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Editor’s Foreword

This issue of the Journal, like the previous one, focuses on the critical yet long-neglected theme of religious bias among both near-death researchers and near-death experiencers (NDErs), and how such biases may influence our understanding of these phenomena. In our lead article, religious scholar Gracia Fay Ellwood provides a sociohistorical perspective on religious systems and elucidates the pivotal role that NDEs may play in the further evolution of contemporary religious thought. In a companion article, cardiologist Michael Sabom responds to Ellwood’s criticism of his research methodology and of his theological arguments regarding psychic and occult phenomena and the authority of the Bible.

Next, sociologist Craig Lundahl compares descriptions of afterworld realms as described by near-death experiencers and by Marian visionaries of Medjugorje, noting that the Marian visionaries suggest the existence of a hellish realm distinct from the “realm of bewildered spirits” sometimes reported by NDErs.

This issue ends with four letters to the editor that continue the theme of religious and cultural interpretations of the NDE. First, Michael Perry, former Archdeacon of Durham, questions whether the millennial scenarios that sociologist Craig Lundahl outlined in the Spring 1999 issue of the Journal, based on parallels between near-death visions of the future and Biblical and Mormon prophecies, are meant to be taken literally or metaphorically; and Lundahl responds with arguments from Scriptures, NDEs, and recent global events. Then sociologists Harold Widdison and Lundahl respond to transpersonal psychologist Jenny Wade’s review in the Fall 1999 issue of the Journal of their book, The Eternal Journey, with appeals to evaluate the evidence of NDEs rather than the religious beliefs of the investigators or experiencers. Finally, religious philosopher Lee Bailey responds to Wade’s review of his anthology, The Near-Death Experience: A Reader, which appeared in the Spring 1999 issue of the Journal.

Bruce Greyson, M.D.
Religious Experience, Religious Worldviews, and Near-Death Studies

Gracia Fay Ellwood, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT: The tense relation prevailing between representatives of conservative religion and other near-death researchers may be illumined by a look at the different functions religion has fulfilled in the past. Religion may be seen as centering on the meaningfulness of the world, on spiritual experience, or on salvation. In this essay, I sketch the place of these themes in the Great Religions. These themes have inherent mutual tensions that in the case of Christianity cannot necessarily be settled by appeal to the Bible, because different Christian groups have somewhat differing views of the source of authority. Furthermore, the Bible's authority is challenged by the results of modern scholarship. In light of these reflections, I see Michael Sabom's *Light & Death* (1998) as showing valuable data and insights but failing to respond to significant challenges.

*Nul n'est propriétaire de l'éternité* [No one owns eternity].

As long as stories of deathbed visions and brushes with death have been told, it has been evident that the topic is involved with religion. Western narratives include reports of seeing Christ or angels, of entering heaven, and of feeling oneself in the presence of God. Accounts from other cultures may mention encounters with Amida Buddha or with messengers of the Hindu deity Yama. In most cases this religious imagery is clearly consistent with beliefs widespread in the culture. However, it has also been evident, especially since near-death experiences (NDEs) became well-known, that these experiences have not necessarily resulted in a strengthening of ties to churches. One hears experiencers taking exception to religious establishments by distinguishing between "religion" and their own outlook of "spirituality." Other experiencers have increased their commitment to a church Christianity that may condemn nonChristians (Sabom, 1998). With the publication in the 1990s of books by Maurice Rawlings (1993), Richard Abanes (1995),

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Doug Groothuis (1995), and especially Michael Sabom’s recent *Light & Death* (1998), and responses to them by researchers working from a nonreligious perspective, these tensions have exploded into hostile exchanges. These painful encounters are, however, only intensifications of a conflict that was already evident as early as 1978 following Rawlings’ first book, *Beyond Death’s Door*.

This divide can be seen as a manifestation of a deep tension inherent in religion for millennia. In fact the term “religion” has been applied to widely varying phenomena, and scholars have not been able to agree on a satisfactory definition of the term. However, certain themes unmistakably recur, as religions continue to attempt to meet basic, often conflicting, human needs. I will sketch below the findings of some leading historians and sociologists of religion on these issues, and reflect on their implications for the “religious wars” that embroil our field, with particular reference to *Light & Death* (Sabom, 1998). I hope that this step into another discipline to take a longer view may help to deepen sympathetic understanding of the issues.

**Three Categories of Perspectives on Religion**

Scholarly views of religion fall into three categories: (1) those centering on the theme of the meaningfulness of life and the world; (2) those centering on the theme of the experience of the Holy; and (3) those centering on salvation or transformation. Obviously these themes overlap, and most definitions involve two or all three of them, but concentrate on one or the other. I will attempt below to show how the forces behind all three feed and complement one another in the life of individuals and groups, but also lead to tension and conflict.

Reality becomes meaningful, becomes a world, when its sometimes seeming chaos is culturally ordered by symbols, narratives, and concepts that distinguish between and rank the valuable and the valueless: the good and the bad, the true and the false or illusory, the beautiful and the ugly. This valuation manifests not only on the level of ideas but is incarnate in the social order, motivates human activity, and manifests in cultural creations. Within any given world there are subworlds shared by smaller groups. A world or subworld is sacred when the touchstones that order it are conceived to be supernatural, transcendent over what is publicly given (Berger, 1967). They are derived from the past and renewed; they tend to support and defend the legacy of the past. From the religion-as-meaningfulness perspective, religion is understood to
be a transcendentally based pattern that interprets and shapes reality. Strictly speaking, for those within the sacred world, the touchstones are not subject to question, whereas from outside it, they are understood to be socially constructed: “For all the gods of the nations are idols: but the Lord made the heavens” (Psalms 96:5). However, mediating positions have been carved out by those who paradoxically accept the social construction of their own sacred world while affirming an elusive transcendence. Thus they can remain, somewhat uncomfortably, within that world.

Religious experience, that is, the experience of the Holy or of mystical oneness with all reality, is central to our second category of views of religion; from these perspectives the experience tends to be seen as requiring no validation beyond itself. According to the classical analysis of Rudolf Otto, the Holy can only be pointed out, not explained. It is the awesome Mystery, the alien and uncanny Something that dwarfs the individual, that may arouse fear, or bliss and desire, in the experiencer (Otto, 1958). In experiences of oneness, the seemingly separate self is felt to be linked to, or united with, or even dissolved in the Whole. Some religious experiences may involve both the Holy and mystical oneness.

Religious experiences have an ambivalent relationship to religion’s function of ordering reality. On the one hand, religious experience is central to the activity of shamans in tribal religions and to the inaugural work of the founders and first generations of the so-called Great Religions. Their experiences, together with their teachings and their actions, provide the major symbols and narratives that later serve to shape their followers’ reality into a meaningful world. (This does not mean that the religious experiences even of the founders are wholly novel; they draw upon the past and meld its themes with what is new.) But once that world is in place, further religious experiences are expected to renew it. These further religious experiences are welcomed chiefly when they are a matter only of feeling, of fervor and conviction; but if they involve cognitive content, they are expected to appear in forms and in contexts appropriate to that world. Any that do not conform (and there will always be some) are suspect. Mystical experiences may be further suspect because they have leveling tendencies that undercut the principles, always more or less hierarchical, by which reality must be ranked if it is to be meaningful. The pronouncements of religious authorities necessarily diminish in importance if the footsteps of the divine can be perceived just as clearly in the cry of a child or the rustling of the grass.
Views of religions centering on salvation or transformation are based on the widespread fact of distress and dehumanization—of fear, pain, suffering, loss, and death—and the longing to transcend it. Though distress is universally found, salvation or transformation has for the most part been understood to have an otherworldly dimension, and the term is largely limited to the so-called Great Religions, about which I will say more below. Salvation may be seen as applying to individuals, to society, or to the whole cosmos, and it may be mediated by one or more of the following: religious experiences, ritual, spiritual discipline, good works, faith, or gradualistic or apocalyptic divine activity in the world. The path to salvation obviously gives meaningfulness to life, and orders reality into a world, but it tends to subordinate the public world to a reality that transcends it (Ellwood, 1993). The symbols and other language in which salvation is conceived are largely derived from the past, which brings us back to the significant degree of conservatism and corresponding suspicion regarding many religious or spiritual experiences. This is not always the case; the religiously-inspired 20th-century movements toward African-American and Latin American liberation are examples of salvation- or transformation-centered religion that are not conservative but are quite open to new religious experiences.

The Axial Age

Readers of this journal are likely to resonate to the views of religion as centered in experience, but may find the meaningfulness-centered and salvation-centered views somewhat alien. In order to realize the importance of the latter two and the tensions involved, a brief historical sketch, necessarily much oversimplified, may be helpful.

The religion of ancient gathering-hunting societies, pastoralist tribes, and small farming societies is separated from the Great Religions (great in the sense of large) by a vast divide anchored in a unique historical period that Karl Jaspers (1953) called the Axial Age, now dated approximately 500 B.C. to A.D. 600. For gathering-hunting religion it was the animal, and the deities who govern the life of animals, that formed the central religious symbols, which were essentially timeless in nature. The religious specialist, that is, the shaman, in his or her trances guided the hunt and gave the people access to the powers that made it successful or otherwise (as well as meeting certain other human needs). With the discovery of agriculture, which made possible the development of settled life in villages and later cities, the central symbols became
the plant, the earth (often personified as female), and the deities who
governed the cycles of plant life, especially those who, like the seed, died
and rose again. Time was seen as cyclical, revolving around agricultural
festivals and the renewal of the world at the New Year's festival.

Settled agricultural life made it possible to store food and other prop-
erty, and eventually to accumulate wealth. Population increased, but
the increased wealth tended to accumulate not in the hands of the multi-
tudes, whose situation often worsened, but of the political and religious
elites and their retainers, who could live off the surpluses. (To com-
plicate matters, some pastoralists accumulated wealth in the form of
herds without settling down.) Trade flourished, and with it knowledge
of other cultures and religions, stirring new questions.

But probably the most important factor launching the Axial Age was
the rise and fall of the ancient empires. Kings or pastoral chieftains
became emperors, increasing their wealth and power by invading and
looting. The armies of the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Roman, Hun,
Aryan, Han Chinese, and other empires marched across the earth and
damaged or crushed the religio-political structures of weaker societies,
taking slaves and sometimes uprooting a substantial section of a coun-
try's population (Ellwood, 1988). The period of an empire's breakdown
also led to much social and political chaos.

As their way of life was disrupted or destroyed, millions underwent
the collapse of their religious worlds: deities weakened and died, and
symbols and myths that had shaped their lives faded. Conceptions of the
spiritual powers upholding the world as essentially timeless or cyclical
were forced to give way before the discovery of history: things change,
often painfully, and do not change back. Even those who profited from
the changes encountered much that was new and required assimilation.
The invention of writing chronicled and consolidated these changes,
fostered trade and other exchanges, and enabled cultural expansion.

The spiritual needs created by the empires were manifold. A person
who had seen him- or herself only as a cell in a tribal or national so-
cial body became aware of his or her individuality, perhaps isolated,
often facing new choices. These might be religious choices, especially
if an empire tried to expand its pantheon by including the deities of
the countries it had colonized or devoured. The many who endured
loss, violence, oppression, and/or enslavement had to deal with unre-
dressed grief and rage. Above all, there was anomie, a sense that the
world no longer made sense and had fallen into chaos (Ellwood, 1988).
Anyone who has experienced overwhelming anomie knows that it is
deeply dehumanizing, worse if possible than the physical violence that
may accompany it; human beings have to live in a world. Mild anomie may be disturbing but also challenging to adventurous souls.

**Characteristics of the Great Religions**

In the context of these widespread needs, the Great Religions arose: Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam. (Zoroastrianism is no longer a world religion, but was a powerful force for perhaps a thousand years. Judaism, though smaller, is generally categorized as a Great Religion, but it developed in an atypical way, and for brevity’s sake will be omitted here.) Of these all but Hinduism began with the work of a founder, a spiritual genius who lived away from the centers of power, was informed by the legacy of the past, experienced a powerful link to the Ultimate, and had penetrating insight and a charismatic personality that enabled him to communicate to others a new vision. The central plant and animal symbols of earlier religions gave place to the founder himself as the chief symbol: the true human individual united to the Ultimate. Renewal could no longer reliably be found in seasonal rituals suggesting a return to Creation, but in some of the Great Religions the life of the founder became the moment in the midst of history that gave history meaning, the moment to which followers could regularly return in spirit for renewal. The legacy of the founder was preserved in writing in the Holy Book.

Above all, the Great Religions offered escape or healing from the terror of history, and a unified view that drew together history’s painful and seemingly chaotic fragments into a world. In these new outlooks, the last word belongs not with mindless chance or fate but with one personal and merciful God or one impersonal divine reality within. The individual matters deeply, and is responsible for his or her choices, choices whose effects go beyond death, into the afterlife or later lifetimes. Fulfilment may not be found in this life, but one may transcend the frail ego and body to find union in and outside of time with the divine Self, or the All, or the loving Creator. The styles of the founders tended to differ between East and West. According to Max Weber’s (1963) typology of prophets, the founders of Chinese and Indian Great Religions tended to be exemplary, presenting a model for transformation of consciousness that the individual may choose to follow when he or she is ready. By contrast, the founders of Western Great Religions tended to be emissaries of the One God, proclaiming His will of justice and mercy and His offer of forgiveness, transformation, and eternal life (Weber, 1963).
In retrospect, one can see that tribal and national deities of limited scope would no longer do. No less than a unifying view of all reality would serve the needs of those either victimized by the rise or fall of the empires, or gifted by the bewildering new options opened by intercultural exchanges. Obviously much was gained in the Great Religions; but much was also lost, for any single transcendentally-based worldview will have its cultural blinders, as we noted in the case of certain religious experiences. Other examples could be given, arising out of and reinforcing social structures. Female images of the divine, especially in the West, were either suppressed or demoted and subordinated to the one, largely patriarchal, God; correspondingly, women, whose lot tended to improve in the first generation of a Great Religion, were soon subjugated to men once more (Ellwood, 1988). Concepts of past karma determining one's next reincarnation, though they made suffering meaningful and fostered individual responsibility, also fostered acquiescence in caste oppression and other social evils.

