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Revelation in Near-Death Experience

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Handbook of Divine Revelation

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Abstract and Keywords

Accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs) across cultures often include claims of encounters with deities or spirits who impart information to the experiencer. Other accounts involve the experiencer obtaining knowledge by other means, without the assistance of a non-human supernatural being. While some cases involve deceased relatives, the most significant factor in others might be the soul's perceptions of the body from a vantage point outside it, seeing or travelling to other realms, having a panoramic life review, encountering the soul of a person not previously known to have died, having prophetic visions, or more generalized impressions of universal understanding and/or union. In all these senses, NDEs can be seen as revelatory experiences, with profound information being conveyed to the individual through ostensibly mystical or 'religious' experiences.

Keywords: revelation, cross-cultural, near-death experience, religious experience, afterlife

Introduction

NEAR-DEATH experiences (NDEs) are reported by some individuals who come close to death, or who are temporarily considered to be clinically dead for a time prior to resuscitation. The experience is made up of a number of sub-experiences, which vary according to individual. Some of the most common are sensations of leaving the body and accompanying perceptions from a vantage point outside it (out-of-body experience), travelling through darkness and emerging into light, arriving in another realm, meeting deceased friends or relatives, encountering a non-human spiritual or divine being often radiating light, a panoramic life review, being instructed or deciding to return to the body, and reviving with feelings of having been positively transformed by the experience. Further commonly reported features include feelings of peace, joy, union with the divine or the cosmos, universal understanding, heightened senses and

clarity, feelings of having returned to the true or original state of being, distortions of time, telepathic communication with other spirits, and receiving new information or instructions. While NDEs are known from around the world and throughout history, they vary considerably according to individual and cultural factors. Although we are not concerned here with the question of whether or not NDEs provide evidence of life after death, it should be noted that while such an interpretation has not been accepted by the majority of the scientific community, nor have NDEs been sufficiently explained by any comprehensive scientific theory. Despite a great deal of research on the subject, and claims to the contrary from both materialist and metaphysical perspectives, NDEs remain a mysterious phenomenon.

(p. 538) For our present purposes, the most significant thing about NDEs is that those who have them almost invariably interpret them in spiritual or religious terms, and as such most examples can be seen as revelatory experiences. While many include an encounter with a deity or other non-human spirit and can be seen as 'divine revelation' in the most literal sense, many do not, and yet they may still feature revelatory content in an unearthly, spiritual setting. Both types will be considered here.

Near-Death Experiences as Revelations for the Community

Examples from ancient China may be the world's earliest ostensibly documented NDEs, and they feature clear divine revelations. The account of a local ruler named Kien-tsze from 498 BCE also includes a brief description of the NDE of the ruler Muh of Tsin (658–620 BCE) some 150 years earlier, and both describe how the Emperor of Heaven gave the men prophetic information. In a narrative actually attributed to Muh, he tells of a joyful visit to the Emperor of Heaven during days of unconsciousness caused by a serious illness. The reason for his prolonged absence, he explained, was that the Emperor had prophetic information to give him involving specific political events that would come to pass in the state of Tsin. Kien-tsze's account also described a joyful visit to the other world, and included details of music and dances he saw in his spiritual wanderings. He too was given prophetic information by the Emperor of Heaven concerning forthcoming events in Tsin. Kien-tsze's NDE, however, detailed such unusual features as killing two bears, being given two baskets, and the Emperor of Heaven assigning a particular dog to Kien-tsze's son on earth. Later in life, Kien-tsze met a man who recognized him from the NDE. This turned out to be a child he had seen standing at the Emperor of Heaven's side during his NDE, now grown. The man correctly interpreted the events in Kien-tsze's NDE, all of which were verified. By validating the information Kien-tsze had been given in the other world, the ancient Chinese historians affirmed their belief not only in the divine wisdom of the Emperor of Heaven, but also in the revelatory power of NDEs (De Groot 1892, 113–115).

