

# Near-Death Experiences: A Significant New Inter-Religious Phenomenon

*John Wren-Lewis*

In earlier centuries, tales of people being miraculously rescued from death and returning with strange reports of non-ordinary realities were the stuff of legend, superstition and religious propaganda. Today the miracles of medical science have made such occurrences almost commonplace, and scientists, professionally trained in scepticism towards legend and superstition, are being impelled to investigate what such experiences mean.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon has even acquired the dignity of an official medical name reducible to initials - Near-Death Experience or NDE - and the 1980s saw the establishment of a professional International Association for Near-Death Studies, or IANDS, which publishes a peer-reviewed *Journal of Near-Death Studies*.<sup>2</sup>

My purpose in this article is to register the phenomenon as one of major importance in the field of Religious Studies, since even people with no previous background of religious belief commonly find religious or mystical language essential in trying to do justice to such experiences, yet those with definite religious convictions before an experience are frequently impelled to refuse exclusive commitment to any particular religion afterwards. This is a subject on which I write with first hand authority, after being brought back from the brink of death-by-poisoning in Thailand in 1983. And it is highly appropriate to present this article in honour of Eric Sharpe, since his wise and scholarly counsel was of great help to me in adjusting to the astonishing after-effects of the experience when I arrived in Australia still reeling from it in 1984.

## The Phenomenon

One of the first facts to emerge from systematic study of NDEs in the early 1980s was that very large numbers of these experiences had gone unrecorded because sceptically-biased medical authorities had simply dismissed them as hallucinations produced by the brain

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent historical overview of the whole subject, see Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Mediaeval and Modern Times*, New York, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> *The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, Human Sciences Press, New York.

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under stress, or by the drugs used in surgery. Indeed, many people have admitted to keeping quiet about their experiences for fear of being thought crazy. Detailed questioning by sympathetic investigators has revealed, however, that amongst the many thousands of people who are nowadays snatched back every year from the very last stages of heart attacks, electric shock, drowning and other traumas, a significant minority insist that they experienced something for which terms like 'hallucination' are utterly inappropriate.

Individual descriptions vary enormously, and many experiences are simply called indescribable, but there is an almost universal insistence on 'something rich and strange', like the opening-up of a new dimension in consciousness, which subsequently gives the experiencer a hitherto undreamed-of level of confidence, equilibrium and creative energy in life - all the symptoms, in fact, of sanity rather than craziness. Anxiety in general, and fear of death in particular, have somehow been dramatically reduced or even abolished by the experience, along with such everyday manifestations of anxiety as boredom, restlessness, competitiveness, acquisitiveness and aggression. No fantasy due to brain-aberration has ever been known to produce lasting effects like these, nor has any drug - and NDEs quite often occur when no drug is involved. Yet the effects cannot be explained away as simply appreciation of living after a close shave, because such life-changes are not reported on anything like the same scale by the much larger group of survivors who recall no special experience; on the contrary, such people often have greater fear of death precisely because the narrow escape has made them more anxious to cling on to life.<sup>1</sup>

And these are not just matters of anecdotal testimony. Psychologists such as Professor (now emeritus) Kenneth Ring of the University of Connecticut<sup>2</sup> and Dr Margot Grey in PhD research at the University of London<sup>3</sup> have carried out psychological tests to confirm these very positive characteristics of post-NDE lives. Other investigators have shown that NDEs and their remarkable results are not confined to any particular gender, race, personality-type, educational level, religious background or socio-economic class; and they can happen to people with almost any prior philosophy of life, or no articulated philosophy at all. IANDS in the United States has even documented some remarkable accounts from children,

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Sabom, *Recollections of Death: a Medical Investigation*, New York, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Ring, *Life at Death*, New York, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> Margot Grey, *Return from Death*, London & Boston, 1985.

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which have been summarized in a book by Seattle paediatrician Dr Melvyn Morse, along with firsthand accounts of some cases he has encountered in his own practice.<sup>1</sup>

The publication of such findings in the 1980s started a snowballing effect, as more and more people who have had NDEs in the past have been emboldened to come out of the closet. While even sceptical medical personnel - probably still a majority in the profession as a whole - have begun to take the phenomenon seriously enough to contribute to the factual record of evidence while reserving judgement about what the experiences mean. In this regard, scepticism has an important role to play at the present stage of the game.