The course of a Great Religion's life can in most cases be traced through measurable stages of (1) initial growth, (2) consolidation, (3) emphasis on interior devotion, (4) reformation, and finally (5) a tendency to lose intellectual leadership and revert to folk religion. In some of these, especially the reformation stage, a religion encounters complex challenges within and without, leading to a return to roots in the search for a simple, sure key to salvation (Ellwood, 1988). In this stage there is a particular tendency to exclusivism and intolerance of other views. Also, a time of particular anxiety and stress for many adherents in all the Great Religions, whatever their stage, was the widespread secularization of the 19th and 20th centuries, as many areas of life formerly under the aegis of religion became independent, their leaders areligious or even antireligious. A response in several of the religions has been the development of fundamentalist and other neoconservative movements resisting modern developments. The intention is to reaffirm the roots, but insofar as such movements define themselves in this resistance, they are in fact new.

In view of the present problematic situation, with Christian fundamentalists and neoconservatives feeling alarmed and nonreligious near-death investigators feeling beleaguered, the latter may be inclined to judge that Eastern exemplary visions are greatly preferable. Exemplary visions do have the obvious advantage of much greater tolerance of other visions and other religions, although even Buddhism and Hinduism have their fundamentalist and neoconservative groups. But it must not be forgotten that important gifts came through the
emissary visions, despite their followers’ record of sometimes pressing their form of salvation on others at actual or metaphorical swordpoint. The burning message of a God who loves justice and mercy has also inspired followers to dismantle oppressive social structures from slavery to apartheid. Furthermore, the crossfertilizing influence of prophetic Western religion had a crucial part in the 20th-century development of the socially transformative Hinduism of Gandhi’s movement, the “engaged Buddhism” of recent decades, and indirectly on the major improvements in the lot of women in China. The distinction between Eastern exemplary and Western emissary visions is not as neat as one might wish.

**How Central Is Exclusivism in Christianity?**

In view of the immediate situation of conflict in near-death studies, it is important to deal with the issue of whether the intolerant, exclusivist strain in Christianity is of its essence, or is an aberration. This issue is by no means easy to settle, even if we had unlimited space; we can only point up the different possible answers. In the Gospels Jesus is quoted as saying “He that is not with me is against me” (Matthew 12:30), but he is also quoted as saying the opposite: “He that is not against us is for us” (Luke 9:50).

Furthermore, Christian bodies do not all acknowledge the same final authority, so that an appeal to one or the other Bible text would not necessarily settle the matter. While all Christians at least officially hold the Bible in high regard, in the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, the Bible is only part of Tradition, delivered to the membership by the Apostles of Jesus and their successors the bishops, who have the authority to interpret it, especially in general councils. For the Catholic Church, the Pope has special teaching authority when he speaks *ex cathedra*, though not all Catholics agree that it is infallible. It was during the Protestant Reformation that the Bible, as interpreted by the individual, became for Lutheran and Calvinist bodies the last word; and even there, the clergy tended to gain greater power to interpret than the laity. In the radical wing of the Reformation, including Anabaptists, Quakers, Shakers and others, the religious experience held pride of place, tending to be balanced with the community’s decisions and the Bible. In the 20th century, Pentecostal and charismatic Christian movements, for all practical purposes giving the last word to religious experience, have gained many millions of adherents worldwide. Thus
we have an extremely complex situation of differing views of the source of spiritual authority in Christianity, with recurring tensions between conservative meaningfulness-oriented and salvation-oriented outlooks, and more individualistic experience-centered outlooks.

Over the centuries millions of Christians have lived immersed in “Christendom,” absolutist in that they assumed that this is what religion is, scarcely considering alternatives. In times of stress and anxiety, such as epidemic, famine, social change, or political threat, the search for scapegoats and other visible enemies has often led to religious hostility, such as persecution of Jews, or Crusades against the Infidels. But most Christians who have learned to coexist with others in a pluralistic situation, as in 20th-century United States, condemn religious persecution and conspicuous intolerance. (Instead, for the four decades of the Cold War, it was a political-social ideology, Communism, that was Christianity's insidious enemy.) But the fact that an absolutistic “Christendom” existed much longer than have pluralistic forms of Christianity does not necessarily mean that the the former is closer to the heart of the religion.

When we look specifically at Christian attitudes to unconventional near-death and other religious experiences, friendliness or hostility do not always accord with liberal and conservative (excluding fundamentalist) styles. Attitudes may vary from one congregation or parish to another, and even among individuals in a given church community. One finds Quakers who do not want to hear about visions of the Divine Light, while there are Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics deeply concerned with visions and angelic guidance. However, fundamentalists, who are marked by a strong preoccupation with submission to authority, are predictably hostile to many or all NDEs.

Modern Biblical Scholarship

Because quotations from the Bible as a final authority are frequently found in neoconservative and fundamentalist writings about NDEs, a few words should be said about the findings of mainline Biblical scholars, especially in New Testament studies, during the past 150 years. In contrast to traditionalist Biblical scholars, mainline scholars have taken as starting-point that the Bible is not an infallible record but a collection of thoroughly human writings, a cultural product. Though there are many disagreements among them, it is generally accepted on the basis of internal and external evidence that the accounts of Jesus’
life in the four Gospels are not historically reliable eyewitness reports. The first three are made up of accounts of Jesus' deeds, sayings, and parables that circulated orally for a generation or more before being gathered together and given the shape of continuous narratives. Each of these Gospels is an interpretation, reflecting the distinctive outlook of the Christian community in which it was written. Some of the fragments probably reflect accurately what Jesus said and did; one criterion for historical reliability is that a story or saying appear in two independent sources. Others were altered, reflecting later church experiences, while still others may be fictional. The earliest and most action-oriented Gospel, Mark, shows many signs of being a major source for the authors of Matthew and Luke, who quoted large portions of it, sometimes making significant alterations. Matthew and Luke apparently also used another source in common, a hypothetical collection of sayings called "Q," choosing according to their own views and purposes. By contrast, the fourth Gospel, that of John, apparently independent of the other three, is made up of select stories of Jesus' deeds, in many cases involving a long dialogue or monologue on the spiritual significance of the event in question. In this work, Jesus' chief concern is his own identity as the one sent from God to oppose evil and give life to the world, whereas in the first three, his central focus is not himself but the Kingdom of God, the transformation of individual and society. Mainline scholars generally agree that though the fourth Gospel may contain profound spiritual insights, some of the incidents and all of the dialogues are nonhistorical (Borg, 1987). (A fifth Gospel independent of the others, Thomas, discovered in 1945, evidently contains some genuine sayings of Jesus, understands salvation as the transformation of the individual, and differs markedly from the four canonical Gospels in having no account of Jesus' death or resurrection.)

The councils of early church fathers who selected the works now known as the New Testament had as their criterion that a work either be written by an Apostle or taken down from his teachings. Thus the rest of the New Testament, the Epistles, were all believed to have been written by the Apostles named in their titles or subtitles. However, mainline scholars agree, on the bases of style, themes, and historical references, that several of them were not in fact written by Apostles, but by early followers of the Apostles or by later writers who sought to claim Apostolic authority. They may contain profound spiritual truths, but a few of these late works are bitterly polemical, demonizing the writer's opponents.
In sum, from the viewpoint of mainline scholarship, the New Testament is a culturally influenced collection of works revealing differing interpretations of a culturally influenced human life. Mainline Biblical scholars do not rule out an ungraspable transcendence, and in fact some of them are devout Christians, but they regard no single chapter and verse as divinely authoritative and beyond question.

It should be noted, however, that their scholarship is itself not free of cultural influence. Significantly, most mainline scholars assume that any Biblical accounts of paranormal events, including return from death, are exaggerated or fictional, because the modern worldview that reigns in much of the academy dictates that paranormal events cannot happen. Thus their questioning work, while opening new vistas and containing many valuable insights, is itself not beyond question.

Commentary on Sabom’s *Light & Death*

Sabom’s recent book criticizes various developments in near-death studies of the last 15 years, particularly the work of Kenneth Ring, from a Christian viewpoint whose final authority is an infallibly authoritative Bible. Sabom’s book should be classed as conservative rather than as fundamentalist; *Light & Death* differs significantly from the work of Rawlings, Abanes, Groothuis, and others in that it is informed by the Calvinist concept of natural revelation, giving it a stronger base in tradition and a greater affirmation of the cultural world than have most fundamentalist positions.

Though religious authority is obviously important to Sabom, he continues to place high value on scientific research as an avenue to truth. When he became uneasy about several developments in the field of near-death research, such as the fact that what his patients were telling him about their increased religious commitment following their NDEs did not fit the seeming consensus of greater universalism among experiencers, his response was to initiate a research study in 1994. The result showed that in the Atlanta area of the so-called Bible Belt, at least, his impression was correct: the majority of his NDEr subjects, who were Christian, became more committed to their faith. This is a significant finding, not necessarily incompatible with a tendency toward universalism in other parts of the United States.

Another way in which the aftereffects of Sabom’s NDErs seemed to differ from those in other studies is that they reported a definite increase
in involvement in family life and closeness to family members. In contrast, some other researchers reported troubled family relationships. For example, Cherie Sutherland (1992) described a pervasive pattern of strain, with a divorce rate more than three times that of the general population of Australia. P. M. H. Atwater, who interviewed not only experiencers but their family members, reported a tendency for NDErs to feel themselves loving their families as well as others more than ever, but in an unconditional, detached way that family members often found unloving (Atwater, 1988).

Perhaps the most important discovery in the Atlanta Study was the "flatliner" case of Pam Reynolds, who underwent a dangerous surgical procedure to excise a giant aneurysm at the base of the brain. With the appearance of Sabom's careful account of this case, it is no longer possible for critics to claim that all "flatliner" cases are unreliable hearsay. Extensive records showed that Reynolds' brain and body were drained of blood to empty the aneurysm, her electroencephalogram (EEG) "flat-lined," and her auditory evoked potentials measuring brain-stem activity were absent. It was in fact during this part of the six-hour operation that Reynolds had the deepest part of her NDE, involving a tunnel-like shaft, light, and welcomers. There is no question that both higher and lower brain functions had ceased; Sabom commented that whether this fact proves that she was dead depends how death is defined. Since he defines death as nonrevival, he considers that she was not dead. Sabom described the implications of this case for brain-mind interaction with caution. It seems evident, however, that the strong and focused consciousness Reynolds experienced during this time was not brain activity, a conclusion that answers reductionist objections that the out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and visionary and mystical experiences of NDErs are due to residual brain activity. (It also speaks significantly to philosophical controversies on the relationship of mind and body.)

Although an invaluable contribution to the field, Sabom's book has serious problems. In an earlier interview conducted by Abanes, Sabom acknowledged that all researchers, including himself, have biases that affect their data; there are no such things as "clean data," though we ought to strive more and more to gain them (Abanes, 1995, p. 189). Sabom was correct in this acknowledgment. An example is the way in which his own religious convictions influenced his categorization of the religion of his subjects. He classed as "Christian" only those who answered "true" to the statement "Jesus Christ is the Son of God and thus supreme over all other great religious leaders," a statement that Jesus is dominant over others. He went on to explain that the reason he did not
necessarily accept his subjects' definition of themselves as Christian is that not all self-proclaimed Christians accept Christ's teachings: "there are 'cultural Christians' to whom faith is not important, and there are devout believers who are committed to biblical teachings" (Sabom, 1998, p. 108). Those who did not answer “true” but nonetheless affirmed a belief in God he classed as “God-believers.”

The exclusivist message seems clear: only traditionalists are genuine Christians, and all who reject the traditional domination-submission model for Christ have only a veneer of faith. This view, which may have slanted his statistics, precludes classing as Christians those persons who have a devout and life-permeating commitment to Christ yet believe that other religions lead as well to God. It also precludes those who find in Jesus' teachings a rejection of the domination-submission model. Both categories of persons certainly exist, some of them among NDErs. I have not investigated what percentage they are of those in our culture professing allegiance to Christianity, nor do I know whether there were in fact any of them among Sabom's 47 experiencers and 113 controls. But it is unfair to claim, without evidence, that all Christians who disagree with one's own Christian theology lack a deep and realized commitment to following Jesus.

Sabom documented a pattern of psychic experiences, including visions, OBEs, precognition, automatic writing, transcendent guidance, dramatic answers to prayers, and telepathy, among his experiencers, including the conservative Christians, to a substantially higher degree than the controls. He questioned whether these extraordinary experiences had actually increased in frequency after NDEs, and concluded that in the case of his subjects, it had not; the proclivity had already been there.

I find Sabom's conclusions about these psychic happenings out of keeping with their described character. Most of the cases he cited were upbeat or even joyful, and of one, an experience of light and healing occurring in the life of a God-believer, Sabom suggested that the light was similar to an angelic appearance and rescue in the New Testament. Sabom prefaced this discussion with an account of Raymond Moody lecturing on his investigation of mirror-scrying as a means of communicating with deceased loved ones in order to bring about resolution and healing for the bereaved. Sabom's concluding evaluation of these psychic experiences, particularly of attempts to communicate with the deceased, was very negative: he uses such pejorative terms as "dog-and-pony show," "witch doctor," "spiritualism with all its bizarre trappings" (a phrase borrowed from an earlier statement of Moody's),
and, in summation, “a cage from which many will, unfortunately, not return” (Sabom, 1998, pp. 143-165). His justification for that evaluation made no mention of his research data, but was completely theological. “[S]uch an interest in psychic phenomena is strongly discouraged in traditional Christian teaching. Such activity is condemned in the Bible…” (pp. 145-146).