Perhaps the most common type of NDE revelation from ancient to medieval times involved a tour of the other world. Plato's Myth of Er (Platthy 1992, 68–73) in his *Republic* from c.380 BCE might be the oldest example of this genre, and perhaps the oldest surviving Western NDE if we accept it as documentary. However, what was meant by 'myth' (in the original *apologos*) in this context is unclear, for in ancient Greece it simply indicated a story or narrative, without specifying whether it was considered factual or not. The narrative tells of how Er died on a battlefield, and was then taken by his people to be cremated. On the twelfth day after his death, he woke up on his own funeral pyre and recounted his NDE, describ-

ing how he had left his body and travelled with many other souls to a place of judgement. The good ascended to heaven, while the bad were (p. 539) subjected to various types of punishment before eventually being allowed to go to the happier realm. When Er met the otherworld judges, he was told that it would be his mission to be the ‘messenger to human beings’ and that he should observe all that he could so that he would be able to describe it to his people when he returned to earth. In addition to the process of judgement, reward, and punishment, Er was also shown how a prophet would help souls to choose lots that would determine their reincarnation into a new person or animal. This rather lengthy narrative features many elaborate details, symbols, and concepts specific to Greek mythology and philosophy, including characters such as the Sirens, the Fates, and the soul of Orpheus, who had reincarnated into a swan. The information Er was able to relate after reviving was thus not only about afterlife fates, but also about complex material concerning the workings of the cosmos. Whether there was really a soldier named Er who had an NDE is difficult to say, though even if it was based on an actual experience the narrative is clearly elaborated with literary embellishments. Alternatively, it could be simply a myth in our sense of the word, but one that is grounded in a general knowledge of NDEs (see Plato, *Republic* 615b–621c; Plato 1997, 1218–1223).

Zoroastrianism also incorporates NDEs into some of its core tenets. In a narrative from the late sixth century, a man named Wirāz was chosen by a council to test some of the beliefs of Zoroastrianism by journeying to the realms of the afterlife. Deliberately inducing an NDE, as was typical of some shamanic practices in indigenous societies (Shushan 2018), Wirāz takes poison, apparently dies for seven days, then returns to tell of his spiritual experiences. It is a lengthy and highly detailed account full of Zoroastrian symbolism, indicating much literary elaboration. After leaving his body, Wirāz is met by the deities Srosh and Adur, who take him on a celestial tour of purgatory, heaven, and hell, where people are being punished or rewarded according to their actions in life. He then meets Ahura Mazda, the main deity and creator, described as a being of light. Ahura Mazda ultimately instructs Wirāz to return to earth in order to tell people of what he learned on his spiritual visit in the other worlds, and to teach the truth of Zoroastrianism as revealed to him during his NDE. The account of his near-death journey became known as the *Book of Ardā Wirāz*, which continues to be an important didactic text in the Zoroastrian tradition (Vahman 1986; cf. Couliano 1991, 107–113).

It is interesting to compare the account of Wirāz’s NDE with that of the Belgian saint Christina Mirabilis (1150–1224), or Christina the Astonishing. In 1171 Christina experienced a tour of the other world and was sent back from her NDE with a divine message to convey to humankind. Her biography quotes her description of dying and being taken by ‘angels of God—the ministers of light’ to ‘a dark and terrible spot which was filled with the souls of men’. She recognized among them people she had known in life, and saw the torments they suffered. She was told that this was only purgatory, where ‘repentant sinners atone for the sins they committed while they were alive’, though she was also shown hell, where she again recognized some of the people being punished. She was then taken ‘to Paradise, to the throne of the Divine Majesty’, who gave her two choices: to remain in heaven, or return to earth and ‘suffer the punishments of an immortal soul in a mortal body’ which would free the tormented souls from purgatory. (p. 540) If she chose the latter option, her example would ‘incite living men to turn to me and to turn aside from their sins’. After completing her mission of martyrdom on earth, she would then return to the Lord ‘and will have earned a reward of much profit’. Though she desired to stay in paradise, Christina decided on the second option, and was immediately returned to her body (Petroff 1986, 184–85).

