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Research Article

God's characteristics as reported by near-death experiencers

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The aim of this study is to replicate Long & Perry's (2016) God study using a more updated database and different inclusion criteria.

The descriptions of God's and Jesus' characteristics as observed by 303 Near-death or Near-death-like experiencers were analyzed for their frequency both in the whole sample and divided by the participants' religious experience.

Both in the whole group and in the subgroups, the main observed characteristics (approximately 70%) were a special Light and Unconditional Love, associated with other characteristics such as Oneness and Nonjudgmental, very similar to the descriptions obtained during spiritual and mystical experiences.

Only 13.9% of the descriptions reported God or Jesus as in human form, as represented in popular religious images.

These characteristics are not commonly reported in God's main descriptions in the texts of the main monotheistic religions.

These first-person accounts of God's characteristics complement what has been reported in other mental conditions, especially in the spiritual/mystical experiences, offering a great resource for the scientific investigation of God's nature.

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Introduction

How is it possible to know if God and Jesus exist, and what their characteristics are? There is no doubt that for most people, his information is usually obtained from the official documents of each religion and spiritual tradition, such as the Bible, the Gospels, the Koran, etc.

However, there is another source where it is possible to know such information, the experiences of those who claim to have had a direct and personal encounter with God or other spiritual Beings recognized as similar. These experiences are commonly labeled spiritual, mystical, or transpersonal. In the history of the different religions and spiritual traditions, such experiences are described by special people who can be recognized as saints or mystics, such as Francis of Assisi, Emanuel Swedenborg, and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

Such experiences are also investigated using a scientific approach (see, for example, Corneille & Luke, (2021); Facco et al., (2019); Tressoldi & Woollacott, (2023); Yaden & Newberg, (2022). These authors tried to analyze the frequency and characteristics of these experiences as reported by either unselected or selected participants,

such as meditators or people practicing specific activities aimed at having such experiences.

Among the more common characteristics are unconditional love, indescribable bliss, and a sense of union and fusion with the Divine Being. This last characteristic is labeled as Oneness or Nonduality (Coomber & Harré, 2022; Josipovic, 2019; Mills et al., 2020), which comprises a sense of losing the boundary of the individual self, maintaining the awareness of self-awareness, feeling to be one with all that exists, and a mental clarity and feeling of love difficult to describe in words.

Near-death experiences (NDE) are another well-known category of first-person accounts that include the possibility of encountering God or similar spiritual beings. In fact, in the scales used to measure the characteristics of such experiences, there are items like: “*Did you seem to encounter a mystical being or presence?*”; “*Did you see deceased or religious spirits?*” (Lange et al., 2004; Martial et al., 2020).

Long & Perry, (2016) analyzed 420 such experiences available in their database, selecting those with an NDE scale score of 7 or above using the Greyson NDE Scale (Greyson, 1983).

Among those who described such experiences, 65% reported information about love, which was sometimes associated with a special light. Another type of experience was to have had a special connection with God, like the Oneness or Non-Duality experiences. Among the other experiences, there was that of not being judged with respect to the actions performed until that moment, and the experience to have entered or at least have been a small experience of being in Heaven or, but with less frequency in a Hellish environment.

The main aim of this study was to replicate Long & Perry’s (2016) God study using a more updated database and different inclusion criteria.

The main difference is that we included participants independently from their NDE scores measured with the Greyson NDE scale (Greyson, 1983). Usually, true NDEs are those experiences that include a minimum of characteristic in the NDE scales, for example, above 7 on the Greyson NDE scale or above 27 on the Near-Death Experience Content (NDE-C) scale (Martial et al., 2020).

A second main difference with respect to Long & Perry’s (2016) God study, was that of including the so-called near-death-like experiences. Near-death-like experiences are those experienced during non-life-threatening events. A comparison of the characteristics

of true near-death and near-death-like experiences has revealed no differences (Charland-Verville et al., 2014).

Methods

Reporting Standards

We followed the Journal article reporting standards for qualitative primary research (JARS-Qual, Levitt et al. 2018).

Data searching

In May 2023, we searched first with the keyword “God” and then with the keyword “Jesus” in the NDERF database available online at <https://www.nderf.org/search.htm> which at the end of May 2023 included 4640 records.

We also read all experiences included in the 2022 Archive (<https://www.nderf.org/Archives/2.6.2022.html>) for a total of 69 records.

