

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 Features¹

1. Separation from the body
2. Journey motifs, such as drifting through darkness, outer space, 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 everyday life, and renewed dedication to the values of empathetic love, lifelong learning, and service to others.

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 laypersons. Special attention is given to how various attitudes are both influenced by and serve to influence theological ideas.



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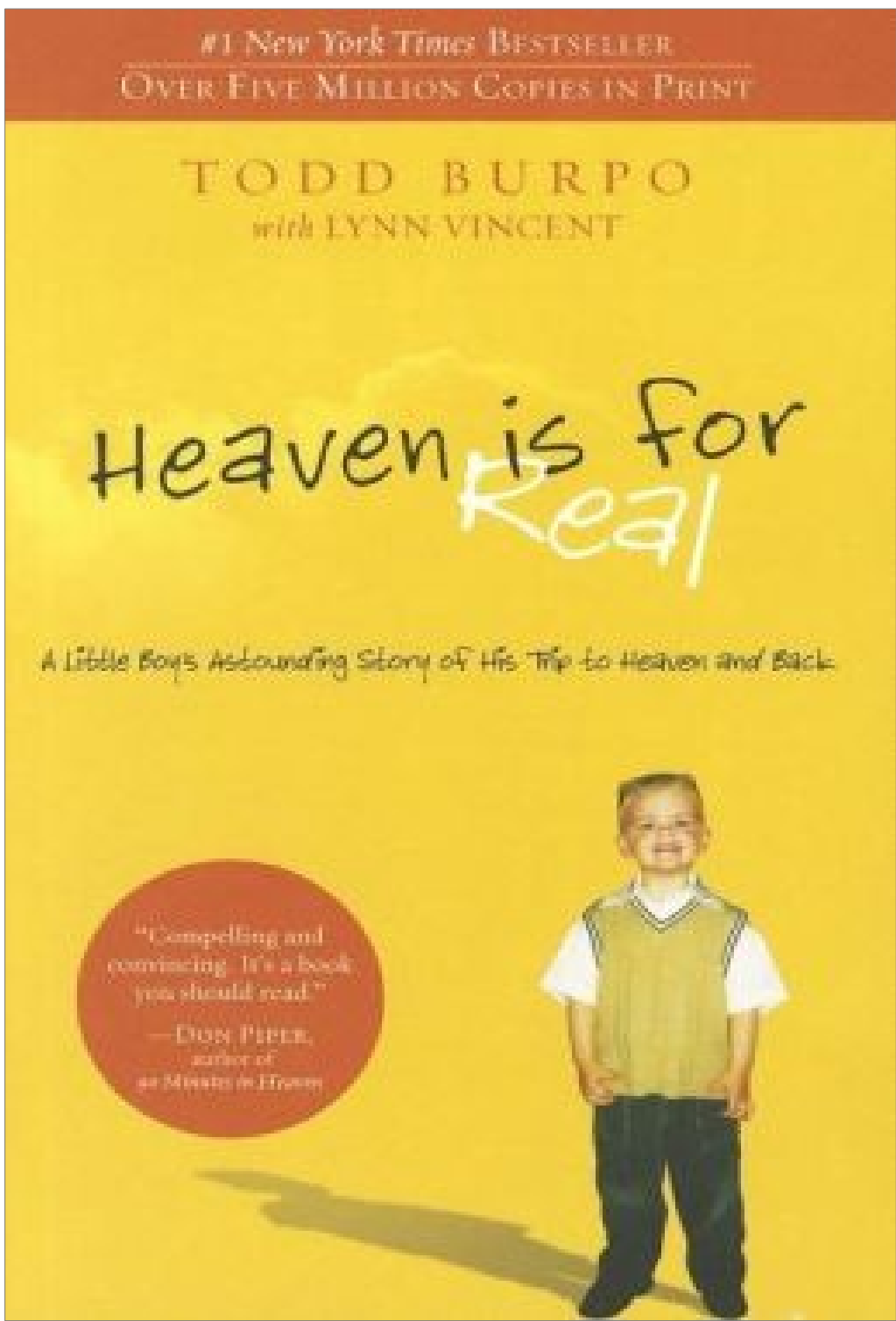
2 Examples

*Proof of Heaven*⁴

- Alexander has no body
- Mystical journey; language, emotion, and logic are transcended
- He communes with God through the help of a sentient orb
- God is an amorphous, being that dwells in a core of “inky darkness”
- No references to Biblical accounts or specific figures
- He meets his long lost sister
- There are many universes all connected by one divine reality

*Heaven is for Real*⁵

- Colton is embodied
- Environment similar to that of Earthly life
- He converses with God verbally
- God is Trinitarian (Father, Son, Spirit), all three members appear as separate beings
- He witnesses numerous Biblical figures, confirms Biblical descriptions, and witnesses prophesied events
- He meets his deceased grandfather and older sister, who had been lost to a miscarriage
- Jesus has a multicolored horse, and everybody has wings



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Arguments from NDE Enthusiasts