Of course, a healthy discipline of scepticism has always been essential in evaluating whether NDE reports are sincere, or merely fabricated for self-aggrandisement purposes - even more necessary now that the subject had been given wide publicity by the often-sensationalist media. But that is the kind of caution to which any competent investigator would automatically be alert. Less often recognized, but no less important, is the need for scepticism in finding patterns in the data which might provide clues to what the experiences are about, and that is one of my main themes here.

### **Rush to Paradigm: the Columbus Confusion**

The human mind has a tendency, even in the most sincere enquirers, to jump to conclusions and then ignore, play down or distort any evidence that does not fit. Half a millennium ago, Christopher Columbus saddled the native peoples of America with the name 'Indians' because he had set out to find a round-the-world route to India and didn't realize that he had actually discovered a whole new continent. The same kind of mistake, which I have proposed calling the Columbus Confusion in the hope of helping to nail it, has been known to occur in even some of the most hard-nosed physical sciences, and it is very likely indeed in a field of study which touches on deep human concerns, as does research in NDEs.

The most striking evidence of it is to be found in the disproportionate attention given to reports of people seeing their own apparently inanimate bodies from outside (usually from a point somewhere near the ceiling in the operating theatre, or a few

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<sup>1</sup> Melvyn Morse, *Closer to the Light*, New York, 1990. See also a more recent Australian study in Cherie Sutherland, *Children of the Light: The Near-Death Experiences of Children*, Sydney, 1995.

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feet above the car that has just crashed or the water into which they have fallen - or whatever), and/or of travelling through a dark tunnel to a heavenly realm of light. In the early days of NDE studies, in the 1970s, these two kinds of experience attracted the attention of many investigators, even though they occur only in a minority of cases, because they suggest that human consciousness may be independent of the physical brain and might make a transition to some non-physical realm when the body dies, as claimed in one way or another by religious traditions from time immemorial. Today these images have become so established in the popular mind that the Monty Python team could satirize the tunnel trip in their movie *The Meaning of Life*, depicting the heaven at the tunnel's end as a luxury hotel with a Hollywood-style Grand Christmas Cabaret perpetually in progress.

This stereotyping cannot be attributed simply to sensation-seeking journalists, though NDEs have received more than their share of attention from that quarter. Many serious researchers still lay special emphasis on the minority of NDEs which seem to indicate independence of consciousness from the brain - most notably, cases where the now famous flat line on electronic brain-monitors seems to prove that the patient really has died, and those special 'out-of-body experiences' (or OBEs) where the person reports travelling to a distant place and bringing back information they could not have acquired by ordinary means.<sup>1</sup> And of course, such claims are important subjects for investigation; should any of them be substantiated beyond reasonable doubt, science will have to revise some of its current materialistic concepts about consciousness as simply a brain-function. But this may be a complete red herring in terms of understanding what NDEs in general are about, comparable to Columbus noticing an American native who happened to look like drawings of East Indian peoples.

For the plain fact is that most NDEs cannot seriously be taken as glimpses of an immaterial soul leaving the body and entering a literal Other World, any more than most native Americans look like East Indians; in both cases, the bulk of evidence has to be ignored or fudged to fit the model. In the first place, a great many NDEs (my own included) do not involve visions of any kind; experiencers simply report feelings of indescribably blissful 'peace past understanding', or a kind of dreamless depth that somehow was not unconscious, or a sense of sinking into pure timeless love - yet their lives are still changed in extremely positive ways, and they still

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Sabom, *op. cit.*

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lose their former fear of death. Even amongst experiences that do seem like otherworld trips or visions, the vast majority cannot seriously be treated as literal glimpses of an undiscovered country beyond, because they contradict one another in many significant details.

