any unilinear causal explanation of this complex phenomenon will surely end in a blind alley" (p. xi), the main thrust of the book is that specific NDE elements can be traced in a linear chronology demonstrating precisely when and how NDEs were "constructed," that is, invented. Indeed, in the very next sentence, Schlieter claimed to be "presenting here for the first time the exciting historical genealogy" of NDEs (p. xi). His use of the term "genealogy" is loaded, for it presupposes intertextuality: that there has been a historical progression of NDE accounts, with each influencing the next over time. Indeed, it presupposes that NDEs are primarily—if not wholly—a cultural-literary construct. Schlieter used such lan-

guage often throughout the book, such as when he characterized what is probably the first collection of NDE accounts in the West as “the first specimen of a new literary genre” (p. 100), and in referring to the elements of NDEs as “topoi”—literary themes or tropes.

In short, his stance went beyond a mere historical analysis of NDEs and into an assessment of their ontological nature, with skepticism about their very occurrence at the fore. The position that a *narrative* of an experience must not be treated as representing any presumed actual experience is, however, grounded in philosophy rather than science (cf. Shushan, 2014; 2016). Nevertheless, the position is a predicate for many of Schlieter’s arguments. If one accepts *a priori* that a narrative of an NDE is simply a product of the cultural imagination, any similarities between accounts *must* be due to the prior expectations embedded within that cultural imagination and not to any actual experience. The philosophical orientation of the scholar thereby takes precedence over the experiencer’s account.

Schlieter went so far as to question whether there is even a causal relationship between NDE circumstances—for example, being physically near death; the NDE itself; and the subsequent reporting of it. Rather, he considered these factors as merely contributing to “conditioned effects” (pp. xxv-xxvi). On the other hand, and somewhat bewilderingly given the hardline constructivist stance of the majority of the book, Schlieter also stated that he did not “doubt that such experiences can occur, nor that authentic accounts are in principle impossible [*sic*]” (p. 5). In addition to “preexperiential expectations” and “subsequent reworking” of the description of the NDE by both experiencers and researchers, one should also be open to “experiential content emerging in the situation near death” (p. 262). In other words, Schlieter allowed for at least the *possibility* that an NDE—or at least particular elements of it—is some kind of “experience” after all. He expressed wariness of even the word “experiencer,” however, claiming that it is part of a terminological genealogy lying in Indian philosophy, “parapsychology, mysticism, and esotericism, which prepared the ground for the near-death experiencer” (p. 5). It seems more likely to me, however, that the term has come into wide usage in NDE studies simply because it is the most succinct and specific way to refer to *one who has had an experience*; indeed, some authors have used the word *experient*.

Like other constructivist theories of the relationship between extraordinary experiences and religious beliefs (cf. Shushan, 2014; 2016), Schlieter’s perspective exposes a seemingly irreconcilable ten-

sion between, on the one hand, the argument that NDEs are simply products of cultural invention and intertextuality and, on the other hand, an acceptance that there is such a phenomenon as NDEs about which one could produce a 344-page monograph. For example, alongside his repeated attempts to question the category “near-death experience,” he wrote “there has been a continuous flow” of NDE accounts, including from “ordinary individuals trying to express experiences that they had in the context of critical accidents” (p. 53). This phrasing indicates an apparent acceptance that NDEs are a specific experience type that can occur during physical near-death situations. Even asking questions such as, “how did individuals make sense” of NDEs (p. 285) indicates that individuals had such experiences and then attempted to make sense of them, rather than simply having invented them. Indeed, Schlieter’s repeated reminders that investigators are dealing not with NDEs but with *reports* of NDEs (p. 257) would suggest that there *is* such a thing as an NDE to be reported.

Although his distinction is valid that reports of NDEs are embedded in the personal, social, and cultural situation of the individual (e.g., pp. 4–6; 301), it does not follow logically that they necessarily are wholly *products* of such dynamics. For that matter, even if NDEs *are* such products, would they not still count as “experience”? Granting that concession, on what grounds is one kind of experience privileged over another, and on what grounds is the constructivist hypothesis more persuasive than a neurophysiological or metaphysical hypothesis? The problem is compounded when one considers the commonalities among cross-cultural and historical NDEs, for the constructivist theory would imply that people around the world and throughout history have some kind of shared cultural and individual religious imagination that would result in similar accounts of invented experiences, which has not been proven. Because of such conceptual problems, despite staying with Schlieter for the length of his book, I still came away uncertain about precisely what he meant when he wrote that he was “aiming to show how narratives of religious metacultures formed the main current of narratives of experiences near death” (p. 285).

Schlieter was not unaware of these problems, and in an attempt to reconcile experiential claims with the constructivist stance, he posited what he called the “death-x-pulse.” The idea is that a near-death or fear-of-death situation can act as a “a sudden trigger within consciousness that brings forth the possibility of its own nonexistence, that is, death” (p. 261, cf. pp. 270–272), thereby inducing “the conscious mind to draw from memory a quintessence of all these former reflections,

experiences, and expectations" (p. xxi) the individual has about death and the afterlife. The "death-x-pulse" itself is thus "a sudden impelling thought that prompts a highly vivid conscious activity searching for thoughts, images, and even whole narratives that will be useful to contextualize and explain this most existential, unknown, and highly critical situation" (p. 261).

The "death-x-pulse" apparently applies only to some accounts of NDEs, however, or to some elements of them. Schlieter suggested that the life review in particular may be a result of the "death-x-pulse." The life review is a curious choice to explore in this light, for it has been established that it is in fact one the least reported NDE elements, as Schlieter was aware (p. 275). He nevertheless speculated that NDEs that lack life reviews are not generated by the "death-x-pulse," as in cases in which "the life-threatening situation had come about gradually," or in which "individuals reacted differently to it" including simply "ignoring" it, or even that individuals actually had a life review but forgot it or did not report it (pp. 275–276). He thus suggested that few of the patients in Karlis Osis's (1961) study of deathbed visions experienced the trigger because few of them reported life reviews (p. 194). Whether this assertion means they experienced a different trigger or no trigger at all—or, indeed, had no experience at all—is not made explicit. Schlieter concluded by stating, "Obviously, there is a large variety of possible reactions, and I do not intend to argue that the death-x-pulse shall be accountable for all" (p. 276). He further added that "to figure out to which extent near-death reports may represent experiences, remains difficult to answer . . . There are surely individual expectations that in the narrative formation of the unfolding experience inextricably merge with what is actually experienced" (p. 281). Again, this assertion seems to suggest that NDEs are actually a particular experience type and that they are experienced according to cultural and individual idiosyncrasies, a stance that conflicts with much of what Schlieter argued throughout his book.

Although this kind of intellectual honesty is admirable, readers are left with a rather vague and confusing argument: (a) There may be actual NDEs, but it is more likely that they are entirely literary-cultural products, or perhaps not, at least in some cases; and (b) Some NDEs and some elements of NDEs are triggered by consciousness reacting to fear of death, though others are not, and though there may be tendencies concerning certain elements such as the life review, there are too many exceptions and too much variation to be able to really argue anything with certainty. My overall impression is not that

Schlieter was constructing a sound, comprehensive theory but, rather, was engaging in a series of philosophical musings and raising more questions than he answered. Finally, the distinction between “death-x-pulse” experiences grounded in “human consciousness in search of meaning” (p. 267) and experiences grounded in individual/cultural expectation is obscure, for both seem to simply be different ways of saying “imagination.” Largely absent from Schlieter’s discussion was a consideration of some very important factors, such as that NDEs are *spontaneous* phenomena, that there are cases in which the individual had no prior knowledge of NDEs, and that many examples of NDEs contradict experienter expectations.

