

CONCEPTIONS OF THE AFTERLIFE IN EARLY CIVILIZATIONS: UNIVERSALISM, CONSTRUCTIVISM, AND NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE by Gregory Shushan. Continuum Publishing Group, London, 2009. Foreword by Gavin Flood. 238 pp. References, Index. £65.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978 0 82644 073 0

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are defined as “profound psychological events with transcendental and mystical elements, typically occurring to individuals close to death or in situations of intense physical or emotional danger” (Greyson, 2000, p.315). These experiences commonly include feelings of calm, peace and lucidity, seeing one’s body (and its environment) from an external viewpoint, a transition to an otherworldly realm, encounters with ‘spirit’ beings (including a ‘Being of Light’), a life review, a border or point of no return, and a return to ordinary awareness (Moody, 1975).

NDEs are an important area of study for psychical research, because most of the phenomena known to psychical research also occur in association with NDEs (Rousseau, 2009), and there is now a very considerable body of analysed evidence (see Holden, Greyson & James, 2009, for an overview). Naturalistic explanations of NDEs have been comprehensively rebutted (see Greyson, 2000, 2007; van Lommel, 2010, pp.113–134), leaving a significant explanatory puzzle. This puzzle is deepened by the existence of more than a hundred published cases of veridical perceptions occurring during cardiac or prolonged respiratory arrest (Holden, 2009).

Despite calls for psychical researchers and parapsychologists to take a greater interest in NDEs (e.g. Parker, 2001), most of the scholarly research into NDEs has been conducted by psychiatrists, medical doctors, and academics within Religious Studies (although there are notable exceptions — see, for example, Cook, Greyson & Stevenson, 1998). The present book is from the last-named field of inquiry.

Religious Studies is an interdisciplinary field that *inter alia* examines the historical development and cross-cultural similarities and differences among humanity’s diversity of religious views. A central concern of such studies is to establish the degree to which religious perspectives might have developed in response to the ‘special’ experiences that humans are in some sense prone to (a view called ‘Perennialism’ or ‘Universalism’), and to what degree religious conceptions are shaped by social or cultural considerations (‘Constructivism’). To that end, it is necessary within Religious Studies to examine evidence for experiences that have putative theological or cosmological import (‘religious experiences’), to compare these with the perspectives held by different religions, and, if there is a correspondence, to consider to what degree such experiences may have an objective basis. In this sense NDEs are religious experiences.

It has been shown that NDEs from different cultures have universally recurring features (e.g. Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995, p.163; Osis & Haraldsson, 1997; Pasricha & Stevenson, 1986), so they qualify as a universal kind of experience (at least in the current era). It has also been shown that the core elements of NDEs recur in a broad range of living religious traditions, supporting the experiential source theory (e.g. Becker, 1981, 1985; McClenon, 1994). An important question left open by this latter research was whether such

cross-cultural consistency is in fact the result of cultural diffusion rather than the objective universality of the underlying experiences, which would cast doubt on the proposition that such experiences reveal aspects of a hidden objective reality, given that the influence of cultural or social factors cannot be isolated.

This important question is decisively answered by Gregory Shushan's research. He investigated the afterlife conceptions of five early civilizations that had little or no contact with each other: Ancient Egypt (Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom up to the Hyksos invasion), Mesopotamia to the end of the Babylonian period (i.e. prior to the invasion by the Kassites), Vedic India, pre-Buddhist China, and pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. His earlier training as an anthropologist was clearly of significant benefit in this undertaking. He found that the core elements of NDEs were consistently reflected in the afterlife conceptions of all these cultures. The elements he identified are: the OBE/ascent, seeing the body (corpse encounter), transition through a dark region to a transcendental realm, encounters with deceased relatives, the presence of a Being of Light, a conduct evaluation (life review), barriers or obstacles, and mystical transformations (Divinization/Oneness/Enlightenment). The consistency with which these elements occur in these separate cultural conceptions is all the more striking in view of the fact that the belief systems themselves vary dramatically in certain other respects, such as their creation myths. Although we do not have personal accounts of near-death experiences from these very ancient times, the presence of these consistent 'mythemes' in ancient belief systems argues both for the trans-temporal occurrence of such experiences, and for there being cross-culturally consistent experiences underlying these mythemes. This undermines the postmodern view that religious experiences are entirely social and cultural constructs (e.g. Proudfoot, 1985), and sharpens the suggestion that these experiences reveal something about an extraordinary objective reality. Shushan's research shows that although these experiences are modulated by cultural factors, they can by no means be considered to have been created by socio-cultural forces.

As Shushan makes clear, how these NDE elements are reflected in these religious conceptions relates principally to *the afterlife journey*, that is, the experiences that people are conjectured to have immediately after death, and these texts are aimed principally at providing instruction and assistance to the deceased on this journey. Like NDEs, these accounts do not say much about the destination or the final state. That said, NDEs do suggest that death precipitates a journey into another form of existence, and does not mark the end of conscious experience, as is also suggested by other lines of evidence in psychical research, such as that from mediumship and children who remember previous lives.

This book is based on the research for a PhD project that was undertaken within the Religious Studies department of the (then) University of Wales, Lampeter (now the University of Wales Trinity Saint David). Some aspects of that study inevitably, but understandably, ended up on the cutting-room floor in the production of this monograph. On behalf of Psychical Research I particularly regret two of these losses, namely the comparisons of these after-life conceptions with the picture suggested by mediumship research and by the past-life memories of certain children and the hypnotically regressed. I

hope that these analyses will be published in due course as scholarly articles, perhaps as papers in this *Journal*. In the meantime some of this material is available in the original thesis, which is held by the library of the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) based in the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (Shushan, 2006).

This book represents a scholarly and well-argued study, and is a landmark in both the anthropological study of afterlife conceptions and in research into NDEs. I recommend it highly, and I eagerly await its sequel, which according to reports in the blogosphere is now under way as a study of NDEs in relation to afterlife beliefs in worldwide shamanic and small-scale societies. It is regrettable that the present book is so expensive, as it represents a very valuable analysis, and is a fascinating read. One can only hope that it will become widely available in research libraries, and that it will soon be re-issued in a more affordable edition.

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