

Response to Kenneth Ring's "Religious Wars in the NDE Movement: Some Personal Reflections on Michael Sabom's *Light & Death*"

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ABSTRACT: This article responds to 15 excerpts from Kenneth Ring's paper that question the accuracy and integrity of *Light & Death* (Sabom, 1998).

I am grateful for this opportunity to respond to Kenneth Ring's reflections on *Light & Death* (Sabom, 1998). Although Ken and I have been friends and colleagues for the past two decades, he has raised serious questions about the integrity and accuracy of my book. With rhetoric more fitting a back-alley fist fight than a professional journal, he has accused me of "blatant distortions," "recklessness," "paranoia," and a "patent desire to discredit." He has characterized portions of my book as "troubling," "unfair," "outlandish," "obviously preposterous," "tendentious," "wayward," "utterly unfounded," "baseless," "greatly exaggerated," and "pure hokum."

Ken's critical remarks mainly reference Chapter 6 of *Light & Death*, entitled "Church: The Battleground for the NDE." There, I analyzed his 1980 editorial in which he inveighed against the use of near-death experience (NDE) research for hortatory purposes and mused that "If NDE research ends up simply providing new swords with which to wage old religious wars, I will regret very bitterly my involvement with this work" (Ring, 1980a, p. 16). His attack on *Light & Death* is also aimed at my Biblical analysis of the NDE found in

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Chapter 11, entitled "Conclusions: The Bible and the Near-Death Experience."

In writing *Light & Death*, I was especially concerned with accuracy and fairness. The prepublication manuscript was carefully reviewed by two prominent near-death researchers very familiar with the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) and Ken's work. Although *neither* of these researchers shares my religious beliefs, they both agreed with the substance of the chapter dealing with Ken. One reviewer wrote that I handled Ken "with a gentle hand and without the mean-spiritedness that sometimes creeps into others' books."

Since publication of *Light & Death*, I have received two additional reviews from respected, nonChristian NDE researchers. Both were complimentary of the book's tone and content. The comments of one are particularly apropos:

What I like about your book is that your Christian perspective is right up front. Since it's up front, I can call it a perspective rather than a bias. I can agree or disagree with particular statements that you clearly make from your perspective, but I'm not worrying that you have "biases," i.e. that your hidden perspective has led you to seriously distort the data and so mislead others about the data.

In view of these reviews from four leaders in the NDE field, I was surprised by the vehemence of Ken's remarks. In this paper, I will examine the substance of his concerns. I will restate the major methodological problems that I found with his study reported in *Heading Toward Omega* (Ring, 1984), and will reassess how these problems skewed his results and led, in part, to several important differences in our findings. I will establish the accuracy of my statements regarding his Religious Beliefs Inventory. I will reexplore his interconnections with other near-death investigators and their sharing of research pools; and I will again call into question the "independently-conducted" nature of these studies.

I will show, using multiple references to Ken's work, that he transgressed the line between the objective reporting of data and the advocacy of religious beliefs. My concern here is not with the *type* of belief system he advocated, but with his methodology and his use of near-death research for hortatory purposes. While it is true that in Chapter 11 I used the Bible to evaluate the NDE, the analysis of Ken's work in Chapter 6 was not linked to my Biblical evaluation of the NDE in that last chapter of my book.

I will also show that I avoided similar hortatory rhetoric in *Light & Death* and will demonstrate that Ken's attack on my Biblical analysis

of the NDE in Chapter 11—a chapter for which he had neither “the heart, the interest, or the space to try to review”—is not, as he claims, a rebuttal to the arbitrarily-constructed “world according to Sabom,” but an attack on Biblical Christianity itself.

Finally, it is important to note that *Light & Death* was completed prior to the publication of Ken’s *Lessons from the Light* (Ring and Valarino, 1998). Although I include some material from *Lessons from the Light* in the responses below, my book dealt only with his prior work.

You begin your analysis, Ken, by claiming that I improperly portrayed and labeled you as the “prophet” of “the Omega religion.” However, my description of you as “bearded” at our first meeting in Charlottesville was not a “stylistic flourish” to cast you “as the would-be head of this faux religion,” but accurately reflects the *photograph* I took of you at that meeting. Moreover, what I wrote in *Light & Death* was: “Believing his near-death experiencers to be ‘prophets,’ Ken devised . . .” (p. 134). “Prophets” there referred to your NDErs, not to you. This word was placed in quotations to indicate it was *your* word, not mine, since you referred to your NDErs as “*prophets* preaching a religion” (Ring, 1980b, p. 255, italics added). I will examine this important phrase more fully in my response to the excerpts from your commentary that encompass the heart of your complaints.

Ring Excerpt 1:

In discussing the research for my book, Heading Toward Omega (Ring, 1984), . . . you claimed that I interviewed “a highly select group of 20 or so near-death experiencers” (p. 134). I do not know where you got that impression, Mike. First of all, there was nothing “highly selected” about the persons who comprised the interviewees for this research; they were just the people who happened to come to my attention at the time or who sought me out. As far as that goes, you never said how you selected your Atlanta sample of NDErs. Just as some NDErs may have come to my door and remained, as it were, to be interviewed, I assume you got yours in pretty much the same way.

Ken, the sentence that you question in *Light & Death* reads: “A highly select group of 20 or so near-death experiencers was interviewed by Ken ‘to glean the real, hidden meaning of these NDEs’” (p. 134). The “20 or so near-death experiencers” to whom I referred were those in your study who had “unusually deep NDEs.” Since you claimed that *these* NDErs gave you “the most informed understanding of the meaning and implications of NDEs” (Ring, 1984, p. 27), I assumed these were also the ones to whom you turned “to glean the real, hidden meaning of

these NDEs." You never divulged the actual number of these NDErs, so I estimated it in the following way.

You wrote that you "concentrated on them in detail in Chapters 3 and 8" of *Heading Toward Omega* (Ring, 1984, p. 27). In Chapter 3 you named 14 NDErs. In Chapter 8 you alluded to 16 NDErs, but only 6 were individually identified. Three of these six (50 percent) had also been included in Chapter 3 (Belle, Darryl, and Hank). Taking the 14 from Chapter 3 and adding 50 percent of the 16 in Chapter 16 (my estimate of the number of new NDErs not already included in Chapter 3), I came up with 22. I stated this number as "20 or so." I apologize if this number was in error. That was not my intent.