Near-Death Experiences as Personal Revelations

Some accounts are more outwardly personal, concerning a transformation of the NDEr rather than sending her to convey revelations to the community. The apparent literary elaboration of some such texts, however, indicates that they also had a didactic function and that their lessons would be shared with others as a religious teaching. This is the case with a Chinese example from the mid-fifth century CE, which also includes direct experiential revelations against killing animals and eating meat. A man named Yuan Zhizong apparently died, and when he woke up at his own funeral he told of how he had been bound and taken away by a crowd of a hundred people. They took him to a group of monks who were venerating an image of the Buddha, and one of them chastised Zhizong for enjoying hunting. The monk 'stripped off his skin, and sliced him into thin cuts, exactly in the manner in which animals are prepared for sacrifice', then put him into water and hooked him like fish, chopped him into mincemeat, and cooked him. Zhizong begged for his life, and the monk washed away his sins with water. The monk instructed Zhizong not to kill any land creature, not even ants, told him that fish is the only kind of meat he is allowed to eat, and gave him ritual dress restrictions for vegetarian feast days. When Zhizong asked why he had to undergo such ordeals, the monk told him, 'you, in your stupidity, were ignorant of karmic retribution, so you were instructed'. When Zhizong revived, he no longer engaged in hunting or fishing (Campany 1990, 119–120).

Some NDErs claim that revelations they received during the experience are private, and even that they were instructed to keep them secret. An ancient Greek named Eurynous revived after fifteen days of a near-death state, and 'relayed that he heard many wonderful things under the earth about which he was ordered to keep quiet'. The experience also led to a transformation in Eurynous, for 'his conduct of life was more just after his revival than before' (Platthy 1992, 85). Both Yuan Zhizong's and Eurynous' accounts exemplify one of the most common features of NDEs: that they can lead directly to some kind of positive transformation. Studies have shown that this is not due simply to the trauma of almost dying, but to the extraordinary aspects of the NDE itself. Revelation, or a sense of revelation, is one of the key spiritually interpreted elements of NDEs, alongside out-of-body experiences, encountering non-physical beings, travelling to other realms, radiant light, feelings of transcendence, and universal understanding. While sometimes associated with a particular religion and sometimes with none at all, (p. 541) 'changes in beliefs, attitudes, and values after NDEs uniformly include enhanced self-esteem, concern, and compassion toward others, sense of meaning in life, interest in spiritual matters, feeling close to God, belief in life after death, and decreased interest in personal wealth and prestige' (Greyson and Khanna 2014, 45).

Claims of Empirical Validation in NDEs

A concern for demonstrating the veracity of the experience is a frequent element of revelatory NDE accounts. In a Mormon example from 1913, a Canadian woman named Bertha had an NDE during an illness. When she revived she described leaving her body and seeing from above the nurse at her bedside. She felt feelings of peace, and did not wish to return to her body. A woman appeared and led her to a room full of souls of people she had known in life, and then to another room where Bertha was

shown the souls of two children. She was asked if she would like them for her own and she replied in the affirmative, saying she wished to take them back to earth with her. The woman told Bertha that the reason she was there in the other world was to meet her future daughters. Bertha returned to her body, recovered from her illness, and her next two children were the girls she had seen during her NDE (Lundahl 1993, 175). In a second Mormon example, from 1923, a man became unconscious following surgery. During his brief NDE, he was met by his daughter who had died twenty-three years earlier. She told him to go back to earth because his 6-year-old son must die first, followed by his mother, and then finally his wife. The man returned to life, and within a matter of months, both his son and his mother died. His wife followed six years later (Lundahl 1993, 177–178).

Claims of empirical validation are also prominent in another kind of revelatory NDE, in which the soul of an individual not previously known to have died is encountered during the experience. The death of that individual is then verified after the NDEr revives. In such accounts the revelation is a dual confirmation of an afterlife, validating both the encounter with the previously deceased person and the reality of the NDE itself. Such accounts are also attested across cultures. In an example from 1669, an English teenage girl named Anne Atherton had an NDE while in a coma during a serious illness. When her testimony of her NDE was met with doubt by her relatives, she recounted that ‘while she stood at heaven’s gate, she saw several people enter in, and named three or four she did know, which died during the time she lay in this trance’ (Selwyn 2004). In a Native American example from the Deg Hit’an people from 1887, a girl lost consciousness while out hunting with her family. She stayed in the other world for months, then one day while walking along a riverbank she saw her father floating on a log in the direction from which she had come. When the girl returned to earth and told of her experiences, her mother revealed that her father had died in her absence, providing evidential confirmation of the girl’s experience of seeing her father in the (p. 542) spirit world. Though the account is apparently at least partly legend, as a direct result of the girl’s narrative new feasts and funerary offering traditions were instituted, indicating a change in religious beliefs (Chapman 1912, 66–7) (a dynamic that will be explored in greater depth below). More recently, in an NDE from the early 1980s, a Kaliai man of New Britain, Papua New Guinea, apparently died of an illness. After entering darkness, he emerged in a field of flowers, and on a road he met ‘a woman whose death had occurred shortly after his and about which he could have had no knowledge’ (Counts 1983, 119–20; many more examples of this phenomenon can be found in Greyson 2010).