In fact, however, the Bible is highly ambivalent on the subject. Strong condemnations, especially of mediumship, are indeed recorded in the Hebrew scriptures (Exodus 22:18; Micah 5:12). But the ancient prophets, including Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah, reported or were reported as having many experiences of a visionary or paranormal nature. Jesus Himself was described as having visionary interaction with the devil (Matthew 4:11), communicating with the long-deceased (Mark 9:2-10), knowing the thoughts of others (Luke 9:22), and calling the dead back to life (Mark 5:21-42). Jesus’ early followers likewise knew others’ thoughts (Acts 5:1-10), experienced visions (Acts 10:10-16), called the dead back to life (Acts 9:36-43), showed knowledge of future events (Acts 21:10-11), and had apparent OBEs including paradisal scenes (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). Sabom’s interpretation of such events, and specifically the callbacks from death, was that they were special and unique interventions by God, usually in response to prayer request by a spiritual leader. But they could just as well be interpreted as models for all believers to aspire to; in fact in John 14:12 Jesus was presented as saying “He that believeth in me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do…” Sabom’s interpretation seems to be a case of the conservative response to spiritual experience described above: acceptance of all manner of religious experiences and other paranormal events, including Jesus’ communication with the deceased, during the formative sacred time in the past, but profound suspicion of contemporary cases as potentially subversive of that world.

Focusing now on attempts to communicate with the dead, we face a clear conflict between warnings to avoid them stemming from a religious subworldview, and the need for scientists, historians, philosophers, and others to be free to investigate them in order to seek the truth and expand the human experience. It can be illuminating to know about religious prohibitions, but it is unacceptable that they should hinder the asking of the basic questions of a search for knowledge in this area: What is the evidence that the deceased are or are not really contacted? What other explanations could be given for such evidence? What psychological and spiritual effects are found in the lives
of those who attempt communication? Do these activities indeed have healing effects for the most part, or do harmful and destructive effects predominate?

Sabom does not ask these questions, does not refer to the evidence pro and con in the vast literature on survival amassed by psychical research in the last 120 years, and does not present evidence of psychological and spiritual harm in Moody’s psychomanteum experiencers, although his Calvinist concept of general revelation would have allowed him to do so. This concept of a “dynamic process whereby God unveils his invisible qualities to all people” (p. 207) throughout creation should have given Sabom the freedom to choose to consider all manner of spiritual and apparently paranormal events as potential manifestations of the divine, just as, in the natural world, “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalms 19:1, cited on p. 207). This is in fact the stance he takes toward near-death experiences; he is open to accepting some of them as divulging spiritual truth, not through literal and direct visionary communication with God, but indirectly, by means not necessarily known. Thus he has no need to be troubled by the many positive aftereffects manifested in the lives of his non-Christian as well as Christian experiencers; all are the work of a God of love (pp. 204–205).

Since according to the concept of natural revelation the truth in NDE communications is not literal, since NDEs present instead a complex situation in which truth can be “choked by human superstition” (John Calvin, quoted in Sabom, 1998, p. 212), criteria are needed for judging the truthfulness and spiritual value of NDEs and, by extension, of other forms of psychic and mystical experience. Sabom presents what are in fact two criteria. One criterion is spiritual and moral results of such experiences: “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:16, quoted in Sabom, 1998, p. 205). This criterion is of course necessary, but not always easy to apply; good trees and transformed people do in fact bear some bad fruit, and bad trees and destructive people have the potential to surprise us with good fruit. This criterion is not found only in the Bible, for “the proof of the pudding is in the eating” is a truth universally acknowledged.

His other criterion, “our only reliable yardstick” (p. 222), is consistency with the Bible and the figure of Jesus that Sabom perceives there. He suggests that certain NDErs such as George Ritchie and Betty Eadie, whose Jesus he finds incompatible with this figure, are in fact deceived by demons, although he does not present any evidence in the form of bad fruit in their lives. However, we have noted that the huge body of mainline Biblical scholarship shows that this supposedly
clear and objective criterion is profoundly multivalent, that the Biblical Jesus is in fact a number of interpretations, some mutually inconsistent, based on memories two or more decades old of the works and teachings of a founder who did not record his own message. (This statement does not necessarily rule out the work of the divine Spirit in the midst of the ordinary processes of retelling and writing.) Which are we to use in judging the content of NDEs and their effects? Should we choose the Jesus of the Sermon on the Plain who said “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27) and later asked forgiveness for his crucifiers (Luke 23:34)? Or should we judge by the incipiently antisemitic Jesus who accused his opponents, “the Jews,” of being children of the devil (John 38–44)? Are we to judge by the Jesus who said “Let the little children come to me... for to such belongs the Kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16), or the Resurrected One who threatened to kill the children of the prophetess “Jezebel” because of the actions of their mother (Revelations 2:20–23)?

Sabom is correct that we do need a yardstick or yardsticks by which to judge NDEs and similar experiences. Many of us rightly wish to be open to the implications of accounts of contemporary spiritual experiences, but we must be cautious about taking them literally. They remain the accounts of limited human beings, however united with the Transcendent the experiencers might have been, and however transformed they may now be. Mutual consistency is another factor. Although NDEs show remarkable parallels, it is obvious that they are not fully in agreement in their content or their implications, either within or across cultural boundaries. Singly or together, they cannot give us an accurate picture of ultimate reality.

In itself, Sabom’s intention to defend his subworld is legitimate. We have the right to defend our worlds, human creations though they are. We must be ready to modify them when they are inadequate to facts and destructive of living beings, but there will always be a valid place for them because so much is still a matter of theory, probability, and balance. When chaos threatens to erode them and give us nothing back, we must also support them, with all the emotional discipline we can muster. We do not have an infallible yardstick by which to do this, to make judgments about the truthfulness of spiritual and paranormal experiences or anything else. We can only use as needed the various limited instruments available to us, such as scientific measurement, historical accuracy, disciplined theory-building, spiritual intuition, faith, moral intuition, and consistent philosophical and theological reflection. Human beings cannot live long in the dark void in which all meaning
is lost. Those of us who have faith that beyond the void is Eternal Love, and that elusive transcendent truth is always ready to break through into our worlds, have the right to support and continue creating a world that reflects this faith.

References


Response to Gracia Fay Ellwood's
"Religious Experience, Religious Worldviews, and Near-Death Studies"

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ABSTRACT: After a brief glance at "religious wars" that now embroil the field of near-death studies, I respond to Gracia Fay Ellwood's commentary on Light & Death (Sabom, 1998), in which she alleges serious problems with my discussion of Raymond Moody's research, my views on the psychic and the occult, my use of the Bible as an authoritative document, my research methodology, and my definition of Christianity.

Gracia Fay Ellwood addresses "religious wars" that have broken out in the study of near-death experiences (NDEs). "[T]ensions have exploded into hostile exchanges," she notes, especially since the publication of "Michael Sabom's recent Light & Death." In her paper, she presents her view of the history and sociology of religion, followed by a "Commentary" on my book. She alleges "serious problems" with my discussion of Raymond Moody's research, with my views on the psychic and occult, with my use of the Bible as an authoritative document, with my research methodology, and with my definition of Christianity. Before addressing each of these charges, I will first look at the nature and scope of these "religious wars" as they apply to the discussion at hand.

NDE "Religious Wars"

NDE "wars" are being fought on two levels. On one level, ad hominem attacks are being made between what may roughly be termed orthodox
Christian and opposing camps. Maurice Rawlings has accused "Professor Ring and his previous colleagues of the IANDS group" of being in collusion to deny the reality of hell (Rawlings, 1993, p. 113). Moody has renamed Rawlings "Dr. Ravings" and referred to Christian fundamentalists as "goshawful deadfannies, stiffness, bores, nuisances, uptight dogmatists, broken records, and wet blankets;... 'JAY-zus'-Sayers, Brimfire and Hellstoners, Swaggartists, Falwells, Bakker-Boosters, Pat Robertsonians, or whatever..." (Moody, 1999, p. x). Richard Abanes has claimed that many NDE researchers have been "raised up by the forces of darkness" (Abanes, 1994, p. 196). And Kenneth Ring has charged me with "recklessness," "blatant distortions," and "paranoia"; has labeled portions of Light & Death "outlandish," "obviously preposterous," "wayward," "utterly unfounded," "baseless," and "pure hokum"; and has implied a similarity between me and "fundamentalists in another country [who] have kept Salman Rushdie under a death sentence" (Ring, 2000, p. 241).

On another level, these "wars" do not directly involve religion, but consist of honest disagreements over research methodology and interpretation irrespective of the religious beliefs of the persons involved. For my part, I have openly questioned the reliability of Rawlings' work and have argued against his claim that the NDE is a literal trip to the afterlife (Sabom, 1996, 1998). I have rebutted Abanes' conclusion that NDEs "take place entirely in the mind" and are "nothing more than biologically based hallucinations built from sensory data and preexisting memories/thoughts/dreams" (Abanes, 1996, p. 108). I have refuted Susan Blackmore's materialistic interpretations of the NDE and argued that it is a spiritual experience (Sabom, 1998, pp. 183–184 and 198–204). I have maintained that Ring transgressed his own personal strictures by proposing an NDE-based religion with "prophets preaching a religion of universal brotherhood" (Sabom, 1998, pp. 131–141; Sabom, 2000). And I have confronted Moody's reversal of his previous interdiction against "allowing the entrance of spiritualism, with all its bizarre trappings, into medicine" (Sabom, 1998, pp. 144–145).

Ellwood now enters the fray seeking "to deepen sympathetic understanding of the issues" by critiquing my work. She avoids using ad hominem attacks and the standard orthodox Christian-nonChristian discourse, challenging instead the meaning of the word "Christian" itself. She begins her commentary on Light & Death with a revealing misstatement certain to usher in misunderstanding: "Sabom's recent book criticized various developments in NDE studies of the last fifteen years, particularly the work of Kenneth Ring, from a Christian viewpoint..." (italics added).
My criticism of Ring’s work was not from a Christian viewpoint, but from the viewpoint of his own editorial in which he inveighed against the use of NDE research for hortatory purposes (Ring, 1980). As I noted in a previous article,

[m]y concern here is not with the type of belief system he advocated, but with his methodology. . . . While it is true that in Chapter 11 I use the Bible to evaluate the NDE, the analysis of Ken’s work in Chapter 6 is not linked to my Biblical evaluation of the NDE in that last chapter of my book. (Sabom, 2000, p. 246)

Ellwood’s misrepresentation highlights an all-too-frequent mistake (or bias) whereby the summary interpretation of data in my last chapter is categorically construed as coloring everything else in my book. My discussion of Moody’s work, furthermore, begins not with a Christian critique but, as with Ring, with his own published warnings.

The Research of Raymond Moody: “A Grand Diversion”

In Light & Death, my evaluation of Moody’s work began with his own strongly-worded statement:

A final note of warning: in my mind, the interesting results of these studies of medical patients who have nearly died should not be used as an excuse for allowing the entrance of spiritualism, with all its bizarre trappings, into medicine. Presumably for as long as there have been human beings, shamans have pretended to put their clients into touch with the spirits of the departed. The history of fraud and fakery associated with such dealings is too well known (and too ancient!) to bear repeating. The validity (if any) of such performances is best assessed by professional illusionists, not by medical doctors.

Near-death experiences, by contrast, happen not in darkened rooms in circumstances contrived by witch doctors, but in the bright light of modern emergency and operating rooms, presided over by physicians. (Moody, 1980, p. 265, italics added)

Since 1980, medical doctor Raymond Moody has failed to heed his own warning as he now guides “subjects” through “grief weekends focusing on the therapeutic value of reuniting with departed loved ones” (McNicholas, 1995). He uses “mirror gazing” to “diagnose a variety of problems, including specific anxieties, depression, and marriage problems” (Moody and Perry, 1993, p. 157).

Ellwood takes me to task for using “such abusive terms as ‘dog-and-pony show,’ 'witch doctor,' ‘spiritualism with all its bizarre trappings’ (a phase borrowed from an earlier statement of Moody’s), and ‘a cage from which many will, unfortunately, not return.’” Obviously, the term
"witch doctor," like "spiritualism with all its bizarre trappings," was borrowed from Moody's own words of warning above.

The phrase "dog-and-pony show" refers to medium George Anderson's errant attempts in front of an Atlanta audience to "randomly select individuals for live readings as directed by the Other Side." During this "Grief Support Seminar," his continued efforts to "link up" with the "Other Side" despite repeated and observable failures smacked of hollow entertainment. But this should come as no surprise. Anderson himself likens his role as "bereavement counselor" not to scientific method, but to "playing ball": "Every time a ballplayer steps up to the plate, he doesn't hit a home run, but that doesn't mean he can't play ball" (Anderson, quoted in Reed, 1999, p. 120).

Even more pointedly, Moody has taken the entertainment/game approach to his psychomanteum-centered therapeutics. On the one hand, he soberly recognized

[t]he wish for reunion with loved ones lost to death is among the most poignant and insistent of human desires. The desire taunts and saddens us with a litany of what ifs and if onlys, and mournful pleas of only five minutes more. (Moody and Perry, 1993, p. ix)

On the other hand, he jocularly maintained that

[i]f all of this seems more like play than science, then I have accomplished my goal. (Moody and Perry, 1993, p. 181).

[T]he time has come to look at things a new way, to stop taking everything so seriously, and, in fact, to consider the possibility that the very reason that ordinary people find the subject of the paranormal so continually fascinating is precisely because they do not take it seriously, but, rather, find the whole topic eminently entertaining—a grand diversion. (Moody, 1999, p. 164)

Thus, characterizing Anderson's performance as a "dog-and-pony show" not only connotes the entertainment feature that Moody may well intend, but captures the helplessness of vulnerable people on parade without the conscious complicity that such participatory entertainment should require.

