

Do Near-Death Experiences show there is a God and an afterlife?

After Raymond Moody popularised the idea of the NDE, near-death experience, despite the fact that such experiences correspond best to occult claims that you can do astral travel, leave the body for a trip, religion has sought to hijack them to seek credence for its claims about God and life after death. Strictly speaking there is no near death experience - only an OBE: Out of Body Experience. Some experts feel that the NDE is a spiritual experience and others feel it is a hallucination afflicting a traumatised brain or dying brain. Some contend it can be both for who says that spiritual experiences are hallucinations but not as a scientist would understand hallucinations? In other words, if medicine shows us hallucinations why can't the magical? It is not true that the experience is always life-changing. People who lie about the experience can be as loud as those who think it really happened and may say how much it changed them! Remarkably for such "transformed" people, "Divorce is fairly common in couples where one partner has experienced an NDE" - Marilyn A. Mendoza Ph.D.

SUSAN BLACKMORE PSYCHOLOGIST

Jeff Long, M.D., is founder of the NDERF which stands for the Near Death Experience Research Foundation. He found no convincing studies that people who had the experience were in any way different - even psychically though many think they have got psychic powers from the experience - but did find their electrical sensitivity seemed stronger. I wonder if that had something to do with making the experience in the first place.

Believers seem to give evidence that there is a problem with how the experience is understood. Sceptic Susan Blackmore holds that the brain creates near death experiences and there is evidence from other situations where there is no near death scenario that the brain is capable of it.

She has found that anoxia a lack of oxygen to the brain can make you think you hear music and see a light and a tunnel. NDE's generally report this bizarre tunnel. She is probably right for there is no account of a dying person having the experience without being starved of oxygen.

The body can respond to the dying process by releasing endorphins which causes the feeling of bliss during the experience.

The sensation that you are not your body and that time has stopped comes from your body shutting down. The body closing down means your sense of self will have to come apart too.

The dying brain creates all these effects - and dying does not mean it definitely will die. All that comprises the Dying Brain Hypothesis.

She says, "I have not claimed that any of my work proves the Dying Brain Hypothesis. In fact no amount of research ever could. The most I could hope to do, and in fact what I tried to do in Dying to Live, is to show that we can account for all the major features of the NDE without recourse to such ideas as a spirit, a soul, or life after death."

THE HANDBOOK OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

Chapter 10 of The Handbook of Christian Apologetics discusses the evidence for life after death.

Near-death experiences (NDE) are put down as evidence - though rather cautiously because nobody can be proved to have had an experience after dying and because they contradict Christian theology. No NDE without brain activity has ever been verified. If that happened the person would count as a resurrected person!

Not all believers in the paranormal think you need a soul leaving the body to explain the experience. Telepathy and other abilities have been hauled in as possible explanations.

The argument that an experience you have when you are not dead yet proves you live on is an odd one. It proves nothing more than that you have had an experience. And not all who have the experience are really dying though they may think they are. Not all near-death experiences really are anywhere near death. Drinkers who think they are dying in the gutter can have them regularly.

The authors say they accept near death experiences as evidences for life after death but with caution for they contradict Christian doctrine for they give no reason to think that repentance is important. The fact that the experience occurs when no drugs have been administered, that things are seen when out of the body that have been later verified, the agreement

between people having this experience, their not seeing things like angels with wings and halos and golden streets like the stereotype of Heaven that most believers have supposedly makes them probably authentic.

The fact that the authors would use an essentially non-Christian miracle, which usually involves meeting a being of light who does not care about your sins, smacks of sheer desperation and is an alarming lapse of logic. That miracle, if miracle it is, refutes the core doctrine of Christianity which is that repentance or forgiveness is necessary and is what religion should be all about. Even the resurrection of Jesus cannot be true if repentance is immaterial for it is about expressing and incarnating the principle of mercy.

Evidence from history that Jesus rose is superseded by evidence that there is a being of light who does not judge and who is certainly not Jesus! Testimony from people you can talk to always supersedes even similar testimony from those who are no longer with us. Unlike the resurrection accounts, the being is glorious. Christianity's core doctrine that the resurrection of Jesus does not mean a return to life but an exaltation to eternal life and glory is granted no evidence at all even in the Bible. Jesus could have risen for all we know and died later and his revival from death is not the only one that is claimed in history.

The handbook's treatment of near death experiences violates the assertion of the handbook and the Christian Church and the Bible that miracles are signs of the truth and tell us truths about God, religious truths. Here miracles that contradict the Church are downplayed though recognised as satisfying the conditions for deserving to be believed.

Also, it is believed that not everybody who has such experiences talks about them so maybe that is why there are no tales of the angels with wings and halos? And there would be stories of that kind that were never taken seriously.