Revelatory NDEs and the Experiential Source Hypothesis

So profound are NDEs to those who have them, and so meaningful and spiritually resonant to those who learn about them, that religious beliefs can be changed and influenced by them. Early Christians placed great value ‘on dreams and visions as revelations of divine reality’ (Potthoff 2017, 73), and among those visions were NDEs. In a fascinating account from Roman Carthage, two Christian converts—Vibia Perpetua and Saturus—had a shared NDE while awaiting execution in a prison in 203 CE, suffering from prolonged deprivations including starvation and being confined in constant darkness. Perpetua had experienced four different otherworld visions prior to this account, though a temporary death

was not recorded in association with them. In Satorius' account, however, both the near-death context and the out-of-body travel to the other world are clear. He is quoted as saying, 'We had died...and had put off the flesh, and we began to be carried towards the east by four angels.' They floated on their backs towards 'an intense light' and arrived in a garden of many kinds of flowers and tall trees. They were greeted by four more angels who cheered their arrival then led them down a road where they encountered the souls of four men they had known in life: three who had been put to death 'in the same persecution' of Christians, and one who had died in prison. The angels then took Perpetua and Satorius to 'greet the Lord' at 'a place whose walls seemed to be constructed of light'. To the sound of voices chanting 'Holy, holy, holy!', four more angels in white robes led them inside where they met an 'aged man with white hair and a youthful face' sitting on a throne, together with a number of other 'elders'. The angels lifted Perpetua and Satorius to kiss the man on the throne so he could touch their faces. The elders then told them to rise, and to 'Go and play.' Perpetua said, 'Thanks be to God that I am happier here now than I was in the flesh.' When they left this place of light, they encountered a bishop and a presbyter they had known on earth, along with various other martyrs. Eventually the angels 'seemed as though they wanted to close the gates' and Satorius 'woke up happy' (Potthoff 2017, 44–45), despite the miserable conditions and doom that he faced. While much of the imagery in this account likely (p. 543) originated in biblical and/or Graeco-Roman mythological or religious texts (Potthoff 2017, 46–48), it is also generally consistent with NDE reports across cultures, including the thematic elements of out-of-body experience, travelling to another realm, bright light, meeting previously deceased persons and non-human spiritual beings, feelings of joy and happiness, returning to the body, and positive transformation. As Potthoff wrote,

Like modern near-death visionaries who die and are reborn, no longer fearing death and yearning for the paradise they had just experienced, Perpetua and Satorius return to life, if ever so briefly, ready to confront, in confidence and without fear, their impending executions in the Carthage amphitheater, secure in the knowledge that death is but a passage into a far more glorious dimension of existence.(Potthoff 2017, 49)

Furthermore, these experiences 'transform not only the visionaries themselves, but the imaginal experience of the afterlife as embraced by the whole community' contributing to Christian conceptions of the afterlife, and affirming its reality to believers. Indeed, Potthoff goes so far as to state that 'The shared, communal Christian vision of the afterlife as paradise emerged and evolved over time, drawing its inspiration and validation from the near-death otherworld journeys of martyrs, monks, and ordinary Christians alike' (Potthoff 2017, 210).

There is, in fact, a great deal of evidence in the form of historical, ethnographic, and contemporary personal testimony that people around the world regularly base beliefs concerning an afterlife and mind–body dualism upon NDEs. Indeed, not only can NDEs be the basis for afterlife beliefs in individuals and even whole societies, entire religious movements are sometimes founded upon them. Such cases substantiate what David Hufford termed 'the experiential source hypothesis' (Hufford 1995), that is, that extraordinary experiences often lead to new religious, spiritual, or supernatural beliefs. Hultkrantz, for example, presented a great deal of evidence to support his conclusions that Native American afterlife beliefs were widely based on NDEs (Hultkrantz 1957, 235–237). When asked about such beliefs, informants from various tribes related accounts of such experiences, both to give a phenomenological description of dying and the afterlife, and to lend their beliefs experiential authority—sometimes including

claims of empirical validation, as we have seen. Recent ethnohistorical research has unearthed dozens of examples from indigenous societies in North America and the Pacific, spanning the sixteenth to the early twentieth century, in which individuals state that their culture's afterlife beliefs were grounded directly in NDE phenomena (Shushan 2018).