Inclusion criteria

We adopted the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

- Only first-hand, no second-hand, near-death, or near-death-like experiences, labelled “probable” or “possible NDE” in the database.
- Independent from any NDE score.
- Including a direct experience of meeting God or/and Jesus associated with specific information about their characteristics. For example, we included information like: “*I saw the love light of God*”; “*I was everything and everything was me, including God*”; “*I stood there and suddenly I saw Jesus. His hair was white like wool and hung down to His shoulders*”.

And excluded information like: “*I was gently guided to the light. I felt unconditional love, immense joy, happiness, contentment, although I did not see God, I knew he was with me*”; “*The light became quite enormous now and was clearly some sort of Being*”; “*I felt that The Presence was honored that I was there*”; “*This sensation was accompanied by the most amazing overwhelming feeling of love, joy, happiness, and union with everything*”. “*I felt the presence of a higher being in which I believe was God*”; “*The Being was communicating with me through thoughts*”; “*God held me in his arms and told me three times to go back*”; “*I’m certain I was before God*”.

For every record satisfying the above criteria we simply copied and pasted the text related to the information we

needed in our database (available open access at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.23585265.v3>).

From the total of the 4709 records examined, we included 303 records after the exclusion of duplicates and the application of our inclusion and exclusion criteria.

God's and Jesus' characteristics description

To simplify God's and Jesus' characteristics description, we extracted the main words from the texts included in the database.

For example, we extracted the word "Light" for every experience including such a word even if its description was like that described by:

ID 4696: "Compared with this light, the sun when looking it in the face looks like a weak electrical light bulb. This light was of a total transparency, to the point that normal light seemed dense and compact in comparison".

ID 2485: "Light? Oh, it was more, bigger, profoundly more, than just light. It was so vast! There was a cloud of warm, love. It was as if I was in love with the whole world, and everyone loved me back!"

ID 2566 "I've never seen anything like the Light that I saw – no matter how light the sun gets or the lightest light – what I saw was a combination of Light – seeing it but feeling it and it was combined with emotion – love and joyfulness."

ID 2662: "There was an indescribable feeling of wellbeing, peace, gladness, freedom, unknown and unconditional love. Everything was the light."

ID 2803: "That light seemed to be the source of all the light, all the love, all the goodness, pleasure, and peace in all of existence. It was the source of everything. It seemed to be the only thing that had ever mattered. It was contained within everything, it united everything, and I was drawn to it as if by a powerful magnet".

ID 2932: "The first time, I went through a light (it is the only way I can describe this) and I was totally saturated in unconditional love. It was the most wonderful experience I have ever had. Unconditional love saturated me, and it was so filling!"

ID 3093: "All I remember is seeing a bright light, which was 1,000 times brighter than the sun. The feeling I had as the rays shone down on me was of peace, love, serenity, like I was safe, I was home, and I belonged".

ID 3098: "I saw the brightest light I had ever seen. It was like warm molasses, and it filled every single speck of my being. The light was love, pure love. It was so spectacular, that I cry just writing this out".

ID 3899: "There was only this dazzling, electrifying, brilliant white Light all around. The light was everywhere. There was nothing except this brilliant Consciousness! It seemed to have a consistency of the ever-finest, minutest electric-like sparkles and was energetically similar to the 'bed of Light' I had come on, except that this light was all-pervasive, limitless. It could perhaps be compared to the light of thousands of brilliant stars reflected in millions of sparkling diamonds, all-encompassing, self-luminous, and pulsating with electric energy: very delicate and smooth".

Similarly for the Love experience:

ID 2518: "I felt LOVE...incredible perfect love, as if everything was just perfect, in order and so peaceful. I had a knowledge or oneness with everything it seemed. Everything was connected, a oneness I had never known".

ID 3119: "The Light was so bright and infusing I thought that it was power. Then I realized that it was Love. There was no judgment of any kind, only unbelievable Love".

ID 3337: "Then there was the love. This is a very difficult feeling to describe. Try to remember the first time you saw your child or met your significant other. You know what I am talking about, that feeling of first-time love that is so positive and so powerful. Now take that feeling and multiply it thousands of times over. It is a love that you can never imagine being possible on Earth".