Ellwood surprisingly does not address Moody's 180 degree turnabout from a psychiatrist who soberly condemned the "entrance of spiritualism with all its bizarre trappings, into medicine" to one who regularly uses "evocation of the dead" for "grief counseling." Instead, she focuses on my assessment (which, interestingly enough, aligns closely with Moody's earlier appraisal) of "psychic experiences, particularly attempts to communicate with the deceased" as being "very negative."
She claims that my negative "conclusions about these psychic happenings [are] out of keeping with their described character" and with my "research data." Here Ellwood is confusing my negative assessment of *sought-after* psychic experiences (the type used by Moody and others) with my neutral assessment of *spontaneous* psychic experiences (the type researched in my Atlanta Study). In *Light & Death*, I drew this important distinction in the following way:

The comments made by two conservative Christians about their out-of-body experiences are interesting. Both had put a negative spiritual spin on these encounters when they intentionally induced them, and they felt as if their efforts in this direction led them into Satan's path. When similar experiences occurred spontaneously, however, as during an NDE, no such condemnation was forthcoming. (Sabom, 1998, p. 162)

Conservative theologians such as R. C. Sproul, Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, believe as I do that *spontaneous* experiences, such as NDEs, are worthy of careful study:

It shouldn't shock the Christian when people undergoing clinical death and being revived come back with certain recollections. I've tried to keep an open mind, and I hope that this interesting phenomenon will get the benefit of further research, analysis, and evaluation. (Sproul, 1996, p. 300)

But *sought-after* experiences are

a radical offense to God. We're simply not permitted to be involved in seances, in spiritualism, or in the use of mediums. That is anathema to God, and in fact, people who do that are in the final chapter of the New Testament as those who are excluded from the kingdom of God [Rev. 22:14]. The warnings are severe and weighty about being involved in these kinds of activities. (Sproul, 1996, p. 298)

The Bible likewise speaks of spontaneous "supernatural manifestations" that need testing by "the word of God," as opposed to sought-after "occult involvement" such as "spiritism, mediumism, necromancy, and magic," which is flat-out condemned:

God teaches that spiritual warfare is a reality (Eph. 6:10–18; 2 Cor. 2:11; 1 Pet. 5:8) and that supernatural manifestations are not to be accepted uncritically but to be tested by the Word of God (1 John 4:1; Rev. 2:2; Acts 17:10–12; Deut. 18:20–22; Matt. 24:24, etc.). ... In many instances, Scripture explicitly cites Satan or his demons as the reality behind occult involvement, idolatry, and false religion (Deut. 32:16, 17; 1 Cor. 10:19–21; Psalm 106:35–40; 1 Tim. 4:1; Thess. 2:9, 10; Acts 16:16–19, etc.). This is one reason why God considers occult activity in virtually all its forms as an abomination (Deut. 18:9–12)—because
it links those for whom Christ died to evil spirits who are His enemies. Thus, occult involvement will eventually lead to judgment for those who refuse to forsake it (Rev. 22:15; 2 Chron. 33:6). Scripture condemns by name spiritism, mediumism and necromancy (Deut. 18:9–12; Hosea 4:12; Ex. 22:18; Isaiah 44:25; 29:8, 9; Ezekiel 21:21; e.g., astrology, Deut. 17:2–5; 2 Kings 17:15–17; Isaiah 47:9–14); and magic (Acts 13:8; 19:16–19; Isaiah 47:9, 12). In their numerous forms these basic categories (magic, spiritism, divination, and sorcery) cover almost the entire gamut of occult activity. (Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 264)

Thus, from a Biblical standpoint, spontaneous psychic experiences—including NDEs, visions, out-of-body experiences, and precognition—should be carefully evaluated, whereas the sought-after variety should be flatly avoided. Brooks Alexander, senior researcher for Spiritual Counterfeits Project in Berkeley, California, explained why:

The fact is that no one knows how demonic beings operate in relation to psychic phenomena. Therefore it is impossible to say that “X” amount of psychic involvement will result in demonic contact. We do not know where the line is drawn between dabbling and demonism, or between curiosity and commitment, nor do we know how and when that line is crossed. It may be that the question of “how much” has less to do with it than we think. I would suggest that the neural and mental pattern set up by psychic involvement provides an interface with other forms of consciousness, which are extradimensional and demonic in nature. If that is the case, psychic dabbling is a little like entering the cage of a man-eating tiger. You may or may not be eaten, depending in part on how hungry the tiger is. The significant point is that once you enter the cage, the initiative passes to the tiger. (Alexander, quoted in Sabom, 1998, p. 163)

In her commentary, Ellwood alleges that my negative assessment of psychic and occult involvement is “completely theological,” dubs my use of the “cage” and “tiger” metaphor “abusive,” and attributes such thinking to “Sabom’s intention to defend his [religious] subworld.” Similarly, Moody passed off notions of “Satan” and “demons” to aberrant beliefs of “infernally-oriented, Satanically-focused, funda-Christian[s]” (Moody, 1997, p. iv). And Ring, in his commentary on Light & Death, impugned my

warnings about dabbling with psychic matters, testing the spirits, Satanic deceptions with demons posing as beings of light or even masquerading as the Christ... [by attributing them to] the whole familiar litany of conservative Christian exhortations against anything that might deviate from their understanding of Biblical truth or threaten to undermine it. (Ring, 2000, p. 241)
MICHAEL SABOM

Have I been blinded by the beliefs of my own “religious subworld”? Let’s take a look.

**Entering the Psychic Cage**

Robert Monroe was one of the world’s foremost pioneers in the psychic and occult. In 1958, Monroe began having out-of-body experiences, traveling “to locales far removed from the physical and spiritual realities of his life... a place unbounded by time or death” (Monroe, 1973, back cover). Fascinated by these experiences, he established The Monroe Institute in 1974 to develop and then teach techniques to induce these experiences. Monroe described the psychic realm as one with a completely different set of rules, another world of entirely different possibilities, populated by beings who seem to know all of them. You have no rule book, no road map, no book of etiquette, no applicable courses in physics and chemistry, no incontrovertible authority you can turn to for advice and answers. (Monroe, 1973, p. 206)

Whitley Strieber is a best-selling author and researcher of “alien abductions.” Like Monroe, he has been extensively involved in the world of the psychic and occult. When we enter the psychic world, Strieber wrote,

> [w]e become like an ant trapped upon a hanging Christmas ornament: We have crossed our own path so many times that we cannot deny the reality of the trap. But we cannot see our way out. So we stop, we reach into the air, we feel blindly. (Strieber, quoted in Ring, 1992, p. 19)

During his psychic adventures, Monroe encountered malevolent “beings”:

I started out [of my body] carefully—and felt something climb on my back!...

It seemed to be trying to get back on me, and I had to hold it away.... I was getting a little panicky. I was over my head again! I thought of lighting matches and trying to burn him up, to do something, anything. There seemed no way to prevent him from climbing back on me until the moment I re-entered the physical....

Then, as I was trying to hold off the first, a second climbed on my back! Holding off the first with one hand, I reached back and yanked the second off me, and floated over into the center of the office, holding one in each hand, screaming for help. I got a good look at each, and as I looked, each turned into a good facsimile of one of my two daughters!... I seemed to know immediately that this was a deliberate camouflage on their parts to create emotional confusion in me and...
call upon my love for my daughters to prevent my doing anything more to them. . . .
By this time, I was sobbing for help. . . .
Then I saw someone else coming up out of the corner of my eye. I first thought it was another one, but this was very definitely a man. . . .
I was still sobbing when he slowly approached us; I was down on my knees, arms outstretched, holding off the two little beings. . . . He wore a dark robe down to his ankles. . . . When he came close, I stopped my struggling, and sank to the floor pleading for help. Still with no recognition of me, he picked up each of the little beings. . . .
Sobbing my thanks, I moved over to the couch, slipped into the physical, still feeling the vibrations, and sat up physical and looked around.
The room was empty.
After a twenty-four hour contemplation of the event, . . . I still don't know what they [the beings] are. . . . Who does the man in the robe represent? (Monroe, 1973, pp. 138-140)

Strieber similarly encountered a “depressing array of demonic or coldly indifferent entities” in his paranormal excursions:

Having had the experience many times, I can attest to its remarkable combination of subtlety and extraordinary impact. To come to terms with it, I went through five years of sheer hell, and still find it difficult to believe that the experience was not caused by an intelligence external to myself. Indeed, all of my internal references to it remain essentially other, despite the insistence of my intellect that this is almost certainly not the case. . . .
I have been able to observe details of its intelligence that so strongly point to its human origins that I can only say that, if aliens are here, they have learned to mimic the inner mind of man. . . .
[T]hey have done an expert job of confusing the issue. Perhaps their final disguise will be our own conviction that they come from within us. (Strieber, quoted in Ring, 1992, pp. 16-19)
The goal does not seem to be the sort of clear and open exchange that we might expect. Whatever may be surfacing, it wants far more than that. It seems to me that it seeks the very depth of the soul; it seeks communion. (Strieber, 1987, p. 5)

These chilling accounts by Monroe and Strieber closely resemble the metaphor of “entering the cage of a man-eating tiger.” This “cage” is a spiritual realm in which the rules of our physical world do not apply. It is populated by “beings” or “demonic entities” who know the rules and use them to accomplish “an expert job of confusing.” They employ “intelligence” and “disguise” to “mimic the inner mind of man.” They utilize “deliberate camouflage on their parts to create emotional confusion.” Their ultimate goal is to seek “communion” with “the very depth of the soul.”
Swedish scientist, philosopher, and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, considered by many to be one of the greatest and most learned men of his country, summed it up this way:

When spirits begin to speak with a man, he ought to beware that he believes nothing whatever from them; for they say almost anything. Things are fabricated by them, and they lie.... They would tell so many lies and indeed with solemn affirmation that a man would be astonished.... If a man listens and believes, they press on and deceive and seduce in [many] ways.... Let men beware therefore. (Swedenborg, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 129)

Compare now these observations by Monroe, Strieber, and Swedenborg to Biblical descriptions of Satan and his demons. Satan is the leader (Matt. 8:28; 9:34; 12:26; Luke 11:18–19) and is called "the father of lies" (John 8:44). His demons "speak lies of hypocrisy" (1 Tim. 4:1–2). These evil spirits use great talents, power, and knowledge to spread confusion and false teaching (Matt. 8:29; Mark 1:24). They lay snares for their victims (1 Tim. 3:7) and seek to devour them as a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8). As "familiar spirits," they can transform themselves into apparitions of readily identifiable people. (Recall the likeness of one of Monroe's daughters appearing on the face of evil spirits during an out-of-body experience.) At times, they disguise themselves as angels of light to evoke awe and worship (2 Cor. 11:4). Their ultimate goal is the destruction of the soul.

These Biblical descriptions of evil spirits are substantiated nearly word for word by well-known nonChristian researchers with extensive knowledge of the psychic and occult. To dismiss casually the very real possibility, if not probability, that "familiar spirits" appearing during an NDE may in fact be demonic deceptions is to ignore the evidence blindly. Indeed, these Biblical warnings are further authenticated by psychiatric and psychological reports.

**Aftermath of the Psychic and Occult**

Psychoses and schizophrenic-like symptoms have been reported following occult involvement. In the medical literature,

> [p]sychiatric diseases resulting from occult practices or spiritualist influences have long been known. Henneberg in 1919 first described independent forms conceived as having a psychological genesis as 'mediumistic psychoses'.... In classifying 'mediumistic psychoses,' it appears appropriate to give first consideration to atypical schizophrenic disorder." (Vollmoeller, 1994)
Psychiatrists from the University of Zurich studied mediumistic psychoses in persons actively engaged in “paranormal experiences.” They found that “dissociation of subpersonalities (subselves)” along with “the splitting of non-ego parts of the psyche leads to a manifestation of schizophrenic symptoms” (Scharfetter, 1998).

German theologian Kurt Koch has counseled more than 11,000 persons in his 45 years of dealing with problems arising from occult practices. He wrote:

> It is known particularly in the field of psychiatry that prolonged activity with mediumistic forces produces symptoms of schizophrenia. This has been termed mediumistic psychosis. Psychology too has drawn certain conclusions on the matter, and Professor Bender, a psychologist of the University of Freiburg in his booklet entitled “Parapsychology—Its Results and Problems,” has warned people in these words: “Thousands of people base their hopes on the deceptive statements of spiritistic practitioners and subsequently become dependent upon the advice they receive from the ‘other side.’ I have quite a number of patients who have suffered serious psychic disturbances through the misuse of such practices. Their personalities have been split and they have been utterly confused by the spirits on which they have called. (Koch, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 163)

John Warwick Montgomery is Professor of Law and Humanities at the University of Luton, England, holds eight earned degrees, and has authored more than 100 scholarly journal articles and some 40 books. He has observed

> a definite correlation between negative occult activity and madness. European psychiatrist L. Szondi has shown a high correlation between involvement in spiritualism and occultism (and the related theosophical blind alleys) on the one hand, and schizophrenia on the other. (Montgomery, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 164)

Clinical psychologist Eleanor Criswell commented as well that

> [t]he experiences dealt with in a psychic counseling setting have an exceptionally broad range.... Frequently such individuals have been hospitalized in mental institutions and have sometimes undergone electro-convulsive therapy and other somatic treatments in order to stop the psychic process. (Criswell, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 141)

Psychic researcher and author Scott Rogo warned that the “types of negative reactions people initially have to their psychic experiences may lead to permanent psychological damage if not immediately treated” (Rogo, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 178).
Suicide has been linked to psychic involvement. Paul Beard, author and past president of the College for Psychic Studies in London,

notes the presence of certain spirits who attempt to “break down the personality [they are] obsessing in order to reduce it to neurosis or even possible suicide.” This pattern of spirit obsession “is virtually universal and has been observed by the victims of such influences, as well as by psychic researchers and spiritualists in many parts of the world.” (Beard, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 133)

German physicians noted the particularly uncommon occurrence of double suicide among homosexuals and then presented the case of a dual suicide by hanging among two 20-year-old lesbian women. Due to abnormal psychic development and mutual induced reaction the thought of dying together and being reborn jointly in one person (a contemporary actor) arose. These ideas were influenced by spiritism and metempsychosis. . . (and were) well documented. . . (Grellner and Krull, 1996)

Spiritual counselor and author Morton Kelsey reported that “Two researchers working with the problem of suicide in Los Angeles were amazed at how often, in the course of their interviews, people who showed suicidal tendencies referred to contact with the dead” (Kelsey, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 168). And Carl Wickland, a physician and psychology researcher with more than 30 years experience communicating with the spirit world, found that “a great number of unaccountable suicides are due to the obsessing or possessing influence of . . . spirits. Some of these spirits are actuated by a desire to torment their victims” (Wickland, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 27).

