

Review of: "God's characteristics as reported by near-death experiencers"

Stephen Smith

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

For some years now, books and articles have been pouring from transcendentalists who claim some expertise as neuroscientists, physicians or psychologists, apparently using their credentials in one discipline as a basis for addressing another - in the present case, that of NDE studies. In both Tressoldi & Long's study here and the book on which it is based (Long & Perry 2016), the authors seek to demonstrate that the nature of NDEs and NDE-like experiences are open to a transcendentalist approach, which they regard as a scientifically viable option. In this, they are in step with other NDE researchers such as Greyson (2021), Moody (1976), Osis & Haraldsson (1990), Ring (1980) and Sabom (1975).

My chief qualm about the present article is that, like those I have just named, the authors take no notice at all of those who, like Susan Blackmore (1993), offer alternative and entirely natural explanations. The 'blurb' on the cover of Long & Perry's (2016) book suggests that Long is 'a meticulous researcher who's not afraid to follow the near-death experience data wherever it leads'. In my view, that is precisely what the book does not do. The article, on the other hand, takes a more scholarly approach, but is one-sided and grounded in the authors' presuppositions. In case this should be regarded as an unfair judgement (after all, presuppositions are the bane of everyone), compare Long's own claim in his book with what actually transpires: 'My goal in this book is nothing less than to provide the most scientifically rigorous account of the afterlife world described by those who have had a near-death experience' (2016: 4). The reality is very different. Of the 238 end-notes, 222 (93.27%) refer to Long's Near-Death Experience Foundation (NDERF) website. There are just six references to the works of other authors, none of which takes a properly critical approach to the NDE phenomenon. One would have thought that Susan Blackmore's (1993) book is a must-read, but in neither the book or the article does it receive a mention. Also conspicuous by its absence is any reference to the work of the late Michael Persinger who attempted to replicate, with some apparent success, some of the NDE effects in the laboratory by applying electrodes to key parts of the brains of his subjects.

The article under review is scholarly in its approach but, perhaps not unnaturally, biased towards the American market 83.8% of Tressoldi & Long's NDE participants came from the USA and, despite the thirty-four shades of religious faith represented, only 4.8% were avowedly from non-Christian backgrounds. As the authors state, 'It would be interesting to analyze similar data derived from non-Western cultures and religions' (p. 11).

Given the stated objective of the authors, the use of anecdotal evidence is obviously unavoidable. After all, only the participants can tell us what they experienced. Also unavoidable, however, are the drawbacks associated with it.

- Some of the accounts can only be described as fantastic. For instance, one percipient who had an NDE as a toddler

and described it decades later spoke of being carried on her grandmother's shoulder and being followed by tiny winged cherubs, one coloured blue, the other purple, that were 'fluttering like hummingbirds', and saw two huge golden gates floating in mid-air (Long & Perry 2016: 20). Perhaps a toddler can experience such images, but surely we are not meant to take this colourful description as evidence for an actual heavenly abode where such things really happen. The problem for me is that the authors (of the book, admittedly) refrain from expressing an opinion about it; they simply quote the story without comment.