One of Schlieter’s main assertions was that:

Certain historical factors, reports, and discourses, culminating in the two preceding decades of the 1970s, allowed Moody to construct near-death experiences as systematic phenomena. If this holds true, it should be possible to show a *terminus ante quem* at which elements of near-death reports had either not emerged or were part of other discourses unrelated to each other. (p. 45)

This is in spite of the fact that he also wrote that “virtually any analysis of whether a certain element had been conceptualized before or was an unpredictable and ‘original’ part of experience proper, will come to a grinding halt” (p. 281). A great deal of Schlieter’s book is nevertheless concerned precisely with seeking his *terminus ante quem* in the historical accounts, attempting to trace when the first “modern” NDE was recorded and to pinpoint exactly when certain NDE elements first appeared. Complicating matters further, conflicting identifications of these “first” appearances undermine Schlieter’s claim to have traced the “development” of NDE “discourse” over time. He wrote that Anna Atherton’s NDE from 1670 is “the oldest early modern report that encompasses main elements of near-death experiences” (p. 57), though Johann Schwedtfeger’s account from c. 1734 is, obscurely, “probably the oldest report of an experience near death in a more focused sense” (p. 62), though it is not until 1889 that we have a “seminal” account (p. 140).

The lack of an explicit out-of-body experience (OBE) in many accounts was particularly significant for Schlieter. He spent much effort in attempting to demonstrate that the OBE was a comparatively late “topos” (e.g., pp. 55, 59, 63, 66, & passim) and claimed that “the integration of out-of-body experiences” into NDE narratives only “became visible in the last two decades of the 19th century” (p. 52). This is,

however, flatly contradicted by examples Schlieter himself cited, such as the OBE of Thomas Say during his NDE in 1726 (p. 69), Joseph Smith's in 1832 (p. 79), among others (see below). It is further contradicted by examples he did not cite, such as the NDE of a Mormon woman from 1838 (Lundahl, 1982, p. 168), not to mention examples from ancient and Medieval times. Schlieter was, in fact, aware of some of the latter, but to justify his claim he took an extremely strict, literalist approach to the accounts. He discounted the Monk of Wenlock's OBE from 716 because Schlieter did not see it as autoscopic, that is, describing the soul seeing his own body. This conclusion was despite the text stating—as Schlieter himself quotes—that the Monk's "own body, while he was outside it, was so exceedingly horrid to him that in all those visions he saw nothing so hateful, nothing so contemptible . . . that exuded such a dreadful stench as his body" (p. 118). Schlieter's reasoning that this was "merely a declaration of body abhorrence" is unconvincing given that the passage refers specifically to the Monk's body—and that he was out of that body at the time. Nor did Schlieter mention the passage stating that when the Monk "quitted the body" his soul was raised by angels "high in the air" (Boniface, c. 717/1911, p. 79), thus providing a context for the Monk's vantage point. Although Schlieter did state that the Monk "detested even his own brothers for taking care of his abhorred body," he neglected to mention that the Monk actually perceived this happening while still out-of-body: "And the brethren, *whom he beheld discharging the last offices*, he despised because they took such care for his hateful body" (Boniface, c. 717/1911, p. 88). Schlieter ignored additional medieval examples, and although he did mention Fursa's autoscopic OBE in a footnote (pp. 117–118, n. 1), he did not explain why it should not be considered a bona fide OBE. Within the main timeframe of Schlieter's study, he did not consider Swedenborg's OBEs to be *quite* OBEs because Swedenborg did not mention "autoscopic visions" and did not describe specifically *returning* to his body (p. 66). Schlieter considered the autoscopic OBE reported by George de Benneville in 1791 to be a variance of typical examples, on the grounds that de Benneville felt revulsion at the prospect of returning to his body (p. 67)—whereas, in fact, such feelings are widely attested in Medieval (including the Monk of Wenlock's account, as seen), modern Western, and cross-cultural NDEs (Moody 1975, pp. 40–41; Shushan 2009, p. 144; 2018, p. 224). In 1851, Alphonse Cahagnet wrote of a drug-induced NDE-type experience in which he left his body and saw himself dying (p. 75). Despite these cases, it is only with Fitz Hugh Ludlow's drug-

induced OBE in 1857—which is still decades before Schlieter alleged that OBEs first appeared in NDE accounts—that Schlieter claimed to have identified “the first instance in which autoscopic interest in the body, now viewed from above, can be grasped more clearly” (p. 76). The phrase “*now* viewed from above” implies that in earlier descriptions this was not the case, though the Monk of Wenlock, De Benneville, and Cahagnet accounts explicitly described being above their bodies, as did the Mormon woman from 1838 mentioned above, to give just a few examples. Adding to the chronological confusion—and making the significance of his distinctions of OBE types even more obscure—Schlieter later provided an *earlier* example of an OBE: one from 1843 in which a woman *stood* next to her body (p. 81). In a discussion of an 1866 collection of NDE reports by Franz Splittgerber, Schlieter did not count as a legitimate description of an OBE what Splittgerber described as “real local dislocation of the soul,” on the grounds that Splittgerber did not explicitly describe individuals seeing their own body below “surrounded by doctors and relatives” (p. 99). It seems to me that with each step of his discussion on this topic, Schlieter moved the goal posts further and further as to what would qualify as a genuine OBE account. In this context Alan Kellehear’s (1996, p. 32) point about OBE reporting should be noted: Even where not explicit, OBEs may be taken for granted in almost all accounts, for as a rule NDErs do not claim that their experiences occurred in the physical body—nor do those who witness the revival of NDErs and hear their accounts believe that the person underwent physical journeys to other worlds.

Although Schlieter’s book is not about NDEs across cultures, the independent non-Western examples also undermine his claims of the “construction” of autoscopic OBEs in Western discourse, for they demonstrate that similarity does not necessarily indicate intertextuality. This point is not to dispute the increase in Western reports of specifically autoscopic NDEs over time, though a change in the frequency of reported events, or in the ways in which they are reported, does not in itself indicate that those reports were generated exclusively by culture rather than by spontaneous experience—or that such events did not occur prior to their increased popularity; indeed, the evidence shows that they did. The key question is not necessarily “Which expectations spurred such experiences” (p. 227) but, rather, what cultural and/or medical factors led to an increase in their reporting.

In the material limited to investigating the historical contexts surrounding changes in NDE reporting, Schlieter was on firm and fascinating ground, as when he explored “how substantial changes within

Western society in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to an intensification of near-death discourse” (p. 228). However, rather than the evidence pointing to cultural invention, as Schlieter invariably suggested, it might simply indicate that NDE reports vary according to changes in the emphasis a given culture places on certain elements—or, indeed, on whether to report NDEs at all. Though Schlieter argued pointedly for an “uninterrupted continuity” of NDE narratives (pp. 52, 243, 257, & *passim*), such a continuity could simply indicate that people have been having NDEs and talking about them for a very long time rather than inventing accounts based on previous accounts. That they have increased over time coincides with factors such as medical advances that increased the number of survivors of near-death circumstances, greater acceptance of such accounts, and new forms of dissemination including personal narratives and popular reporting in various media. In addition, absence of evidence is never evidence of absence, as Schlieter recognized when he wrote that the extant written NDE accounts are “only the tip of the iceberg” when one considers the likelihood of “an oral transmission” of even more such narratives (p. 257). Although Schlieter did consider advances in medical resuscitation, for example in relation to the changing perceptions of bright light and the identity of beings of light (pp. 287–288), rather than exploring the impact on incidence of NDEs or frequency of elements being reported, he framed the discussion in terms of how these medical advances impacted the patients’ *expectations* that allegedly generated their NDEs. It is obviously true that all experience is deeply affected by culture and is thus subject to change as a culture changes. It does not follow logically, however, that these changes are evidence of the cultural *construction* of a given experience.

