Evaluating Near-Death Testimony: A Challenge for Theology¹

Carol G. Zaleski
Committee on the Study of Religion
Harvard University

ABSTRACT

In nearly every culture, people have told stories of visionary journey to other worlds, in which an individual dies, enters the afterlife, and—by divine decree or medical prodigy—comes back to life. The return-from-death story has a long history in Western culture, developing within the apocalyptic traditions of late antiquity, flourishing in the medieval Christian vision narratives that inspired Dante's Divine Comedy, and re-emerging today in reports of near-death experiences (NDEs). Evaluating the literature of NDEs is a task for historians of religion and theologians as well as psychologists. On the basis of a comparative study of medieval and contemporary accounts, this article proposes a nonreductionist interpretation, showing that it is possible to give credit to individual testimony while still taking into account the physiological, psychological, and cultural conditions that influence visionary experience in the face of death.

In nearly all cultures, people have told stories of travel to another world, in which a hero, shaman, prophet, king, or ordinary mortal passes through the gates of death and returns with a message for the living. In its most familiar form, this journey is a descent into the underworld. Countless figures of myth, sacred history, and literature are said to have ventured underground to the kingdom of death, to rescue its shadowy captives or to learn its secrets.

The voyage to the underworld—portrayed in religious epics and enacted in rituals, dramas and games—is often associated with initiatory death and rebirth. To represent states of ecstasy, divinization, and royal or prophetic consecration, on the other hand, many traditions favor the symbolism of ascent to higher worlds. Thus, legend attributes to the Prophet Muhammad a heavenly journey that sealed his status as God's messenger and established the model for later Islamic literature on the path of souls at death or in mystical rapture. So, too, the prophetic powers of Zarathustra and Mani, Enoch and St. Paul find expression in vivid tales of ascent to celestial spheres. In many different societies, moreover, ritual and spiritual practices aimed at achieving transcendence imaginatively act out or imitate

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the heavenly journey. The shaman dons an eagle feather or mounts a sky pole to achieve what Mircea Eliade called a "breaking of the plane," and to recover the primordial human condition of free access to heaven (Eliade, 1972). The Mithraic initiate, like Blake’s sunflower, counts the steps of the sun, ascending a seven-runged planetary ladder from darkness to light. The philosopher of antiquity disdains the mudball on which he stands and contemplates the superlunary and ideal world, launching a mental “flight of the alone to the Alone” (Plotinus, 1985).

A third variety of otherworld travel, neither so lofty as celestial ascent nor so profound as descent into the abyss, but perhaps just as lively in its appeal to the imagination, is the fantastic voyage. From the fabled wanderings of Odysseus and St. Brendan to the fanciful travelogues of Sir John Mandeville, to the chronicles of Marco Polo, Columbus, and Ponce de Leon, this genre has provided great scope for the interplay of the historical and the mythic imagination. The protagonist of a fantastic journey tale sets forth to find another world by exploring the remote reaches of this world: the far east or west, the edge of the ocean, the Ultima Thule. He returns to tell of hidden treasures and elusive Edens, of fabulous prodigies, monsters, ghosts, demons, and angels that inhabit the periphery of normal life.

From these three types of otherworld journey narration arise a multitude of overlapping forms and a vast array of mythical, mystical, dramatic, ritual, poetic, allegorical, and even satirical expressions. If there is such a thing as “otherworld journey studies,” it is thus a field whose materials are almost endlessly varied and whose contributors, approaching from their separate disciplines, rarely see eye to eye.

Scholars have investigated otherworld journey motifs in primitive and tribal religion, in Oriental, Mesopotamian, and Greek mythology, in works of Homer, Plato, and Vergil, in the multiple strands of Hellenistic religion, in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, and in Zoroastrian, Islamic, and medieval Christian traditions. During the nineteenth century, there developed within Dante scholarship a whole industry devoted to mining the otherworld vision stories of Christian, Zoroastrian, and Islamic literature and folklore in the search for sources of the Divine Comedy. So many precursors were found and championed over the years that one might imagine that Dante needed little besides scissors and paste to construct his poetic journey (Labitte, 1842; Ozanam, 1845, 1859; d’Ancona, 1874/1912-13; Becker, 1899; Dods, 1903; Modi, 1914; Asin Palacios, 1919/1927, 1926, 1943; Cerulli, 1949; Munoz y Sendino,
The best scholarly treatments of otherworld journey literature focus on particular historical contexts, making use of comparative insights, but keeping a fairly tight rein on speculative interpretation. Too often, however, generalizations about the otherworld journey come from authors who view all its varied forms according to a single model, whether taken from shamanism, psychoanalysis, depth psychology, or psychedelia. More taxing, but much more worthwhile, would be to build an interpretive theory on the basis of detailed historical and cross-cultural study, just as, for example, Victor Turner has done for pilgrimage (Turner, 1973, 1977; Turner and Turner, 1978). Despite the profusion of scholarly and informal writings on the otherworld, this comprehensive work has yet be done.

For one who does not wish to tackle such an ambitious task, however, there remain smaller uncharted areas. Since no general theory of otherworld journey narration can be complete that fails to recognize its latest manifestations, we might search for contemporary parallels or vestiges. Perhaps the otherworld journey motif is “camouflaged” (as Eliade would put it) in the modern lore of space travel, which, like the fantastic voyage legends of the past, exemplifies the “lure of the edge.”

Another possibility is that otherworld journey accounts might be found in contemporary culture, not only in camouflaged or self-consciously literary forms, but also in literal forms that claim to describe actual events. Indeed, this is true of at least one tenacious variety of otherworld journey narration, in which the protagonist “dies” and yet survives to tell the tale. Such eyewitness accounts of life after death can be found throughout the folklore and religious literature of the world. In Western culture, return-from-death stories developed within and alongside the apocalyptic traditions of late antiquity, flourished in the Middle Ages, declined during the Reformation, and reappeared in connection with some of the evangelical, separatist, and spiritualist movements of the nineteenth century. Today these tales have returned in full force in the form of “near-death” testimony, first popularized in the early 1970s by Raymond Moody’s best-selling book Life After Life (1975), and kept in the public eye since then by a flood of books, articles, talk shows, and films on the subject.

Let us consider the opening statements of two accounts of visionary near-death experience:

My heart had stopped. . . . Everything was just completely black. . . . This void became the shape of a tunnel, and then before me was the most magnifi-
cent light; it’s The Light in capital letters, and it’s—very bluntly—the essence
of God.

Four days ago, I died and was taken by two angels to the height of heaven.
And it was just as though I rose above not only this squalid earth, but even
the sun and moon, the clouds and stars. Then I went through a gate that
was brighter than normal daylight, into a place where the entire floor shone
like gold and silver. The light was indescribable, and I can’t tell you how
vast it was.

The first of these narratives came from Tom Sawyer, a heavy-
equipment operator who lives in Rochester, New York. He was
describing, to the audience of the television feature show called
20/20, what he experienced during fifteen minutes in which he lay
crushed under the weight of his pickup truck (ABC-TV, January
6, 1983). The second passage has been attributed to Salvius, a sixth-
century holy man who, according to The History of the Franks,
spent
a night lifeless on a funeral bier, but revived when God sent him
back to serve the Church as a bishop (Gregory of Tours, 1957,
Vol.
2, Book 7, pp. 88-94).

Are these two accounts describing essentially the same experience?
Are the differences between them merely incidental? What do the
similarities and differences between these narratives, fourteen
centuries apart, tell us about the history of otherworld journey
narration, its recurrent features, its social function, and its ultimate
significance?

Such questions can be answered adequately only by examining
accounts like those of Tom Sawyer and Salvius in historical context,
so that they no longer appear either monolithically similar, or,
because of different idioms, completely unrelated. A closer look will
reveal, for instance, that Salvius’s vision is a work of hagiography
and, as such, differs from many return-from-death narratives of the
same period that feature the visit of a sinner or penitent to hell. Tom
Sawyer’s account has not been reworked into a literary form, but
he nonetheless tells a story that, as the present study will show,
reflects modern assumptions and concerns.