In the late nineteenth century, the Ghost Dance revitalization movements originated with the NDE of the Native American Paiute shaman Wovoka (Mooney 1896, 701–702, 926–927), and the Indian Shaker Church was founded by John Slocum following instructions given to him during an NDE (Ruby and Brown 1996, 7–9, 752). Indeed, although the Shakers considered themselves to be Christian, because Slocum had (p. 544) returned from the dead with personal testimony of the other world, his word was valued as revelation while the Bible was not. In another example of an NDE-based religious movement, around 1860 a Wanapum shaman named Smohalla was killed in a fight. He revived and proclaimed that he had been 'in the spirit world and had now returned by divine command to guide his people'. Having witnessed his death, his people believed him and accepted his teachings on the authority of his experience. Smohalla's revelation and messages were consistent with those of many other revitalization movement prophets, and his new 'Dreamer' religion Washani combined local belief and ritual with elements of Catholicism and perhaps Mormonism (Ruby and Brown 1989, 37). Washani spread to many neighbouring tribes, introducing a system of hereditary priests, and new dances and ceremonies. The religion was sustained, in part, by further experiences in which Smohalla apparently died, left his body, went to the spirit world, and returned with additional revelations, as well as by the trance-visions of his followers via repetitive ceremonial singing and drumming (Mooney 1896, 718–719, 723, 726–728). Many other examples of such movements originating in NDEs are known, not only in North American traditions, but also in South America and the Pacific (Shushan 2018).

There is also an important, even foundational connection between NDEs and Pure Land Buddhism in China and Japan, with many prominent figures in the traditions reporting them (Becker 1993, 73–76). Indeed, the NDE of T'an-luan (476–542), a founding patriarch of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism, was crucial in his conversion from Taoism to Buddhism. Though there is little description of his experience beyond seeing a gate of gold open before him during a grave illness, it was profound enough to T'an-luan that he was inspired to devote his life to spreading Pure Land beliefs, and developing new experiential practices for adherents in the form of repetitive chanting (McClenon 1994, 175–176). McClenon cited numerous other Chinese and Japanese examples in Pure Land contexts spanning nearly a thousand years, and concluded that

The history of the Pure Land movement suggests that religious doctrines evolved in harmony with, and benefited from the existence of, the primary features of NDEs. The patriarch T'an-luan's NDE was instrumental in determining the specific sutras granted importance in future Pure Land doctrines. Through the history of Pure Land doctrinal development, NDEs provided rhetorical tools for ideological innovation. Concepts supported by NDEs included the notion of karma, the superiority of Buddhism over Taoism, the prohibition against killing animals, the value of chanting, statue making, and sutra-copying, rituals for the dead (McClenon 1994, 182; cf. Becker 1993, 73–76)

NDEs also hold a significant place in Mormon beliefs, which incorporate the various visions and revelations of the Church's early figures, including Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. They demonstrate to

adherents that revelatory extraordinary experiences did not cease with the biblical prophets, and that they continue even to the present day (Schlieter 2018, 79). This helps to validate the teachings of the early Church leaders, and reinforce the belief that there are more revelations to come—and indeed that they are available to all those who seek them.

