

Religious Experience, Religious Worldviews, and Near-Death Studies

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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].

François Brune, *Les Morts Nous Parlent* (1988, p. 18)

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 transcendently 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 property, and eventually to accumulate wealth. Population increased, but the increased wealth tended to accumulate not in the hands of the multitudes, whose situation often worsened, but of the political and religious elites and their retainers, who could live off the surpluses. (To complicate 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 country'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 social 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 unredressed 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 transcendently-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 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 NDEs 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) “flatlined,” 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-spying 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 paradisaic scenes (2 Corinthians 12:1–4). Sabom’s interpretation of such events, and specifically the call-backs 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.

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