In some, for example, the heavenly landscape is a pastoral scene, in others a science-fiction-style celestial city, in others an insubstantial cloudy space, and in some a human scene almost justifying the Monty Python spoof. The much-publicized experiences of encountering long-deceased friends or relatives sometimes find them at the age they were when they died, sometimes as old as they would be now had they lived (especially the case with those who died as children), sometimes (especially with old people) miraculously rejuvenated or regenerated from illness, and sometimes transfigured into shining angelic forms that are nonetheless somehow recognizable. A small number of NDEs include visions of hellish regions, reminiscent of the guided tour given to Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. But the majority find only heaven, even when the experiencers have been anything but saints.<sup>1</sup>

In fact it is obvious, when all the evidence is taken into account, that play of imagination must be involved to a considerable degree in most visionary NDEs, even though experiencers commonly insist on a feeling of reality unlike any dream. Whatever kind of reality is being experienced in these apparent 'otherworld journeys', the visionary aspect of it clearly comes from the experiencer's imaginative faculty in most cases, and therefore probably in all - *and this consideration would still hold, from the mutually contradictory character of the visions, even if flat lines on brain-monitors could somehow prove that consciousness was functioning independently of the brain.*<sup>2</sup>

The same goes for experiences in which consciousness seems to range beyond the body in *this* world. For every 'out-of-body trip' that seems like an accurate psychic perception of real events (and some uncanny cases of this kind have been reported), there are dozens that are plainly cases of roving imagination, however real they seem, because they involve definite non-events. A dramatic example was given by the great Swiss psychologist Jung when he had a near-fatal heart attack in 1944, long before the term NDE had

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on the notable absence of hellish visions from modern NDEs, see Zaleski, *op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> This issue is cogently argued in an excellent sceptical survey by British psychologist Susan Blackmore, *Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experience*, London, 1993.

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been coined.<sup>1</sup> He seemed to leave his body and soar high into space, getting a view of the earth's globe such as no human eye had ever seen at that time, though astronauts have since done so. One might call it a psychic perception befitting a man of global stature, as Jung felt himself to be. But he also encountered an asteroid-type rock with a Hindu temple carved into it, manned by a swami sitting in lotus-posture amidst flickering candles, and there are certainly none of those in airless outer space!

This obvious imaginative element in most commonly-described NDEs is of course one of the main reasons why many dogmatic religious authorities, who believe they already know from revelation what really happens at death, have joined hands with materialists in dismissing the whole NDE phenomenon as mere fantasy, maybe even demonic deception. Several cases are on record of hospital chaplains doing this, thereby driving patients who have had NDEs firmly into the closet. In marked contrast, however, experiencers themselves, for all their insistence on felt reality, are usually very resistant to any kind of dogmatism about the supernatural realm - and this is so even for many who were convinced dogmatists before. This 'inter-religious' aspect of NDEs was first documented by Professor Ring in the United States<sup>2</sup>, but has since been strongly confirmed by an Australian survey conducted by sociologist Dr Cherie Sutherland of the University of New South Wales.<sup>3</sup> NDEs seem to have the effect of making the experiencers willing to acknowledge and affirm the validity of one another's experiences despite differences, even though they all tend to make assertions like 'This was the most real thing that ever happened to me'.

Clearly the word 'real' is here being used to mean something quite other than 'literal and not involving imagination', and over the past few years many NDE researchers (whose company I joined in 1984) have been coming to the conclusion that this is the essential point of the 'new continent' discovered by travellers who return from the brink (or perhaps beyond). Irrespective of whether or not NDEs turn out, with further research, to prove the independence of consciousness from the brain, *they are already discoveries of a normally unrecognized depth-dimension in*

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1 See C. G. Jung's autobiographical memoir, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, New York, 1961, ch. 10.