(p. 545) Not all NDEs lead to similar kinds of revelations and beliefs, however. Reception and interpretation of the phenomenon is very much rooted in pre-existing cultural factors, as is the individual's experience itself. In the early eighteenth century, the Kongolesse prophet Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita was both a Catholic and a medium in the local Kimpasi healing cult. Initiation into the cult involved a ritual death and resurrection, brought about by cutting off the circulation with tight bonds. Upon revival, or 'rebirth' initiates were believed to be possessed by a friendly spirit who would stay with them throughout their lives (Thornton 1998, 57). In 1704 Kimpa Vita died during a week-long illness, then revived (Thornton 1998, 119). She claimed to have met St Anthony, who told her he had 'been sent from God to your head to preach to the people'. He gave her religious and political instructions, then entered her body and remained in her thereafter, just as spirits did with members of the Kimpasi cult. Subsequently, Kimpa Vita 'died' each Friday in order to commune with God in heaven over the weekend. Her possession by the saint gave her the ability to perform miracles such as healings (Thornton 1998, 132) and to control nature and the weather (Thornton 1998, 136–137). It also led to the foundation of a syncretized religious revitalization movement called Antonianism. During a time of European religious and ethnic persecution, slavery, and political turmoil, Kimpa Vita taught a message of peace along with an indigenized Christianity that relocated the origin story of Jesus to the Kongo (Thornton 1998, 160). The movement grew to have its own missionaries, some of whom replicated Kimpa Vita's experiences (Thornton 1998, 148). The religion was also characterized by claims of an impending apocalypse (Thornton 1998, 131), which alongside the NDE context and localization of foreign themes are all common with religious revitalization movements across cultures. Aside from her meeting St Anthony, there is no description of any other elements of Kimpa Vita's NDE: it was her possession that held the religious import and significance. Two years after her experience, however, by order of the Kongolesse Roman Catholic king Pedro IV (Nusamu a Mvemba), Kimpa Vita was burned at the stake on suspicion of being a witch possessed by a demon. This reflects a tendency in many African cultures to view with mistrust and hostility those who have apparently revived from death (see Shushan 2017; Shushan 2018, 122–124).

It should be emphasized that spiritual interpretations of these experiences are not confined to religious contexts. Staunch materialists and atheists have also had changes in beliefs following their NDEs. While publicly admitting only that his experience had 'slightly weakened' his conviction that death is the end of consciousness, shortly after his fairly typical NDE the philosopher A. J. Ayer told his doctor, 'I saw a Divine Being. I'm afraid I'm going to have to revise all my various books and opinions' (Foges 2010). Prior to his own experience, the mathematical physicist and psychologist John Wren-Lewis regarded mysticism as a form of neurosis (Wren-Lewis n.d.). Not only did his NDE run contrary to his expectations, it also resulted directly in new spiritual beliefs, namely 'that proponents of the so-called Perennial Philosophy are correct in identifying a common "deep structure" of experience underlying the widely different cultural expressions of mystics in all traditions' (Wren-Lewis n.d.).

(p. 546) Theological and Metaphysical Implications of NDE Revelations

Prophetic revelations ‘received’ during NDEs demonstrate that even if some NDEs—or some *parts* of NDEs—are veridical, others are demonstrably not. In the early days of NDE research, Kenneth Ring, an American psychologist and an important figure in the field, published an article called ‘Precognitive and Prophetic Visions in Near-Death Experiences’. With data gathered from contemporary NDErs in the United States, he found that prophetic experiences were often given to the experiencer as divine revelation, that is, occurring ‘in association with an encounter with guides or a being of light’ (Ring 1982, 54). Reminiscent of some of the historical examples we have seen, some even believed that they had been chosen by God to deliver his message to people on earth (Ring 1982, 66). Ring found that the prophecies in the thirteen cases he analysed bore remarkable consistencies, including that Earth will suffer devastation on a global scale owing to a nuclear event and/or widespread natural disasters, and that this will occur sometime in the late 1980s, with 1988 specifically being the most frequently specified year. A few years later, the British psychologist Margot Grey independently replicated these findings (Grey 1985), collecting a number of NDE prophetic visions that were astonishingly consistent with Ring’s. Obviously, the prophesied events did not come to pass, demonstrating that the alleged divine revelations were wrong.

It is interesting to note that another common feature of these prophecies was that following the devastation, Earth would experience an era of renewal, and a Golden Age of ‘peace and human brotherhood’. This dynamic is familiar from apocalyptic and millenarian prophecies throughout history, as Ring later highlighted (Ring 1988, 4). Revisiting the theme some years later, he wrote that prophetic visions during NDEs are best seen as ‘manifestations of a collective prophetic impulse that historically tends to arise during periods of cultural crisis’. In support of this, Ring noted an NDE prophecy account from 1892 that had all the typical features of his contemporary examples (Ring 1988, 12). Likewise, the Mormon NDE scholar Craig Lundahl demonstrated remarkable consistency between these kinds of prophetic revelatory NDEs and biblical prophecies (Lundahl 1999, 201–202). Perhaps unsurprisingly for a religion rooted in the Bible, Mormon prophecies are similarly consistent, though they indicate that the end of the world would come at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While Lundahl interpreted the similarities as possible evidence for the veracity of these prophecies of global catastrophe followed by a Golden Age, their failure to materialize rather appears to support Ring’s cultural-psychological explanation instead.