In addition to the damaging psychiatric and psychological aftermath of psychic and occult involvement, the danger of human deception is also very real.

“New Age Thanatothespians”

In March, 1997, Moody sent me a copy of his book The Last Laugh published by William Moore Consulting in Atlanta, Georgia (Moody, 1997). This book was later republished under the same name by Hampton Roads Publishers (Moody, 1999). In the William Moore edition, Moody offered an insider’s glimpse of NDErs masquerading as “New Age thanatothespians.” This material, largely deleted in the Hampton Roads edition, focused on Dannion Brinkley, arguably the person most recognized
These words of Moody's were not written from a "religious subworldview":

The complex, fascinative, and amusive dynamics of near-death experiences set the stage for their exploitation in the entertainment media. So it was predictable that popular demand for tidings from the Near Beyond would give rise to a new breed of performers I dub the NDEntertainers.

Two NDEntertainers in particular have scored big hits—Betty Eadie, author of *Embraced by the Light*, and Dannion Brinkley, who told his story to journalist Paul Perry, who artfully crafted it into *Saved by the Light*.

I met Dannion in 1976, several months after he barely survived being struck by lightning. [During his NDE, he was shown a series of encapsulated visions which, he was led to believe, were] visual representations of events that were to take place in the future.... [T]he majority of Dannion's foreseeings were the typical soothsayer-fare-loom-famine, war, economic depression, societal disarray....

[Sometimes] he issued predictions that seemed totally off the wall at the time, only to be fulfilled later with chilling precision.

Then I must go on immediately to add that I have seen and heard him pronounce many other prophecies, detailing even the exact day, month, or year of their forthcoming, and all in the same preemptory voice and manner of all-confident authority, that never did materialize as he said they would....

Nor is Dannion ever bothered for a minute by any of his misforeseeings, for when prophecies fail, fresh ones soon are heard tripping from his tongue to replace the worn out ones....

He holds listeners spellbound, on the edge of their seats, but as long as I have known him, I have never been able to track his train of thought. He speaks in a rapid-fire double-talk that makes it impossible for anyone else to get a word in edgewise. His inimitable manner of oration is a word-blizzard of rodomontade; according to him, he has a long list of distinctions and innovations to his credit. Over the years he has told me this: he went to film school with Steven Spielberg or George Lucas; he worked closely with Jacques Cousteau; he invented and marketed an electronic device that keeps barnacles from growing on the sides of ships and enables deaf children to hear; he owns a high-security electronics firm in Washington, D.C., that debugs Pentagon offices; he once had his own clown character and hosted a popular kid's television show; he has organized a country-wide chain of stress relief centers that have been just about to open any day now for the past seven years, etc., etc., etc. Yet I never have seen any real evidence that any of these claims are true.

To make all of this even better, Dannion interweaves his dazzle-drama of overpowering individuality into an incredible, ongoing spy-tale of cloak-and-dagger intrigue and swashbuckling military accomplishment. At various times, he has told me that he works for the CIA, for the DIA, and for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and that
he is a colonel in the Marine Corps. He once told me that he spent his nineteenth birthday in a foxhole in Vietnam, and that he killed nineteen enemy soldiers that day. . . .

According to a newspaper report, the Defense Department claims Dannion never went to Vietnam at all, but spent his brief military career as a PFC driving a truck in Atlanta. . . . (Moody, 1997, pp. 177–184)

Is Brinkley's deceptive "rapid-fire double-talk" and "word-blizzard of rodomontade" unique within the world of the psychic and occult? Martin Ebon, a former secretary of the Parapsychology Foundation, managing editor of the International Journal of Parapsychology, editor of Spiritual Frontiers, and an author of several books on parapsychology, has found "much darkness and greed" in the psychic world and likens participation to a game of Russian roulette: "A game in which the element of danger is ever present and must be acknowledged" (Ebon, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 131). Raymond Van Over, another former editor of the International Journal of Parapsychology and author of books on the occult, has likewise warned that the psychic world "is a world where few stabilizing or discriminating personalities function as a counter example. It provides fertile ground upon which neurotic and dangerously unstable personalities can flourish unquestioned" (Van Over, quoted in Ankerberg and Weldon, 1993, p. 132).

Ellwood points to "a clear conflict between warnings to avoid them [i.e., occult practices] stemming from a religious subworldview, and the need for scientists, historians, philosophers and others to be free to investigate them in order to seek the truth and expand the human experience . . . ." (italics added). My intent, however, is not to infringe on the freedom of others to investigate psychic activities and the occult, but to call attention to the dangers of such investigation. As we have seen, these warnings come not only from persons sharing my "religious subworldview," but from a heterogeneous group of religious and nonreligious researchers, psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors as well.

**Biblical Accuracy and the Words of Jesus**

Ellwood criticizes my use of the Bible as "our only reliable yardstick." She bases this critique on what she has termed "modern Biblical scholarship" conducted by "mainline scholars" who have "taken as starting-point that the Bible is not an infallible record but a collection of thoroughly human writings, a cultural product." According to this view, "the accounts of Jesus' life in the four Gospels are not
historically reliable.... Some of the fragments probably reflect accurately what Jesus said and did... others were altered... while still others are fictional." Although her stated intent is to "deepen sympathetic understanding of the issues," her one-sided analysis dismisses out-of-hand the views of "traditionalist Biblical scholars" and researchers who have carefully refuted claims that the Bible is unreliable (Ankerberg and Weldon, 1997; Blomberg, 1987; Craig, 1981, 1993; Habermas, 1988, 1996; Metzger, 1992; Sheler, 1999; Strobel, 1998; Wilkins and Moreland, 1995).

Furthermore, it is curious that Ellwood endorses, on the one hand, the "valuable insights" of "mainline scholars" when they expost the inaccuracy and unreliability of the Bible, while on the other hand she balks at their conclusion that "Biblical accounts of paranormal events (including return from death) are exaggerated or fictional"—an error that she attributes to "the modern worldview that reigns in much of the academy [which] dictates that paranormal events cannot happen." Her basis for discerning "valuable insights" from error seems arbitrary, however, leaving one to wonder whether the "modern worldview that reigns in the academy" has tainted all, and not just some, of these controversial teachings. Could not these "mainline scholars" have erred in their conclusions regarding both paranormal events and reliability of the Bible?

In *Light & Death*, I used a "traditionalist" view of the Bible as articulated by Darrell Bock, Professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary:

Some treat the words of Jesus like a "memorex" cassette tape. The red letters of the Gospels are the exact words Jesus spoke... not a summary or the gist of that.... The other end of the interpretative spectrum is [what I have loosely termed "jive" and is] represented by the Jesus Seminar. This approach emphasizes the loose oral roots behind the communication of Jesus' teaching and the Evangelists' need to adapt that teaching for their preaching. According to those who hold this position, the Gospel writers had and took the opportunity to create sayings.... The Jesus Seminar only manages to rate 18 percent of the sayings of Jesus as being directly from him (in red letters) or something close to what he said (in pink letters).... A third ["live"] approach—rooted in a careful understanding of how historical events and sayings were remembered and recorded in the first century and drawing on careful attention to the biblical texts themselves—leads us to recognize both the writers' accuracy and the nature of the differences in their accounts.... Such variations, reported by authors who know the tradition's wording, reveal their intent to summarize and explain, not merely to quote.... We clearly hear Jesus, but we must
be aware that there is summary and emphasis in the complementary portraits that each Evangelist gives to the founder of the faith. Jesus’ teaching is both present in the Gospels and reflected on in light of the significance his teaching came to possess. . . . [T]his is what the Gospel writers intended to do: nothing more ("memorex") and nothing less ("jive"). . . . [S]uch reporting is both common and capable of being fully trusted. (Bock, quoted in Wilkins and Moreland, 1995, pp. 74–77)

Using Bock’s “live” interpretative method, let us consider Ellwood’s use of the words of Jesus. First, in asking “How central is exclusivism to Christianity?” she contrasts the following verses: “In the Gospels Jesus was quoted as saying ‘He that is not with me is against me,’ (Matthew 12:30) but He is also quoted as saying the opposite: ‘He that is not against us is for us’ (Luke 9:50).” The contradiction implied here is resolved when we discover in Matthew 12:30,

the Saviour is speaking of the conflict with the Evil One. And in that conflict there is no room for neutrality. But in verse [Luke 9:] 50 it is a question of someone who believed in Jesus to such an extent that he cast out demons in His name and who revealed such an humble attitude that he allowed the disciples to forbid him to continue to work. . . . So the Saviour teaches them [i.e., the disciples] to be more magnanimous and more tolerant. (Geldenhuys, 1988, p. 289)

In this latter situation, however, Jesus

does not enjoin us to give a loose rein to rash men, and to be silent while they intermeddle with this and the other matter, according to their own fancy, and disturb the whole order of the Church: for such licentiousness, so far as our calling allows, must be restrained. He only affirms that they act improperly, who unseasonably prevent the kingdom of God from being advanced by any means whatever. And yet he does not acknowledge as his disciples, or reckon as belonging to his flock, those who hold an intermediate place between enemies and friend, but means that, so far as they do no harm they are useful and profitable: for it is a proverbial saying which reminds us that we ought not to raise a quarrel till we are constrained. (Calvin, quoted in Pringle, 1996, p. 373)

Is Christianity then exclusive? The answer is “No,” if by “exclusive” we mean that within the Christian religion, there is only one proper way to worship Jesus Christ. Different Christian churches and denominations embrace diverse approaches. Christianity is exclusive, however, in its assertion that only Jesus Christ is Lord, and that only through Christ is salvation received. (I will return to this point below.)

Second, Ellwood questions my conclusion that the “Christ” that Eadie and George Ritchie encountered in their NDEs was not the Biblical
Jesus. Recall here Strieber's stern warning that the spiritual realm is populated by “demonic entities” who accomplish “an expert job of confusing,” and Swedenborg’s caution that we should believe “nothing from them; for they say almost anything.” Given the possibility that the messages received by Eadie and Ritchie may be false and misleading, I turned to the Bible to evaluate these NDE “Christ.” I based my reasoning on Matthew 7:16: “By their fruit you will recognize them.” Ellwood suggests, however, that my conclusion is in error because I offered no “evidence in the form of bad fruit” in the lives of Ritchie and Eadie.

In Matthew 7:15, the immediately preceding verse, Jesus warned: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves.” It was their “fruit” which was “bad,” and their “fruit” was false doctrine. I enumerated several examples of just such false doctrine espoused by Eadie and Ritchie—doctrine clearly in opposition to Biblical teaching (Sabom, 1998, pp. 216–217), which is consistent with Strieber’s and Swedenborg’s warnings above. Moody has likewise voiced strong concern over Eadie’s “fruit” in particular:

I once saw Betty breeze through a stack of written queries submitted by audience members. She read each question aloud—“Are people who commit suicide punished for it in the afterlife?” “Do dogs make it to the beyond?” “Is there a Hell?” Then, she confidently dashed off a definite “yes” or “no” answer to each...

In my experience, [her] behavior diverges sharply from what is heard from most NDExperients during private, one-on-one interviews. In that kind of setting, average NDExperiencers are reticent to make grand pronouncements. They are willing to own up to their own inner assurance of a life hereafter, to be sure. It seems that, for most people, having a transcendental near-death experience does put to rest the vexing, innermost personal issues of survival of bodily death. But beyond that, most are acutely aware of the futility of trying to provide any ultimate solutions to humankind’s cosmic concerns about a life after death. (Moody, 1997, p. 187)

Third, Ellwood asks “Which are we to use in judging the content of NDEs and their effects? Should we choose the Jesus of the Sermon on the Plain who said ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you’ (Luke 6:27) and later asked forgiveness for his crucifiers (Luke 23:34)? Or should we judge by the incipiently antisemitic Jesus who accused his opponents, ‘the Jews,’ of being children of the devil (John 8:44)?”

In these verses, four actions are addressed: showing love, doing good, asking forgiveness, and speaking truth. The basis for love, goodness, and forgiveness is truth; and the basis for truth is what is true, not necessarily what is appealing. Jesus, the Jew, rightly identified Satan
as the source of the nonbelieving Jews' desire to murder him. Speaking this truth was, in essence, a loving act, because the identification of evil is the first step in changing it. Once this evil had been identified, Jesus asked, while dying on the cross, for forgiveness for those who had perpetrated it: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). These three verses are thus found to complement one another.

Fourth, Ellwood asks: "Are we to judge by the Jesus who said 'Let the little children come to me ... for to such belongs the Kingdom of God' (Luke 18:16), or the Resurrected One who threatened to kill the children of the prophetess 'Jezebel' because of the actions of their mother (Revelations 2:20–23)?"

In the Luke passage, the word "children" refers to infants and youngsters (Calvin, quoted in Pringle, 1996, p. 390). In Revelation 2, however,

Jezebel's 'children' are not the literal offspring of her adulteries ... but those who have so unreservedly embraced the antinomian doctrines of their spiritual mother that they are best described as younger members of her family. No particular distinction should be drawn between the children of Jezebel and 'them that commit adultery with her.' (vs. 22) (Mounce, 1977, p. 104, italics added)

Finally, Ellwood notes that "in John 14:12 Jesus was presented as saying 'He that believeth in me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do...’" Since Jesus raised people from the dead, she contends, then we should likewise be able to perform "callbacks from death." In Light & Death, I argued the opposite: the NDE is a near-death, not an after-death experience. Doctors resuscitate, not resurrect, their patients. Biblically, I used both Old and New Testament verses to support this view: 2 Samuel 14:14 (at death, we are "like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die"); Hebrews 9:27 ("man is destined to die once"); and Luke 16:26–31 (the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, where the rich man was prevented from returning from the dead to warn his family of the reality of hell). Ellwood correctly notes that Jesus raised persons from the dead (Mark 5:21–42; Luke 7:11–15; John 11: 1–44). However,

[w]hat Jesus means [when He instructed that we shall do "greater works than these,"] we may see in the narratives of the Acts. There are a few miracles of healing, but the emphasis is on the mighty works of conversion. "Greater works" mean more conversions. There is no greater work possible than the conversion of a soul. (see fn. 31) On the day of Pentecost alone more believers were added to the little band of believers than throughout Christ's entire earthly life. There we see a
literal fulfillment of “greater works than these shall he do.” (Morris, 1971, p. 646)

Thus, when properly understood, the words of Jesus that Ellwood calls into question do not contradict one another, and do not support her claim that the “Biblical Jesus is in fact a number of interpretations, some mutually inconsistent.”

