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Proof of Heaven?: Controversy Over Near-Death Experiences in American Christianity

Winner, 2015 Graduate Humanities Conference

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Since its foundation, one of the major tenets of the Christian faith – and arguably the main hope and promise of the Christian message – has been the possibility of life after death. Conceptions of how this promise is fulfilled, for whom, and what exactly the afterlife looks like have varied over the centuries and from group to group within the tradition. These various conceptions have been informed by scriptural passages as well as personal revelations, visions, and mystical experiences. Some of the more direct experiences of the afterlife come from those who have come very close to death and then recovered, claiming to have glimpsed life on the other side. For several reasons, the number of documented accounts of these experiences, usually termed “near-death experiences,” has increased in the second half of the twentieth century. Along with the increase in number of accounts, has been an increase in the circulation of these accounts in American popular media. Among Christians, the responses to these accounts have been mixed, ranging anywhere from enthusiastic support to extreme skepticism. By examining the discourse surrounding near death experiences within the Christian community, one may gain a greater understanding of how the current popularity of these accounts might affect the way Christians view many issues, including death, the afterlife, morality, theology, and the universe itself. The following pages provide a brief overview of some popular NDE literature, focusing on two of these recent publications in detail, and analyze some reactions within the American Christian community and the possible motivations for those reactions.

Before considering the modern reaction to these phenomena, it is important to define more clearly the kinds of experiences under consideration and some of the history and complications surrounding their report and study. Near-Death Experience (henceforth abbreviated to NDE) is an umbrella term used to refer to a variety of phenomena experienced by individuals at, near, or beyond the point of death or apparent death. These can involve the use of the five senses as well as other sorts of extrasensory or inexplicable sensations/perceptions. Far from being limited to a particular tradition or community, NDEs have occurred throughout human history in many places, cultures, and societies.ⁱ One of the most well known and oft-cited early accounts can be found in Book X of Plato's *Republic*, dated between 380 and 360 BCE,ⁱⁱ in which Plato recounts the story of Er, a Greek soldier who was believed dead and placed upon a funeral pyre for incineration.ⁱⁱⁱ According to the tale, Er awoke and reported that his soul had been separated from his body and traveled to a place where spirits are judged before entering a new realm.^{iv} Other accounts of travel beyond death can be found in the literature of medieval China^v and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (written c. 8th Century CE).^{vi} Many experiences of the afterlife don't seem to occur anywhere near death itself, and so are not proper NDEs, but fall under a broader category of otherworldly and paranormal experience. This category, which Carol Zaleski terms the “otherworld journey” includes descents into lower realms (such as the underworld), ascents into higher realms (such as heaven), and fantastic voyages to distant places on earth.^{vii} More recent somewhat famous accounts of visits to or visions of the afterlife include those of scientist and mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg,^{viii} actor Peter Sellers,^{ix} and psychiatrist Carl

Jung.^x Although all of these accounts claim insight into life beyond the veil of death, this insight is not always gained through an experience of or closeness to death itself.

The differentiating feature of the NDE, the experiencer's proximity to actual death, perhaps helps explain the proliferation of NDE accounts in the second half of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1960s, advances were made in medicine, particularly in the area of emergency response, that allowed for increased success in resuscitating individuals at risk of death.^{xi} The resulting increase in the number of persons recovering from near-death situations has certainly increased the potential for NDEs to occur, and it is cited as reason for the recent increase in the number of testimonies.^{xii} The modern conception of NDEs as well as the beginning of their widespread scientific and scholarly study are owed in large part to the seminal work of philosopher and psychiatrist Dr. Raymond A. Moody, Jr..^{xiii} In 1975, Moody published *Life after Life*, in which he coins the term “near-death experience” and presents his findings based on 150 testimonies of NDEs. Moody identifies 3 types of testimony that he considered in his study: those of persons thought or pronounced clinically dead who then recovered, those of persons coming very close to death without dying, and those of persons who relayed their experience with others as they died.^{xiv} He further identifies 15 elements commonly found among the narratives, arguing there is striking similarity between individual experiences.^{xv} Subsequent research has caused this list to be revised and paired down.^{xvi} The following list, reflecting these changes, is provided by Zaleski:

1. Separation from the body, sometimes accompanied by a “spectator” perspective, watching the scene of crisis from a distant or elevated vantage point.
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 (Moody's “being of light”).
4. Review of one's past deeds in the form of a panoramic visual replay of memories (the life review). In cases of sudden encounter with life-threatening danger, this life review often takes precedence over other features.
5. Immersion in light and love. Many confess that this experience is indescribable. Cognitive and affective characteristics are fused. The keynote is a profound sense of security and protection, accompanied by a sense of receiving special messages or hidden truths. For some, this takes the form of an instantaneous, timeless, and comprehensive vision of the totality of existence.
6. Return to life, either involuntarily or by choice, 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. For some, these positive effects are accompanied by difficulties in adjusting to normal life.^{xvii}

Life After Life quickly popularized NDEs as a distinct phenomenon and sparked research into their nature, effects, and authenticity across fields such as medicine, psychology, parapsychology, neurology, and religious studies.^{xviii} As a part of this research, inquiry has been made into the frequency of NDEs. Estimates of the number of people resuscitated who also report NDEs range anywhere from 18 to 40 percent.^{xix} Even at the low end, these numbers indicate a significant portion of the population, so it is perhaps no surprise that some have written books about their experiences.

Since 2004, there have been a host of books published in the U.S. providing personal narratives of NDEs, at least six of which have made it onto the *New York Times* “Best-Sellers” list.^{xx} The popularity of these narratives has led some to view them as constituting an emergent literary genre all their own, sometimes referred to rather cynically as “heaven tourism.”^{xxi} That there is religious significance to these accounts is obvious, and many of the

authors make explicit claims not just that their experiences are real, but also that those experiences provide new information about the nature of humanity, God(s), and salvation. Some of the authors openly identify themselves as Christian, and make an appeal to a Christian audience, while others remain more ambiguous about their personal faith, apparently inviting a wider appeal. However, as previously mentioned, even regarding those claimants most explicit in their endorsement of Christianity, the Christian community is divided over whether to accept these NDE accounts, and many Christians remain skeptical. To understand why, it is helpful to examine some of these accounts and the conventions of the NDE narrative genre as a whole.

Because of its recent popularity and clear ties to the Christian faith, there is perhaps no better place to start gaining a familiarity with the genre than with Todd Burpo's *Heaven is for Real*. Burpo provides a secondhand account of the NDE of his 3-year-old son, Colton, which took place during an emergency appendectomy.^{xxii} The book was adapted into a major motion picture in 2014, which grossed over \$100 million at the box office worldwide.^{xxiii} It does not contain a linear narrative of Colton's NDE, but instead provides bits and pieces of the experience as revealed to Burpo by Colton over several years following his surgery. Colton reports meeting several prominent figures in heaven including John the Baptist,^{xxiv} the angel Gabriel,^{xxv} and all three members of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Spirit),^{xxvi} and he reports meeting his great grandfather who had died before he was born and his older sister who had been lost to a miscarriage.^{xxvii} Burpo, a Wesleyan pastor,^{xxviii} makes frequent references to scripture throughout the narrative, often tying his son's account to specific Biblical passages.^{xxix} The correlations between the Bible and Colton's experience seem to serve, in part, as verification of his story. Burpo reasons that there are several features of the story consistent with scripture and doctrine that Colton could not possibly have known or understood other than through experience. He cites in particular that Jesus has wounds on his hands and feet and sits at the right hand of God the Father,^{xxx} that God is three persons, and that it never gets dark in heaven.^{xxxi} But Colton's experience goes beyond confirming scripture and, at times, provides supplemental information about heaven, including that Jesus has a multicolored horse,^{xxxii} that everybody has wings,^{xxxiii} and perhaps most significantly, that unborn children (such as Colton's sister) might make it to heaven, a point on which, Burpo states, "the Bible is largely silent."^{xxxiv} However, when Burpo teaches about heaven from the pulpit, he still sticks to Scripture.^{xxxv} As he explains in the final chapter, one of the main benefits of Colton's NDE for his family has been a renewed confidence and security in their already existing faith.^{xxxvi}