Such an explanation also recalls the relationship between NDEs and religious revitalization movements, as discussed above. In both cases, the theme of death and return is reflected on cultural levels, regarding existential threats to the planet in Ring’s accounts, and to a society’s beliefs, way of life, resources, and economic sustainability in the Native American and other indigenous accounts. Likewise, in both cases renewal and regeneration—or rebirth—are the ultimate states to be attained following the ‘death’.

(p. 547) Just as a person’s temporary ‘death’ in an NDE culminates in a rebirth with a new spiritual focus and other positive transformations, ‘prophets arise during times of cultural crisis’ with ‘a messianic message of the need for cultural renewal’ (Ring 1988, 12). In other words, prophecies about the future obtained during NDEs might be nothing more than human manifestations of anxieties about survival on Earth, concerns surrounding the possibility of life after death, and a longing for a Golden Age.

Some NDE prophecies are vague as to the timing or other details, and are therefore not subject to verification. One late twentieth-century account, for example, predicts the Second Coming of Christ at some unspecified date, while another states that an increasingly thick, dark, evil haze is slowly enveloping the earth and will lead to upheaval (Lundahl 2001, 235–236).

Although long-term vivid recollection is a hallmark of the phenomenon, some who have revelatory experiences during NDEs are unable to remember them upon return. The theologian Carol Zaleski has noted that this kind of forgetting is known from both medieval and modern Western NDEs, writing that experiencers 'are permitted to keep their memories of the lesser sights of the other world, in order to bring a message to humanity; but they find it nearly impossible to retain a clear impression of that instant of direct, unmediated absorption in all of reality' (Zaleski 1987, 132). This dynamic, too, has a cultural/literary dimension reminiscent of ideas of a lost Golden Age, for it reflects cross-cultural notions of having forgotten some kind of essential, universal truths, and 'speaks of the need to re-awaken and recover lost self-knowledge' (Zaleski 1987, 133).

On a wider level, cross-cultural variations between revelatory content in NDEs raises some difficult philosophical and metaphysical questions. If we are to accept that NDEs are genuine experiences of an afterlife, what are we to make of their diversity? Are all manifestations of deities and beings of light, for example, genuine divine figures with identities that correspond to the experiencer's claims? Or are they perhaps the same divine figure, which manifests according to local cultural/individual preconceptions? These questions are further complicated by the fact that NDEs often *conflict* with the expectations of the experiencer. Furthermore, NDEs that do not feature an encounter with a divinity are also interpreted in spiritual or religious terms by those who have them.

By their very nature of 'revealing' to the individual the experience of dualism and the phenomenon of surviving the death of the body, alongside knowledge of life after death in other worlds, NDEs can by definition be seen as revelatory experiences. This underscores the notion that theism is not a precondition for belief in an afterlife. Ultimately, however, whether the NDE is evidence of an afterlife, dualism, or theism remains a matter of personal belief.

Conclusion

As the British theologian Paul Badham has argued, NDEs can be seen as a democratization of religious and revelatory experiences, particularly when we consider that modern medical advances enable more people to be resuscitated (Badham 1997, 12). (p. 548) Such advances have 'made available to thousands an experience which has from the beginning lain at the heart of much of the world's religious perceiving and formed an important experiential basis for the future hope', that is, belief in a positive life after death. The NDE is not only a 'profound and life-changing experience which people never forget', it also 'shares many of the characteristics of the deepest religious experiences known to humanity' (Badham 1997, 10). Indeed, as a spontaneous experience rather than one sought within a particular religious or spiritual practice, in NDEs revelation 'is not dependent on faith or adherence to a particular creed or religious tradition' (Fox 2003, 4). In a twentieth-century British example, a cancer patient had an NDE after wondering 'what God really looks like'. She found herself suddenly out of her body and

'was carried, until with a shattering light I entered another world and found myself face-to-face with God' encircled by 'a shimmering circle of light'. 'God', however, had the face of her 'beloved therapist', which made her realize 'that God is love. His face reflects that face which the individual loves' (Fox 2003, 353).