I have elsewhere (Zaleski, in press) examined the return-from-
death story in two widely separated settings: medieval Christendom
and modern secular and pluralistic America. That comparative study
highlighted features that are not otherwise obvious, putting into
sharper relief the elements that are culturally specific, and at the
same time drawing attention to perennial aspects of otherworld
journey narration. It disclosed some of the ways in which the
otherworld journey narrative is shaped by the social and historical
situation in which it occurs. Although this does not tell us the whole
story about otherworld journeys, it does provide a new perspective on the question of how we might interpret the literature of otherworld visions.

In examining contemporary near-death literature and its recent precursors as a parallel to the medieval Christian vision literature, I described comparable accounts of sudden exit from the body, travel across tunnels, paths, or fields, encounters with luminous guides and spirits, glimpses of heavenly bliss, reluctant reentry into life, and an aftermath of psychological and spiritual transformation. Yet there were striking differences as well: gone were the bad deaths, harsh judgment scenes, purgatorial torments, and infernal terrors of medieval visions; by comparison, the modern other world is a congenial place, a democracy, a school for continuing education, and a garden of unearthly delights.

If we are to succeed in negotiating the labyrinth of medieval and modern otherworld journey accounts, we must do more than simply tabulate these recurrent and contrasting motifs. We must search for a common thread that will not be deflected by variations in content, and that will help us to account for both similarities and differences without prejudice. That common thread is story: the otherworld journey is a work of the narrative imagination. As such, it is shaped not only by the universal laws of symbolic experience, but also by the local and transitory statutes of a given culture. The present study is intended to fix our attention on the narrative and imaginative character of otherworld visions, for only by holding onto this thread can we avoid the blind alleys down which so many discussions of religious visions and life after death have led.

How do we evaluate the visionary testimony of individuals who believe that they have returned from the gates of death? The current wave of interest in near-death experience makes this a live issue. We can no longer treat otherworld journey narration as a cultural fossil, buried safely in the past. With so many people turning to near-death literature in the hope of gaining insight into the meaning of death, theologians and scholars of religion have a responsibility to put this material in historical perspective and to reflect on its ultimate significance. To refuse the challenge to interpret near-death literature is only to widen the gap between academic theology and popular religious concerns. The result is a loss for both sides; not only does the public lose the benefit of historically informed discussion, but theology is deprived of a potentially revitalizing connection to contemporary experience.

It would be premature, at this stage, to announce a comprehensive theory of otherworld visions. Elsewhere (Zaleski, in press) I
have reviewed the interpretations that have already been advanced—from medieval Christian vision theory to the current debate over explanations of near-death experience—and have suggested some alternative views.

In the present paper, I offer some reflections on the symbolic character of otherworld visions and on the visionary and imaginative aspects of religious thought in general. If, as William James asserted in "The Sentiment of Rationality," the role of philosophy is to define the universe in a way that gives people a warrant and a point of reference for the use of their innate capacities, then it must also make a place for our imaginative powers (James, 1979). The traditional way to accomplish this has been to define the universe as an object that religious images describe. Unfortunately, for those who think critically about science, history, and world religions, such simple acceptance of religious imagery no longer seems to be a reasonable option. We can still say that the religious imagination guides us through life and as far as the threshold of a wider life, but we cannot claim that it supplies us with direct maps of an afterlife. Without attempting to pronounce the final word on this complex subject, this paper indicates some directions for future exploration.

EXPERIENTIAL CLAIMS

One conclusion to which the comparative study of contemporary and medieval Christian return-from-death accounts leads us is that the West has seen no steady progress from literal to literary use of the otherworld journey motif (Zaleski, in press). Although the line between fiction and confession is necessarily blurry, contemporary near-death reports—like their medieval predecessors—make the claim, at least, that they represent actual experience. In this paper, I will consider whether it is possible to take this claim seriously without being naive.

Some might feel inclined to disregard the question, as do the social and literary historians who concern themselves only with the cultural transmission of otherworld journey imagery. For if we take visionary accounts at face value, as a direct description of what happens after death, we run the risk of trapping ourselves in a shrunken utopia, isolated from the scientific and historical awareness that is our culture’s special gift. Theologians, as much as other intellectuals, might wish to ignore experiential claims in order to avoid having to evaluate testimony that conflicts with accepted religious and scientific principles, or that brings the mysteries of life, death, and the hereafter embarrassingly close. It is safer to treat the otherworld
journey solely as a metaphor or literary motif that illustrates a psychological or moral truth. By doing so, we render it harmless; we attenuate the visionary virus until it is so weak and thin that it produces immunity instead of contagion.

Aside from the injustice this does to the individuals who report near-death experience, however, it also is an inadequate way to account for the imaginative power of the otherworld journey. As I have shown (Zaleski, in press), the otherworld journey motif becomes impotent if it does not retain at least a hint of correspondence to a sensed, dreamed, or imagined reality. An image like the review of deeds still has some resonance for us because, along with its metaphorical uses, it continues to evoke an imaginative visualization of the other world. In contrast, an expression like "the road to hell is paved with good intentions," which we recognize as exclusively metaphorical, has become a dead circuit, cut off from any conceivable reference to experience.

We must therefore take experiential claims seriously in order to understand the whole range of otherworld journey imagery, from its vestiges in our ordinary language to the more overt forms considered here. More important, the current controversy over the rights and needs of the dying—and the fact that many people are turning to books like Life After Life (Moody, 1975) for spiritual guidance or consolation—puts us under an obligation to assess near-death literature in an informed and sympathetic way.

It is a good sign, then, that some religious thinkers have taken an interest in interpreting near-death literature. Before I make suggestions of my own, it will be useful to consider the main currents of theological opinion on the subject.

When Life After Life appeared, it provoked widely varying reactions. In Reflections on Life After Life, Moody (1977) remarked that there were some among the clergy who accused him of selling "cheap grace," while others thanked him for producing a book that was such an asset to their pastoral work with the dying and bereaved. That pattern of response continues as public awareness of near-death experience grows. The loudest reaction against Life After Life and its successors comes from conservative Christians who see these books as a Satanic diversion, designed to lull us into a false sense of security about the future life, to lure us into occult practices such as astral projection, to beguile us into accepting the advances of demons disguised as departed spirits, and to sell us a secular (but fundamentally diabolic) bill of goods about salvation without Christ. At the same time, there has been a proliferation of born-again versions of near-death experience—complete with recollections of
hell that, according to Maurice Rawlings, are repressed by the Life After Lifers (Rawlings, 1979, 1980).

On the other side, Moody reported that Christian clergy often tell him that Life After Life has strengthened their faith in the traditional Church teachings that it is their office to represent. It gave one minister the confidence to affirm at a funeral that the woman he eulogized had gone to join her deceased husband with Christ: “I wasn’t speaking figuratively or symbolically; I meant it. This gave them comfort. . . .” (Moody, 1977, p. 54). Near-death testimonials play a similar role in the pages of Guideposts, Soul Searcher, Spiritual Frontiers, and other magazines of Christian or Christian/Spiritualist inspiration.

Among professional Christian theologians, the idea that near-death testimony might make a case for life after death has received critical attention, both favorable and dissenting. A few mavericks—notably John Hick and Paul Badham—suggest that clinical and parapsychological evidence might provide just the empirical elixir we need to invigorate our culture's withered eschatological imagination. Yet neither of those theologians relies on empirical arguments alone. In Death and Eternal Life, Hick (1976) combined the evidence from mediumship and parapsychology with scientific, philosophical, and moral grounds for conceiving the future life on an evolutionary model. Badham's view is that near-death experiences and other psychic phenomena, while providing no guarantee of immortality, at least push aside naturalistic prohibitions and make room for a faith founded on the experience of relationship to God (Badham, 1980; Badham and Badham, 1982).