Compared to other contemporary NDE accounts, the main feature that stands out about *Heaven is for Real* is that the experiencer is a very young child. In evaluating its reliability, whether this works for or against the account seems to be a matter of perspective. To the author, Colton's age provides evidence for his honesty and against any contamination of his experience by cultural influence or expectation. To others, Colton's age might make his experience more susceptible to embellishment from imagination or suggestion.^{xxxvii} Such concerns seemed justified when, in January of 2015, another best-selling NDE narrative^{xxxviii} was pulled from the shelves after the young boy who had claimed the experience released a statement recanting his entire account.^{xxxix} Alex Malarkey, who was 6 years old in 2004 when he was involved in a debilitating car accident, admitted to making up his trip to heaven in order to get attention.^{xl} In response, Colton released a statement on the website for Heaven is for Real Ministries stating that he stands by his account.^{xli} It is also significant that Colton did not in fact die, but only came close to death.^{xlii} It is unclear from Burpo's account whether there might have been a loss of brain function at some point during Colton's surgery, but for Burpo, this does not hold importance as to whether the experience was authentic.^{xliii} Aside from these considerations, the features of Colton's NDE match several of the common elements of NDE accounts given by professed Christians.

Proof of Heaven, by Eben Alexander, contains an account in many ways different from that of Colton, though there are similarities. Alexander gives a firsthand account of his NDE, which occurred during a coma produced by a rare illness affecting his brain.^{xliv} Alexander, a neurosurgeon,^{xlv} uses his expertise in brain physiology and chemistry to claim the authenticity of his experience. He argues that since there was no measurable activity in his neocortex, his experiences could not possibly have been produced by his brain, and therefore, he must have experienced events apart from his body.^{xlvi} The conclusion he draws is that his NDE was a real experience of life after death.^{xlvii} Like Colton, Alexander encounters a person he later discovers to have been a sibling he never knew he had.^{xlviii} He also meets God, but like the rest of Alexander's experience, the way he describes his encounter with God is decidedly more mystical than Colton's. He refers to God variably as the Creator, the Source, Om, and the Divine, which dwells in a core of "inky darkness that [is] also full to brimming with light."^{xlix} He describes a world in which he has no body; language, emotion, and logic are gone;^l and everything is distinct but is also a part of everything else.^{li} While there, he communes with God through the help of a sentient Orb and receives super-human knowledge.^{lii} He learns that there are many universes all connected by one divine reality, and that evil exists in these universes so that growth is possible through free will.^{liii} Alexander indicates that the most important truth he learned from his experience, indeed the only thing that truly matters, can be summed up in the following statements. "You are loved and cherished. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong."^{liv} This he believes to be a universal truth and that sharing it is his most important task.^{lv}

With regard to religious affiliations, Alexander remains non-committal. There is little reference to scripture throughout *Proof of Heaven*, just as there is no mention of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or any other Biblical figure. He does describe his outlook on life prior to his experience, and indicates that he had not believed in God.^{lvi} His NDE served as a conversion experience for him, and towards the end of the book he describes his first trip to church after his coma, expressing a new-found appreciation for religion.^{lvii} He states, "At last, I understood what religion was really all about. Or at least was supposed to be about. I didn't just believe in God; I knew God."^{lviii}

In some ways, Alexander's account in *Proof of Heaven* and Colton's account in *Heaven is for Real* represent two ends of a spectrum of NDE accounts. Some align closely with what is found in scripture and Christian theology and others are connected loosely at best. The conflicting details in accounts such as these two is quite possibly directly related to the conflicting reactions to NDE accounts within the Christian community. This is not to imply that reactions are split evenly among the Christian population. Importantly, both books can be found for sale on the website for Family Christian stores,^{lix} but there is an apparent difference in their reception. As of August of 2015, *Heaven is for Real* had been given 12 reviews with an average rating of 5/5 stars, while *Proof of Heaven* had only one review with a rating of 1 star.^{lx} In this case, *Proof's* one reviewer objects to Alexander's lack of reference to Jesus, and states, "I do not doubt that he had an NDE, but he did not see God."^{lxi} Similar objections can be found on websites geared toward more general readership (where the two books end up much closer in ratings), but so too can some endorsements from reviewers self-identifying as Christians.^{lxii}

It is no surprise that many Christian readers are distrustful of claims to revelation that fail to mesh with scripture. Since the formation of the Christian canon, and especially following the Protestant Reformation, scripture has remained the primary source of religious knowledge and the standard against which claims of prophecy and experience have been tested for authenticity. It seems this is as true today for near-death experience as it has been for other claims of experience throughout history. Many Christians are skeptical of NDE accounts because of the threat they pose to the Doctrine of Scripture. This argument takes a variety of forms. On one extreme, it is suggested that some or all NDEs are the result of Satanic or

demonic influence.^{lxxiii} The conservative Christians who hold this view hypothesize that these experiences are tricks “designed to lull us into a false sense of security about the future life, to lure us into occult practices such as astral projection, to beguile us into accepting the advances of demons disguised as departed spirits, and to sell us a secular bill of goods about salvation without Christ.”^{lxxiv} They argue for the possibility that when one encounters a deceased relative or a “being of light” it is in fact a demon in disguise.^{lxxv} NDE proponents, however, point to the aftereffects of the experiences on many of the experiencers, which often include a strengthened faith and increased sense of empathy, arguing that such effects would constitute quite a failure for any hypothetical demon.^{lxxvi} However, one need not attribute NDEs to demonic influence in order to question their validity, and there are a number of other arguments leveled against them by conservatives.