This recalls an account by Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, who encountered his living doctor during an NDE which he had in a Swiss hospital in 1944. He described a highly individualistic experience in extraordinarily vivid detail, in which he found himself in space with Earth visible below, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East facing him. He then saw 'a tremendous dark block of stone, like a meteorite...floating in space'. It had been hollowed out to form a temple, as Jung had seen in South and South-East Asia. Inside the temple 'a black Hindu sat silently in lotus posture upon a stone bench. He wore a white gown, and I knew that he expected me.' Candle flames burned everywhere and wreathed the doorway, as Jung had seen in Sri Lanka. As he approached, he felt that

everything was being sloughed away; everything I aimed at or wished for or thought, the whole phantasmagoria of earthly existence, fell away or was stripped from me—an extremely painful process. Nevertheless something remained; it was as if I now carried along with me everything I had ever experienced or done, everything that had happened around me. I might also say: it was with me, and I was it. I consisted of all that, so to speak. I consisted of my own history and I felt with great certainty: this is what I am. 'I am this bundle of what has been and what has been accomplished.' This experience gave me a feeling of extreme poverty, but at the same time of great fullness. There was no longer anything I wanted or desired. I existed in an objective form; I was what I had been and lived. At first the sense of annihilation predominated, of having been stripped or pillaged; but suddenly that became of no consequence. Everything seemed to be past; what remained was a *fait accompli*, without any reference back to what had been. There was no longer any regret that something had dropped away or been taken away. On the contrary: I had everything that I was, and that was everything.

(Jung 1961, 289–297)

Suddenly overwhelmed with questions about his life and his identity, he believed he would find the answers inside the temple. He then saw a figure arise 'from the direction of Europe' below, and it turned out to be his doctor, though 'in his primal form' as an ancient Greek prince from Kos, a city associated with healing and medicine. (p. 549) They communicated telepathically, and the doctor told Jung that he 'had been delegated by the earth to deliver a message to me, to tell me that there was a protest against my going away. I had no right to leave the earth and must return. The moment I heard that, the vision ceased' (Jung 1961, 292).

It is perhaps unsurprising that a person who devoted so much of his life and thought to theorizing about dreams, myths, religions, symbols, and archetypes would have an NDE that reflects these preoccupations. Nevertheless, Jung did not interpret the experience as a product of his own learned and fertile imagination, and in fact it seemed to have had a profound influence on his thinking about consciousness and the possibility of life after death. A few months after the experience he wrote in a letter, 'What happens after death is so unspeakably glorious that our imagination and our feelings do not suffice to form even an approximate conception of it' (Jung 1973, 343). In addition to revelations about the nature of the afterlife, Jung also revived with a premonition of his doctor's death, which soon came true.

As Potthoff wrote, apocalyptic literature such as the *Book of Revelation* of John and the *Apocalypse of Peter*, ‘bases its authority on, and centers around, visions of and journeys to the other world during which the visionary receives heavenly knowledge, often revealed by an angel or other intermediary, about God’s plan for history, the end of the world, what happens after death, and the geography of the postmortem realm’ (Potthoff 2017, 10). All these have been demonstrated in the various NDE accounts discussed here. Another definition of ‘apocalypse’ is perhaps even more fitting to NDEs. According to the Old Testament scholar J. J. Collins, ‘*Apocalypse* is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world’ (Couliano 1991, 54). While some such narratives do not contain otherworld near-death journeys, many do. Nor are NDEs the sole extraordinary experience type by which these kinds of revelations occur. Generally speaking, ‘Such heavenly revelations typically are associated with non-ordinary states of consciousness’ which not only can occur spontaneously but also can be brought about via ‘ascetic practices like fasting, as well as singing and incantation, prayer, meditation on scripture, and the ingestion of hallucinogenic substances’ (Potthoff 2017, 10). Though Potthoff was writing in the context of the ancient Mediterranean, similar ‘shamanic’ practices are also known from around the world. In some Native American and Pacific Island cultures in particular, certain shamanic practices were actually intended to replicate NDEs, so that practitioners and their communities obtain revelatory information in the other world without actually dying, and use that information in ways that benefit the community (Shushan 2018).

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