- Another problem raised by this story and many other NDE accounts is that the percipients often relate them many years - sometimes decades - after their experience, so that memory becomes an essential factor. While I appreciate that it would have been impossible for the authors to have engaged in a full-blown discussion about memory within the limits of a short article, the problems are nevertheless there. In recent times cognitive scientists have shown just how unstable the memory can be. Daniel Schacter (2001) provides a good general introduction to the key issues, while Willem Wagenaar (1986) and others have demonstrated experimentally how soon memories of events begin to fade, suggesting that a great deal is lost, not simply over time, but within five years of the event in question. No doubt it will be countered that event as mind-blowing as a full NDE will be exceptions to the rule, but a good deal of work has been done on so-called 'flashbulb' memories showing that these are just as likely to be affected by the lapse of time as any other event (Winograd & Neisser 1992). It is now generally understood that it is not uncommon for individuals to 'recall' events that never happened (Loftus 1993). Although this is less likely to apply to NDE cases, other research is of relevance. Some scholars have suggested that, as time passes, our initial memories of an event become ripe for reconstruction, so that over the years it is these, rather than the event itself, that are remembered, and then memories of memories, and so on down the line, so that the original becomes hopelessly distorted (Duling 2011).
- Other issues can be noted briefly. According to Tressoldi & Long's list of religious affiliations, it is clear that at least 75% of their sample would have been Bible-believing Christians, and yet it seems that these were among the subjects who claimed that they were assured there would be no condemnation, regardless of the fact that the Bible, Old and New Testament alike, is full of it. Further, those who claimed to have seen God in human form apparently overlooked the passage in Exodus 33: 20 in which God himself asserts that 'no-one can see me and live' (although, admittedly, there are some significant exceptions to the rule).

Obviously, we cannot expect the authors to take account of these exceptions in any detail, any more than we can expect them to engage in an epistemological discussion of what counts as 'justified true belief' or whether anything can be indubitably known, but these issues cannot be ignored. The obvious similarities between the various NDE accounts which so impress Tressoldi and Long does not constitute proof that the various percipients were all witnessing a heavenly world 'out there'. Other explanations are possible, and perhaps more likely. Take any number of people who suffer a cardiac arrest and who experience an NDE during the resuscitation process, and it is at least likely that they will experience similar effects, particularly if the same part of the brain (the temporal lobe, for example) is affected. As for the differences, these may be accounted for on the basis that no two heart trauma cases, together with their medical interventions, will be identical.

In conclusion, it must be said that this article is not the scientific study it is purported to be. First, it is clear, both from the

article itself and from the book on which it is based, that the authors harbour presuppositions of a transcendentalist nature which prevent them from reaching any conclusion which would be contrary to their faith position. Moreover, their scientific method does not inspire confidence. Genuine science depends upon an open-minded, repeatable experimental process, but this study is heavily reliant on anecdotal evidence which tells us nothing about the reality behind it. There can be no doubt that most of those who experience an NDE (as I have not) are understandably impressed by it, and there is no reason to believe that they are not telling the truth as far as they can know it. What they cannot know, however, is that their experience was genuinely objective. It is entirely possible, therefore, that the experiences described by NDErs, however honestly, are wholly subjective and do not provide information about an objective heavenly abode.

Bibliography

- Blackmore, Susan. 1993. 'Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experience. London: Grafton.
- Greyson, Bruce. 2021. *After: A Doctor Explores what Near-Death Experiences Reveal about Life and Beyond*. London: Bantam.
- Duling, Dennis C. 2011. 'Memory, Collective Memory, Orality and the Gospels'. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 67: 103-13.
- Loftus, Elizabeth F. 1993. 'The Reality of Repressed Memories'. *American Psychologist* 48: 518-37.
- Long, Jeffrey and Paul Perry. 2016. 'God and the Afterlife'. New York: HarperOne.
- Moody, Raymond. 1976. 'Life after Life'. New York: Bantam.
- Osis, Karlis and Erlendur Haraldsson. 1990. 'At the Hour of Death'. Mamaroneck, NY: Hastings House.
- Ring, Kenneth. 1980. 'Life at Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan
- Sabom, Michael B. 1982. 'Recollections of Death. London: Corgi.
- Schacter, Daniel L. 2001. 'The Seven Sins of Memory'. Boston and New York: Mariner Books.
- van Lommel, Pim. 2010. 'Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of the Near-Death Experience'. New York: HarperOne.
- Wagenaar, Willem. 1986. 'My Memory: A Study of Autobiographical Memory over Six Years'. *Cognitive Psychology* 18: 225-52.
- Winograd, Eugene and Ulric Neisser, eds. 1992. 'Affect and Accuracy in Recall: Studies of "Flashbulb" Memories'. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

