University of Stirling

EWEN CAMERON MILLAR

Department of Languages, Cultures, and Religions

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2006

Abstract

In this thesis I argue that the category Near-Death Experience (NDE) emerged in the late-twentieth century, and is structured by the discourses of 'Medicine' and 'Science', and the wider discursive factors of the 'Spiritual Marketplace'. Within NDE literature, the experiences of people coming out of their bodies in Operating Theatres, and then travelling to other realms, are considered to have parallels in the accounts of mystics, shamans, and religious visionaries of other cultures and other times. Against this, I argue that the category of the NDE does not "articulate the same field of discourse" (Foucault, 1969:24-25) as these other religious accounts. NDE researchers sift through these accounts in search of a common thread, but miss the wider social fabric of the religious narratives they seek to excavate, as well as the discursive location that structures their own research.

In order to reposition this debate within its own history of ideas, I argue that the category "NDE" is itself dependent on the Operating Theatre for its emergence and initial appeal, and it is the Operating Theatre that makes the discourse of NDEs possible. Within the last 120 years, there have been many attempts to intersect science with anomalous experiences on the fringes of human consciousness: Psychical Research categorised deathbed visions in a wider schemata that was interested in how the fringes of the subconscious mind might yield evidence of another reality; contemporary Parapsychology looked at third-person accounts of deathbed visions recounted to Nurses and Doctors across the globe. Neither of these discourses had the crossover into the wider 'public sphere' that Raymond Moody's book *Life After Life* (1975) did, a book that recounts first-person accounts of normal people, caught in extreme medical emergencies, who come out of their bodies, witness the medical teams' attempt to resuscitate them, visit a heavenly realm, and return to tell people about it. What is unique about the NDE is not the vision of a world after death, but the context in which this vision occurs.

In Chapter 2 I explore that context by arguing that Psychical Researchers' investigation of mediums, apparitions, and deathbed visions sought to prove that posthumous existence of the Other (that is, one's relatives or friends who had passed on to the other side), and indirectly the Self. (Conversely, NDE research, seeks to prove the existence of the Self, and indirectly, the Other.) In Chapter 3 I examine how Medicine and the Modern Hospice Movement shaped the conditions of emergence of the category 'NDE'. The removal of 'death' from the public sphere into the private sphere of the West meant that death became something exotic. The idea that death

was a defeat for modern medicine lead to the emergence of the modern Hospice movement, which opened up a space for the visions of those close to death to be recounted in the public sphere. The recounting of such experiences encapsulates a narrative that includes the Surgeon's intervention, the technology used in the Operating Theatre, and of the everyday man or woman talking about their visions, all of which gives these experiences a cultural currency that sets them apart from other religious and/or New Age accounts.

In chapter 4 I recognise that, for these experiences to have an appeal, they must have a market to appeal *to*. Thus, I examine the 'Spiritual Marketplace', and argue that the NDE researchers fundamentally misread the appeal of their life after death accounts. NDE researchers felt that they had uncovered publicly verifiable evidence for life after death, which they expected to shake the foundations of Western society. Instead, these accounts were read as a curio in the privacy of the spiritual consumer's home, an interesting account that suggested death might not be the end of existence, but little else. When their vision of a spiritual revolution failed to materialise, the founders of the NDE movement fell into a bitter war about the precise signification of the category NDE, thus giving an indication of the fundamental indeterminacy of the category.

In chapter 5 I explore how NDE research intersects with the discourse of "Science". I therefore examine the construction of science, the function of science, and the limits of science in NDE literature. I begin by examining how the narratives of science permeate NDE literature, and how all sides implicitly reinforce a binary of Science/Religion that emphasises the former as objective and neutral, and the latter as irrational belief. I then argue that, ultimately, NDEs happen at the very limits of human experience in a realm far outside of what can be answered by direct scientific observation; the debate tells us more about the different metaphysical presumptions present than it does about whether or not science can answer the question 'is there life after death?"

In chapter 6 I argue that, in the discourse surrounding NDEs, death and mysticism become entwined as the 'exotic other'. I therefore examine how the categories 'death' and 'mysticism' are themselves both bound up in a particular web of signification. The NDE secures its own identity against an understanding of death born in clinical medicine and, latterly, Freudian psychoanalysis: death becomes a point, after which there is an unknown. Similarly, the NDE inherits an understanding of Mysticism that can be traced back to William James. Nevertheless, the understanding of 'death' throughout history is not fixed but fluid, depending on a myriad of cultural and social discourses. Similarly, the modern psychological

definition of 'mysticism' as an ineffable, subjective experience is extremely narrow in comparison to the accounts of mystics in the Middle Ages. When the understanding of these two categories changes, the emphasis upon securing 'evidence' for life after death evaporates. This point is missed in contemporary NDE research that assumes that its own desire to find evidence of life after death is reflective of a universal need for humans to believe in religion: whilst NDE researchers believe that they have finally uncovered a window on to another world, I have argued that this is, in fact, a mirror of their own particular predilections and desires.

The Social Construction of Near-Death Experiences

Dedication

"... every person who has ever lived has been born, and born of a woman. Natality is a fundamental human condition. It is even more basic to our existence than the fact that we will die, since death presupposes birth..."

Grace Jantzen (1998:144), *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*

This thesis has been finished in a space where thoughts of birth and death have weighed heavy on my conscience; the presence and absence of writing a thesis meditating on death, whilst losing the person who gave birth to me. I write this therefore in memory of my mother, who chose her own path, and never saw me complete this. It is one of my deepest regrets that she never held a copy of my completed work in her hand, coming just after never meeting her daughter-in-law, and never holding her grandchild. Nevertheless, her support materially, emotionally, and spiritually permeates my academic career to date, and it is to her, Margaret Millar, that I dedicate this work.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the 3 year AHRC grant that made this research possible- my gratitude goes out to Daniel Gritten for his support above and beyond the call of duty, and to his successor Fiona Gibson, for her warmth, professional discretion, and exemplary help during some difficult circumstances.

Mention must also be made of Anna Palfreyman and the staff at the Hamelt Tea-Room in Letham, who, for four years, have put up with my (almost) daily arrival with my laptop and legions of books, and who have grinned and borne my tendency to take over their establishment.

A central consideration of this thesis is that there are no ideas born in a vacuum: I wish to acknowledge June Campbell, Alan Sage, Dr Claire Palmer, Dr Mary Keller, Dr Malory Nye, Professor Richard King, Professor Gavin Flood, Dr Timothy Fitzgerald, Dr Andrew Hass, Dr Alison Jasper, Dr Vicky Clifford, Julie Dawson, and most of all my friend and ten-year co-adventurer Dr Fiona Darroch (who busted my gender-blind chops until I saw the feminist angle after-all), as well as all those involved in the glory days of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Stirling, who have been responsible for my intellectual development.

I would like to thank my Dundee College Colleagues, (in no particular order), Grant Duff, Tony Spurling, Dr Angela Howkins, and Susan McAvoy, for their help and support.

Penultimately, I would like to thank my friend and teacher David Isdale Anderson for setting me on the path 'A Long Time Ago' in a 'Galaxy Far Far Away', Dr Scott Matthews for raising the bar and encouraging me to jump, and most of all, my supervisor Dr Jeremy Carrette. It has been an honour and a privilege to work with Dr Carrette. My supervisor knew when to encourage me, and when to tell me to reign in my narcissistic tendencies. His patience and hard work (since 1997) have all been exemplary, and it is to him I extend a debt of gratitude.

Finally, and most importantly, I express my love for my wife Christina, and our little girl, Felix Rose. The rest of our lives will not be long enough.

Introduction

1.1 Setting the Scene

"... [A]fter all, 'literature' and 'politics' are recent categories, which can be applied to medieval culture, or even classical culture, only by a retrospective hypothesis, and by an interplay of formal analogies or semantic resemblances; but neither literature, nor politics, nor philosophy and the sciences articulated the field of discourse, in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, as they did in the nineteenth century" (Foucault, 1969:24-5).

The category of the Near-Death Experience (NDE) is the creation of a late 20th-century Western discourse, a concept that has been treated as a continuous historical occurrence and posited as the source of major religions and recorded experiences of visionaries down through the ages.[1] The category NDE was first coined in 1975 by Raymond Moody and has assumed a cultural location of great importance via the books, movies, magazine articles, and television documentaries that it has engendered.[2] Further, within medical, scientific, and academic communities, this phenomenon has become a site of contestation regarding the validation of religious experiences, and has been used as an indication of the reality of a realm above and beyond the strictures of everyday living within late 20th-century Western society. Originating in the work of "dissident medical authorities" (Kellehear, 1996:96), accounts of the NDE have led psychiatrists, psychologists and doctors to believe that they have uncovered a window on to a realm beyond death.[3] The importance of this concept can be seen across numerous specialist interests: philosophers muse on the possible implications of the nature of the mind's relation to the brain;[4] psychiatrists and psychologists question the physiological basis for the NDE and the rehabilitative implications;[5] theologians ruminate on the theological and metaphysical ramifications for the universals of faith;[6] scholars and scientists from all sides ponder

---

[1] See, for instance, the progenitor of Near-Death Studes Raymond Moody (1975:chp.3), the (initially) more scientifically orientated Kenneth Ring (1980:59), the sceptic Susan Blackmore (1993:11-22) and the theologian Mark Fox (2003:chp.2).

[2] According to Allan Kellehear (1996:76, italics his) "The reaction of the media to the NDE has been nothing short of spectacular. Few would disagree with the observation that not a week goes by in America without a television, radio, magazine, or newspaper story on this experience... It is difficult to keep track of all the NDE material in the Print media... *Oprah Winfrey, Geraldo, Sally Jesse Raphael, The Phil Donahue Show, 20/20, Good Morning America, 60 Minutes, Hugh Downs, The Joan Rivers Show*, and *Unsolved Mysteries* are just some examples (of the television shows featuring NDEs)". See also Carol Zaleski (1987:229-230n). I suspect, however, that in NDE literature, there is a tendency to overplay just how earth shattering the concept of the NDE has been in wider Western culture (especially after the 1980s), a point I return to in chapter 4, chapter 6, and my conclusion.

[3] See Moody (1975, 1977), Ring, (1980, 1984, 1999), and Sabom (1982, 1998).

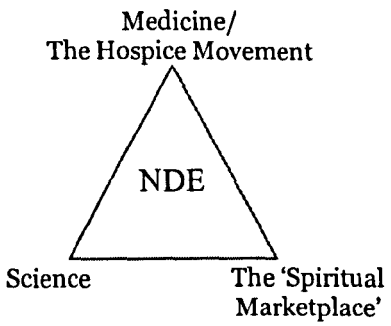
[4] For a consideration of the philosophical overviews see Hövelman (1985), Kastenbaum (1996).

[5] See Blackmore (1993), and Carr (1982).

[6] See Cressey (1996), and Fox (2003).

the relation of NDEs to other mystical (and drug-related) accounts;[7] parapsychologists discuss it in the context of the so-called "survival hypothesis";[8] religious scholars and theologians trace the historical dimension of the experience back through the 'Otherworld Journey' literature of medieval times; [9] transpersonal psychologists compare it to the journeys of shamans across cultures and times.[10]

In this thesis I shall argue that the aforementioned NDE literature is *structured* by the anxieties and concerns that are endemic to this peculiar secular age.[11] I shall explore how the following discourses structure NDE literature:



It is my contention in this thesis that the category of the NDE was principally shaped by the discourses of modern Medicine and the Hospice Movement, a fact that has not been recognised in the existing literature. Upon its emergence from the Medical sphere, the signification of the category was transformed by its engagement with the discourse of Science, and the concept of the NDE was packaged and repackaged by the requirements of the 'Spiritual Marketplace'.[12] This has passed without comment as scholars, scientists and academics have sought to locate the 'true' meaning of the NDE, although, as I shall establish throughout this thesis, the NDE as a category, has no stable referent.[13] The boundaries of the category 'NDE' are somewhat fuzzy, and the *ultimate* meaning of the NDE varies, depending on the wider discourses that it is

[7] See Moody (1975), Ring (1980), Blackmore (1993), and Fox (2003).
[8] Hövelman (1985), and Beloff (1985, 2001).
[9] See Zaleski (1987, 1996).
[10] See Bailey (2001) and Grosso (2001).
[11] From here, NDEs refers to Near-Death Experiences, and NDEr refers to a Near-Death *Experiencer*. These are the standard abbreviations used in NDE literature, and shall crop up in quotations throughout this work.
[12] My use of the term 'Spiritual Marketplace' comes from Wade Clark Roof's book *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the remaking of American Religion* (1999). He defines it as "a quest culture shaped by the forces of supply and demand" (1999:10). I discuss his work in greater detail in chapter 4.
[13] For instance, despite the desires of those working in the NDE field to find a stable referent to the category, it has been acknowledged that it is hard to distinguish this from other 'mystical' or 'religious' experiences (see chapter 4 and 6). In addition, experiences that do not fit into the 'standard' NDE template are often deemed hallucinatory: reflection on this demarcation shows it to be somewhat suspect (I come back to this in chapter 5).

located in, whether it be the discourses of science, theology, philosophy, psychology, or the New Age.[14]

Nevertheless, within NDE literature it is possible to discern deeper structures that define what can and cannot be said about the NDE. The written discourses that have emerged around this category dovetail neatly with a Western, secular construction of religion: the NDE is being used to "prove" the existence of the afterlife in a society where non-belief is assumed (in many Western countries) to be the ontological 'norm'. The capacity for non-belief, as a viable lifestyle option for a vast amount of people living in the West, is itself a relatively unique development in the history of ideas about religion.[15] Put another way, the kinds of questions asked about the NDE are nothing like the kind of questions asked by (or about) mystics in other cultures, or mystics in the Middle Ages, or by Psychical Researchers in the nineteenth century. This fact is barely acknowledged, if acknowledged at all, by the aforementioned researchers.[16] If it is acknowledged, it is usually asserted that mystics had to be wary of what they reported because of the Church, whereas now, scientific objectivity allows an experience less biased by the concerns of religious institutions. Subsequently, there is an emphasis upon whether the NDE reflects a common-core of mystical experience, one that should carry more evidential weight due to the advances of medical technology bringing people back from the absolute brink of possible human experiences.[17]

The key tenet of this thesis is that the origin of the concept of the NDE is firmly grounded in the discourse of medicine, and it is the Operating Theatre that has made the discourse of NDEs possible. In the words of Raymond Moody:

> I strongly suspect that near-death experiences have been vastly more common in the past few decades than in earlier periods. The reason for this is simply that it has only been in fairly recent times that advanced resuscitation

[14] I return to this in chapters 4, 5, 6 and my conclusion.

[15] I am not denying that there have never been cases of religious non-belief before the modern era in the West, but rather it is the extent of this non-belief that makes it unique, and which plays a huge part in the modern construction of religion. According to Talal Asad "The medieval church was always clear about why there was a continuous need to distinguish knowledge from falsehood... as well as the sacred from the profane (religion from what was outside it), distinctions for which the authoritative discourses, the teachings and practices of the Church, not the convictions of the practitioner, were the final test... In later centuries, with the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production, and the modern state, the churches would also need to be clear about the need to distinguish the religious from the secular, shifting, as they did so, the weight of religion more and more onto the moods and motivations of the individual believer" (Asad, 1993:39). Asad traces the emphasis upon belief as an indication of religious affiliation through the advent of Natural Religion (where God can be proven via rational argument) in the works of John Locke and Immanuel Kant (1993;40-42), towards the view that religion is an *optional internal state*. I discuss this further in the body of the text.

[16] The exceptions to this are Carol Zaleski (1987), and Allan Kellehear (1996). I shall discuss these in chapters 3 and 6.

[17] I return to this in chapter 6.

> techniques have been available. Many of the people that have been brought back in our era would not have survived in earlier years. Injections of adrenaline into the heart, a machine which delivers shock to the heart, and artificial heart and lung machines are examples of such medical advances. (Moody, 1975:133)

Further, in his introduction to Ring's *Life At Death* (1980) he argues that

> ... with the growing use of modern techniques of resuscitation, I suspect that near-death experiences are here to stay... Doctors must deal sympathetically with patients who have them. Near-Death Experiences happen mostly, after all, in hospitals... (Moody, in Ring, 1980:13)

Again, without an operating theatre or a medical ward there would be no discourse of the NDE. I am *not* arguing that medicine provides some kind of unmediated access to a heavenly realm. Rather, the success of NDE stories in NDE literature can be ascribed to the appeal of the Operating Theatre, though this recognition is incognisant within much of the analysis surrounding this phenomena. To understand why the discourse of the NDE emerged, and why it has had such appeal, it is not enough to say that modern resuscitation techniques have opened up a view on another world. The reasons that a combination of descriptions of visions of the afterlife and medical procedures hold such sway in contemporary accounts of religious experiences must be dissected in order to locate the NDE within its own history of ideas. 19th century Psychical Researchers investigated deathbed visions, but understood them alongside a whole host of other paranormal phenomena such as ghosts, apparitions, and medium investigations. Modern parapsychologists are either for or against the 'survival hypothesis'. Psychiatrists and Doctors prior to the sixties regarded the visions of those near death as a psychological oddity, but one very much epiphenomenal to the real concerns of saving patients no matter what. Of course, in NDE literature we find not only medical references but references to battlefield casualties, drowning victims, car-crash victims, climbing disasters, usually sprinkled with some apparent drug induced experiences and/or stories from other religions in other time periods. Nevertheless, these disparate elements would not be assembled under the one roof (nor would they share the same public draw) without a focal point to draw them together: the focal point of the discourse of medicine. Thus, whilst I shall argue that the signification of the category 'NDE' has varied according to the backgrounds of those who have sought to analyse it, its initial emergence within the discourse of medicine has meant that it is often associated with medical imagery, even as different individuals have sought to analyse it from a variety of perspectives.

This thesis is not principally concerned with the truth or falsity of the NDE. Rather, these questions are themselves part of the discourses that I intend to analyse. I seek to discern precisely *why* these questions are being asked, and what this indicates about the intersection of death, medicine, science, modernity and religion in the (post) modern West. In order to unpack this, I borrow the following example from Terry Eagleton's dissection of Post-Structuralism:

> Western philosophy... has been committed to a belief in some ultimate 'word', presence, essence, truth, or reality which will act as the foundation of all our thought, language and experience. It has yearned for the sign which will give meaning to all others – the 'transcendental signifier' – and for the anchoring, unquestioned meaning to which all our signs can be seen to point (the 'transcendental signified'). A great number of candidates for this role- God, the Idea, the World Spirit, the Self, substance, matter, and so on- have thrust themselves forward from time to time (Eagleton, 1983:113).

Within NDE literature, this experience is seen by many who write about it as "the sign that gives meaning to all others..." including mystical experiences, and is therefore composed of "...the 'transcendental signifier'" (Eagleton, 1983:113). This signifier points towards an unfettered vision of the afterlife, thus providing "...the anchoring, unquestionable meaning to which all... signs can be seen to point (the 'transcendental signified')" (Eagleton, 1983:113). My project is to recognise that, with the discourse of medicine intrinsic to the origins of the NDE, "for this meaning to be possible other signs must already have existed" (Eagleton, 1983:114). Accordingly, if the conventional wisdom within much of NDE literature seeks to "render familiar a past that is thoroughly strange... through the lens of the present" (Bevis, Cohen, and Kendall, 1989:175), and in doing so prioritise the NDE as existing at a level over and above other religious and/or mystical experiences, then my project is to "undermine the assumed certainty of present practises by tracing their development to a contingent arrangement of forces..." (Jacques, 1991:99). I do not deny outright that there may be phenomenological similarities between NDEs and other mystical accounts, or that there may be a "universal core" to NDEs and mystical experiences, or that the NDE is possibly reducible to psychological or biological components; rather, I wish to demonstrate how there has been inadequate recognition of the specific social, cultural and political discourses that have shaped the NDE. [18] In short,

[18] Whilst I concur with the sentiments of Steven T. Katz, who argues that "There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences", an argument based on the idea that "... all experience is processed through, organised by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways" (1978:26), I also recognise the rejoinder made by Sallie King who responded with the example of tasting coffee: "Being told that coffee is bitter would certainly predispose one to find bitterness in the taste...(But)... the taste of coffee is ineffable... before one drinks coffee one really has no idea what it tastes like... In the end, although drinking coffee is a mediated experience, that mediation is a relatively insignificant element of the

I do not deny the *validity* of the debate about the truth or falsity of the NDE, but for the rest of this thesis I suspend these questions in order to open up previously hidden dimensions that shape this category.

In order to frame the NDE within a "history of the present" (Foucault, 1977:25), the contours of this thesis will unfold a number of steps in the historical formulation of the concept. Despite Andrew Von Hendy's recognition that "(t)rying to pinpoint a shift in intellectual history is about as satisfying as attempting to determine the edges of the colors in a rainbow or a sunset" (2002:3), I nevertheless traverse a number of different academic disciplines in order to track the influences on the discourse of NDEs, and the cultural conditions that gave rise to its popularity. As Von Hendy indicates, this will often be a somewhat overlapping affair, and the trajectory of this thesis will explore the different theoretical areas that emerge out of locating the NDE within its history of ideas. I begin by exploring Psychical Research as the *apparent* progenitor of NDE studies, an idea which I discount as something of a red herring. I then analyse the discourses of 'Medicine' and the 'Hospice Movement' in relation to NDEs, before elucidating the wider cultural scene out of which NDE research originated, and the 'Spiritual Marketplace' into which it emerged. Of course, 'Science' has played its part in the appeal of these accounts, and so I examine the nature of the construction of science, the function of science, and the limits of science within NDE research. Finally, recognising that "... the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is not" (Eagleton, 1983:111), I allude to *other* cultural constructions of death and mysticism as a means to further locate the sign 'NDE' within its own unique position. For the remainder of this chapter I shall establish my methodology before locating its use within its own history of ideas, both within and without the discipline of religious studies. I shall then delineate precisely how this connects with the relationship between psychology and religion, and conclude by providing the "classic" definition of the NDE, as postulated by Raymond Moody in 1975.

---

experience itself" (cited by Richard King, 1999:174). The point, I think, is not to become ensnared as to the precise demarcation between ineffability and mediation (and, reflecting a neo-Kantian perspective, Katz would no doubt respond that such a distinction was *a priori* impossible anyway), but to recognise how being a mystic, or (in this case) being an NDEr, will mean that one's experience is understood via the lexicon of ones own cultural background, a recognition that registers political concerns when contextualised in lieu of feminism and post-colonial theory (Jantzen, 1995, King, 1999). Thus, to become mired in the debate about the epistemological demarcations between social construction and pure experience (and Katz has his critics from within the NDE discourse- see Fox 2003) is to potentially miss the wider social location of the NDE, which is the main concern of this thesis.

1.2 Location within the History of Ideas

I utilise a Foucaultian Archaeology as my method for exploring the discursive formations that shape the NDE. My Archaeology of the NDE will explore how cultural, scientific, and medical discourses define what can and cannot be said about these experiences. Foucault defined discourse as "...a group of statements that belong to a single system of formation, thus I shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse" (Foucault, 1969:121). The statement is thus the base unit of discourse, "...as Dreyfus and Rabinow have stated, a 'serious speech-act' which can be spoken, recorded on tape, written in a book or on a poster" (Carrette, 2000:11). In this thesis I examine statements made about the NDE and map out the rules that govern how these statements interconnect as a discourse.[19] Similar statements about life-after-death research can mean different things depending on how they are related within their respective discourses: 19th century Psychical Researchers were interested in acquiring scientific evidence for life after death just as modern NDE researchers are, but, as I shall show, the 'statements' generated by these investigations were understood quite differently depending on their context.[20] Thus, as I argue later in this thesis, NDE research has more in common with the (apparently quite different) discourses of

[19] Linda Martin Alcoff (in Gutting, ed. 2005:215) provides a perceptive analysis of how a Foucaultian method relates to questions of 'truth' or falsity': "Like the structuralists Foucault sees discourses as generative and not simply organisational. A fully articulate belief emerges from the prescriptions of a discourse which provides both resources and limitations for the possibilities of cognition. But this account is not necessarily inconsistent with realism: discourses do not determine the truth-value that any given belief has, but whether it *can* have a truth-value". Indeed, Foucault himself stated "what I would like to do however, is reveal a positive unconscious of knowledge: a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse, instead of disputing its validity and seeking to diminish its scientific nature... It is these rules of formation, which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be only found in differing theories, concepts, and objects of study, that I have tried to reveal, by isolating as their specific locus a level that I have called... archaeological..." (Foucault, 1969:xiii). Nevertheless, not everyone has been convinced by such a 'realist' reading of Foucault (especially in light of the influence Nietzsche had on Foucault's thought). See, for instance, Christopher Norris (1993, 1997a) for the argument that, whilst Foucault himself may not have *explicitly* subscribed to a relativist or nihilist perspective, this is the unavoidable implication of his work and *necessarily* follows from his analysis. Norris states "...for Post-Structuralists, this follows from Saussure's doctrine of the 'arbitrary' nature of the sign, usually (and wrongly) taken as warrant for renouncing any concern with language in its referential aspect. In Foucault it amounts to a thorough going nominalism... that views all truth claims, whether in the natural or human sciences, as products of an epistemic will-to-power configured through various discursive formations that undergo successive paradigm shifts beyond reach of rational explanation..." (Norris, 1997a: 102). Space does not permit a defence of Foucault against this charge, save for the recognition that Foucault, evidently, recognised the worth of the natural sciences (as indicated in the aforementioned quote) and accepted historical investigation even as he aimed to overturn progressive/whiggish views of the emergence of the clinic, the modern prison, countercultural discourses of 'sexual liberation', and so forth. (Norton would undoubtedly reply that this indicates a contradiction in Foucault's methodology, as his own stated aims, and his later totalising emphasis upon power/knowledge, would disallow access to the 'correct/objective' version of history). In response to such critiques, I refer the reader to Gary Gutting's *Michel Foucault's archaeology of scientific reason* (1989).

[20] See chapter 2 for my analysis of Psychical Research, chapter 4 for my analysis of NDE research, and also my conclusion.

Medicine and the New Age than it does with its supposed historical precursor because there are deeper structures that underpin these contemporary domains of knowledge, structures that help define how we understand the relationship between religion and science in our (post) modern age.[21] This process of mapping out how different discourses interconnect in the same time period was identified by Foucault as providing a description of the "episteme", which involved deciphering "...a 'hidden network', 'the fundamental codes of culture', or... 'the conditions of possibility'" (Foucault, cited by Carrette, 2000:15).

In order to explore the "episteme" then, we need to decipher the rules that govern what can and cannot be discussed at any given point. Foucault argued that a "...discursive formation is not, therefore, an ideal, continuous, smooth text that runs behind the multiplicity of contradictions, and resolves them in the calm unity of coherent thought", instead "(i)t is rather a space of multiple dissensions; a set of different oppositions whose levels and roles must be described" (1969:173). These 'discursive formations' cover a wide range of differing statements about the NDE. I therefore examine how these statements are located within a set of discursive formations that arranges those statements "...in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations" (Foucault, 1969:9).

An Archaeological method therefore "erects the primacy of contradiction", and by doing so, maps "...in a particular discursive practise, the point at which they are constituted, to define the form that they assume, the relations that they have with each other, and the domain that they govern" (1969:173). Thus, I examine "the simultaneous affirmation and negation of a single proposition" (1969:173). The affirmation and negation of the single proposition can be framed as: 'The NDE is an experience that indicates that there is an afterlife that we travel to when we die'. This would be constructed in opposition to: 'The NDE is generated by the dying brain'. This proposition is affirmed and denied in the initial debates surrounding the NDE, but became transformed as other discourses became interested in the experience. Consequently, the discursive formations that make up this debate reflect a "space of multiple dissensions; a set of different oppositions" that nevertheless maintain certain key understandings of religion and mystical experience, which are then assumed to be universal. These formations allow NDE proponents and opponents to reach back into other cultural and historical discourses in order to peek behind these cultural, historical and religious veils and so explore the "true" afterlife underneath,

[21] For my analysis of the wider epistemic structures that define how the NDE is understood in line with neuroscience, see chapter 5, and for an exploration of the relationship between NDEs and the New Age, see chapter 4.

either as evidence of an afterlife, or evidence of a universal experience that can be reduced to concomitant physiological correlates. This in turn allows the construction of a continuous progressive chain of scientific investigation into the afterlife that retrospectively reads the category of the NDE into the past, and thus implicitly reinforces key assumptions about the nature and function of Western methods of scientific and historical analysis, and carves Western ontological and epistemological assertions into these historical discourses.

Foucault's Archaeological project was anchored in the need to explore the presumptions of our thinking that we *assume* to be ontological, but in actual fact are presumptions governed by a series of rules that determine the possibilities of our thinking.[22] Gary Gutting provides a lucid summary of this:

> Kant... thought that the limits of reason... derived from the necessary a priori structures that defined the very possibility of our knowledge... Unlike Kant (Foucault) is not concerned with determining the a priori, necessary conditions governing the exercise of reason but with reflection on what *seem* to be such conditions to reveal the extent to which they in fact have a contingent historical origin. (Gutting, 1989:3)

These concerns were enshrined in Foucault's Archaeological research. *Madness and Civilisation* (published in English in 1967) attempted to show how, historically, 'reason' defined itself against 'unreason'.[23] It was not until the 19th century that this binary was broken, with 'unreason' becoming pathologised via the advent of clinical psychology. The mad, rather than being excluded as the 'other' from society, were considered threats and confined as a means of social control *that stabilised the discourse of psychiatry.*[24] In *Birth of the Clinic* (1963), Foucault shifted his focus

---

[22] Thus he sought to decentre 'man' as the engine of change, by showing how the works that 'man' is supposed to have produced are themselves subject to 'discursive formations'. 'Man' therefore becomes like a fossil, frozen in the structures that have governed the rules of possibilities of 'his' discourse, as well as the discourses that have (apparently) opposed 'him' in the debates of the day. This leads us to a common criticism of Foucault, that in pursuing a "critical ontology of ourselves" (quoted in Owen 1994:141), he postulates an analysis that harbours the implication that "... it is the discourse that produces human experience and belief rather than human experience producing the discourse..." (Turner, 1992:129). There is an undoubted weight to this criticism, but it should be remembered that Foucault's work acts as a *corrective* to the assumption that human beings are the main engines of change in society. His work recognised some form of agency: he stated, for instance, that "(e)ach individual has at his disposal a certain power, and for that very reason can also act as the vehicle for transmitting a wider power" (cited by David Luis, in Luis ed. 1997:48). In this thesis (and aligned with the feminist concerns of Jantzen, 1995, and Post-Colonial concerns of King, 1999, and Urban, 2003), I shall not follow the structuralist path to its ultimate conclusion, but rather refer to authors as at least *partial* agents in their own works (while analysing the discursive factors that define what can and cannot be spoken of in a particular discourse).

