

Religious Wars or Healthy Competition in the NDE Movement?

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ABSTRACT: In the early years of near-death research many organized religions rejected the near-death experience (NDE) as a legitimate expression of religious faith. More recently numerous religious apologists have laid claim to NDEs as verifying particular theological beliefs. I see this as a healthy competition between religions, and a competition that results from the very success of the near-death research effort. Religious apologists, however, must be reasonably objective in any juxtapositions of religious philosophy with NDE findings. I point out some problems in this regard with Michael Sabom's recent work. I also argue that Kenneth Ring's recent statements that we might not now be headed toward "Omega" as he once thought may be premature.

Some time ago my friend and fellow near-death researcher, Kenneth Ring, sent me a preliminary draft of his essay (Ring, 2000) stimulated by Michael Sabom's book, *Light & Death* (1998), and asked me to comment on it. Since I had recently read Sabom's book I readily agreed. As I expected, Ring's paper was full of thought-provoking ideas. I found particularly fascinating his development of the interrelationship between the secular goals of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) with the gradual, and more recent rapid, shift to a religious thrust.

One issue raised by both Ring and Sabom that needs to be addressed is the so-called intrusion of religion into the province of secularists who present their more "objective" views of near-death research findings. My perspective is that this competitive thrust by religion into the world of the near-death experience (NDE) is a healthy event and one occasioned by the success of decades of research on NDEs.

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Heading Toward Omega

Ring's essay summarized his reasons for changing his ideas about reaching Omega. He pointed out that his ideas have matured since he originally wrote *Heading Toward Omega* (1984), and he is no longer as optimistic about civilization's ability to become more civilized. From my perspective, I would not be too quick to dismiss the Omega theory. It is true that people have been hoping and searching for Camelots, Shangri-Las, Edens, and Omegas since the dawn of time. But Ring's own research has indicated progress. In the 1970s he conducted some very insightful studies, which he reported in *Heading Toward Omega* (1984) in a chapter labeled "Planetary Visions of Near-Death Experiencers." Numerous individuals that he interviewed reported having seen in vision catastrophic events occurring in the early 1980s, which did not occur as envisioned.

My research showed, and continues to show, similar findings. Howard Storm's experience shed the most light on the subject. In his NDE he saw a disastrous worldwide depression occurring in the near future. But then he also saw an alternative scenario in which universal peace and plenty were achieved. He was told that the alternative scenario could occur if the world turned in a more righteous direction (Gibson, 1994).

It would seem, then, since we have not yet fallen into Armageddon, that the world must have moved somewhat in the direction of Omega. So let us not completely abandon hope. It is true that there is much in the world that represents evil of the worst kind. But there is also much to illustrate righteousness of the highest kind. The media amply illustrate the former, but there is less disclosure given to the gentle acts of goodness done each day by millions of people. There are still Mother Therasas in the world.

Religious Wars in the NDE Movement

Sabom has a chapter in his book entitled "Church: Battleground for the NDE," and Ring titled his paper, "Religious Wars in the NDE Movement." Rather than "religious wars," I would use the term "religious competition." Despite what one calls it, I agree that there is such competition. One of the most fascinating aspects of this increased desire to be identified with the NDE movement has to do with the reasons for wanting to latch onto the NDE bandwagon.

In the early years of near-death studies many organized religions rejected such experiences as being false imitations of the religious experience—or worse, being Satanic. The Latter-day Saint (LDS) or Mormon Church, to which I belong, could not reject them out-of-hand even if it wanted to, because similar experiences were so firmly embedded in the church's history. But why the intense desire by many, if not most, religions to now associate themselves with the NDE?

In my view the reason has to do with the success of near-death researchers and experiencers in convincing the world (aside from an isolated portion of the scientific community) that these experiences are real and cannot be readily dismissed. Moreover it has become increasingly clear to objective observers that there is a spiritual and otherworldly component of the NDE that really should have a home in the world's religions. Because of the widespread recognition of these facts the religious community has reconsidered its original judgments of this burgeoning phenomenon. Too many of their members are now challenging the hierarchies to explain individual experiences, which can no longer be authoritatively dismissed so easily.

So, what must apologists for various religions, such as Sabom and I, do? Obviously, we should look for patterns in the NDE that are similar to patterns found in our own theologies. The problems come in how we identify and present those patterns. Our inherent biases can obscure or even emasculate our findings if we are not careful—just as can the biases of non-religionists. Ring's essay was very clear on these hazards. As he so carefully pointed out, there is nothing inherently wrong with presenting the research results from a religious apologetic, as long as the results are displayed accurately and objectively. It is only when the conclusions of the author are at odds with the data or are force-fitted into a formulaic rendition of the particular religion being studied that he or she should be called to task. Unfortunately, in that regard, I did find that Sabom misquoted and distorted some of Ring's work.

Ring did take to task, perhaps with some justification, a few of my Mormon colleagues for not declaring their religious affiliations in their NDE writings. It is interesting to me, though, that Mormons are so often chastised for not identifying themselves as such, while there is no similar cry for, say, Episcopalians to similarly identify themselves. Even more importantly, I wait in vain for an outcry against those antireligious authors, many in academia, to declare their philosophic stripes. Their writings are often assumed to be "objective" when, in fact, their antireligious biases permeate their writings.

Ring quoted Raymond Moody's book, *The Last Laugh* (1999), in which Moody derided "funda-Christians" with satiric humor. Moody's humor was directed at that group, again, perhaps with some justification, because of their attacks on his earlier writings. Here, Ring made a good point as he illustrated another aspect of the "religious wars," and it is a pity. If one were to identify a single word that exemplifies the message of those who glimpse eternity in their near-death journeys, that word would be "love." Surely we in the religious community—and those in the secular community—can pick up on this message of love and incorporate more of it in our writings.

As a final observation to be made at this point, therefore, I would make a plea for greater collegiality amongst those of us attempting to present data that may or may not correlate well with our particular philosophies. In a sense this competition for a place at the table should be embraced rather than shunned. It surely is a recognition by the religious community that near-death research is succeeding in its goal of bringing greater knowledge of what the NDE is all about. And so I appeal to Sabom and Ring, for heaven's sake (and I expect to join them in that not-so-exclusive place), in their future writings to use their obviously formidable talents to strengthen each of us in our attempts to demonstrate to the world the magnificence of the NDE message. And as Ring's Omega goals of yesteryear dreamt of an increasingly spiritual dawning, let us all be participants in helping to bring that dream closer to reality.

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