In referring to this group of NDErs as "highly selected," I relied on your own statements to this effect: "I have made a special effort to locate and to interview persons who have had unusually deep NDEs" (Ring, 1984, p. 26). "[I]t should be strongly borne in mind that the cases presented here have been *specifically sought out* and that because of both the limited sample size and the method of sampling, the results need to be independently validated before they can be fully accepted" (Ring, 1984, p. 195, italics added). Thus, according to *Heading Toward Omega*, these persons were not, as you now claim, "just the people who happened to come to my attention at the time or who sought me out."

You correctly point out that NDErs in The Atlanta Study were not randomly selected, and I did not represent them as such. However, unlike many of your subjects, these NDErs were not "specifically sought out" according to the type or depth of their NDEs; and they were interviewed in a structured and formal setting quite different from your "informal but far-ranging conversations" at the Near-Death Hotel (Ring, 1984, p. 27).

Ring Excerpt 2:

And finally, concerning the methodological limitations of the study and my alleged lack of scientific caution, it is interesting to me that after quoting me partially on these matters, you failed to indicate what I wrote immediately afterward, so let me remind you here:

As a result of these methodological deficiencies, some of the conclusions I will draw will have to be taken tentatively from a scientific point of view. Perhaps they should be regarded as hypotheses to be more rigorously tested in subsequent research. I would encourage and welcome such investigations. (Ring, 1984, p. 30)

Ken, this continuation of your quote was actually included in an earlier draft of my book. It was editorially deleted when the length of my manuscript greatly exceeded the 208 pages called for in my contract. I simply did not have room to include it. We made this deletion since we felt it was a general restatement of what had already been presented—that is, your acknowledgment of “methodological deficiencies.” I applaud your honesty here and wish we could have retained it. However, I do not feel its exclusion significantly changed the meaning.

Ring Excerpt 3:

And as you yourself pointed out there have now been any number of investigations—to the best of my knowledge carried out in at least four different countries so far—that have in fact broadly confirmed the pattern of aftereffects I first delineated in Heading Toward Omega. Indeed, even in Light & Death you described some of your own recent findings on such variables, using some of the same measures I employed in Heading Toward Omega, and you reported the same results. You cannot have it both ways, Mike. You cannot impugn my research for its putative lack of objectivity and in the next breath concede that, with one possible exception (to be discussed in a moment), pretty much everybody else, including you, has found what I did!

Ken, I use your own words to “impugn” the objectivity of your research! You devoted several pages at the beginning of *Heading Toward Omega* to qualifications, disclaimers, warnings of “methodological deficiencies,” and a lengthy advisory that you “have not presented the usual tests of statistical significance simply because the assumption of random sampling is so plainly violated. . . . The professional or simply critical reader will soon become aware of some of the faults of this research. . . . These are not small points, they are major shortcomings” (Ring, 1984, pp. 28–30).

One major shortcoming, however, was *not* mentioned at the beginning of *Heading Toward Omega*. On page 314 in the Appendix you noted that following your study, “all categories of respondents [that is, NDErs, nonNDErs, and others in the study] are now more inclined to endorse statements favoring spiritual universalism than they once were.” You then add this important disclaimer: “Given that virtually all respondents are members of IANDS, however, this result is not particularly unexpected.” You seemed to acknowledge there that your subjects, by virtue of being members of IANDS, were encumbered with a definite bias toward spiritual universalism. It would have been nice to have

identified and fully discussed such an important, *known* bias at the front of your book, especially since this bias most likely deeply affected your conclusions in chapters on "Spiritual Awakening," "Personal Transformation," "Value Changes," and "Religious and Spiritual Orientations." In The Atlanta Study, I recognized this bias as a potential pitfall for my own research and took steps to avoid it (Sabom, 1998, p. 33).

Finally, Ken, I do *not* "concede that, with one possible exception (to be discussed in a moment), pretty much everybody else, including you, has found what I did!" Our studies produced diametrically-opposed findings on the effect of an NDE on religious beliefs, religious affiliation, frequency of church attendance, and psychic experiences—in addition to its effect on belief in reincarnation (which I assume is the "one possible exception" to which you refer) (Sabom, 1998, pp. 131–163).

Ring Excerpt 4:

In any case, after having raised doubts both about my motives and my research findings, you then zero in on one particular chapter of my book that deals with what I found having to do with changes in religious and spiritual orientations following NDEs. And it is here, Mike, where it seems to me you were guilty of some very blatant distortions and misrepresentations. Let me simply try to show you where and how, and take things one at a time. You began by describing one of my questionnaires, the Religious Beliefs Inventory (RBI), and state that its findings "delivered a clear message to Ken: the near-death experience led people away from a [and then, seeming to quote me] 'more conventional (Christian) religious orientation'" (pp. 134–135). Mike, I never said that. When I checked the page reference you cited, what I actually wrote was that agreement with certain items on the RBI would imply "a more conventional (Christian) religious orientation" (Ring, 1984, p. 145). You have therefore misrepresented me here.

Ken, your RBI measured a shift in two directions—either toward "a more conventional (Christian) religious orientation" (which included a belief in heaven and hell, in the necessity of accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord to receive eternal life, in the implausibility of reincarnation, and in the Bible as the inspired word of God) or toward a "universalistically spiritual orientation" (which included a belief in a universal religion embracing all humanity, in the essential core of all religions being the same, in life after death for everyone regardless of religious belief, and in God being "within you") (Ring, 1984, pp. 282–283). You stated that data from the RBI

reinforce one primary conclusion: Following their experience, NDErs are likely to shift *toward a universalistically spiritual orientation* . . .

[T]he thrust of the spiritual development of NDErs is very clearly in accord with a *general spiritual—rather than religious—orientation towards life.*” (Ring, 1984, p. 145, italics added)

Because of the way this RBI has been set up, a shift *toward* one orientation is, at the same time, a shift *away from* the other orientation. My sentence in *Light & Death* accurately represented your finding of a shift “toward a universalistically spiritual orientation” by reporting it as a shift away from a “more conventional (Christian) religious orientation.” In addition, I purposely quoted your phrase “more conventional (Christian) religious orientation” not to confuse or mislead, but to convey your meaning as precisely as possible.

Ring Excerpt 5:

Immediately afterward you cited a 1980 article of mine that I will return to later in another context in which I had warned against a danger I even then perceived that the findings of NDE research could be, as it were, hijacked and used for propagandistic purposes by individuals with an obvious religious agenda. You then reproached me for apparently violating my own strictures by quoting this passage from Heading Toward Omega:

the real significance of the NDE here may not be simply that it promotes spiritual growth . . . as much as the kind of spiritual growth it promotes. (p. 135, quoting from Ring, 1984, p. 144, and adding italics and ellipses)

But, Mike, what exactly is the problem here? I am simply reporting a clear implication of the data from my study; I am not actually advocating anything, and I certainly have no religious ax to grind. There was nothing in my 1980 article that proscribed studying the spiritual or religious aftereffects of the NDE, but only using the NDE for hortatory purposes. You personally may have wished that the pattern of my data had turned out differently, but that is surely no reason to upbraid me personally.

