BOOK REVIEW

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Light and Death is cardiologist Michael Sabom’s second fascinating book presenting his research on the near-death experience (NDE) and its aftereffects. Sabom’s landmark first book, Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation, published 17 years ago, remains in my opinion the most important scientific study of the phenomenon. Recollections of Death was described, in a review appearing in this journal, as “sober and objective” (Grosso, 1981, p. 172). Although these terms generally characterize his new work as well, Sabom in Light and Death brings to bear not only science and medicine but also religion—specifically, Biblically conservative Christianity. This addition makes for a book that is sure to spark controversy.

Although Light and Death is more popularly written than was Recollections of Death, Sabom the scientist and medical researcher is very much in evidence in both books. In Recollections of Death, Sabom explained that interviewing each participant as soon as possible after the near-death event was important not only because then the details would still be “fresh in his [or her] mind” but also because “an early interview would minimize the possibility that the content of the patient’s experience has been influenced by discussions with family members, by reading materials on the subject and so forth” (p. 11). In the new “Atlanta Study” reported in Light and Death, this concern with collecting fresh, unadulterated data continues. Sabom used previously uninterviewed, naive hospital cases and refrained from using the possibly ideologically

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influenced International Association of Near-Death Studies (IANDS) participant pool.

Other "sober and objective" methodological features evident in both books are: generally adequate sample sizes (in Light and Death, 160 patients, although one subsample totaled a mere 12 participants); use of standard and relatively neutral interview protocols; documentation and classification of participants' near-death physical crises; tape recording and transcribing of participants' interview responses wherever possible; standard questionnaires to quantify key variables such as "depth" of the NDE independently; and comparisons using nonNDE and other control groups (we will note faith-defined participant groups used uniquely in Light and Death).

Beyond common methodological scruples, research findings are similar in both books—although, as we will see, faith-related aftereffect findings are emphasized in Light and Death. The Atlanta study in Light and Death replicated Sabom's previous findings that: NDEs represent a fairly reliable pattern; NDEs are not more prevalent or deeper as a function of particular educational, social, or religious background, or type of near-death crisis event; NDEs are more prevalent and deeper, however, in cases where the near-death was prolonged or severe; attitudinal and other aftereffects such as reduction in fear of death are attributable not just to the near-death event but specifically to the NDE; and the accuracy of NDE visual recollections of the medical scene is substantiated by medical records. One recent reviewer (Glynn, 1997) evaluated Sabom's evidence as "the hardest to quarrel with [in the literature], given his initial skepticism, the meticulous care of his methods, and the unique access he had to patients and their medical records" (pp. 116–117).

The accuracy finding is also supported in the new 1998 book through a case study. Although Sabom in Light and Death did not re-employ his widely noted 1982 baseline role-play control group, he did present meticulously the extraordinary surgery case of Pam Reynolds. Removing her brain aneurysm required an astounding medical procedure: cooling and removal of all blood from her body! Her body was accordingly in a state of advanced clinical death for over two hours: no heart beat or blood pressure, no breathing, no brain waves. Is it mere coincidence that Reynolds also had the deepest NDE of all participants in the Atlanta study? Most pertinent to the present point is that Reynolds—despite her closed eyes, plugged ears, and extraordinary degree of clinical death—recollected even the peculiarities of her surgery's procedures and instruments with astonishing accuracy.
Although this case study is prominent, the main focus of *Light and Death* is on faith-related aftereffects. Again, Sabom replicates his previous findings. Sabom had found in 1982 especially among his NDE participants a post-NDE “deepening of religious beliefs, a changing of vocational interests (e.g., becoming hospital volunteers) and a focusing on more humanitarian concerns” (p. 157), as well as “a new personal interest in the caring and loving aspects of human relationships” (p. 132). Similarly, in 1998 Sabom found that “intrinsic [faith or] beliefs were strengthened at the expense of . . . extrinsic religious behavior,” such as (in the words of one participant) “the little country club things that go on in the churches” (p. 88). Other replicated aftereffects include a diminishing of interest in material gains; an increase in one’s desire to pray or meditate; and an increase of belief in God and life after death. In the light of such faith-related aftereffects, Sabom concludes in *Light and Death* “that the NDE involves the general revelation of God” (p. 212).

