Reply to Michael Sabom’s Commentary

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ABSTRACT: In his commentary, Michael Sabom contends that my argument falls short of demonstrating a congruence between near-death research findings and John Shelby Spong’s spiritual view of humanity, continuity view of Jesus, and call for a new Christianity. Sabom is correct that near-death research sheds no direct light on Jesus’ true identity and that research findings regarding near-death experiences (NDEs) should not be used to promote religious agendas. Nonetheless, I suggest in this reply that the NDE’s ontological and spiritual significance extends to religious issues and raises questions relevant to whether near-death experiencers and Jesus have spirituality in common.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; Spong; Christianity.

Spong ... posits that Jesus was not God, but just a person. ... If Jesus were just “a person” ... then Spong’s “continuity view” would hold sway, since Christ would have been simply a mortal member of the human race. (Sabom, 2005, this issue, emphases added)

If Jesus is not the incarnation of the theistic deity, they [the critics] say, then he is “just” a human being. I find their use of this word just to be intriguing. (Spong, 2001, p. 83)

just, adv. ... 5. No more than; only, merely; barely ... c. Used to ... represent ... as a small thing. (Oxford English Dictionary, accessed at http://dictionary.oed.com 10/27/05)

mortal, a. ... 2. a. Subject to death, destined to die; not immortal or supernatural. Often in the tautologically emphatic phrase mortal man. ... 6. a. Theol. Of sin or a sin: entailing spiritual death;

What is the nature of the person, of life, of God? Can research with near-death experiencers help us to explore such questions? In other words, does research into near-death experiences (NDEs) have ontological, spiritual, and, by extension, religious significance? Does the research bear any implications for Christianity? for evaluating the views of particular Christian thinkers such as John Shelby Spong?

I very much appreciate Michael Sabom’s joining me in pondering these questions. Sabom is a preeminent NDE researcher, distinguished cardiologist, and friend. Sabom’s classic Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation (1982) “remains in my opinion the most important scientific study of the phenomenon” (Gibbs, 1999, p. 117). I am honored by his writing a commentary on my article, “What Do Near-Death Experiencers and Jesus Have in Common? The Near-Death Experience and Spong’s New Christianity” (Gibbs, 2005, this issue). Sabom correctly wrote in his commentary that NDE research sheds no direct light on Jesus’ true identity and that NDE findings should not be recruited to serve particular religious agendas. His thoughtful commentary prompts me to reflect that my argument may have fallen short of “demonstrating congruence” (Sabom, 2005, this issue, emphasis added) between NDE research implications and Spong’s spiritual view of humanity, continuity view of Jesus, and call for a new Christianity.

Yet some congruence is suggested if not demonstrated. Sabom noted that the ontological and spiritual significance of NDE research (as I would put it, that humans, despite varying degrees of self-centeredness and distortion, are ultimately spiritual beings integral with a deeper reality of divine love) seems congruent with traditional Christian beliefs based on the Bible that humans (imperfectly) reflect the image of God. It is not a “small thing” to be a human being. NDE research and the Bible seem to resonate with Spong’s spiritual view of humanity, namely, that “human” is ultimately “blended” with “divine.”

Sabom’s and my positions more clearly diverge, however, as the NDE’s ontological and spiritual significance extends further into the arena of religion in general and Christianity in particular. I will not argue or attempt to demonstrate but instead suggest that the reader join us in pondering these questions and issues in the spirit of open dialogue. What does “a spiritual view of humanity” mean? Does it mean that persons are ultimately integral to the light of divine love?
Does it mean that when the body dies, the essence of the person typically rejoins the light? If so, then how can we retain the traditional Christian view of humans as discontinuous with the divine, that is, as mortals at risk for spiritual death? Might near-death experiencers (or persons in general) and Jesus have spirituality in common? If persons are ultimately integral with the mystery of the universe, then how much does it diminish the mystery of Jesus to say that Jesus was "just" a person – perhaps the most divinely suffused and inspiring person in human history?

References