But then you really appeared to get carried away in the next paragraph, which began, “A new religion was proposed” (p. 135). My goodness, just where did you find that in my text?! Of course, you did not—it simply is not there; you have invented it. When I examined the skein of quotes you strung together to support this outlandish notion I could see what you had done. You had, first of all, taken the findings for a subset of NDErs, who espoused a more inclusive, universalistic spiritual orientation following their NDEs, and made it seem as if I were peddling this as “a new religion.” Of course, this is absurd on the face of it, and reflects a persistent tendency on your part to confuse data with advocacy.

Ken, you accuse me of confusing two levels of discourse, "data" and "advocacy." In actuality, you deal with three levels of discourse: the reporting of data; the reporting of "spiritual or religious aftereffects"; and "using the NDE for hortatory purposes."

First, your data in *Heading Toward Omega* did *not* show, as you now claim, that only a "subset" of your NDErs espoused a more inclusive, universalistic spiritual orientation following their NDEs. Instead, you wrote:

that *all* respondents are now more inclined to endorse statements favoring spiritual universalism than they once were.... [and] that *NDErs of all groups* show the greatest tendency toward spiritual universalism, followed by near-death survivors and others, in that order." (Ring, 1984, p. 314, italics added)

Next, you elaborated on spiritual and religious aftereffects in a section suggestively titled "The Unity of Religions and the Quest for a Universal Religion":

Indeed, the strongest evidence of NDErs' universalistically spiritual orientation and in many ways the culmination of the qualities already discussed is their belief in the underlying unity of all religions and their desire for a universal religious faith that will transcend the historical divisiveness of the world's great religions. (Ring, 1984, p. 162)

Finally, you molded these NDE data and aftereffects into a personal belief in and call for

the emergence of a new messianic movement in our time, one that is planetary in scope and for which the NDE phenomenon itself is pivotal. . . . These persons, *I believe*, are the true visionaries of our time, the bearers of the emerging myth of the twenty-first century calling us to a cosmic-centered view of our place in creation, a myth that has the power to ignite the fires of worldwide planetary regeneration and thus to save us from the icy blasts of Thanatos's nuclear winter. (Ring, 1988b, pp. 13 and 15, italics added)

Your hortatory use of the NDE continues as we consider the next excerpt.

Ring Excerpt 6:

And that paragraph, seemingly still about the new religion I am urging, ended with a quote from the well known esotericist, Manly Hall, to the effect that in the end, we shall be "one congregation united in truth." I could not remember saying anything like that either—and it turns out I never did. The quote is actually from a book by Charles Flynn, as your

endnotes made clear for the careful reader; but that would not be at all evident from the context of the paragraph, which seemed to be all about me, the avatar of the new NDE religion.

Ken, to avoid any possible misunderstanding, I placed quotations around Hall's phrase, referenced the source, and did not attribute it to you. In complaining about its inclusion in my paragraph that is mainly about you, are you now attempting to dissociate yourself from Hall's statement? In the Afterword that you wrote to Charles Flynn's book, *your* sentence from which I took this phrase reads: "Clearly, something of note is happening—something big; something on a planetary scale; and something that seems to have the power to make us, as Hall says, 'one congregation united in truth'" (Ring, in Flynn, 1986, p. 162). There, you clearly aligned yourself with Hall's phrase. This alignment is further solidified in the rest of this paragraph and the next:

Something universal is surfacing in our time and is surfacing fast, as though there is a certain urgency that it be *noticed* and acted upon swiftly. NDEs are not simple stories; they are teachings and teachings with a particular relevance *now*. And the transformations to which NDEs lead are not just individually uplifting; they seem to prefigure something in our *collective* future, the first indications of which are already apparent.

I am suggesting, of course, that others besides myself who are more than casually interested in the NDE as a phenomenon sense, whether dimly and inchoately or openly and explicitly, some such larger meaning in this. In *Heading Toward Omega*, for example, I propose that NDEs may point to the next stage of human evolution. . . . [W]e can all participate consciously in the awakening of humanity to its own divinity and speed the day when we shall all more radiantly reflect the Light in our daily lives on planet Earth. (Ring, in Flynn, 1986, p. 163, *italics in the original*)

Ken, your proposal above that this "something" (most likely your "new messianic movement") be "*noticed*" and "acted upon swiftly" clearly fits the definition of "hortatory."

As to your denial that "A new religion was proposed," consider the following: you espoused a *personal belief* that NDErs—as "prophets preaching a religion" (Ring, 1980b, p. 255) and as "the true visionaries of our time" (Ring, 1988b, p. 15)—exhort "teachings with a particular relevance *now*." According to your statements, central to these "teachings" is a belief in the "underlying unity of all religions" and in a "universal religious faith that will transcend the historical divisiveness of the world's great religions." You promoted these "prophets" and "visionaries," along with their preachings and teachings, as leaders of "a new

messianic movement in our time, one that is planetary in scope and for which the NDE phenomenon itself is pivotal." This, Ken, is advocacy of an NDE-based religion.

In writing *Light & Death*, I stringently avoided such hortatory rhetoric in several ways. First, to assess the relationships between religious beliefs and the NDE, I evaluated, but *did not comment upon*, these beliefs in my Atlanta Study NDErs using the following scheme:

Bible scholars don't exactly agree on precisely what is meant to be a Christian. But to analyze the results of The Atlanta Study, I had to set up a few boundaries. The only subjects I considered Christian were those who answered "True" to statement 8 [i.e., "Jesus Christ is the Son of God and thus supreme over all other great religious leaders"]. "False" or "don't know" identified them as non-Christian. I further split up the Christian group into those with traditional beliefs and those who were more liberal-minded. Most researchers tend to lump all self-proclaimed Christians together. The problem with this approach is that not everyone who claims to be a Christian accepts the teachings of Christ. . . . Non-Christians were further divided into atheists and those who believed in God, based on their response to statement 1 [i.e., "There is a God"]. (Sabom, 1988, p. 108)

These categories were set up *for research purposes only*, not as theological commentary. Since the data (the individual responses to each questionnaire) were acquired and maintained independent of these categories, reanalysis of this data using differently-defined subgroups could, if necessary, be easily undertaken.