NDE research is not always consistent, however. Indeed, a major stimulus for the Atlanta study was a contradiction between certain findings by Sabom and those of psychologist Kenneth Ring. Despite the deepening-of-intrinsic-faith finding, Sabom had also found in 1982 that

no change in the basic type of religious belief occurred—that is, no agnostic became a [Christian] believer [although belief in God increased], 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. (p. 130; emphasis added).

In contrast, Ring (1984) and others found a decrease in formal religious activity such as church attendance as well as changes in basic religious orientation, especially, away from conservative Christian beliefs and toward a more universal spiritual perspective.

Realizing that “much of the religious controversy surrounding the NDE hinged on this . . . apparent contradiction” (p. 16), Sabom made its investigation a major thrust of the Atlanta study. Paralleling Ring’s Religious Belief Inventory, Sabom devised and administered a Spiritual Beliefs questionnaire to assess religious orientation. Using the Spiritual Beliefs questionnaire, he divided his sample into conservative Christian NDErs (defined by agreement with items such as “The Bible is inerrant [without error]” and “Nonacceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior condemns one to hell in the afterlife”), liberal Christian NDErs, nonChristian but God-Believing NDErs, and nonNDEr controls. The 1998 results replicated his 1982 findings and again contradicted Ring’s: Sabom again found that very few of his NDErs “changed
their religious doctrine or affiliation following their NDE” (although I wonder whether NDE survivors still classifiable as “conservative Christian” might nonetheless have become less likely to agree specifically with the Spiritual Beliefs Questionnaire item that non-believers in Christ are condemned to Hell), and that “church attendance increased in conservative Christians, liberal Christians, and God-believers alike” (p. 140).

Sabom resolves this apparent contradiction in *Light and Death* by acknowledging in effect that his participants, although “fresh,” did bring particular life contexts or frames of meaning and expectation to their experience. Sabom observed that, after all, “the presuppositions we bring to an issue [or experience] can direct our conclusions” (p. 213). More specifically: “All NDErs are imbued with a sense of increased spiritual fervor, but the direction in which this fervor is expressed is determined by other influences” (pp. 140–141), a point of which theology professor Carol Zaleski (1987) has made us well aware. Hence, the presuppositions and influences of Ring’s free-thinking New England, IANDS-influenced (read: New Age-oriented) sample directed those participants toward universalist fervor regarding their experience, whereas the presuppositions and influences of Sabom’s Bible Belt rural Southeastern participants generally directed them toward aftereffects in terms of conservative or liberal Christian activities and beliefs. Indeed, one NDE survivor, after joining a Christian church and thereby gaining new influences, reinterpreted the entities she had met from being “Spirit People” to being “Jesus and the Angels” (Cox-Chapman, 1998, p. 17).

Sabom’s point is best articulated in external validity terms. There would appear to be good external validity or generalizability to diverse human populations for the statement that NDEs tend to induce in the experiencer movement toward a more intrinsic faith in God centered on a profound love—and away from the trappings of conventional or traditional religious social activity (“the little country club things that go on in the churches”). Consistent with this “intrinsic” movement are the earlier-noted faith-related aftereffects that may reflect “general revelation.” There is poor external validity to claims that NDEs prompt abandonment of, say, Christianity in favor of more universalistic or mystical orientations; such an effect is observed only for those samples that are culturally influenced in such a direction.

Within broad parameters of love, then, the NDE per se appears to be quite adaptable—an attribute that researchers such as Ring in his most recent works (Ring, *in press*; Ring and Valarino, 1998) have evaluated
in a positive light:

This [divine vision of love] is not, of course, to suggest that the knowledge that stems from the NDE is meant to substitute for one's own faith or spiritual tradition. No, it is rather that the lessons from the Light are more akin to Type O blood in transfusions: They are the "universal donor" to spirituality and religion in that they fit easily and well into a variety of well-established spiritual traditions and world religions. And, more than that, as Carol Zaleski ... has shown, the modern NDE has served not to undermine but to revitalize religious faith by providing fresh and compelling stories from ordinary people that ultimately coincide with perennial spiritual teachings from around the world. In this sense, the NDE generally serves to reinforce one's preexisting faith by adding something compatible to it, not by competing with it. On the other hand, while the spiritual teachings of the NDE are obviously not meant to provide the basis of a new religion, much less a cult (!), it is certainly possible that they can offer to those who are not themselves religious, or even to antireligious persons, a point of view that furnishes a credible experiential basis governing moral conduct in the world. In the end, one might say there is only the magnificence and incomparable radiance of the Light. But what one makes of this Light is an individual matter. (Ring and Valarino, 1988, p. 302)