As with his treatment of OBEs, Schlieter sought “the roots of the topos” of the panoramic life review element of NDEs. Though unable to actually pinpoint it, he nevertheless stated that “it surely relates to Platonic ideas of a full ‘recollection’ . . . in the after-death existence of the soul” (p. 70). Although his use here of the word “relate” is vague, Schlieter apparently meant that the life review element in Western NDE accounts can be explained by historical continuity with ancient philosophy via Christianity and esoteric traditions. He did not consider that they may simply be due to human beings actually having life review experiences during NDEs; nor did he explain how the Platonists originally arrived at the idea and did not consider that they may have known about the phenomenon from contemporary cases or, in some instances, may even have had the experience themselves; nor

did he demonstrate the historical continuity from Plato to Moody that he seemed to imply. There is no logical reason to privilege a genealogical explanation over an experiential one. It is certainly true that life reviews are less common in some cultures and eras than others, as are tunnels and other elements commonly seen as typical of NDEs. Nevertheless, these elements *are* sometimes attested in areas where they are not expected, and they also have thematic counterparts—in the case of life reviews, involving some kind of assessment of one's earthly life and, in the case of tunnels, traveling through darkness and emerging into a place of light (Kellehear 1996, pp. 36–37; Shushan 2009, pp. 43–45, 149; 2018, pp. 4–5, 221–222). Schlieter (pp. 84–85) expanded upon Kellehear (1996, pp. 36–37) in observing that visual innovations such as photography, the diorama, and the panorama—“paintings on a revolving cylindrical surface”—contributed to the ways in which NDErs have described metaphorically their life reviews. This is certainly an interesting connection to make, and his arguments are compelling. Again, however, it is quite a speculative leap to thereby argue that the life review is a *product* of such developments and that there was a late 19th century “*Formation of the Life Review Near Death*” (p. 83). It may instead have been a case simply of increased interest in the life review theme alongside an increase in the occurrence and reporting of the phenomenon due to specific cultural-historical and medical factors.

Schlieter's overarching conclusion about the life review, however, may be supported by the lack of the phenomenon in small-scale societies (Kellehear, 1996, pp. 37–38; Shushan, 2018, pp. 222–223). Though he did not cite Kellehear in this regard, Schlieter echoed his hypothesis in concluding that the life review is “dependent on the modern self and its individualized, autobiographical self-understanding, searching for relevant information exactly because it understands itself in autobiographical terms” (p. 281). In any event, Schlieter's discussion of life reviews raises important questions about the relationship between culture, consciousness, and brain function, and it will hopefully stimulate further research and discussion.

Whereas the point of any monograph is to present new hypotheses based upon original research, it is also incumbent upon scholars to demonstrate the failings of existing hypotheses and how their own is more compelling. The lack of serious engagement with competing theories is another shortcoming I found in Schlieter's book. Specifically, he has not disproven the widely accepted conclusion that NDEs are pan-human phenomena which share a variety of general thematic

similarities that are expressed in culture- and individual-specific ways, nor has he invalidated the historical and cross-cultural evidence that has led to this conclusion. When Schlieter did engage with other researchers of historical NDEs, his approach was often problematic. For example, he criticized Zaleski (1987) for comparing modern NDE accounts with Medieval otherworld visions that had near-death contexts. Schlieter stated that this comparison allowed her to “invoke the picture that medieval and modern experiences—the latter’s direct dependency on the former is to be ruled out—share ‘perennial insights’ of life after death” (p. 45). In fact, Zaleski was indeed concerned with demonstrating a “dependency” of modern NDE accounts upon the medieval accounts which she perceived to belong to a *literary* genre. Indeed, she characterized both kinds of narratives as “stories” and even—similar to Schlieter himself—questioned the degree to which NDE accounts represent actual experiences. In criticizing Dinzelsbacher’s (1992) work on the Middle Ages, Schlieter wrote, “he, too, is convinced of the authenticity of medieval reports as ‘reported experiences’” (p. 46)—something of which Zaleski (the “too” reference) was demonstrably *not* convinced. Her determined focus on difference at the expense of similarity certainly did not reveal perennialist beliefs about “life after death.” Her constructivist stance could not be clearer, exemplified by her famous statement that NDEs are “through and through a work of the socially conditioned religious imagination” (Zaleski, 1987, p. 127). She is, in short, Schlieter’s intellectual forebear.

Schlieter also faulted Zaleski (1987) for “astonishingly” leaving a “gap” (p. 46) in her research by not investigating NDEs and otherworld journey accounts *between* the Medieval period and Moody—that is, the timeframe of Schlieter’s own book. Clearly, however, that timeframe was not the subject of Zaleski’s book. Rather than seeing such previous research in terms of scholars exploring the subject in relation to their own specialties and interests, Schlieter saw a deeper, more sinister agenda: He stated that “it is not only an accidental negligence of former studies to skip over centuries—it was essential to their argument” (p. 45) that NDEs can even be compared with earlier NDE-like narratives. What I find “astonishing” is to accuse other scholars—without evidence—of having deliberately ignored data because those data did not fit with their theories.

I also was surprised to read Schlieter inaccurately generalize that previous researchers have been predominately essentialist—seeking only to prove the “transcultural and transhistorical universals” (p. xiii) of NDEs while ignoring cultural particularities and histori-

cal contexts. Even more surprising was his claim that scholars “were above all interested in establishing near-death experiences as authentic visions of . . . an afterlife” (p. ix). In fact, very little scholarship on historical NDEs can be characterized in these ways, including Zaleski (1987), Kellehear (1996), and Shushan (2009, 2016), all of whom Schlieter cited; as well as Carl Becker (1983), John Belanti et al. (2008), and James McClenon (1994), among others who are absent from Schlieter’s bibliography. Such mischaracterizations highlight the sometimes dismissive and cursory way Schlieter engaged with his fellow scholars as he searched for—and believed he found—evidence of their supposed religious agendas.

For example, Schlieter (p. 48) stated that both the historian of religions I. P. Couliano (1991) and I (Shushan, 2009) “transgress the boundaries of a historical survey, expressing a general conviction that there is a space of our disembodied mind in its own right” (p. 48). In fact, in both of those books Schlieter referenced, readers will search in vain for evidence of his claim. Despite quoting Couliano (1991, p. 132) that he “arrives at no particular conclusions” as a result of his historical survey of otherworld journey accounts, Schlieter interpreted as “conviction” Couliano’s mere openness to the *possibility* that science may one day reveal the genuineness of such journeys. The point of Couliano’s (1991, p. 1) survey was to “endeavor to assess how people in different temporal and geographical settings would themselves explain their experiences” of otherworld journeys, and nowhere did he make ontological claims about NDEs.