Second, in discussing these results, I characterized the spiritual aftereffects of the NDE as *nondirectional*:

One final note: My findings are not meant to suggest that the near-death experience cannot lead to an increase in Eastern religious thought. Depending on factors outside of the NDE itself, either the path to "Omega" or the road to deepened Christianity may be taken. All near-death experiencers are imbued with a sense of increased spiritual fervor, but the direction in which this fervor is expressed is determined by other influences—influences I will examine further in the concluding chapter. (Sabom, 1998, pp. 140–141)

Third, I administered the Hoge Intrinsic Religious Motivation Scale (Hoge, 1972) to both NDEr and control groups. This scale maintains reliability and validity without reference to any one particular belief system. My finding of a statistically-significant deepening of one's closeness to God following an NDE when compared to controls lent scientific credence to my conclusions regarding God and the NDE.

Fourth, I limited my Christian analysis of the NDE to the final chapter unambiguously titled "Conclusions: The Bible and the Near-Death Experience." This sequestration of my theological analysis has already drawn the ire of one Christian reviewer (Stanford, 1998).

Fifth, I used the Bible in this final chapter to interpret the NDE, not the NDE to interpret the Bible or to advocate a religion. For instance, in analyzing the "Jesus" figures encountered by George Ritchie and Betty Eadie, I concluded that: "Since these teachings of 'Jesus' encountered by Ritchie and Eadie contradict Scripture—something the Biblical Christ never did—their 'Jesus' is clearly not the same as the historical Jesus of Scripture" (Sabom, 1998, p. 217). Here, as elsewhere, I compared the NDE to Biblical facts, not to personal opinion.

Sixth, I reinforced in this final chapter the nondirectional spiritual nature of the NDE: "Spiritually-charged near-death experiencers and researchers alike can thus be seen to pursue widely differing paths in search of truth and enlightenment—paths which lead as easily down the road to Omega as down the road to Jesus Christ" (Sabom, 1998, p. 213).

And finally, I ended my book not with the proposition of a "new messianic movement . . . for which the NDE is pivotal," or with NDE-contrived proof of the Christian religion, but with the specific warning that one's choice of a religion should *not* rest on "taking a stand on a vision during the waning moments of life" (Sabom, 1998, p. 223).

Ring Excerpt 7:

This small paragraph then continued by averring that the new religion would evince (now apparently quoting me) "a marked shift toward Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and spiritual universalism" (p. 135). Mike, I have searched in vain to try to find the source of that quote, which your notes say can be found on p. 158 of my book. But there is no such quote there. Where did you get it?

My apologies, Ken. I should not have used quotation marks here since my reference was to the content, not the actual words, of this phrase. On page 158 of *Heading Toward Omega* you wrote:

In the public mind, therefore, it [reincarnation] has come to be associated primarily with Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. . . . What I found here paralleled and reinforced my earlier findings: NDErs do appear to be more inclined to a reincarnational perspective following their experience and, not surprisingly, appear to be more sympathetic to Eastern religions as well. (Ring, 1984, p. 158)

You wrote elsewhere that your NDErs shifted toward “a universalistically spiritual orientation,” and for many, this shift was a “tremendous leap” (Ring, 1984, p. 314). Taken together, these references support the accuracy of the phrase “a marked shift toward Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and spiritual universalism.”

Ring Excerpt 8:

Next came your “conspiracy theory,” . . . —specifically the four near-death researchers you had previously implicated as the welcoming committee for the new NDE religion. It turns out that I knew all of these people, they all were affiliated with assorted branches of IANDS, and I had furthermore befriended them in various ways. True enough, I guess. But there is the clear implication in your account of all this that my favors did not come for free. No, there was apparently some sort of sinister influence—my Svengali nature, I guess—that I was exerting over these people, fostering some kind of subtle conspiracy among us to slant the data so as to promulgate the new religious world view, as “new swords were forged to wage new religious wars” (p. 136).

But, Mike, surely you must know this is pure hokum, tinged by a certain seeming paranoia. . . .

As for Margot Grey, . . . [description of Ken’s relationship with Margot Grey and his surprise that] Margot had somehow contrived to write, entirely independently of my own research during these past three years, her own version of Heading Toward Omega! I could scarcely believe what I was reading in Margot’s book—precisely because it was so close to what I had put into mine.

So much for my purported influence, Mike. One might just as well say that Charles Darwin influenced Alfred Russell Wallace. We just independently were hearing the same thing from our respondents and simply wrote up what our NDErs were telling us as faithfully as we could. Much the same thing was true for the other researchers you name, and I could give you more supporting details there, too, but perhaps I have now made it obvious that the only conspiracy that existed was in your head.

Ken, I did not wish to imply, *nor did I write*, that your relationship with Margot or these other researchers was a “conspiracy.” I wrote:

*What concerned me here was not having a friendship with Ken Ring or holding membership in IANDS—I claimed both for myself. My concern was that the independence of the replications of these major NDE studies appeared compromised, and the samples collectively might not be representative of the population of near-death experiencers as a whole. IANDS was the center and substance of most of this research. IANDS had become a wonderful support group for experiencers and researchers alike. But its membership was generally recognized as *not* representative of the general population.*

For instance, in *Heading Toward Omega*, Ken qualifies his conclusion that NDErs lead to spiritual universalism in the following way: "Given that virtually all respondents are members of IANDS, however, this result is not particularly unexpected" (Ring, 1984, p. 314). Bruce Greyson, the research director of IANDS, has likewise admitted that the IANDS research pool, which has been heavily used by NDE researchers, is "not comparable to the general population" [Greyson, 1983, pp. 618–620].

As I was pondering this situation, I came across a curious thread [i.e., reincarnation] that was woven into the fabric of many of these studies, a thread that appeared to confirm my suspicions of a subtle bias in this research. (Sabom, 1998, pp. 136–137)

It was this "subtle bias" present in IANDS' research pools which concerned me, not a "conspiracy." And this "subtle bias" appeared to extend to or (more likely) to originate from the worldviews of many of the IANDS researchers. For instance, you claimed that you "do not have any affiliation with any spiritual tradition or religious organization" (Ring, 1998, p. 303). On the other hand, your worldview is clearly hostile to "evangelical" and "conservative" Christianity (see excerpts 12 and 13) and sympathetic to Eastern religious traditions, which support the doctrine of reincarnation:

[I]n my own work, especially *Heading Toward Omega*, I have drawn quite extensively on Gopi Krishna's writings and have cited him repeatedly in connection with my hypothesis that the NDE is an evolutionary catalyst in humanity's ascent toward higher consciousness. I mention this only to make it clear that I, too, like many others, esteem the work and views of "the sage of Srinagar" (Ring, 1988a, pp. 139–140).