The authors only cherry-pick what tales they want to pay heed to. And what about visions had by people who were not on their deathbeds but which reported the heavenly and angelic stereotype?

What about this one? Fr Steven Scheier had an NDE in a traffic accident in 1985. Jesus told him he was going to Hell. But then Mary said, "Son, will you please spare his life and his eternal soul?" Jesus challenged her, "Mother, he's been a priest for twelve years for himself and not for me, let him reap the punishment he deserves." She argued that if he got graces he might be different and Jesus relented and let him live. This experience is evidence that it's all in the mind. Catholic doctrine says that Mary does not challenge Jesus and Jesus does not and cannot revoke a damnation sentence.

Gloria Polo was another one who claimed she got her sentence of damnation reversed and got another chance.

The Bible says there is only one death and one judgement.

If that is true then Scheier and Polo are doing the Devil's work by giving false hope. And also they contradict the doctrine that you damn yourself and even God cannot do anything about it. They present a God who does send people to Hell.

Near death experiences do not really support spirituality or religion. They support the idea that the brain has the power to create experiences and credible visions and to deceive. As believable as they are the experiences are not real. If the brain can do all that when somebody is very ill what is it up to the rest of the time? They could well be the strongest evidence that religion is about some subliminal need and not really about God or Jesus though that may not be apparent.

FROM PATRICK GLYNN GOD: THE EVIDENCE

Glynn treats us to some tables showing how patients on the operation table having these experiences knew things they could not have known when they were unconscious. For example, a patient on page 106 says that he saw that he was draped in several sheets and his head was covered and could draw a picture of the saw that was used on him and his chest was held open with metal implement and he saw a dark part inside himself which was interpreted as the aneurysm. First of all he would have thought it would take a few sheets, and he would have been told or guessed beforehand about the need for the saw and would have expected something to be inserted to hold his chest open and heads have to be covered for sterility. He could have known all this from the television or by working out for himself for it is hardly rocket science. Rare is the patient who does not pick up information from other people about what he might have to go through in the theatre. Glynn anyway says that what our patient said matched what the surgeon said. Glynn makes a hit of what he meant about the aneurysm being dark but what the surgeon says is that it was very big. Hardly a hit! Moreover, with most sillier and wackier near death experiences being kept relatively quiet and being dismissed as dreams by the visionary there would have to be some that seem to be impressive and which grab more interest just through pure chance while the other ones that are not impressive are forgotten about. In other words, if enough experiences happen many of them will accurately describe surgery or whatever is happening to the body though the person couldn't have humanly known about it and it is chance not psychic power. Page 116 tries to make out that there is no motive for lying in these things. If your story comforts your relatives there is a motive. Don't people tell the lie that there is a God all the time? The near death subjects claim to have

met the best being there is allegedly is there so they feel proud to have people think it is true or possible.

If the recipients of near death experiences were humble they would not be making emissaries from Heaven of themselves as if they were special. They wouldn't speak of the experience. They will deny it but they are claiming to be something special. Would you believe somebody that spends two hours putting on make-up every day that says they were not vain but merely trying to make others happy by looking pretty?

In the very popular book, *Embraced by the Light* by Betty J Eadie we read many things that show how near death experiences are not reliable accounts of what happens at death. The Jesus and God she encountered in a near-death experience, an experience in which she claims she really died, taught her that Jesus and God instead of being one being were actually two beings (page 47). Christianity teaches that Jesus and God meaning the Father and the Holy Spirit are one being: three persons in one God. Page 46 states that she received knowledge from God that nobody has the right to criticise any Church or religion "in any way". If she really believes that, then why does her God and Jesus feel the need to teach her religious as distinct from ethical doctrines that contradict what the historical records say Jesus taught? Jesus criticised the Jewish religion a lot. To criticise a religion is really to criticise a system. If we can't criticise religion then we can't have the right to criticise clubs and associations either. To teach religious ideas that differ from the Church such as Jesus and God being separate beings is criticism of Christianity. And even more so when we see how she could have just mentioned the ethical teachings and taught spirituality and left specifically theological ideas out. Her doctrine that God does not punish sin contradicts the God of the Bible and much of Protestantism - ie Calvinism. It blasphemes the God of Islam who indeed does punish. Her doctrine that no one Church can take care of every need a person has (page 45) contradicts religions that purport to be the one true faith and to be the one faith that everybody should join. Her God didn't mind her sins and just showered unconditional love on her. A God like that is an unjust God. God needs to punish to be fair. He doesn't check sin. He effectively rewards it. Her doctrine that we must not deny the presence of illness and problems but merely deny their power over us (page 65) deprives people who need to realise that they do have power over them. It is not fair on them. They need the chance to accept their defeat. Pretending they are not beaten will only make them feel worse. Page 68 has her telling us that we choose our illnesses and our accidents. She says a person may choose to die as a result of being hit by a drunk driver in order that the driver will be prevented from killing a number of people the following week (page 68). So the person has on some level chosen this way to avert worse evil. She states that suicide is wrong (page 70). She speaks of the spiritual damage it does to the person who kills themselves. If you choose your accident that kills you then perhaps you are choosing your suicide as well. If you can die under the wheels of a drunk driver to save him killing more people then perhaps your suicide somehow enables you to save others? Maybe if you don't commit suicide you will become a serial killer or something? She keeps contradicting herself.