In general, however, academic circles have not seen much debate over the implications of near-death research. The predominant trend has been to ignore or repudiate efforts to find evidence for existence after death. One reason is that many Christian thinkers believe that the whole idea of personal survival has been rendered obsolete by recent scientific, philosophical, and linguistic discoveries. Beyond that standard and widespread skepticism, however, several generations of liberal and neo-orthodox theologians have warned us against preoccupation with the hereafter. It is a narcissistic distraction from the ethical and social mission of the Church, they argue, and it is both childish and arrogant to expect more from rational or empirical proofs than from biblical promises. Applying that criticism to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a Lutheran pastor wrote, “If life after death could be empirically verified 'beyond a shadow of a doubt,' then there would seem to be little need for faith” (Herhold, 1976; see also Woelfel, 1976; Ousley, 1981).
For some religious critics, the most serious flaw in near-death literature is its portrait of death as a pleasant, gentle transition. Converging streams of Freudian, existentialist, and neo-orthodox thought, along with modern biblical scholarship, have produced a strong sentiment among theologians that it is essential to the Christian message to affirm the reality and sting of death (e.g., Tillich, 1959, p. 30). Ever since Oscar Cullman drew, or perhaps overdrew, the distinction between the resurrection faith of Christianity and the Greek philosophical idea of natural immortality, this contrast has been a recurrent theme, even a rallying cry, of theological writing (Cullman, 1965). Stephen Vicchio spoke for many when he complained that “the empty tomb for Kubler-Ross and Moody is superfluous if not redundant. There is no need for Easter if we are immortal” (Vicchio, 1979, p. 65; see also Herhold, 1976).

Those who pit Cullman against Kubler-Ross and her ilk are actually heirs to a long tradition of Christian polemic against the opponent—pagan or straw man—who would stake our hopes on knowledge rather than faith, on nature rather than sacred history, on the soul’s intrinsic purity rather than on God’s willingness to cleanse it. Viewed pragmatically, however, the real issue in these debates is whether the alternative views make a difference in religious life; do they breed complacency or catalyze conversion? But the answer to this question cannot be decided solely on biblical, doctrinal, or philosophical grounds. A great deal depends on social climate and personal temperament; as I shall suggest below, the history of religion tells us that similar eschatological conceptions may serve, under different circumstances, either to awaken efforts to merit an afterlife or to deaden those efforts by feeding people pie-in-the-sky consolations.

In the current atmosphere of skepticism and cultural fragmentation, fears and doubts about survival of death can be just as morally and spiritually paralyzing as a monolithic faith in its certainty. Those who testify to the transforming effect of near-death experience often say that their conviction that death is not the end gave them the freedom and energy to change their way of life. On the other hand, when the search for immortality is isolated from other religious concerns, as in psychical research, it can become something tawdry, egoistic, and this-worldly. So, too, medieval Christian vision literature runs the gamut from profound to mechanical understandings of penance, purgatory, and conversion. Perhaps the doctrine itself is not at fault, but only its use; the present danger, then, is not that people will become convinced of immortality, but that the whole subject will be trivialized by a narrow focus on the case for or against survival.
Clearly, a new approach is needed; to make near-death testimony an arena for re-staging old philosophical or theological battles will not suffice. Since it appears to be a hopeless task, in any case, to determine objectively whether near-death reports are accurate or inaccurate depictions of the future life, it might be more fruitful for theologians to consider near-death visions as works of the religious imagination, whose function is to communicate meaning through symbolic forms rather than to copy external facts. This is the aspect of near-death literature that the present study attempts to illuminate.

DOUBLE VISION

The purpose of my comparison of medieval and modern vision narratives (Zaleski, in press) has been to benefit from the stereoscopic effect, the depth perception that the juxtaposition of two separate perspectives can provide. It will be helpful, then, to review the results of that comparison before proceeding to generalize about the religious implications of otherworld journey narration.

In broad terms, the similarities I found were as follows: both medieval and modern narratives depict the death and revival of individuals whose experience is held up as an example of what we can expect in our own final moments. The manner of death—departure of the spirit from the body—is described in frankly dualistic terms, the separated spirit looking down upon its former dwelling place with indifference or contempt.

After leaving the body, the visionary finds himself in a liminal condition, hovering just overhead and watching the scene of crisis in a mood of detachment. The beginning of the otherworld journey proper is signaled by the advent of a guide, and by motifs of visionary topography and travel, such as paths, valleys, and tunnels. The guide, who is the narrator’s alter ego, escorts the visionary from place to place, pushing the story forward and interpreting the inner significance of otherworld scenes; he thus calls attention to the symbolic character of the other world, and to the need for spiritual instruction in this life and the next.

In the pivotal episode of both medieval and modern journeys, the visionary confronts himself through various graphic representations. He meets his thoughts, words, and deeds, learns the weight of his soul, or reviews his life in a book, play, or movie—and in such fashion brings judgment upon himself.

Although medieval hell and purgatory scenes find scarcely any counterparts in the near-death testimony collected by Moody and his colleagues, motifs of paradise topography are much the same
in both periods: shining edifices, gardens, meadows, heavenly cities, and so forth. In addition, the ultimate experience of contemplative vision, though treated only rarely and briefly by medieval otherworld journey narratives, is consistently described as a comprehensive vision of the whole, in which cognitive and affective powers fuse. It is a moment when the dramatic action of the otherworld journey seems to be suspended and unmediated awareness floods in; but an instant later the play resumes, a message is formulated, and the visionary feels compelled, against his desires, to return to life.

Upon revival, the visionary is physically and spiritually changed. Reticent and overwhelmed at first, he is eventually persuaded to communicate his discoveries and share his mission with others. Once an ordinary *vir quidam*, average guy, or "just a housewife," the visionary takes on a prophetic role, teaching by word and by the example of a transformed life.

Also in both periods the otherworld journey narrative evolves through the visionary's conversation with others, and the narrator shapes the account to conform to the conventions of the genre in which it will appear, whether sermon, allegory, chronicle, Christian polemic, contemporary best seller, tabloid testimonial, statistical study, or television talk show. Yet in all those different formats, the vision story retains its didactic aim: the other world is not described to satisfy theoretical curiosity, but to serve as a goad toward transformation.

There is bound to be disagreement over whether these recurrent motifs—guides, paths, barriers, encounters with deeds, and so forth—comprise a universal lexicon, or whether they provide only the syntactic structure of the otherworld vision. Many of these areas of similarity appear to be formal rather than substantial, for when we fill in the picture, supplying the emotional content and the culturally specific features that make up a concrete vision, we discover significant divergences.

Thus, despite the structural resemblance between descriptions of the soul's exit from the body, we find that medieval visions exemplify the "two deaths" theme (i.e., different fates for saints and sinners), while modern visions portray only the comforting prospect of a good death. So, too, although the guide is essential in both periods as a narrative expedient, didactic instrument, guardian of the threshold, and psychopomp, his character and relation to the visionary are understood quite differently. In medieval visions, the guide stands for hierarchical and feudal authority; in modern visions, he represents benevolent parental acceptance. His role appears to be shaped by
cultural presuppositions about social and family structure, judicial process, education, and pastoral or psychological cure of souls.

The most glaring difference is the prominence, in medieval accounts, of obstacles and tests, purificatory torments, and outright doom. Aside from continuing the hellfire traditions of early Christian apocalyptic, medieval narratives serve as vehicles for the consolidation of Catholic teachings on purgatory and penance. In modern accounts, on the other hand, a sense of inevitable progress softens the rigors of final reckoning; the review of deeds is transformed from an ordeal into an educational experience; and the only serious obstacle is the barrier marking the point of no return. These narratives are shaped throughout by optimistic, democratic, "healthy-minded" principles that transparently reveal a contemporary ideology and mood.

The contrast to medieval accounts is sharpened when we set near-death narratives against the background of nineteenth- and twentieth-century spiritualism and its intellectual offshoot, the psychical research movement. The spiritualist other world, like that of near-death literature is a social utopia, directly mirroring the progressive causes with which many spiritualists and psychical researchers have been connected: prison, insane-asylum, and school reform, abolition, feminism, socialism, Christian perfectionism, and other high-minded liberal concerns have been vindicated by mediumistic and clairvoyant descriptions of the ideal conditions of the spirit world (Lawton, 1932; Nelson, 1969; Turner, 1974; Moore, 1977).

Although ours is a less fertile period for generating utopian schemes, near-death literature expresses and provides otherworld validation for similar progressivist ideas. It is no wonder, then, that it provokes the ire of conservative religious thinkers, whose objections to current near-death studies echo the earlier reactions against spiritualism (Moore, 1977, pp. 40-69).