[T]here are many features of the NDE that are described as components of the experience of dying and the after-death bardo states in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. . . . [I]n the bardo of becoming, it is obvious that should efforts at liberation fail, the individual will eventually find himself drawing ever closer to reincarnation, which is of course an integral part of the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. . . . [T]he great majority of near-death experiencers, following their NDE, also come to embrace a reincarnationist view of the life cycle. . . . Thus, here, too, we find further evidence linking the traditional teachings of Tibetan Buddhism on the nature of death with the revelations apparently vouchsafed during the NDE. . . . And to the Tibetan tradition generally our debt is enormous and enduring. . . . (Ring, 1993, pp. 75–84)

Ken, you have pointed out that persons with "a reincarnational perspective. . . not surprisingly, appear to be more sympathetic to Eastern religions as well" (Ring, 1984, p. 158). If this is correct, then I would assume the converse is true—that is, persons with an Eastern religious perspective would be more sympathetic to reincarnation. In your case,

your strong embrace of Eastern religious traditions should then make you more sympathetic to, or have a "subtle bias" toward, a belief in reincarnation.

As to your disavowal of any influence in the work of other NDE researchers, you have been, and continue to be, a very influential figure on the NDE scene. To your credit, you are widely-recognized as the "dean" of near-death research, as a past President and founder of IANDS, and as a prolific writer and researcher. You openly share your personal opinions regarding the meaning and implications of the NDE, and you maintain a rich network of friendships within the NDE community, especially with the major researchers named in my book, such as Margot Grey, Charles Flynn, Cherie Sutherland, and Phyllis Atwater.

Given this high-profile position, it is surprising to read your heated response to my suggestion that your stature and relationship with other NDE researchers such as Margot Grey may have influenced their work. She had been invited in 1981

by Kenneth Ring to visit him at the University of Connecticut, where the newly formed International Association of Near-Death Studies has its headquarters, in order to collaborate in the research project that he was conducting there. . . . The individuals chosen to be interviewed [by Margot] were selected from among the files of case histories in the archives of IANDS [and were included in her book *Return From Death*]." (Grey, 1985, p. 25)

Upon returning to England, Margot followed the research methodology, in her words, "initiated by Kenneth Ring" (Grey, 1985, p. 23). Her interview style "attempted to keep to Dr. Ring's pattern wherever possible" (Grey, 1985, p. 32).

"Shortly after the *first draft*" of your book *Heading Toward Omega* had been written, you received her "master's thesis reporting the results of an investigation of NDEs in an English population" (Ring, 1984, p. 334, italics added). Since "first drafts" are not final copies, you then included part of Margot's thesis in *Heading Toward Omega* (Ring, 1984, p. 334).

In the summer of 1984, you "exchanged books" with Margot. But just as you had studied Margot's thesis (which she has stated formed the basis of her *Return From Death*) prior to completion of *Heading Toward Omega*, Margot studied your same book prior to completion of *Return From Death*. Margot wrote: "Shortly after completing the *first draft* of this book [*Return From Death*], I was presented a copy of *Heading Toward Omega*. . . ." (Grey, 1985, p. 152, italics added).

This sharing and cross-pollination of research resulted in the un-referenced recitation of *your* key ideas from *Heading Toward Omega*

in Margot's chapter on "Explanations and Interpretation of NDEs" in *Return From Death*. Identical ideas in both books seem to have originated from a 1982 article you wrote in *Anabiosis*, the predecessor of this Journal. Consider, for instance, your "psychodynamic interpretation" of the NDE as it appeared in this 1982 article:

Another variant of this kind of interpretation has it that the individual who was, after all, very close to death has unconsciously registered the physical symptoms of his near-death state and has used them as an inadvertent basis on which to generalize to "the death of the world." That is, since he is dying, he somehow transforms this into "the world is dying." (Ring, 1982, p. 64)

In *Heading Toward Omega*, you repeated this idea:

Another variant is that the individual who was, after all, very close to death has unconsciously registered the physical symptoms of his near-death state and has generated them inadvertently to "the death of the world"—i.e., since he is dying, he somehow transforms this into "the world is dying." (Ring, 1984, p. 210)

And in *Return From Death*, Margot dutifully followed suit:

Another version of this kind of possibility has been suggested by Kenneth Ring, whereby an individual who is, after all, very close to death at the time could have unconsciously registered the physical symptoms of [his or her] near-death state and [have] used them as an inadvertent basis on which to generalize . . . "the death of the world." That is, since he is dying, he somehow transfers this into "the world is dying." (Grey, 1985, p. 178)

Consider further your "Zeitgeist interpretation" in the 1982 article:

Is it not possible, then, that near-death survivors are simply "picking up on" what many people already think and feel? If this were so, no special weight need be given these visions. . . . (Ring, 1982, p. 65)

In *Heading Toward Omega*, you repeated:

Is it not possible, then, that near-death survivors are simply "picking up on" what many people already think and feel? If this were so, no special weight need be given these visions . . . (Ring, 1984, p. 212)

And in *Return From Death*, Margot again followed suit:

However, as Dr. Ring suggests, since "All these fears and expectations . . . have been 'in the air' for some time, is it not possible that near-death survivors are simply 'picking up on' what many people think and feel? If this were the case then no special significance need be given to these visions. (Grey, 1985, p. 181)

In the end, Margot acknowledged with great deference that she had “examined some of the explanations and interpretations offered by other researchers, but more especially by Kenneth Ring” (Grey, 1985, p. 182).

Thus, Ken, much of what ended up in your former intern’s *Return From Death* were your NDEs, your research methodology, your interview style, your explanations, and your interpretations obtained directly from you, from your *Anabiosis* article, and from a hand-delivered copy of *Heading Toward Omega*. Needless to say, this relationship between you and Margot cannot be compared, as you have done, to one of two complete strangers such as Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace. I stand by my statement in *Light & Death* that “the independence of the replications of these major NDE studies appeared compromised.”

Ring Excerpt 9:

Indeed, I think you have very usefully brought to our attention the importance of reexamining some of the generalizations that have been widely accepted in NDE research thus far—and I, too, would urge that more studies like yours be undertaken to test the limits or even the validity of these generalizations.

The only thing I take exception to here is again a rather veiled implication that previous research was somehow slanted to produce a particular result or that other researchers made it clear to their respondents beforehand what their religious views were, whereas only your studies have been objective. You may not have intended to put it quite this way, but such statements convey a certain snideness that is just unworthy of you. Your methodological points are cogent enough without your having to resort to these gratuitous comments that are more suggestive of smears than reproofs.