[23] *Madness and Civilisation* has been criticised for "wanting to write a history of madness *itself. Itself.* That is, by letting Madness speak for itself" (Derrida, 1967:39), a move that Derrida ponders the possibilities of, as to speak of 'unreason' is still to enter it into a discourse and a mode of operation. Certainly, it seems that this text placed a heavier phenomenological emphasis on its subject than Foucault later thought appropriate (see Foucault in Lotringer ed., 1989:1, Bernauer, 1990:48-49,Visker, 1995:30-31, Carrette, 2001: 10, 28-29).

[24] Foucault's concerns echo key themes in this thesis. The social location of medical and psychiatric discourses are challenged by the possibility that NDEs are not just pathological and psychological

from the advent of psychiatry to the advent of medicine, arguing that the modern clinic stabilised itself against the dead body, and, in doing so, the gaze of the doctor moved from classifying disease in a horizontal schemata against other diseases to penetrating the patient to decipher the source of illness.[25] *The Order of Things* (1966) sought to explore how the construction of knowledge changed from an emphasis upon *resemblance* in the Renaissance period,[26] to *representation* in the Classical Age. In the former, language resembled what it described, whilst, in the latter, a space is opened up where language and life became separated. The understanding of language changed from being able 'see' or to 'demonstrate', to being able to provide 'commentary' (Foucault, 1966: 45).[27] From here, Foucault went on to flesh out this method of examination in his last major work on this particular methodology, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). In this work, Foucault disputes the historical focus on the 'book', for as soon as one interrogates the category 'book' it loses its sense of unity, and indicates a relationship with a *series* of books, the *type* of book that it is, and so forth, before moving on to dispute the 'oeuvre', that is, a "collection of texts that can be designated by the sign of a proper name" (1969:26).[28] Foucault states

> There is the notion of 'spirit' which enables us to establish between the simultaneous or successive phenomena of a given period... We must question these ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is accepted from the outset... (Foucault, 1969:26)

---

phenomena (located in the subjective private realm of human experience), but could well be evidence for an afterlife (I discuss this in chapters 3 and 5).

[25] I discuss the implications of this in regards to NDE research in chapter 3. For a subtle discussion on *Birth of the Clinic*, and the argument the many authors (including the sociologist of medicine David Armstrong, who figures heavily in chapter 3 of my thesis) read this book through the lens of Foucault's later genealogical work, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), see Osborne (1992, in Smart Ed.1994:251-277).

[26] Foucault states "(i)n it's original form, when it was given to men by God himself, language was an absolute certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them" (1966[2004]:40).

[27] Michel de Certeau provides a concise summary: "(Foucault) dismisses the naïve certitudes of evolutionism, which believes it can finally grasp a reality that had always lain within reach beneath the illusions of yesteryear... Beneath thoughts, he discerns an 'epistemological foundation' which *makes them possible*. Between the many institutions, experiences and doctrines of an age, he detects a coherence which, though not explicit, is nonetheless the condition and organizing principle of a culture... Things are defined in a network of words, and they give way when it does. Order emerges from disorder only in the form of the equivocal. Reason, *rediscovered* in its underlying coherence, is always being *lost* because it is forever inseparable from an illusion" (1986, in Smart ed.1994:246-258, italics his).

[28] In relation to this thesis, the 'book' in question is Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* (1975), which itself is understood alongside other NDE titles in order to explain and expand on the concept, and the 'oeuvre', which would be the spread of his work through the last 30 years. Rather than this 'oeuvre' providing us with a clear signification of the NDE, it rather constructs the NDE alongside the author's own predilection at any given point in his written discourse. I discuss this in Chapter 4, and in my conclusion.

Following Foucault's lead, this thesis shall question the groupings of NDE research with the 'spirit' of Psychical Research and the 'spirit' of mystics writing throughout history.

Foucault himself did not venture far into questions of religion or mystical experience, although the recent Foucaultian scholarship of Jeremy R. Carrette (2000) has sought to recover the religious subtext in his work on madness, the clinic, the prison, the body, confession, sexuality, governmentality and silence.[29] By examining these diverse subjects, and showing how they were interconnected via 'power-knowledge' relationships", Foucault challenged "...the boundaries of our thinking" (Carrette, 2000:xii), a move that has proved immensely useful to a host of scholars looking to utilise, modify and critically examine his work in relation to feminism, post-colonial theory, the sociology of medicine, and the emergence of the category 'religion', to name but a few areas that will crop up in this work.[30] By utilising a Foucaultian method, I aim to examine the boundaries of the thinking that define what the NDE *is*, and what it is defined *against*.[31]

The Foucaultian method has been used in the field of Religion by a number of writers in the period after Foucault's death, including David Chidester (1986), Russell McCutcheon (1997, 2004), Donald Lopez (1998), Ivan Strenski (1998), Richard King (1999), and Hugh Urban (2003). My own use of Foucault is aligned with Grace M. Jantzen's *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (1995). The relationship between NDEs and mysticism is fairly complex,[32] nonetheless, the modern understanding of mysticism and the NDE share a similar location in Western discourses on religious experience. In Jantzen's assessment of debates about mysticism, she states, "The fascination of the subject of mysticism is not, I suggest, simply a fascination with

---

[29] Carrette divides Foucault's body of work into two categories that remain unified in a critique of religion, namely, those that display a subtext of "spiritual corporality" and those that display a subtext of "political spirituality" (2000:4-5). In the former, which takes in Foucault's Archaeological period, Carrette argues that Foucault is concerned with critiquing the idea of religious transcendence in favour of models of religious immanence. He did this by questioning "...the hegemony of religious discourse" in order to identify its "excluded Other", and he identified the "hidden currents of confessional practise" and the "silenced body" (Carrette, 2000:129). In the latter category ('political spirituality') Foucault's work shifted to an emphasis upon the "...construction of the subject through a series of power relations which shape life, the body, and the self. Religious beliefs, ceremonies, and rituals enact those relations of power and maintain a system of control through the mechanism of pastoral authority" (Carrette, 2000:136).

[30] See, for instance, Jantzen (1995) in relation to Feminism, King (1999) in relation to Post-Colonial Theory, Leder (1990, 1998) and Armstrong (1990) in relation to the Sociology of Medicine, and Asad (1993), McCutcheon (1997) and Carrette (2000) in relation to the category of religion.

[31] Edward Said (1978:54) provides a classic example of the process of constructing the Other: "To a certain extent modern and primitive societies seem thus to derive a sense of their identities negatively. A fifth-century Athenian was very likely to feel himself be a nonbarbarian as much as he positively felt himself to be Athenian... often the sense in which someone feels himself to be not-foreign is very much based on the idea of what is 'out there', beyond one's own territory".

[32] I examine this in chapter 6.

intense psychological experiences for their sake, but rather (a way of) delimiting authority" (1995:1).[33] She continues,

> If... mystical experience (or religious experience more generally) were to be trusted, this would prove an authoritative basis for knowledge of the existence and nature of God... Or from another perspective, if mystical experience could be delimited as private and subjective, this would be a way of ensuring that it did not have to be taken into account by those making social and political decisions: religion could be kept out of politics (Jantzen, 1995:2).

Additionally, if mystical experiences were seen to be more achievable by women, then "...this could be used to reinforce stereotypes", stereotypes that define women as "spiritual nurturers", a move that keeps "both women and spirituality firmly domesticated" (Jantzen, 1995:2). Jantzen notes how debates about mysticism almost always ignore the way that power and gender are entwined when one considers who or what counts as a mystic, and, therefore, "Foucault's point would be that there is no such thing as an abstract 'essence' of mysticism that could be discovered by a theologian pondering in her study[34]... Rather what counts as mysticism will reflect (and also help to constitute) the institutions of power in which it occurs" (Jantzen, 1995:14). Whilst in the Middle Ages these institutions were effectively the church (a threat to church authority by mysticism would be dealt with via the inquisition [1995:14]), in modern times mystical experiences have been defined as intense, psychological experiences. Therefore,

> Devotional and New Age books, and volumes containing 'selected readings from the mystics' can be read for a few minutes at the beginning and at the end of each day... (this) spirituality might actually deflect attention from the real needs of people, offering palliatives to individuals rather than attending to the social causes of injustice. (Jantzen, 1995:18)

There is a substantial crossover between Jantzen's analysis of mysticism and the discourse of NDEs, although there are also differences. The category "mysticism" is (as Jantzen indicates) often assumed to already *have* a rich historical lineage, and the NDE is discussed in *relation* to this historical lineage. However, the NDE itself is

[33] Jantzen's work is rooted in the later Genealogical Method of Foucault, and she seeks to explore the way that the ecclesiastical power structures of the Middle Ages shaped women and women's bodies, whilst female mystics negotiated their mystical status with the church. All of these concerns are still relevant in the NDE, and certainly genealogical themes will appear throughout this work (Foucault thought that Archaeology and Genealogy were mutually compatible and all that separated them was a difference in emphasis). Nevertheless, I suspect that a genealogical examination of the NDE would entail a much larger analysis of how religious experience was transformed via the processes of late capitalism (somewhat akin to Carrette and King's *Selling Spirituality* [2005]) and is interlocked with the religious discourses of other cultures. As my focus is narrower- I wish to trace the development of the concept of the NDE- I shall allude to these issues, but ultimately subsume them under the rubric of a more descriptive Archaeological perspective.

[34] Foucault's work is well known to have been gender blind, and to (in effect) operate as if the female did not exist (Carrette, 2000:126-127).

separated by the veil of death and legitimised by the discourse of medicine, a fact that imbues a certain amount of tension in the interconnection of NDE analysis and modern mystical discourses. Whilst I would argue that the discourse surrounding NDEs possibly offers *more* of a challenge to those "authorities" that seek to provide a psychological explanation of religious experiences (by virtue of their medical and scientific flavour), the very fact that these experiences are assumed, by default, to have a physiological and/or psychological cause *that they must disprove or transcend* means that they pose less of a threat than (say) the mystic of the Middle Ages, where God (or the Devil) was the instigator of these revelations. In this sense, the NDE does not intersect with gender construction in the same explicit way that the category of mysticism has been shown to, and although the wider feminist concerns of Jantzen remain extremely relevant, they do not strictly translate across to my analysis. As Richard King shrewdly assesses about contemporary female mysticism, but equally applicable to NDErs, "...of course, the mystical has become a marginalized category in modern, Western society, and it now serves to include (women) in the category since it no longer serves to give them power" (King, 1999:21).

Jantzen's feminist analysis of mysticism has been contextualised in light of recent innovations in Post Colonial theory by Richard King in his book *Orientalism and Religion; Post Colonial Theory, India, and the Mystic East* (1999).[35] Following Jantzen's lead, King recognises that "...the modern preoccupation with 'extraordinary experiences' or altered states of consciousness does not accurately represent mystics and mystical traditions both in the pre-modern era and in non-Western cultures, though it does dovetail rather well with many contemporary forms of New Age religiosity" (King, 1999:23). According to King, The Enlightenment, and subsequently the Modern era, established the following binary:

Public	**Private**
Society	Individual
Science	Religion
Institutional Religion	Personal Religion (Mysticism?)
Secular	Sacred
Rational	Irrational/Non-rational
Male	Female
(Life)	*(Death)*
(Objective)	*(Subjective/Human)*

[35] Reflecting the fact that no idea is born in a vacuum, I note here the social location of this work can be traced to a major constellation of Post-Structural and Post-Colonial Thinkers who were centred in the University of Stirling from 1997-2002 (Richard King, Jeremy Carrette, Mary Keller, Gavin Flood, and Timothy Fitzgerald).

King argues that the rise of "secular rationalism" has entailed the "location of religion and mysticism firmly within the private (as opposed to the public) sphere" (1999:25).[36] This location means that the mystical is often defined as emotional, ineffable, and irrational (or non-rational), and understood against the publicly verifiable research of science, and the aspirations of rationality to which philosophy aspires (King, 1999:24-28). This fixation on the otherworldly mystic reconstructs their experiences along the lines of Western, private abnormal states that exist outside everyday "public" experience. As King notes,

> The point is... that contemporary Westerners do not normally take these states as 'normative' if they consider them at all. When such experiences are described they are usually rejected as delusory, subjective, and hallucinatory, or are described as altered states of consciousness, a phrase that presupposes the normative nature of so-called 'everyday' experience. In some religions... (especially in Buddhism and classical Yoga) such 'altered' states are sometimes taken to be the normative states... (King, 1999:23)

Such a move means that "(i)n expunging or exorcising the 'mystical' aspects of Western culture, post-Enlightenment thought has also tended to project these same characteristics on to the 'mystic East'" (King, 1999:33).[37] This projection has meant that religions like Buddhism and Hinduism have been understood via "...the stereotype of the navel-gazing, antisocial and otherworldly mystic", which "has come to function as one of the most prevailing cultural representations of Indian Religion and culture..." (King, 1999:33). As I shall return to in Chapter 6, such representations are endemic in NDE literature, when the 'exotic' mystic or shaman of another culture provides similar accounts of the NDE in their own religious discourses.

King's analysis slides between dissecting Western constructions of mysticism and discerning Western constructions of religion; the Indian Mystic becomes the focus of attention in categorising Indian religion. What King is (in effect) arguing is

---

[36] The top 6 categories of each half of the binary are from Richard King's *Orientalism and Religion* (1999:13). I have added Life/Death, as Death has been moved out of the public sphere of our society, and into the private hospital or Hospice room (see chapter 3), Objective/Subjective, as Science is often portrayed as an objective entity removed from human influence (a point I shall return to in Chapter 5) whereas Religion is biased and subjective.

[37] King's argument here is somewhat reminiscent of the seminal work of Edward Said, whose book *Orientalism; Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) could (arguably) be said to have inaugurated the field of Post-Colonial criticism. Said utilised a modified Foucaultian critique to look at how the West (or the 'Occident') relates to its Other, the Orient, in ideological, economical, and political terms. He argued that "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also its place of Europe's richest and oldest colonies; its source of its civilisations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring image of the Other... the Orient has helped to define... (...the West).... As its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of the Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European Material civilisation and culture." (Said, 1978:2-3). This is important for the present thesis because the discourses surrounding the NDE do not exist in a vacuum, but have looked to the 'wisdom of the east' in order to find prototypical NDEs nestled within the religious traditions. By doing so, the material, economic and ideological status quo that links the West with East is maintained. I return to these points in chapter 6.

that the two are mutually imbricated: by understanding one a certain way, we understand the other correspondingly. This is also true of NDEs and, in recognising that these experiences are structured by the discursive factors of a late twentieth century (post) modern society, we must also be aware of the wider understanding of religion present in such debates. The category of 'religion' has itself come under scrutiny as a post-Enlightenment, Christian, taxonomic category,[38] and "has a history that is bound up with the cultural and intellectual history of the West" (King, 1999:35). According to King, the category is theologically loaded via an "adherence to doctrine as indicative of religious allegiance, upon sacred texts as of central importance to religious communities and to questions of truth and falsity as of paramount importance to the religious adherent or 'believer'" (King, 1999:39). Therefore, "Christianity has generally served as the prototypical example of a religion and thus as the fundamental yardstick... for 'other religions'" (King, 1999:40).

Religion, as a category, took on its present inflection via the dividing up of Western society into the 'public' and the 'private', spoken of previously. The assumption that religion is a universal, transcendent phenomenon and a distinctive facet of human experience, is deeply ingrained, despite the fact that "...it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to fit the word with a legitimate referent..." (Fitzgerald, 2000:9).[39] Timothy Fitzgerald, in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000), builds on this by arguing,

---

[38] The category of religion has come under scrutiny from Russell T. McCutcheon, in his book *Manufacturing Religion* (1997), who argues that the idea of autonomous 'sui generis' religion (that is, religion exists as a distinct 'sphere' of human existence) has been manufactured in the West via an intellectual "industry" (1997:7). Thus he states that the category 'religion' is a "...tool specific to certain sets of human beings who currently use it to name, demarcate and rank specific zones of human practise... 'religion/not religion' or 'sacred secular' (are) but examples of the classificatory tools used by some groups of people (notably, those impacted by European cultures) to establish relations and identities between things..." (McCutcheon, 2004:174). In doing so, he somewhat parallels the arguments of Talal Asad, who, in his book *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), argues that "...a transhistorical definition of religion is not viable" (1993:30), and his project has been (in part) to track how the term religion has been transformed from "...a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power knowledge..." to an entity "that is abstract and universalised" (1993:42-43). As he correctly points out "religion is indeed now optional in the way that science is not. Scientific practises, techniques, knowledges, permeate and create the very fibres of social life in ways that religion no longer does. In that sense, religion today is a perspective... but science is not" (1993:49). Whilst far beyond the scope of this thesis, I suspect that the distinction between natural/supernatural- itself a post-Enlightenment, post-science binary- is responsible for aligning the category of religion within the supernatural (and therefore non-scientific heavily "belief centred") sphere of Western existence.

[39] Fitzgerald lists five different factors that have shaped the emergence of the category of religion: "Private Experience" (2000:27-28)- I discuss this in the text above; "Deism" (2000:28-29), which according to Fitzgerald "...reflected and promoted a view of the world that corresponded very closely with emergent bourgeois values... by appealing to a universal rationality (Deism) acted as a bridge between the old feudal order and the new bourgeois individualism"(2000:28); "Capitalism and Imperialism", which led to "...the creation of a new category (natural religion) whose ideological function was to clear a conceptual space for 'secular nature' – not only the world as an object imagined as a machine or an organism but also natural individuals, natural rationality, natural forms of exchange, natural markets" (2000:29); "Missionaries", who were "...involved with all aspects of colonial life, including education, administration, medicine, political representation, and research on local customs and institutions... The one true God through Jesus Christ was

> ...the Protestant doctrines of salvation introduced a profoundly different concept of the private conscience. The new doctrines of the self in relation to God and the world had implications for philosophical concepts of individual autonomy, for economic activity, for ideas about rationality... there developed an influential notion that the truly religious consciousness is private, that religion is defined in terms of some special kind of experience had by individuals, and that the institutional forms of ritual, liturgy, and the church are merely secondary social phenomena that are either not themselves religious or are religious in a secondary, derivative sense... (Fitzgerald, 2000:28)

This division between institutional religion and a purer religious experience was given an influential articulation by the 19th century German theologian Frederich Schleiermacher (Fitzgerald, 2000:28), and it can be found in "...many of the founding fathers of comparative religion, including Max Mueller... William James... Rudolf Otto... and Joachim Wach" (Fitzgerald, 2000:28).

For the present study, the most important of these seminal figures is William James, whose discussion of Mysticism influenced NDE research, and who will appear in various guises at different points in this thesis. The divisions, evident in James's work, between secondary public institutional religion and a primary, private religious experience are also reflected in the NDE, which is reported by some as a "true" experience that seems to cause people to leave behind the shackles of institutional religion (Moody, 1975, Ring, 1980).[40] William James defined religion as

> *...the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so as far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.* Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion... theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow. (James, 1902 [2002]:29-30, italics his)

For James, to examine the purest and most potent forms of religion, one must look at those states at the fringe of human experiences. In this, he displays the influence of the aforementioned German Romanticists on his work. These Romanticists (especially in the cases of Schelling and Schleiermacher) were entrenched in the

---

detected through shadowy forms in the mythical figures of indigenous cultures (but the) onus was on the local representative to prove... that these forms of life were genuinely religious... as opposed to so-called magic, witchcraft, and other irrational forms of ritual behaviour." (2000:31); "The Modern Myth of Religion" emerges from the previous four factors as an idea that "there is one Ultimate Reality, God, or The Transcendent, who is ontologically outside the world... This one unconditioned reality makes itself known to human individuals in special kinds of experiences... Sometimes this mystical remains confined to limited sects and cults, and sometimes it permeates a culture, making it difficult to decide where the truly religious elements should be demarcated from the non-religious ones" (2000:31).

[40] See chapter 4 for an outline of the discourse of NDEs. In the "Otherworldly Journey" literature of the early-to-mid Middle Ages, the panoramic scope of these visions are understood along the lines of whether or not the traveller had lead a Christian life, and were often accompanied by descriptions of unfortunate sinners being thrown into the pits of hell (Zaleski, 1987, 1996). I discuss this further in chapter 6.

prevalent German Platonic Monist theology of the 19th century.[41] James was neither a Platonist nor a Monist, although he was well educated in the German theological traditions (having spent a considerable amount of time in Europe and being fluent in German). What he did inherit was the romantic emphasis upon experience of the immanence of the divine, and Schleiermacher's re-orientation of religion away from a rational discernment of God, to "...the proper mode of apprehension as a 'feeling'... Religion is precisely the intuition and feeling of the universe rather than cognition (i.e. metaphysics) or action (i.e. ethics)" (Hedley, in Gilley and Stanley ed. 2006:36). Whereas these romantic theologians sought to emphasise feeling as a way to transcend post-Kantian limits on what the individual could know about God, James looked at extreme psychological states as a means to outflank Darwinian naturalism (I come back to this in chapter 2). By doing so, James secured the 'religious feeling' of the romanticists firmly within the domain of the psyche (Von Hendy, 2002:112).

James maintained that Immanuel Kant was mistaken to think that we could have no access to a "super-natural realm", as he believed that there might be a parallel between our ordinary senses experiencing the everyday realm, and the "margins of our consciousness or our subconscious minds", which could interface with "higher spiritual agencies" (Jantzen, 1989:296). James states, "our normal waking consciousness... is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different" (cited by King, 1999:22). His interest in "...psychic phenomena, hallucinations, the effects of nitrous oxide and intoxication, and intense or bizarre accounts of religious experience including trances, levitations, seizures, hallucinations and the like"[42] (Jantzen, 1989:296) should be understood as a way to circumnavigate Kantian limitations on the ability for the individual to know the divine. James argued that there was a "...sense of reality, a feeling of an objective presence", that was felt deeper in the psyche than "...any of the special and 'particular' senses by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed" (1902 [2002]:50). In arguing this, he sought to respond to Kant's

[41] See Douglas Hedley's article *Theology and the Revolt Against The Enlightenment* (in Gilley and Stanley ed. 2006:30-52).

[42] James understood the relationship between mysticism and the kinds of experience investigated by Psychical Researchers by stating "...we cannot avoid the conclusion that in religion we have a department of human nature with unusually close relations to the transliminal or subliminal region. If the word 'subliminal' is offensive to any of you as smelling too much of Psychical Research, call it by any name you please, to distinguish it from the level of full sunlight consciousness... Our intuitions, our hypotheses, fancies, superstitions, pervasions, convictions and in general all our non-rational operations come from it. It is the source of our dreams... In it arise whatever mystical experiences we may have, and our automatisms, sensory or motor; our life in hypnotic and 'hypnoid' conditions; our delusions, fixed ideas, and hysterical accidents, if we are hysteric subjects; our supra-normal cognitions... if we are telepathic subjects. It is also the fountainhead that feeds our religion" (1902 [2002] 373-374). I expand on this in chapter 2.

"curious" and "uncouth" ideas on the lack of a 'religious object' (an object needed in the field of sense-experience in order to render religious talk meaningful) by noting that if "...religious conceptions were able to touch this reality-feeling" then, despite Kant, "...they would be believed in" (James, 1902 [2002]:47-50).

This is extremely relevant, not because James is necessarily *causally* related to NDE studies, or because modern discourses of mysticism are synonymous with the NDE research. Rather, the penchant to investigate private 'communions with the divine' as a way to prevaricate the humdrums of everyday "secular" experience is *inherent* in the interest in NDEs. Put another way, whilst the everyday "secular" world is assumed as the norm, these extreme experiences hold a fascination as the 'Other' that the norm uses to define itself against. Thus, to understand why these experiences have occupied their own location in discourses about providing scientific evidence for religion, we need to return to James to explain the motivations of such an approach. James's own analysis of mysticism fell within the wider cultural location of the 19th century advent of psychology and its analysis of the category 'religion'. [43] His analysis fed into his wider project as an apologetic for the pragmatic validity of religious states, but by locating the most fruitful facet of religion within the realm of the psyche, James would himself reinforce the aforementioned public/private binary. According to Grace M. Jantzen (1989:295), "The definition of mysticism has shifted, in modern thinking, from a patristic emphasis on the objective content of experience to the subjective psychological states or feelings of the individual." By categorising religious and mystical states alongside other physiologically based phenomenon (seizures, trances, hypnosis and so on) mystical experiences became psychologised,[44] and even though James sought to defend the pragmatic validity of these states, he would shift the focus on to the psychological *abnormality* of them. With religious experiences being kept firmly located as non-rational, ineffable and private, the secular public realm retained ontological closure on "normal, everyday reality", even as many would feel a certain fascination with the "other". In the words of Richard King:

---

[43] William James (1902[2002]:295), defined Mysticism in the following way: "1). Ineffability... The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its content can be given in words... One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or the ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly... The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment. 2) Noetic Quality... mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect... 3) Transiency. – Mystical states cannot be sustained for long... 4) Passivity... the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped by a superior power." I return to the relationship between this definition and NDEs in Chapter 6.

[44] As Carrette (2002:xlii) states "... The 'secular' and 'religious' models of the self were illusory categories set up to establish a new order of power and the intervention of psychology enforced such ambiguous categories".

> Since the 17th century those elements of Western culture that have been classified as 'mystical' have generally been marginalized or suppressed in mainstream intellectual thought, despite a resurgence in Romanticism and a comparable rise of a variety of New Age philosophies in the late twentieth century. In both Romanticism and the New Age, however, the anti-mystical presuppositions of secular rationalism are often inverted rather than rejected... (King, 1999:27)

NDE literature shares this inversion of the presuppositions of 'secular rationalism', but lacks recognition of its own cultural and historical position. In order to truly explore the fundamental structures over which the contours of this debate are formed, we need to follow Foucault and "...question those ready-made synthesis, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is accepted from the outset; we must oust from the darkness those forms and obscure forces..." (Foucault, 1969:24). Before embarking on excavating the discursive formations surrounding the NDE, I will recount the statement that has initiated many into the debate(s) about these experiences.

1.3 Conclusion: Raymond Moody and the Composite NDE Model

The discourse of the NDE was founded on the following composite statement, which has become a mantra amongst those writing on the topic, whatever their perspective.[45] In this regard I shall be no different. I quote in full:

> A man is dying, and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time he feels himself moving very rapidly thorough a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.
>
> After a while he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a body but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends that have already died, and a warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before- a being of light- appears before him. This being asks him a question, non-verbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic,

[45] See, for instance, Ring (1980:22-23), Zaleski (1987:102-103), Blackmore (1993:7), Kellehear (1996:9-10), Fox (2003:18-19), and Wulff (1997: 618). Even when this account is not specifically quoted, the influence of Moody on the field is immense, as researchers have swarmed to investigate his composite model (see Chapters 4 and 5).

> instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some kind of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet he finds that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point he resists, for by now he is taken up with the experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude though he somehow reunites with his body and lives.
>
> Later he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life (Moody, 1975)

Whilst the phenomenology of the NDE itself takes up the majority of this description, it begins and ends in this world (these parts are somewhat less examined than the other world vistas that the NDEr recounts). In this statement, the NDEr finds himself "pronounced dead by his doctor", before coming out of his body and witnessing the resuscitation attempted within a clinical environment. Whereas, in times gone by, it would be the Priest who would administer the last rites, and whose unction might well help deliver the soul favourably into the next realm, it is now the utterance of the Doctor who ultimately decides whether the patient is alive or dead.[46] The NDE therefore originates within the sacred space of the medical environment, and the violence of the revival attempt (both of which are removed from the wider public sphere of the West, and are therefore exoticised in the popular media).[47]

Moody's composite account *ends* with people 'scoffing', leading to the silence of the individual who has had these experiences. Nonetheless, had the NDEr had a comparative religious vision in the late Middle Ages, people 'scoffing' at 'him' might very well have been the least of 'his' worries. Rather, as the NDE is already assumed to be a subjective, psychological phenomenon, the impetus falls on NDE researchers to provide evidence for its objective reality. Thus, the recounting of this experience indicates the rules of engagement that initiated NDE research.

If this is the 'statement' that initiated NDE research, then the field of its 'enunciation' refers to the rules that govern its discussion within the texts that reiterate it. According to Foucault, "The consistency of the statement, the

---

[46] For instance, doctors are more likely to spend time attempting the revival of young patients than the old or terminally ill. I examine this in chapter 3.

[47] The sociologist Allan Kellehear (1996:11) also notes that although "...Moody, like others after him, considered the possibility that of these experiences in a non-medical setting, the vignette privileges the medical image." His work diverges from mine, however, in his intriguing functionalist analysis of the NDE as a 'status passage', that can be understood alongside (for instance) shipwreck survivors (1996:42-56). One would infer that he would disagree with my 'harder' emphasis on 'social construction', as opposed to his more linear (but nuanced) approach to the 'sociological function' of the NDE.

preservation of its unique identity of its enunciations... constitute the function of the *field of use* in which it is placed" (1969:117, italics his). Foucault argued that the statement cannot be remade, only "...*repeated*, but only in strict conditions" (1969:118, italics his). In the words of Foucault:

> Instead of being something once and for all- and lost in the past like the result of a battle, a geographical catastrophe, or the death of a king- the statement emerges in its materiality, appears with a status, enters various networks and various fields of use, is subjected to transferences or modifications, is integrated into operations and strategies in which its identity is maintained and effaced... (Foucault, cited in Lopez jr, 1998:46)

For the remainder of this thesis I shall explore the forces that have shaped these conditions, and the 'field of use' that this statement has initiated. As shall become apparent, even though this statement is *repeated*, its intersection with a variety of scientific, psychological, religious, and New Age positions changes its actual signification. Thus its 'identity is maintained and effaced', a point lost to those interested in proving or disproving their own particular perspectives.

In chapter 2 I argue that Psychical Research shares less historical roots with NDE research than some think. I explore the discursive formations of 19th century Psychical Research, focussing specifically on the work done in Britain and America. Against the assertion that NDE research should be located in a "family tree" (Zaleski, 1987:98) with Psychical Research, I show that these early explorers of the psyche were less concerned with the visions of the dying than with how the undercurrents of the mind might interface with another realm. Building on this, I turn to William James, as his analogy of the "White Crow" has been enormously influential both on Psychical Research and, latterly, NDE research. The "White Crow" approach, of seeking one unexplainable experience that overturns the strictures of scientific materialism, has beguiled NDE research. The search for the "White Crow" in Psychical Research was, by all accounts, broadly unsuccessful, triggering an epistemic shift into Parapsychology in the 1930s that brought with it a new set of disciplinary boundaries and a staunch scientific rigour. Thus, (with certain notable exceptions) the relationship between modern Parapsychology and NDE research has not been particularly harmonious. I conclude by examining just why Parapsychology has not caught the public's attention in the way that the initial NDE research did, and what this indicates about the particular conditions of emergence that have shaped the NDE.