Likewise, nowhere in my book that Schlieter cited did I argue that NDEs are genuine experiences of leaving the body and going to another world, and my neutral stance on metaphysical interpretations was very clear (e.g., Shushan, 2009: pp. 16, 198–199). The subject of the book was the possible influence of NDEs on afterlife beliefs in early civilizations—not the veridicality or otherwise of NDEs—and it was stressed that my conclusions relied neither on a reductionist nor a survival hypothesis. Schlieter’s erroneous treatment of my work was also noted by another reviewer, sociologist of religion Markus Altena Davidsen (2019, para. 7), who wrote that Schlieter “sometimes slides into an unsubstantiated dismissal of Shushan’s very agenda as apologetic”—in the theological sense of defending a religious theory. Concerning OBEs specifically, Schlieter wrongly asserted that “Shushan takes them as real experiences of an afterlife realm” (p. 50). The quote from my book that he cited to support this misconception said nothing of the kind but, rather, summarized how the “diverse

methods of ascent” of the soul found in ancient descriptions of after-life journeys correspond thematically to the OBE element of NDEs (Shushan, 2009, p. 155). Accepting that people report having OBEs and write about them in culture-specific symbolic ways does not indicate an acceptance that they really left their bodies.

In a similar vein, Schlieter stated that Russell Noyes and Roy Kletti’s (1977) suggestion that the life review reflects “the psyche’s search for ‘meaning’ . . . transgresses a purely naturalistic explanation” (Schlieter, 2018, p. 213), as does their argument that “mystical experiences near death” have “a central value” for the dying (p. 212). The charge regarding their first argument is surprising, for it seems very similar to Schlieter’s own notion of a “death-x-pulse.” Regarding the second argument, the impact such experiences can have on an individual is quite apart from the problem of whether or not those experiences are genuinely metaphysical; indeed, the “value” placed on the experience by the NDEr can be seen in entirely psychological, evolutionarily adaptive, or other naturalistic terms. For Schlieter, it seems, to merely accept that extraordinary experiences can be valuable to the experiencer, or that they can influence beliefs, makes one a transgressor of the scientific method and a participant in a supposed deep-seated religious agenda that defines NDE studies.

These examples reflect a methodologically problematic tactic that Schlieter sometimes employed in his dealings with other scholars: to select a minor passage or phrase in a given work and criticize it in isolation, as if a single error, or supposed error, taken out of context is indicative of the author’s arguments as a whole. Again, using my own 2009 book as an example, Schlieter misrepresented my schema for categorizing components of NDE and afterlife journey narratives. Having adapted my conceptualization from Levi-Strauss, I divided the phenomena into *structure*, which is simply the afterlife narrative itself; *mytheme*, the elements that make up the structure, such as ascent to the other world or encountering a spirit; and *symbol*, the way mythemes are expressed in culture-specific ways, such as the mode of ascent or the identity of the spirit (Shushan, 2009, p. 48). Schlieter wrote, “Far from being precise, Shushan invokes several other categories to circumscribe the status of these universal mythemes” (p. 48). To support this perception, he quoted from my book: “Symbols express mythemes, and mythemes are combined to form the overall narrative structure (myth or NDE report), like a collection of metaphors organized to form an allegory” (Shushan, 2009, p. 156). Schlieter objected to this last phrase, apparently missing the important preposition *like*.

What was, I believe, an obvious attempt to *elucidate* the three categories and their relationships by using a literary simile, Schlieter saw as the introduction of “several other categories,” which apparently proved fatal not only to my book but also to comparisons of religious phenomena in general, for Schlieter wrote,

If the relationship of “symbols,” “metaphors,” and “narratives” on the one side, and mythemes on the other, will not be more thoroughly defined, comparative analysis is threatened by the danger of not being analysis at all, merging all accounts into a prestabilized harmony of supra-empirical evidence. (p. 48)

Thus, despite the dozens of pages in which I had outlined my methodology, theoretical orientations, and “*tripartite* organizational system of categories” (Shushan, 2009, p. 154), a misunderstanding of my use of a simile apparently invalidated the entire endeavor. This dismissal was in lieu of actually engaging with the substantive arguments of the book and the body of cross-cultural evidence I had provided.

Another issue I consider unfortunate regarding Schlieter’s dealings with other scholars is that his tone sometimes seemed dismissive or even hostile. For example, he called anthropologist Walter Y. Evans-Wentz “complacent and patronizing” (p. xx) for his speculations based on ideas found in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* that materialists would have content-less and atheistic afterlife visions. Regarding Kellehear’s (1996) reference to certain sources as “esoteric and unfamiliar” (p. 46), Schlieter obscurely found this description significant enough to call Kellehear out by writing, “Unfamiliar—really? Far from that, as I subsequently show” (p. xvi). When Mark Fox (2003) observed that Couliano (1991) did not consider that NDEs might have a “common core,” Schlieter dismissed this observation as “the traditional judgment of a theologian” (p. 8)—despite the fact that Fox’s book is clearly more a philosophical treatment of the subject than a theological one. It should also be pointed out that there is no single “traditional” theological stance regarding NDEs and a common core: The universalist perspective of someone like Paul Badham (1982)—arguably the most prominent theologian to engage with NDEs in history and across cultures, and whose work also is missing from Schlieter’s discussion—is profoundly different from the postmodernist perspective of someone like Don Cupitt (1998). To refer to “the traditional judgment of a theologian” is akin to saying “the traditional judgment of a philosopher.”

Even more serious are Schlieter’s abundant unsubstantiated accusations of dishonesty, with Raymond Moody bearing much of the brunt.

Schlieter outright suspected Moody (1975) of having been “dishonest” in stating that the NDErs in his first book had no prior knowledge of texts such as those of Swedenborg or the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*—“even though we may not be able to offer any kind of proof” (p. 26). Schlieter went so far as to speculate that Moody’s “own rephrasing [of NDE accounts] altered some narratives in order to fit with the Tibetan account” (p. 26). He also found it “hard to believe” that Moody was unaware of Robert Crookall’s work, so similar were their descriptions of NDE phenomena—again insinuating scholarly deception on Moody’s part (pp. 186–187). Schlieter also doubted Moody’s claim that he discovered esoteric and historical parallels to NDEs “only after collecting the accounts” (p. 221) he published in *Life After Life* (1975), on that grounds that *Schlieter himself* regarded Moody’s research as part of a wider stream of parapsychological studies concerned with survival after death. To Schlieter, then, his own assessment of the disciplinary tradition to which Moody’s work belongs means that it is impossible that Moody could have learned about NDEs independently of preexisting psychological research literature, for Moody’s work “presupposes a better knowledge of the corpus of literature on the paranormal and occult than Moody admits” (p. 221). This assertion is essentially a tautological statement, claiming that Moody could not have learned about NDEs without having prior knowledge of them, and if he claims otherwise, he is dishonest. Schlieter’s only “evidence” for this accusation seems to be the fact of similarity between Moody’s work and previous studies concerning life after death. Although Schlieter cited Fox (2003, p. 23) in support of his assertion, Fox did not actually evaluate Moody’s claim in the same way. Instead, Fox merely observed that despite “Moody’s disavowal of any knowledge of parapsychological literature generally,” his book was part of the overall developments and increased interest in efforts to empirically prove life after death. In fact, Moody’s continuing ignorance of psychological research more generally was revealed in a 2012 quote Schlieter cited: that prior to Moody’s 1975 book *Life After Life* “there was no real scientific examination of the possibility of life after life” (p. 222).