Ken, we have already established that selecting subjects from the IANDS research pool *does* produce “slanted” results—not intentionally perhaps, but slanted nevertheless. Moreover, you *did* make your religious worldviews known to many of your IANDS-associated respondents either prior to your interviews through writing, classroom teaching, public presentations, and media appearances; or during your interviews which “transcended the usual relationship that exists between interviewer and interviewee” (Ring, as quoted in Moody and Perry, 1988, p. 160) and included “informal but far-ranging conversations” (Ring, 1984, p. 27) which were “very different from arranging to interview a near-death survivor in a neutral setting on a single occasion” (Ring, 1984, p. 25). These interviewing flaws, you note, “are not small points, but are major shortcomings” (Ring, 1984, p. 30).

On the other hand, my interviewing technique utilized a formal, structured format (Sabom, 1998). Furthermore, "to add objectivity, The Atlanta Study interviews were conducted in a neutral setting, and the religious views of the researcher were not discussed prior to the interview" (Sabom, 1998, pp. 139–140).

Ring Excerpt 10:

Finally, since at the end of your chapter you returned, one last time, to the idea that some NDErs may after all be led to follow the road to Omega, perhaps this is the point for me to divulge something else to you that may surprise you. Indeed, I suspect it may well astonish you. . . . But I can assure you that quite a few of my NDEr friends and colleagues have heard me say in recent years that I no longer am walking, much less leading the way, toward Omega.

[L]et me simply quote from a letter I wrote a while back to a long-time NDEr friend of mine:

My views have changed quite drastically in some respects since I published Heading Toward Omega. In particular, I have forsworn my previous hypothesis about NDEs leading to "Omega" or anywhere else. I no longer think, and haven't for years now, that NDErs are part of a vanguard of folks leading us to the glory of higher consciousness. I won't deny that NDEs themselves can be transformative experiences for those who undergo them, but I do not think that such changes will spread like a kind of wildfire of consciousness to affect all of humanity.

Indeed, Ken, I am astonished and pleased at this reversal. But I am also a bit confused. In an interview published in 1997 you stated:

The implication of the transformations that come about because of an NDE is that if you look at the NDE not merely as an experience of individual transformation but as a collective mass phenomenon, and if you note the kinds of changes there are occurring on a mass scale to millions of people across the world who have had this kind of experience, and who have undergone its transformative energies, then what the NDE collectively may represent is an evolutionary thrust toward a higher consciousness for all humanity. . . . So I see the NDEs as being potentially very important, not just for the individuals who undergo them but for a new planetary awareness, a higher level of consciousness for the human species as a whole. (Valarino, 1997, pp. 146–147, italics added)

In the Introduction to *Lessons from the Light*, you wrote:

Indeed, as I have tried to suggest in my earlier books, especially Heading Toward Omega and The Omega Project, NDErs—and others who

have undergone similar awakenings by other means—may be the *harbingers of humanity's evolution toward higher consciousness.*" (Ring, 1998, p. 4, italics added)

You now write a *few months* after the 1998 publication of *Lessons from the Light* that "for years now" you have shared with friends and colleagues that you no longer think "that NDErs are part of a vanguard of folks leading us to the glory of higher consciousness." Which of these two different positions have you held "for years now": the one expressed in your privately-shared thoughts and letters, or the one put forth in your publicly-shared interviews and books?

Ring Excerpt 11:

When we early researchers first began our scientific studies of the NDE, we were of course under no illusion that we could—or even wanted to—keep vested religious interests from having a stake in our findings and making use of them in such a way as to reflect their own point of view.

Ken, if by "we" you are including me, then you are mistaken. I wanted to "keep vested religious interests from having a stake" in my findings. In *Recollections of Death* I scrupulously avoided any discussion of Christianity and made only one brief mention of the religious implications of the NDE:

The religious views of persons encountering an NDE were commonly strengthened by the experience itself. [Footnote: However, no change in the basic type of religious belief occurred—that is, no agnostic became a believer, no Protestant a Catholic, no Catholic a Jew.] This strengthening of previous beliefs was usually evidenced by a marked increase in formal religious activity or personal commitment. (Sabom, 1982, pp. 129–130)

Since 82 percent of these subjects were Christian, 82 percent professed a strengthening of their Christian beliefs, religious activity, and personal commitment following an NDE. Such results would have been fertile ground for hortatory Christian rhetoric. However, as noted in *Light & Death* under "Skipping Religion": "One thing I didn't do in my research was to give a second thought to religion. I allowed it no space in my book [i.e., *Recollections of Death*], no time in my lectures" (Sabom, 1998, p. 14). Furthermore, I declined an invitation to use this research for an Easter sermon since "I had made no effort to point the reader either toward or away from a belief in Jesus Christ" (Sabom, 1998, p. 193).

I continued to steer clear of theological arguments in my 1996 review on Maurice Rawlings' *To Hell and Back* (1993) in this Journal. You asked me after reading the prepublication manuscript why I had "demurred from taking on Rawlings from a purely Christian or theological point of view," and you actually urged me to consider "this kind of extension" into the theological arena (Ring, personal communication, February 17, 1994). In my reply to you, I wrote:

I have restrained myself on going further at this point, however, since I have been concerned for quite some time that mixing fact (e.g. Rawlings' data or lack thereof) with opinion (e.g. my own interpretation of the NDE and implications for the Christian religion vis a vis Rawlings' mistakes) often mixes two levels of discourse in a detrimental fashion. (Sabom, personal communication, February 19, 1994)

Ken, after urging me to tackle the NDE "from a purely Christian or theological point of view," you now bitterly attack me in the next two excerpts for doing just that!

Ring Excerpt 12:

I do not have the heart, the interest, or the space to try to review here the final chapter of Sabom's book, entitled "The Bible and the Near-Death Experience," where he gave his overall assessment of the nature and meaning of the NDE by openly acknowledging that he meant to use the Bible as his ultimate hermeneutical authority. Suffice it to say that, as an avowed evangelical Christian, Sabom's interpretations are all doctrinally driven and in line with his theological beliefs. There are all the expectable warnings about dabbling with psychic matters, testing the spirits, Satanic deceptions with demons posing as beings of light or even masquerading as the Christ (Sabom, like other fundamentalist critics, strongly implies that this was the case for such celebrated NDErs as Betty Eadie and George Ritchie)—in short, the whole familiar litany of conservative Christian exhortations against anything that might deviate from their understanding of Biblical truth or threaten to undermine it.