ID 3774: "The most amazing part was a pure feeling of the most intense love I can barely describe. It was just wave after wave of pure love. It was within me, it was around me, it was EVERYTHING. It felt like heartbeats of love, one wave of love after another. Yet there was love in the interim as well, then the wave would come with even more and more. It was endless, eternal and complete. I had no fear whatsoever, I had no feeling other than LOVE".

Some examples related to the concept of "Oneness".

ID 600: "The presence of God was in all things. Feeling that your God is in everything! Forever! He lives with you in his perfection for all time".

ID 688: "The moment that I entered the Light, to become one with the Light".

ID 1011: "There was no place that God did not exist, and I was within God. I am an inseparable part of the light".

Some examples related to the Nonjudgmental characteristic:

ID 441: "There is a myth that has been circulating for centuries, and just for the record, I used to be one who put stock in this myth. If we are not all good little people and follow God's word and seek salvation, in the afterlife he will condemn us to eternal hellfire and damnation. Contrary to this very popular belief, it isn't a wonderful and loving God

that condemns us by any means. Rather by the use of our own free will that we choose to -- in a sense condemn ourselves”.

ID 688: “*The Light knew everything that I had ever done or will do, and the Light loves me because I’m Andy. The Light loves me because of who I am! No fear! No judgments! No punishment!*”.

ID 689: “*God was not judging me. I was looking at my actions, with God at my side loving me while I was judging myself – and believe me, no one can judge me any harsher than I already judge myself*”.

Some examples related to the Human form characteristic:

ID 686: “*Then a figure emerged who I identified as Jesus – a figure consistent with a painting of Jesus my grandmother had*”.

ID 1019: “*He had long hair and a beard*”.

God’s characteristics extractions

To simplify the analyses of God’s and Jesus’ characteristics, we extracted the main words from the description of the experience. For example, from the text of ID 3119: “*The Light was so bright and infusing I thought that it was power. Then I realized that it was Love. There was no judgment of any kind, only unbelievable Love*”, we extracted the words, Light and Love. From the text of ID 688: “*The moment that I entered the Light, to become one with the Light*”, we extracted the words, Light and Oneness.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics of the main variables are presented in Table 1

| | Percentage (Count) |
|----------------|--------------------|
| Female | 59.4 (180) |
| Male | 40.6 (123) |
| Religious | 78.2 (237) |
| Not Religious | 11.2 (34) |
| Christian | 21.5 (51) |
| Catholic | 20.7 (49) |
| Moderate | 15.2 (36) |
| Liberal | 9.7 (23) |
| Fundamentalist | 9.3 (22) |
| USA | 83.8 (254) |
| Non-USA | 16.2 (49) |

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the main variables.

A more detailed description of the different types of religions declared by the sample included in the study is presented in Table 1S in the Supplementary Material.

God's – Jesus's characteristics

God was encountered 84.5% of the time, Jesus 14.8%, and .07% uncertain if Jesus or God.

The simple count of God's and Jesus's characteristics is presented in Table 2.

| | Count | Percentage |
|---------------|-------|------------|
| Light | 151 | 33.1 |
| Love | 127 | 27.9 |
| Oneness | 73 | 16.0 |
| Human form | 67 | 14.7 |
| Nonjudgmental | 23 | 5.0 |
| Energy | 8 | 1.8 |
| Powerful | 2 | 0.4 |
| Peace | 2 | 0.4 |
| Judgmental | 2 | 0.4 |
| Vibration | 1 | 0.2 |

Table 2. Count and percentage of God's and Jesus's characteristics.

Differently, Figure 1 shows the percentages of the characteristics associations as observed by our participants. For example, under the label Light +, we calculated the percentage of all experiences where God's characteristics included the word Light, hence, Light, Light – Love, Light – Love Oneness, etc. Similarly, for the Love + characteristic, that is, Love – Oneness, Love – Nonjudgmental, and so on.

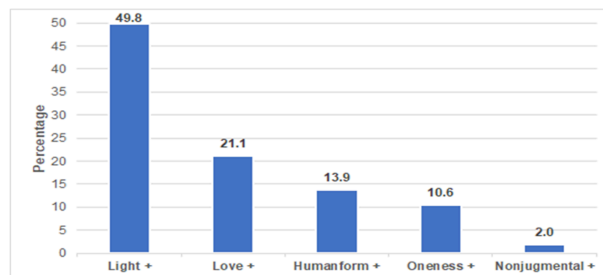


Figure 1. Main God's – Jesus's characteristics as observed by the whole sample.