Schlieter also criticized other scholars for treating NDE accounts as indicative of an actual experience, as if accepting the testimonies of the people they are studying is somehow a methodological error. For example, he faulted veteran NDE researcher Bruce Greyson (1983) for taking “the authenticity of individual experiences for granted” (p. 220). To be clear, Schlieter was not faulting Greyson here for believing that NDE reports are indicative of survival; he was faulting

Greyson for treating the reports of experiences as if they refer to actual experiences. Instead, according to Schlieter, Greyson should have assumed that the accounts were wholly invented, implying that most (or all?) NDErs are lying. Schlieter also implied that the accounts in Karlis Osis's (1961) study were invented, stating that Osis "shows no sensitivity to the problem that the reporting parties could compose conventional accounts based on what they felt as being expected by them" (p. 194).

Schlieter's rather extreme employment of the hermeneutics of suspicion is equally pronounced in his treatment of specific NDE accounts. Concerning the well-known NDE of geologist Albert Heim in 1871, Schlieter initially claimed that "for the time being, I should . . . follow the hermeneutics of trust and lend credibility to Heim's reconstruction," though ultimately he stated that "we are forced to conclude" that Heim's experience was "formed" by his prior knowledge of NDEs in a "complex amalgamation of expectation and fulfilment" (p. 110). I consider this to be quite an assumption—and one that appears to be grounded only in the fact of Heim's prior knowledge of the phenomenon. The British physician and astronomer Sir Auckland Geddes (1937) fared even worse, for Schlieter stated—again without evidence—that Geddes only "pretends" that he had no personal experience of mysticism prior to his NDE (p. 175). Concerning Victor D. Solow's 1974 account of his NDE, Schlieter stated without explanation that Solow was "*pretending* to be somewhat skeptical" and that his NDE contained "Gnostic-Esoteric content" (p. 207). Schlieter provided no biographical details about Solow, so it remains unknown to readers whether Solow was someone who might have been familiar with "Gnostic-Esoteric content." In his discussion of Robert Monroe, Schlieter again insinuated dishonesty when stating that Monroe "does not even mention the plain source of so many of his topoi," which Schlieter *assumed* were "the classical theosophists" (p. 204). Schlieter provided no evidence that Monroe was familiar with theosophy: For Schlieter, the similarities between the experiences Monroe described and those described in theosophical texts were themselves enough to damn Monroe as dishonest. This assessment is despite the fact that Schlieter also stated that Monroe's accounts drew more upon science fiction imagery than theosophical. It is also unclear why Monroe was not given the same benefit of the doubt as Heim was—that is, that he was relating actual experiences made up of a "complex amalgamation of expectation and fulfilment" rather than entirely inventing them based on his supposed knowledge of theosophy and science fiction.

Such tactics also feature in Schlieter's discussion of parallels between NDEs and psychedelic drug use in the 1960s. Noting that researcher Walter N. Pankhe described a "white light" among other NDE-like elements, Schlieter wrote that although "this is in line with the bright light of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*," such a parallel "is not too far-fetched" considering that Pankhe knew Timothy Leary and Ralph Metzner as "advisors and close collaborators" (p. 200) and that they were working on a psychedelic interpretation of the *Book*. In other words, for Schlieter, the only way to explain the parallel is that Leary and Metzner must have told Pankhe about Tibetan descriptions of the "bright light." This speculation goes beyond negating Pankhe's account of his own experience, for it insinuates that he was dishonest in claiming to have experienced a bright light at all. Although Schlieter acknowledged that some accounts of LSD experiences bear striking similarities to NDEs, he was, in my view, bizarrely unwilling to accept even "that LSD actually 'caused' these experiences," and yet again he suggested that the similarities are due to prior expectation in both kinds of experiences (p. 218).

The frequent use of scare quotes for terms such as "spiritual," "experiencers," "scientific" (in reference to parapsychology), "reincarnation research," and so on, gives me the impression that Schlieter doubted every aspect of every claim ever made concerning NDEs. Those who write books of personal testimonies of NDEs, in which the experiencer undergoes a spiritual or religious transformation, Schlieter somewhat sarcastically "paraphrased" as, "Now I know! I should write a book—has it not been commanded—I should share my experience!" (p. 209). There is no consideration of the fact that NDErs throughout history have felt compelled to share their experiences, sometimes ostensibly following instructions from a spirit or deity, and that the theme can itself be seen as a recurring element of NDEs.

I found Schlieter's treatment of early psychical research also to be problematic, and for me he did not convincingly demonstrate his claim that "the central protagonists of psychical studies and parapsychology were interested in near-death reports within the confinements of a religious agenda" (p. 136). The fact that he did not define "religious" in this context creates confusion, for although few psychical researchers had an explicitly Christian agenda, it seems that Schlieter used "religious" in a much broader way, to encompass the very notion of life after death. If that is the case, his assertion is uncontroversial in the sense that one of the primary goals of psychical research was to obtain scientific proof of life after death. Criticizing psychical research for be-

ing concerned with the subject is akin to criticizing zoology for being concerned with animals. The implication that its metaphysical concerns make it by definition a “religious” endeavor could also be made about quantum physics, physical cosmology, evolutionary biology, or any branch of science that seeks to explain phenomena that religions also seek to explain, such as the origins of the universe, the ontological nature of consciousness, or life on Earth. Rather than revealing a “religious agenda,” the Frederic Myers (in Gurney et. al. 1886) quotes Schlieter cited to support his argument actually express that psychical research does *not* support any particular religion, though that science and religion may agree on the matter of life after death. Even Myers’s (1903) remark about “the Resurrection of Christ” seems less evangelical than intended to make the point that the evidence from psychical research makes the resurrection more believable—not vice versa.

In his discussion of an NDE reported by Geddes (1937), Schlieter attributed quotations to Geddes whereas, in fact, they derive from a first-person verbatim account by the NDEr himself “taken down in shorthand by a skilled secretary as life was re-establishing itself” (Geddes, 1937, p. 374). In his own discussion of the NDE, Geddes wrote that he did not know if the experience should be considered a dream or “a symbolic vision of one aspect of reality translated into inadequate words” (p. 376). Indeed, Geddes was careful to distinguish between science and the supernatural: “There is absolutely nothing in the record which is metaphysical. The whole adventure, if such it were, took place on the plane of Nature. It is thus to be sharply distinguished from the records of the spiritual adventures of the mystics. These belong to the plane of spirit, which is supernatural” (p. 377). Despite these qualifications, however, Geddes’s statement that he regarded the NDE as a “symbolic impression of man’s body-soul as it disintegrates in death”—again, a notion reminiscent from Schlieter’s own “death-x-pulse”—is curiously interpreted by Schlieter as implying a *belief in* survival. Likewise, Schlieter alleged that Geddes’s *criticisms* of Christianity brought him “closer to Christian metaculture” (p. 175). I came away from these interpretations with a sense that if Schlieter could not find the evidence he sought, he would turn the existing evidence on its head so that it appeared to support his own assumptions and arguments. The result was that Schlieter represented many scholars as having *really* meant precisely the opposite of what they actually had written.