Ken, even though I relied on Biblically-based Christian theology, many of my conclusions were far from the "familiar litany of conservative Christian exhortations." I challenged (without naming names) the opinions of several conservative Christian NDE authors. For instance, I argued against Maurice Rawlings' claim in *To Hell and Back* (1993) that the NDE is a literal trip to the afterlife; and I countered his contention that the religious background of the NDEr determines the "heavenly" or "hellish" nature of the experience. I rebutted Richard

Abanes' conclusion in *Journey Into the Light* that NDEs "take place entirely in the mind" and are "nothing more than biologically based hallucinations built from sensory data and preexisting memories/thoughts/dreams" (Abanes, 1996, p. 108). I clarified several points raised by John Ankerberg and John Weldon in *The Facts on Near-Death Experiences* (Sabom, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1996, p. 33). And I proposed for the first time a connection between the NDE and the general revelation of God as articulated by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans (Sabom, 1998, pp. 198–202).

Ring Excerpt 13:

In the end, the world according to Sabom seems to be divided into the usual absolute categories: The saved and the damned—and the damnable. Although he did not mention it in his text, in the group of NDErs that Sabom himself identified with—those he called Conservative Christians—86 percent agreed with the statement, "Nonacceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior condemns one to hell in the afterlife." There you are. I suppose that people like me, most of my friends and family are not likely to receive invitations to their garden parties either. To me, it is particularly dispiriting that although we are supposedly living in a postmodern age, we still find statements like these coming from the cream of Sabom's NDErs. Why do I have the feeling that instead I am back in Tertullian times, listening to him rage against the Gnostics? Perhaps I need to remind myself that I am still living during an era when fundamentalists in another country have kept Salman Rushdie under a death sentence for more than a decade. I am lucky, I guess—here, I am only told that I will rot in hell because I do not accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior and for my part in perpetuating the universalist heresy.

Ken, contrary to your insinuations here, I "raged" against no one, I put no one "under a death sentence," and was not "telling" you anything. What you have done is to select a statement from my Spiritual Beliefs Questionnaire, apply that statement to yourself, and then rage back at me as if I had concocted this statement to persecute you. The eleven statements in this questionnaire were based on Old and New Testament principles, including the one that particularly offended you ("Nonacceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior condemns one to hell in the afterlife") (Sabom, 1998, pp. 107–108). If you believe that this or other statements in my questionnaire are *Biblically* incorrect, let's discuss *theological* specifics. If, on the other hand, you believe that the Bible itself is at fault, then your argument is with it, not with *Light & Death* or me.

You further imply that I am a religious bigot. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even though I hold “pro-life” and “pro-family” views, I, unlike the Muslims you refer to who have Salmon Rushdie under a death sentence, deplore the actions of “Christians” who, in the name of religion, murder abortionists, publish “hit lists” of abortion doctors on the Internet, carry “God hates Fags” placards, or embody such beliefs. Moreover, for years now I have worked closely with two devout Jews in a three-man cardiology practice. I have co-labored with dedicated members of the Muslim, Mormon, and Catholic faiths to advance mutually-held concerns at international United Nations meetings. And I continue to interact, both personally and professionally, with unlike-minded near-death researchers and experiencers. In each of these situations, we recognize and respect our religious differences without resorting to the abusive language and *ad hominem* attacks that you hurl at me in your paper.

Ring Excerpt 14:

I suppose it might come as a bit of a shock to the readers of this article to learn that after all my inveighing against the distressing incursion of tendentious religious thought in the NDE movement I have recently written a complimentary foreword to a book by the prominent Mormon NDE researcher, Arvin Gibson. Furthermore, in this book, The Fingerprints of God (Gibson, 1999), Gibson made no bones about his Mormon affiliation and indeed devoted the last third of his book to a lengthy discussion of the relationship of the NDE to Mormon history and doctrine. (And this, incidentally, is not the only foreword I have written for NDE-based books by writers with an openly declared allegiance to their own religious tradition.) I mention this chiefly to make it clear that of course I have no objection in principle to books on NDEs written from a religious point of view. Rather, as I trust this article has made plain, what galls me is when their religious investments are concealed or when the theological tail begins to wag the NDE dog.

Your “complimentary” treatment of Arvin Gibson and his Mormon evaluation of the NDE is indeed “a bit of a shock” when compared to your treatment of me! If you truly “have no objection in principle to books on NDEs written from a religious point of view,” then what’s wrong with a Christian point of view?

You claim that what galls you is when “religious investments are concealed or when the theological tail begins to wag the NDE dog.” You certainly cannot accuse me of concealing my religious beliefs in the final chapter of *Light & Death*. Perhaps, on the other hand, you feel that I

let the “theological tail wag the NDE dog.” If, by this, you are objecting to a situation in which the theology of the researcher (the “theological tail”) *influences* the NDE data (the “NDE dog”), then I agree with your objection. I have avoided this and spoken out against it (Sabom, 1996). If you are objecting, on the other hand, to the interpretation of the NDE by an overarching theological framework, then I disagree with your objection. In the analysis of the NDE, theology should be the interpreting agent and the NDE the object of that interpretation. If we deviate from this and allow the NDE to interpret theology, then we will have used the NDE to forge a new theology, and thus a new religion—something we both now apparently wish to avoid.

Ring Excerpt 15:

Each near-death experiencer, regardless of his or her belief, or lack of it, is the ultimate authority on the personal significance of the NDE he or she has undergone. Why should any of us presume to make the judgment about or pronounce on its authenticity?

Certainly, each person is the “ultimate authority on the personal significance” of his or her own NDE, since *for the individual*, authenticity of a personal experience is an individual matter. However, when these experiences are promoted as “teachings” which extend *beyond* the person involved, then your warning issued in the closing pages of *Lessons from the Light* becomes apropos:

As always, discrimination and discernment must be exercised, because even in ‘the near-death world,’ if I may use that expression here, there are persons, including some NDErs, who are not always what they seem, or who suffer from obvious self-inflation or other grandiose tendencies that any prudent person would do well to eschew immediately. In this context, one might use an old but still apt cliché, ‘Light casts shadows, too,’ and in your forays into the NDE culture, you should not be so focused on the Light that you fail to observe the shadows. Please remember something that should be obvious: NDErs, though they may have seen the Light, are still human and have human failings. Not they, but only the Light should be exalted. So do not let your enthusiasm for these teachings and for what the Light represents blind you to possible excesses in its name. (Ring, 1998, p. 303)

Here, Ken, you have hit upon the most pressing problem facing NDE research—discerning “the Light” from its “shadows,” truth from falsehood. In your efforts to “give away the fruits of the NDE Tree of Knowledge” (Ring, 1998, p. 3), however, you never mention *how* you judged

these fruits to be “what the Light represents” from “human failings” or “possible excesses in its name.”

