To the Editor:

Allan Kellehear (1991) has contributed a most useful study of what might be called "the sociology of heaven." His description of the transcendent society, using elements of J.C. Davis's typology, was excellent. He delineated it in broad strokes, showing both the social structure and psychological motivation behind its outward form, and giving its sociocultural relevance for humanity.

Kellehear did not consider the question "Is it real?" Yet that question is fundamental to the issue of sociocultural relevance. He asked, "Do these visions and values of the Good Life bespeak a renewed desire for some lost arcadia or golden age? Or do these visions in the final moments of consciousness reveal, at death's door, a final yearning for utopia?" Both questions presume a psychological origin in the human mind of the ideal-society concept. However, I do not think the answer is simply "either/or"; I think it is "both/and." The "and" is this, stated as still another question: "Or are they clear perceptions of another realm transcendent to physical reality?"

For me, the last question is rhetorical. Yes, near-death visions of the ideal society are clear perceptions into a transcendent, metaphysical realm that is senior to our familiar three-dimensional space/time reality and that, in the great chain of being, influences and guides our development in the physical realm. Call it the shaman's imaginal world, Plato's world of Ideas, or the yogic model of reality. Call it Judeo-Christianity's heavens, Hinduism-Buddhism's Iokas, Taoism's World of the Immortals, Islam's Garden of Paradise, or the Native Americans' Happy Hunting Ground. Whatever the name, the universality of the notion of reality as multileveled, with various planes of being affecting those "below" them, is what makes sense of near-death visions of a transcendent society.
All the world's great religions, sacred traditions, hermetic philosophies, and mystery schools agree that the senior realms—collectively, the metaphysical world—have beings who are native to those realms and who interact with humanity in some way. Some apparently are malevolent, but the benevolent ones whom near-death experiencers perceive as beings of light are the most notable for our concerns here. Although their social organization is not entirely clear in all details given by the sources I just named, it is clear that they are models for human aspirations of spiritual growth.

Call them angels and archangels, as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; call them devas, as in Hinduism and Buddhism; call them ascended masters in their solar bodies, as in the mystery schools; call them cloudwalkers, as in Taoism; call them those who have attained the resurrection body and the company of saints, as in Christianity—these beings present themselves to us in ways that appeal to our deepest nature and that urge us to externalize that nature in every aspect of our existence, including relationships and social organization. They are, as Kellehear wrote about the transcendent society, “an order that exists beyond, but alongside our own.”

However, it appears that the “membrane” dividing that realm of nature and its inhabitants is permeable in a two-way fashion. Near-death experiencers penetrate it spontaneously through nearly dying, but psychics, mediums, shamans, and seers such as Emanuel Swedenborg and Rudolf Steiner penetrate it in controlled fashion at will. And those who die biologically often report penetrating it in their final moments, as Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson showed in their important study, *At the Hour of Death* (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977).

Osis and Haraldsson presented findings from interviews with more than a thousand doctors and nurses in America and India, two widely diverse cultures, who reported strikingly similar perceptions by the dying. Those deathbed visions included, as I reported in *A Practical Guide to Death and Dying* (White, 1980), apparitions of human and nonhuman figures such as Jesus and Krishna and scenes or landscapes of nonearthly nature. As Osis said to me, “The experiences of the dying are basically the same, regardless of culture, education, sex or belief system, and their experiences cluster around something that makes sense in terms of survival after death, and a social structure to that afterlife” (White, 1980, p. 17).

“As above, so below” is a metaphysical axiom. Christianity preaches the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, Tibetan Buddhism has its Sham-bhala, and other traditions have their images of human perfection. But these images are not simply “all in the mind” as conventional psychology would have it.
ogy would have it—that is, fantasy, wish fulfillment, and projection. Rather, as esoteric/transpersonal psychology would have it, there is only one great Mind, and what we experience as most deeply personal is actually universal. So in that sense, yes, it is all in the mind, but only because the deepest layers of the human mind are coterminous with the ultimate structure of the cosmos.

Therefore, the pursuit of the ideal society is a perennial project for humanity and will be until our evolution has brought us back to godhead—the same godhead that began the cosmic drama of our evolutionary unfoldment and that, paradoxically, we are/have been all along without recognizing it. Insofar as near-death experiences awaken us to our true identity, the acronym NDE could be said to stand for "Nearly Done with Evolution."

References


John W. White
60 Pound Ridge Road
Cheshire, CT 06410