Although the NDE of Dr. A. S. Wiltse (1889) was reported in a

US medical journal, Schlieter stated that the account “demonstrates how the Christian and Occult-Spiritualist metacultures may incorporate a scientific stance” (p. 139). Thus, Schlieter saw the account as a “Christian and Occult-Spiritualist” one rather than a scientific one and reduced the scientific context to a mere “stance.” He did not appear to take seriously Wiltse’s scientific curiosity about his NDE or his claims of detached observation of the experience—and even deliberate experimentation—*while* he was undergoing it. Schlieter’s argument appeared to be that because the Theosophists utilized alleged scientific evidence from NDEs to legitimize their teachings, Wiltse’s attempt at scientific legitimization of his own experience aligned him with Theosophy rather than with science. This inverted logic allowed Schlieter to recast one of the key principles of the scientific method—seeking objective evidence—as something grounded in religion rather than science. Schlieter made this determination about the case despite the absence of any indication that Wiltse had knowledge of Occult traditions and in contradiction to Wiltse’s statement that he “had not believed all the Church tenets” (p. 139). As Schlieter himself summarized, Wiltse “declares that he did not adhere to any religious belief before the experience, but developed and proclaimed in its aftermath an own, ‘better’ faith” (p. 140)—that is, one distinct from Christianity. Schlieter also inaccurately stated that Wiltse “expects” that “a heavenly messenger will take him to heaven” in keeping with his “Christian metaculture!” What Wiltse (1889) actually described was “feeling miserable” during a distressing part of his NDE, when “a face so full of ineffable love and tenderness appeared to me for an instant.” It reassured him about his gloomy thoughts but did not “take him to heaven” (p. 360). Indeed, it was Schlieter (2018, p. 139) who referred to the being Wiltse encountered as “God,” whereas Wiltse himself called it a “vast intelligence” (1889, p. 360), and in fact the account is highly idiosyncratic rather than reflective of Christian tenets about the nature of afterlife. The result of Schlieter’s misreading of the case is that the scientist Wiltse is damned as a Christian Occultist by vague, thematic associations with Theosophy and because his NDE included elements that Schlieter—not Wiltse—interpreted as necessarily Christian. Likewise, Schlieter seemed to deem insignificant Hornell Hart’s (1954) background as a sociologist because he was allegedly “firmly based in the Spiritualist-Occult tradition” (p. 179).

My criticisms here are certainly not to argue that Wiltse’s NDE—or anyone else’s—occurred in a cultural void or that the ways in which NDEs manifest or how they are recounted are not influenced by pre-

existing knowledge of religious or spiritual ideas. Early psychical researchers clearly did come from a predominantly Christian background, which impacted their thinking and how they expressed their theories. That fact does not, however, equal a discipline-wide “religious agenda,” though one could certainly argue for a religious or spiritual agenda *on a case-by-case basis*. I would not argue with Schlieter’s assessment of geologist Robert Crookall’s (1960) work being rooted in “Spiritualist-Occult,” “Gnostic-Esoteric,” and Christian metacultures (p. 189), for example. It seems, however, that for Schlieter, any scientist or scholar of NDEs is tarred retroactively with the same brush simply on the grounds of their research interests and their willingness to take seriously the evidence of the cases they study.

The discussion of early psychical research thus lays a shaky foundation for Schlieter’s claim that since its advent in the 1970s, the field of near-death studies has always been “religious discourse” and that even “the introduction of the term . . . followed almost exclusively a religious agenda” (p. xv). Although few serious NDE researchers have argued for an explicitly religious interpretation of the phenomenon—Maurice Rawlings and Michael Sabom being notable exceptions—Schlieter asserted that arguing for a survival interpretation of NDEs makes one necessarily “religious” (p. 17). He did not consider that atheists, agnostics, and those who identify as spiritual but not religious can have rational beliefs in an afterlife grounded in *philosophical* traditions, in scientific evidence, or, indeed, in their own spontaneous experiences. Belief in an afterlife is not predicated upon theism—or upon adherence to any religious tradition. Schlieter’s notion of “religious” appears to be so broad that it encompasses even the very notion that “there is a deeper level of consciousness, to be found cross-culturally and chiefly independent of historical circumstances” (p. 202). Arguments for such a theory could be made from any number of secular positions, however, including anthropology, psychology, cognitive science, and neurophysiology.

On the grounds that researchers such as Osis and Haraldsson (1986) and Ian Stevenson (1966) argued for or even entertained the *possibility* of a survival hypothesis, Schlieter deemed their work to be “Esoteric parapsychology” (p. 197). This categorization is in contrast to Celia Green’s (1968) work on OBEs, which Schlieter considered to be “halfway to strict empirical research” (p. 197)—implying, of course, that her work was somehow half *not* empirical, and that Osis and Haraldsson’s and Stevenson’s were even less so. Although Schlieter did argue convincingly for the religious *contexts* of interpretations

that *certain* researchers have made—notably Osis and Haraldsson (1986)—he did not show how their research is not empirical; indeed, I found an adequate critique of any scientific methodology to be fundamentally lacking in Schlieter’s commentary. As he did with earlier psychical researchers, Schlieter faulted Stevenson (1966) for the very subject of his research: seeking “empirical evidence for reincarnation.” In addition, he criticized Stevenson for “always insinuating a ‘survivalist’ conclusion” (p. 197)—an implication I find to be unfounded in my reading of Stevenson’s work. Although Schlieter stated that researchers “often share the paranormal beliefs of the experiencers” (p. 4), the example he cited was Sam Parnia—again, without supporting evidence. In fact, Parnia himself has stated that he has no religious beliefs and that he has used science to address questions previously the domain of religions (Adams, 2013). Nowhere did Schlieter consider that NDE researchers may have turned to metaphysical interpretations of the phenomenon following a scientific assessment of the evidence; instead, he assumed that their interpretations necessarily followed preexisting religious commitments and “agendas.” Indeed, one might get the impression from Schlieter’s book that these researchers are not legitimate scientists at all.

Schlieter’s reluctance to properly engage with evidential claims about NDEs is further reflected in his treatment of the so-called “Peak-in-Darien” phenomenon. He only partially summarized Osis (1961) in stating that the term refers to reports in which “spirits of dead relatives come and aid the dying in their passage to the other world” (p. 193; cf. p. 196). In fact, it is much more complex and interesting than that, for it more precisely refers to when the patient “sees a dead person *about whose death he has not been informed*” (Osis, 1961, pp. 16–17). Schlieter was aware of this component, elsewhere accurately summarizing the phenomenon as cases “in which experiencers see recently dead persons not known to have died, so that an illusory confirmation can be ruled out” (p. 97). He also cited Greyson’s (2010) article on the subject, in which Greyson explained precisely why “cases of this kind provide some of the most persuasive evidence for the survival of consciousness after bodily death” (p. 159)—though Schlieter did not discuss it. Nor did he discuss claims of veridical observations during OBEs (Rivas et al., 2016) or other such alleged evidence and, indeed, did not privilege accounts reported within scientific contexts over overtly religious ones in terms of reliability. It is true that Schlieter’s interest in reductionist explanations of NDEs was primarily in relation to how they impact NDE accounts and their

reception in the West—specifically, that they put “constant pressure on how to justify the meaningfulness” of NDEs in religious/spiritual ways (p. 41). His skeptical approach is certainly appropriate, and not all books on NDEs require a rehearsal of the pros and cons of the survival hypothesis. Nevertheless, partially formed efforts to debunk various aspects of that hypothesis are scattered throughout the book rather than being given due attention. In a book about particular religious and cultural aspects of the phenomenon, such discussions seem misplaced. This observation is not to defend the survival hypothesis or to make any claims about the evidence of NDEs but, rather, to note Schlieter’s cursory treatment of them.