From this initial excursion into the 19th century, I change tracks and argue that the discourses of modern medicine, and its progeny Palliative Care, have a more

specific role in the emergence of NDE discourse than Psychical Research or Parapsychology. In chapter 3 I maintain that the 'denial of death' within modern Western culture, and particularly modern medicine, laid the groundwork for Palliative Care's emphasis upon the care of the individual close to death. By doing so, the dying patient was ascribed a sense of agency that opened up a space for their experiences near-death to be reported. Whilst tracking the change from death being hidden away from public view in the modern West to death being embraced "as a journey", as postulated by the Hospice Movement founder Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, I show how the physical realities of bodily death apparently hidden in the former are in fact *still* hidden in the latter, to be replaced by stories of a transition to a higher realm. These visions occurred at the end of a terminal illness, and are couched in terms of care and compassion, which (whilst undoubtedly somewhat consoling), did not have the same impact as stories of people caught in traumatic medical emergencies, recounting their visions of heaven. The popularity of the NDE is then explainable, in part, by its emanation from the "sacred space" of the Operating Theatre, and I argue that the transitional visions recounted via the 'feminine' caring discourse of the Hospice Movement did not carry as much popular appeal as the 'masculine' Doctor bringing people back in the Operating Theatre. In NDE literature, the Doctor can be seen as both heroic (in the psychoanalytical sense), and as a Priest mediating between worlds.

Such stories, to be popular, must have an audience to which they appeal. In chapter 4 I explore the work of the main founders of the NDE discourse and elucidate the wider cultural conditions of the American New Age market in order to ground the appeal of NDEs. I therefore explore the work of the initial founders of the NDE movement (Raymond Moody, Michael Sabom, Kenneth Ring), the institution that they inspired (*The International Association of Near-Death Studies*), and the frictions that they encountered during the late nineties, when the initial predictions about NDE research, as ushering in either a new science of religions or even a golden age on earth, did not come true. I argue that the reasons for the widespread appeal of the NDE are also precisely the reasons why it has never spawned a new religious movement; there is something about the 'Spiritual Marketplace' in the (post) modern West that negates the translation of such phenomenal interest into the kind of movement that its founders hoped.

Having analysed the role of medicine in shaping the NDE, and the wider cultural location within which the discourse of NDEs emerged, I turn to the role of science in structuring the experience, and contributing towards the appeal of the experience. In Chapter 5 I therefore analyse the way that the NDE is categorised

alongside, and separated from, potential biological and psychological mechanisms that may explain it. I argue that the search for the "white-crow" of NDE research- the one case that transcends reductionist explanations- is doomed to failure. As breathtaking as some of these cases may be, they miss certain fundamental points about the ontological assumptions that structure scientific research. In doing so they replicate exactly the same philosophical mistakes that Psychical Research did in the nineteenth century.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I conclude my argument by showing how, in the NDE, both death and mystical experience become coupled as an "exotic other". In order to contextualise this I begin by arguing that the concept of "death" present within NDE literature is itself built on an understanding of death inherited from the discourses of pathology and psychoanalysis, themselves linked through the work of Freud (even if the common currency of such ideas display little of the nuance or astuteness of Freud's own work). I argue that such an approach is implicitly grounded in a particular 'philosophy of being' where the drive towards religious beliefs is a response to the terror of non-existence. By switching into a "philosophy of the sign" I show how death in the Middle Ages was understood differently when religion was not so much a question of the "will to believe" as the "will to guarantee safe passage", and thus the "fear of non-existence" is perhaps not as applicable as "the fear of hell". People in the Middle Ages did not seek evidence for the afterlife so much as protection from it. This is a substantial change in perspective, but one that is completely glossed over by those seeking a phenomenological similarity between the NDE and "Otherworld Journey Narratives" and/or "Medieval Mystics", which I analyse respectively. The trend to sift through such accounts looking for "conceptual resources" inherits a more urgent political edge when the focus shifts from times gone past to non-Western cultures in the present; thus in the last section I explore the fascination with Tibet in NDE literature, and specifically *The Tibetan Book of the Dead.*

Chapter 2: From Deathbed Visions to *Life After Life*: Psychical Research, Parapsychology, and the "Survival Hypothesis"

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I examine how 19th century British and American Psychical Researchers sought to find evidence for life after death.[1] I follow this by noting why the 1930's transition from Psychical Research into the discipline of Parapsychology necessitated a switch from the question of post-mortem survival to laboratory-based ESP research. From this I trace how, conversely, the 1960's saw parapsychological investigations begin to question the possibility of life after death again. By tracking these changes, I show how the similarities and differences in these investigations into the possibility of life after death are shaped by their own cultural milieu. It has been a common argument amongst researchers that the reason for the popularity of the NDE discourse is because it deals with people who have been dead and have come back, whereas investigations into mediums communicating with discarnate spirits, or deathbed-vision accounts, deal primarily with the living, or those on a "one way ticket". For example, the Parapsychology sceptic Gerd H. Hövelman quotes Susan Blackmore, who argues that "There is good reason for the recent upsurge interest in NDEs, and that is that more people survive close brushes with death... deathbed accounts were more common as people lingered on... today they are rushed to hospital and resuscitated from states which, not so long ago, would have been called death" (Blackmore, cited in Hövelman, 1985:649).[2] NDEs therefore seem to offer something *more*, something over and above the prior research of Psychical Researchers (and, latterly, Parapsychology). It is this extra element that explains their popularity.

Whilst there is no doubt that this crossing over (and return from) the threshold of death explains *part* of the appeal of NDEs, such an explanation misses

---

[1] I limit my examination to Psychical Research in Britain and America for a number of reasons. First, NDE researchers themselves focus on this particular subset; witness Zaleski who states, "More direct inspiration for contemporary NDE literature can be found in the early work of British and American Psychical Researchers" (1987:98). Additionally, according to the eminent parapsychologist J.B. Rhine, cultural differences between Britain/USA and Europe meant that the Anglo-American researchers were more interested in the survival problem, whereas continental researchers were more interested in telepathy (1985:26-27). I return to the religious anxieties of Anglo-American Psychical Researchers below.

[2] Hövelman's position is, in fact, a good deal subtler than Blackmore. He recognises that accounts similar to NDEs have been around for considerably longer than Moody, and cites Albert Heim (1892), William Barrett (1926) and others (Hövelman, 1985: 649), before recognising that the modern "denial of death", which I discuss in the next chapter, has something to do with the appeal of the NDEs. Nevertheless, the modern "denial of death" was certainly not in place when Heim published his 1892 accounts of the survivors of falls in the Alps; the conditions of emergence for the category of the NDE were therefore more complicated than Hövelman recognises, and I shall return to this later in the present chapter, and the next.

the fact that the deathbed accounts assembled by early Psychical Researchers such as Myers, Podmore, and Gurney *et al* were themselves part of a much larger interest in mediums and spiritualists that occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Jalland, 1996). Since home deaths were more common (as, for the most part, people died in the home and not the hospital), and the mortality rate was far higher in the 19th century, Victorians interested in spiritualism were not as concerned with the accounts of those who had died and come back, but rather in contacting the loved ones who were already dead.[3] In this chapter I therefore argue that the fundamental difference between 19th century Psychical Research and 20th century NDE research is that the former looked for evidence of the survival of the Other (and through this, the Self) whereas the latter looks to establish evidence for the survival of the Self (and through this, the Other). In the former, the gaze of the researcher is focussed on the medium as a means to contact those on the other side, whilst in the latter, the gaze of the researcher is focussed on the everyman/everywoman who has crossed that threshold, and came back to talk about it. In addition, improving mortality rates and the management of death in Hospital Wards means that death has become a somewhat exotic affair, and NDE literature has revelled in first person accounts of people in medical emergencies crossing over to the other side. The discourse of NDEs thus reflects these cultural trends (I return to this argument in chapter 3).

I begin in Section 2.2 by exploring the 19th century discourse of Psychical Research. I pay particular attention to the nineteenth century backdrop that Psychical Research occurred in, including the decline of institutional Christianity, the rise of the discourses of science, the widespread interest in spiritualism, and the early days of psychology. As a result, Psychical Research should be located in the exploration of the "undiscovered country" of the psyche (to appropriate a Shakespearean metaphor), and psychic forces were understood and categorised alongside the early development of theories of the subconscious or subliminal self. I therefore explore the work of F.W.H. Myers in regards to the understanding and categorisation of evidence for life after death, and then William James, whose beguiling metaphor of the White Crow still retains an appeal in NDE research today.[4] In Section 2.3 I dissect the key changes that occurred in the early 1930s when the somewhat quixotic discourse of Psychical Research made the shift to the academic discipline of Parapsychology, and strived for respectability. Jettisoned were questions of post-mortem survival (or "proof"), to problems that could be investigated via a

[3] This, of course, was not the only reason; I return to the interest in spiritualism later in this chapter.
[4] See Chapter 5.

more rigorous laboratory based analysis (thus looking for the "processes" of psychical phenomena). Although generally not commented on, this somewhat parallels the historical rise of behaviourism within the wider discourse of psychology; Parapsychology of the mid twentieth century was a different beast indeed from its 19th century precursor. From there I examine how, during the 1960s, questions of post-mortem survival began to reappear within wider parapsychological literature. Whilst not a large part of "mainstream" Parapsychology (if one can forgive the irony of such a description), nevertheless, investigations appeared into the possibilities of drugs affecting psychic experiences and abilities, of the possibilities of out-of-body experiences in sleep, of the effect of altered states of consciousness on psychic phenomena, and of reincarnation memories. Again, the parallels with the 1960s counter-culture seem apparent, and whilst Raymond A. Moody was undertaking his PHD in philosophy, two parapsychologists (Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson) were undertaking a study of cross-cultural deathbed visions that shared many parallels with NDE research. Published two years after *Life After Life* (1975), their book *At The Hour of Death* (1977) was marketed in the same populist mould, had an introduction by the Hospice founder Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (whom I discuss in the next chapter), and an approving cover quote by Moody, but nevertheless harbour key differences. I conclude by investigating the relationship between modern Parapsychology and its far more successful rival, NDE research.

2.1. Spiritualism, Psychical Research and the Hidden Depths of the Mind

In this section I argue that Psychical Researchers and NDE investigators are not related by methodology, academic location, or the 'gaze' of the researcher.[5] As I shall

[5] In dealing with the discourses of Psychical Research, spiritualism, and NDE research, I draw three points of comparison. First, the *Researcher*: the Psychical Researcher cast 'his' gaze into the undercurrents of the 'psyche' in order to establish life after death of others, whereas the NDE researcher cast his or her gaze into the exotic private space of the Operating Theatre (I discuss this in chapter 3). Perhaps more importantly, the Psychical Researcher would not become part of the reason for the success of the discourse 'he' sought to study, whereas the medical qualifications of two out of the three NDE founders meant that they could speak authoritatively about what went on in the Operating Theatre, which I argue was part of the appeal of NDE literature (I return to this in chapters 3 and 4). Second, the *Experiencer*: being a spiritualist offered a certain amount of empowerment (I discuss this below), whereas being an NDEr does not perform the same social function (this is because NDE narratives do not share the same popularity as spiritualism did in the 19th century- I discuss this in chapter 4 and my conclusion). Third, the *Enthusiast*: both spiritualism and NDEs have acquired a vast amount of written material, and probably appealed to enthusiasts for a variety of reasons, from entertainment to ontological anxiety, but I suspect that the very nature of spiritualism (that people could attend séances) explains its longevity, and the fact that interest in spiritualism vastly increased during both world wars suggests that it functioned to assure people of the continued existence of others, whereas NDE consumers look to find evidence of their own survival (see chapter 4). The single methodological similarity that Psychical Researchers share with their (post) modern NDE counterparts is the emphasis on one full-proof case that will transcend materialist explanations and prove that another realm exists. I return to this in later in this chapter, and again in chapter 5.

go on to establish in the next two chapters, the popular discourses that have emerged around the category of the NDE soothe the religious anxieties of the 'spiritual consumer' (that is, they function as a tonic to soothe the fear of the individual's own non-existence). Reading about NDEs, for most people, is a passive affair, carried out via books, magazines, or watching television, and it is nigh on impossible to witness NDEs as they happen (indeed one of the major draws of NDE literature is the exoticness of the experience, cut off from the everyday 'public' realm). By contrast, Spiritualism in 19th century Britain and America was something of a social phenomenon, and functioned in a variety of ways across different classes and social strata: if you were interested in life after death (and because of the historical and cultural changes of the period, many people were) it was easy to take part in a séance. Psychical Researchers could therefore focus their gaze on the mind of the Spiritualist in order to prove life after death, and they sought *indirect* evidence for their own discarnate survival via the *posthumous existence of others*. In this section I shall therefore flesh out the relationship between Psychical Research and Spiritualism in order to provide a stark contrast to discourses surrounding the category 'NDE' in later chapters.

According to Carol Zaleski (1987:98), NDE researchers have inherited certain traits from prior investigations into the possibility of life after death, and "A little digging at the family tree reveals... that the mid-1800s witnessed a spate of books combining visionary testimony of the hereafter with edifying descriptions of death... ".[6] Zaleski continues, "the reasons for the appeal of contemporary near-death literature are similar to those that swelled the ranks of the spiritualist movement in the second half of the nineteenth century and attracted public attention to the work of the early Psychical Researchers" (1987:98). These reasons include appearing "non-dogmatic, rational, empirical" and that, even though NDE accounts seem to provide more credibility than their 19th century counterpart, they might be perceived as "... practical evidence, which, when verified in the lab, will yield scientific conformation of religious hope" (1987:98-99). This is only partly true. Spiritualism, as a 19th century movement, has no parallel in the reaction to the literature surrounding NDEs: it is not enough to argue that deathbed vision accounts were not as prominent as other Psychical Research interests because medical resuscitation techniques were

[6] The book that she explicitly refers to- *Dying With and Without Religion; designed to illustrate the truth and power of Christianity* (1852) ed. by Davis W. Clark- is part of the evangelical "good death" tradition, a movement that I refer to in the body of the text. Rather than serve as evidence for life after death, the evangelical good death texts were rather meant to highlight the results of the death of a pious death as opposed to the death of a non-believer. This is a far cry away from proving the existence of life after death, and rather *assumes* this reality. Nevertheless, Zaleski subsumes this within a broader "visions of the otherworld" category, a phenomenological discernment that is laden with problems. I discuss this in Chapter 6.

not up to par (thus not revealing the full extent of afterlife visions) for this misses the fact that death at home was a far more common occurrence, and the actual transcription of death was therefore not part of the appeal. Conversely NDE literature is awash with descriptions of medical procedures (I return to this in the next chapter). Additionally, Psychical Research was interested in a number of facets of the human psyche- after-death survival was itself only a part of this- and the exploration and categorisation of "the unknown" fell within a far larger sphere of activity.

The backdrop to 19th century Psychical Research must begin with recognition of the historical turmoil of this period. According to Susan Blackmore (1995:3)

> In the late Victorian era physics was enormously successful and Darwinism had come as a threat to many people's beliefs. Evolution in particular... [was] strongly opposed by the church, and some saw spiritualism as providing the evidence they needed to refute them. If the spirits of the dead could appear and speak, then materialism was false...(Psychical Researchers) established their objectives... to "examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognised hypothesis." [7]

Blackmore is correct in highlighting the rise of Darwinian evolution as a causal factor in the striving for a scientific study of evidence for post-mortem survival. Nonetheless, the familiar story of religion being usurped by the continuing progress of scientific discovery is perhaps too black and white. First, the religious evaluation of the theory of evolution was by no means homogenous, and the theory was gladly adopted as well as opposed by certain strands of the nineteenth century Christian community.[8] Second, religious devotion in the Victorian era remained high until the

---

[7] The Darwinian theory of evolution, first published in *On The Origin of Species* (1859), was the final lynchpin that provided scientific naturalism a complete explanation of the origins of humanity. In the words of Charles Taylor "Darwin had devastating consequences for belief because of the intellectual structures in which faith had come to be cast, mainly but not only in Protestant countries. In the previous two centuries there had been an immense investment in the argument from design as a certain proof of the existence of the existence of the Deity... Darwin, by showing how there could be design without a Designer, blew a gaping hole in this way of reasoning" (Taylor, 1989: 403,404). Nevertheless, the threat of Darwinian evolution was felt most acutely by the educated elite who were already struggling with the possibility of God's non-existence. In the words of Jerry Fodor "(Daniel) Dennett thinks that Darwin killed God. In fact, God was dead a century or so before Darwin turned up. What really happened was that the Romantics tried to console themselves for God's being dead by anthropomorphising the natural order. But Darwin made it clear that the natural order couldn't care less. It wasn't God that Darwin killed, *it was Mother Nature*" (Fodor, 2000:186, italics his). Whilst Fodor's polemic is itself somewhat one-sided, he does indicate that the relationship between Darwin and religion is more complex than is often realised (I return to this in the footnotes of Chapter 5).

[8] Nicholas A. Rupke makes the observation that "Darwinism -defined in terms of natural selection-never became widely accepted by biologists and palaeontologists of the second half of the nineteenth century, and a 'Darwinian evolution' in this sense never occurred. *The origin of the species* proved compelling, but not in converting the scientific community to natural selection- only to evolution by natural means. Many scientists incorporated general teleology in models of orthogenetic or more specifically also of theistic evolution, the

1880s, and beyond this, the religiosity of the middle and upper classes would start to decline, but still remain far higher than in our (post) modern era (Jalland, 1996, Oppenheim, 1985). It would not be until the turn of the century, and especially the Great War, before levels of belief would begin to take the shape that Blackmore indicates (Jalland, 1996).[9] Third, the investigation into spiritualism fell within a wider remit; according to Oppenheim, many Psychical Researchers were attracted to an investigation of spiritualism, "... not only because it apparently offered a chance to prove immortality, but also because it presented the opportunity to explore the mysteries of the human mind" (1985:3). Whilst it would be fair to say that many of the early Psychical Researchers would turn to spiritualism in order to seek answers for their own agnostic worries (especially in Britain), a deeper understanding of the cultural tectonics of the day will yield a more intricate picture as to why researchers sought to understand life after death in this particular fashion.

This picture necessarily begins with the recognition that spiritualism and Psychical Research were not necessarily synonymous. Spiritualism is generally regarded to be an American import from the mid-19th century (Taylor, 1999:137). According to Eugene Taylor, "...it was believed that the spirits of the dead or disembodied entities from some other plane of existence... would take possession of an otherwise sensitive subject, called a 'medium' and through that person communicate with the living" (1999:137). These communications were categorised by "rapping and knocking, automatic speech, automatic writing, displays of floating bodily fluid from the spirit world,[10] table tipping, slate writing" (Taylor, 1999:137-138) and were first publicised around the case of the "Hydesville Rapping" in 1848. The Fox sisters, later exposed as a fraud, reported the tapping of the spirit of a

---

Christians among them grafting evolutionism onto one of several harmonisation schemata" (Rupke, in Gilley and Stanley ed. 2006:172).

[9] I return to this in chapter 3.

[10] According to Oppenheim (1985:211), "The eighteenth century was awash with fluids- universal, vitalistic, mechanistic, animistic, subtle, magnetised, and electrical". In the case of Franz Anton Mesmer, the Viennese Doctor who discovered animal magnetism in the late 18th century, he believed that the effects of animal magnetism could be explained by "invisible, superfine fluid existing in and around the bodies of the Universe" (Oppenheim, 1985:210). According to John Beloff, Mesmer's theories of animal magnetism thus predated hypnotism, although Beloff notes that the group that grew around Mesmer extolled the virtues of Mesmerism for every ailment, and thus understood Mesmeric states as being able to bestow powers of clairvoyance (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:7), a view that ultimately prevented Hypnotism from being recognised by the French Medical Authorities until the late nineteenth century. In actual fact, Mesmerism and spiritualism sat quite comfortably together in the mid-nineteenth century, often on the same stage, and spiritualism seemed to inherit this emphasis on fluids from it (Oppenheim, 1985:245). Although, as Alan Richardson (2001:I) points out, "(o)nly in the Romantic era, in fact, was the brain definitely established as the organ of thought, although this seemingly inevitable notion would continue to be challenged on religious and other grounds well into the 1820s"; with the brain only coming in to focus prior to the rise of Mesmerism, the emphasis upon the 'psyche' would not be as prominent as it would become. What is important to note about Mesmerism is that, unlike hypnotism, a universal fluid apparently caused it. The powers that were ascribed to this state were located in a physical property of the Universe, and not in the depths of the psyche, as hypnotism would later be.

murdered man in their house, a case that received national attention (Taylor, 1999:138). The sisters became public speakers on matters of the occult, and spiritualism became a national phenomenon (Taylor, 1999:139). By 1850, there were an estimated one million spiritualists in the USA, and by 1890, the figure had grown to eleven million (Taylor, 1999:140). This formed a wider backdrop of religious revivalism in the US that lasted until the civil war.[11]

Whilst not experiencing the variety of religious expression that occurred in the nineteenth century USA, a similar evangelical revival had occurred in the first half of the 19th century in Britain, also sweeping across Anglican and non-conformist denominations (Jalland, 1996). The heralds of the spiritualist movement came across from America and inherited the high wave of religiosity (Oppenheim, 1985:13). These mediums included the famous Daniel Dunglas ("D.D.") Home, a performer extraordinaire who was investigated many times by Psychical Researchers but never once found to be fraudulent, a fact that contemporary parapsychologists still refer to.[12] The appeal of the more showmanship elements of spiritualist performances was not necessarily the main reason for its appeal however; spiritualism attracted the interests of Christians as well as those interested in opposing Christianity (Oppenheim, 1985), those interested in the latest fad (Oppenheim, 1985:13), and those that looked for evidence to fend of their fear of agnosticism. In short, not everyone who attended a séance was seeking to combat materialism (Oppenheim, 1985:3).[13] Thus

---

[11] As Taylor puts it, this "... was the era of frontier camp meetings... it was the era of an enormous number of utopian experiments in Christian Socialism; and it was the era of wide experimentation with every form of religious expression, from the ultraconservative to the ultraliberal... the ranks of mainstream denominations, such as Presbyterians, the Baptists, and the Methodists swelled to great numbers in the Midwest, and transcendentalism overtook New England" (Taylor, 1999:19).

[12] According to the contemporary parapsychologist John Beloff, (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:7) D.D.Home was that "one special case" and "Were it not for Home, there would be a strong argument for dismissing the entire physical phenomena of spiritualism...". Home, already well known to the American Spiritualist scene, moved to London in 1855. The prestige that he garnered meant that he mixed with "...the highest social and literary circles and was a welcome guest at the courts of Europe where he gained the special patronage of the Empress Eugénie of France, Queen Sophie of Holland, and Tzar Alexander II of Russia" , (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:8). Home was never caught cheating, and his apparent abilities extended even to floating out of a window, and in through the window next door (Oppenheim, 1985:14-15). Despite this, he remained an amateur spiritualist (even though he accepted large donations from wealthy patrons), a fact that sceptics have suggested allowed him to select his clientele, and thus screen out the less gullible (Oppenheim, 1985:16). For a truly indepth analysis of Home, see Peter Lamont's *The First Psychic; The Peculiar Mystery of a Notorious Victorian Wizard* (2005).

[13] Such was the interest in spiritualism in the late 19th century that even Darwin himself almost attended a séance, albeit one more born out of notions of entertainment than genuine scientific enquiry: "'We had good fun one afternoon; for George hired a medium, who made the chairs, a flute, a bell, and candlestick and fiery points jump about in my Brother's Dining Room and took away all their breaths'... Darwin found the séance so hot and tiring that he departed before these 'astonishing miracles or jugglery' took place. He did not understand how these activities were carried out but concluded they were 'rubbish'" (Jalland, 1996:365). Darwin was also perplexed by the accounts of D.D. Home, and under encouragement from Francis Galton, wrote a "very kind letter" to Home asking that he hold a séance for them, but Home never replied (Lamont, 2005:221-222).

> ...the significant spread of spiritualism in Victorian Britain probably owed far less to the exertions of professionals than to the development of hundreds of private, or amateur, mediums who discovered their spiritualist powers in their own drawing rooms... It is, after all, far more compelling to see one's own dinner table in motion than to read about the antics of someone else's furniture... (1985:8)

In Britain, spiritualism served a variety of purposes and needs right across the class spectrum. In particular, housebound women would often be attracted to séances in the Victorian parlours (Oppenheim, 1985:9,21), and it seems no coincidence that many accounts of mediums were servants in well-to-do families (Oppenheim, 1985:9,21), neither that there seems to have been a gender dynamic of young female mediums attracting the attention of older men under the auspices of contacting the dead.

In the words of Lucie Armit, "... clairvoyance is associated with female seers, and indeed was frequently associated in late nineteenth century terms with adolescent females on the cusp of puberty. The combination of inherent gifts and a tantalising threshold of adult sexuality rendered the adolescent particularly susceptible to visions, or so it is claimed" (Armit, in Brewster, Joughin, Owen and Walker ed. 2000:138). William Crookes, the esteemed chemist and physicist who would become President of the Royal Society, was particularly interested in spirit manifestations that "...involved several lovely young women who claimed to produce the full-form materialisations" (Oppenheim, 1985:16). In particular, he spent a considerable amount of time with teenage medium Florence Cook who could produce the spirit "Katie King", about whom Oppenheim wryly comments that "Crookes investigated these full-form materialisations over an extended period of time and was privileged to walk arm in arm with the attractive spirit. She had, it seems, an irresistibly solid quality" (Oppenheim, 1985:17). According to Crookes, "Katie King" was six inches taller than Florence, lacked a skin blemish on her neck that Florence had, and did not have pierced ears (Hyman, 1985:28). Despite Crookes vouching for the authenticity of the materialisation, Florence Cook was caught cheating before and after Crookes' investigation, leading some to speculate on an illicit affair between scientist and medium, an accusation still debated presently (Hyman, 1985:28-29). In any case, these type of events seem to have been by no means uncommon, and Oppenheim concludes that "There may also have been a sense of sensual enjoyment, possibly subconscious... on can summarise that the holding of hands and the caressing of spiritforms might have been stimulating not only to the sitters, but also

to the young women, whose emerging sexuality was denied... means of expression..." (1987:21).[14]

Whilst an important point, it should be qualified with the recognition that femininity seems to be implicitly understood (and coupled) with abnormal states of consciousness.[15] Feminists, such as Grace Jantzen, would no doubt point to the reinforcement of the binary of maleness as the rational, public norm, whereas the female becomes understood through the lens of the abnormal, (and in the case of other female mediums, hysteria and possession). She argues, "Western civilisation, dominated by masculinst structures, has both a fascination with and dread of death" (Jantzen, 1998:129). This fascination and dread becomes linked with the female, a "conceptual linkage of woman, absence, and death" (1998:132), and Jantzen quotes Kristeva's recognition that "the unrepresentable nature of death was linked with that other unrepresentable – original abode but also last resting place for dead souls, in the beyond- which for mythical thought is constituted by the female body" (Kristeva, cited by Jantzen, 1998:132). In the gaze of the Psychical Researcher, "Death the unrepresentable, the ultimate absence, is symbolised as woman" (Jonte-Pace, cited by Jantzen, 1998:132).[16]

At the turn of the 19th century, in Victorian society death was considered to be decreed by God's will; "In the early and mid-Victorian periods the good Christian

---

[14] In the words of Helen Sword (2002:3) , "(m)any... scholars portray spirit mediumship as a self-empowering strategy enacted by specific oppressed or disenfranchised social groups such as African Americans... English plebians... or women... spiritualism, however was practised at societies power centres – in aristocratic drawing rooms, in scientific laboratories, and even at the White House and Westminster – just as avidly as its frayed edges ... it is certainly true that nineteenth century spiritualism replicated problematic imperialist attitudes (by claiming to colonise new territories), class structures (by insisting simultaneously on the populist sympathies and the elitist insight of the spirit medium) and gender paradigms (by deploying traditionally 'feminine' behavioural traits such as passivity, receptivity and insensibility in the service of intellectual commodities typically coded as male, for example, knowledge, productivity, and reason)".

[15] Thus, we see parallels to Allan Grapard's *Vision of Excess and Excesses of Vision: Women and Transgression in Japanese Myth* (1991, cited by Strenski, 1998). He states that "(t)he ability to communicate with the realms beyond appears to be related to pathological disorders that are related to modalities of knowledge and to strategies of power" (cited by Strenski, 1998:349). In this case we see the linking of spirit possession with hysteria: "Theodore Flournoy, one of Freud's earliest disciples, explains medium Helene Smith's apparitional visions as hysterical manifestations of an unconscious hostility towards her parents" (Sword, 2002:46). Whilst one should be careful to note the empowerment that being a medium afforded, one should also recognise the association between 'femininity', 'death', 'darkness', and the 'irrational' in 19th century spiritualism. As Helen Sword (2002:7) assesses, "...male authors, such as Sir Lawrence Oliphant, Robert Dale Owen, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and W.B. Yeats... relied significantly on female mediums (frequently their own wives) for spirit contact... (Yeat's desire) included a covert longing to achieve, like his own mediumistic wife, direct access to visionary perception, 'that sudden miracle as if the darkness had been cut with a knife, [which] is mostly a woman's privilege'".

[16] Certainly, it seems as if there is an association made between maleness and disembodiment, and femaleness and the frailty of the body, in much NDE literature. See, for instance, the generic masculine used by Moody in his classic NDE statement that I quoted at the end of chapter 1, and compare this to his silence on the feminine aspects of the Modern Hospice Movement that predated NDE research (I discuss this in chapter 3), as well as Carol Zaleski's avoidance of later female mystics (who had their experiences 'in their bodies') in her book *Otherworld Journeys* (1987), which I discuss in chapter 6.

assumed that death was divinely ordained..." (Jalland, 1996:6). After 1880, medical advancement had changed wider understandings of the reasons for death (Jalland, 1996:5-6).[17] This, combined with the slow filtering of scientific ideas through society, the still high mortality rates until the last part of the nineteenth century, and the increasing agnosticism of the educated elite, meant that contacting the dead was, for many, motivated by the need to contact loved ones and anxiety over the reality of life after death (Oppenheim, 1985, Jalland, 1996). Additionally, the emphasis upon the evangelical "good death"[18] which assumed full-force at the turn of the nineteenth century, and the concomitant romanticism-influenced 19th emphasis upon the "family",[19] meant that many people were uncomfortably familiar with the grim realities of death (Jalland, 1996), thus laying the groundwork for deathbed vision accounts that would be reported to early Psychical Researchers.