A more detailed presentation of all these characteristic combinations is presented in Table 2S in the Supplementary Material.

Comment

The light and love characteristics associated with them, and the other main characteristics are clearly the more frequent characteristics of God's and Jesus's experiences. Oneness and Human form were experienced less frequently, followed by non-judgmental characteristics. Jesus was experienced in human form more frequently than God (70.1% vs. 29.9%).

In Figure 2, we show the same characteristics separately for participants who declared themselves to be religious (n. 237), those who declared not to follow a religion (n. 34), and those who did not declare their religion (n.32).

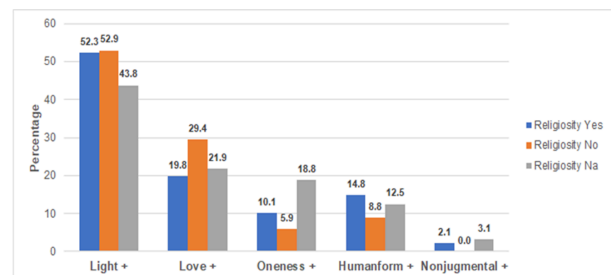


Figure 2. Main God's – Jesus's characteristics as experienced by religious, non-religious participants and those who did not declare this information.

Comment

The frequency of main God's and Jesus's characteristics are almost the same in the three groups, but Love was experienced more frequently by the not-religious group (29.4 %), and Oneness was experienced more frequently by the group that did not report religious experiences (18.8%).

Given the explorative approach of this study and the uniqueness of the data sample, we considered it inappropriate to apply inferential statistics to the data analyzed.

Comparison with God's characteristics as presented in some of the main religious traditions.

God as presented in the Catechism of the Catholic Church is described as: "God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone is his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is....God's very being is love" (https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P16.HTM).

God in the Hebrew tradition: "God is conceived as unique and perfect, free from all faults, deficiencies, and defects, and further held to be omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and completely infinite in all of his attributes, who has no partner or equal, being the sole creator of everything in existence" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_in_Judaism).

God in the Islamic tradition: "God is conceived as a perfect, singular, immortal, omnipotent, and omniscient god, completely infinite in all of his attributes". Islam further emphasizes that God is most-merciful. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_in_Islam)

God in the Hinduist tradition: "Brahman connotes the highest universal principle, the ultimate reality in the universe. In major philosophical schools it is the immaterial, efficient, formal and final cause of all that exists. It is the pervasive, infinite, eternal truth, consciousness, and bliss which does not change, yet is the cause of all changes". (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahman>).

Comment

Even if the above descriptions of God cannot be considered exhaustive of all religious traditions, this study finds that NDErs are far more likely to describe God in terms of Light, Love, Non-judgment, and Oneness than the descriptions of God in the main

monotheistic religious traditions, where perfection, ultimate reality, omnipotence, omniscience, etc., are the main characteristics.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to replicate Long and Perry's (2016) God study using a larger database and different inclusion criteria.

Our main findings confirm those observed by Long & Perry (2016), that is, God's description is mainly characterized by a special light and love that are difficult to describe given the limitations of human experience and words. Among the other principal characteristics, Oneness and Nonjudgment were those experienced more frequently, very similar to spiritual and mystical experiences, as already observed by (Greyson, 2014).

It is curious that God or Jesus human form descriptions were observed in only 15.2% of the sample, with small differences with respect to their religious experience. The fact that Jesus was experienced in human form more frequently than God (70.1% vs. 29.9%) is expected given Jesus's more frequent representations in human form in religious pictures and images.

Religious experience does not seem to contribute much to God's and Jesus' descriptions, but the presence of Love is experienced more in the non-religious group (see Figure 2).

For those who raise doubts about the nature of these experiences, that is, if participants really experienced what they described or if what they reported could be assimilated into lucid dreams or hallucinations, it is important to read what they declared about their perceived sense of reality.

For example, ID 4612: "*Our daily life seems like a dream in comparison to my experience.*"; ID 4613: "*Everything was hyper-realistic, perhaps more real than I have ever known reality to be.*"; ID 4637: "*More consciousness and alertness than normal. It was a state of hyperreality. Everything was much more real than the usual reality. It was very clear, very direct, vivid, emotional, quick, telepathic, immediate, and completely undiluted.*"

A recent survey of 834 NDErs by Long (2022), confirmed that 93.8% (782/834) believed their NDEs were definitely real.