I also found problems with Schlieter’s comparative methodology, which reverberated throughout the book. As argued forcefully by the famous historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith (1982), similarity does not by definition indicate genealogy—or, indeed, *any* particular theory (cf. Shushan, 2009, pp. 10–13; Shushan, 2018, pp. 4–5, 12, 217, 226–227; Shushan 2013 *passim*). Many of Schlieter’s negative assessments of the claims of both researchers and NDErs are rooted in his attempts to explain in strict genealogical terms the similarities between NDE reports and (a) earlier NDE reports, and (b) parallels in religious and spiritual writings. His arguments are wholly reliant on *assumptions* about intertextuality or borrowing, and Schlieter based those assumptions almost entirely on the mere fact of similarity. Thus, because Moody’s description of NDEs bears similarities to afterlife descriptions in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, his description of NDEs must be grounded in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* rather than in actual NDEs. Indeed, Schlieter argued, Moody and “his followers” used the *Book* as their “model” in their “construction” of NDEs (p. 25). The similarity of descriptions, however, does nothing to indicate that NDErs do *not* have experiences that they interpret in culturally relevant ways—and that happen to have certain elements in common with the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (which itself may likely reflect such experiences). Arguments based on these kinds of assumptions are common throughout the book. Schlieter considered two 16th century Algonquin Native American NDEs—which he wrongly called “death-bed visions”—to belong to “Christian metaculture” on the grounds that they contain elements familiar from Christian concepts of heaven and hell and that they were related by British explorer Thomas Hariot (1588, p. 56). In reasoning this way, Schlieter essentially precluded the possibility that the experiences genuinely occurred as reported—or even that they emerged from an Algonquin religious-cultural mi-

lieu with only incidental similarities to certain Christian doctrines. Schlieter's interpretation is despite the fact that one of the NDEs was said to have occurred some years before Hariot's arrival (1588, pp. 37–38). Schlieter was thus able to undermine the implications of the accounts by making subjective genealogical determinations about cross-cultural similarity. This approach begs the question of under what circumstances might any NDE account qualify as a product of its own culture rather than that of the person who reported it. Very few of the dozens of examples from indigenous societies (see Shushan, 2018) were written directly by indigenous people; rather they were related to and reported by missionaries, explorers, and ethnographers. Should they all be considered part of the "Christian metaculture" on the grounds that most of those authors were Christian? Or should accounts collected by atheistic anthropologists be considered atheistic despite descriptions of encountering deities in other worlds? If Schlieter were to collect and summarize an account from the Navajo, would that account qualify as Navajo or as being part of Schlieter's particular German philosophical metaculture? In his determination to prove that "reports of near-death experiences are essentially a continuation" (p. xv) of Christian and Western Esoteric "discourses" combined with influences from Eastern traditions, he scarcely considered alternative ways of explaining the similarities of accounts over time.

Schlieter objected to scholars regarding the Algonquin accounts as "evidence for the cross-cultural salience of NDEs" (p. 57). He considered my own summary of one of them to be "a perfect example of how post-Moodian beliefs are read into a historical document" (p. 57). In the article he cited (Shushan, 2016, p. 72), to introduce NDEs to readers unfamiliar with the phenomena, I very briefly—for illustrative purposes—summarized six historical accounts from 7th century BCE China to early 20th century southern Africa. Although the Hariot (1588) NDE summary comprised but two sentences and the account was not addressed again in the article, I must acknowledge that it does contain an editing error I made when choosing between the Algonquin example and a Ho-Chunk example from 1909 that includes a clear description of an NDEr who "saw his corpse below"—which, incidentally, is only one of many examples of indigenous autoscopic OBEs I have found. Schlieter was correct that neither Algonquin example describes overt autoscopic phenomena, though both contain language suggestive of OBEs more generally. The first describes where the NDEr's "soul had been" (Hariot, 1588, pp. 37–38), making it clear that the journey to the otherworld was out-of-body. The second relates

how the NDEr's "body had lain dead in the grave, yet his soul was alive, and traveled far in a long broad way" (Harriot, 1588, p. 38). Both accounts also feature other typical NDE elements. The first describes reaching a limit or barrier to the other world and being sent back by a deity to tell others of the experience, whereas the second includes entering an idyllic landscape and being sent back by a deceased relative to tell others of the experience (cf. Shushan 2018, pp. 21–22). It is curious that Schlieter did not discuss any of the other historical examples I gave in the article or those cited in additional works by myself and other scholars. Nor did he engage with the actual substance of the article, which is of more immediate relevance to Schlieter's book: the argument that NDEs present a serious challenge to cultural-linguistic constructivist interpretations of religious experience, such as those argued by Schlieter. Instead, he again took a minor passage out of context and presented it as indicative of the author's arguments as a whole. Ultimately, Schlieter's statement that "it should be obvious that such documents cannot be taken as immediate evidence for transcultural, ubiquitous experiences" (p. 57) is undermined by a mass of cross-cultural evidence to the contrary, including his own footnote mentioning—without discussing—the NDE of an 18th century "Mexican princess" (p. 57, n.3).

In addition to assuming that similarities are due to genealogy, in order to sustain the argument of the cultural construction of NDEs, Schlieter also emphasized differences between accounts. This emphasis involved what I consider imaginative interpretations of the texts—and curious assumptions about their contexts. In the first example he discussed, that of Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century, he interpreted a reference to the NDEr feeling like he was "coming from the other world" not as a description of experience but as "a metaphor for the memorized experiences of a 'shock' state disconnected from the usual life world" (p. 55). Schlieter also stated that the out-of-body "travels" of medieval monks and nuns "were usually not connected to near-death situations" (p. 117), when in fact many were, including those of the Spanish monk Peter as reported by Gregory the Great, Fursa, Barontus, Drythelm, the Monk of Wenlock, Ansgar, Bernoldus, Tundale, and Christina Mirabilis, among others. Readers may recall at this point Schlieter's claim, quoted earlier, that OBEs were not integrated into NDE narratives until "the last two decades of the 19th century" (p. 52). As with any experience, there is no reason to expect NDEs to be precisely "the same" between any two individuals—and, indeed, differences were pointed out as far back as Moody (1975), who

stressed that no single NDE contained *all* the elements he had identified. In fact, I can think of no scholar of NDEs who has claimed that all such experiences are “the same” between any two individuals, let alone across history and cultures.

Although the loosely chronological organization of the book facilitated Schlieter’s discussion about the development of NDE discourse, it perhaps gives an exaggerated impression of the degree to which the three “metacultures” truly interacted in their alleged “construction” of NDEs. Because Naturalist, Christian, and Occult metacultures each had their own cultural-historical particularities and paths of development, in my view, Schlieter’s approach served to decontextualize them to some extent. Schlieter was always careful to designate the metaculture to which each NDE discourse allegedly belongs, so I would hesitate to say that he conflated them; nevertheless, however, he treated them as a single cultural-historical stream, which sometimes resulted in confusing organizational issues. The NDE of Schwedtfeger (p. 60), for example, was returned to in the section on Du Monchaux’s NDE without transition and without returning to the original subject (p. 63). Likewise, a section on Mormon NDEs switched to a discussion on unrelated material concerning philosophers and mesmerism, with no return to the Mormons (pp. 79–81). A section on “Clairvoyant Visions Near Death in American Spiritualism” (pp. 92–98) included a return to considering NDEs in naturalist/medical contexts (pp. 97–98). Arguing for a “historical coevolution of drug reports and near-death reports” (p. 78), Schlieter discussed both types of experiences alternately and only semi-chronologically.