The perspicacity of these investigators would lead to the categorisation of such accounts in a different manner from the NDE researchers of the 20th century. In the 1886 study by Edward Gurney, F.W.H. Myers and Frank Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, a phenomenal amount of anecdotal material was amassed of visitations, hallucinations, hauntings and so forth. Unlike modern NDE research, which looks to accounts of after-death experiences as a means to suggest evidence for life after death, these researchers sought to investigate "...all manner of cases where there is reason to suppose that the mind of one human being has affected the mind of another..." Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, cited by Oppenheim, 1985:140). As with F.W.H Myers *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903), the clear lack of a mass of out-of-body accounts is striking, and whether the Psychical Researchers were looking at apparitions or mediums, the survival of the discarnate mind was coupled with a desire to prove evidence for mind-to-mind contact. Myers categorises the object of his study thus:

---

[17] Jalland (1996:6) states "...growing uncertainty about the Christian faith in the late Victorian period coincided with a revised view of disease, as death was increasingly attributed to specific diseases rather than divine intervention". This corresponds with Foucault's assessment (1963) of the change in the discourse of medicine, as Physicians moved from a horizontal typology of disease (thus comparing it to other symptoms via an Aristotelian classificatory analysis) to looking vertically within the patient. I return to this in Chapter 3.

[18] According to Jalland (1996:8), "if death in the nineteenth century Britain is to be characterised in terms of a single model or ideal, then it should be the Evangelical 'good death'". Additionally, "Death evoked the most intense emotions in family life, and Romanticism encouraged early and mid-Victorians to give full scope to their expression... They were not shy about expressing the depth of their suffering in tears and in words, with varying degrees of restraint..." (Jalland, 1996:4).

[19] Jalland (1996:4) refers to the work of Lawrence Stone, and recounts that "...marriage in 1500 was primarily economic and reproductive relationship (in England)... by 1800 'there developed much warmer affective relationships between husband and wives and between parents and children'. The increase in affection was a response to both the Evangelical and the Romantic movements". See also John R. Gillis's *World of Their Own Making: A History of Myth and Ritual in Family Life* (1997:3-57).

> We gradually discover that the accounts of apparitions at the moment of death- testifying to a supersensory communication between the dying man and the friend who sees him- led on without perceptible break to apparitions occurring after the death of the person seen, but while that death was yet unknown to the percipient and thus apparently due... to a continued action of that departed spirit... it became gradually plain to me that before we could safely mark off any group of manifestations as definitely implying an influence from beyond the grave, there was need of a more searching review of man's incarnate personality...(Myers, 1903:4)

Myers set out to explore the machinations of the subliminal level below the "threshold of consciousness", and as well as examining "phantasms of the living" (1903:167-217) takes in sensory automatism (which includes automatic writing[1903:127-166]), motor automatism (such as table turning [1903:218-289]), hypnosis (1903:85-126), genius (1903: 48-56), sleep (1903:57-84), and "Trance, Possession, and Ecstasy" (1903:290-346). Through these diverse topics, Myers discerned a tri-fold categorisation scheme of "normal" (sleep), "abnormal" (hysteria) and supernormal (telepathy) (Alvarado, 2003:8) which he located in the subliminal mind.

Myers himself quoted a case from Gurney's collection that reads like a NDE. In it, a Kansas Doctor fell into a unconscious state for four hours, brought on by typhoid (Myers, 1903:172). Upon awakening in his "Ego" (which the Doctor distinguished from his body) he oscillated out of his flesh and burst like a "soap bubble", before "unravelling" to become his spiritual self (1903:173). He then attempted to communicate with his grieving family, found that he could not do so, and travelled out of his house, whereas he was propelled towards a boundary on a road that he could not cross even though he wanted to (1903:174). A cloud appeared before him, and told him it was time to go back (1903:174-176).

Such an account seems like the iconic NDE (as I discuss in chapter 4). This case passes without comment though, as Myers moves on to recount the case of a supernatural message given from a deceased Russian girl through motor automatism, a message that asked her friend to right her statue in the graveside (1903:176-177), the ghostly visitation of a father intent on warning his son not to become involved in a financial matter (1903:178-179), and several cases where the recently appeared to unsuspecting relatives telling them not to worry (1903:180-217). The main bulk of these cases seem to be in detailing accounts of dead people communicating to the living in order to announce their departure, telling them not to worry, or passing on messages, rather than discussing the phenomenology of the other world. In any case, Myers considers these cases interesting but fleeting, to be considered merely an appetiser for the potential fruits that will be yielded from the diligent study of

mediums and the messages/scripts that they produce (Myers, 1903:215-217). Carlos S. Alvarado states "In Myer's view 'so soon as man is steadily conceived as dwelling in these wider range of powers, his survival of death becomes an almost inevitable corollary'... the presence of spiritual powers while the person was alive indicated an element of human personality that continued after death in a spiritual world" (Alvarado, 2003:3).

In Myer's work the link between the other world and the dark recesses of the mind is made clear, and whilst his contemporaries (such as William James) would cast some scepticism of the confidence and explicitness of Myers thesis (Alvarado, 2003:11) it seems clear that Psychical Research occupied a more central ground in the early days of psychology. Unlike modern Parapsychology, "... psychical research loomed as very serious business to very serious and eminent people, such as Fellows of the Royal Society, university professors, and Noble Prize-Winning Scientists..."(Oppenheim, 1985:3). In Britain, the *Society for Psychical Research* (SPR) was formed in 1882 in London and would serve as the model for other likeminded organisations in America and Europe (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:10). The SPR built on a heritage of clubs and societies in Cambridge that fused philosophical, religious and spiritualist interests, as well as the less academic interests of the wider spiritualist movements that had sprung up in Victorian Britain. Beloff states, "...there was a decisive shift away from physical phenomena, which by this time had acquired a thoroughly bad odour" (in Wolman ed. 1977:11). According to Oppenheim,

> In so intellectual a circle of investigators, the grosser forms of spiritualist materializations, redolent with fraud, tended to have less appeal than the mental phenomena of mediumship... (1985:119)

Amongst the early SPR researchers, the distinction between psychology and Psychical Research was difficult to discern (Oppenheim, 1985:119). Questions of thought transference coincided with hypnotism, mesmerism, automatic writing, séance investigation and so on.[20]

Nonetheless, the move to focus on the mind as the locus of enquiry did represent an attempt to circumnavigate the limits of the rise in materialism in the

[20] Many Psychical Researchers were attracted to an investigation of spiritualism, "... not only because it apparently offered a chance to prove immortality, but also because it presented the opportunity to explore the mysteries of the human mind" (Oppenheim, 1985:3). By exploring the phenomenon of "...Automatic Utterances, oral or written, the possibility of telepathic communication between two or more people, the relationship between hypnotism and telepathy...", they were indicating that the "...distinction between mind and brain, the functioning of both, the nature of consciousness, and the definition of intelligence were all topics of profound importance to them" (Oppenheim, 1985: 120).

sciences. Jeremy Carrette discusses this circumnavigation within the Psychology of Religion, a field closely related to the present topic of discussion through the work of William James whom I discuss below: 'The early psychologists of religion marked out a fragile territory in which human experience could be divided out, however precariously, into the so-called "religious" and "everyday"' (Carrette, 2002:xlii). If we substitute "abnormal" for "religious" (in James' later work on mysticism the two become intertwined) the exploration into the extremities of the mind becomes a way to investigate the existence of another realm.

For instance, prior to the rise of experimental psychology in Wundt's laboratory in Germany, questions of the psyche had been located under the domain of metaphysics (Oppenheim, 1985:238). These were of particular interest to the founders of the SPR, many of whom sought to fuse philosophy, metaphysics, and science in order to shore up the religious doubts that they had.[21] "The generation of scholars and intellectuals who came of age in the 1860s and the 1870s was characterised by a salient lack of theological convictions" (Oppenheim, 1985:118). In the words of Pat Jalland,

> The membership was chiefly drawn up from the upper-middle class, including a strong university element... Many members of the society were Christians haunted by religious doubt, such as Henry Sedgewick and Myers, seeking empirical evidence of immortality... (Jalland, 1996:366)

What is important to note about the investigations of the Cambridge and Oxford educated patrons of the SPR- Frederick William Henry Myers, Edmund Gurney, Frank Podmore, and Walter Leaf (to name but a few)- is that evidence for telepathy constituted the first step to proving that there was life after death (after all, if minds could communicate with each other then they could possibly communicate with the dead).[22] As Andrew Von Hendy states (in relation to the relationship between the unconscious and dreams, but equally applicable here), this trend can be seen as "...products of the general turn toward affective explanations of mind and behavior,

---

[21] According to Carrette and King (2005:58-59), "Since the birth of modern psychology with William Wundt (1832-1920) and William James (1842-1910) in the 1870s, there has been a slow process of 'psychologising' human experience in the West... Before psychology, the self was shaped by the philosophical imagination and (what we now call) religious models of introspection. These allowed for more open ended and fluid ideas about the self, sue to the fact that identity was grounded in a divine reality or a social group". Ironically, it was the British colleagues of James who would seek to shore up their own particular views about reality, defined through the social clubs of Oxbridge and their own religious backgrounds, in psychology. (Edward Gurney, F.H.W. Myers, and Frank Podmore were all sons of Anglican Clergy, and Walter Leaf grew up in an Evangelical home [Oppenheim, 1985:118])

[22] According to John Beloff, "The accent was now on Telepathy (a term coined by F.W.H Myers) and on survival of bodily death as evidenced by the verbal communications of mediums. These two topics are not unrelated as it can be argued that if telepathy between the living could be established, this would render more plausible communications between the living and the dead" (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:11.)

combined with a growing post-Darwinian awareness that the circumvention of rationality sought by the romantics in transcendental intuition must be looked for from below, in the obscure regions of 'instinct'" (Von Hendy 2002: 112).

Which brings us to William James.[23] Like Myers, questions of evolution were not far from the fore in James' work. James, was an avid supporter of Darwinian evolution, having become aware of it as early as 1859, and latterly working on how it interfaced with the problem of consciousness. According to Eugene Taylor:

> The Boston School of Psychopathology was made up of an informal knot of investigators including William James, James had ties... with the intuitive psychology of character formation bequeathed to them by Emerson and the Concord transcendentalists... James (and his contemporaries) however, were all reared in much more scientific and Darwinian environment than there predecessors and hence were charged with refashioning the transcendentalist legacy into the more rigorous scientific dictates of the age... At the time (James) was studying consciousness in Darwinian theory... he was also chastising scientists for not taking the claims of spiritualists seriously... *James maintained that psychic phenomena were destined to change the very shape of science in the future...* (Taylor, 1999:174-175, italics mine)

Darwinism had effectively knocked out the traditional Deist/Natural Theology arguments for establishing the existence of God, so researchers like James had to adopt a different tact; they had to look to experience itself to provide them with a recourse for justification for religious beliefs.[24] Whether in the altered states of consciousness of the medium or the extreme ineffable experience of the religious mystic, the answer to the threat of Scientific Materialism lay in the abnormal experiences on the fringes of human existence; James was not one to necessarily reject the existence of the spiritual realm because of adherence to scientific naturalism– rather, all the facts had to be gathered before judgements could be called, and all facets of human experience had to be given a fair hearing (Jantzen, 1995). As Ralph Barton Perry states, "James's interest in 'Psychical Research' was not one of his vagaries, but was central and typical. He grew up in a circle in which heresies were more gladly tolerated than orthodoxies" (Perry, 1935:155).

It was James that introduced the metaphor of the 'white-crow'. According to James,

---

[23] With the exception of James, Psychical Research in the USA did not meet with the same success as it did in Britain; the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) was founded in 1886 but was soon amalgamated with its British counterpart for the remainder of the 19th century (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:11). Like the SPR, "its original research members were all chaired by distinguished Harvard professors in science, medicine, and philosophy" (Taylor, 1999:164). This esteemed group of investigators "left the question open as to whether they would be able to marshal evidence for the existence of the supernatural, they did expect to uncover what they called an underlying and consistent 'laws of mental action'" (Taylor, 1999:164).

[24] See chapter 1 and chapter 6.

> If you will let me use the language of the professional logic-shop, a universal proposition can be made untrue by a particular instance. If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn't seek to prove that no crows are; it is enough to prove one single crow to be white. (William James, 1896:884)

Encapsulated within this statement is the approach to Psychical Research until the 1930s. James's insistence on having found his 'white crow', only for it to be debunked after being subject to intense sceptical scrutiny, foreshadowed the future of the burgeoning discipline of Psychical Research, and its progenitor Parapsychology, and there have been several 'white-crows' spoken of hopefully in these disciplines, such as the aforementioned D.D. Home, Leonore Piper and others.[25]James was involved with some of the earliest systematic studies of mediums, and it was through his family that he first heard of the Boston medium Mrs Leonore Piper who was to become the most studied medium of her time (Taylor, 1999:168) .[26] James himself thought he had his white crow; writing in 1896 he stated "...[m]y own white crow is Mrs. Piper... I cannot resist the conviction that knowledge appears which she has never gained by the ordinary waking use of her eyes and ears and wits" (1896:884). Eugene Taylor provides a description of one of their interactions:

> ... James began to talk in soothing tones to induce a light hypnotic trance... He pricked her arm with a small needle, but she felt nothing... James even made a small incision in her left wrist that remained open but did not bleed... James flipped through a deck of playing cards as Piper called out the numbers and the suits without seeing them, and he separated the hits and the misses into piles... Finally, he brought her out of the trance. The instant she was awake the small incision in her wrist began to ooze blood. Later, James reported that she named more cards correctly than would have been expected (Taylor, 1999:158).

---

[25] In the late 19th and early twentieth century the European medium Eusapia Palladino generated a large amount of interest (Blackmore, 1993:2, Beloff, 1985:364), and "...apparently levitated, materialised extra limbs, caused inexplicable noises and made furniture glide about" (Blackmore, 1993:2). Palladino, however, was caught cheating on several occasions. Despite her fraudulent activity, Beloff has argued that there were occasions where the observation conditions were stringent enough to indicate that something genuinely paranormal was occurring; his challenge to the sceptics has been "what is your counter explanation?" (1985:364-377). William James (1909:311) himself stated, "Eusapia Palladino, the Neopolitan medium, has been under observation for twenty years... Everyone agrees that she cheats at every opportunity... Yet her credit has steadily risen". For others, such as Paul Kurtz (1985, introduction) or Ray Hyman (1985:40), this is known as the "dirty-test-tube" problem: how can you trust the results of a test tube that is known to be contaminated, or, how can you trust the results from a psychic that you know has cheated?

[26] Beloff states "Mrs Leonore Piper... (was) a brilliant medium from Boston who was discovered by no-less than the great William James and then retained by the SPR... She was steered away from any involvement in physical phenomena, but, as a mental medium, she remains unsurpassed..." (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:11)

According to Taylor, this meeting was important for James because it represented the first time an altered state of consciousness (hypnosis) had been demonstrated in the laboratory; hypnosis being considered and understood alongside the psychical abilities of the medium (Taylor, 1999:158-159).

Piper became something of a mainstay of the Psychical Research scene, being employed by it for demonstrations and studies for 14 years. The early part of her career saw her speak in trance, apparently possessed by a French Doctor of "doubtful authenticity" called "Phinuit", whilst in 1892 her principal "control" appeared, "George Pellow", a recently deceased acquaintance of the American psychical investigator Richard Hodgson (Gauld, in Wolman ed. 1977:583). Her possession by Pellow was "...extremely realistic, conversing freely and naturally with Pellow's own friends..."(Gauld, in Wolman ed. 1977:583). In 1905 Hodgson himself passed away and became one of Piper's controls, convincing William James of the authenticity of this possession by informing him of personal matters that had befallen Hodgson in England (Murphy, in Wolman ed. 1977:53). He concluded "*I myself feel that as if an external will to communicate were probably there,* that is, I find myself doubting, in consequences of my whole acquaintance with that sphere of phenomena, that Mrs Piper's dream life, even equipped with telepathic powers, account for the results found" (cited by Murphy, in Wolman ed. 1977:54, emphasis Murphy's).

Despite her rapturous reception from Psychical Researchers, not all were convinced. In the words of Alan Gauld

> ... (Sedgwick noted that) Mrs Pipers own personality showed through the personalities of the controls and communications in diverse ways. They displayed an ignorance of science, philosophy and literature... Maintenance of the drama was everything and to this end the controls would cover up mistakes in an absurd and evasive manner... (Gauld, in Wolman ed. 1977:583)

G. Stanley Hall, a contemporary of James and a fellow leading founder of the Psychology of Religion, worked with Piper on 6 occasions and came to altogether different conclusions about the psychic basis of her mediumship.[27] He noted that Piper, whilst apparently in the possession of the deceased psychic researcher Richard Hodgson, assured both Hall and his associate Amy Tanner that the spirit was in contact with Ms Tanner's father, who, as it turned out, was not dead at all, but still in the realm of the living. Upon Hall informing Piper of this fact, the spirit replied by

[27] Tanner (1910) cited in Spitz, http://articles.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2843/is_1_28/ai_111897969, Accessed 15/06/04

stating that "... I say he is living. Nothing ever dies I say. Dead, no such thing. You do not UD [understand]. Catch me and you will catch a white blackbird. Blackbird".[28]

Such cases were not uncommon in psychical investigations of mediums, and James concluded in his last paper on Psychical Research that "[f]or 25 years I have been in touch with the literature of Psychical Research... I have also spent a good few hours (though far fewer than I ought to have spent) in witnessing (or trying to witness) phenomena. Yet I am theoretically no 'further' than I was at the beginning..." (James, 1909, quoted in Hyman 1985:4-5). The problem of sifting evidence of discarnate survival from the medium's own personality, of trying to rule out fraud and/or subconscious influence, or even telepathy as a means of information transfer[29] (as opposed to the spirits of the dead) remained daunting, leading James to conclude that "...I remain uncertain and await more facts, facts which may not point clearly to a conclusion for fifty or a hundred years" (cited by Murphy, in Wolman ed. 1977:583). Thus, whilst spiritualism would gather pace in the early twentieth century, especially during The Great War, and reach the peak of its popularity (in Britain) in the 1930s, the SPR's investigation into mediums would decline between 1900 and 1926.[30]

---

[28] ibid

[29] This would come to be known as the "Super-Psi Hypothesis", which I discuss below and (in relation to NDE research) in chapter 5. Briefly, a more parsimonious explanation of medium's recounting data that they could not possibly know is that they acquire this information telepathically (this has the advantage of not postulating another level of reality, and thus only requires one to explain telepathy). There is some evidential basis for such an occurrence. Professor E.R. Dodds recounts the following case; "...when the experimenter (Richard Hodgson) thinks about Sir Walter Scott, an obviously fictitious "Sir Walter Scott" communicates the next day at the Piper sitting; when he thinks about D.D. Home, a similarly spurious "Home" presents himself the next day... Mrs Salter heard... an anecdote about a man who wore several pairs of trousers... next day at a Leonard sitting the control purporting to be Professor Verall remarked ..."It isn't given to many men to wear two pairs of trousers. Well I did once, I think you'll remember." Mrs Salter did not remember" (1934:158-159, cited by Gauld, in Wolman ed. 1977:583).

[30] There is one final addendum to add to the psychical investigation of mediums: the posthumous messages received from Frederick Myers. Myers died in 1901 comparatively young, at the age of 58. In order to prove that messages delivered to Spiritualists were actually from the disembodied dead and not from subliminally absorbed information, imaginatively constructed fantasies, or fraud, the idea of cross-correspondence was mooted, where different pieces of messages were provided to different mediums in different locations which made no sense, although, when combined, the messages matched some pre-arranged criteria. Susy Smith, in her 1961 preface to *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, has the following to say, "At about this time (1907) four women who were deeply interested in Psychical Research began to develop considerable facility in automatic writing. These were Mrs A. W. Verrall, her daughter Helen... Mrs Holland (a pseudonym for Rudyard Kipling's sister) who lived in India, and Mrs Leonore Piper in the United States. They began to receive considerable classical knowledge on the part of the sender... As Gardner Murphy says "Often a message developed from these scattered scripts from various automatists would have a peculiarly Myers-like ring..."' (1961[2001]:xxi). Hoyt L. Edge (1986: 341), speaking about the same events, states: "One of the best known is called the 'Hope, Star and Browning' case... a J.C.Piddington requested 'Myers' (through Mrs Piper) in Latin that he should provide evidence by giving fragmented information to two separate mediums, which would only make sense when explained by the scripts of a third medium. Within a month, Mrs Verall talked about the use of an anagram with the word 'stars,' made an allusion to hope, as well as an allusion to a Browning poem... Thereafter, Mrs Piper's 'Myers' indicated that he had fulfilled Piddington's request by referring to hope, star, and Browning."

In this section I have mapped out the network of relations that locate Psychical Research and Spiritualism with the emergence of Darwinism, the decline in traditional religion, and the realities of death and dying in 19th century Britain. These relationships are necessarily different from the discourses surrounding the category of the NDE that would occur a century later, as I shall establish in the next three chapters. The change from Psychical Research into Parapsychology would engender a shift away from the kind of questions that preoccupied those in the 19th century, until the 1960s (which corresponds both to the rise of behaviourism in psychology that I discuss below, and changes in the management and understanding of death in Western culture between 1920 and 1950, which I discuss in the next chapter). In the 1960s survival questions became somewhat popular in the discourse of Parapsychology, corresponding with the wider cultural sphere, and so I analyse a "parallel" to NDE research in the work of Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson and explore what the similarities and differences are between this and Moody's book *Life After Life.*

2.3 From Proof To Process: The advent of Parapsychology

In the 1920s, the image of Psychical Research was severely tarnished by the case of "Margery", a medium who was married to a renowned Boston surgeon; both were implicated in faking psychic phenomena that had been touted extensively by the ASPR (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:16). William McDougall, the experimental psychologist and Psychical Researcher who held a chair at Harvard, had nonetheless been sceptical about the medium, even though she had outwitted Houdini. Because of this, some semblance of respect was salvaged by the ASPR, but the furore that occurred left a deep impression on McDougall and his assistant, the biologist J.B. Rhine. From this, Rhine was determined to remove Psychical Research away from such haphazard research, and bring it into the laboratory. According to Hövelman:

> There can be no doubt that the focal point of parapsychologist's interest has shifted away from survival research to other areas of parapsychological investigation... between the late 1930's and the early 1960's most parapsychologists considered it wiser to defer a direct attack on the problem of survival after death until after a more complete understanding had been achieved of the power and limitations of extrasensory perception on the part of a living persona (Hövelman, 1985:645,646).

This ushered in the "J. B. Rhine era" (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:42). Rhine had two objectives; one was to acquire for Parapsychology professional university status, and

the other was to standardise testing procedures so as to try and actually achieve consistent, replicable results.

It also seems that wider research trends in the discourse of psychology, itself seeking academic recognition, might well have influenced the move towards a stricter empirical basis. Around this time, behaviourism was itself in vogue, and was an attempt by those involved within psychology to apply strict scientific criteria towards the study of human behaviour.[31] According to Pinker

> ...behaviourism... dominated psychology from the 1920s to the 1960s... In behaviourism, an infant's talents and abilities didn't matter because there was *no such thing as a talent or an ability.* (John B.) Watson had banned them from psychology, together with the contents of the mind, such as ideas, beliefs, desires, and feelings. They were subjective and unmeasurable, he said, unfit for science, which studies only objects and measurable things... Among the casualties of behaviourist minimalism was the rich psychology of William James... (2003:19, italics Pinker's)

It seems no coincidence that Hövelman (quoted above) along with John Beloff (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:20) and Rhine (in Wolman ed. 1977:43-45) locate the "process" period of parapsychological research up until the 1960s, the same time that behaviourism started to wane. As psychology, as a "science", sought funding and respect, so too did Parapsychology, itself an extremely controversial subject.

Rhine himself did not go quite as far as the behaviourists in his striving for objectivity, but nonetheless sought to bracket out the phenomenon to be examined in the laboratory. At the start of this thirty-year period, the emphasis effectively switched from "stories" to "stats", as epitomised by an increasing sophistication in experimental design and analysis, and Parapsychology made a fairly permanent transition away from the need for that "one special case" to looking for statistical trends as a means to establish the occurrence of paranormal phenomena "above chance".[32] He stated, "I have no compunction in deleting from current consideration,

---

[31] And of course, Logical Positivism had spread from the Vienna Circle and was causing ripples in Anglo-American Philosophy.

[32] Nevertheless, the desire for the white-crow still runs deep, even today. Sceptic Ray Hyman (1985:91) states, "Both proponents and critics want to resolve major questions of psi now. This has led to the attempt to settle the matter with a single crucial experiment. Such impatience has meant that the long years of controversy have actually settled nothing." The parapsychologist John Beloff (2001:101) is an example of this: "Whether, in the face of... suspicion, parapsychologists can succeed in demonstrating that there are paranormal remains to be seen. Four hypothetical stratagems (have been) mentioned: (1) the discovery of some set up that can be relied upon to produce psi phenomena where and when required;(2) a once-for-all definitive demonstration of just one blatantly paranormal phenomenon which would then be recorded for posterity in a permanent form; (3) the production of a permanent paranormal object... that would shift the onus of explanation onto the physicalist, and (4) the development of a reliable practical application of a psi phenomenon... Personally, as one who takes seriously the paranormal, I would reckon the second stratagem... is the most hopeful." This seems like a somewhat naïve request, given that Beloff himself is

in the interest... of scientific clarity and objectivity, problems for which no adequate methods are known" (Rhine, in Wolman ed. 1977:30). Hence, the investigation of Extra-Sensory Perception (ESP) began proper, with Rhine and his colleagues seeking to enquire whether or not ESP was limited by physical geography or distance,[33] whether it could be linked to a known property in the Universe (like electromagnetism)[34] or whether it existed outside the physical laws, whether there were experiments that could discern a difference between telepathy and clairvoyance,[35] whether precognition could be distinguished from psycho-kinesis,[36] whether the investigator herself could have an effect on the outcome of the study,[37] and whether ESP applied to animals.[38] Rhine sums up that

> The three subtypes of parapsychic ability- clairvoyance, precognition, and PK- gave rather conclusive experimental results... even though we may need to carry over ... the debatable points of difference between PK and precognition. However, not all the claims of special psychic abilities succeeded so well... it was found that telepathy could not be tested in a way that clearly excluded clairvoyance... Similarly, no way has been found to test the claim of post-mortem survival so as to exclude the medium's psi exchange with the living and the terrestrial environment as the source of information in the "messages"... (Rhine, in Wolman ed. 1977:34)

Latterly, the problem of discerning whether or not any evidence of discarnate survival can be induced from the evidence, or whether there is no way to distinguish this from ESP or "Super-Psi", led Beloff to conclude that "to this day parapsychologists are still divided between survivalists and non-survivalists" (cited in (Hövelman,

---

evidently a subscriber to a thoroughly modernist understanding of science (see below), and is also well aware of the problems of such an approach.

[33] See, for instance, Rhine, in Wolman ed. (1977:32).

[34] We can therefore trace how Mesmerism and early spiritualism made use of universal fluids to explain their peculiar properties (especially in the latter, where the fluid 'ectoplasm' made its appearance during spirit manifestations). By the turn of the twentieth century, these fluids were gradually replaced with an emphasis upon the electromagnetic waves and radio waves: "In the twentieth century, as radios became an increasingly affordable household item, the notion that the dead can communicate via 'etheric vibrations' using frequencies undetectable by the living, became a spiritualist commonplace. By the time that H.D. claimed in the late 1940s to have received séance messages from dead R.A.F. airmen, radios were such unremarkable domestic objects that her conflation of radio communication and spirit communication emphasises quotidian ignorance rather than scientific knowledge..." (Sword, 2002:36).

[35] This is to see whether apparent telepathy results are evidence of mind-to-mind contact as opposed to one mind "seeing" the other person (Rhine in Wolman ed. 1977:32).

[36] Could someone predict a series of cards, or was their mind influencing the shuffling of the decks? Studies indicated both could happen (Rhine, in Wolman ed. 1977:33).

[37] This is the so-called sheep/goat distinction, which is the idea that a researcher with a negative attitude towards PSI can psychically influence the results below chance, as compared to a researcher favourably predisposed, who may affect the results in the opposite direction (Rhine, in Wolman ed. 1977:42). Sceptics, such as Susan Blackmore, have pointed out that this is a fairly convenient way of explaining negative results when replication is attempted (1995, 2001).

[38] See Rhine (in Wolman ed. 1977:42)

1985:645,646). In Rhine's day, the nebulosity of this problem meant that the majority of parapsychologists focussed on what they could discern via experimentation.

This period of research was extremely fruitful, and immensely fascinating, but as it deliberately bracketed out questions of survival, falls outside the remit of this thesis. According to Beloff (in Wolman ed. 1977:20), "The decline in the 1960s of behaviourism brought a certain rapprochement between psychology and parapsychology". This rapprochement was also engendered by cultural changes:

> Parapsychology is being taught in an ever-increasing number of colleges in the United States but whether this represents a tribute to its achievements or a concession to the greater intellectual permissiveness[39] of our age (the initiative usually comes from the student body fir whom its unorthodoxy constitutes its principle recommendation!) is a debatable point (Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:20)

Parapsychological research, in the sixties, began to reflect the era.[40] ESP investigations into altered states of consciousness became popular[41], with work being done with the effects of drugs on ESP;[42] on out-of-body verification of targets in awake, meditative and dream-like states;[43] and of reincarnation memories.[44] According to Hövelman, "stimulated by an increasing public interest in questions related to death and dying since the late 1960s, or early 1970s, survival research is gaining ground again" (1985:646).

---

[39] In a similar vein, Beloff (1974:12-13) has stated "The retrieval of reason is gradually turning into a stampede; the "occult" revival threatens to engulf even our seats of learning... In these circumstances the commercial exploitation and debasement of Parapsychology ideas is no less inevitable than the spread of pornography in society... Faced with the bizarre array of gothic wonders which are here brought to light he may well wish to exclaim ... ' Did the sun of the enlightenment shine in vain (?)..."

[40] Within the wider trends of American Humanist Psychology, Abraham Maslow's concept of the "peak experience" had achieved some sort of vogue, and it corresponded with "...the 1960s Hippy culture and dovetailed with the psychedelic world of Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary" (Carrette and King, 2005:75).

[41] See Charles Honorton (in Wolman ed. 1977:435-472), and Bem and Honorton (1994). The work of Honorton with the Gantzfield paradigm (an "altered state of consciousness" experiment designed to remove the sensory information of sight and sound) has been reported in the aforementioned studies as providing the replicabilty needed to provide weak but significant statistical results. It seems to stand unique in the history of Parapsychology, and Robert Matthews, writing in the March 2004 issue of *New Scientist*, compares this to the strength of the results to the clinical trials of a widely used blood-clot dissolving drug Streptokinase, that did not achieve the same statistical significance. Not everyone has been convinced; for a scrupulous but fair critique, see Hyman (1985).

[42] See Charles T. Tart (in Wolman ed. 1977:500-528).

[43] See Robert Van De Castle (in Wolman ed. 1977:473-499).