In its otherworld cosmology, as well, near-death literature is as close to spiritualism as it is distant from medieval visions. Medieval vision narratives, as we saw, are the fruit of a long history of development and suppression of cosmological schemes for the soul's journey to God; as such, they retain vestiges, sometimes sublimated or confused, of older conceptions of the planetary spheres as places of interrogation and punishment. Naturally, this is a completely foreign idiom for modern accounts; near-death literature reflects instead a short history of attempts to reconcile the spirit world with the world of Faraday, Maxwell, Darwin, and Einstein. Though less inclined than spiritualism to localize the other world in the outer atmosphere, modern narratives make similar use of scientific
vocabulary: energy, magnetism, vibrations, dimensions, evolution, now supplemented by terms drawn from relativity theory, quantum mechanics, and holography to update the imaginative cosmology.

In focusing on the reports of those who return from death, however, modern accounts are closer to their medieval counterparts than to spiritualist literature. The return-from-death story, unlike mediumistic accounts of the afterlife, conforms to the pattern of a conversion narrative. Rather than mapping the spirit world in great detail, the return-from-death story places emphasis on the visionary's special task, on the message he is charged to bring back to humanity, and on the transformation of his way of life.

On the other hand, medieval and modern narratives differ considerably in their understanding of the nature of the visionary's message, commission, and conversion. Moral rehabilitation is too vague a goal for medieval visions; they are concerned, as we have seen, to promote particular penitential and monastic institutions. Modern narratives, however, advocate the renunciation of worries and fears and conversion to a life of love, learning, and service; this is an individualistic, anti-institutional, humanistic ideal, of which churches, hospices, and other service organizations may be the incidental beneficiaries. Considered closely, then, the differences between medieval and modern accounts of return-from-death conversion are as impressive as the similarities.

These comparative observations force us to conclude that the visionaries of our own age are no more free of cultural influence than those of less pluralistic eras. We have seen that the otherworld journey story—which comprises every level of the experience to which we have access, as well as every layer of narrative reconstruction—is through and through a work of the socially conditioned religious imagination; it is formed in conversation with society, even if it takes place in the solitude of the deathbed and in the private chamber of inner experience.

Once we recognize this, we lose the right to insist that *Life After Life* (Moody, 1975), Gregory's *Dialogues* (Gregory the Great, 1959), or any other work of visionary eschatology paints a true picture of what occurs at the extreme border of life. If we wish to avoid the self-defeating extremes of shallow relativism and naive affirmation, then our only recourse is to focus on the imaginative and symbolic character of otherworld visions.

The remainder of this paper will consider whether that approach can yield a fuller understanding of near-death literature and of visionary and religious testimony in general. I should explain at the outset, however, that I am not attempting to provide a systematic
theory of near-death visions. Such a theory would require the collaborative efforts of many different interpreters. Perhaps, as with other questions that affect human destiny, the solution to the puzzle of near-death experience will always remain in the distance, drawing us along by receding as we approach it. What I offer here is not a conclusion designed to close the book on the subject, but a set of suggestions and thought-experiments intended to point out promising directions for further inquiry.

Although this discussion is preliminary and open-ended, it is guided by certain assumptions about the symbolic character of religious discourse; in case these assumptions are not apparent, I will make them explicit.

In speaking of symbolism, I have in mind a definition that the reader may not share, but may be willing to grant for the purpose of discussion. According to most dictionaries, a symbol is an image or object that represents something beyond itself. To this minimal definition I would add—following the view expressed in various ways by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Paul Tillich, Ernst Cassirer, Suzanne Langer, and Paul Ricoeur, among others—that a symbol participates in the reality that it represents. It does not copy or fully contain that reality, but it does communicate some of its power. Unlike a metaphor, it cannot be translated adequately into conceptual terms.

By “religious imagination,” I understand the capacity to create or to appreciate religious symbols. In this study, we have caught a glimpse of some of the features of the religious imagination. We have seen that it works not only with universal patterns—such as death and birth—but also with culturally specific and idiosyncratic material, and that it can fuse the universal with the particular into a seamless narrative whole.

Connected to this understanding of symbol and religious imagination is an assumption about the nature of religious discourse and of theology. Theology, as I understand it, is a discipline of critical reflection on religious experience and religious language. As such, no matter how objective or systematic it becomes, it cannot escape the fundamental limitations that apply to religious discourse in general.

To put it bluntly, I do not believe that any of our notions of God, the soul, or the other world are likely to be true in the ordinary sense of the word. One reason for this is human weakness: we are too thick-headed, twisted, or frightened to see clearly. Another reason, which perhaps brings less discredit, is that we have no mode of expression that combines the virtues of analytic and symbolic thought: our concepts are too abstract and one-dimensional, while
our images and symbols are too concrete; we sense that both modes of understanding are necessary, yet they seem incompatible. For this and other reasons that have been adduced by countless philosophers and religious thinkers, there is no sensory, imaginative, or intellectual form capable of fully expressing the transcendent. We can intuit and be forever changed by a higher reality, but we cannot apprehend or describe it in the direct and unequivocal manner with which we seem to know the objects of ordinary experience. Such understanding as we do receive of the transcendent comes to us through symbols, and it is through symbols that we communicate this understanding to one another.

Thus, although theology involves analytic thought, its fundamental material is symbol. Its task is to assess the health of our symbols; for when one judges a symbol, one cannot say whether it is true or false, but only whether it is vital or weak. When a contemporary theologian announces, for example, that God is dead or that God is not only Father but also Mother, he or she is not describing the facts per se, but is evaluating the potency of our culture’s images for God—their capacity to evoke a sense of relationship to the transcendent.

To say that theology is a diagnostic discipline is also to say that its method is pragmatic. In evaluating religious ideas and images, theology deals with ranges of experience that cannot be verified—that even overflow our normal categories of thought. One need not abandon the idea that there is an ultimate truth in order to recognize that for now, at least, pragmatic criteria must be used. If we have no direct sensory or conceptual access to the reality for which we aim, then we must judge those images and ideas valid that serve a remedial function, healing the intellect and the will. In this sense, all theology is pastoral theology, for its proper task is not to describe the truth but to promote the quest for truth.

I suggest, therefore, that a pragmatic method and a sensitivity to symbol must go hand in hand if we wish to give a fair hearing to the claims of near-death literature. If we fully recognize the symbolic nature of near-death testimony (and accept the limits that imposes upon us), then in the end we will be able to accord it a value and a validity that would not otherwise be possible; that in turn will yield further insight into the visionary, imaginative, and therapeutic aspects of religious thought in general.

**CORPOREAL IMAGERY**

The advantage of paying close attention to the way otherworld
visions reflect imaginative modes of thought becomes evident as soon as we try to access visionary accounts of the soul’s exit from the body. We have seen that near-death reports, like their medieval predecessors, presume an old-fashioned dualism of the sort that most contemporary philosophers and theologians find inadequate to deal with the complexities of mind-body interaction. For some, this makes it difficult to take near-death visions seriously. A philosophy professor told me that although he was fascinated by near-death studies, he would hate to have to give up his hard-won sophistication and go back to thinking of the soul as “housed in the body like an oyster in a shell.” He could not decide whether to listen to his philosophical training or to the empirical data of out-of-body experience; one or the other would have to go.

Fortunately, however, a third alternative becomes available if we perform what I have called the “Copernican revolution” of regarding the other world as the domain of imagination, and interpret its features accordingly. Without requiring adherence to any particular school of philosophical or psychological idealism, this revolution or change in perspective allows us to reclaim a whole range of imagery and experiential testimony that we might otherwise have to reject on theoretical grounds. Not only dualism and somatomorphism, but also personification imagery, theatrical and cosmological symbolism, and externalization of deeds can be understood and valued as imaginative forms rather than descriptive models. They provide coherent patterns for dramatizing inner experience, yet they entail no particular metaphysics. They have a logic of their own, but if we try to grasp them in theoretical terms, we lay hold of nothing but confusion; and, like other category errors, this can lead to unwarranted skepticism.

Several vexing issues are clarified, then, by viewing otherworld visions as artifacts of the imagination; most important, it should silence those critics who invoke the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” or similar vetoes against the claims of near-death literature. If the other world is the inner world projected on the stage of the imagined cosmos, then here, if anywhere, is the place where concrete and graphic, embodied and animated principles belong. When we think theoretically, we must guard against spatializing and hypostatizing our ideas; but it is possible that we could not think creatively at all if we lacked the capacity to imagine, perhaps only subliminally, a realm in which our ideas can act. For this reason, I have suggested that many symbolic and even metaphorical expressions refer latently to another world.

