

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

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Review

Patrizio Tressoldi and Jeffrey Long's article *God's characteristics as reported by near-death experiencers* is a very promising advance in the study of near-death experiences and the understanding of their religious and spiritual content from a replication of Long and Perry's (2016) work. Compared with this previous work, the new study uses an expansion of the database and a reelaboration of the inclusion criteria of the considered sample: the methodological framework of this research - and the differences introduced from the previous study - are adequately explained and justified.

Of particular interest is the main result achieved, which is the difference in the description of the figure of God by near-death experiencers compared to the conventional representation offered by some of the major historical religions (the Authors cite Catholicism, Islamism, Judaism and Hinduism as examples). This result seems to suggest how the depictions of the divine in near-death experiences - centered on the categories of "light", "love", "non-judgment", and "oneness" - are at least partially independent of the formal religious beliefs or affiliations of the subjects involved in the study and their reception of the theological imaginary that qualifies the spiritual traditions of reference. In fact, the Authors point out how similar depictions of the divine unite both subjects who claim to be religious and those who claim to be non-religious.

While this portrayal seems to depart from the teachings of monotheistic religions, it can be likened to the experience of union with the divine that connotes the language of mysticism. The parallelism between the contents of near-death experiences and the phenomenology of *unio mystica* would merit further investigation and could mark a direction for future research developments, drawing on specialized literature on this topic (e.g. Greyson 2014; Irwin 2015; Tassell-Matamua and Holden 2020; Carunchio and de Oliveira Maraldi 2020).

One limitation discernible in the methodological approach of Tressoldi and Long's work concerns the lack of reference to the social and cultural context of near-death experiencers. From the variable of religious affiliation, in fact, it is not possible to assess the actual relevance that religious faith, beliefs or practices have for the subjects included in the sample nor the personal meaning they give to this dimension. It is therefore not possible to ascertain whether and to what extent it is merely a formal and nominal adherence to a given religious tradition or a more deeply rooted involvement such that it influences the biographies and worldviews of the subjects. In a complementary way, individuals who declare that they are not affiliated with any church, denomination or religious group cannot be considered, *eo ipso*, to lack religious orientation in the broad sense. As a large body of literature in the sociological field suggests, more and more are those who since the

1960s and 1970s, especially in the Western countries, have described themselves as “spiritual but not religious”, that is, committed to lay paths of seeking the sacred or ultimate meanings, but critical of organized and institutional religions and dogmatic doctrinal teachings (Fuller 2001; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Mercadante 2014; Parsons 2018). The “spiritual but not religious” are often bearers of narratives, values, and symbolism historically influenced by the language of mysticism -not infrequently, a secular mysticism -, the New Age, and other currents of alternative spiritualities in which depictions and conceptions of the divine (or even of Jesus) can be traced that are comparable to those emerging from accounts of near-death experiences.

To account for these aspects, it might be useful to (a) delve into the biographies of a subsample of the subjects involved in the study, through qualitative research methods such as semi-structured discursive interviews, and (b) broaden the framework of analysis to include the cultural context within which near-death experiences are situated and in which personal accounts are constructed and communicated.

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