[44] See, for instance, Ian Stevenson in Wolman ed. (1977:631-660), and for a contemporary evaluation of Stevenson's work in relation to NDE research, Sharma and Tucker, (2004:104-118). Possibly little more than a historical curiosity, Ian Stevenson was himself a research student under J.B. Rhine, and he would go on to supervise Bruce Greyson in Psychiatry, who himself would supervise Raymond Moody (the last two are prominent NDE researchers and will be discussed in the chapters that follow).

The shift back towards survival research[45] nevertheless still contained key differences from NDE research, which was to occur around the same time. In 1975 Raymond Moody published *Life After Life* to great popular acclaim. In 1977 the parapsychologists Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson published *At The Hour of Death*, a more traditional parapsychological investigation. Both Moody's book and Osis and Haraldsson's book share an introduction by the palliative-care founder and NDE proponent Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, and Osis and Haraldsson's book has a quote from Moody on the back cover stating that their work is "a major contribution to the scientific study of the question of post mortem existence", no doubt inspired by a publisher eager to tap into the market that *Life After Life* had generated. Osis and Haraldsson were not aware of Moody's work during their own qualitative study that involved three surveys (1959-60, 1961-64, 1972-73) of American and Indian medical personnel (numbering over a thousand respondents), a point that has been picked up on by subsequent academics and scientists looking at NDEs.[46] Part of this is due to the way Moody wrote his book. Osis and Haraldsson state:

> During the 1960s and the 1970s we alone were working on the phenomena of deathbed visions. Then, in the mid 1970s, a new surge of interest in such research occurred, stimulated mainly by the work of Dr Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and Dr Raymond Moody... This book [*Life After Life*] has different strengths and weaknesses from ours... Moody's data, collected mainly after lectures on survival research, came from members of the audience... However his cases are richer in detail and include more colourful descriptions of afterlife experiences than ours... (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:24)

Osis and Haraldson reported that they "are very encouraged by the resurgence of research into deathbed visions", and that they "hope that it will be broadened to include all of the basic phenomena suggestive of an afterlife- apparitions collectively seen, out-of-body experiences, reincarnation memories, and mediumistic communications – that are ostensibly coming to us from the dead" (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:24). In hoping that NDE reporting would echo other

[45] Not everyone was convinced by these new apparent trends in Parapsychology. The sceptic Ray Hyman suggests "The research on reincarnation, survival after death, paranormal photography, psychic metal-bending, poltergeist phenomena, hauntings, and faith healing, while admittedly colourful, does not deserve the serious attention of scientists... Today the parapsychologists who want the scientific establishment to take their work seriously do not offer for inspection the evidence that previous generations of psychic researchers believed was sufficient... Instead they ask us to look at the trends and patterns they find in research programs carried out in a variety of different parapsychological laboratories" (Hyman, 1985:71).

[46] This is often used as a means to point to the similarity of the NDE as discovered by Moody to the independently done research of Psychical Research and Parapsychology. See, for instance, Paul and Linda Badham (1982:82-83), Kenneth Ring (1980:219), Carol Zaleski (1987:98-101), Susan Blackmore (199342) and Mark Fox (2003:25-28, 240-242).

parapsychological interests, Osis and Haraldsson would reflect the parapsychological heritage of their own research.

In discussing this heritage, the authors analyse other investigations of death-bed phenomena, principally William Barrett's *Death-bed Visions* (1926). Barrett compiled this account just before the advent of the Rhine era (Beloff notes that 1926 was the end of the "heroic age" of Psychical Research [Beloff, in Wolman ed. 1977:20]), and according to Osis and Harlaldsson, this was the first systematic study of its kind that did not categorise deathbed vision accounts alongside other paranormal phenomena (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:17). Barrett found that the deathbed visions of the dying often involve witnessing deceased people who were there to guide the dying into the hereafter, and also that the dying person was not hysterical, but rather was cogent (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:17). In addition, the visions would often offer surprise, such as angels appearing to children without any wings (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:17). In this study, "Osis was struck by the fact that Psychical Researchers, except for Barrett, had totally neglected to look at the experiences of the dying themselves, placing greater emphasis instead upon apparitions of the dead seen by relatives or after the individual's death" (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:17). It is interesting to note that the question is phrased this way, but not switched around: why is it that, suddenly, in the twentieth century, the experiences of the dying move to the fore, instead of apparitions, or those already dead? The prevalence of death in the home would mean that the act of dying (and by implication, deathbed visions) would therefore not hold the same thrall as evidence of someone who has crossed over to the other side and communicated with the living.

In addition, Osis noted that "the reports of professional medical personnel in Barrett's book both seemed more detached, more objective than accounts given by clergymen or relatives who attended the dying" (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:17). In accordance with this, the three studies that Osis and Haraldsson undertook sent a mass survey to doctors and nurses both in the United States and in India in order to ascertain the deathbed vision accounts of their patients (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:17). In the first study, 10 000 questionnaires were mailed out to Medical Professionals in the USA, of which 640 were returned (the authors lament that "In the late 1950s, medical professionals held a much stronger bias against paranormal phenomena than they do now" [Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:27]). Of this, the Doctors and Nurses in question reported 35,540 observations of dying patients, of which 1318 saw apparitions, 884 reported visions, and 753 reported mood elevations shortly before death (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:27). They then compared these to a later Indian study, where around 700 medical professionals filled out their questionnaire

(Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:49). Two-thirds of their book is dedicated to examining the nature, occurrence, and phenomenology of apparitions, and a final third to "near-death experiences" (that is, third person accounts of people's visions as they die, and not to be confused with the post-Moody NDE), and descriptions of the "other world". Like later NDE research, Osis and Haraldsson forego the super-psi conundrum and instead focus on categorising the problem as a choice between "Survival" and "Destruction" (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:46-48).

Further similarities with later NDE research are evident with the roles that Doctors and Nurses seem to play in authenticating the discourse; there is something about the discourse of medicine that seems to offer an authentication over and above the recollections of the patients themselves, or their closest relatives. There are several key differences as well; the authors report third-person accounts of people dying (as opposed to lengthy "first person accounts" in NDE research), and consistently refer to these visions as "hallucinations" throughout the text, even though they are sympathetic with the idea that many of these visions may represent a snapshot of the otherworld. It seems that the work of Moody hit upon the right balance of the first person recollection of the person, and the authoritative stamp of the discourse of medicine, to lend it more appeal. In the words of the theologians Paul and Linda Badham:

> *Their data differed from those used by Moody... in that their reports came from observers of the last moments of dying and not from individuals who recovered from apparent death.* But there are striking similarities between the two categories because many of the dying claimed to see deceased relatives 'welcoming' them into the next world just before they actually died... Osis and Haraldsson based their research on questionnaires completed by over two thousand doctors and nurses in the USA and India about the experiences of their dying patients. The advantage of the data was that it ensured that all the data came from trained medical personnel who were in a position to relate any claimed deathbed visions to the known biomedical and psychological state of the patient, who were familiar with the problems of the critically ill, and who could describe the experiences of their patients in a standard manner so that these could form the basis for detailed computer analysis of the various factors... (Badham and Badham, 1982:82-83)

In actual fact, Osis and Haraldsson analyse visions from both those who have recovered, and those who have died, noticing no difference between the amount and type of apparitions that appear (Osis and Haraldsson, 1977:148). As I discuss in chapters 4 and 5, what differs between NDE accounts and these deathbed visions is not so much a hard and fast distinction between the two, but rather the currency of the imagery involved. The transition from parapsychologists *recounting* third person

accounts of dying patients, to medical doctors *authenticating* the first person phenomenological descriptions of an afterlife goes part of the way to recognising why NDE accounts somewhat overshadow contemporary parapsychological investigations into the "survival hypothesis", although there is much yet to be unpacked on the acute role that Palliative Care and Medicine have in shaping the discourses surrounding the NDE.

2.4 Conclusion

According to the Psychologist Adrian Parker (2001:225), writing in the *Journal for the Society for Psychical Research*, "The study of Near-Death Experiences... has brought a new focus and vitality to the survival problem... Not only did NDEs become a hot media topic, but there appeared to be a sense of progress and discovery absent from formal Parapsychology, which by contrast, may have seemed to many to be, at best, sterile, and at worst, contentious". After noting (one could infer, somewhat enviously) that NDE research has been published in prestigious journals such as the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* and the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Parker argues that NDE research has stagnated, and, in effect, needs to "return to the fold" in order to make progress in establishing evidence for an afterlife (Parker, 2001:226). Such an argument seems to misunderstand the reasons for the cultural appeal of the NDE; when one compares Moody's composite NDE model (recounted in chapter 1) to parapsychological debates surrounding the best way to carry out a meta-analysis of the statistical results of (say) the Gantzfield and Auto-Gantzfield studies, it becomes apparent that these two entirely different levels of discourse, that operate in different areas of Western debates on the survival of death. In this chapter I have argued that the discourse of NDEs shares little similarity with either the social impact of popularist spiritualism in the 19th century, or the psychological basis of early Psychical Research. The deathbed vision accounts that it can apparently be located in a "family tree" with are themselves sandwiched between stories of ghosts, apparitions, telepathy, and the power of the subconscious mind. Latterly, Parapsychology complete with its emphasis upon statistical analysis, its positivist leanings, and its ESP emphasis, bears even less resemblance to contemporary near-death analysis than Psychical Research did. I am unsure, therefore, as to how Parker can argue that NDE research originated in Parapsychology before breaking away (2001:225), as, apart from the aforementioned academic lineage from Rhine to Moody, there seems little family history to speak of. Instead of looking to Psychical Research and Parapsychology to ground the NDE in its "history of ideas", I turn

instead to the discourses of Palliative Care and Medicine with specific reference to the "denial of death", and show how the discourse of the NDE should be understood as originating within a reaction against the denial of death in modern medicine, and how it functions within the wider strata of western post-modern culture.

Chapter 3: Medicine and the NDE

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter I argue that the category of the NDE has been fundamentally shaped by the discourses of Medicine and the Modern Hospice Movement from which it emerged. From the discourse of medicine, NDE literature is awash with masculine imagery of heroic Doctors facing into the abyss and pulling patients back from it.[1] This masculine imagery, I argue, can be tied into psychoanalytic notions of the fear of death, and it also carries a certain currency due to the special place that medical discourses afford within western culture; the role of the doctor can be read as the role of the Priest. This is especially true of many of the founders of the NDE discourse, who have advanced medical or psychiatric degrees, and who argue that the scientific method either suggests evidence for an afterlife, or has given conclusive evidence of it.[2] By positioning religious experiences within the discourse of medical (and therefore scientific) validation, these authors have lent the discourse surrounding the NDE a certain weight of authority and allowed it to become contested within a wider scientific discourse.[3]

From the discourse of the Hospice Movement, there has been a reaction against the perceived silence about death and dying within the West during modernity, as modernity has cloaked death behind curtains, and sanitised death away from "public" spaces (Bauman, 1992, 1998, Lawton, 2000). One of the major founders of the American Hospice movement, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, sought to combat this by giving the dying a voice. By doing so, she argues that she is attempting to redress the silence of death in the West. Her aim was to turn the dying patient into an agent instead of an object, thus transforming experiences previously dismissed as pathological hallucinations into "proof" of a reality to which we travel when we die.[4] In doing so, however, she has substituted the "denial" of death with a construction of death as a peaceful, pain free transition, a construction that ignores the reality of

---

[1] Julia Lawton notes a gender divide in her ethnographic research in a Hospice. Popular conceptions of the death-bed scene were often inspired by Hollywood where the feminine is often associated with females dying in death-bed scenes, with the male lead holding her as she undertakes a dignified death (Lawton, 2000:vi-vii). I shall have more to say about how this parallels (but does not mirror) the NDE researcher later in this chapter, who construct the Doctor in a more masculine heroic role. My use of "heroic" here is aligned with the psychoanalytical analysis of heroism and death, as first postulated by Ernest Becker (1973). I return to this later in the chapter.

[2] See for instance Moody (1975, 1988), Ring (1980), Sabom (1982, 1998).

[3] I discuss this in chapter 5.

[4] See for instance, the edited transcripts of her famous lecture *The Cocoon and the Butterfly* in *Death is of Vital Importance* (1995), and also *On Life After Death* (1991).

bodily decay and the loss of self.[5] This construction of death, rather than bringing death to the fore, merely uses one set of taboos, that of modernity's "denial" of death, to hide another, the reality of bodily decay.

The discourse of NDEs was born between the discourse of medicine that has viewed death as failure, and the reaction against this view by the discourses of Palliative Care and the Hospice Movement, which saw death as transitional journey. In order to explore the discursive formations that allowed the birth of the NDE discourse, I look at four facets that have laid this groundwork. First, I look at the supposed "denial of death" that has been attributed to Modernity, and explore how this has changed with the advent of Post-Modernity. I propose that there is little recognition of the insights of post-modern theory in the debate surrounding the 'denial of death' in the West, and suggest that the concept of the NDE exists within a wider "simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1994:364) that blurs the distinction between real and unreal, and reassures the spiritual consumer that there will be life after death.[6] Second, I narrow the focus down to the 'denial of death' thesis in modern medicine, and explore how the removal of death from the public sphere into the hospital laid the groundwork for making death 'exotic', which ties into my wider argument that part of the appeal of the NDEs is the exoticness of the medical procedures. Third, I examine the birth of the Hospice movement and Palliative Care, exploring how the latter's reaction against the treatment of death and dying in modern medicine attempted to redefine death as a transition to another stage of reality. I argue that, by focusing on the dying patient as a person, and not a sign of defeat for the medical Doctor, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross opened up a space for the deathbed visions of the dying to be reported. Even so, whilst her feminine emphasis upon "rebirth", and her work with the terminally ill on a 'one-way ticket' found a voice within the wider counter-culture of the sixties and seventies, it did not have the same cultural impact as masculine Doctors bringing people back from the brink of existence in traumatic

---

[5] See Julia Lawton (2000:10-16).

[6] It should be noted that Foucault was not a Post-Modernist: one has only to lay his work out besides Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, or even Frederic Jameson to see how strikingly different it is (Foucault's analysis of governmentality, surveillance, the body, psychiatry and the prison are a different portfolio of themes from commodity, mass-media, double-coding, or the cultural logic of late capitalism). I link the work of Baudrillard with Foucault in the following way: I utilise Foucault's Archaeological approach as my main means of uncovering the hidden rules that structure the subject at hand (therefore my method), and Baudrillard's work as a sociological *commentary* on facets of the age in which we live. Gregory Alles (2001:123) talks about the use of Foucault in our (post) modern age "Foucault's writings ... read like a catalogue of cold war themes... Foucault's pervasive concern(s are) with power, politics, surveillance, and governmentality... (r)ather than view the world as an unstable network of force relations... those of us who live after the Cold War might see it in terms of ever-shifting sets of exchange transactions". Of course, these two themes are not mutually exclusive, a point Carrette (2001:133) points out in reply to Alles: "... (t)he panopticon has moved outside the walls and into society... Foucault's ideas need to be carried forward, and be culturally repositioned..." This reflects what Bauman identifies, when he quotes E. Allemand "...'it is not Big Brother who watches us, it is we who watch Big Brother..." (1997:165).

circumstances. I therefore explore the wider of appeal of this latter image under the category *Doctor as Hero/Doctor as a Priest.* This mediation between worlds happens in the sacred space of the Operating Theatre, and these four facets flesh out my wider argument that it is the Operating Theatre that opens up the conditions of possibility for the category NDE.

3.2 The Denial of Death

In this section I argue that the 'denial of death' thesis, is a valid analytical category for examining the way 'death' has been silenced in the public sphere in the West during Modernity. This thesis, traceable to the work of British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer (1965), argues that thanks to the changing social circumstances in the West, death became an unmentionable act, especially during the first half of the twentieth century. Recently, this thesis has been disputed on the grounds that a) it harbours romantic notions for a pre-modern era (although if one was to argue that it *necessarily* follows that the denial of death thesis is wrong because it is wistful of other times, one would be committing a logical fallacy), b) it does not take into account the fact that health workers have dealt with death all throughout the twentieth century, and their numbers are not inconsiderable, and c) it ignores the fact that, especially post-1960, death has been beamed into our living rooms every night (from Vietnam through to the second Gulf War). I think that this last argument is especially telling, and by intersecting it with the work of Jean Baudrillard (1994) and Zygmunt Bauman (1992) I argue that *there is still a denial of death in our culture even now* but one that is bound up with a wider blurring of the distinction between real and unreal in Western culture: accounts of the NDE function to inoculate people against the realities of physical death. In this section my exploration shall therefore necessitate an examination of a number of differing perspectives, before I link the strands together in the category of the NDE.

It is widely argued that, due to the encroaching secularisation of the West (and the accompanying rise in scientific materialism) that occurred between the eighteenth and twentieth century, death has been hidden away from public spaces; as people lost their faith in the afterlife, they have emphasised the remembrance of this life instead of the hope of the next one (Jalland, 1996:367).[7] A correlation has been traced between the 19th century rise of Darwinism, the emerging acceptance of agnosticism and atheism, and the truncation of the flamboyant public mourning

[7] See, for instance, Gorer(1965), Aries(1974), Bauman(1992, 1998), Jalland (1996, 2002), Clark(1993), Lawton(2000).

rituals and displays of grief that characterised the Victorian era (Jalland, 1996:367). This truncation was exacerbated by the catastrophic social upheaval associated with the First World War, which killed off notions of Hell within mainstream protestant denominations. After all, ministers could not easily preach about the realities of a hell in the afterlife to soldiers that had gone through hell on the battlefield (Walter, 1994:15). Death was, for many, uncoupled from spiritual concerns about the afterlife, and the focus moved to medical and psychological models of grief (Walter, 1994:15). This further changed the way people grieved. With so many bodies being lost on the battlefield, grieving became less about a family ritual and became nationalised; people grieved as a nation.

The emphasis upon secular remembrance instead of glorification of the afterlife, combined with the rising industrialisation of society and the increasing specialisation of medical care and technology, made 'death' an increasingly specialised concern (Jalland, 1996). Additionally, with the advent of modern medicine, the emphasis upon life being saved at all costs engendered a view of death as a form of defeat; the dying patient was neglected in favour of patients that could be saved (Morse, 2001, Lawton, 2000:10-14). Within the wider strata of western culture, the changes in modern discourses meant that death was no longer as visible with the public sphere of existence as it would have been before, a point picked up on in the sixties as indicative of a "denial of death" within the West (Gorer, 1965). The "denial of death" thesis became a prominent concern not only within the history of ideas (Aries, 1974) but within anthropology (Gorer, 1965), history (Jalland, 1996), sociology (specifically the sociology of death) (Clark, 1995), psychology (Kastenbaum, and Aisenberg, 1972), and cultural studies (Bauman, 1992, 1998).

But the denial of death hypothesis has not been without its critics. According to Walter (1993:286), most arguments surrounding the changing conceptions of death and dying, specifically in a medical context, should be treated with a note of caution as they harbour a romantic streak that is wistful of a pre-modern era; they associate the home death with a good and/or dignified one.[8] Further, the 'denial of death' thesis has been over-elaborately discussed in recent post-modern commentary, as Seale (1998:53) indicates:

> Baudrillard... argues that 'There is an irreversible evolution from savage [sic] societies to our own; little by little the dead cease to exist, they are thrown out

[8] Walter (1994:22-23) argues that "(s)everal authors nod their heads sadly at the sorry state into which modern death has got itself into and look wistfully at death in previous centuries and in far flung climes... I would rather die in this century, with its medical help, than in any previous century; it is only in this century that the poor as well as the rich get a decent burial; and it is only in modern bureaucratic welfare states that a widow need not fear utter destitution..."

> of symbolic circulation'... Bauman... extends this with a poetic though macabre metaphor, suggesting that whereas people in tribal or traditional societies eat their enemies, thus incorporating them into the life of the living, people in modern society vomit or spew them back out, designating them as Other... These, really, are no more than fanciful ways of expressing the familiar denial thesis.

Seale sees the work of Baudrillard and Bauman as being poetic without marshalling any exacting analysis or scrupulous sociological dissection, a common enough complaint in regards to the excesses of Post-Modern theory.[9] Nevertheless, *contra* Seale, I think that both aforementioned scholars have their uses in this debate, a point I return to below.

On a different front, the sociologist Allan Kellehear (1996) has challenged the idea that there ever was a denial of death within modern Western culture *per se*; just because people did not necessarily discuss these things in public, does not mean that they were part of a psychologically motivated denial of death *en mass*. Discretion surrounding death is, on this analysis, not necessarily denial. Rather, according to Seale (1998:54), "(d)eath is in fact actively managed in modernity... the host of 'experts' in healthcare... are, after all, also a part of 'society'...".[10] On this analysis, to utilise the "denial of death" thesis is to risk falling in to an academic cliché that misses how death has been managed and dealt with in the West. Further,

> ...one can also see in the denial of death thesis a rather limited view of the place of ritual in social life, this being conceived as occurring in the formal, large scale events commonly described in anthropological studies. The view of social life as being imbued with ritual activity, some of which can be mobilised to deal with the problem of mortality... is absent (Seale, 1998:55)

The lack of community wide rituals put in place to deal with death has then been replaced with individual rituals for coping; in effect, *people get by in their own way*.

Nonetheless, even those, such as Seale, who dispute the "denial of death" thesis as a cultural wide taboo still recognise that "... there are differences in the way that modern and tribal or traditional societies manage the problem of mortality, and that solutions are roughly congruent with those identified in the denial of death hypothesis; sequestration, the imposition of social death, the management of dying

[9] See Pinker (2002) for an example of a typically bewildered response to the annals of Post-Modernism, and for a more informed, but nonetheless sceptical analysis, see Norris (1993), and Eagleton (1997).

[10] Anxiety about death could, of course, also affect health professionals. The Doctor Glin Bennet argues that "... do Doctors have more anxiety than non-Doctors about the realities and implications of death? I am inclined to believe this is true... if the young person has deep anxiety about death, then one way of coping with them is to join those whose business is to keep death at bay..." (Bennet, 1987:167).

by experts, a decline in formal, community inspired changes" (Seale, 1998:53). Like Seale, the sociologist Tony Walter also recognises:

> (However) (w)ith the partial exception of the media, the public practises and discourses are impersonal and unrelated to the private experiences of individuals who are dying and bereaved... private experience and public discourse do not tally... (Walter, 1994:22-23)

Even though people get by in their own way, there is incongruence between 'impersonal' public practises and the 'private' sphere where people grieve. In both Seale and Walter, the distinct impression arises that the 'denial of death' thesis retains some analytical strength even if both authors dispute the clichés and excesses that often accompany it.

Before this is unpacked further, I wish to analyse the contours of the "denial of death" thesis and draw some parallels with the work of Michel Foucault. Certain facets of this debate about the denial of death are reminiscent of the assumed denial of sex within Victorian times, an assumption that Foucault (1979) argued was in fact the reverse of the truth; far from denying sex, the Victorians were actually obsessed with it.[11] Translating Foucault's analysis into this debate, the denial of death within western culture becomes anything but: in reality, we have witnessed a "veritable discursive explosion", to utilise Foucault's term (1979:17). Death has become the subject of this discursive explosion in the annals of Western cultural discourses. It has become exoticised and transformed first by the denial of death within modernity, and, leading on from this, the explosion of mass media in post-modernity.

The arguments surrounding the denial of death in the West were first brought to prominence by the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer (1965).[12] He stated:

> ... (S)ex was the Pornography of the Victorians, death is the pornography of our times... Pornography is, no doubt, the opposite face, the shadow, (sic) of prudery... (Gorer, [1965] 1995:18,19)

---

[11] The historian Roy Porter disagrees with facets of Foucault's argument. He agrees with Foucault that "... sex must be understood as discursively produced... It may be reasonable to argue that a history of investigations into the solar system tells us of a move from ignorance... to information. But 'sexual knowledge' is not like astronomical enquiry (heavenly bodies are just objects; human bodies are subjects and objects at the same time)... Sex advice books are thus continually reinventing the object they are purporting to discover, depict and even legislate for... the ages which supposedly repressed or suppressed sexual discourse, were, in reality, talking endlessly about it... sexual writings flourished as never before..." (Porter, 1995:8,9). Nevertheless it "... is less clear... that Foucault's wholesale dismissal of the 'repressive hypothesis' is historically justified... (w)hat he failed to do... was to pay sufficient attention to its tone and implications, those whom it included, excluded, those it empowered, those it disqualified..." (Porter, 1995:9).

[12] Gorer's arguments are famous in the field of Death Studies; see Houlbrooke (1989), Bauman, (1992), Clark, (1993) Howarth and Jupp (1996), Seale, (1998), Jalland (1996, 2002), and Lawton (2000).

According to Gorer, in the nineteenth century discussions of sexual acts were unmentionable in polite society (along with birth), death had no such stigma attached to it (Gorer, [1965] 1995:20).[13] Children's literature was rife with death-related stories, in part because of the high mortality rates at the time (Jalland, 1996:7), and children "were encouraged to think about death, their own deaths, and the edifying of cautionary deaths of others" (Gorer, [1965] 1995:20). Grief and tragedy were big business in Victorian times, and Victorian literature was awash with tales of sorrow and remorse (Jalland, 1996:7). Customs surrounding grief encouraged hysterical public outbursts of emotion, and extolled eloquent expressions of the sense of sorrow and loss (Jalland, 1996, 2002). Gorer continues:

> It can have been a rare individual who, in the nineteenth century with its high mortality, had not witnessed at least one actual dying, as well as paying their respects to "beautiful corpses"... in the twentieth century... copulation has become more and more "mentionable"... death (on the other hand) has become more and more unmentionable as a natural process. I cannot recollect a novel or play from the last twenty years which has a "deathbed scene" in it, describing in any detail the death "from natural causes" of a major character; this topic was a set piece for most of the eminent Victorian and Edwardian writers... (Gorer, [1965] 1995:20)

Looking for the cause of this reversal, Gorer stated that (writing in 1965) he could not find a single acquaintance over 60 who had not witnessed a painful death of a relative. For anyone under thirty, though, the opposite was true; he could not uncover one who had witnessed a painful death (Gorer, [1965] 1995:20). This has led to a society where the discussion of death is taboo, where the "natural processes of corruption and decay have become disgusting, as disgusting as the natural processes of birth and copulation a century ago..." (Gorer, [1965] 1995:20). And yet, despite this, whilst "natural death" is more and more smothered in prudery, violent death plays an ever growing part in the fantasies offered to mass audiences – "detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction, and eventually horror comics" (Gorer, [1965] 1995:21). To be sure, many of these forms of fictions existed in Victorian times, but the question is one of a shift of emphasis; natural

[13] Foucault states "... (c)alling sex by its name became more difficult and more costly... in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it became necessary to subjugate it on the level of language... At the level of discourses and their domain, however, practically the opposite phenomenon occurred... I am thinking not so much of the probable increase of 'illicit' discourses... But... the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself..." (Foucault, 1979:18). Foucault located an increase in the policing of discourse by governmental structures in matters relating to the body. I am not sure that there is a corresponding "top-down" centralised diffusion of power in the policing of the denial of death; rather, I suspect that there is a micro-fusion of different structures that we in the West take part in, a point I return to in the body of the text.

death, and people's exposure to it, has markedly decreased, and so death has become a shadowy other to be dwelled on by facets of "lower culture".[14]

Locating the source of this shift, Gorer believes that the change in taboos can be traced to the change in religious belief. Whilst in the Victorian era the "sins of the flesh" could be directly linked to the Pauline doctrine of the sinfulness of the body (Gorer [1965] 1995:20), the continuing decline in religious belief in the West, coupled with improving medical techniques and standards, has led to both a declining death rate and death being moved away from the home and into the medical ward. Gorer continues:

> ...people have to come to terms with basic facts of birth, copulation, and death, and somehow accept their implications... if we dislike the modern pornography of death, then we must give back death to death- natural death- its parade and publicity, readmit grief and mourning. If we make death unmentionable in polite society... we almost ensure the continuation of the "horror comic". (Gorer, from Williamson and Schneidman, 1995:22)

As is somewhat evident in this quote, Gorer's text harbours a puritanical streak. There is a sense that he wishes to hark back to a morality of the "polite society".[15] By

---

[14] A closely related area is the relationship between sex and death, an area that falls outside the remit of this thesis. For Bataille (1962:100-101), "...death is always the symbol of the retreating waters after the violence of the storm... the multiplication of beings goes hand in hand with death. The Parents survive the birth of their offspring but it is only temporary... the appearance of the newcomers guarantees the disappearance of their predecessors..." For Freud, "while we might like to think of ourselves 'like Gods', we are gods with genitals and anuses" (Clack, 2002: 61). Freud saw culture as our means to transcend the twin facts of sex and death, and (latterly) postulated a struggle between the life instinct (which encompassed the sex instinct) and the death instinct. In the words of Clack (2002:65) these postulated instincts imply "... a connection between sex and death: both can be equated to fundamental instincts, and both are concerned with the attempt to restore organic life to an earlier state of affairs..." Further, "... it is not surprising that the very reality of bodily existence should elicit a sense of dread, and it is this dread that which translates into a resistance of the anal, and, ultimately, to rejection of sex itself" (Clack, 2002: 65). On a psycho-analytical reading then, Geoffrey Gorer's fears are bound up within the fears of infantile loss of control: "... (e)vidence for this claim might be found in the fascination with horror felt in contemporary fiction and film... primarily they horrify us because they remind us of our childhood experience of a body which is out of control, thus revealing the fiction of the autonomous self..." (Clack, 2002:65). Whilst the specific semantics of Freud's arguments may be disputed, his recognition that the self relies on a sense of mastery through bodily control has been borne out by the Hospice ethnography of Lawton (2000), where she noticed a dissolution of a sense of self within cancer patients who suffered a loss of bodily restraint. I return to this in the body of the text, and I discuss the relationship between psychoanalysis and death in chapter 6.

[15] There are parallels between Gorer's position and Foucault, but with one *crucial* difference. Whilst both recognise that cultural taboos end up working themselves out within different facets of a discourse, Foucault wished to utilise this to *obfuscate* normative gender categories and dismantle notions of the "natural" way to have sex (1979), whereas Gorer wished to *romanticise* them by returning to the natural way of having sex. Gorer states "If marital intercourse be considered the natural expression of sex..."(Gorer, from Williamson and Schneidman, 1995:20-22). Gorer states, in regards to the sexual imagery to be found in Hinduism, "I have never felt quite certain that the three-dimensional poses plastiques on so many Hindu temples... have really the highfalutin worship of the lifeforce or the creative aspect of sex which their apologists claim for them; many of them seem to me very much like 'feelthy' pictures" (Gorer, {1965]1995:19). Further, he makes some interesting comments for an anthropologist, including the argument that pornography only arises in "literary" societies, as he doubts how it could be spread in "illiterate" ones (Gorer, [1965], 1995:19).

seeking to step back to "natural death" he himself falls into the trap of romanticising the past; as Lawton pointed out (2000), natural death is not necessarily synonymous with a 'good death', and there are specific medical reasons why death has moved from the home to the hospital and the Hospice. According to Lawton, the processes of 'natural death and decay' can be and are horrible and disgusting depending on the illness and the symptoms of bodily distress (2000:vi-x). Children's literature extolling the virtues of the good death could, after-all, hide the realities of bodily decay in just the same way as the "horror-comic" does (although there seems little doubt that children in Victorian times would be far more familiar with death than western children in the present). Further, just because people were more familiar with the realities of death a hundred years ago does not necessarily mean that this was a *choice* they made in the way that someone in Britain or America may choose a home death now. Given the biological realities that having (say) certain types of cancers entails (and the burnout that round the clock care can bring on families caring for suffering relatives [Lawton:2000:vii]), a certain care should be taken not to dismiss discretion surrounding death as a bad thing.