One of the most common concerns of NDE critics is that many accounts paint a highly inclusive picture of salvation, one inconsistent with the Biblical picture.^{lxxvii} Conservatives who would hold to an exclusive view of salvation, in which faith in Jesus is the only path to heaven, are concerned with the apparent “looseness” of some NDE accounts.^{lxxviii} Reflecting back on *Proof of Heaven*, it is easy to see how this concern might arise. Alexander's account emphasizes unconditional love as the basis of everything,^{lxxix} and he includes no mention of hell, at least in the ordinary sense. One of the three most important lessons he recalls learning is that there is nothing he can do wrong.^{lxxx} Taken as a whole, although it refrains from addressing salvation as such, his narrative seems to imply universalism, and he is far from alone in this tendency. One common feature of NDEs is an immersion of the experiencer in love. In the words of Colton Burpo, “. . . God is the biggest one there is. And he really, really loves us, Dad. You can't *belieeeve* how much he loves us!”^{lxxxi} Colton's account does mention hell, but only in the context of the final battle, in which Satan is defeated and cast down.^{lxxxii} There are also those NDE accounts which offer insight into controversial issues within the Church. In the midst of controversy over the question of homosexuality within the Christian community, a number of homosexuals have reported pleasant NDEs, that is NDEs involving trips to heaven and/or feelings of love and acceptance.^{lxxxiii} While this doesn't necessarily settle any debate about the morality of homosexual behavior, for those who view these experiences as authentic, it indicates that homosexuals are at least not automatically condemned to hell for their sexual orientation.^{lxxxiv} Yet, there are those NDE accounts which do emphasize the exclusivity of heaven through their focus on hell and the possibility of a distressing afterlife for some.^{lxxxv} A prime example is Bill Weise's *23 Minutes in Hell*, another recent *New York Times* Best-seller. Distressing accounts are, however, understandably less popular, and as long as the overall emphasis in the genre is on God's loving acceptance, conservatives will likely continue to show concern.

Another common form of criticism leveled against popular NDE accounts is to argue strictly from the basis of scripture. Critics point to specific Biblical passages to argue that NDE accounts cannot be trusted or simply shouldn't occur among Christians.^{lxxxvi} Some of the basic ideas are that there is no Biblical basis for NDE accounts, and to expect them is arrogant and ultimately indicative of a weak faith.^{lxxxvii} One passage commonly employed in this argument is 2 Corinthians 12:1-4,^{lxxxviii} in which the apostle Paul speaks of one who was “. . . caught up to the third heaven . . . and he heard things which cannot be told, which man may not utter.”^{lxxxix} Since Paul seems to be describing a case in which it was forbidden to share testimony of heaven, it is argued this sets a precedent for similar experiences among future believers. In June of 2014, the Southern Baptist Convention published an “Issue Analysis” on NDEs in response to the wide popularity of published accounts.^{lxxx} 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 is among the verses cited as a part of the analysis. Some of the arguments are that none of the Biblical accounts of resurrection include testimony of NDEs and that the Bible discourages using others' testimony of heaven to bolster one's faith.^{lxxx} The conclusion of the analysis is to recommend that Christians avoid NDE books altogether.^{lxxxii} Others have made similar

arguments, sometimes with stronger language. Writer Tim Challies refers in an article to Mary Neal's *To Heaven and Back* as “. . . pure junk, fiction in the guise of biography.”^{lxxxiii} He goes on to say, “You dishonor God if you need this kind of outside verification.”^{lxxxiv} This view is expressed by Alex Malarkey in his statement recanting his own NDE account. Malarkey urges Christians to look to the Bible for answers, stating, “the Bible is the only source of truth. Anything written by man cannot be infallible. It is only through repentance of your sins and belief in Jesus . . . may you learn of Heaven outside of what is written in the Bible . . . not by reading a work of man.”^{lxxxv} It seems that, for some, these books represent not just an unreliable source of evidence, but a dangerous distraction for the true believer. There is real concern that people might fall into the trap of seeking evidence outside the scriptures, and so end up compromising their relationship with God. This sentiment is sometimes believed to be reflected in John 20:29, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”^{lxxxvi}

