BOOK REVIEW

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Revealing Heaven, by Episcopal priest John W. Price, is the story of Price’s acceptance and use of near-death experiences (NDEs) as a uniquely powerful pastoral tool. Price also made his case for NDEs as compatible with and even “central to our Christian faith” (p. vi). These two themes are interwoven throughout the book; in this review, I will treat them separately.

Much of the book revealed Price’s own story in relation to NDEs. He grew up steeped in science and technology, and even when he studied to become a pastor he stayed close to his materialist roots, never really bringing himself to believe in life after death. Once he entered the pulpit, he avoided the topic of heaven, focusing instead on the here-and-now. When two parishioners independently approached him with stories of their NDEs, he dismissed them.

Things began to change when in 1976 he read the then-recently released Life After Life by Raymond Moody (1975), which provoked him to think there may have been more to his parishioners’ experiences than he had assumed. The real change, however, occurred when, as an army chaplain, he heard the NDE of a young private that he called Alberto. As he listened to Alberto’s story, Price felt overwhelmed by the conviction that the soldier’s experience was real: “I knew there was no way he would have made it up. . . . Something life-changing had hap-

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pened to him” (p. 10). Right then and there, Price became convinced of the validity of NDEs and the reality of life after death.

This is the reader’s first encounter with a major theme of the book: the sheer power of NDE stories. And it was not just Price himself who was changed by that power. As he heard more such stories, he immediately began incorporating them into his pastoral work. He shared the stories with a man named Kirk who was dying of cancer, and Kirk, in his anticipation of death, was transformed from constantly sobbing to beaming with delight and singing.

Then, the power of NDE stories unexpectedly showed up within Price’s congregation. His focus on God’s love had caused a faction to split off from his church. Then one of the women who left with this faction and later returned experienced an NDE, in which, she reported, “God told me, ‘John Price is right, God does want us to pray for our enemies and not to work against them’” (p. 60). As news of this stunning event swept through the church, Price began opening up about what he knew about NDEs. With his authority apparently given the divine stamp of approval, the church experienced a “paradigm shift . . . that love was the way to live in harmony” (p. 62).

What the reader repeatedly sees, then, is the ability of NDE stories to bring about a “paradigm shift” within individuals and even groups. Where the Christian tradition had failed to convince Price of the reality of heaven, a single firsthand NDE story succeeded. Where Price’s own preaching had failed to convince his congregation of the centrality of God’s love, another single NDE story succeeded. Price’s book reminds the reader that there is a self-evident quality to NDE accounts, a quality that is impossible to quantify yet that can be literally life-changing for the listener. The only people in Price’s book who were immune to this quality, to his surprise and dismay, were the majority of his fellow clergy and two seminary professors, all of whom dismissed the accounts out of hand.

Revealing Heaven, then, provides the reader with the nearly 40-year story of a priest who allowed his personal beliefs, his pastoral work, and even his theology to be transformed by the witness of NDEs, with reported results that any pastor would envy. This, however, is not the main way in which Price billed the book. The subtitle is The Christian Case for Near-Death Experiences, and the back cover says, “Can Christians Trust Tales from Heaven? Yes!” The primary thrust of the book is that NDEs are completely compatible with Christianity. Yet it is on this level that I believe the book falls short. I do not think that Price fully acknowledged the gulf between NDEs and traditional Christian-
ity nor the extent to which he has created a new Christianity that is a significant departure from prevailing Christian orthodoxy.

Price’s new Christianity was the result of him granting sweeping authority to NDEs on a theological level. For example, the question of whether homosexuals, non-Christians, and the unbaptized can go to heaven was decided for him by NDEs (pp. 71, 143, 149). Individuals from all three categories have had predominantly pleasurable—rather than distressing—NDEs, which showed Price that these people can indeed enter heaven. He said, for example, “These demonstrate that active homosexuals can have beautiful near-death experiences and aren’t condemned to hell for their sexual orientations” (p. 71).

Even more significantly, he allowed NDEs to craft a theology in which God is unconditionally loving. Traditionally, God’s justice exists alongside His love, compelling Him to condemn sinners to hell and to demand payment for their sins in the form of Christ’s death. For Price, though, an expression of divine wrath like purgatory, rather than being thousands of years of purging fire, “is simply the brief, lovingly conducted life review” like that described in NDEs (p. 148). As an extension of his NDE-inspired view of God, Price saw love and forgiveness as “the main elements of Christianity” (p. 98).

His theology also seemed to have little or no room for the central Protestant doctrine of salvation through faith in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, a topic he notably avoided. Instead, he opted for a version of what in evangelical circles is disparagingly termed “works righteousness”—salvation through living a righteous life. Based on the testimony of NDErs, Price believed that “whoever lives lovingly is given the beautiful experience of being taken to heaven” (p. 143). Accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior is not necessary. Indeed, he reinterpreted “accepting Jesus” to mean living a life of love, because, after all, Jesus is love (pp. 137-138). That interpretation is certainly not what most Christian churches mean by “accepting Jesus.”