Nonetheless, I think it is possible to hold to Gorer's general thesis (that death has become fetishlike in popular culture via the removal of it from the public sphere), without holding on to a romantic idea of 'correct' death (or 'correct' sex, for that matter, which seems to be a classic case of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'). His rigid stance has led to questions as to the linearity of his binary between sex and death. Kellehear postulates:

> In the thirty years preceding the 1960s, lay people often did display an extraordinary reluctance to speak about death, but these same groups found it just as difficult to discuss sex. Discussions of masturbations, homosexuality, incest or child sexual abuse were thought to be inappropriate topics for dinner conversation ... Death was not denied, nor was sex... (Kellehear, 1996:87)

So, according to Kellehear, death was a subject that was not discussed, as opposed to socially repressed. He continues:

> ...the postwar baby-boom generation was different. By 1960, 80 percent of American homes had a television... and it is estimated that the first television generation has viewed some 10 000 acts of homicide, rape, or related forms of violence... Even now, the sociologist Michael Kearl reports that, by the age of sixteen, the typical American has witnessed "some eighteen thousand homicides on television". For these postwar generations, timidity about sex or death was not only laughable, it was also objectionable. The heart of American liberalism quickened in the 1960s, feuled by higher education, the

> Vietnam War, the rise of popular culture in music and protest, and religious reforms such as Vatican II. (Kellehear, 1996:87)

For Kellehear, there has been a linear progression of discussions about death from the end of the nineteenth century through to the modern day as the baby-boomer generation begat the sixties generation, a generational difference that coincided with the birth of both the modern Hospice movement and sociological analysis of death and dying. Any denial of death was thus an extremely localised blip on the strata of Western secular society, a blip that did not even cover all facets of our culture. Gorer's thesis dissolves further: according to him, the Victorians could not speak about sex in polite society but were happy to discuss death, whereas we have witnessed twentieth century taboo against discussing death while sex has become "mentionable". But this analysis is too linear; both sex and death were "unmentionable" in the period preceding the sixties, and so Gorer's binary inversion is a little too neat.

The crucial problem with Gorer's argument is that his somewhat traditional morality posits an essentialist definition of "pornography" (I come to the link between NDEs and pornography below). For Gorer, pornography is the inversion of the proper; but, rather than this inversion being culturally defined, it is stuck within a rigid analysis of "proper" sexual conduct and "improper" sexual misuse. This binary is carried over into his understanding of the so-called "pornography of death", a turn of phrase that lends an unhelpful moral dimension to an anthropological analysis. The linking of pulp stories, westerns, science fiction *et al* with the term pornography is misleading as it attempts to maintain a tenuous distinction between literature and non-literature that neither helps explore the changing cultural matrix of death, nor gets any closer to actually explaining how the term "pornography" can be made to cover both a 1950's science fiction movie and lurid Victorian literature.[16] The *images* associated with the word "pornography" in the present day are completely different from how these discourses were conceived of in Victorian times.[17] The proliferation of

---

[16] Terry Eagleton (1996:14) states "...it will not do to see literature as an 'objective' descriptive category, neither will it do to say that literature is just what people whimsically choose to call literature. For there is nothing whimsically choose to call literature... literature does not exist in the sense that insects do... (t)hey refer in the end not simply to private taste, but to the assumptions by which certain social groups maintain power over others". As we can see in the work of Gorer, his definition of the term literature might be seen to reinforce certain perspectives on proper morality.

[17] Jane Juffer (2004:60) states that "...the many obscenity trials of the twentieth century uncoupled the 'pornographic' from anything experts could affirm to be of 'scientific' or 'literary' value: 'pornography' officially became words or images designed primarily for sexual arousal..." Further, "(t)oday, it would seem truer than ever that the borders... shift and blur into other genres (the uncontrolled, non-commercial production on the internet of nerds on the internet creating endless new possibilities and problems)... much of what anti-porn feminists refer to as classic instances of pornography are taken from the Slasher and Horror genre..." (2004:60-61).

pornographic material amongst the Victorians was not simply a matter of their repressions being worked out into other cultural facets, as Gertrud Koch (2004:154) points out:

> In the age of Taylorism, a dramatic rise in the dissemination of pornography was observed in Victorian England. It remains to be established that this sudden interest is strictly the result of the notoriously repressive Victorian society, that is, that it was conceived as an outlet for damned up passions. Rather, the dissemination of pornography is connected to specific social aspects of modernisation...

For Koch, the aspects of modernisation that really jumpstarted the modern pornographic industry were the advent of early pornographic cinema in the early twentieth century, a technology that changed the role and function of how pornography was interacted with and absorbed by the consumer.[18]

Rather than read the use of death in popular culture through the lens of pornography, a more fruitful vein of analysis is to read twentieth century pornography alongside other cultural discourses; we should see death and pornography as an outworking of the cultural logic of post-modern society.[19] So, both death (in popular culture) and pornography are simulations; "(c)ounterfeit and reproduction always imply an anguish... (t)here is always uneasiness before the mirror image... " (Baudrillard, 1994:367-368n). The NDE is a simulation as well: in reading a first-person based NDE account, one reads about the traumatic death situations that other people have faced, and from which they returned. NDE accounts do not necessarily sooth the ontological crises of those on a spiritual quest as much as they provide a slightly uncomfortable mirror image of death that reassures the Self that there is no non-existence.[20]

---

[18] Koch (2004:154) quotes Theodor Adorno who argued that" '... (t)he eye has adapted to bourgeois rationality and ultimately to a highly industrialised order by accustoming itself to interpreting reality, apriori, as a world of objects, basically as a world of commodities...' ". Further, " ...the dissemination of pornography is connected to specific social aspects of modernisation... (t)raining the eye means adapting the sense of sight to strategies of socialisation and modernisation" (Koch, 2004:154).

[19] Jane Gaines (2004:31) argues that "... Pornography requires the breach of the real world/fantasy world separation... (it) asks its viewers to produce the ultimate sign that something 'really' happened..." . Further, "Linda Williams... in her important article on 'body genres' asserts that horror melodrama and porn make the body scream, cry, and come, and (Richard) Dyer... compares pornography to weepies, thrillers, and low comedy' genres... hence their low status" (Gaines, 2004:31). Finally, "Pornography... challenges us to think through the philosophical problem of representation, and its realities, representations sandwiched by two realties... (q)uestions of realism are tied up with particular pulpabilities..." (2004:32). Perhaps William's distinction is too rigid; it assumes that what we would now identify as "literature" and/or "high art" (and therefore cerebral), is not associated with making people "scream, cry, and come..." but this says nothing for the way that such literature/art was understood in the age in which it was written (I think particularly of Shakespeare here). Nevertheless, in *our* times, her point is valid.

[20] It has not escaped my attention that this is the exact opposite of what Mircea Eliade argues in relation to myth (myth invokes "the primordial event" [Segal, 2004:56], whereas I am arguing that the NDE 'myth'

With the advent of modern technology, and the move into post-modernity within the West, I argue that our concept of death has been fundamentally altered: wider cultural commentary on the changing ontology of death refers substantially to fictional and mass-media representations of death.[21] Against the readings of Seale, Walter, and Kellehear, I think that there are certain strands of Post-Modern commentary that allow some illumination; I shall therefore utilise the work of Baudrillard as a lens through which to explore the sociological concept of Post-Modernity and how it intersects with the arguments surrounding "the denial of death".[22]

For Baudrillard, "Culture is now dominated by simulations" (Poster, 1988:1), as opposed to "face to face symbolic exchange and print" (Poster, 1988:1). His focus on the diversification of the mass media leads him to transform traditional Marxist critiques of the modes of production (as to him the age of mechanical reproduction was over) into an analysis of how the commodity is no longer understood as having a utility, but rather "...its force is directed... to desire" (Poster, 1988:1). His work is therefore an "...attempt to grasp the strange mixture of fantasy and desire that is unique to late twentieth century culture" (Poster, 1988:2). Baudrillard argues,

> (s)o it is with simulation, in so far as it is opposed to representation. The latter starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent... Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false

---

inoculates against the reality of the 'event', as it were). I discuss Eliade's ideas on Myth, briefly, in the footnotes of chapter 6.

[21] See for instance, Geoffrey Gorer (1965), Allan Kellehear (2000: xvii). In an article that begins with the question "When Death knocks at our door, how should we answer?", Kellehear looks to *Star Wars* and the *Arabian Nights* to provide illustration and guidance. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but it does reflect a change in our approach in the West to issues of guidance and understanding. We now look for help from material that is *knowingly* fictional in place of religious narratives that we (in the West) once would have regarded as real. Baudrillard (1994:362) states "...to simulate is not simply to feign...'Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms...'... simulating threatens the difference between true and false, between 'real' and 'imaginary'...".

[22] I would qualify this with a note of caution however: the ability to live in a world where representation becomes as totalising as Baudrillard implies is the privilege of the very few. In the words of Bryan S. Turner (1993:85) "Baudrillard's own style... is successful because it simulates the condition it wishes to convey rather than producing a critical style in opposition to postmodern culture..." Baudrillard himself argues that critique is a metaphysical remnant of modernity and the only critical position viable is silence (Poster, 1988:1-2); therefore, he would not believe that such a critique is possible. I do not agree. Frederic Jameson states "postmodernism is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new order (the rumour about which, under the name of "postindustrial society", ran through the media a few years ago) but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systematic modification of capitalism itself" (1991:xi). The implications of this can be fleshed out with Baudrillard's example of Disneyland: "Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entanglements of simulation.. Pirates, the Frontier, Future World etc. ... In this imaginary world the only phantasmagoria is in the inherent warmth and affection of the crowd, and in that sufficiently excessive number of gadgets used there to specifically maintain the multitudinous effect..." (1994:365). This simulated world hides the reality of the workers who are employed behind the scenes to make this work, a point that Jameson is making by disputing the term "post-industrial". We may have moved into a post-industrial age, but all that has happened is that the industry has been *moved out of the West*. On a parallel note, the reality of death may be cloaked within a world of simulation, but the industry surrounding it still exists, even if veiled (a point I return to in the body of the text).

> representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum... (1994:364).

'Simulacrum' is Baudrillard's (archaic) way of expressing the idea that reality is replaced by a substitute that smoothes over any reference to the real; death becomes lost in simulations that blur the difference between real and unreal.

For instance, it is recognised widely on all sides that we in the West have our own elaborate rituals surrounding death and that death is more than just a biological process (Kellehear, 1996, Lawton, 2000).[23] What is less frequently commented on is the intermingling of mass-media discourses within this cultural commentary; the formation of our understandings of death and bodily decay rests, in part, on understandings borne out of what we absorb through the mass media.[24] This analysis allows us to explain Kellehear's objection to the "denial of death" perspective, where he argues that the first television generation "has viewed some 10 000 acts of homicide, rape, or related forms of violence", and that the typical American has witnessed "some eighteen thousand homicides on television". Far from raising a generation savvy with the realities of death and dying, this has in fact inoculated a generation against such a reality. Julia Lawton talks about her experiences of death before she embarked on an ethnography of a Hospice:

> I did not lack a conception of death altogether. Films, TV dramas and novels... were filled with images of death: soldiers dying heroically on the battlefields, cowboys and Indians in mortal combat in Westerns; and cops and robbers in

---

[23] I use the binary "West/Rest" as the literature I deal with reads the "west" as synonymous with Britain and America; I focus particularly on the latter because of Kübler-Ross's influence of the NDE field. Things are, of course, not as simple as this- Seale (1998:112-112) highlights some of the differences in response to medical diagnosis in European cultures. Further, there are differences in ritual custom between Britain and America; in the latter, for instance, there is a tendency towards embalming and open-coffin memorial services, a custom traditionally absent from British culture. Additionally, as Walter (1994:24) points out "... (b)ecause of their finely honed fears of lawsuits, American doctors are more likely to engage in unfruitful high tech intervention so they can claim that they tried everything; for the same reason, they are more likely to inform the patient of the prognosis." This is different from Britain, where "...our emotional reserve may make bereavement a particularly isolating and protracted experience and it maybe significant that two of the most cited critics of modern bereavement, Geoffrey Gorer and Colin Murray-Parkes, are British" (Walter, 1994:24).

[24] There is a danger, readily apparent in the verbiage of Baudrillard, of *creating* that which one wants to *analyse*. Nonetheless, I feel that social developments in the so-called information age set it apart from other times and cultures. The Utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, in discussing this issue with Noel Rooney, makes the following point on this matter: "the ability to know what's happening everywhere instantly by having CNN or something similar there beaming it into our living rooms; that connection with remote parts of the world that we never had (is new). The idea that we can actually have an impact on places more or less instantly, too, by responding in some way or not responding ... it creates a different sort of community; I think you can't really speak of the notion of a single community if you have to send someone for three months to find out what's going on, and it's going to take them another three months to get a report out, and then if you want to respond, it's going to take who knows how long..." (www.nthposition.com, accessed 11/12/05). Similarly, as Derrida points out, we cannot analyse "...[the media]... without taking into account so many spectral effects, the new speed of apparition (we understand this word in its ghostly sense) of the simulacrum, the synthetic or prosthetic image, and the virtual event" (cited by Sword, 2002:163).

> armed shoot-outs. What is notable about these shoot-outs is that death occurs in an instant, the wounded person staggering slightly before falling to the ground and dying. Running in parallel with these masculine images, more feminised portrayals also occur... In these depictions the heroine (for the dying person in this context is normally a she) is viewed elegantly reclining in bed, hair perfect in place, surrounded by 'loved ones'... These two seemingly dissimilar portrayals in fact have strong points of affinity: it is not so much what is represented, but what is *not* represented in both, that I came to recognise as significant (Lawton, 2000:vii, italics hers)

There is, therefore, an interaction between death and the wider media/cultural discourses, one that does not specifically deny death, but distorts it. In the case of the denial of death in Western culture, as we have moved from modernity into post-modernity, our denial of (and obsession with) death has been cross-pollinated within the mass media. This process has led scholars such as Bauman (1992,1998) to query whether we really are more open about death now, or whether there is a more insidious denial of death as the sting and finality of death is numbed, a point that shall be returned to. This is directly pertinent in relation to the NDEs because on this analysis the NDE becomes part of a wider post-modern phenomenon that is used to mask the realities of death and dying. In the words of Bauman:

> ...death ceases to be a one off act, a single, unique event with irreparable consequences. The sting of finality has been pulled out from mortality, all mortality, including the mortality of immortality; things disappear from view for a time only. Death is but a suspension, a transitional state... (Bauman, 1992:173)

Death, for Bauman, is rehearsed every day, and the "centre of public vision is permanently overcrowded... the 'news' must fight tooth and nail for the a share of attention..." (Bauman, 1992: 187,189). It has been sanitized by the emergence of television and movie screens - "people dying 'like flies' in droves take the sting of dread from the sight of death" (1998:66). Further,

> in the society that emerged at the end of the modern era it is the majestic yet distant immortal bliss that is being deconstructed into a sackful (sic) of bigger or smaller, but always in reach, satisfactions... (Bauman, 1992:164)

The ramifications of this are therefore clear; we do not live in a society that denies death in as much as in a society that has hidden it. In the words of Baudrillard:

> ...we want this immortality here and now, this real-time afterlife, *without having resolved the problem of the end.* For there is no real time end, no real time of death. This is an absurdity... The problem of the end becomes crucial and insoluble. *There will no longer be an end.* We enter upon a kind of radical indeterminacy... (Baudrillard, 1994:90-91, italics his)

For Baudrillard, the cultural-age that we are in is based on a glut of the immediate instead of a "deferred immortality" (Baudrillard, 1994:89), but, not having solved the problem of our own mortality, our afterlife is lived out in real-time that brings about this ontological indeterminacy. [25] So, in amongst the constructions, the simulations, the virtual worlds and the pornography, images of real death and destruction *out-there*, whether death by natural causes, wars, famine or genocide, slip by; "(t)here is no more secure place to hide than the crowd... (t)he bigger the better"(Bauman,1992:172). The NDE is part of this crowd: a religious experience that offers a hint of immortality here and now, without impinging on our day-to-day life, and one that obscures the realities of death and bodily decay.[26] Kellehear's argument that "(f)ew would disagree with the observation that not a week goes by in America without a television, radio, magazine, or newspaper story on this experience... It is difficult to keep track of all the NDE material in the Print media..."(1996:76) illustrates exactly how the NDE is part of the "Simulacrum". The mass-media discourses that carry these stories will just as quickly switch to the next topical point, and accounts of the NDE can be read about, or watched, and then forgotten.

In this section I have analysed the debate surrounding the 'denial of death' in the West and argued that it has some merit, especially when illuminated with post-modern theory. By analysing the somewhat puritanical idea of the 'pornography of death', I have realigned the contours of the debate to show how the NDE takes its place amongst a wider simulacrum that rehearses death, via the mass media, every day. It is not just that death has been removed from the public sphere and has become exoticised (although this is a valid sociological assessment), but that death itself has been transformed by the advent of post-modernity, where it is divided up, and intermingled with other fictional (and non-fictional) accounts. Thus, in NDE accounts, death is rehearsed, and, in associating with the NDEr, the "I" survives at the end of it. This argument shall become crucial in my reasoning for why the NDE did not enjoy the popularity that many of the originators of this discourse thought it

---

[25] In the end though, talk of mirror images and simulations can only get us so far; in order to simulate, they have to have something to simulate in the first place. Bauman (1992:155) states "(p)ersonal experiences can be enclosed by the frame of the television screen. One doubts whether the world can..." He continues "*(p)ace* Baudrillard, many people... need to sink their teeth into real bread before they abandon themselves to munching images. It becomes a philosopher and analyst of his time to go out and use his feet now and again. Strolling still has its uses."

[26] I return to this argument (in a slightly different form) in Chapter 4.

would (I return to this in the next chapter). For now, I narrow my focus down from the wider denial of death in the West to the view of death-as-defeat in medicine, a view that would ultimately lay the groundwork for the founders of Palliative Care and the Hospice Movement.

3.3 Medicine, Modernity, Death

Within wider western culture, our concept of death has been altered by the process of secularisation, which has privatised death away from the public domain, as well as by the concomitant cloaking of the reality of physical death by hiding it within a wider media-saturated sphere. The discourse of the NDE, as a cultural concept, is part of this cloaking of the reality of death. There is, however, another facet that needs analysing: before exploring how the category 'NDE' interconnects with, and has emerged out of, the sacred space of the Operating Theatre, I wish to narrow the focus down to how 'death' has been viewed as defeat within the modern discourse of medicine. This analysis will therefore necessitate an (extremely brief) exploration of how medicine originated and changed within modernity, and how this altered the ontology of death, dying, and the corpse. Of course, in this section I could never do justice to such an enormous topic, so I settle for arguing four salient points: first, the shift from death being personified and constructed as visiting the unfortunate thanks to the "differences of fate" and "fortune" (Foucault, 1989:211) changes as modern medicine uses 'death', specifically the concept of the 'corpse', as a means to stabilise it's own analysis (Foucault, 1989:243). The agency of the patient is bypassed as the patient is asked to, in effect, 'act like a corpse'. Second, and concurrently, the patient's body has often been assumed to be like a machine (which have been defined in absence of the spirit- in effect 'dead'). Third, just as 'modern man' exists in mastery over nature, death becomes a symbol of defeat for his mastery: the Doctor must fix the human machine at all costs, a drive that caused the advent of CPR. Nonetheless, such an emphasis in modern medicine has multiplied the possible states of existence in which humans are capable of surviving, and necessitated a symbiotic interface between people close to death, and the machinery that keeps them alive. This leads to my fourth point: with human beings existing in these intermediate states of existence, it becomes even easier for medical staff to miss treating the patient as a person, and focus on their various ailments and machine readouts. This sets up the reaction of the founders of the modern Hospice movement and Palliative Care discussed in the next section.

Before we progress any further, definitional matters arise. Like any mass historical and/or cultural epoch, "modernity" has no clear demarcated boundaries that allow for a succinct definition. Nevertheless, I shall define "modernity" in line with Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (1992). In certain respects, western societies began to modernise as early as the fifteenth century, but the discursive statement of 'the modern', as opposed to the traditional and/or the religious, really came to fruition in the eighteenth century (1992:2), and was followed by industrialisation and mass socio-economic upheaval in the nineteenth (1992:2). Further, Hall, Held, and McGrew argue that:

> Modernity can be characterised as a cluster of institutions... the nation state and an international system of states; a dynamic and capitalist economic order based on private property; industrialism; the growth of large scale administrative and bureaucratic systems of social organisation and regulation; the dominance of secular, materialist, rationalist, and individualist cultural values; and the formal separation of the 'private' from the 'public' (Hall, Held, McGrew, 1992:3).

As institutional religion and religious understandings of life and the afterlife changed with the processes of modernity, so did the understanding of death and the body. Between the 15th and the 17th century, Death was often personified as waiting to tug on the cloak of the unwary (Walter, 1994:9), an unnatural phenomena where the spoken words of the dying person indicated their future journey. As Seale (1998:47) states "... pre-modern idealisations of the good death... often emphasised the desirability of control over the dying process, requiring conscious farewells to the world, but conditions were such that this was probably less feasible for most people...". With the advent of statistical analysis of populations, however, death started along the road of rationalisation; death "...ceased to be a spiritual passage, and became overseen by Doctors" (Walter, 1994:12). As Walter's puts it, " (e)xit the good death, enter the normal death" (Walter, 1994:10).[27]

This process of normalisation meant that the human body was "... no longer shadowed by a single skeleton personifying Death, but by any number of germs and diseases which attack medically identifiable organs of the body..."(Walter, 1994:12).

---

[27] Another huge factor in the changing construction of death, well beyond the remit of this chapter, is the demystification of reality that happened post-protestant reformation. Previously, in "...the worldviews of Aristotelianism and natural magic, nature was understood as seeking to realise certain aims, or as exhibiting occult sympathies and antipathies" (Leder, 1992:119). Although Descartes believed in a spirit realm, he had demarcated it so thoroughly from the natural world that it was supposed to link to, that he gave himself little recourse to postulate how these two realities interfaced. Descartes himself was concerned with medicine, precisely because of "[t]he threat posed by the perishable body [which] helped provoke not only his metaphysical, but his scientific work" (Leder, 1992:118).

This lack of cohesion is significant because "modernity has not produced another symbol to replace the figure of Death... It is now dissolved in the minute, yet innumerable, traps and ambushes of daily life..." (Bauman, 1998: 65) In the first instance, modern life has "become subject to the division of labour; it has become a specialised concern" (Bauman, 1998:64). Bauman discusses this:

> The idea of human self sufficiency undermined the grip of institutional religion not by promising an alternative way to eternal life, but by drawing human attention away from it... in the absence of any given order of things, it was clear that there would be as much sense and order in the world as humans managed to insert into it... the modern life strategy has been a matter not of choice, wise or foolish, but of a rational adjustment to totally new life conditions which humans had never visited before (Bauman, 1998:61-62).

Death was divided up into little chunks – it no longer had a cohesive whole. Modernity, according to Bauman, demystified the finality of death by transforming it away from something that we would all face into a collection of illnesses to be cured. He states:

> ... modernity deconstructed death into a bagful of unpleasant, but tameable, illnesses, so that in the hubbub of disease fighting which followed modernity death could be forgotten and not worried about... (Bauman, 1992:164)

This has led to the removal of the dead and dying from the public sphere of existence, to be cared for in Hospices by health workers. The processes of secularisation have caused the transference of the management of death from the Priest to the Doctor, with the Doctor now overseeing the dying process (Walter, from Lawton, 2000: 9). The transition from Priest to Doctor is an extremely significant facet of my argument surrounding the appeal of the NDE, as the Doctor mediates between life and death (I discuss this in section 3.5).

The transition from Priest to Doctor corresponded with a shift from death as part of the social fabric, to death being understood as pathologically 'abnormal'. David Armstrong argues that:

> (Foucault's argument that)... 'Man does not die because he falls ill; he falls ill because he might die' allows death itself to be seen as a social construction interwoven with particular models of illness... Foucault suggested that death was a natural phenomena in the eighteenth century (only the coroner's court determining 'unnatural' causes such as murder or misfortune) but became a pathological event in the nineteenth century (and twentieth century) with the... rise of hospital medicine and the post-mortem to establish the

> pathological cause of death. (I still tease medical students with the question: is death normal or abnormal?)... (Armstrong, 1993:22-23)

By stating that 'Man does not die because he falls ill; he falls ill because he might die' Foucault identifies the increasing abnormality of death in the West: before the rise of modern medicine, death was an ever-present part of life (and to be ill might very well mean that death was just around the corner), whereas after the rise of modern medicine, death becomes the pathological culmination of the breakdown of the body via illness.

This investigation of illnesses rendered the patient somewhat obsolete, something to be bypassed as the Doctor searched for a means to investigate the illness within a patients body. According to Foucault, the understanding of illness and disease changed in the 18th century, as the gaze of the physician shifted from the pathology of the disease, as *described* by the patient (which was the essence of the disease), to the physical effects that the disease caused on the patient (i.e. lesions). [28] Foucault utilises the notion of "the physicians gaze" as a lens through which to analyse the changing discursive factors that defined the early days of medicine, as the changing object of the physician's gaze gives an indication of the discursive formations that structured his or her understanding.[29] Foucault identifies a shift from a horizontal typology of disease to a vertical typology that had to look underneath the surface of the symptoms (and hence into the body of the patient) to find the cause of the symptoms. In the former (a horizontal typology), the effects of the symptoms had an essence in themselves, to be understood in a classification system that compared and contrasted them to other essences of symptoms. In the latter (the vertical), the gaze encapsulated the "order of touch" (Bernauer, 1990:50), and so "[t]he classical idea of a pathological essence inserting itself into the body is definitely overthrown and replaced with the notion of the body itself that becomes ill" (Bernauer, 1990:51). The direct result of this was the physician's gaze going beyond what the patient described as their symptoms and into the mechanics of the body itself, thus rendering the patient epiphenomenal.

Within modern medicine the agency of the patient then became passive, as the doctor interacted with the disease. Moreover, with the rise in industrialisation

---

[28] Foucault argues "(f)or Descartes and Malebranche to see was to perceive... (but) it was a matter of rendering it transparent for the mind... At the end of the eighteenth century, however, seeing consists in leaving to experience its greatest corporal opacity; the solidity, the obscurity, the density of things closed in on themselves, have powers of truth they owe not to light, but to the slowness of the gaze that passes over them, around them, and gradually into them, bringing nothing more than its own light..." (Foucault, 1973:xiii)

[29] His analysis has proved fruitful in modern sociological analysis of medicine. For a review of Foucault's usefulness in this area, see Armstrong (1993).

and the advent of modern technology, from around the eighteenth century onwards, the body was understood through the lens of machinery.[30] In effect, the body became like a machine that broke down, and the Doctor's job was to see past the patient into the constituent parts, much like the way a watchmaker might fix the broken parts of a watch. But the ontological assumptions coupled with this perspective tended towards seeing the body as an inanimate object, a machine. Drew Leder argues that

> The epistemological primacy of the corpse has shaped not only medical technology but diverse aspects of training and practise. Medical Education still begins with the dissection of a cadaver, and ends in the pathologist's lab... the living patient is often treated in a cadaverous or machine-like fashion... The patient is asked to assume a corpse-like pose, flat, passive, naked, mute. The entire ritual and context serves to reduce the living body to something almost dead... the doctor uses means which will alter the body as one would a mechanical thing, substituting parts, altering inputs and outputs, and regulating processes. At the core of modern medical practise is the Cartesian revelation: the living body can be treated as essentially no different from a machine (Leder, 1992:120)

Leder argues that modern medicine is built upon the foundations not of a lived body, but of "the dead, or inanimate body" (1992:117), and that the "dead body is frequently a symbol of the failure and termination of the therapeutic process... " (Leder, 1992: 117). This ties into Kellehear's argument that,

> ... in the nineteenth century the body was thought to hold the secret of death. Prior to the nineteenth century it was the words of the dying person, which is why it was important for the dying and everyone else to know when dying commenced. When the secret of death was determined to reside in the body, an obsession with the causes of death began... (Kellehear, 1996:89)

The body "poses a threat", but at the same time "provides a tool for securing knowledge... and it rests at the heart of the mechanist world-view and its associated projects of mastery..." (Leder, 1992:120).

As death was conceived of as defeat for "man's" mastery, the point of death was pushed further and further back with new and more ingenious ways to cure and recover patients. Bringing people back from the dead secured modern medicine's

[30] Leder traces this understanding right back to the so-called Cartesian split that Descartes is credited as causing. He states "(i)n order to advance his medical knowledge, Descartes engaged for years in the dissection of dead animals and animal parts. At certain periods of his life he paid almost daily visits to butcher shops, collecting material for this purpose... dissection of dead bodies can become a primary instrument of knowledge because Descartes models the living body first and foremost upon the inanimate... Nor is death the result of the soul's departure... 'death never comes to pass by reason of the soul, but only because some one of the principal parts of the body decays...'... Descartes' ontology is thus intertwined with a project of mastery..." (Leder, 1992:119).

dominion over it, a factor that contributed to the death of the patient as a failure for medicine. The process of reviving the dead via C.P.R. was conceived of by pioneers in the 18th century, who were willing to cut against the grain of the church and rally against the fatalism that was brought about (in Britain) by Protestant Calvinism and the notions of predestination (Porter, 2003:212). William Buchan, in his book *Domestic Medicine* (1769), was appalled at the speed in which people would be pronounced dead should they show signs of unconsciousness or swooning (Porter, 2003:214), and in the 18th century numerous remedies were suggested to bring round people who had fallen ill, or drowned (Porter, 2003:213-215).[31] In the late 18th and early 19th century, scientists, physicians and naturalists became enchanted by what electricity could do to a corpse, specifically whether or not they could be brought back to life (Porter, 2003:215-216). Roy Porter continues:

> All such endeavours - from reviving the drowned to reanimating the dead - heightened speculation as to precisely what death was... questions arose as to the timing and mechanism of the separation of the body and soul... The eminent doctor John Fothergill offered his 'Observations' on a case reported by a surgeon who had inflated the lungs of a man suffocated by fumes in a coal fire, thus restoring him to life... 'It does not seem absurd... to compare the animal machine to a clock... Inflating the lungs, and by this means communicating motion to the heart... may actuate its organs afresh'... death was beginning to be stripped of its mystery... The implications that such rescues could be used as 'natural experiments' into the nature of life and death was, in turn, deprecated by conservative churchmen, fearful of a medical takeover of one of the Christian mysteries... (Porter, 2003:216-217)

The increasing powers of medicine and its technology changed our ontology of death by increasingly specifying a point of death (the cessation of breathing, then the loss of pulse, and more recently the absence of electrical impulses in the brain stem), but also by pushing this point of no return further and further back.