Research Methodology in The Atlanta Study

Ellwood points to “bias” in my Atlanta Study protocol by referring first to a previous statement of mine on this subject:

[W]e all need to do research in a way that data can be used by anyone for whatever reason they want to use it. There’s no such thing absolutely clean data, but I do think that we need to strive much harder to do research into the NDE which is not encumbered by our own presuppositions and preconceptions. Once we can do that we can talk on a level of “Well, what does your data show; what does my data show?” (Sabom, quoted in Abanes, 1994, p. 189, italics added)

In collecting data for The Atlanta Study, I utilized a formal, structured format (Sabom, 1998, pp. 33–34), and “to add objectivity, The Atlanta Study interviews were conducted in a neutral setting, and the religious views of the researcher were not discussed prior to the interview” (Sabom, 1998, pp. 139–140). Despite these precautions, I do not maintain that I collected “absolutely clean data,” since subtle interactions and body language between interviewer and interviewee can and do influence responses. When Ellwood speaks of bias, however, she has something different in mind:

An example [of Sabom’s bias] is the way in which his own religious convictions influenced his categorization of the religion of his subjects. He classed as ‘Christian’ only those who answered ‘true’ to the statement ‘Jesus Christ is the Son of God and thus supreme over all other great religious leaders,’ a statement that Jesus is dominant over others. . . .

This view, which may have slanted his statistics, precludes classing as Christians those persons who have a devout and life-permeating commitment to Christ yet believe that other religions lead as well to God. . . . But it is unfair to claim, without evidence, that all Christians who disagree with one’s own Christian theology lack a deep and realized commitment to follow Jesus.

Ellwood is here confusing my use of the word “data” with “categorization of data.” In *Light & Death*, I introduced my categorization scheme with the disclaimer that “Bible scholars don’t exactly agree on precisely
what is meant to be a Christian. But to analyze the results of The Atlanta Study, I had to set up a few boundaries” (Sabom, 1998, p. 108). I have since emphasized that “[t]hese categories were set up for research purposes only, not as theological commentary. Since the data (individual responses to each questionnaire) were acquired and maintained independent of these categories, reanalysis of this data using differently-defined subgroups could, if necessary, be easily undertaken” (Sabom, 2000, p. 254). Setting up clearly-defined “boundaries” within which to group data does not bias the data itself. Charles Tart, a respected nonChristian NDE researcher, recognized this important distinction:

What I like about your book is that your Christian perspective is right up front. Since it’s up front, I can call it a perspective rather than a bias. I can agree or disagree with particular statements that you clearly make from your perspective, but I’m not worrying that you have “biases,” i.e., that your hidden perspective has led you to seriously distort the data and so mislead others about the data. (C. Tart, personal communication, February 20, 1999)

But the question remains: Was I “unfair to claim, without evidence” that “those persons who have a devout and life-permeating commitment to Christ yet believe that other religions lead as well to God” are not true Christians? Jesus declared himself to be the Son of God (Sabom, 1998, pp. 194–196). Furthermore, He clearly stated that “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:23); “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber . . . I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved” (John 10:1, 9); “[H]e who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me” (Luke 10:16); and “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6). Jesus had tough words for those who casually used his name:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord,’ did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7: 21–23)

Furthermore, Jesus warned that

if anyone says to you, “Behold, here is the ‘Christ,’” or “There He is,” do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and
will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead even the elect. (Matthew 24:23–24)

In *Light & Death*, I recognized that

[most researchers tend to lump all self-proclaimed Christians together. The problem with this approach is that some who claim to be Christian or indicate “Christian” on a survey actually believe the traditional doctrine that Jesus was the divine son of God, while others mean they are Christian in a more general or cultural sense but do not hold to such a strict doctrinal position. (Sabom, 1998, p. 33)]

In my Spiritual Beliefs Questionnaire, I used the statement “Jesus Christ is the Son of God and thus supreme over all other great religious leaders” to separate Christians from nonChristians regardless of their other responses. This was done not only to reflect Jesus’ own teaching properly, but, in the words of C. S. Lewis,

> to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool; you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (Lewis, 1960, pp. 55–56)

Ellwood forcefully ends her commentary on *Light & Death* by asserting: “Those of us who have faith that beyond the void is Eternal Love, and that elusive transcendent truth is always ready to break through into our worlds, have the right to support and continue creating a world that reflects this faith.” Her “right” is not in dispute. But as these “creations” continue to emerge from near-death studies, “as waters boil up from a vast, full spring, so does an immense crowd of gods flow forth from the human mind, while each one, in wandering about with too much license, wrongly invents this or that about God himself” (Calvin, quoted in McNeill, 1960, p. 65). “Eternal love” awaits some, but “the highway to hell is broad; and its gate wide” (Matthew 7:13). As unpopular as it is in this postmodern age, there is only one God and one truth, and His truth is revealed in the Bible. Without this, all yardsticks lose their measure and “[w]e become like an ant trapped upon
a hanging Christmas ornament: . . . we cannot see our way out. So we stop, we reach into the air, we feel blindly” and completely miss the real reason the ornament was hung in the first place.

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A Comparison of Other World Perceptions by Near-Death Experiencers and by the Marian Visionaries of Medjugorje

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ABSTRACT: Near-death research has identified another world that consists of two divisions: Cities of Light and a Realm of Bewildered Spirits. In 1981, the apparition of Mary, the mother of Jesus, appeared to six young people in the village of Medjugorje, Croatia. These young visionaries were shown Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell in visions that were like watching a movie. Two of the visionaries were also physically transported to see these realms. A comparison of their observations of the other world with those of near-death experiencers (NDErs) shows a close similarity between them. The visionaries' observations provide some corroboration for the City of Light and Realm of the Bewildered Spirits elements of the NDE and suggest the possibility of a third division called Hell. Further study of frightening NDEs may reveal whether or not those NDErs who travel to a less than heavenly realm may be going to two separate places instead of one.

In 1977, Raymond Moody, the founder of modern near-death studies, identified “cities of light” and “a realm of bewildered spirits” as less common elements of the near-death experience (NDE) that normally occur in near-death encounters of extreme duration. Moody found that his subjects described the City of Light as a “heavenly” realm (1977, p. 15). The Realm of Bewildered Spirits appeared to contain dulled beings who were trapped in an unfortunate state of existence (Moody, 1977, p. 18).

I first used information from NDEs to describe in some detail the social system and the physical dimension of the City of Light in the

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perceived other world (Lundahl, 1981–82). I briefly described the social structure, social interaction, social stratification, social control, socialization activities, buildings, landscapes, and vegetation in the other world of the NDE. Other researchers who had documented NDE accounts that gave some information on the physical environment in the City of Light included Ray Canning (Lundahl, 1981–82), Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson (1977), Kenneth Ring (1980), and Michael Sabom and Sarah Kreutziger (Sabom, 1982). In 1993, Harold Widdison and I described the social positions of inhabitants in the City of Light as reported by a limited number of Mormon NDErs and provided more detail about the physical environment in the City of Light (Lundahl and Widdison, 1993; Widdison and Lundahl, 1993). The most detailed description of the social and physical aspects of the City of Light put forth to date was published in our book The Eternal Journey (Lundahl and Widdison, 1997).

Widdison and I found that NDErs describe life after death as consisting of two major divisions with the possibility of a third division. One of the major divisions was the Cities of Light with their countrysides. This division contains countrysides with beautiful landscapes of mountains, hills, valleys, fields of golden grass and flowers, meadows, paths, trails, lanes, roads, great forests, brooks, streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes. The plant life includes grass, flowers, trees of all kinds, shrubs, and vegetable and flower gardens. There is a variety of animal life and insects such as butterflies and bees. Buildings such as houses and some larger buildings are also found in the countrysides (Lundahl and Widdison, 1997, pp. 140–153).

The beautiful gardens, flowers, shrubs, and trees in the Cities of Light perfectly complement their physical structures, which include walls, gates, streets, houses, and various buildings with magnificent interiors and furniture (Lundahl and Widdison, 1997, pp. 154–170). The cities in this first division emanate light. For example, four NDErs described it this way:

(My guide) next led me to a city. It was a city of light. It was similar to cities on earth in that there were buildings and paths, but the buildings and paths appeared to be built of materials which we consider precious on earth. They looked like marble, and gold, and silver, and other bright materials, only they were different. The buildings and streets seemed to have a sheen and to glow. The entire scene was one of indescribable beauty . . . There was a feeling of love and peace.

After soaring for a while, she (the angel) sat me down on a street in a fabulous city of buildings made of glittering gold and silver and
beautiful trees. A beautiful light was everywhere—glowing but not bright enough to make me squint my eyes.

... and then I saw, infinitely far off, far too distant to be visible with any kind of sight I knew of... a city. A glowing, seemingly endless city, bright enough to be seen over all the unimaginable distance between. The brightness seemed to shine from the very walls and streets of this place, and from the beings which I could now discern moving about within it. In fact, the city and everything in it seemed to be made of light.

The beauty of the countryside was incredible but even it could not compare with the splendor of the city because of the glow. (Lundahl and Widdison, 1997, pp. 155-156)

There are several cities built of light that appear to be on different levels with each city being more grand than the last one, but all far superior to any city on earth (Lundahl and Widdison, 1997, p. 170).

All the Cities of Light are characterized by intense levels of activity. All people in these Cities of Light have something meaningful to do, a job or assigned responsibility that fits into the overall operation of the city that they willingly perform. Everyone seems to be content and happy as they actively pursue their various activities. In general, most of the activities revolve around the family, which is the basic social unit in the other world (Lundahl and Widdison, 1997, pp. 171-192).

The second major division is the Realm of Bewildered Spirits. Documentation on this division of the other world in NDEs is found in the work of Moody (1977), Maurice Rawlings (1978, 1993), Margot Grey (1985), George Gallup and William Proctor (1982), Bruce Greyson and Nancy Evans Bush (1992), and Arvin Gibson (1996). Widdison and I described this division as a dark, gloomy, and hostile environment where millions of unhappy and wicked people who are gray, bewildered, confused, miserable, anguished, dreary, angry and do not seem to communicate much, are confined until they can solve whatever problem they have that appears to be keeping them there (1997, pp. 222-238). For example one NDER described this division as follows:

The next thing I remember is being sucked down a vast black vortex like a whirlpool and I found myself in a place that I can only describe as being like Dante's Inferno. I saw a lot of other people who seemed gray and dreary and there was a musty smell of decay. There was an overwhelming feeling of loneliness about the place. (Grey, 1985, p. 64)

The possibility of a third division called “hell” is suggested by the NDE account of Don Brubaker (Lundahl and Widdison, 1997, pp. 229-233). However, no study has yet provided data that establish whether
such a hellish realm exists, and if so, what might distinguish between it and the Realm of the Bewildered Spirits.

The purpose of this article is to compare the perceptions of the other world found in NDEs with those of the Marian visionaries of Medjugorje, Croatia. This examination, although limited, can serve as an independent confirmation of the other world by viewers who reportedly have seen it while not near death.

**Visions of the Other World in Medjugorje**

On June 24, 1981, six years after the founding of the field of near-death studies, the apparition of Mary, the mother of Jesus, appeared to two young girls, Mirjana Dragicevic and Ivanka Ivankovic, outside the village of Medjugorje in the central part of the former Yugoslavia. The next day they returned to the same place with three other teenagers named Vicka Ivankovic, Ivan Dragicevic, and Marija Pavlovic, and a little boy named Jacov Colo. That day they all saw the apparition and heard her speak and identify herself as the Blessed Mother. She still appears to all the visionaries, and to four of these six visionaries she continues to appear every day (Connell, 1990, pp. 1–2).

All of the visionaries are of the Catholic faith and describe Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell as the divisions of the other world. Each of the visionaries was shown Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell in visions that were like watching a movie, except for Mirjana Dragicevic and Ivanka Ivankovic who did not see Hell because they did not want to see it. Vicka Ivankovic and Colo not only had visions, but were also transported bodily to see these realms, during which they reportedly disappeared for twenty minutes (Brown, 1992, pp. 217–219).

Mirjana Dragicevic noticed that the people in Heaven had bodies, were about 30 years of age and dressed in clothing like that Jesus wore, radiated a type of inner light, and were immensely happy. She saw people walking in a beautiful park. She said Heaven had trees, meadows, and a light that is brilliant, and said that "Heaven is beautiful beyond any possible comparison with anything I know of on the earth" (Connell, 1990, pp. 25–26). Ivanka Ivankovic also said that Heaven was a very beautiful place, and also noticed that people had bodies and wore robes, and that everyone was filled with an unexplainable happiness (Connell, 1990, p. 38). Vicka Ivankovic said Heaven was vast and had a brilliant light. She and Colo saw people dressed in variously colored robes who were walking, praying, and singing, and who were
very happy (Connell, 1990, p. 62). Ivan Dragicevic also said people in Heaven are happy (Connell, 1990, p. 87).

Purgatory is only darkness according to Ivanka Ivankovic (Connell, 1990, p. 39). Vicka Ivankovic said Purgatory is large and misty with gray fog where people could be heard weeping, moaning, and trembling, and where people are extremely lonely (Connell, 1990, pp. 65–66). Pavlovic also described Purgatory as a large, foggy, gray, and misty place, and said there are people there but they cannot be seen (Connell, 1990, p. 119).