Study limitations

Among the main limitations of this study, we must consider that 83.8% of the experiences were obtained by the USA participants. It would be interesting to

analyze similar data derived from non-Western cultures and religions.

Furthermore, only 11.2% declared not to have had a religious experience.

Only future studies, with new participants, both with and without a religious experience, could confirm or disconfirm our findings.

Conclusions

This study is another contribution to the scientific investigation of religious/ spiritual experiences that are relevant to responding to relevant human questions (in this case: Does God exist? What are his characteristics?), allowing us to obtain responses that are usually

available in the official and unofficial texts of all main religions and spiritual traditions.

Responses similarities and differences between scientific and nonscientific sources can help us to form more informed opinions about such relevant topics.

Authors' contributions

- P.T.: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Supervision, Visualization, Writing - original draft, and Writing - review & editing.
- J.L.: Data curation, Supervision, and Writing - review & editing.

Supplementary Material

| Religion | Count | Percentage |
|------------------------------|-------|------------|
| Christian | 51 | 21.5 |
| Catholic | 49 | 20.7 |
| Moderate | 36 | 15.2 |
| Liberal | 23 | 9.7 |
| Conservative fundamentalist | 22 | 9.3 |
| Mormon | 5 | 2.1 |
| Lutheran | 4 | 1.7 |
| Methodist | 4 | 1.7 |
| Buddist | 2 | 0.8 |
| Baptist | 9 | 3.8 |
| Jewish | 2 | 0.8 |
| Liberal Christian | 2 | 0.8 |
| Native American | 2 | 0.8 |
| New Age | 2 | 0.8 |
| Spiritualist | 2 | 0.8 |
| United Church of Christ | 2 | 0.8 |
| Universalist | 2 | 0.8 |
| Anglican | 1 | 0.4 |
| Charismatic Pentecostal | 1 | 0.4 |
| Church of England | 1 | 0.4 |
| Congregationalist | 1 | 0.4 |
| Episcopalian | 1 | 0.4 |
| Faith in God | 1 | 0.4 |
| Hinduist | 2 | 0.8 |
| Independent Christian Church | 1 | 0.4 |
| Jainist | 1 | 0.4 |
| Jehovah's Witness | 1 | 0.4 |
| Liberal Buddhist - Christian | 1 | 0.4 |
| Muslim | 1 | 0.4 |
| Pentecostal | 1 | 0.4 |
| Presbyterian | 1 | 0.4 |
| Protestant | 1 | 0.4 |
| Seventh-day Adventist Church | 1 | 0.4 |
| Unitarian | 1 | 0.4 |

Table 1S. Percentage and count of religion declared by the sample included in the study.

| Characteristics | Count | Percentage |
|--|-------|------------|
| Light | 62 | 20.46 |
| Human form | 41 | 13.53 |
| Light - Love | 38 | 12.54 |
| Love | 36 | 11.88 |
| Oneness | 31 | 10.23 |
| Love - Oneness | 15 | 4.95 |
| Light - Human form | 13 | 4.29 |
| Light - Love - Oneness | 11 | 3.63 |
| Light - Oneness | 7 | 2.31 |
| Nonjudgmental | 6 | 1.98 |
| Light - Love - Human form | 6 | 1.98 |
| Love - Human form | 6 | 1.98 |
| Energy | 5 | 1.65 |
| Love - Nonjudgmental | 4 | 1.32 |
| Light - Love - Nonjudgmental - Oneness | 5 | 1.65 |
| Light - Love - Nonjudgmental | 3 | 0.99 |
| Love - Nonjudgmental - Oneness | 2 | 0.66 |
| Light - Nonjudgmental | 2 | 0.66 |
| Love - Energy | 1 | 0.33 |
| Light - Nonjudgmental - Oneness | 1 | 0.33 |
| Peace - Power | 1 | 0.33 |
| Light - Judgmental | 2 | 0.66 |
| Powerful | 1 | 0.33 |
| Vibration - Oneness | 1 | 0.33 |
| Peace | 1 | 0.33 |
| Energy - Human form | 1 | 0.33 |
| Light - Energy | 1 | 0.33 |

Table 2S. Combinations of the main God's and Jesus' characteristics as experienced by the whole sample of participants

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