The actual point-of-death has thus changed. The cardiologist and NDE researcher Michael Sabom talks about how medicine has affected our conception of the point of death:

> The scientific definition of death is a medical quagmire. Previously, death was declared when a person was found unconscious without pulse or respiration.

[31] Resuscitation techniques were, of course, not necessarily the prerogative of the West. Allan Kellehear discusses the history of resuscitation: "There are accounts of resuscitation in Egyptian Mythology, and Hebrew Midwives used expired air to resuscitate newborns... a variety of techniques, usually unsuccessful, were attempted. These included smoke enemas, being hung upside down by the feet, bottles of hot water, buckets of cold water, yelling and screaming, the application of animal excreta, holy oil or amulets, tongue stretching; being placed on a trotting horse, employing a fire bellows, and mouth to mouth exchange of air" (1996:81-82).

> Death was confirmed by holding a mirror under the nose to test for condensation and by checking the pupils for reaction to light. In the nineteenth century, the invention of the stethoscope enabled doctors to diagnose death by the absence of heart sounds... This so-called Heart Lung criteria fell out of favor, however with the advent of cardiopulmonary resuscitation... this necessitated a new definition of death- the loss of brain function (Sabom, 1998:48)

This criterion for death was is no more clear-cut than previous attempts, for the loss of higher brain-functions due to lack of oxygen or trauma does not necessarily mean complete physical death. The invention of the respirator machine can keep a person alive who is otherwise in a permanent vegetative state (Lock, 2002:2). Sabom continues,

> ...even when a person is deemed brain-dead by strict clinical criteria- that is, showing no spontaneous movements or respirations, no response to painful or auditory stimulation; and no brain-stem, cough, gag or respiratory reflexes- brain activity can still be demonstrated days later... (Sabom, 1998:51)

This has led to complex ethical issues as to whether death is necessarily to be understood as the death of consciousness. Medical technology, far from providing any sense of closure or finality to what it means to be alive or dead, has merely multiplied the quagmire of possible states between life and death.[32] The advent of medical technology creates a symbiotic state where human beings can survive for extended periods of time by being entwined within machinery; those who have long periods of dependency on wheelchairs, respirators or other technological apparatus even begin to understand these additions as part of themselves, as these additions become crucial for their understandings of selfhood (Harraway, 1991, Lawton, 2000:110-111).[33] The advent of this technological interface has created a whole host

---

[32] According to David Sudnow (1967:131), the definition of death is a flexible and can depend almost entirely on the whims of the medical staff: "two people in 'similar' physical conditions may be differentially designated as dead or not... a young child was brought into the ER with no registered heartbeat, respiration, or pulse, and was, through a rather dramatic stimulation procedure involving the coordinated work of a large team of doctors and nurses, revived for a period of eleven hours. On the same evening, shortly after the child's arrival, an elderly person who presented the same physical signs, with what a doctor later stated in conversation, to be no discernable differences from the child in skin colour, warmth... 'arrived' in the ER and was almost immediately pronounced dead, with no attempts at stimulation instituted...".

[33] Far from having a unified definition of brain death in the U.S., there have been consistent attempts to homogenise a point out of various divergent criteria in order (amongst other things) to have a legal justification for the utilisation of organs from the transplant industry (Lock, 2002:111). In 1981, a Presidential Committee was set up to look at the issue, as six different types of brain death criteria were being used around the country (2002:111). This commission was concerned with the death of "a human being and 'not the "death" of cells tissues and organs' " (Lock, 2002:112). A construction of death was put forward that "avoided the contention that brain death was a new creation intimately associated with life-support technology" (Lock, 2002:115).

of ethical problems as people's bodies are further objectified, becoming entwined with the machinery required for life support (Lock, 1997, 2000). The Physician's gaze becomes focussed on the interaction between the body and the machinery, thus leading to a further loss of agency and self amongst those who are seriously ill (Lawton, 2000:101-105). It is this loss of agency against which the Hospice movement reacted, thus opening up the conceptual space for the emergent discourse of the NDE as the agency of the patient was recovered.

In this section I have made the first allusions to my argument that the category 'death' is not a fixed static point, but is rather bound up in its own definitional matrix.[34] In the past, death was somewhat entwined with notions of fate, now, it has become entwined with the modern biological understandings, and physiological processes. The interactions between modern medicine and the body take place behind the ward curtain or in the side-room of the Hospital. I argue that this, combined with the element of the unknown inherent in the average layperson's understanding of medical processes (as this happens in the private sphere of the Hospital), adds to the strong allure of NDE research. Before I flesh this out further, I add the final piece of the puzzle and analyse how Elisabeth Kübler-Ross sought to transform the dying person from an object of defeat to an individual, and how, in doing so, she opened up the possibilities of reporting experiences near death.

3.4 The Hospice Movement, Palliative Care, and the NDE

> Things do not die because of old age, metal fatigue, disintegrating beyond repair - not of 'natural causes'; not because death is inescapable. They disappear long before they reach the point of 'natural death'; indeed well before they begin to show signs of senility. (Bauman, 1992:188)

In order to locate the category of the NDE in its 'history of ideas', I specifically focus on the 'matriarch' of NDE researchers, Hospice founder Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Whilst NDE researchers (Moody, 1975; Morse, 2001) have located their own work in lineage with Kübler-Ross, and, conversely, she has publicly supported their research, there are certain differences that, I maintain, explain why Moody's concept of the NDE retains more cultural currency than Kübler-Ross's view of deathbed visions. In this section I therefore do four things. First, I provide a brief overview of the specific features of modern medicine against which Kübler-Ross reacted. Second, I analyse the key beliefs of the Hospice ethos, indicating how it itself replicates notions of consumer choice, and individualism. This is not *ipso facto* a problem, but it does

[34] I build on this in chapter 6.

contribute to a wider representation of death, and how to die, that has more to do with pandering to the beliefs that people would like to hold than with the reality of end-of-life care. This carries over into my analysis of Kübler-Ross, whom I argue has been at pains to stress the idea that death is a rebirth into a higher realm (against the idea that death is a defeat for modern medicine), but it also feeds into the wider simulacrum that I discussed in 3.2, as other research into the (undoubtledly admirable) work that goes on within the Hospice paints a somewhat darker picture. Nevertheless, despite the somewhat New Age flavour that colours Kübler-Ross's work, her emphasis upon birth into higher realms, feminine care for the patient (as opposed masculine medical intervention), and her holistic approach evaporate in the work of masculine NDE researchers who would locate their work in line with hers, but who would nevertheless illustrate what Jantzen (1998:129) identifies when she argues that "the western intellectual tradition is obsessed with death and other worlds, a violent obsession that is interwoven with mastery".

The first half of the twentieth century saw the transition from people dying at home to people dying in the hospital due to the increasing specialisation in medical innovation and changes in the social structure of family life. This created problems; modern medicine was based on the presupposition of prevention or cure, and the medical fraternity viewed death as a failure (Lawton, 2000: 10). Prior to the 1960s a "...hospital's patient care both alienated the dying patient and facilitated his or her sense of personal isolation and powerlessness" (Lawton, 2000:10). Medical professionals seldom told patients of their prognosis, shielding the patient from the diagnosis via a "closed awareness" (Seale, 1998:100-103) and at times "avoided contact with such patients altogether" (Lawton, 2000:10). There were (and are) reasons for this; medical staff are human beings, and the maintenance of routines that marginalize engagement with the patient are perhaps necessary in environments such as casualty wards where staff need to work extremely quickly in order to save lives.[35] Nevertheless, this "closed awareness" permeated; the need for "normalisation" meant that the patient was integrated within a model of dying where it was felt that diagnosis was best withheld. Lawton continues:

> It was also common practise to sedate patients very heavily, partly because medical staff had no means of controlling pain, but also to reduce the likelihood that patients would read 'the fateful signs' of impending death... Sundow's observational study of American hospitals showed that once a

[35] Seale discusses a case where medical staff had to deal with a patient who was a ward clerk; the clerk had been shot, and because of the staff's personal involvement with the patient as a person, the ripples of shock that they felt lasted long enough to mean that they missed their window of opportunity to resuscitate (Seale, 1998:101).

> patient had been sedated... staff often regarded him or her as a corpse. It was not uncommon for... staff to close a patient's eyes prior to death... Hospice pioneers pointed to severe short-comings in the way in which dying patients were moved to remote corners of wards or into side rooms, with visits from medical staff becoming 'cursory' or 'infrequent' (Lawton, 2000,10-11)

This movement of patients into side-rooms "...demonstrated the complex negotiations of information involved in the orderly management of a potentially overwhelming emotional sequences of events" (Seale, 2998:101).[36]

It was against this climate that the Hospice movement and, latterly, Palliative Care were born.[37] Cicely Saunders is generally regarded (Murphy, 1990:236, Lawton, 2000: 10, Gracia, 2002:27) as the founder of the Hospice movement, who, in 1967, founded St Christopher's Hospice in London, while Elisabeth Kübler-Ross provided the major impetus in America.[38] As opposed to viewing death as a defeat, the founders of the Hospice movement viewed death as a normal part of life; the emphasis was not upon cure but on care, and "patients were neither subjected to aggressive life-sustaining strategies nor to excessive technological interventions" (Lawton, 2000:12).[39] Thus, "...proponents emphasised the benefits others could gain from by witnessing another patient dying peacefully beside them", and openly acknowledged the Christian philosophy that "...death is an event in life; not a terminus" (Lawton, 2000:12). So the death within a Hospice should be conceived of as an "inner journey" (Seale, 1998:105), one that reverses the emphasis within modern medicine for withholding information from the dying patient. The patient is encouraged to become an active participant in this journey. Seale states that

---

[36] The Zen Buddhist Hospice worker Merrill Collett refers to a five year study, published in 1995, that concluded that (in America) "it is painful and expensive to die... According to the study... Doctors routinely allowed death to be unnecessarily prolonged and painful. People died isolated from their loved ones and invaded by feeding tubes that kept them alive *against their wishes*" (1997:13, italics his).

[37] Lawton (2000:18) states " 'Hospice care' and 'palliative care' are now thought to be synonymous, although palliative medicine only became an accredited medical specialty in 1987..."

[38] Collett (1997:18-19) defines the principles of American Hospice care along the following seven fundamentals. First, there is an emphasis upon "Hollistic Care", which "blends lay and professional caregivers", whilst maintaining that patient care is as important as medicine, and at the same time "respects the unique way that each person dies". Second, there is an emphasis upon, "Effective Pain Management", which relieves "(p)hysical, mental and spiritual pain... through medication, counselling, and loving care". Third, there is a "receptivity of death", where patients are assured that death is a normal part of life. Fourth, there is an encouragement of the involvement of "Family and Friends". Fifth, grieving is encouraged as a healthy process. Sixth, there is a policy of "Minimal Intervention" except where a patient's quality of life is improved. Seventh, there is an emphasis on the relationship between patient and caregivers, where medical professionals take on a secondary role.

[39] The construction of this debate as a binary between modernist impersonal technology and a more holistic, person-centred, community-based approach is one that has emerged within a wider construction of a psychological self. Walter states "...terminal care was central to the (medical) rediscovery of the person. And again, the key text is Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*...Kübler-Ross interviewed dying patients while students watched through a one-way screen, and thus 'restaged the anatomy lesson by placing the patient, now reconstituted as an experiencing person, under the rule of the gaze'... If medieval and reformed Christians gazed upon the dying and the dead person's soul, if medicine in the Age of Reason gazed upon the body and upon the corpse, whole-person medicine today gazes on the psyche" (Walter, 1994:37).

> Patient centredness... is a great medical sermon which makes people believe that they are speaking out against power as articulate consumers or activists, reclaiming the rights taken from them by a bio-medical system... it is... an incitement to speak the self into discourse, so that doctors can be understood as human instruments in a new therapeutic alliance, with patients positioned as joint adventurers... (Seale, 1998:97)

The re-positioning of patients as joint adventurer, imbued with an individualist notion of consumer choice, meant that patients could, for instance (in the UK), choose to have not only chemotherapy, but also massage and aromatherapy in their treatment program (Walter, 1994:43). The irony is that "...the free-market theory of the sovereign consumer assumes fully informed individuals, and death is something about which we can never be fully informed" (Walter, 1994:43).

This joint-adventure has also been cast in light of an essentialist notion of gender: if Modernity features masculine notions of heroic interventions into the arena of death, the Hospice movement reintroduces women as carers and nurture-givers. According to Walter (1994:70), ..."it is no coincidence that the most famous evangelists (i.e. Hospice founders) are women, for this is a feminine mode of communication...". Medical discourses or "patriarchy... controls through abstract systems... liberation can only come through women (or patients) giving their own concrete, unedited stories..." (Walter, 1994:70). Thus, he argues,

> Hospices generally have an atmosphere that is Christian, middle-class, and feminine. On entering one Hospice near London I felt... that I was walking into a Laura Ashley showroom- soft, feminine, traditional, and almost aristocratic... if a Hospice is to feel homily it must have a feminine feel (Walter, 1994:89)

The idea of a dying patient as a 'joint adventurer' was postulated not only by Cicely Saunders, but also by the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.[40] Her story is part of

[40] Julia Lawton (2000:175) states " Kübler-Ross's work provided the major impetus for the development of the modern Hospice Movement in America". For Kübler-Ross's influence in the discourse of palliative care, see Kellehear (1996), Lawton (2000), Scheper-Hughes (1992). For her influence in the emergent NDE field, see her introductions to Moody's *Life After Life* (1975), and Osis and Haraldsson's *At The Hour of Death* (1977). For her general influence on the wider NDE field see Moody (1975), Sabbom (1982), Blackmore (1983), Ring (1980), and Zaleski (1987). There is debate however as to the relationship between Kübler-Ross and the Hospice movement. Teresa Chikako Maruyama argues that "...many founders and researchers on the modern Hospice have been deeply influenced by Kübler-Ross's work whether they approve or disapprove... what she was actually proposing was not Hospice care... (Kubler Ross's) Hospice has developed under such a deep Christian influence..." (1999:11). Maruyama argues that because Kübler-Ross developed her work concurrently, she should not be considered as part of the Hospice movement. Whilst this is something to bare in mind I argue that a) there is certainly a strong link between Kübler-Ross and the Hospice movement, and further, that she perhaps makes certain Christian undertones explicit that are implicit in the more sober Hospice and palliative care literature written in the UK, and b) her relationship with the wider discourse of NDE research makes her to the centre stage in the present discussion.

"...a 150 year old romantic tradition that elevates female over male, feeling over technique, home over hospital- a story of the triumph of ordinary people and their experience, championed by a caring women, over the depersonalisation of male technological rationality" (Walter, 1994:71). Even so, her story of 'female over male' and the depersonalisation of medical rationality would again become inversed in NDE research, where it is the (male) Doctors, utilising their medial technological intervention, that have the most definitive say over the realities of life after death.

In 1965, two years prior to the opening of St. Christopher's, Kübler-Ross published *On Death and Dying*. According to Marian Gentile and Maryanne Fello (1990:147),

> ... Kübler-Ross' landmark book, *On Death and Dying*, revolutionised the psychological approach to patients with terminal illnesses...Kübler-Ross created a theoretical framework describing the psychologic (*sic*) stages of dying and pointed out to health-care workers that... as dying patients were needing more attention and support, they were actually receiving less...Kübler-Ross brought death and 'dying out the closet'

Kübler-Ross's first work postulated five stages of death and dying; denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969:34-138). As postulated by her, the final stage of acceptance was akin to a restful contemplation before a long journey (Kübler- Ross, 1969: 100). Medical professionals should therefore focus on helping the patients through this experience, instead of not conversing with them because they think that the patients should not hear about the time they had left. Melvin Morse reports that Kübler-Ross was challenged by angry medical professionals who asked her if she took pleasure out of telling patients that they had weeks to live; she responded that the patients would invariably know anyway (Morse, 20001:xii).

Kübler-Ross was no stranger to the realities of death even before entering medical school. Leaving Switzerland at the age of 19 she ended up in post-war Maidenek, Poland, where, by her own estimate, somewhere in the region of 960 000 children perished in a Concentration Camp (Kübler-Ross, 1995:3). She noticed that, in the barracks where the children had spent their last nights, there were carvings of butterflies in the wood (Kübler-Ross, 1995:3-4). Kübler-Ross did not understand this image at the time, but went on to state in her lecture *The Cocoon and the Butterfly*:

> I have worked with dying patients for the last twenty years and... I was (not) very interested in life after death... when you study the definition of death you see that it only includes the death of the physical body as if man only consisted of a cocoon... (Kübler-Ross, 1995:65)

According to Kübler-Ross, her experience in helping dying patients over her long career has led her to conclude that the dying experience is very much like the birth experience, and should be considered as a transitional state, as a person is transferred from their cocoon (their physical body) to the second stage, the Butterfly (Kübler-Ross, 1991:10-11). Her work seeks to reverse the idea of death as a defeat by advancing the idea that death can be a source of personal growth.[41] She states:

> I want to assure you that it is a blessing to sit at the bedside of a dying patient. Dying doesn't have to be a sad and horrible matter. Instead you can witness wonderful and loving things... Dying Patients, when you take the time to sit with them, teach you about the stages of dying... All the hardships you face in life... most people view as a curse, as a punishment from God... If only you would realise that that nothing that comes to you is negative... It's like somebody has to temper the iron. It is an opportunity that you are given to grow. This is the sole purpose of existence on this planet earth (Kübler-Ross, 1991:20)

Her work has discussed the experiences of select patients with whom she has worked, and how they have interacted with their parents, siblings or friends, showing them a process of transition through the act of dying. Her work is thus heavily anecdotal, a bone of contention amongst the more sober analysis of other researchers (Seale, 1998:107), although "... for Kübler-Ross to have adopted the scientific approach of basing her model on carefully marshalled empirical evidence would have been to enter the very technocratic arena of which she was so critical..." (Seale, 1998:107). For her "... the dying experience is almost identical to the experience at birth" (Kübler-Ross, 1982:10-11).

This collage of spiritually flavoured anecdotes is seen by some as suspiciously like a New Age Revivalist movement (Walter, 1994, Seale, 1998). Seale attributes the appeal of her first book to "... the sanctification of peak experiences, achieved through drugs, meditation, or sexual abandon, in the American counter-culture in the late 1960s" (Seale, 1998:106), an appeal that sold it to the tune of one million copies (Walter, 1994:69). Is also worth pointing out however that, besides this "revivalist" element, there are also implicit Christian values that are enshrined within the wider Hospice Movement.[42] In the words of Maruyama:

---

[41] Hence the name of her edited book: *Death the Final Stages of Growth* (1975). See also Lawton (2000:192).

[42] Fiona Randall and R.S. Downie also locate a strong Kantian element within Palliative Care; there has been a focus on patients autonomy (i.e. patients are rational self-governing agents) that demands that they be treated with the respect that such agents deserve, irrespective of their health conditions or their cost of

> In the Christian tradition people need to atone for sin before death... Modern Hospices try to help cancer patients to complete a 'pilgrimage to death' satisfactorily... One of the most important aspects of the modern Hospice care is physical pain relief, and when the patient's physical pain is approximately controlled he or she can think about their life and death... Such reflection is in tune with Kübler-Ross's idea of psychological pain relief through completing 'unfinished business' (Maruyama, 1999:27)

The idea of the "good death" is therefore reworked in the Hospice movement, but, rather than it being an indication of whether one is bound for heaven or hell, it becomes entwined with a secular notion of dignity and autonomy; the emphasis upon the *biology* of death identified with modernity gives way to a reworked idea of the last spoken words of the patient.[43] It is in the last spoken words of the patient that visions of the afterlife might be reported, and the space for reporting NDEs is revealed, although it should be noted that the emphasis upon lucid patients reporting heavenly realms right at the brink of death can itself function to mask the realities of death.

In their critique of the uncongenial management of the dying in hospitals, the modern Hospice movement has sought to provide a group of carers who become like a wider family network (Lawton, 2000:12). This has led the Hospice movement to be labelled 'anti-modernist' because of the "emphasis it gives to supposedly traditional values such as family networks, community affiliation, and a community's responsibility for offering support to those such as the dying and the bereaved (Lawton, 2000:12). The Hospice movement can be considered a forthright reaction to cultural changes in the notion of the self; put simply, one has the power to participate and consume a certain model of dying with dignity, consumption that involved seeking "...to reintegrate the patients mind, bodily, and spiritual experiences, whilst

---

treatment (1999:6-8). Further, Julia Lawton (2000:18) traces the frustrations of Hospice staff at the economic business model brought in by the NHS with its notions of "services" and "clients" (effectively the language of laiser fare economic exchange). In a sense Utilitarian concerns (or decisions made with an eye on social consequence- costs etc.) are being used to renege on Kantian assumptions of patients as rational autonomous individuals.

[43] For example, Kübler-Ross discusses her engagements with her twelve year old patient 'Liz' who could not die because Priests, Nuns and Clergy had told her that only people who loved God more than anyone else in the world could get into heaven; Liz was distraught because she loved her mother and father more (1995:27). Kübler-Ross (1992:26-28) re-orientated her understanding by asking her " '...since God is ... a teacher... did He give you a very tough assignment, or did He give you one that he could give to just any child...?'... she looked down at her poor, devastated body- her very huge belly and her very skinny arms and legs... Then she smiled a happy smile and dead seriously said 'I don't think God could give a tougher assignment to any child."... a few days later... I went back... She suddenly opened her eyes... and with this big... almost happy grin on her face, looked at her belly like 'I got your message'... This is how we try to help children finish their unfinished business... " This is sometimes at odds with the wishes of the patient however; the Hospice philosophy is that the patient remains alert and cogent to the end, although the patient may well want to be sedated when their last moments come (Seale, 1998:178).

simultaneously according patients central control over how their care was orchestrated" (Lawton, 2000:14).

This approach is not without its problems, something that Lawton experienced first-hand during her ethnography. Lawton notes that people did not follow Kübler-Ross's model of the stages of dying linearly, but could experience different stages at different points, or more than one stage at once (Lawton, 2000:49). [44] This idea of empowering patients to 'live until they die' is based on the 'rhetoric of individuality' which is destabilized by the "absolutely, fundamental non-negotiable undermining impact a patient's bodily deterioration can have upon his or her self... the widespread popularity of the Hospice movement stems partly from the fact that it has propagated an image of death that most people now want to 'consume'; an image which is... compatible with contemporary ideas of selfhood" (Lawton, 2000:16). This notion of selfhood is disembodied and dualistic, and is carried over into academic debates about embodiment that assumes an able, *functioning* body. She states,

> ...we are told that the dying process hidden away in hospitals is surrounded by problems, problems for which the Hospice care can provide the solution. The images are... in fact very similar to those contained within Hollywood deathbed scenes... A somewhat romanticised conception of dying patients resting comfortably in bed, mentally alert, calm and reassured is all too prevalent... What I was unprepared for was something different; it was the visible signs of bodily decay; the stench of incontinence; the lethargy and despondency of patients... and the burnout and exhaustion experienced by their families and friends... the protracted period of suffering that can occur before death is rarely, if ever, portrayed... Yet, clearly, there is good reason why such selective and romanticised images exist (Lawton, 2000:vii)

In a sense, the Hospice movement is partly a post-modern phenomenon that harks back to a pre-modern ideal of the family, but at once intermingles these images with a Hollywood like construction of death as a painless transition. Walter argues, "...it has become almost obligatory for revivalist writers to eulogise primitive or Victorian death... (p)re-technological, pre-medical death is hailed as a more personal and

---

[44] There have also been concerns raised as to how these stages apply cross-culturally. Nancy Scheper-Hughes states about her research in Brazil "... I made a point of visiting the homes of women who had recently lost an infant... What I found did not conform to the conventional biomedical wisdom concerning "normal" grieving following child death, a model that it is... the creation of a few influential psychologists, among them... Elisabeth Kübler-Ross... " (Scheper-Hughes, 1992:188). Further, "...(i)t strikes me as no coincidence that so much psychological literature on disordered mourning concerns *female* patients..." (Scheper-Hughes, 1992:190, italics hers). Finally, "... I have no doubt... that the local culture is organised to defend women against the psychological ravagings of grief, (but) I assume that the culture is quite successful in doing so and that we may take women at their word when they say 'No, I felt no grief. The baby's death was a blessing.' One need not... engage in second guessing on the basis of alien and imported psychological concepts of the self" (Scheper-Hughes, 1992:190).

natural, more in touch with the rhythms of natural life and death" (1994:42). In fact, the common images of the Hospice movement cloaked the reality of types of bodily deterioration where bodily functions become unbounded and where carers can no longer manage the smell and cleanliness of patients with advanced cancers, a situation that Lawton specifically identifies with the point where a patient loses a sense of self.[45] She states "...in order for bodies to be 'moulded' and 'shaped' as vehicles for and expressions of the self there have to be a minimum set of physical capacities in existence" (Lawton, 2000:105). Even an emphasis upon embodiment prioritises a physically fit body:

> (Deborah) was one of several patients admitted with rectal-vaginal fistulas during my fieldwork... Staff considered Deborah a particularly difficult patient to look after. One night... she disappeared from her side room. She was eventually found in the staff toilets totally covered in excreta... Deborah recovered from her temporarily confused state and was deeply upset and embarrassed... When Deborah's bodily deterioration escalated... she suddenly became more withdrawn... Deborah spent the (last) ten days of her life either sleeping or staring blankly into space... it appears that she 'disengaged' and 'switched off' prior to her physical cessation. Such an experience seemed to be shared by a number or patients with unbounded bodies...

I have quoted this account not as a shock tactic, but to show that even the modern Hospice movement, which purports to recover the agency of the dying, in fact functions to cover the realities of bodily decay: we bear witness to an emphasis upon such things as 'spiritual growth', 'consumer choice', and dying as an 'individual' (as opposed to the terminally ill patient being regarded as a symbol of defeat for modern medicine). We are a far cry here from stories of children's faces lighting up as they see visions of angels about to guide them into heaven (Blackmore, 1993:112). Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive; rather, one account is acceptable within the wider public domain (children witnessing Angels as in their last moments), the other (terminally ill patients in the most horrendous of circumstances) is not.

Additionally, if "(b)odies only appear in post-modern culture as youthful, athletic, enticing, sexual..." (Walter, 1994:45) then it is no coincidence that "Revivalist discourse has almost exclusively focussed on terminal disease, primarily that of cancer, but also from AIDs... no missionary movement has emerged to transform conditions for the elderly in society" (Seale, 1998:105). This discourse is predominantly concerned with the young or the middle-aged struck down in the prime of their life, and it gives them a construction of death as a painless inner

[45] Curiously, Lawton noted that the single defining concept that palliative patients held on to until the very end was one of class (Lawton, 2000: 35).

journey of the psyche, a construction that coincides neatly with the cultural logic of the Post-Modern conception of the body. Thus, NDE literature, littered as it is with accounts of car-crashes, cardiac arrests, and sudden traumas that strike even those in the prime of their lives, appeals over and above even those deathbed experiences spoken of by Kübler-Ross.

Whilst it would be disingenuous to suggest that Kübler-Ross has no recognition of the realities and indeed, potential horrors of death, the experiences that she talks about, and the experiences Lawton talk about, read like two very different worlds.[46] Nevertheless, her work has been enormously influential, and by moving the patient into the centre stage, instead of allowing him or her to simply be a collection of illnesses or a symbol of modern medicine's failure, she opened the door for patients to talk about any spiritual experiences that they have near-death. In bringing death and dying out of the closet, she sought to portray death as "... a return to a peaceful, oceanic, womblike state, a near ecstatic freedom from pain and suffering, similar to religious experiences..." (Seale, 1998:106). Thus, whilst I have argued that the emphasis on death as a individualistic journey has hidden the realities of death, Kübler-Ross's work has harboured a femininity that has emphasised birth, caring, and natality.

This emphasis upon natality and a 'return to the womb' is conspicuously absent from later NDE accounts, and even though Kübler-Ross would, in a sense, be considered the matriarch of NDE accounts, her (male) offspring would soon shift the emphasis from spiritual rebirth at death's terminus to NDE stories laden with accounts of invasive surgical procedures designed at mastering death and bringing people back to tell the tale of their disembodied, spiritual, adventures. As Jantzen has put it (in her pursuit of the question why death has occupied male philosophical and theological traditions through the ages) "(t)he masculinist philosophy of the west has dimly recognised the significance of birth, and at some deep level has felt the threat to its imaginary of death and theorising of other worlds" (1998:141). Indeed, the

[46] For instance, Kübler-Ross (1982:19) states "... I want to point out that it is a blessing to have cancer. I do not want to minimise the bad parts that go along with cancer, but I want you to know that there are thousands of things which are worse than cancer. I have patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, one of the many neurological illnesses where you cannot do anything but watch the process of paralysis continue until you cannot move anymore..." Kellehear, whose book *Eternity and Me* (2000) is written very much in the tradition of Kübler-Ross, and which reads like a secular guidebook for the art of dying, discusses this. He states "(t)here are several books on the market describing what death is like. They make for grim reading... These books are the rollercoaster rides of death and dying... (a) chariot ride through a set of anatomical images that make the Marquis de Sade look like he needs assertiveness training... But are we better off?... When it comes to death, remember that few people know what death is really like, least of all those who have not done it. Very old people often say that they feel middle-aged or younger. People who have been resuscitated consistently report pleasant feelings... The worst rumours about death seem to come from people with the least experience. Isn't that always the way?" (Kellehear, 2000:26).

transition can be seen in the NDE researcher and medical doctor Melvin Morse, who states in his preface to the 2001 edition of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* (1975):

> It is fitting that *Life After Life* was originally introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the pioneering researcher on death and dying... Whereas most people died at home in 1800, by the mid-twentieth century most people died in hospitals. The aggressive, end of life interventions medical science made possible resulted in the dying person giving up dignity and control over his or her life...Dr Kübler-Ross dared to talk about dying patients about their feelings. This generated enormous hostility from the medical staff at her hospital in Chicago... Although Dr Kübler-Ross has gone on to make her own contributions to the spiritual understandings of what happens when we die, in her first book she discussed only the emotional stages of death (which) included denial, isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance... *It is ironic that the same medical technology that contributed to the degrading and humiliating conditions of the dying patients allowed us to successfully resuscitate people so that they could report their near-death experiences... Modern intensive-care medicine and rapid-response medical teams have made the cheating of death routine* (Morse, 2001:xii-xiii, italics mine)

In the transition between Kübler-Ross and Morse, the focus switches back to the technology that enables NDEs to be recounted. Similarly, what is viewed in the work of Kübler-Ross as a rebirth into a higher realm becomes something to cheated through rapid-response medical intervention.