The concrete imagery of near-death visions is dictated not only
by their imaginative character, but also by their narrative quality. The otherworld journey, as we have seen, is at its very roots a story. In order to fulfill its narrative purpose of engaging interest and its didactic purpose of moving the audience from ideology to action, it must portray the afterlife as an active realm, and the soul as a protagonist whose experiences epitomize and interpret those of earthly life. If the soul must take on the shape of the body for that purpose, then so be it; it would make a dull story indeed if near-death visions had to conform to the requirements of abstract philosophical theology.

In the context of religious story-telling, then, it is not necessarily a sign of advancement if, in deference to subtler understandings of spiritual perfection, we pluck off the limbs, erase the features, and shave our image of the soul into a bald, symmetrical bit of geometry, incapable of motion or life. The same is true of images of the divine; attempts to picture God as transcending time, space, and gender often end by making God appear disembodied, neuter, and inert. In either case, the religious imagination is at work; the only question is whether it works vigorously, harnessed and disciplined by spiritual practice, or whether it works lamely, hindered by misplaced theoretical scruples.

Perhaps, then, there is no need to forgo speaking of the divine or the self in ways that feed the imagination. This is the view William Blake endorsed, when he urged us to imagine God as a person rather than a metaphysical principle (Blake, 1971, p. 434):

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God Appears & God is Light
To those poor Souls who dwell in Night,
But does a Human Form Display
To those who Dwell in Realms of day.
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As an antidote to the poisoning of academic theology by rationalist prejudices, Blake’s attitude is welcome; but in his insistence on anthropomorphism, he exaggerated. The point is to give up dull abstractions, not to side with one form of imagery against another. Even our most vivid images of God and the soul are bound to stiffen with time and require revision or outright dismantling. Corporeal imagery can have a tyrannizing effect, as St. Augustine discovered during the long period in which he struggled to free himself from a childishly materialist understanding of God, good, and evil; sometimes what is most needed is a fresh gust of iconoclasm, a healthy disdain for imaginative forms. When an archetype degenerates into a stereotype, then the laws of religious imagination no longer bind us to it, but call on us to register the changes that
a new situation demands. At its best, theology is the art of detecting and serving these changing needs of religious symbol systems; thus, it proceeds by a rhythm of creation and destruction, rather than by the progressive conquest of truth.

To view theology in this way, as essentially a therapeutic rather than theoretic discipline, makes it easier to come to terms with religious change while still maintaining respect for tradition. Religious teaching is an art, an activity, and an interaction with others; doctrine is only its byproduct. A gifted religious teacher is not only able to transmit a tradition, but also to read the historical and personal situation and respond in kind, spontaneously discerning what is required. Similarly, the various modes of speculative and systematic religious thought that we call theology succeed when they are attuned to the needs of their times. What is called for is not a shallow pursuit of "relevance" for its own sake, but a balance between preservation and innovation. Theology should be forceful enough to maintain links to the authoritative sources and stored wisdom of the past, and at the same time flexible enough to alter doctrinal formulas for the sake of progress or reformation in religious life. Such flexibility is possible only if we acknowledge that theology, like the primary acts of religious teaching and inquiry on which it reflects, has to do not with truth-telling but with truth-seeking.

That is especially true of eschatological doctrines; within every major tradition they vary greatly not only in ideological content but also in the extent to which they permit the imagination to visualize a concrete other world. If we recognize that religious teaching is a therapeutic art, then we can see the value of teachings that are evasive on the subject of an afterlife—from Jesus's parabolic sayings about the Kingdom of God to Thoreau's insistence on "one world at a time"—yet we can still appreciate the elaborate depictions of heaven and hell that form a Christian legacy in sermon, scholastic sententia, and cathedral stone. We can acknowledge that the Buddha, as "Supreme Physician," wisely diagnosed the condition of his audience when he refused to satisfy their curiosity about the destiny of saints after death, and kept silence on the other leading metaphysical issues of his day; yet we need not consider the Pure Land sect, with its lush representations of the Western Paradise, a betrayal of the dharma.

Gregory the Great, whose voice has been so prominent in the Christian literature of the other world, spoke directly to this point (1874, Part 3, Prologue, p. 128):
The medicine that lessens one disease adds force to another; and the bread that enhances the life of the strong destroys that of little ones. Therefore the speech of teachers should be shaped according to the condition of the hearers.

In the contemporary context, religious thinkers who sit in judgment on traditional or newly coined conceptions of God, the soul, or immortality, should consider the situation in which they occur, rather than evaluating them on narrow intellectualist grounds.

THE QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION

The present study has alerted us to the need to take into account the imaginative, narrative, didactic, and therapeutic character of eschatological visionary literature; and in doing so, it has yielded a guiding principle for the interpretation of religious discourse in general. The virtue of this approach is that it not only helps us to come to terms with the varied religious expressions of our own culture, but also contributes to our effort to understand other traditions. Recognizing the imaginative character of religious utterances does not mean that we give up our faith in an ultimate and objective truth, but it does allow us to stop pitting one set of beliefs against another. It means that the hope for rapprochement among the world’s religions does not depend on our ability to identify areas of conceptual agreement or to dissolve apparent differences into a vague consensus. Moreover, it is an aid to historical self-awareness to learn, as the study of near-death narratives makes plain, that we are not yet cut off from our myth-making past. Like our ancestors, and like people of other cultures today, we come into contact with reality in ways that are shaped by language, social structure, geography, and weather, along with the particular forces that differentiate us from our neighbors. If we can appreciate this in ourselves, we can appreciate it in others. We need not strip the temples and divest the gods in order to discover affinities between different religious world-views. Yet the benefits of this outlook can be ours only if we are willing to renounce the notion that an original and essential religious experience can be discriminated from subsequent layers of cultural shaping. This is the error in method against which theologian Gordon Kaufman warned us (1975, p. 6):

Our “religious experience,” whatever this turns out to be, is never a raw, pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic experience, the undialectical foundation on which theology can be built. It (like all the rest of experience) is always
a construction or composite, heavily dependent for its form and qualities on the learned terms and concepts which give it particular flavor and shape.

In a sense, the effect of this observation can be to protect the integrity of experiential testimony. If we heed Kaufman’s rejection of the notion of raw experience, then we will not make the assumption that the visionary who sees Christ or Krishna is only “labelling” an underlying experience that can be described more accurately and directly as encounter with a “being of light” or the “higher self.” As I suggested earlier, such modern expressions may be more palatable, but they are no less culturally determined or mythically cultivated.

For Kaufman, the fact that we can have no access to uncultivated religious experience means that theology should be viewed as an act of deliberate imaginative construction, taking its materials from reflection on our language and social experience, rather than from private oracles. The advantage of this position is that it calls on religious thinkers to acknowledge and take responsibility for their own reflective and creative work in framing ideas of the universe and of God. Its disadvantage is primarily a practical one: if we follow Kaufman’s suggestion that theology should be related to but not rooted in individual religious experience, then we run the risk of widening the gap between the amateur theologian who examines his own experience in the search for truths, and the professional who knows better.

Indeed, it is already the case that academic theologians tend to avoid questions of inner experience, rather than risk privatism, subjectivism, or the transgression of Kantian boundaries; yet that is happening at a time when—to judge by the success of Life After Life and other books that concern individual spiritual experience—the wider public is hungry for theoretical and practical guidance in precisely that area. Just as scholars are becoming more sophisticated about the social character of religion, the social context for religion is growing increasingly individualistic. For many people, personal experience seems to be the only available arena for religious discovery, and the only guide for choosing among the dizzying array of competing world-views and paths. Under the pressures of secularism and pluralism, religion is more than ever a matter of “what the individual does with his own solitariness” (Whitehead, 1926/1960, p. 16). There has never been a period in which undue skepticism about religious experience could be more damaging.