Consider, for instance, these NDEs reported by those whom you respect—NDEr George Ritchie and researchers Margot Grey, Bruce Greyson, and Nancy Bush:

What I saw horrified me more than anything I have ever seen in life. . . . There was no fire and brimstone here; no boxed-in canyons, but something a thousand times worse from my point of view. Here was a place totally devoid of love. This was HELL. (Ritchie, 1991, p. 25)

I felt I was in hell. There was a big pit with vapour coming out and there were arms and hands coming out trying to grab mine . . . I was terrified. . . . I have never believed in hell, I feel God would never create such a place. But it was very hot down there and the vapour or steam was very hot. At the time I did not think very much about it, but in the intervening years I have realized both good and evil exist. The experience has transformed my life. (Grey, 1985, p. 63)

He [Jesus Christ] led me from a side of bliss to a side of misery. I did not want to look, but he made me look—and I was disgusted and horrified and scared . . . it was so ugly. The people were blackened and sweaty and moaning in pain and chained to their spots. And I had to walk through the area back to the well. One was even chained to the evil side of the well. The man was so skeletal and in such pain—the one chained by the side of the well—I wanted to help him, but no one would—and I know that I would be one of these creatures if I stayed. (Greyson and Bush, 1992, p. 106)

According to you, Ken, these NDEs fall into the category of “human failings” or “excesses:”

[T]he fear associated with these encounters [i.e., hellish NDEs] is mediated by the human ego, which is ultimately an empty fiction. . . . Thus, it is the transcendent and not the frightening NDE that is, after all, a leaking through of ultimate reality. Frightening NDEs merely reflect the fact that hell is actually the experiences of an illusory separative ego fighting a phantom battle. (Ring, 1994a, p. 22)

But other researchers, such as Arvin Gibson, disagree: “From the Scriptures, and from the [near-death] experiences of those who have endured an encounter with evil spirits, it is abundantly clear that Satan, his followers, and hell, are real” (Gibson, 1994, p. 259).

Who’s right and who’s wrong? Is the existence of hell a truth from the light or a falsehood from its shadow? You wrote: “Empirics will not help us here; this has more to do with *personal axiomatic presuppositions* relevant to the NDE itself” (Ring, 1994b, p. 60, italics added).

So, in the end, your directive that “only the Light should be exalted” is reduced to a reliance on “personal axiomatic presuppositions.” To a

large extent, I agree with you here. This is not meant to imply, however, that *no* intrinsic truth and meaning can be gleaned from the NDE itself. In *Light & Death* I wrote that “near-death experiencers consistently demonstrate a deepened belief in the existence and universal laws of God following their experience—a finding in support of my contention that the NDE involves the general revelation of God [as found in Romans 1:19–20; 2:15]” (Sabom, 1998, p. 214). However,

[i]f Ring, I and others are talking about a similar relationship of the near-death experience to God, then why do we differ so markedly in other beliefs concerning his Son Jesus Christ, his Word as revealed in the Bible, and in the nature of heaven and hell? John Calvin elegantly explains:

The manifestation of God [within the general revelation] is choked by human superstition and the error of the philosophers. . . . Surely, just as waters boil up from a vast, full spring, so does an immense crowd of gods flow forth from the human mind, while each one, in wandering about with too much license, wrongly invents this or that about God himself. (Calvin, quoted in McNeill, 1960, p. 65)

Spiritually-charged near-death experiencers and researchers alike can thus be seen to pursue widely differing paths in search of truth and enlightenment—paths which lead as easily down the road to Omega as down the road to Jesus Christ. As with so much of life, the presuppositions we bring to an issue can direct our conclusions. (Sabom, 1998, pp. 212–213)

For me, the truth of the Bible is my one presupposition. This presupposition is backed by centuries of careful research conducted by authorities such as William Ramsay, regarded as one of the greatest archeologists ever. Initially convinced that the New Testament Book of Acts was not a trustworthy account, Ramsay conducted an extended investigation of the writings of Luke, the author of Acts. He was forced to conclude that “Luke is a historian of the first rank . . . this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians” (Ramsay, in McDowell, 1981, pp. 43–44). In addition, Sir Fredric Kenyon

was the director and principal librarian at the British Museum and second to none in authority in issuing statements about manuscripts. . . . [After intense investigation, Kenyon concluded:] “Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.” (Kenyon, in McDowell, 1981, p. 48)

These and other authoritative investigators attest to the veracity of my presupposition—a presupposition which affirms the deity of Jesus

Christ, not the road to Omega; and the reality of hell, not hell as “empty fiction.”

You, on the other hand, reassured your readers that you “do not have any affiliation with any spiritual tradition or religious organization.” This seemingly gave you free rein to interpret your “lessons from the Light” without the shackles of any “spiritual tradition or religious organization.” But, at the same time, this self-declared nonaffiliation reduced these “lessons” for which “[e]mpirics will not help” to personal opinion—opinion which may be right, in some instances, and sadly wrong in others. Recall the folly of your “youthful indiscretion” which led you (and others with you) to “Omega.” Is your assessment of the “hellish” NDE as “empty fiction” any more reliable? Perhaps near-death experimenter and researcher Nancy Bush said it best:

From a practical standpoint, Ring’s dismissal of the frightening NDE as phantasmagory echoed remarkably like Ronald Siegel’s (1980) insistence that all NDEs are merely hallucinations, not to be taken seriously. . . . No one knows the number of individuals whose lives are being shaped in the awesome, awakened consciousness of a “realer than real,” terrifying encounter. They—and all of us—deserve to hear more than “It’s only. . . .” (Bush, 1994, pp. 50 and 53)

Having now addressed these 15 excerpts from your paper, Ken, I recognize that our differences have severely strained our friendship. I sincerely regret this and hope for reconciliation. Although we disagree on major issues involving the NDE, I have always valued you as a friend and gifted researcher. I look forward to our meeting again.

The audience for the airing of these differences, however, extends well beyond the two researchers involved. It includes persons such as Deborah Drumm—the nurse who, while dying from incurable breast cancer, found that the most important factor in her psychological recovery

has been the regular reading of near-death experiences (NDEs) from the works of Kenneth Ring, Raymond Moody, Melvin Morse, and others. I keep these books by my bed. For the six weeks after news of my recurrence, not a single day went by that I did not read or reread some of the accounts. Still, when I begin to feel fear or sink into depression, reviewing these accounts is my first line of defense. (Drumm, 1993, p. 189)

If people like Deborah are making NDE books “their first line of defense,” then we NDE authors owe it to them, as well as to ourselves, to speak the truth in love.

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