Despite the criticism leveled against NDE accounts, there are still those within the Christian community who view them in a positive light. In *Revealing Heaven*, John Price, a Christian pastor and former hospital chaplain, makes a case for their validity and value to a Christian outlook on life.^{lxxxvii} Like Burpo, Price draws connections between Biblical descriptions of heaven and descriptions from the many NDE accounts he has heard.^{lxxxviii} Interestingly, one of the connections he cites is with 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, the same passage used by others to argue against NDE testimony.^{lxxxix} Price, however, apparently does not interpret the passage to be forbidding the sharing of NDE accounts, emphasizing instead that Paul (writing in the third person) is claiming his own experience of heaven and God's presence.^{xc} Price further claims that Paul's statement that everyone “. . . must appear before the judgment seat of Christ”^{xcⁱ} is a reference to the life review common in many NDEs.^{xcⁱⁱ} For Price, the main value of NDEs, for both the experiencers and those with whom they have shared their experiences, is increased compassion, empathy, and agape love.^{xcⁱⁱⁱ} He states that these experiences help clarify Jesus's only commandment: “live a life of love for God, neighbor, and self.”^{xc^{iv}} According to Price, this increased capacity to love is a result of distressing or hellish NDEs as well.^{xc^v} In addressing the commonality of heavenly NDEs among people of different faiths, he states that God's love is not limited to Christians but is universal,^{xc^{vi}} and he reasons, “those who live a life of love are, whether they know it or not, accepting Jesus in his command to love as the central orientation of their lives.”^{xc^{vii}} In support of this claim, he cites John 10:16, seemingly implying that Jesus is referring to those of outside of Christianity as his other sheep that will be part of his one flock along with Christians.^{xc^{viii}} Ultimately, Price comes to the conclusion that “. . . there are really only two religions in the world: a religion of love and a religion of fear.”^{xc^{ix}} It seems, then, the insight he gains from NDEs is that God is forgiving and accepting, even of those outside the traditional Christian faith.

Price is not alone in his support of the NDE phenomenon. Kyle Rohane writes in an online article for *Christianity Today* that the NDE accounts can be quite valuable to Christians, provided they are viewed with spiritual discernment.^c Rohane points out that Christianity has a long history of individuals seeking ecstatic and mystical experience. He argues that the value of this experience comes from its ability to bring comfort or renewed hope or commitment to the individual, not from any particularly new or specific information about God's nature or the workings of the universe. Likewise, he cautions, Christians should approach NDE accounts with discernment and test them against scripture, while celebrating the fact that God works “. . . in ways that can't (and sometimes shouldn't) be explained.”^{ci} This view, more reserved than that of Price, is espoused by others in the Christian community, who believe the interpretation of NDEs is key to discerning their spiritual significance.

As with many controversies within Christianity, the debate over NDEs is centered around scripture. Conservatives question the validity of subjective experiences, most often, based on

their apparent contradiction of or addition to scripture. These Christians are concerned with maintaining the exclusivity and purity of the Biblical message. Proponents of the NDE phenomenon argue for its value as a reviving force, which reassures Christians of their security and guides them towards the proper emphasis on love and compassion. Proponents do not view these experiences in opposition to scripture, but as aids in discerning its correct interpretation. For some, like John Price, the testimony of NDEs has been so powerful as to result in a significant reinterpretation of the doctrine of salvation. This might be accurately understood as a move from orthodoxy to orthopraxy, from an emphasis on belief in Jesus as savior to an emphasis on the virtue of love and acceptance. For Christians on both sides of this debate, the primacy of scripture remains central. Yet, there is much room for interpretation. As NDEs continue to occur and accounts become more common in the wider culture, it remains to be seen just what sort of a long term effect this may have on Christian theology.

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- iv Moody, *Life After Life*, 106; Price, *Revealing Heaven*, 50.
- v Robert Ford Campamy, “To Hell and Back: Death, Near-Death, and Other-Worldly Journeys in Early Medieval China,” in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other-Worldly Journeys*, ed. John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 350-54.
- vi Moody, *Life After Life*, 107-9.
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