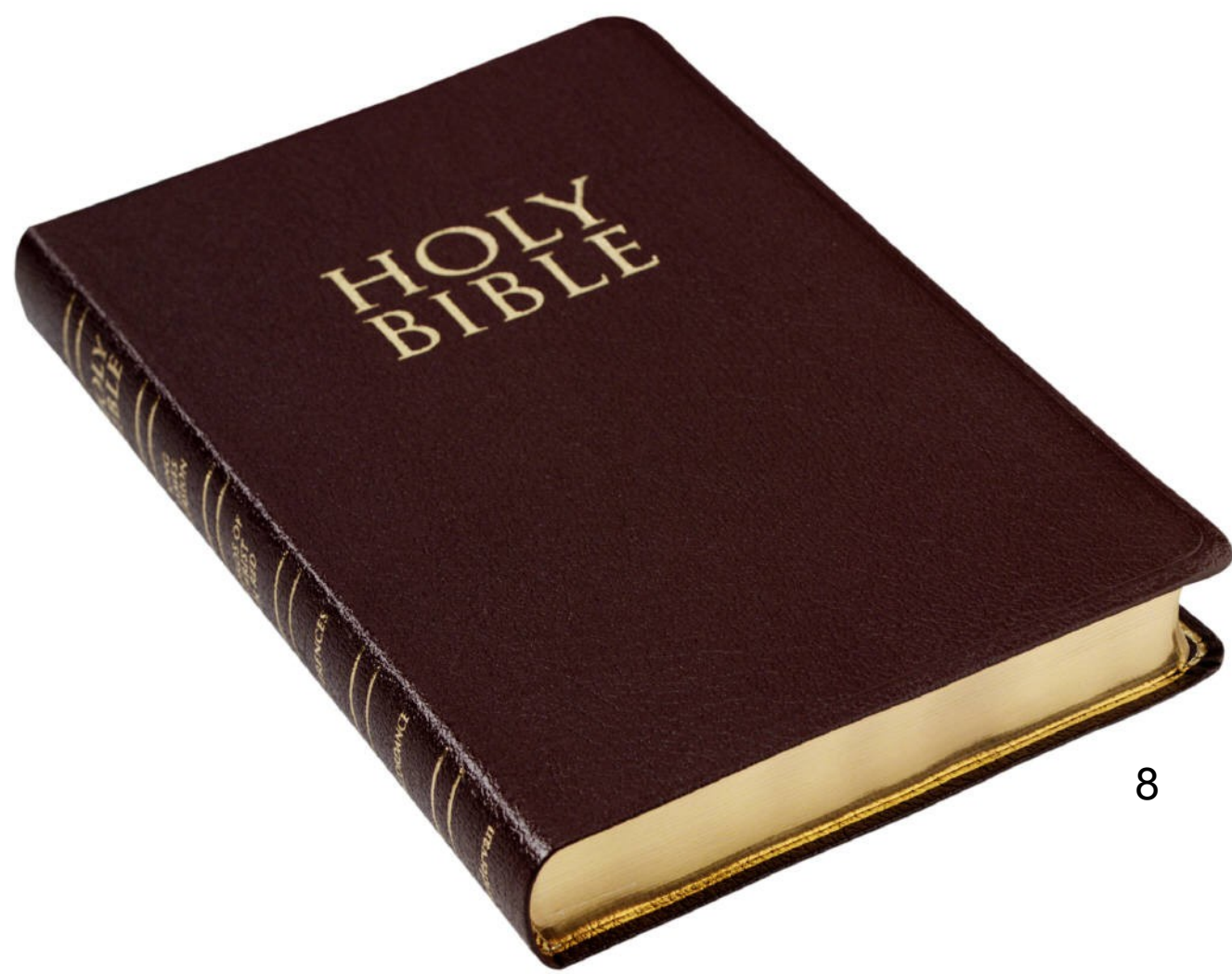
- NDEs provide assurance of salvation
- They promote empathy and service
- They provide answers to important theological questions:
 - Who will be saved and why? Unborn Babies? Non-Believers?
 - Is there Free-will?
 - How does God feel about Homosexuality?



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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



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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

1. Carol Zaleski, “Death and Near-Death Today,” in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other-Worldly Journeys*, ed. John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 391.
2. “Proof of Heaven (Turtleback School & Library Edition),” *Barnsandnoble.com llc*, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/proof-of-heaven-eben-alexander/1113460000?ean=9780606324267>.
3. “Heaven is for Real 4 Pack: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back,” *Bansandnoble.com llc*, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/heaven-is-for-real-4-pack-todd-burpo/1111384155?ean=9780849958939>.
4. Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).
5. Todd Burp, *Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).
6. Emma Major, “How Can We Bring Heaven on Earth?,” *LLM Calling* (blog), February 9, 2012, <http://llmcalling.blogspot.com/2012/02/how-can-we-bring-heaven-on-earth.html>.
7. Morgan Guyton, “A New Metaphor for Thinking about Heaven and Hell,” *Mercy Not Sacrifice: The Blog of Morgan Guyton*, July 30, 2013, <https://morganguyton.wordpress.com/2013/07/30/a-new-metaphor-for-thinking-about-heaven-and-hell/>.
8. “Bible Study Group,” *Holy Cross PNC Church*, February 13, 2012, <http://www.holycrossncc.org/2012/02/13/adult-bible-study-group/>.