All of this has a bearing on the problem of interpreting otherworld visions; for if we wish to maintain a middle path between reductionism and naivete, then we must mediate between the
impersonalism of social theories that stress the coerciveness of language and culture at the expense of individual experience, and the exaggerated individualism of earlier interpreters such as William James (1901-02/1958) and Henri Bergson (1935), who disregarded the social side of religion in favor of its private dimension and its solitary "geniuses." Since debates are often muddled by unacknowledged differences in usage, it will clarify our task to discriminate three ways in which the terms "social" and "individual" can apply to religious experience:

1. Religious experience is invariably social in that religious life and thought are shaped by linguistic and social forces; for that reason, Clifford Geertz (1973) defined religion as a "cultural system."

2. Religious traditions reflect and promote social order and, in many cultures, tend to value the group over the individual. In archaic societies, according to Mircea Eliade, religious experience is profoundly unindividualistic—the individual feels his identity securely only when merged with the community, reenacting the mythical acts of its foundation, purging himself of idiosyncracy. Many of the historical religious traditions also have a communal focus; the Hebrew Bible is the story of a people’s response to God’s acts rather than the diary of a solitary seeker. Yet the extent to which religious experience is communal depends on the degree and quality of social cohesion in a given group. The social character of religious experience, understood in this sense, is a variable rather than a constant. Therefore, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued (1978, p. 177), it can be misleading to generalize about the fundamental significance of religious community on the basis of a particular situation. To make archaic religion on the standard is no more reasonable than to suppose, as James did, that the separation between personal and institutional religion that characterized his own intellectual milieu should stand for all time and apply to all forms of religious experience.

3. Religious experience is invariably individual in that, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has also said, "to be religious is an ultimately personal act." No matter how communal their society may be, human beings are essentially alone in the experience of life and death and in the encounter with transcendent values. This is as constant as the fact of social conditioning (#1), and is not altered by changing conditions of social structure. Individual experience may not be the locus of authority, but it is the touchstone for authenticity; in this sense, the opposite of "individual" is not "social," but "insincere."

In interpreting contemporary near-death literature, therefore, we can say without contradiction that it records the genuine and irreducibly personal experiences of individuals (#3), that it is
nonetheless a product of the social religious imagination (#1), and that one sign of its social character is its individualistic message (#2). If we keep these three rudimentary distinctions in mind, then our awareness of the cultural shaping of near-death testimony need not lead to relativism or skepticism. The anti-reductionist principle of judging religious experience by its fruits rather than its origins applies as well to current sociological insights as it does to the "medical materialism" against which William James battled.

Having cleared the way by defending near-death testimony against the new reductionisms of social science, we are free to apply pragmatic criteria toward interpreting the content of near-death visions. As I suggested earlier, a pragmatic method is ideally suited for dealing with testimony that cannot be verified in other ways. If there is any validity to religious accounts of life or death, it is not because they provide a direct transcript of the truth, but only because they act as a lure toward truth, by leading people out of anxious, mechanical, or vicious patterns of thought and behavior. As long as our religious ideas and images perform this leading function, and do not falsify our experience along the way, then we can say, with James, that they are "true in so far forth" (1975, pp. 98-103).

It is important to recognize that we can use this pragmatic approach without necessarily embracing James's pragmatic theory of truth; it is perfectly legitimate to combine a common-sense "correspondence" model of truth with pragmatic criteria for testing the validity of religious truth claims. We should not adopt James's pragmatic method, however, without stretching it to include attention to the workings of the religious imagination and the cultural forces that shape it. When James judged the practical consequences of an idea, he often did so in general terms, without considering its particular, historical implications. That means that he failed to do justice to ideas that are colored by situations with which he was not familiar. For example, when he criticized the notion of the Absolute, calling it a pallid substitute for the richness of a pluralistic universe, James was primarily addressing the intellectual situation of the modern West; he gave only passing recognition to the fact that the Absolute served early Greek philosophers as the aim of a religious quest and as a means of liberation from more pluralistic, but less vital and inclusive outlooks. To be truly pragmatic, one must also take into account such historical elements. The "cash value" of a religious conception depends on the state of the economy in which it is circulated, and cannot be measured against any universal rate of exchange. With that in mind, I have criticized theological
interpretations of near-death literature that do not take into account its particular implications for our culture.

We cannot return to James, then, but we can combine a Jamesian respect for the validity of individual religious experience with a greater sensitivity to the cultural shaping of that experience. We can expand his pragmatic method by incorporating into it an appreciation of the symbolic and therapeutic character of religious discourse. Having made this methodological excursion, we can turn to the task of interpreting near-death visions with a renewed sense of the rightness of treating them as socially conditioned, imaginative, and yet nonetheless real and revelatory experiences.

That is the approach that allows us to respect the visionary’s claim that he or she experienced death, even if the “death” did not meet medical criteria. It is enough to know that the shock of extreme danger or expected death opened the person to a discovery of what death means to the person at the core of his or her being. When the visionary stepped onto the stage of the other world—which is the inner world, turned inside out—the visionary confronted his or her own deeply held image and presentiment of death, perhaps just as he or she will at the time of actual death. Thus we can say, in the fullest possible sense, that the visionary “met his death.”

Indeed, it is no accident that the ordinary expression “he met his death” is compatible with the testimony of near-death visionaries. Here is one instance in which our language preserves a vestige of otherworld journey imagery in a saying that, though commonplace, nonetheless retains a vital charge. Dormant in our everyday speech, the expression has the potential to spring into a full-blown imaginative or visionary experience; its potency is a sign that the traditional and folkloristic view of death as a symbolic encounter still has resonance for us. If we recognize this, then the testimony of near-death visionaries will begin to seem less foreign. On the basis of this common ground of imaginative experience, we have reason to accord some validity to the visionary’s claims. Certainly this is a more fruitful and more humane approach than the applications of external medical tests.

The same logic applies to the conviction of having survived death. Though it proves nothing about our own prospects for life beyond the grave, we are entitled to accept an individual’s report that he experienced something in himself that surpasses death. Given the immense practical significance of this claim, it would be foolish to deny it solely because of scientific opinions. Science can hardly have the last word on a subject about which it has so little to say, and the transforming effects of near-death experiences speak for
themselves.

So the benefits of reading visionary testimony as a work of the imagination keep accumulating; and if we move on to consider the near-death vision as a narrative whole, its immunity against reductionist criticism becomes even stronger. We have seen that arguments against the validity of visionary experience depend on analyzing it into component parts. As Gordon Kaufman said of religious experience in general, so the critics of near-death research remind us that near-death experience is a composite, and that its individual elements may be "explained" by distribution to various physical, psychological, and social facts.

Yet it is our prerogative as imaginative beings to form meaningful wholes out of the elements of sensation, perception, language, memory, and so forth that we are given. Imagination, which Coleridge called the power "to shape into one," fuses these bits of experience into a dramatic sequence, aimed toward a destination, and therefore not reducible to their origin. Thus, in acts of telling and retelling, the near-death experience takes shape as a unified and unifying whole. Once that narrative integrity is achieved, no amount of analytical dissection can destroy it.

The immunity this affords us is lost, however, the moment we try to verify near-death experience by isolating veridical elements, ruling out pathological causes, or breaking it down into statistics. Paradoxically, the very method that permits us to respect visionary testimony prohibits us from using it to make a case for survival. To that extent, we must frustrate the truth-claims for near-death literature.

In every respect, our defense of near-death reports depends on treating them as symbolic expressions that can never be translated into conceptual terms capable of objective verification. Perhaps that will prove a disappointment to those who wish to have their doubts about life after death resolved, but it has positive religious implications as well, for it requires us to give up our insistence on objective verification (which has been the source of so much grief throughout history) and to cultivate an appreciation of symbol in its place. Instead of regretting the fact that religious experience is symbolic rather than descriptive, we might well rejoice that the truth empties itself into our human language and cultural forms. The desire to strip away those forms, in the belief that they merely embellish, veil, or obstruct the truth would be, in effect, a revival of the Docetist heresy.

Hence, even if we grant that near-death visions convey something real, there is no reliable way to formulate what that "something" is. We cannot take a consensus of the visionaries; their visions are
too culturally specific. We cannot crack their symbolic code, and we know before we start that every explanation or interpretation, however thoughtful, will leave the essential mystery untouched. Therefore, as the remainder of this paper will suggest, we can appropriate the messages of near-death literature only in an indirect fashion; and yet that may prove to be no insignificant thing.

