CONTROVERSY OVER NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE IN AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY

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What is a Near-Death Experience (NDE)?

Broadly speaking, the term “Near-Death Experience” (NDE) may refer to a variety of phenomena reportedly experienced by individuals at, near, or beyond the point of death or apparent death. Such experiences have occurred throughout human history in many cultures and places. The modern term was coined by philosopher and psychiatrist Raymond A. Moody Jr. in 1975 with the publication of Life After Life. Moody collected 150 personal testimonies of NDEs and identified 15 common features among them. Below is a simplified list of common features, which reflects subsequent research into these experiences.

Common Features:
1. Separation from the body
2. Journey motifs, such as drifting through darkness, outer space, or a “void,” or a tunnel
3. Encounter with deceased relatives or friends, or with a godlike or angelic presence
4. Review of one’s past deeds in the form of a panoramic visual replay of memories
5. Immersion in light and love
6. Return to life to complete unfinished business on earth
7. Transforming aftereffects, such as loss of fear of death, new-found zest for life, or the ability to look at life’s problems differently
8. Transformation of one’s perception of the afterlife

Abstract

In recent decades, narratives of Near-Death Experiences have become increasingly popular in American media, as evidenced by a slew of New York Times best sellers. With provocative titles such as Proof of Heaven and Heaven is for Real, these narratives are often championed by their authors as powerful evidence for the existence of life after death. Within the Christian community, a group with a vested interest in the afterlife, reactions to these accounts and to the NDE phenomenon in general have been mixed. Some champion NDE’s as supporting evidence or even proof of certain doctrines or beliefs. Others view them with skepticism, doubting their validity based on their inconsistency with scriptural evidence or established doctrine. For those who take these experiences seriously, they provide new and important insight into the understanding of theology, ethics, cosmology, and soteriology. This project examines the various attitudes toward NDEs within the mainstream Christian community, through an analysis of written material from both clergy and laity persons. Special attention is given to how various attitudes are both influenced by and serve to influence theological ideas.

Arguments from NDE Enthusiasts

- NDEs provide assurance of salvation
- They promote empathy and service
- They provide answers to important theological questions:
  - Who will be saved and why? Unborn Babies? Non-Believers?
  - Is there Free-will?
  - How does God feel about Homosexuality?

Arguments from NDE Skeptics

- The Scriptures must not be supplemented
- Faith is weakened by reliance on such evidence
- NDEs are the results of demonic deception
- They lead to false theology

Conclusions

- For Christians on both sides of the debate, scripture remains the primary authority
- Most NDE Proponents view experience not in opposition to scripture, but as an aid in its correct interpretation
- Some proponents are reinterpreting the doctrine of salvation, resulting in a more inclusive view, emphasizing proper action over proper belief

References:
5. Todd Burpo, Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy’s Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).