Similarly, Patrick Glynn (1997) suggested that

the cumulative theology of the near-death experience—if it can be called that—tends to add to its plausibility. For it tracks very closely with that of the Bible—and with a core moral vision in many respects common to all major religions—while failing to confirm some of the detailed doctrines, and certainly the prejudices, of particular sects. (p. 130)

Sabom's "general revelation of God" is similar to Ring's "universal donor" knowledge and Glynn's "core moral vision." Sabom would disagree with Ring and Glynn in at least one crucial respect, however. Whereas to Ring the NDE's adaptability to specific religious directions is a plus, to Sabom this adaptability entails a potential spiritual danger—especially for those NDErs or interested observers not rooted in conservative Christianity. For example, Sabom sees universalistic or New Age religious directions from the NDE (humans as essentially divine, universality of heaven, reincarnation, etc.) as not merely different but rather as wrong and misleading in a spiritual sense. New Age-oriented directions from the NDE have been prominent, promulgated by writers such as Ring. Apart from the question of Ring's current position on such directions (they are not featured in his 1998 Lessons from
the Light), the issue of what to make of them—whether they are benign adaptations or pernicious adulterations—remains a prominent one. As noted, Ring's finding of post-NDE decreases in church attendance and increases in mystical or universalistic orientation contradicted Sabom's findings and stimulated the Atlanta study.

In addition to Sabom's empirical work on the issue, Sabom addresses the issue in theological terms and elaborates on the "danger" he sees in Light and Death's final chapter. In this controversial chapter, Sabom the scientist and medical researcher is much less in evidence; instead we find Sabom the conservative Christian. Unlike the NDE, Sabom writes, the Bible provides us with a clearly directional "road map" for faith. What we make of the NDE is not merely "an individual matter" but requires discernment with the Bible as a guide:

The near-death experiencer is not directly meeting God or the actual spirits of deceased persons.... An uncritical acceptance of the identity of godlike [and other] figures in an NDE can readily lead to attributing falsehood to God; a more objective measure is needed to assess the veracity of commentary from such "Jesus" figures. Here the Bible is our only reliable yardstick. (pp. 214, 221–222; emphasis added)

To some extent, Sabom's thesis is not controversial. That NDE encounters are neither "direct" nor "actual" is consistent with his earlier point regarding contextual "direction" or influence and is supported not only by the Bible but by any sophisticated consideration of the NDE and related phenomena (Zaleski, 1987). Generally, "dying people often employ symbolic [or metaphorical] language that evokes their life experiences" (Callanan and Kelley, 1992, p. 9). In death-bed visions or "nearing death awarenesses," spiritual "travel" may be expressed in the imagery of airplanes, boats, or buses, especially by pilots, sailors, or bus drivers, respectively (Callanan and Kelley, 1992); that the dying persons will not actually "travel" to heaven in their familiar vehicles is obvious. Similarly, in the NDE, an experiencer with mainly rural or outdoor life experiences may describe the tunnel as a valley or cave and the border as a stream, while the lifetime urban dweller may describe a cylinder and a door, respectively. Whatever the tunnel and the border phenomena are, they are only metaphorically and not "directly" or "actually" experienced.