Her visions during her "death" were just that - visions. We can't take them seriously.

Raymond Moody's flawed research is accepted in this book as valid. Moody has often been taken to task for depending so much on gossip and hearsay. Needless to say no criticism of him appears in this book.

Some points are provided by Glynn for refuting the view that the experiences are hallucinations. He treats them as hallucinations that happen in rather ordinary circumstances but we are talking about people who seem to be dying which is hardly the same situation. Hallucinations could follow rather different patterns then.

One, the people who have the experiences see them as fully real.

In refutation of one, you have to see a hallucination as real to some degree for it to be a hallucination. You can see a person you mistakenly think is dead walking into the room and not consider your vision to be real though it is. If you might not believe what you see, then you can believe what you see no matter how silly it is. One is a pile of rubbish.

Two, hallucinations distort reality while these experiences are coherent.

Two ignores the fact that imagining can make coherent fantasies and be the medium through hallucination works. Also, people will forget the silly bits if there are any for it is human nature to look for coherent patterns in things. How likely are witnesses to tell the bizarre elements?

Three, hallucinations are accompanied by emotional disturbance but these experiences give a huge feeling of peace and joy.

Three, the near death experience evokes distress when the subject sees his life and crimes flash before him. And for a hallucination to cause distress the part of the brain that can sense it has to be up and running if it is not the distress will not manifest though it tries to. But we are not talking about normal brains here. We are talking about brains that are fighting for their lives. When you battle for your life you could shut off all the distress you feel. It could be there but you don't notice it.

It is foolish to say that because normal people cannot be made to replicate a near death experience that is cannot be hallucination for the people who have these experiences were not having a normal experience and were not normal.

Four the experiences change lives which hallucinations never do.

Five, any hallucination that is misinterpreted or misremembered can change lives. Anything at all can make a person change. And if people think they nearly died they are more likely to be nicer to other people anyway.

Nobody knows why heart attack victims sometimes report near death experiences and it is hard to tell what the cause is for they are not on machines to see what is going on in their heads.

Several sceptical theories for how the near death experience happens are refuted. The temporal lobe has been stimulated in experiments resulting in people feeling a presence and sensing that they are out of the bodies. Glynn complains that other parts of the brain are not stimulated so the temporal lobe theory is out for the other parts need to be stimulated for the elements of the NDE which involve smell language body image and communication to take place. But the out of body sensation and the feeling of the presence are the basic things and point to the NDE's having a natural explanation even if the whole thing cannot be replicated. It only means we do not know how to make people have the experiences in full.

The astonishing claim that near death experiences involving a hellish experience are most likely to be forgotten is approved (page 129). This is the excuse for the paucity of such reports. Actually, if the honesty of the witnesses is accepted their forgetting is simply impossible.

Near death experiences report meeting a being of light. The being of light is identified with Jesus Christ by Christians and is said to be non-judgmental though he has an uncompromising view that right is right (page 133). Stress is put on his unconditional love. All this is trash because it is impossible to love the sinner and hate the sin and it shows that the vision is coming from WITHIN the person. If not then they are from the Devil. Glynn then theorises that people from pagan religions, and cites Hinduism, see one of their gods in the near death experiences because it would be too much of a jolt if they seen anybody else, perhaps Jesus, and found out there and then that they were in the wrong religion (page 134). First, Jesus wanted all people confronted with the truth and promised that his Spirit would make up for bad evangelism and do the converting. Second, Jesus does not have to appear in the form of a Hindu God. He could just be himself and not reveal who he is. Third the near death experiences imply that all religions are true and equally acceptable. They are essentially New Age and occultic. The Glynn makes a daring statement. He declares that the visions are doctored and filtered by the subjective needs and prejudices of the visionary (page 134). If that happens then the visions arise from somewhere within the person's brain for we for we are talking about living people who are almost dead not people who die and return to life.

HANDBOOK OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS, Peter Kreeft & Ronald Tacelli, Monarch, East Sussex, 1994

God the Evidence, Patrick Glynn, Forum, California, 1999

GOD A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED Keith Ward, OneWorld, Oxford, 2003