2 Kenneth Ring, *Heading Towards Omega: In Search of the Meaning of Near-Death Experiences*, New York, 1984.

3 Cherie Sutherland, *Transformed by the Light: Life after Near-Death Experiences*, Sydney, 1992.

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*consciousness itself even in this life, a dimension of intense aliveness that makes ordinary worldly existence seem like a land of shadows.*

Professor Ring, now *doyen* of near-death investigators even though not himself an experiencer, was driven by his long-term in-depth questioning of experiencers to conclude that the positive life-changes following NDEs were shared by many who recalled only 'indescribably timeless happiness' and 'peace past understanding', with no otherworldly visions or out-of-body trips at all; in fact to his puzzlement, some even denied (as I do) any particular conviction about the possibility of personal survival beyond the grave. Their anxiety about living and fear of dying had gone *because something of that sense of timeless reality had come back with them into continuing bodily life on earth.* His conclusion, in his second book published in 1984<sup>1</sup>, was that NDEs are most accurately categorized as exceptionally vivid and 'secular' instances of the 'spiritual awakening' normally ascribed to mystics right across the religious board.

### **NDEs as Mystical Awakenings**

At the very time when Ring was formulating this conclusion, I was, all unwittingly, providing experiential confirmation of it - and it could not have happened to a less likely guy. I had read little then about NDEs, having been travelling in remote Third World regions for nearly a decade, and about what I had heard I was extremely sceptical - but that was nothing to my scepticism towards all things mystical, which I saw as a kind of neurosis afflicting religion.<sup>2</sup>

When I was rescued from death-by-poisoning in Thailand after many hours of uncertainty about my survival on the doctors' part, my memory was only of a kind of timeless blackness that was anything but blankness - an intensity of peaceful consciousness that made me totally re-evaluate Henry Vaughan's paradoxical line, 'There is in God, some say, a deep but dazzling Darkness'. The most important thing about it, however, was that I did not leave the experience behind when I was brought round, but have retained it as a kind of continuous background to my entire consciousness ever

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<sup>1</sup> Ring, *op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> My anti-mystical writings of the 1950s played a large part in inspiring Bishop John A.T. Robinson's landmark work *Honest to God*, London, 1963. My detailed analysis of mysticism as a form of neurosis was published in the essay 'Love's Coming-of-Age' in Charles Rycroft, ed., *Psychoanalysis Observed*, London, 1966.

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since - and as a result, the anxieties that overshadowed my life for nearly sixty years, including fear of death, now seem absurd *because the intensity of life in each moment is such that my concern about the future, in this life or beyond, is completely relativized.*<sup>1</sup>

After more than a decade of studying hundreds of NDE reports since I arrived in Australia in 1984, and personally questioning experiencers in my travels, I would now go even beyond Ring, by hypothesizing that all those widely-varying otherworld visions, the famous tunnel and out-of-body trips included, are the conditioned mind's efforts to express this 'ineffable' eternity-dimension of consciousness by drawing on the same imaginal faculty that is used in ordinary dreams to express feelings left over from the previous day.<sup>2</sup> When experiencers insist that their visions were 'more real than any dream', I believe they are referring to the intensity of aliveness added to the images by the eternity-dimension of consciousness, rather than to anything like ordinary literalness.

That, I believe, is why experiencers so often use words like 'inexpressible' in the very same breath as protesting reality - and also why they are not fazed by other experiencers reporting quite different kinds of vision, which on the plane of ordinary literalness would be adjudged contradictory. Specifically, I cannot and do not dismiss all those mutually contradictory accounts of meeting deceased relatives as mere delusion. For although my own experience included nothing like that, and left me very doubtful about any ordinary kind of personal immortality, the timeless depth of what I have come to call eternity-consciousness brings a sense of unity with all beings past and present every bit as real - indeed far more real - than the relationships which characterized life for me during my previous fifty-nine-odd years.

The fact that such 'mystical awakening' has happened to millions of quite ordinary people of all kinds and conditions is surely a discovery far more important than that of Columbus, with shattering implications for all our so-called commonsense (and common religious) notions about what the good life consists of, what 'mental health' really is, indeed about every aspect of human

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of my own NDE and its consequences, see John Wren-Lewis, 'The Darkness of God: A Personal Report on Consciousness-Transformation through an Encounter with Death', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 28, No 2, 1988, p.105. A book-length story, told in retrospect from 1993, is in preparation for publication as *The 9.15 to Nirvana*.