Two of the visionaries did not see Hell and the other visionaries, except for two, do not talk about this realm. Vicka Ivankovic said that there are many people in this realm. She described Hell as a location with a great fire at its center where people enter and emerge no longer possessing a human shape: they go into the fire naked and come out with horrifically blackened skin (Brown, 1992, p. 219). According to her, the people in Hell are full of rage, horrible, ugly, and angry (Connell, 1990, pp. 63–64). Pavlovic also described this realm as a large space with many people and a big sea of fire in the middle (Connell, 1990, p. 120).

Generally, the Medjugorje visionaries describe Heaven as a brilliantly lit and most beautiful place with trees, meadows, and parks unlike anything on earth that are filled with people about 30 years of age wearing variously colored robes who radiate an inner light and are immensely happy. They are seen walking, praying, and singing. The visionaries said Purgatory is a large, foggy, gray, and misty place filled with lonely people who are weeping and moaning that they could not see. Hell is a large space with a big sea of fire in the middle occupied by raging, horrible, and angry people who have grotesque nonhuman shapes according to two of the visionaries.

**A Comparison of Other World Perceptions by NDErs and by the Marian Visionaries of Medjugorje**

In order to compare the perceived other world in NDEs and in the visions and bodily visits by the Marian visionaries in Medjugorje, I will use basic features of the divisions in the other world derived primarily from Widdison’s and my descriptions of the other world as revealed in NDEs.

The basic features of the City of Light are the world of light and preternatural beauty, vegetation, and physical structures, inhabited by content and happy people who emanate light. The basic features
of the Realm of Bewildered Spirits are the world of darkness and fog, the damp, musty, and lonely environment, and earthen structures and walls, inhabited by bewildered, confused, miserable, anguished, dreary, angry, and unhappy people who have a gray or dark appearances. A division and the features for Hell, a realm described by the Marian visionaries, have not been established or delineated in near-death studies.

The Table 1 compares NDE perceptions of the other world divisions with those of the Marian visionaries of Medjugorje on each of the basic features. The comparative term used by the visionaries for City of Light is “Heaven” and that for the Realm of Bewildered Spirits is “Purgatory,” while the term “Hell” to denote a separate division is used only by the visionaries.

An examination of these divisions and features shows that the visionaries in their brief glimpses of the other world did not see any physical structures in the City of Light, as did some NDErs. Another difference in the observations of NDErs and the Marian visionaries is found in the Realm of Bewildered Spirits, where NDErs often describe seeing people who appear to be gray or dark, whereas the visionaries did not see any people but did hear them. For this reason the Table 1 shows a qualified yes under the Marian visionaries next to the people found in the Realm of Bewildered Spirits, since both the NDErs and the Visionaries appear to agree that people are unhappy in this division of the other world.

What is particularly interesting in this comparison is the fact that the Marian visionaries were shown or taken to a realm in the other world that they identified as Hell, a realm that to date has not been well delineated in near-death studies. The visionaries say this realm has fire, a particular environment, and strange people. They do not mention any particular structures in this realm.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the Marian visionaries of Medjugorje were very young and had only brief and limited glimpses of the other world and did not see with any detail (Connell, 1990, p. 136), they still had observations that closely corresponded with those of NDErs.

The visionaries' observations in the other world suggest the possibility of a third division or realm, of which near-death researchers are not yet cognizant. These observations lend support for further study of frightening NDEs to determine whether or not those NDErs who travel to a less than heavenly realm may be going to two separate places instead of one. Various frightening NDE cases suggest this might be a
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Described by NDErs</th>
<th>Described by Visionaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City of Light (Heaven)</td>
<td>World of light and preternatural beauty</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vegetation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical structures</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Happy people who emanate light</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realm of Bewildered</td>
<td>World of darkness and fog</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirits (Purgatory)</td>
<td>Damp, musty, lonely environment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Earthen structures</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bewildered, anguished, unhappy,</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (qualified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gray/dark people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hell</td>
<td>World of fire</td>
<td>Not established</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raging flames</td>
<td>Not established</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structures</td>
<td>Not established</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raging, angry, grotesque nonhuman</td>
<td>Not established</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>blackened people</td>
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possibility. However, in most of these cases the NDErs feel they are in what they call “hell” just because of the foreboding nature of the experience, when in fact it may be what the visionaries saw as Purgatory. A beginning point in such a study might be to analyze a number of frightening NDE cases in terms of the basic features of the Realm of Bewildered Spirits and those of Hell as identified by the Marian visionaries. If features of both divisions are described by those NDErs who experience a less than heavenly realm, then more specific characteristics of each division could be identified.

If the observations of the Marian visionaries do nothing else, at least they provide some corroboration for the City of Light and Realm of the Bewildered Spirits elements of the NDE from a source other than NDEs. Father Slavko Barbaric, the visionaries’ spiritual director, said, “I think they were permitted to see . . . so that they could witness to us. . . . So they are naive witnesses—‘we know it exists, we saw it’” (Connell, 1990, pp. 136–137). Is that not the same message NDErs who have seen the other world have been trying to give?

References

Letters to the Editor

Millennarian Prophecies

To the Editor:

Craig Lundahl, in his article in the Spring 1999 issue of this Journal, warned us that we ignore the parallels between Biblical and Mormon prophecies and the predictive aspects of some near-death experiences “at our own risk” because it could be “the most serious and deadly mistake we could ever make” (p. 203). May I dissent? It is at least equally possible that Joseph Smith and contemporary near-death experiencers simply worried about the immediate future of our civilization and clothed their worries, and their sense of urgency about them, in a traditional apocalyptic dress that has been part of the collective Western subconscious at least since Biblical times.

Much modern Biblical scholarship recognizes that when Jesus of Nazareth used this type of imagery, He was not predicting the end of the space-time universe or, even less, things that would happen millennia ahead, but that He and the Jewish prophets before Him “knew a good metaphor when they saw one and used cosmic imagery to bring out the full theological significance of [contemporary] cataclysmic sociopolitical events” (Wright, 1992, p. 333). Sadly, and particularly at the turn of the millennium, many people still hold to the literal meaning of metaphorical language. So far, every dated prophecy has failed, despite frequent adjustments in the light of nonfulfillment (Kyle, 1999). That should make us realize that the millennarian scenario is symbolic rather than literal; but obviously, for many of us, it does not. That depresses me.

References

To the Editor:

Michael Perry suggests that my caution against ignoring Biblical and Mormon prophecies and the predictive aspects of some near-death experiences (NDEs) because of the potential for deadly serious consequences should be disregarded. He offers as his rationale that Joseph Smith and contemporary NDErs simply worried about the immediate future of our civilization and clothed their worries in the traditional apocalyptic dress found in the collective Western subconscious, and that Jesus of Nazareth used this type of image as a good metaphor to describe the cataclysmic sociopolitical events of His time.

Did Smith project his worries about the future of civilization in the prophecies found in The Doctrine and Covenants (1979)? Supposedly, most of the sections of this book came to Smith by direct revelation and the words were those of the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth Himself. Twelve persons bore witness that it was spiritually manifested to them that the record was not the words of Smith. Also, many of those book sections were recorded by persons other than Smith. However, probably more convincing to scientific scrutiny is the fact that Section 45 of The Doctrine and Covenants contains information that is not mentioned or clearly explained in the other scriptural account (Matthew 24) of what Jesus said regarding His second coming to the world (Watch and Be Ready, 1994, pp. 134–166). This suggests that The Doctrines and Covenants is more than just the traditional apocalyptic dress.

Regarding contemporary NDErs, Perry seems to be saying that the NDErs who reported having prophetic visions never had them at all, but that these visions were falsified and used by the NDErs as an avenue in their attempt to change the disastrous course of our civilization. This means that at least 16 subjects in Kenneth Ring's study of prophetic visions (1982, 1984), who were unknown to each other and from different
locations, all had the same motive and falsified their visions to the researcher. However, Ring wrote that their reports of the future events they saw in their prophetic visions were highly consistent from person to person, suggesting the unlikelihood of this occurring (1984, p. 194). Margot Grey's (1985) independent study of prophetic visions tended to confirm Ring's earlier findings, raising further doubts about Perry's supposition. The prophetic visions also spoke of volcanic activity and economic breakdowns that were not specifically mentioned in the holy writ of the Bible or The Doctrine and Covenants, placing these prophetic visions beyond the traditional apocalyptic dress.

Was Jesus of Nazareth projecting his worries about the future of civilization and describing just the cataclysmic sociopolitical events of His time? That is apparently not true according to Smith's inspired translation of the gospel of Matthew found in The Pearl of Great Price (1979) and The Doctrine and Covenants. In Smith's translation of Matthew 21, a transition is made from the generation of A.D. 33–70 to a description of later generations, especially the generation living just prior to Jesus of Nazareth's second advent. The same transition also occurs in Verse 24 of The Doctrine and Covenants, Section 45. Despite modern Biblical scholarship, both of these scriptural sources clarify that Jesus was not simply describing the cataclysmic sociopolitical events of His time.

Perry's letter speaks of dated prophecy always failing. It is true that subjects in John Audette's NDE study (1982) and in Ring's investigation (1984, pp. 194 and 205) most frequently cited the year 1988 as the year that would be the end of time. But it is also true that the near-death experiencers who had the prophetic visions generally agreed that there were no fixed dates for specific events to occur in the future, even though some were told of a date or felt something would happen at a particular time unless some mitigating circumstances intervened. This is entirely consistent with holy prophecies that rarely specify an exact date when a prediction is to come true. Usually the period and the accompanying circumstances are given, but not a precise date.

However, the prediction by the NDE prophetic visionaries that the time for the end of time would come in the late 1980s was correct. Unbeknownst to Ring or Grey, and probably to most if not all of the NDE visionaries, was the intervention of Mary (a mitigating circumstance), the Mother of Jesus, who obtained from the Lord Jesus Christ a delay in the end of time and its attending events. She actually intervened in 1988, again in 1990, and on other occasions (Marian Movement of Priests, 1996, pp. 611 and 713).
Perry does not specify exactly what he means by dated prophecy, but I assume he means a prophecy with a specific date. The only predictions of the second advent of Jesus Christ, besides the 1988 date in my article, are found in a statement from Ring's investigation about the future scenario of the Earth not extending much beyond the beginning of the 21st century before an era of peace, and one found in The Doctrine and Covenants stating that Jesus Christ's coming will be in the beginning of the seventh thousand years. Neither of these prophecies could be classified as prophecies with specific dates. Surprisingly, though, both of these prophecies are in agreement and pertain to the first part of early period of the 21st century. According to The Doctrine and Covenants 77:13, Jesus Christ's second advent will occur after the opening of the seventh seal in the year 2000 (The Doctrine and Covenants 20:1 establishes the correctness of our calendar system since the birth of Jesus), which assures us that there will be a space of time wherein the events spoken of in Revelation 9 will be accomplished.

These events are to take place before the coming of Jesus Christ. How long will it take for these events to occur? The only time periods indicated by holy prophecy during this interval are the amount of time the unnatural locusts will torment the wicked, which is five months; the three and a half years the two prophets will prophesy in Jerusalem before being slain; and the period of silence in heaven for about the space of a half hour that will occur in the seventh thousand years, although John failed to state explicitly how that half hour should be interpreted in terms of Earthly time (Revelation 9:5, 11:3–13. 8:1). This still leaves us to wonder how many more years beyond at least 2003 will the second advent occur. Nevertheless, it does make it clear that the year of the second advent of Jesus Christ will not be at the turn of the millennium, as Perry inferred I stated and believe.

The fact is that no person knows the exact time that Christ will come the second time (Matthew 25:13; The Doctrine and Covenants 49:7). If a person wants to know the time of the impending second coming, I suggest he or she watch for the unfolding events that will surround it. They will serve as warnings that the second coming is about to occur. Other warnings to watch for in addition to the events outlined in Revelation are a great apostasy; The Warning where all humankind will experience a life review simultaneously, to be followed by a great miracle in Garabandal, Spain; the end of the public appearances on Earth by Mary, the Mother of Jesus; a cross in the sky; the disappearance of the rainbow; the moon turning to blood; the surrounding of Jerusalem by armies; a third of humankind slain and those left refusing to repent; and the
preaching of the gospel to the world and the appearance thereafter of a desolating sickness throughout the world.

What is really sad and depressing is not that many people believe in an end to the world as we know it and that a Millennium of Peace is literal, but rather that some people either will be too involved with the cares of life even to give attention to such things as a second advent of Jesus Christ or will deride such a thing (Luke 21:34; II Peter 3:3–5).

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Review of The Eternal Journey

To the Editor:

In the Fall 1999 issue of the Journal, Jenny Wade reviewed our book, The Eternal Journey. However, her review of the book was overshadowed by her perceptions of the authors. It was obvious that she does not think it possible for anyone affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more commonly known as Mormons, to detach themselves from their religious beliefs and write as objective social scientists.
Wade claimed that the authors purposefully hid their religious affiliations in an attempt to brainwash the unaware. She wrote specifically:

The book seeks to “enlighten us about the reality, purposes, and meaning of life and death” (p. 11). However, the authors never state that their version of enlightenment, purpose, and meaning comes largely from a single source: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, or Mormons). Mormon ideology permeates the entire book, but identification with this organization is not apparent to the average reader who is the audience for this mass-market book. As much as I respect these researchers’ previous work, their affiliation makes a difference, given the reason for writing The Eternal Journey. Like controversial NDER Betty Eadie, Lundahl and Widdison’s concealment of their ideological bias is in marked contrast to the straightforward stance of other Mormon writers, such as Brent and Wendy Top (1993) and Arvin Gibson (1992). The nature of this bias is particularly relevant in a work purporting to reveal the “reality” about the “meaning of life.” The LDS ideology is so pervasive in the book that it deserves treatment here before the contents of the book can be properly reviewed. (pp. 51–52, italics added)

Then she argued that the intent of the authors was to deceive the less sophisticated reader:

Thus the book, intended as an objective study of representative near-death experiences from the general population conducted by objective scientists, is in fact a tract written by Mormons about mainly Mormon experiences. (p. 52, italics added)

She concluded her review by stating:

What I do question is their presentation as “scientific truth” in a work whose proselytizing ideology is never straightforwardly acknowledged. (p. 57, italics added)

We found it quite disturbing that Wade felt it necessary to attack the personal and professional integrity of the authors. She has accused us of being unprofessional, flagrantly unscientific, and purposively deceptive in our research. And the “evidence” she used was the fact that we are members of a particular religious group and that membership in this group makes us incapable of being objective. Her second criticism was based on the fact that a significant number of the sources utilized in the book were from “Mormon” sources. Thus, because the authors are Mormon and some of the sources in the book are from Mormon NDErs, the book was presumed to be unreliable, biased, and hence deceptive. Her argument was that we should have been straightforward in
acknowledging our religious affiliation so that readers would be warned that they were about to be subjected to a heavy dose of Mormon theology. But Wade never specified what Mormon theology is, how it permeates the book, or how it distorts what was reported. At best she only hinted at areas in the book with which she personally disagrees as being the influence of Mormonism.