The same point pertains to the light. Generalizing from his interview data, researcher and theologian Philip Berman (1995) concluded: "If we are prepared to meet the Buddha, or Christ, or Shiva, that is what we will call what we encounter" (pp. 104–105; see also Moody, 1975; Osis
and Haraldsson, 1977). In Sabom's *Light and Death* data, the light or spiritual presence was significantly more likely to be identified as "Jesus" or "Lord" by Christians—interestingly, conservative or liberal status made no difference—and as "God," "Supreme Being," or "Source" by non-Christian/God-believing experiencers. Consistent with Sabom, researcher Mally Cox-Chapman (1998) suggested that "experiencers describe their experience in their own cultural context" and reported that

A truck driver said he shot through a tailpipe toward a brilliant light.... Jews will call them angels. A person who has had no religious training or conviction described him as he saw him: A Being of light. (pp. 17-18)

It should be noted that these encounters do not conform entirely to the experiencers' familiar cultural context and expectations (see Gibbs, 1985, 1997). Maggie Callanan (personal communication, November 18, 1998) provided hospice care for Danny, a terminally ill 25-year-old man who was an atheist. Whereas Danny's mother urged Callanan to help convert Danny into a Christian before it was too late, Danny just as vehemently proscribed any such appeals. One morning, Danny awoke from a semi-comatose state emotionally transformed. His anger and despair had vanished as tears of joy streamed down his face. He exclaimed that he had flown toward and into an all-enveloping, loving light. "Now I know," he said, "that a being of love waits for me." The experience totally dissolved Danny's nihilistic ideas of death. Incidentally, Danny still resisted talk of God or Jesus. His mother stopped attempting to convert Danny, rejoiced in this experience that gave her son such joy and took away his fear of death, and reconciled with her son before he died.

Apart from being surprised at having any such experience, experiencers often "report surprise at the manner in which their experiences unfolded and at what they learned," a "fact" that "adds a dimension of credibility" (Glynn, 1997, p. 130). Cox-Chapman (1995) called such facts "intriguing":

George Jehn, who had only known his best friend Tom as bald with the diabetes that killed him, gets choked up every time he describes seeing his deceased friend during his near-death experience with a full head of curly dark hair. Elinor's father loved having friends and family around. The fact that it still seems odd to Elinor that her father would have turned down her company ["All he said to me was, 'Sweetheart, don't come'"] gives credence to the possibility that her vision is not simply a construct of her imagination. (p. 134)
Then there are what I (Gibbs, 1997) call the "secondary surprises," that is, the startled reactions or even astonishment of persons who hear from the NDEr information that the NDEr is unlikely to have been able to learn in any ordinary way. The parents of a girl who had been comatose were shocked by the accuracy of their daughter's recollection of "vivid details" pertaining to their exact locations, clothing, and activities at home during her hospitalization (Morse and Perry, 1990, p. 7). Dying individuals may share that a friend or relative has died; sometimes the news had been deliberately kept from the dying person, so the announcement or query is startling (Callanan and Kelly, 1992; Kübler-Ross, 1991). Jenny Wade (1996) noted surprising "accounts of meetings with predeceased relatives who were unknown to the subject during life (such as a grandfather or aunt), whose identifications were later confirmed by photographic or anecdotal evidence" (p. 229). Atwater (1999) provided an illustrative case:

The family of Carroll Gray of Atlanta, Georgia is still shocked by the fact that at the age of two, while "dead" of hypothermia, she spoke with a grandfather who had died several years before she was born. After Carroll recovered from her ordeal, not only did she accurately describe the man she saw—by picking out his picture from a family album she had never seen before—but she relayed numerous and exact details about the two-bladed pocket knife he let her play with and his gold watch and chain.... She also said her grandfather told her the shiny things belonged to her.

Although her family was overwhelmed by what she told them, no one would give her the "shiny things" as promised to her in death, until, when she was twenty years old, her mother, while sorting through papers, was flabbergasted to find the grandfather's missing will. In it, he had bequeathed his watch, chain, and gold knife to his granddaughter and namesake. At the time of his death, he had no granddaughter or namesake, nor did anyone have any inkling that he expected to have one.... Carroll was finally presented the treasures her grandfather said she could have when she "died" at the age of two. (pp. 1-2)

Such accounts of both primary and secondary surprise strike me as too frequent to be dismissed.

Although like other researchers Sabom interprets NDE figures as having indirect or subjective aspects, he too would not ontologically dismiss these accounts as simply illusory—especially given his own findings. Rather, the controversy enters with how Sabom proposes to assess the veracity of the impressions imparted by the figures and the light. Sabom does not go along with the benign assumption, shared among many other researchers, that the light will manifest itself in whatever
form best suits the individual experiencer's needs (see, for example, Berman, 1995; Glynn, 1997; Kübler-Ross, 1991; and Rommer, in press). Rather, Sabom's point is that such NDE figures or forms require discernment; for example, that they may be evil angels masquerading as Jesus in an effort to mislead even conservative Christians. By this argument, the former atheist Danny was misled by a deceiving spirit into thinking that a being of love awaited him, whereas in truth—given Danny's ostensible nonacceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior—hell awaited him.