In Price’s view, the line is not between Christianity and other religions. Rather, the line runs right through the middle of Christianity: between those who believe in a God of love and those who believe in a God of fear. Price likened these two categories to Garrison Keillor’s humorous division of “happy Lutherans” and “dark Lutherans.” And although he openly acknowledged that NDEs clash with belief in a wrathful, vengeful God, he implied a comfortable alignment between NDEs and the brighter side of Christianity.

Yet it is much more than just the “dark Christians” who would not recognize Price’s Christianity. Without a focus on the unique, saving
work of Christ, even the “happy Christians” might wonder where the Christianity they know has gone. At the base of Christianity is the belief that Jesus Christ, primarily through his death on the cross, brought about the decisive shift in God’s relationship with humanity, making salvation possible for those who have faith in him. When that core belief is gone—when belief is in not Christ himself but in what Christ professed, as it seems to be in Price’s view—I seriously question that the result can still be called Christianity. Near the end of his book Price shared his conviction that “there are really only two religions in the world: a religion of love and a religion of fear” (p. 157). Again, I strongly doubt that most Christian churches would be comfortable with Christianity being just another variant on a universal religion of love.

Once a person starts granting authority to NDEs to dictate Christian doctrine, where does that person draw the line? Many aspects of NDEs (Ring, 1980, 1984) contradict prevailing Christian theology. For instance, it is often revealed in NDEs that the world is an illusion, a doctrine utterly foreign to traditional Christianity. NDErs also frequently report that humans are innately one with the Creator, which seems to challenge Christianity’s ontological divide between God and humanity. Many NDErs claim to have discovered that in reality they are perfect divine spirits who merely wear a physical body for a time, which stands in stark contrast to Christianity’s teaching that humans are inherently corrupted souls who are permanent amalgamations of flesh and spirit. Some NDEs include an affirmation of reincarnation, another non-Christian belief. In my view, the inherent contradiction of these NDE features with traditional Christian theology creates a challenge to simply declaring them Christian doctrine.

To be fair, how a thoughtful traditional Christian grapples with the relationship between Christianity and NDEs is extremely thorny. A related example is Christianity’s collision with evolution, where scientific evidence apparently replaced the hand of God with random mutations and savage competition. Here in the case of NDEs, however, the problem is far greater, for NDEs—which many people take to be scientific evidence—offer their own perspectives on a long list of core Christian beliefs: God, Jesus, heaven, angels, the world, human nature, salvation, etc. How can traditional Christians reconcile when eyewitnesses return from beyond the grave to tell them that all these things are not as they have been taught?

Price’s response to this dilemma, as I have said, is to reshape Chris-
tianity based on that eyewitness testimony. Yet this is one response out of many possible options. J. Steve Miller (2012) offered quite a different response in Near-Death Experiences as Evidence for the Existence of God and Heaven. Miller’s approach was to ignore any potential differences and view NDEs as scientific evidence in support of existing Christianity. A more popularized version of this same approach is found in Christian books and television programs that showcase Christian-friendly NDEs, treating them as comforting testimony in support of the believer’s worldview.

And then, of course, there is the conservative Christian backlash against NDEs. For example, the release of the movie Heaven is for Real, based on the book of the same name (Burpo & Vincent, 2010) about four-year-old Colton Burpo’s NDE, sparked a blistering response from John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in California. In “Are Visits to Heaven for Real?” MacArthur (2014) described NDEs as “figments of the human imagination” that contradict scripture, “glorify self while barely noticing God’s glory,” and lead “gullible souls into superstition, gnosticism, occultism, New Age philosophies, or any kind of spiritual confusion.” “It is seriously dangerous,” he warned, “to listen to anyone who claims to know more about God, heaven, angels, or the afterlife than God Himself has revealed to us in Scripture.” This is the other end of the spectrum from Price’s response: Rather than allow NDEs to rewrite Christian doctrine, use scripture to hit back and quash NDEs.

It is impossible to foresee where all this controversy is heading. What will happen if NDEs acquire more cultural clout? What Christians need are sober explorations of exactly how Christianity and NDEs relate to each other. In a book that is about precisely this subject, I would have liked to see an acknowledgment of this thorny issue and then thoughtful answers in response. I found Price’s book, unfortunately, a light treatment of a heavy topic.

On the other hand, I admire Price’s willingness, reminiscent of the Apostle Paul, to have a vision of light, to allow it change him on the spot, and then to spend the rest of his life spreading that light in the lives of fellow Christians. Certainly, people who are not Christian can applaud Price’s vision of a Christianity that is a religion of love, based on a God of love, following a personification of love (Jesus), and aimed at living a life of love. And who knows? Perhaps Price is an early pioneer of a future trend. Perhaps the power of NDEs is such that they will eventually bend Christianity itself in their direction.
References