<sup>2</sup> For the modern scientific assessment of how dreams relate either literally or symbolically to 'unfinished emotional business' from recent waking life, see Ann Faraday, *The Dream Game*, New York, 1974.



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affairs, including art, ethics, religion and even science itself. The mother of all questions, as I now see it, which I hope will become a main thrust for research in this field, is - can this astonishing intensity and depth of consciousness be opened up without dicing with death, and without getting bogged down into the mystique and mystification that has so commonly surrounded mysticism in the past?<sup>1</sup>

Such research would of necessity be an inter-disciplinary activity embracing psychology, psychiatry, medical science and philosophy. But inasmuch as the great database for information about mystical experience falls in the field of Religious Studies, this would seem to be the umbrella-discipline for what I believe could turn out to be one of the most important human investigations ever undertaken. The largely medico/psychological orientation of research so far has, for example, resulted in little attention being given to the fact that life-changing experiences remarkably similar to NDEs frequently occur in crisis-situations where the body is in full health, as when a mountaineer is falling to what seems certain death until he/she lands on soft snow completely unharmed.<sup>2</sup>

In the existing literature such incidents have been either ignored altogether or marginalized because of the Columbus Confusion. If noted at all (usually by sceptics as evidence that NDEs do not prove that consciousness is independent of the brain) they have been interpreted in terms of supposed crisis-mechanisms in the neural networks, with no relevance to ordinary life.<sup>3</sup> From the wider standpoint of Religious Studies, however, account would need to be taken of individuals like the Indian mystic Ramana Maharshi (1897-1950) who underwent a most dramatic *and lasting* consciousness-change, without any prior practice of spiritual discipline, as a result of *artificially inducing* a death-facing crisis.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See my guest editorial entitled 'Avoiding the Columbus Confusion: An Ockhamish View of Near-Death Research' for *The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, vol. 11, No 2, 1992, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, one of the earliest scientific reports of near-death phenomena was in this sense 'pre-Columbian', inasmuch as it did not suffer from the Columbus Confusion. It was a classic account of falling by an alpine climber named Albert Heim published in a Swiss journal in 1892, but not translated into English until 1972 by psychiatrists Russell Noyes and Roy Kletti at the University of Iowa; see their 'The Experience of Dying from Falls', *Omega*, No 2.

<sup>3</sup> See Russell Noyes and Roy Kletti, 'Depersonalization in the Face of Life-Threatening Danger: A Description', in *Psychiatry*, No. 39, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Ramana Maharshi's story is told in, *inter alia*, T.M. Mahadevan's *Ramana Maharshi*, London, 1977. For a modern account of lasting consciousness-

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On the other side of this coin, however, recognition that mystical awakening can occur *on a mass scale*, independently of spiritual practice or even belief, is surely an issue of major significance for almost every area in the Religious Studies field. It points, paradoxically, towards a spirituality de-mystified from precisely those claims of exclusive revelation and specialness which have hitherto divided faiths from each other.<sup>1</sup> To some degree such de-mystification has been part of the defining essence of Religious Studies, as many pioneers in our field have pointed out, Eric Sharpe not least amongst them. By taking the study of NDEs and kindred experiences under its umbrella, it might well find itself assuming in the next millennium a similar royal mantle to that which once (mistakenly) adorned Christian theology - perhaps not the queen of the sciences, but certainly a queen in science.

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transformation occurring in deep sleep without trauma or spiritual practice, see Ann Faraday's 'Towards a No-Self Psychology' in Georg Feuerstein, ed., *Voices on the Threshold of Tomorrow*, Wheaton, Ill., 1995.

<sup>1</sup> For my critical evaluation of mystical movements ancient and modern in the light of NDEs generally and my own experience of eternity-consciousness in particular, see John Wren-Lewis, 'A Reluctant Mystic' in *Self and Society*, vol. XXIX, No 2, 1991, p.4. For my personal line of research on why NDEs induce mystical awakening, see John Wren-Lewis, 'Aftereffects of Near-Death Experiences: A Survival Mechanism Hypothesis' in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, vol. 26, No 2, 1994, p. 107.