ANOTHER WORLD TO LIVE IN

The narrative integrity of near-death visions derives not only from the fact that a story is told, but also, and more importantly, from the fact that the story has an aim. What seems at first glance to be a visionary travelogue describing for the curious the sights of an exotic supernatural realm, turns out to be the story of a conversion experience; and, as we have seen, its main purpose is to communicate to others the new insights won by the convert.

Otherworld vision stories resemble conversion narratives in two respects. First, and most obvious, they trace the protagonist’s recovery from a condition of sin, melancholy, malaise—or from death itself, which is the fundamental reference point and emblem for all states of despair. Modern near-death narratives give us deliverance without conviction of sin, but they follow the conversion pattern nonetheless, often beginning with an allusion to the protagonist’s long-standing enslavement to fear of death, and ending, as the medieval narratives do, with an account of his regenerated way of life. The death-first pattern of contemporary reports thus serves a function similar to that of the hell-first pattern of medieval narratives.

The second, and more intriguing, parallel between conversion experience and near-death visions is the way in which inner transformation colors perceptions of the outer world. Not only do otherworld visions resemble conversion, but, in this respect, conversion narratives resemble otherworld visions. William James suggested as much in his discussion of conversion, when he pointed out that a sudden sense of inward illumination can spill over into the landscape, saturating it with beauty, light, newness, vitality, and harmony. James’s prime example for that was Jonathan Edwards’s account (quoted in James, 1901-02/1958, Lecture 10) of his own conversion experience, in which the face of nature seemed to change, and the voice of thunder was transformed from a dreadful summons into a sweet invitation. James also cited several anonymous witnesses who entered the “state of assurance” under the auspices of evangelical revival; the following narrative, taken from E. D. Starbuck (James, 1901-02/1958, p. 200), is representative:

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It was like entering another world, a new state of existence. Natural objects were glorified, my spiritual vision was so clarified that I saw beauty in every material object in the universe, the woods were vocal with heavenly music; my soul exulted in the love of God, and I wanted everybody to share in my joy.

For a secular variation on the same theme, we can turn to Gustav Fechner, the philosopher whom James admired, who attained to his “daylight view” of the panpsychic intelligence of plants and planets after emerging from a period of painful seclusion (1946, p. 211):

I still remember well what an impression it made upon me when, after suffering for some years from an ailment which affected my sight, I stepped out for the first time from my darkened chamber and into the garden with no bandage upon my eyes. It seemed to me like a glimpse beyond the boundary of human experience. Every flower beamed upon me with a peculiar clarity, as though into the outer light it was casting a light of its own. To me the whole garden seemed transfigured, as though it were not I but nature that had just arisen. And I thought: So nothing is needed but to open the eyes afresh, and with that old nature is made young again.

In this passage there converges a whole array of literal and metaphorical conversion and otherworld journey motifs. We might compare it to the account by Alphonse Ratisbonne, quoted by James (1901-02/1958, Lecture 10), which likens a sudden conversion experience to emerging “from a sepulchre, from an abyss of darkness,” and finding that “in an instant the bandage had fallen from my eyes.” But the special charm of Fechner’s account is that these age-old symbols of awakening and renewed sight—exit from a darkened chamber, having a covering drop from the eyes, entering a luminous garden—here take a literal form. The same is true of near-death narratives, in which the literal sense comes to rest not on bandages or gardens, but on the passage from death into life, from the darkened chamber of the body and its lidded vision, to the lucid garden which, as Fechner put it, “lies beyond the wall of this world.”

William James held that the principle by which a conversion experience transfigures the landscape can also operate in reverse, in a melancholic refiguring of the world that strips it of value, interest, and hence of visual allure; and we have seen that this is the chief feature of what psychologists now call “depersonalization,” the condition that resembles yet is the very antithesis of visionary near-death experience. According to James, this is more than a psychological principle; he maintained that our exalted or depressed states, assisted by our ideals, beliefs, doubts, and philosophic opinions, positively shape the character of the world. Not only con-
version, but all meaningful experience has the power to endow the environment with reality and value, just as pathological, disordered, or lethargic states of mind correspondingly denature it.4

Considered in this way, the otherworld vision seems less bizarre; though exceptional, it is part of the normal range of religious, and, in the sense just mentioned, even of ordinary experience. As a special form of conversion experience, in which the landscape is transfigured as a corollary of subjective transformation, the visionary journey dramatizes the way imagination contributes to our perception of the world. To use a Blakean analogy, imagination plays the demiurge and—with its skill enhanced by the visionary’s exalted state—creates a new world to dwell in, or restores the natural world to its Edenic exemplar.

If that is true, it still does not mean that we can decode the features of otherworld topography by tracing them to particular states or objects of mind. Attempts to do so usually betray dogmatic assumptions; thus Freudian Geza Roheim (1930/1972) saw phallic imagery in the architecture of the other world, while psychopharmacologist Ronald Siegel (1980) related it to optic and mnemonic structures, and Swedenborg (1897) proposed an elaborate system of correspondences in which houses and cities are thoughts, animals and birds are affections, gardens are ordered ideas, and so forth. If we inclined to adopt a Jungian approach, or to apply the teachings of the Tibetan Book of the Dead (Evans-Wentz, 1957), which counsels the deceased to recognize his afterlife visions as a projection of the mind’s own radiance, we must be conscious that it will cost us our impartiality. Nor does the “intentional” character of otherworld visions call for any particular brand of philosophical idealism or endorse any special school of phenomenology; to enter these intellectual frameworks requires a large added step.

The main conclusion we can draw, without committing ourselves to such a step, is that the other world—in its literal and metaphoric forms—plays a significant role in our imaginative appropriation of moral and religious ideals. George Santayana, though no friend of literal eschatologies, implied that in his famous definition of religion (quoted in Geertz, 1973):

Any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular.... Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncracy; its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or not—is what we mean
by having a religion.

Like Fechner's statement, the passage owes its potency to the way it compacts metaphorical and literal senses. Santayana seems to suggest that myth, ritual, conversion, moral improvement, and other aspects of religious life are ultimately related to a primitive—and perhaps consciously repudiated—understanding of the other world as an actual place. For those of us who have abandoned thinking about other worlds, that produces a shock of recognition, demonstrating that our metaphorical ways of having "another world to live in" exert their power on the imagination only because we continue, at least subliminally, to visualize a literal other world. It is better to acknowledge that, and look for its possible benefits, than to ignore it and be unconsciously determined by it. The chief virtue of our tendency to conceive of another world may be that it provides a sense of orientation in this world, through which we would otherwise stagger without direction.

ORIENTATION

In the otherworld vision literature we have considered, conversion motifs merge with pilgrimage motifs because the journey to the next world is actually a guide for pilgrimage through life. The maps of death and afterlife that those accounts convey are meant to help us get our bearings, right now, in relation to the cosmos in which we dwell, or wish to dwell.

Biologists Peter and Jean Medawar have expressed that point (quoted in Popper and Eccles, 1977, frontispiece):

Only human beings guide their behaviour by a knowledge of what happened before they were born and a preconception of what may happen after they are dead: thus only human beings find their way by a light that illumines more than the patch of ground they stand on.

Comparative study of religion shows that Homo religiosus has never found it sufficient to orient himself solely in terms of his place in local history, in the "rat race," in private concerns that devour his energy. The imaginative cosmologies and eschatologies of different cultures testify to our human need to find a place to occupy in a wider universe.

That has not always been formulated in terms of life after death, however. Even the contemplation of death, unadorned by images of the beyond, can have an orienting effect insofar as it makes us place ourselves, with greater urgency and purpose, in the midst of
life; and a sense of the mystery of existence, of infinite presence or surrounding emptiness, can have the same value as a graphic depiction of the steps to paradise and hell. In that sense, Buddhist evocations of the inexhaustibly productive void are as well suited as Dante's *Divine Comedy* to respond to the need for orientation. The question they address is not necessarily "what was I before I was born, and what will I be when I die?" but rather, "where am I now in relation to the north, south, east, and west of the cosmos, the yesterday and tomorrow of history, the higher and lower ranks of being?" And the answer to that question can legitimately take many different forms, as long as it succeeds to some degree in correlating our position in the social order with our position in the cosmic order. Thus, I have suggested that otherworld journey narration is most likely to become prominent at times when a culture develops, or encounters through contact with other cultures, new perspectives on the social and natural universe that—until assimilated by the religious imagination—give rise to "cognitive dissonance" and spiritual dislocation.

