

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

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This article contains interesting facts, but there is no real analysis of those facts. You start out by saying it is possible to know the characteristics of God or other spiritual beings, inter alia, through reports of near-death experiences. This suggests you are presenting these reports as evidence for the characteristics they describe, mostly light and love, being divine characteristics. But if that is your aim you need to explain more fully how your selection criteria get you there. Maybe my point will become clearer through some specific comments.

1. If these experiences reflect God's nature, it would seem to follow that God's presence is their cause. Yet, you start off by excluding from your universe people who seem to have the same experience but do not clearly attribute it to God. You don't really explain why you do that, and there seem to be several problems with that exclusion.

a) If God is real, and this is how God really manifests, it would seem that God would manifest in the same way regardless of whether a person articulates the experience as specifically one of God or not. An atheist, for example, might be unlikely to specify that her experience was of God, but if she had the same experience as a Christian and you count the Christian's experience as being of God, why wouldn't you count hers as an experience of God as well?

b) This is especially problematic if you don't have access to these people to question them about their experience; if you're just going on what statements they made that happened to be recorded. In particular, I don't see why you would exclude a person who says, "I felt the presence of a higher being in which I believe was God." But many of the other examples you give are similar. It seems that you're dividing people by an accident of the language they use rather than by anything substantively different about their experiences. This is especially true if a person is, for example, reluctant to use the locution "I saw God" because of justifiable humility, or a sense of it being unbecoming, or simply because it seems presumptuous to make such a flat claim. How could any of those characteristics of the reporter be meaningful to the question of what they observed?

c) Mystical and NDE experiences are said to be ineffable. Why are you so focused on the precise words a subject is using to describe an ineffable experience?

d) What if the people you exclude report an experience of light and/or love at **higher** rate than those you include? Nothing in your article allows the reader to determine whether that might be true or not. Yet, by your own implicit standard it would seem to be rather problematic if it were true. How could the reporting of, say, light by 25% of the people who claim to have seen God support the claim that "light" is a divine characteristic if 40% of the people who don't

claim to have seen God also report seeing light?

2) A number of statements in your article lead me to suspect that you have a very narrow definition of what counts as “God” or “religious experience.” For example, you say “Oneness was experienced more frequently by the group that did not report religious experiences.” Yet, Oneness is a religious experience. Some would say it is the quintessential religious experience. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Religious experience is, in any event, highly diverse. Try reading *America’s Four Gods* by Christopher Bader and Paul Froese to capture some of the vast differences just among Americans in how they view God.

3) You have some valuable material here, but given that this is a pioneering study you ought to approach it from a phenomenological standpoint. That is, instead of selecting for God or Jesus, select for “light,” “love,” “nonjudgmental,” and “oneness.” Then focus on the differences and commonalities among the people who make those claims. E.g., were they near death as a result of an illness or a trauma; were they male or female; were they regular church attenders or not. How do they differ in these regards from the people who don’t have any of these experiences? If you have access to these folks or at least some of them, you might get them to take a Meyers-Briggs test to see if there is a certain personality type that is more likely to have these experiences than another. These are just suggestions, but the key point is that you ought to start from the individual’s experience, not from an attempt to categorize the experience verbally that is necessarily both inaccurate (if the experience is ineffable) and secondary to the experience itself.