We would like to answer her charges. First of all, when we wrote this book, we were writing it as sociologists. We are both researchers and have taught courses on research methods and statistical analysis. Harold Widdison was also a program evaluator with the United States Atomic Energy Commission from 1960 to 1965 and Craig Lundahl was the Director of Research at Western New Mexico University. A feel for the research philosophy of both can be seen by reading Lundahl's earlier book, A Collection of Near-Death Research Readings. We are well aware that personal life experiences, culture, professional training, and values can be potentially biasing. While we do not believe that it is possible to eliminate all bias in research completely, it is possible to minimize its influence. Therefore, we decided that rather than start with a specific theory and its attendant hypothesis, we would do what is known in sociology as "grounded research" (Glaser and Strauss, 1965, 1967, 1968).

Grounded research entails attempting to locate all the sources of information that might relate to the phenomenon being studied, in this case the near-death experience. As data are collected, the researcher looks for common features between cases and for new types or categories. The researcher continues to collect data until new categories no longer occur. It is at this point that the researcher believes that he or she has discovered all the key variables and then tries to see how they relate to each other and as a whole. Thus the hypothesis and theory that emerge are derived from and grounded in the data.

We started with the rich and largely untapped body of data that is included in existing published sources. We identified every book, journal, magazine, diary, personal journal, or letter we could locate that included accounts of near-death experiences. Widdison personally reviewed 565 books and 1,289 articles, letters, and diaries dating from the mid-1700s to the present. We stipulated in our book that we had elected to limit our research strictly to first-person accounts of near-death experiences, that is, to accounts of individuals who personally had an NDE or of others who witnessed a person having the experience in some way. We did not include any other accounts that were not recorded near-death experiences and we excluded any accounts from the reincarnation, mediumistic, psychic, and regression literature that
were the very sources used by Wade to criticize our book. Wade complained about the book not utilizing materials from reincarnation and regression literature, but we made clear to the reader that we utilized only NDE accounts for the book. The result of this research is what was reported in the book. Wade never used any published NDEs—which again were the basis of the book—to support her criticisms.

In regard to Wade’s frustration with the referencing style, we agree with her one hundred percent. When our manuscript was submitted to Warner Books, we had designed it for both the near-death researcher and the general public. The book was heavily documented and many points, issues, and themes had multiple citations. Our editor at Warner Books stated that the book would be marketed not as a textbook but as a book for the general public, and therefore the large number of references was distracting and had to be eliminated. We did manage to get our editor to accept the abbreviated but incomplete set of references that are in the book, but these include less than half of the original citations. As it currently stands, the reference section contains 90 of the original 178 references (20 Mormon, 70 other) and 292 of the original more than 400 citations (99 Mormon, the rest other).

Wade noted that “of the almost 300 citations, at least 150 were from identifiable Mormon sources” (p. 52). We suspect that what she referred to as “Mormon sources” were books printed in Utah. The fact is that all the publishers in Utah are not Mormon, and in those books or magazines that are published by individuals who are Mormon, not all the accounts recorded are Mormon. For example, at least 30 percent of the cases Arvin Gibson used in his three books were not Mormon NDErs. And the same is true for books by other authors. But this raises an important point. Is there some reason to suspect that Mormon NDErs have experiences that are quantifiably and qualitatively different from other people? It was our observation that their experiences were not significantly different in content. We did discover that the depth and breadth of the typical “Mormon” experience was different, but this fact was also noted by Kenneth Ring, Melvin Morse, Raymond Moody, George Ritchie, and Howard Storm, just to mention a few major researchers and experiencers.

We speculated as to why this might be the case and concluded that the following two factors could be responsible. First, Mormons are encouraged to keep records of the significant things that happen in their lives. The near-death experience definitely falls into this category and is therefore very likely to be recorded and preserved as part of a person’s history. Second, the near-death experience is very complementary
to Mormon theology and seen as an affirmation of belief, which is a further motivation for recording and sharing it.

As a result, there seem to be a lot more near-death experiences of Mormons available to analyze and research than their population would warrant. It would be interesting if other major religious traditions, cultures, and philosophies had a more substantial data base of NDEs that could be used to compare with those of Mormons. However, based on our experience in reviewing thousands of NDEs, it is our conclusion that there are no substantive differences. The accounts are very similar. It is how the experiencer interprets the significance of the experience in their lives that is likely to reflect a cultural influence. Therefore, it is imperative to have experiencers describe what happened in as much detail as possible with minimum input by the researchers. After the experience is described is the time to have experiencers talk about what it meant to them. Their interpretation of what they saw and experienced is where the cultural influence could show up.

On page 54, Wade noted as an example of our supposed selective perception (and perhaps of her own personal anticonservative Christian bias) the finding in the research primarily of Ring and of P. M. H. Atwater that NDErs move away from traditional, organized religions. On page 61 of our book, *The Eternal Journey*, this same point was clearly stated. Again on page 54, Wade chastised us for making unqualified statements of certainty. Yet she also noted that we used qualifiers such as “… these children might well…”

Wade obviously has some problems with Mormonism or at least her perceptions of what Mormonism is. On page 54, she quoted from our book a reference relating to the importance of families. Then she asserted that “this conclusion is yet another Mormonism.” But she did not say how or why she reached that conclusion. Evidently, if she does not agree with what was reported, it must be something associated with Mormonism and hence (a) incorrect and/or (b) a reflection of the authors’ biases. Wade was troubled by our summary of activities in the Realm of Light: after asking a series of questions she concluded that our findings “may reflect a strong Mormon cultural overlay that might well be absent from other records” (p. 55, italics added). Has Wade examined the records to see if this is true, or has she made these accusations without documentation or data?

Wade’s educational and professional bias was demonstrated in her comments on the top of page 56. Quoting from our book that “there is no ‘menial’ work in the spirit world” (p. 189), she noted, “yet people sweep streets, and women can expect to cook, perform other kitchen
duties, weave cloth, and even make clothing" (p. 56). Her understanding of "menial" shows her cultural bias. The point being made in this segment of our book was that just being in the City of Light is an honor and that anything requested of the inhabitants they consider to be a privilege. By the way, many of the references from this section of the book were not taken from Mormon sources or Mormon accounts.

In her book review, Wade seemed to be saying that it should be a standard for all writers and researchers to report things such as religious affiliations that in some way might influence their research or publications. But should this be limited only to Mormons? We think not! If Mormon writers must identify themselves, it makes sense that individuals who are anti-religious, atheist, or agnostic should also reveal this fact to the reader. Too many academicians hide behind their diplomas, projecting an aura of total objectivity and expertise when they are pushing their own agendas on the unwary reader, listener, or student. This in effect is what we have been accused of. However, there is more than one type of religious zeal that drives researchers and writers. Scientism is a form of religion with its equivalent high priests and oracles, that is, professors and researchers. In some ways they are just as zealous, if not more zealous, in promulgating their version of what constitutes truth or facts as the most evangelical preacher. We read Wade's own book, Changes of Mind (1996), expecting her to inform the reader explicitly of her ideological, philosophical, and theoretical biases. All we found were her academic qualifications and areas in which she has consulted. Are we to assume that everything Wade does is immune from any influence from her personal experiences, cultural influences, and academic orientations?

We are both social scientists and we are both members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; and believe that we can be good members of both groups. In this regard, we challenge Wade to review the thousands of recorded near-death experiences before 1997 (the period of time covered in the book) and prove that the near-death experiences of Mormons are significantly different from those of nonMormon NDErs. We also issue the same challenge to Ring, who has recently joined Wade's criticism of our work (Ring, 2000). We would like to see both Wade and Ring conduct replication studies of NDEs documented before 1997 and we will see if their data or the organizational scheme for them are significantly different from what we reported. As for Ring's statement that the Mormons have "latched onto the NDE" (Ring, 2000,
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

p. 230), that is completely inaccurate. It can be argued strongly that modern near-death research has latched onto the Mormon interest in these experiences, and that near-death researchers today are in essence confirming what Mormons knew 140 years ago (Lundahl, 1993-94).

Apparently, Ring insists that religious or spiritual phenomena are mutually exclusive from religion and can be separated or disconnected from religion. That is just not being realistic, based on the direction that systematic near-death research has taken. Can Ring simply dismiss research findings when they happen to collide with specific beliefs, be they religion or otherwise, and may reflect the very essence of this phenomenon? Is not the major purpose of science a search for the truth no matter where it may lead?

We strongly suspect that what Ring has accused us selectively of doing—using NDEs to promulgate a particular religious belief system—is actually what Wade and Ring are doing. Apparently, they disagree with our findings because those findings do not agree with their worldview or values. Ring admitted as much in his article when he wrote: "To me, the original promise of the field of near-death studies has ... been betrayed" (Ring, 2000, p. 229, italics and ellipsis added). That is the same thing as saying I had a preconceived notion of the direction this research was supposed to take and, because it did not do that, I feel (the field has been) betrayed. Ring also argued that the values governing research in the field of near-death studies have been corrupted. What specific values was Ring referring to, and what values should govern scientific research and near-death research specifically? Is there a difference between how near-death research should be conducted and how other scientific investigations should be conducted? What appears to be going on here is that Wade and Ring have a bias against religion, especially Mormonism, and are using professional journals to further their anti-religious agenda. They do not believe that religious individuals can conduct objective research, and without doing any scientific research to objectify their claims, they attack the professional integrity of two fellow scientists and attempt to discredit the results of a scientific study. The issue is not whether the authors should have declared their religious affiliation in their book; since when was it a requirement for serious scientists to give such information? The real issue here is the study's findings and their implications for near-death research. Let the chips fall where they may, regardless of religious or other belief systems. In due time, the truth will prevail in spite of the beliefs of any one group or individual.
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Review of The Near-Death Experience: A Reader

To the Editor:

Would you criticize a giraffe for not being an elephant? Or an eagle for not being a sparrow? Jenny Wade's review in the Spring 1999 issue of the Journal of our book, *The Near-Near-Death Experience: A Reader*, edited by Lee Bailey and Jenny Yates (1996) suffered from the logical flaw called "the straw person." In this fallacy, one sets up a misconception and attacks it, rather than analyzing the reality at hand. Those of us working in areas such as near-death experiences (NDEs) must be very careful not to fall unintentionally into logical pitfalls, but Wade regrettably fell into this trap.
She set up her straw person by asserting that “this anthology is not intended as a textbook.” I do not know how she can read the intentions of the authors, but that was part of our purpose. We sought to reach an audience of college students and thoughtful readers with a willingness to reflect both sympathetically and critically to NDEs. We tried to cross the divide between (a) the broadly popular trade books that too often neglect critical analysis and (b) the research literature that focuses on a specialized professional readership. We intentionally edited a bridging book, not the book that our reviewer expected. So she naturally reacted critically to a type of book and an audience that she did not envision.

As college teachers we aimed at an undergraduate audience, and college graduates, whereas perhaps Wade wanted us to serve a graduate audience engaging in the rigors of postgraduate thought. As I teach using the book, I find it a perfectly appropriate introduction to NDEs for undergraduates. It stretches them in both directions: the soulful mystery of the experience itself on one side, and the scholarly scepticism and careful analysis on the other side. So we assumed it would appeal to a broad, educated audience willing to be stretched in the same way. This is also why we chose some NDEs of well-known people, rather than only the newly found ones prized by researchers (although I have my file of those too).

We offered a generally accessible methodological presentation in the introduction, explaining the biological, psychological, philosophical, and religious methods of analyzing NDEs, in order to introduce new readers to the field. Of course some of its points could be appropriate for current researchers, as well. For example, I wish more researchers would take responsibility for the philosophical issues underlying their methodologies, such as the difference between the deductive (death is a one-way trip) and the inductive (lack of vital life signs) definitions of death, that Yates contributed to our book. We reached out to introductory readers willing to begin exploring research issues, with minimal fine-tuning of the methodological disputes, because the research literature was already doing that.

In order to serve this broad audience, we purposely chose to present the classical positions of major NDE scholars, in order to provide newcomers with an introduction to the field, rather than present their latest views, which are available in the scholarly literature, and rapidly changing. So for the reviewer to write that she wishes we had edited a more current research-oriented book is indulging in the straw person fallacy, and not seeing what is there. I would certainly welcome the kind
of book that Wade wishes for; perhaps she is the one to do it, rather than criticize others for not doing it.

Contrary to our review's claim, our book did present some barely known NDE cases, such as Mellen-Thomas Benedict's, Peter Sellers' and Eddie Rickenbacker's. Almost half the book's chapters were new essays by thinkers such as Yates, Robert Kastenbaum, Karl Jansen, David Lorimer, and Judith Cressy, for example, plus my “No-Thing-ness” article.

Our publisher tells us that we have had inquiries from abroad about translating the book, and that it is currently being considered by a major book club. If we can bridge a gap by introducing NDEs in a thoughtful way to a broad audience, we will be content, and will look forward to research-oriented books by other authors.

References


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