For it is the religious imagination that turns map into cosmos and cosmos into home; and in visionary literature, that is accomplished by sending scouts to visit the farther reaches and return with eyewitness accounts that imaginatively appropriate the current world picture. Without such reports of actual experience, we seem to live in an unevaluated and desacralized universe.

If the otherworld journey is a way for the religious imagination to digest a culturally fashioned cosmology, then it is not surprising that such narratives, today as in the past, raise questions of a scientific order. The narrators who attempt to provide verification, according to the investigative canons of their day, are only extending that original impulse to link cosmology with imaginative experience. Although they may never achieve a profound synthesis of scientific and religious world-views, they are at least making an effort in that direction, unlike those religious thinkers who are so disenchanted by the failed alliances of the past that they look for religion only in those areas—such as ethics—that do not clash with scientific consensus.

Fortunately, those are not the only options. A third possibility, as Gordon Allport told us (1950, p. 132), is the "ceaseless struggle to assimilate the scientific frame of thought within an expanded religious frame." The intent of the present study has been to point the theological interpretation of near-death experience in this direction: acknowledging scientific and historical contributions without succumbing to positivism, taking experiential claims seriously, and
yet posing the question of verification on a deeper level.

We can sum up by saying that otherworld journey narratives orient us in two ways: as works of visionary topography, they provide an updated, culturally sanctioned picture of the cosmos, and as works of moral and spiritual instruction they call on us to inhabit that cosmos, by overcoming the fear or forgetfulness that make us as insensible to life as to death. All that is the action of the religious imagination, that power that makes our ideas and ideals come to life and act upon us. Although most of us do not seek visions (nor are we advised to do so by the visionary literature we have considered), we can at least respect the testimony of vision literature as an extreme instance of the legitimate imaginative ways in which one can instill a religious sense of the cosmos.

Yet, it is one thing to acknowledge in general terms the orienting value of otherworld visions, and it is quite another to decide whether their specific content might be relevant to our own view of life and death. In order to understand the conditions, both cultural and natural, that shape near-death experience, we have taken on the role of spectators, and cannot easily divest ourselves of that role. In comparing medieval and modern visions, we seem to have stepped outside of our own cultural context and may feel at a loss as to how to step back into it and make judgments. Such incapacity for wholehearted participation is the intellectual's occupational disease; among scholars engaged in the comparative study of religion it can produce a sense of nostalgia for days of innocence or for some idealized form of archaic or traditional religiosity.

Thus, when we try to evaluate near-death experience, we may feel stymied by our sophistication. We have gotten beyond reductionism to the extent that we can say of near-death visions, as William James said (1901-02/1958, p. 322) of mysticism, that they "usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come"; but we find ourselves effectively collared by the corollary that these revelations cannot legislate to—and hence, perhaps, cannot be shared with—the general public. The result is that those individuals whose understanding has been shaped by an overwhelming visionary experience seem to be isolated from the rest of us who are trying to make sense of things without the aid of immediate revelation.

To some extent, that is a necessary quarantine. At this stage, I see no justification for treating contemporary near-death testimony as the foundation for a new eschatology or religious movement. Near-death literature is at its best when it is modest and anecdotal; pressed into service as philosophy or prophecy, it sounds insipid. There is
no match here for the revelatory literature of the great religious traditions, and it is unlikely that a Gregory the Great or a Dante will emerge to shape near-death testimony into a religiously sophisticated or artistically ordered statement. Nor could the medieval visions we considered stand on their own; they thrived insofar as they exemplified a wider tradition.

In the end, a revelation is binding only if it binds; on a personal scale, it must organize life into a meaningful whole, without excluding other experiences. On a social scale, it must create or serve a community; and on that score, near-death testimony breaks down into private testaments that, despite their common features, cannot muster the collective energy to produce a coherent world view. Those who experience near-death visions, as well as those who are affected by hearing them, still face the problem of finding a community and a context in which to apply and search again for the insights they have received.

In our fragmented religious situation, the otherworld journey narrative has lost some of its orienting power. It can remind us of the need for orientation, the need to have a consecrated cosmos as the setting for a spiritual journey, but it cannot provide the means or material to accomplish this. We are thrown back on our own devices, our own partial and provisional solutions.

Under these circumstances, the most significant contribution made by near-death literature today may be that it puts in experiential terms questions about life and death that are so urgent as to call not for answers, but for a vital response. The moment of death—whether it is an imminent prospect or just an idea—still has a salutary shock value; it can make what James would call "live options" out of metaphysical notions that might otherwise seem remote, abstract, or obsolete.

If near-death literature is to have any prophetic value or evidential weight, that will be because it communicates insights capable of being verified—not in medical charts, but in our own experience. We may find no difficulty in respecting the testimony of those whose lives have been transformed by a near-death vision, but we can verify their discoveries only if, in some sense, we experience them for ourselves. The same can be said of other forms of religious testimony; for, unlike the generalizable truths of science, religious truths are true only insofar as religious people make them their own.

In that respect, there is no great distance between those who have experienced near-death visions and those who have only read them. The visionary—who must continually struggle to understand and not to betray this original vision—is in the same boat with the rest of
us. We are all in constant need of verifying our beliefs, whether they derive from personal experience or from venerated hearsay. A conviction that life surpasses death, however intensely felt, will eventually lose its vitality and become a mere fossil record, as alien as any borrowed doctrine, unless it is tested and rediscovered in daily life.

In addition, this study shows a fundamental kinship between otherworld visions and the more common forms of imaginative experience. Whether we fall into the “experiencer” or the “non-experiencer” category on a near-death survey, we are all, in a sense, otherworld travellers. Otherworld visions are products of the same imaginative power that is active in our ordinary ways of visualizing death, our tendency to portray ideas in concrete, embodied, and dramatic forms, the capacity of our inner states to transfigure our perception of outer landscapes, our need to internalize the cultural map of the physical universe, and our drive to experience that universe as a moral and spiritual cosmos in which we belong and have a purpose.

Whatever the study of near-death visions might reveal about the experience of death, it teaches us just as much about ourselves as image-making and image-bound beings. To admit this is no concession to the debunkers; on the contrary, by recognizing the imaginative character of otherworld visions, we have moved beyond the merely defensive posture of arguing against reductionism. Within the limits discussed in this paper, we are able to grant the validity of near-death testimony as one way in which the religious imagination mediates the search for ultimate truth.

NOTES


2. Theological discomfort with experiential claims has a long history, but in its current forms reflects the influence of such diverse thinkers as Hume, Kant, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Barth. In setting boundaries on the theoretical and practical use of reason, Kant established that God as Absolute cannot be an object of possible experience. Many theologians have since felt compelled to characterize religious experience as categorically different from all other kinds of experience, and hence not recognizably em-
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pirical; or even to condemn interest in religious experience as a self-centered, idolatrous fixation that substitutes for pure faith. A pragmatic view of religious experience has the potential to release us from some of those vetoes; as William James pointed out, the God of religious experience is a More rather than a categorically transcendent All. Perhaps God is willing to descend from the status of "wholly other" in order to become available to human experience.

3. The sociological approach to cognitive religious claims reflects the influence of Marx, Weber, and especially Durkheim, who insisted that the reality expressed by religious symbols is primarily a social one and, as such, cannot be understood by introspection.

4. In putting forward that view, James occupied a theoretical position somewhere between the practical idealism of the optimistic Mind-Cure philosophies he described and criticized in The Varieties of Religious Experience, and the more complex doctrines of intentionality that have become the specialty of modern schools of phenomenological inquiry. The details of his position cannot be covered here; I have only extracted the general insights that are relevant to the interpretation of near-death testimony, and which are compatible with many different philosophical systems.

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Requests for reprints to:
Carol Zaleski
Harvard University
Committee on the Study of Religion
61 Kirkland Street
Cambridge, MA 02138