Furthermore, I found that Schlieter’s strategy of embedding repeated constructivist arguments throughout the discussion distracted from the narrative flow. The numerous theoretical digressions made the progression of his arguments difficult to follow, resulting in a generally diffuse though very dense book to read. A more engaging and perhaps more convincing approach might have been to present the historical discussions in turn, then, once all the evidence had been presented, follow them with a theoretical discussion. As it stands, one gets the impression that Schlieter embarked on the project with constructivist convictions in place prior to outlining his evidence, putting him in the position of having to attempt to demonstrate and justify those convictions multiple times along the way. These issues were exacerbated by a sometimes awkward syntax and writing style. For example: “The phenomenological perspective that takes reports for experiences suffers from a more general failure, namely, to project the

radical individuation of dying (of an autonomous individual), which is, existentially speaking, certainly the case, into the ‘authenticity’ of the reports” (p. 47). Word choices were also sometimes curious, as when he wrote that I “admonish” (p. 49) readers simply by pointing out that the main consistencies between NDEs and afterlife beliefs lie in religious and mythological descriptions of afterlife journeys (Shushan, 2009, p. 160). There are, in addition, instances of contradictory statements. For example, Schlieter wrote that “in recent scientific research on near-death experiences, remarks on the literary and narrative forms have been astonishingly commonplace,” whereas in the very next sentence he stated that “research adopts almost exclusively” the idea of examining experience “from the point of view of the experienter” (p. 5, quoting Kellehear, 1996, p. 43).

In conclusion, I consider this book to have been at its best when Schlieter retained his focus on the history of the reception of NDEs in Christian and Esoteric thought after the Medieval period. I found his discussions on the relationships between NDEs and the opium and hashish literature of the 19th century, for example, to be astute and knowledgeable. Readers more interested in those aspects of the book and less interested in the meta-analysis and constructivist hypothesizing will fortunately find much to engage them. Some of the less widely known NDEs Schlieter discussed will make the book of interest to researchers and other regular readers of this journal. As a reflexive analysis of the history of NDE studies, I found much food for thought in Schlieter’s observations. Nevertheless, whereas I found that his grasp of the historical material within his main timeframe was erudite and clearly showed a great deal of research and thought, the same cannot always be said of his grasp of NDE studies. This incompleteness was particularly apparent when he discussed cross-cultural and historical cases outside his area of expertise and when he addressed the nature of evidential claims surrounding NDEs that have emerged from the scientific community.

The extent to which philosophical minutiae is interrogated will likely be of interest only to a narrow segment of specialists in the study of religions and related fields, particularly those concerned with contemporary theoretical issues, historiography, and metatheory. Those who accept even the most basic axioms of near-death studies—such as that people actually have NDEs and that they describe them in accordance with their cultural idiosyncrasies—may find themselves baffled by Schlieter’s stance. Readers who are sympathetic to the idea that NDEs may be proof of an afterlife or who are hoping to gain spiritual,

religious, or metaphysical insight and expecting the book to explore its eponymous question, “What is it like to be dead?” will likely be disappointed with this book.

Treating NDE accounts as narrative artifacts that intersect with the popular, religious, and scientific currents of their times and tracing the way these strands developed in tandem over time is a fascinating and worthy endeavor. Such an approach does not require the scholar to make statements about the ontological status of NDEs, however, and in this case refraining from doing so would have made for an overall more satisfying and compelling book. Ultimately, I do not believe that Schlieter has convincingly demonstrated that NDEs can be reduced to merely culturally-created narratives that have developed as purely literary artifacts over time; nor has he “accomplished the historical genealogy of the different topoi and strands that were bundled by Moody with the generic term near-death experience” as he claimed (p. 218). The mental hurdles required to accept these constructivist proposals necessitate (a) ignoring an abundance of conflicting evidence, (b) accepting that scholars and researchers of NDEs are, as a rule, motivated by religious agendas prior to their research, and (c) accepting that NDE accounts are the fictive results of the prior beliefs of so-called “experiencers.” His arguments effectively constitute a wholesale dismissal of (a) essentially all NDE research, regardless of discipline or conclusion, on the inaccurate claim that it is necessarily rooted in religion rather than science, and (b) NDE personal testimonies on the unproven claim that they are either culturally-constructed hallucinations or outright fabrications. The competing hypothesis is more parsimonious, more logical, and more in line with the actual evidence: that NDEs are pan-human experiences that vary by individual and culture, both in phenomenology and in how they are reported and integrated into local belief systems. Schlieter’s arguments invert the notion that NDEs can be the foundation for new beliefs about life after death, despite cross-cultural claims to that effect by NDErs themselves (Shushan, 2018). Although Schlieter cited two of the main sources to engage explicitly with constructivist interpretations of NDEs (Fox, 2003; Shushan, 2016), he surprisingly did not engage substantively with their arguments.

Though couched in new terminology, Schlieter’s “death-x-pulse” notion essentially (a) makes the uncontroversial statement that NDE phenomena are caused by being near death or believing that one is; (b) makes an argument, familiar from NDE skeptics, that the experience itself, after being triggered by the near-death or fear-death event,

is constructed entirely from the individual's memories and expectations; and (c) implies that when the phenomenology of an NDE account did not conform to what Schlieter expected to result from the trigger, the NDEr is probably making it all up, which brings the reader back to the alternative—the hard constructivist stance that denies that any experience happened at all.

What I consider to have been an unfortunate combative tone sometimes gave the impression that Schlieter had a vendetta against the entire cross-disciplinary field of near-death studies. When he stated that it was not his “aim to drive unnecessary nails into the coffin of near-death experiences” (p. xi), one wonders at his motivation for writing an entire monograph on a subject he considered to be a dead issue. To me, the book sometimes seemed to take on polemical tones, which is ironic for a work designed with such determination to reveal supposed hidden agendas in the works of other scholars. At the same time, I found both his misunderstandings of the work of many of those other scholars and his assumptions about their motivations based upon those misunderstandings to be troubling. His statement that his book is the first work that “offers an intellectual and social history of near-death discourse as religious discourse” (p. xv) seems grandiose when one considers the existence of other works that could fit such a description (Fox, 2003; Kellehear, 1996; Pothoff, 2017; Shushan, 2016b, 2017, 2018; Zaleski, 1987).

Although it is certainly an important endeavor to attempt to fill the Medieval-modern gap in historical near-death studies, Schlieter scarcely considered the influence of earlier accounts on those of his own period. Similarly, though he made generalizations about cross-cultural NDEs and their alleged lack of consistency with Western NDEs, the actual treatment of them was minimal. Greater consideration of such material would have helped to contextualize the main examples with which Schlieter was concerned and to elucidate and more convincingly demonstrate his genealogical-constructivist claims, if possible—while also revealing more fully the potential challenges to them.

To summarize my assessment, Schlieter has produced a deeply problematic but nevertheless fascinating contribution to the literature. Despite my criticisms, the book is unquestionably an important one. Schlieter's critique of potential religious biases in NDE researchers from all disciplines will hopefully lead to a more open, reflexive approach to new studies—in which prior metaphysical commitments are made clear. Though missing from Schlieter's own book, this type

of “full disclosure” is common practice in fields such as the study of religions and anthropology, and, considering that so many people see NDEs in spiritual or religious terms, it should also be so in the field of near-death studies. Though there is much with which I would disagree, Schlieter’s concluding chapter dealing with “The Religious Functions of Near-Death Experiences”—both in near-death studies and in NDE-based spiritual movements—is essential reading for anyone interested in the sociology of the contemporary NDE “scene,” alongside a philosophical discussion of the processes by which NDE reports lend legitimacy to religious ideas.

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