Sabom's appeal, then, is to the need for some objective yardstick or road map by which to judge the truth of NDE content. For Sabom, the Bible is that objective criterion of good and evil in the spiritual realm, indeed, is "our only reliable yardstick" (p. 222, emphasis added). I have a few caveats here. First, surely other proposed criteria for determining spiritual authenticity (such as those proposed by William James [1903]: immediate luminousness; philosophical reasonableness in light of established knowledge; and moral helpfulness for conduct and character) deserve at least some note. Second, although the Bible may be inspired, reading its truth requires construction or interpretation in a way that reading a road map or yardstick does not. Divine reality is mediated through symbol or metaphor not only in the NDE but in the Bible as well (see, for example, Akenson, 1998; Dunn, 1985; Kane, 1994, as quoted later; and Kugel, 1997). I wish to make a related comment, for what it is worth: when I think of the dying, joyful Danny knowing he's headed for love, I find it hard to believe that he was actually headed for hell; I feel that Danny was right, and that any map or map reading that says otherwise is inaccurate.

There is much more to Light and Death than its controversial final chapter. My preference goes to those chapters in which Sabom the scientist and medical researcher is more in evidence. I have already mentioned Sabom's superb recounting of the Pam Reynolds case. Also superb (if less spectacular) are his astute discussions of the definition of death (chapter 3), the role of authority and expectation in physical health and survival (chapter 4), the medical benefits of intrinsic faith and loving family involvement (chapter 5), the therapeutic role of prayer (chapter 6), psychic or "precognitive" aftereffects among Christians and nonChristians alike (chapter 8), and the inadequacy of current reductionist explanations including those of the prominent critic Susan Blackmore (1993) (chapter 10). Even the nonChristian student of the NDE should find these chapters well worth the purchase of the book.
Although Sabom did not "bring [his] theology along" (1998, p. 17) in *Recollections of Death*, he did suggest "that the NDE may involve God" (p. 193). Given my own predilections (Gibbs, 1999), my preferred conclusion for Sabom's *Light and Death* would have harkened back to his inspiring final thoughts in *Recollections of Death*:

My involvement in the lives and deaths of the people in this book has made me humble to the ways of the universe, much like Albert Einstein, who once wrote:

> Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a Spirit is manifest in the Laws of the Universe—a Spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we, with our modest powers, must feel humble.

For it is precisely this "Spirit" which has been acknowledged time and time again by the majority of those encountering an NDE. And it is precisely this "Spirit" which seems to live on in the lives of those who were touched by some ineffable truth encountered face to face at death's closest moments.

> For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (I Cor. 13:12) (p. 186)

That we see through a glass darkly and should be humble to the ways of the universe is espoused not only by Einstein and Sabom but as well by the eminent philosopher Robert Hillary Kane (1994), who—unlike Sabom—applies this stance to Biblical truth:

We must take seriously the image of seeing "only through a glass darkly."... Christians can and should believe that the Bible, and especially the New Testament, contains a large chunk of what is worth knowing about the supreme reality...[But] in view of the uncertainties of transmission, translation, and interpretation, well known to Biblical scholars; in view of what the Bible does not discuss or what it says conflicting things about; and in view also of the continuing revelations of Christian experience, believers in the Bible have no... right to hold that it (on their interpretation or any other particular interpretation) is the whole and final truth. ... If they [Christians] are true to their beliefs, they must hold that there is some profound truth in the claim that God suffered in Christ out of compassion for the human race. They should insist that this message of divine compassion to the point of participation in human suffering will be part of the final accounting of things religious, and is an important message to all humans, not just to Christians, though it is not wholly understood at present. In other words, they need not
say that the doctrine fails to be objectively true, only that it is not the
whole truth and not now completely understood. This is what it means
to call it a “mystery.” (pp. 167, 169–170)

References

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