Vincent Responds

To the Editor:

It was good to have so prestigious a researcher as Kenneth Ring remind readers that he has long believed, as I do, that the near-death experience represents a type of mystical experience. There is no question that the initial decision to focus the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) on the near-death experience (NDE) has provided an immeasurable service to NDErs and education to the general public. However, my current Letter to the Editor was written in response to Jan Holden’s request in Vital Signs (Holden, 2004) for ideas regarding the future of IANDS, in view of its declining membership. I seriously believe that expanding IANDS to include scientific research into other mystical experiences and related phenomena is the natural direction to grow.

My primary impression from the letters of Jack Selk and Brian Miller is that they share an allergy to the word religious. Granted, the experience of “unconditional love” expressed by NDErs is often overwhelmed by the harsh, fearful messages of Fundamentalist Christianity and Fundamentalist Islam. Jack Selk is mistaken if he thinks that the term “mystical” implies “imaginary”; like NDErs, those who have mystical religious experiences consider them to be life-affirming, and life-changing, and more real than ordinary life. Folks who are curious to know more about research into this field may find The Alister Hardy Society Religious Experience Research Centre website helpful (http://www.alisterhardytrust.org.uk/). William James, in his conclusions to The Varieties of Religious Experience (1994/1902, p. 569) noted, “Religion, in fact, for the great majority of our own race
means immortality, and nothing else.” The expectation that Jack Selk expressed that he and his deceased wife will be reunited “in some fashion” is the essence of what William James was talking about and the way people have universally understood religious experience.

Brian Miller knows, as do most readers of this Journal, that the interpretation of the NDE is affected by culture and religion. To me, this has been one of the Journal’s major contributions to the study of comparative religion: that NDEs from the time of primitive people until today were, by necessity, expressed within the language and culture of the experiencers. The same is true of scientific research into other mystical religious experiences (Fox, 2003; Hardy, 1979; Hood, 2001; James, 1994/1902). I disagree with Brian Miller that “religion should not be mixed in with the NDE, with IANDS, or with the Journal.” To do so would be to eliminate many articles that appear in the Journal and to dismiss several members of the Consulting Editorial Board who have religious affiliations.

In summary, if continuing IANDS in its current structure is not a viable option, then it seems to me that opening our organization to scientific researchers of other mystical religious experience is the best alternative. Currently, this field is marked by tiny organizations publishing journals with limited distribution. My point is that without a legitimate, strong organization advocating for serious scientific research into these fields, the public will quickly regress into the superstition and sensationalism seen in tabloids. This affects not only continuing research into NDEs but research into all mystical religious experiences.

References


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