Previously, any religious experience near death was pathologised as the Lazarus Syndrome (Morse, 2001:x). Post Kübler-Ross, and a space was beginning to open up that would lay the foundations to allow Dr Raymond Moody's concept of the NDE to take centre stage. In the words of Kenneth Ring:

> There are a number of factors responsible for this development; the liberating climate of research provided by Kübler-Ross's work... improvements in resuscitation technology; the effect of Moody's work in facilitating discussion of these experiences in those who would not have divulged them, and so on (Ring, 1980:257)

In order to analyse the discursive formations that structure our debate on the NDE, there is a particular facet here that is missing. Kübler-Ross's work allowed the dying a certain agency, but they were, in effect, on a 'one-way ticket'. Moody, as shall be shown, described experiences of Doctors intervening right at the very point of death in order to recover patients and bring them back, a process that encompasses the status of Doctor's as life-givers in a secular age.

3.5 The Doctor as Hero/The Doctor as Priest

"...we have reached an era of transition in our society... We have to have the courage to open new doors for people who have an open mind..." (Kübler-Ross, from Moody, 1975: xxii,xxiii)

In this section I argue that the category NDE *initially* acted as a kind of conceptual 'sign' that signified the 'Doctor as Hero/Doctor as Priest', and the "heroic" everyday individual brought back by the Doctor to recount his or her experiences of the afterlife.[47] In order to build this case, I explore perceptions of the Doctor in modern times, arguing that modern medicine is highly ritualised, and some of these rituals bear more than a passing similarity to those performed by the Priest. From this, I explore the idea that the Operating Theatre represents a sacred space between this world and the unknown, with the medical Doctor in charge of the relationship between the two: the Doctor becomes imbued with heroic qualities as 'he' faces death in a way that the majority of people in the West will never have to, and retains an element of control over it. This heroic quality also translates to the everyday individual who has the NDE, the ordinary person who faces extraordinary circumstances (who has no particular religious motivation for talking about their experience). All of these features, I maintain, go a long way to explain the popularity of the category of the 'NDE'.

Whilst Kübler-Ross has portrayed death as a peaceful transition and attempted to reassure with her anecdotes about visions of Heaven, others, notably Julia Lawton (2000) have argued that, by in large, there are no deathbed conversions *en masse* amongst those who have seen death looming for some time. Crudely put, if a person is religious, he or she may die religious, and if not, he or she may die an atheist. This does not necessarily hold true for reports of the NDE however; it is in situations of medical emergency where the realities of the embodied existence interject into the wider sphere of our cultural and social existence, an untimely reminder of our own mortality. The stakes in these situations become raised; the events of accidents or physical emergencies such as cardiac arrest can strike at any time with no allowance for someone to plan their care, and choose how they might die. Reports of NDEs are therefore mixed up in these flashpoints. At a conference in 1982, Raymond Moody and Bruce Greyson argued that what sets an NDE apart from other mystical and/or drug related experiences, is because it "... comes unexpected and unsought, and because it occurs in a context of 'ultimate loss'" (Zaleski,

[47] As I show in the next chapter, and discuss further in my conclusion, this signification would slide depending on the interests of the researchers examining the NDE.

1987:243). Furthermore, it can be seen to tap into concerns unique to our understanding of spirituality in post-modernity. Allan Kellehear states that the

> ...images of death that emerge from the NDE is one of a detailed, organized set of experiences that... are intriguingly familiar... the recent introduction of the subject is seen as originating from *dissident medical authorities such as Kübler-Ross, Moody, and Sabom.* It therefore has an added... quality of authority, in contrast to being seen to derive from unconvincing religious or fringe cult sources. NDEs, then, have a genuine "designer" quality... The NDE is the quintessentially postmodern idea of death- eclectic in imagery; philosophically accessible to a wide range of beliefs without being particularly harmful to any of them... It is not an innocuous idea of death but rather a highly adaptable, and hence highly attractive, set of images... (Kellehear, 1996:90-91, italics mine)[48]

This 'highly attractive set of images' has been made more so by the setting of these experiences within an Operating Theatre where Doctors have pulled patients back from the point of death. These images are given more currency because they are postulated by 'dissident medical authorities' who have, in Kübler-Ross's case, sought to give the dying patient the dignity they reserve and, in Moody's case, sought to publicise little-known but apparently widespread accounts that were previously pathologised as the 'Lazarus Syndrome'.[49] Of course, as I have shown, Kübler-Ross had just as much to say about spirituality and the afterlife as Moody. The key to the popularity of the NDE is that Moody does not report stories of a one-way immigration of people to a far off place, but rather presents their holiday slide-shows when they return.[50]

There are certain key areas of medical practise that may be read as ritualised. I utilise the definition offered by Jan Van Bremer (as quoted by Fitzgerald):

> The study of ritual is not a search for essential qualities of a peculiar or qualitatively different event; it is a way of examining how trivial elements of

---

[48] The sociologist Allan Kellehear (1996) is perhaps the only NDE researcher to retain some sense of the social location of NDEs, although, as I mentioned in my introduction, he stops short of exploring just how post-modernism *transforms* these experiences, and how this differs from other religious and mystical accounts.

[49] Kenneth Ring (1980:19) states "these (Kübler-Ross and Moody's) mutually supporting sets of findings were reported by two highly credible physicians, one eminent to begin with and the other compelling in print, lent a certain 'scientific aura' to these accounts... Nevertheless, the impression of scientific validity is not quite justified..." This is because of their anecdotal nature, a flaw that both Ring (1980) and Sabom (1982) would rectify with their early work. I discuss this in the next chapter.

[50] Kübler-Ross (1995:74) states "... Moody's first book, *Life After Life*, which is the only one that is correct, is helpful but it will not tell you what death is all about, because those are all *near*-death experiences" (italics hers). Also, "...I wanted to share with you some of this research in death and life after death... We have studied near death experiences for decades, but we were very aware that these were only *near* death experiences..." (1995:80, italics hers). Further, "...(l)et me now share with you now some of my own mystical experiences that helped me truly know rather than believe that all these existences beyond the realms of our scientific understandings are true..." (1995:98).

> the social world can be elevated and transformed into symbols, categories, mechanisms, which, in certain contexts, allow the generation of a special or extraordinary event (quoted in Fitzgerald, 2000:50)

The Doctor Glin Bennet recounts how insecure, newly-qualified Doctors wear the white coat and the stethoscope as a symbol that sets them apart from the public, and one that both *distances* the Doctor from the patient, and sets up a power-dynamic that clearly demarcates their respective roles (Bennet, 1987:67-69). This wearing of the symbols of medicine also signify the long hours that Doctors work, the pressure with which they must cope, and the grandiose elements of life and death with which they struggle; by putting on the white jacket and stethoscope, they signify the heroic job they undertake (Bennet, 1987:70-71). According to Bennet (writing in 1987), this is still a male-dominated world, one that is insular and elitist (1987:xiv). [51] Although, with the increasing specialisation of technology and the shifting of medical roles from the Doctor to other health professionals, the Doctor's prestige is not quite as majestic as it used to be, it is "still advantageous... when the Doctor can create the impression of being permanently in demand" (Bennet, 1987:4). Thus "... the public also likes to invest the Doctor with heroic qualities, since it needs heroes as much as they, in turn, like adulation..." (Bennet, 1987:4).

The Doctor both becomes imbued with heroic qualities and seeks them by adopting the ritual attire of the discourse. Those that do, in the end, reach the stage of adopting this attire are a select group who have gone through an extensive initiation procedure (medical school), and guard their ranks (Bennet, 1987:63-64). According to Seale it is "...important to understand medicine as a religious calling" (1998:78). Bennet (1987:70-72) argues that the Doctor's role has been gradually eroded by the increasingly technical nature of the technology that is used (thus requiring specialised staff), and latterly, the movement towards giving nurses more of the roles that Doctors have had in the past.[52] He states,

> The high point for surgical virtuosity was in the early years of this century when anaesthetic and antiseptic techniques permitted a greater range of surgical interventions but high technology had not arrived... The distance

---

[51] Bennet states that this"...powerful male ethos dominates an environment in which women Doctors do exactly the same work as men, yet the men most often behave as though these women Doctors simply are not there...(there has been) a great expansion in the West of medical services of all kinds and a consequent demand for more Doctors. Women were able to fill this gap (also Doctors from poor countries), and the cynic will argue that this has been an important reason for the rapid increase in the number of women admitted to medical school in recent years... women are left with the lower status jobs, usually in primary care (referring here to family practise, paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology) and less popular specialties such as psychiatry and anaesthetics" (1987:78-79).

[52] For instance, in Britain, certain qualified nurses now have the power to prescribe drugs (Margaret Millar, Private Communication).

> between surgeon and helpers therefore was enormous, his prestige soared and his helpers enjoyed the reflected glory. Nowadays there are many highly skilled people present in the operating theatre, on whom the surgeon depends totally... There is more than a little longing for the status and privileges of a performing virtuoso, but acting like a prima donna does not make the surgeon one... (Bennet, 1987:71)

This transference of skills has not gone unchallenged, and Bennet notes that in "... the Western world there are many instances when doctors will refuse to work with non-medically qualified people irrespective of their abilities" (1987:72). Whilst there may well be an erosion of the god-like status of the surgeon, the exoticness of the technology and the functions that it perform (bringing the dead back to life) hold an allure in NDE literature (I return to this).

Further, there is a drive amongst academically inclined Doctors to be seen as scientific (Bennet, 1987:101) and to have the status of physicists or chemists.[53] Thus,

> The message is unequivocally reductionist, so much so that the editors of *Scientific Foundations of Oncology* found it necessary to explain what a chapter entitled 'The Challenge of Terminal Care (by Cicely Saunders) was doing in a 'scientific' textbook... Dame Cicely played the game admirably by including in her chapter graphs, a table, and photographs of patients before and after her interventions, but still her contribution was felt to be slightly anomalous since it concentrated on the whole person and not on the parts (Bennet, 1987:103)

Tellingly, Cicely Saunders (who initially qualified both as a nurse and a social worker) had to retrain as a Doctor in order to have her work in Palliative Care taken seriously by the wider medical fraternity (Seale, 1998), and had to play the "scientific" game in order to become part of the discourse of medicine.

Surgeons, particularly, "work against the background of disaster" and therefore "must have the best available equipment, the best conditions for work" (Bennet, 1987:74). They have to work in "Medical Temples" because "technological medicine is so complicated and so expensive that it can only be practised in special places" (Bennet, 1987:74). The rituals surrounding work in a "Medical Temple" become doubly relevant in regards to the Doctor who discusses the NDE. There are parallels with Mircea Eliade's idea of the "Symbolism of the 'Centre' ", where he argues that

[53]Bennet states that"... academic medicine, like experimental psychology, suffers from the methodological straightjacket born of trying to imitate the physical scientists... both have frequently disregarded the person for the sake of the parts that interest them..."(Bennet, 1987:102).

> ...(o)n this side there is ordered- because inhabited and organised- space; on the other, outside this familiar space, there is the unknown... in a word, chaos or death or night... formerly, communications with Heaven and revelations with the divinity were easy and 'natural', until, in consequence of a ritual fault, these communications were broken off... Only medicine men, shamans, priests, and heroes were now able to re-establish communication with heaven... (Eliade, 1952:37-41)

In appropriating Eliade (and reading him somewhat against the grain of his own work), I note here that I do not subscribe to the romantic subtext that this quote indicates (namely that humanity has lost its communication with the divine, an issue I discuss in chapter 6). Rather, on my analysis, the Doctor carries out his work in the sacred centre, or medical temple, whilst on the other side there is "chaos, or death, or night" (Eliade, 1952:37). Working in this sacred space, Doctors have been *perceived* as re-establishing contact with heaven. This illuminates Moody's comments in regards to the hard-fact of the NDE, where he argues that evidence for life after death is "...not found in darkened rooms in circumstances contrived by witch Doctors, but in the bright light of emergency and operating rooms, presided over by physicians" (quoted in Zaleski, 1987:100-101). In a sense, Moody, Sabom, Morse *et al.* describe Doctors in the process of performing exorcisms, healings, last rites, and engaging in the resurrection of the dead; rituals that have been carried out all through history, but in our modern secular discourse, these rituals have a measure of real success.[54]

Before focussing on the specific work of the founders of the NDE movement, there is more to be uncovered in the relationship between Doctors and Death. Bauman argues:

> It transpires that it is ultimately impossible to define death, though attempts to define it - to master it... to assign it its proper place and keep it there, will never stop ... (Bauman, 1992:2-3)[55]

Acoording to Ernest Becker in *The Terror of Death* (1973), the root of the fear of death can be found in our animal instinct for self-preservation, an insight he traces from Darwin through William James (1973:26). This is the "normal biological functioning of our instinct for self preservation", which Becker ties into the

---

[54] Carrying on the analogy with witch-doctors, Bennet (1987:72) has the following to say about the use of medicine by Doctors: "Doctors touch on many disciplines in the course of their training which they can never expect to master... (f)ew have the knowledge to understand the chemistry of the drugs they use, yet almost all have the knack of knowing what they need to know, and no more, about the use of a particular drug. It does make for a somewhat superficial and "cookery-book" kind of knowledge, but it works."

[55] Raymond Moody (1975:3-5) makes a similar point when he argues that to talk about death is to talk about a realm that we cannot by definition experience, and therefore we talk in euphemisms (such as "sleep") as a means to get round this. Nevertheless, Moody thinks that this is an unhelpful view of the situation as it "... does not give us any real comfort or hope in facing death" (1975:5).

developmental processes of the child (1973:26-27). The child, for Becker, lives in complete reliance upon his parents, and when "his" needs are met it must seem as if "he" possesses magical abilities (1973:27). When the inevitable aggravation comes of "his" parents not succumbing to "his" will, the child directs "hate and destructive feelings towards them", a force that causes "him" to live in a state of psychic chaos (Becker, 1973:27). The fear of death and loss is becomes immersed within the 'talion principle', where, seeing "his" father kill a mouse "he" has no way of knowing that the father might not likewise kill "him" (Becker, 1973:27). These psychic fears are repressed as the child makes 'his' way in the world. Becker continues,

> ...even more importantly is how repression works; it is not simply a negative force opposing life energies... fears are naturally absorbed by organismic striving... A lion must feel more secure that God is on his side than a gazelle. On the most elemental level the Organism works actively against its own fragility by seeking to expand and perpetuate itself in living experience... (Becker, 1973:28)

Hence, the strongest organisms strive against the fear of death. This fear is also motivated by Freud's recognition that the unconscious is not able to recognise its own mortality, a factor that itself leads to psychic tension (Becker, 1973:28). Therefore, we identify with acts of heroism because

> ...heroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death. We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration; it moves us deeply in our hearts because we have doubts about how brave we ourselves would be. When we see a man bravely facing his own distinction we rehearse the greatest victory we can imagine... The hero was the man who could go into the spirit world, the world of the dead, and return alive...(Becker, 1973:23)[56]

This analogy does not *strictly* translate across to the analysis of the popularity of the NDE, as the original medical proponents of the NDE were not facing their own extinction but that of their patients. Nevertheless, on this analysis, medical professionals still face up to the physical realities of traumas, cardiac arrests and so on that may leave the average layperson in the lurch, a feat that instils admiration amongst the non-medical fraternity. Further, we then have access to the "greatest victory" that we could imagine through the accounts of the NDE reporter, a reality that scientific resuscitation techniques give us access to that we would not have had otherwise, and we have the discourse of medicine to thank for this.

[56] I contextualise the relationship between psychoanalysis and death in chapter 6.

Specifically, we have these "maverick authorities" to thank (to use Kellehear's nomenclature) who have centred the medical gaze back on to the patient and, in doing so, have opened up this 'new' avenue for exploration.[57] Nevertheless, the gaze has been shifted back on to the violence of the NDE encounter and the technology that has been used, all bound up in a discourse of mastery. Margaret Lock (1997:91) argues that

> (t)he history of technology has usually been transmitted as a heroic tale about the conquest of the enemy, whether it be human or the natural world...this dominant ideology has, for the last century at least, been accompanied by a counter-discourse replete with ambivalence and warnings of technology gone wild...A tension exists between the heroic use of technology and the fearful applications that it can have.[58]

Within medical NDE literature, we have all these fears and admiration rolled up into one; the fear of illness, death and the terror of non-existence; the fear of the surgeon's knife and the technology used to penetrate and explore the body; but also the reassurance of both the surgeon's ability to use "heroic measures" to bring us back, and the promise of an afterlife that medical science has helped uncover.[59] NDE literature offers us hints of the terror of death, but reassures us that we have a guide to help us through. Further, the advent of C.P.R. techniques, and the increasing ability to bring people back from states hitherto unknown, made the discourse of medicine superior to any form of divination, chanting or prayers surrounding the dead. Consider Melvin Morse's discussion about just how he and Moody came to discuss their research into NDEs:

---

[57] According to Raymond Moody, "(t)he subject of death is taboo. We feel perhaps only subconsciously that to be in contact with death... somehow confronts us with the prospects of our own deaths... For example, most medical students, myself included, have found that even the remote encounter with death which occurs upon one's first visit to the anatomical laboratories when entering medical school can evoke strong feelings of uneasiness. In my own case, the reason for this seems quite obvious... it wasn't entirely concern for the person who's remains I saw there, although that certainly figured, too. What I was seeing on the table was a symbol of my own mortality..." (Moody, 1975:4).

[58] An example of this is in the language of the Professor of Medicine Laurens P. White (1977:97, italics mine), where he states "..(w)e are all aware of patients who have been kept "alive" by the use of respirators, IV fluids, and repeated cardiac defibrillation or massage. *There is no question of the value of these heroic measures*... (w)hen I listen to lay groups discussing this issue, I am struck with the frequency with which physicians are blamed for 'keeping people alive'... our technology has created the problem... that after all chances for a meaningful life have passed... people may be kept indefinitely 'alive'..."

[59] Sabom recognises this in his initial foray into NDE research. He states "(r)ecently, the medical profession has been widely criticised for its alleged preoccupation with the technical aspects of medical care and a concomitant diminished emphasis on close patient rapport. This criticism had quite frequently come from terminally ill or dying patients, precisely the individuals who represent 'technological failures' and are most in need of a supportive physician relationship. These individuals are also likely to have encountered an NDE during the course of their illness... I began to realise that these conversations served a much greater purpose... For the individual who had had an NDE, the sessions appeared to fulfil a need... Many had wondered whether they were 'cracking up'..." (Sabom, 1982:189).

> We spent three days talking non-stop about near-death experiences. I vividly remember being called to the hospital to resuscitate a critically injured patient during this time period. Dr Moody accompanied me to the hospital and we continued our discussions at *whatever breaks in the action* that came while I was attending to the patient, and all the way home again. (Morse, 2000, in Moody, 1975:xviii; italics mine)

This is hardly the usual parameters for undertaking an intellectually engaging conversation– these men were in charge of the life and death of their patients, and expert in bringing back those on the brink. Kübler-Ross may have given the dying an agency by have talking about religious visions and experiences of the terminally ill, but it has been the work of "heroic man" who really brought this phenomenon into the public eye.

There is also another side to this discourse; the founders of the NDE field did not go through these experiences firsthand, but rather researched, interviewed, collated, assembled and published the accounts of other people.[60] There is an element of the "ordinary heroics" about these experiences. Seale argues that

> Everyday life, which is routine and taken for granted, in whose reproduction and maintenance women play an important part... resists being cast as a grand narrative. Here there is no place for the self-defining adventurer... This is an essentially masculine fantasy, we are told... It would be a mistake to fully accept this argument... heroism described in ancient cultures is far from extinct... opportunities to become ordinary heroes are potentially open to all... In certain circumstances- and the facing of death is one of these- the self can be understood, with the help of psychological techniques and constructions, to be engaged in a heroic drama... Feminist critiques of the older masculine heroics, too, has played a part in constructing this new-directed heroics of the self (Seale, 1998:91-92)

The growing emphasis upon a psychological self, one that is divorced from a community that shares the same traditions, and instead *consumes* and constructs a piece-meal tradition to suit each individual, has led to a generation of literature that focuses on the heroic dramas faced by the normal person. About the NDE survivors, Ring states,

> Of course the experiences we have discussed... happen, for the most part to ordinary men and women who have neither the inclination, nor, usually, the charismatic gifts, to become prophets in any serious, sociological way. Indeed, the typical near-death survivor will usually say that his spiritual understanding is not one he wishes to impose on others. (Ring, 1980:255-256)

[60] The exception to this being George Ritchie MD, who's NDE account inspired Moody's initial research, and Margot Grey, both of whom I mention in the next chapter.

According to Seale (1998:91), ordinary accounts like those featured by NDE researchers allow the development of an individual's coping strategies for the trials and tribulations of life and death, as they no longer necessarily have a community wide set of traditions or support networks that would have been in place in the past or in other climes. In the last section we saw how Kübler-Ross utilised an anecdotal method of reporting her findings as a means to challenge the strictures of modernist medicine; this method has been adopted, to varying extents, by the original trio of NDE researchers.

3.6 Conclusion

"If modernity struggled to deconstruct death, in our post-modern times it is the turn of immortality to be deconstructed" (Bauman:1997:163)

Death, as I have shown, is a theoretically complex sign; this chapter has explored the many levels of the biological, the social, the unconscious, and the cultural aspects that make up the changing discourses that relate to it in our present times.[61] In a sense, I have examined things in a backwards order in this chapter; I started by looking at the "denial of death" in our (post) modern twentieth century, before going back to look at how modernity has compartmentalised, and warded-off, death. This was done because I felt that, with certain notable exceptions (Tony Walter, Zygmunt Bauman, Julia Lawton), insufficient recognition had been given to the cultural logic of post-modernism and how this interfaced with, and changed, questions of death in the "public sphere". By utilising the commentary of Jean Baudrillard as a means to elucidate how "simulation" and "representation" have changed our conception of death, I have further explored my Archaeological project of examining the unwritten rules that have structured the debate as to whether or not we "deny" death in the West. Modernity employed that strategy of "hiding the death of those close to oneself from sight and chasing it away from memory", whereas Post-Modernity means that Death is "put blatantly on display, made into a never-ending street spectacle, that is... one among many of daily life's paraphernalia" (Bauman, 1997:163). This has translated into the medical view of death as a defeat, a perspective that the founders of the Hospice Movement reacted against. In doing so, they replaced the statement of "death as a denial" with one of "death as a transition"; we have witnessed a modern pushing *away* of death, to a post-modern *embrace* of it as a journey, but both function to hide the realities of the decaying body. This suppression of morality, of

[61] In chapter 6 I return to this, but look at the signification of death in earlier times in the West.

the fear of bodily decay and the loss of control of the self (which is bound up implicitly within western notions of identity [Lawton, 2000]), left the way open for medical Doctors to face these "terrors" and reassure us with scientifically validated "evidence" for an afterlife, one that dovetails nicely with the wider emergence of the 'Spiritual Marketplace' in the (post) modern West (I come to this in the next chapter).

Chapter 4: The NDE and the 'Spiritual Marketplace'

4.1 Introduction

In the last chapter I mapped out the relationship between statements surrounding the NDE, and the discourses of Medicine and the Hospice Movement. In this chapter I explore the wider discursive factors of the American "Spiritual Marketplace" (Clark Roof, 1999) out of which the NDE emerged. I ground my analysis in the work of the founders of the NDE discourse (Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom) and follow the contours of their work from its early stages, through to the formation of the institution *The International Association of Near-Death Studies* (IANDS), and on to the late 1990s when simmering tensions between the three founders spilled over into *The Journal of Near Death Studies*, and a very public falling out ensued. By traversing this thirty-year history of research into the NDE, and by exploring the recent so-called "religious wars" between the NDE founders, I show that their perceived "golden era of religion" never materialised because NDE literature, despite being packaged as offering scientific evidence of life after death (evidence that NDE researchers such as Bruce Greyson and Kenneth Ring hoped would radically change the world), did not necessarily appeal to the 'spiritual consumer' as evidence *for* the afterlife, but rather helped inoculate them against the idea there was *no* afterlife. As I argued in the last chapter, NDE literature should be understood as part and parcel of a wider post-modern blurring between real and unreal, and so the wider audience for NDE literature consumed such evidence alongside other New Age and Spirituality titles. Rather than ushering in a new religious era then, the founders of the NDE movement grew frustrated with the lack of progress, and accused the discourse of NDEs of "stagnation" (Kastenbaum, 1996, Moody, 1999).

Against the aforementioned accusation of stagnation - which seems to imply that an object (the 'NDE') exists to be studied and that this research has faltered- I argue instead that researchers have real difficulty maintaining conceptual closure when dealing with the category 'NDE'. Moody's classic 'statement' of the NDE, which I quoted in chapter 1, has been debated over, intersected with, and dissected by a variety of competing discourses. Once Moody published the classic 'statement' of the NDE (which, I argued in chapters 1 and 3, owes its own conditions of possibility to the Operating Theatre) it entered 'various networks and fields of use', as scholars

swarmed to investigate it, road test it, and see how it interconnected with other related categories.[1]

The evident tension in defining the NDE as an entity-in-itself, and defining it against what it is not, means there is constant slippage between this category and other religious and mystical discourses. Because the NDE exists at the extremes of possible human experience, a field ultimately inaccessible to the researcher, the statement of the NDE was investigated via "...test scores, rating scales, response distributions, serial lists, and innumerable other items that the investigator does not just find but constructs with great care..." (Danziger, 1994:3). Because the NDE must forever remain absent from under the microscopes of scientific researchers, it *necessarily* exists for the public (both researcher and layperson alike) as something reported in texts, discussed at conferences, or talked about on screens. Trying to segregate it from other religious or mystical experiences is like trying to know a stranger by listening to other people talking about him/her, and forming an impression based on this: although research has been done, graphs have been charted, statistical analysis has been carried out, and some impressive results have been obtained, there is an inherent air of subjectivity that cannot, by this discourse's nature, be avoided.[2] The NDE is bound up within a discursive field that is not limited to a theoretical subset within (say) particle physics, but one that involves researchers from a multitude of religious, philosophical, theological and scientific perspectives. There is, therefore, no way to distinguish between the subject and object in NDE studies. As a result of this, the IANDS, the institution that was initially set up to enter "various networks" in order to maintain the distinct identity of the NDE as a medically discovered, scientifically based proof of the afterlife, would soon find itself enmeshed with disputes about its religious significance. The IANDS is not an

---

[1] In chapter 5 I examine how the NDE is interconnected with the category of science, and in chapter 6 I examine how the NDE is interconnected with death, mysticism, the 'otherworld journey' narratives of the Middle Ages, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead.*

[2] For instance, Bruce Greyson opens his review chapter on NDEs by stating "...Although the term near-death experience... (was) not coined until 1975, accounts of similar events can be found in the folklore and writings of European, Middle Eastern, African, Pacific, and Native American Peoples." Nevertheless, he clarifies this several pages on by saying "A basic methodological problem in near-death research has been lack of consensus amongst researchers as to the definition of the phenomenon. Various investigators have used the term... to refer to any experience of clinically dead persons who return to life, any experience undergone by individuals who are judged to be near death, and any similar experience that leads to personal transformation whether or not the individual was near death when it occurred" (Greyson, in Cardena, Lynn and Krippner ed, 2000:342). For instance, Michael Sabom argues that the NDE is defined by the advent of the clinical setting (1982:12) and Kenneth Ring argues "...near-death experiences are not uniquely associated with the moment of apparent death; that is simply one of the most reliable pathways to them ..." (1980:264). On a different front the sociologist Allan Kellehear argues that "...clinical NDEs might be taken as part of the wider social experience that every member of society shares- the status passage" (1996:53). To this end he examines the example of the shipwreck to show how "the status passage" of undergoing such an ordeal displays both phenomenological similarities to the NDE and can produce "the social processes of transitions to new values and identity" (1996:48-53).

organisation with a New Age agenda *per se*, but exists as a multi-disciplinary organisation that is a microcosm of the wider politics involved with the religious engagement with the secularised sphere as a whole (especially in America). A Foucaultian examination of discipline and control should not, therefore, look to the Panopticon of the IANDS as a way to regulate these experiences along the lines of a New-Age religion, but should instead explore how the IANDS is in effect a rather toothless institution enmeshed in a wider field of force-relations.[3] By exploring the conflict between the founding members of the IANDS I therefore draw attention to the deeper structures that inform their disputes, structures that can be identified as originating in the 'Spiritual Marketplace' of late-twentieth-century America.

It should be noted that, as this chapter serves the dual purpose of exploring the issues of authority and also covering the history of the idea of the NDE, I make heavy use of footnotes as a way to flesh out the specifics of NDE research. I begin in section 4.2 by exploring the "Spiritual Marketplace" terrain into which the discourse of NDEs emerged. In section 4.3 I explore the work of the three founders of the field and position them as reacting against the modern structures that have caused death to be seen as taboo. Reacting *against* a system does not necessitate a shared common ground amongst revolutionaries, however; the various religious inclinations and idiosyncrasies of Raymond Moody, Michael Sabom, and Kenneth Ring caused real tension, especially during the institutionalising of the movement they inadvertently spawned.[4] I explore this alongside the historical formations of the *International Association of Near-Death Studies* (henceforth IANDS), which starts in roughly the same time period, in section 4.4. This will eviscerate the tensions that have arisen from the start of IANDS, as it has been transformed and fought over through the introduction of a whole host of historical, sociological, theological, religious, philosophical and psychological discourses. In the midst of this conflict is the NDEr who may not even be concerned with these debates, but who is looking for a support network as there is none available in the wider public sphere. This segues into section 4.5 where I look at how, after three decades, the founders of NDE research have looked back on their life's work with varying degrees of disenchantment and disillusionment as they have chosen different paths through the 'Spiritual

[3] Which is, of course, a concern of the Conservative Christian NDE researchers (Sabom,1998), who see a profound irreligiousness, promiscuity and ultimately satanic worship associated with the New Age. In effect, the New Age disrupts their own "bio-power" and the bodily control they wish to exert on people.

[4] Moody, Sabom, and Ring were of course not the only researchers initially interested in NDEs, although, as I shall detail in the body of the text, their work has set the discursive formations that other researchers have used to engage in this debate. Other researchers at the time included John Audette who undertook his own study in Peoria, the parapsychologist Ian Stevenson whom I discussed at the end of chapter 2, Bruce Greyson who investigated the question of NDE and suicide, and Craig Lundhal, who worked (and continues to work) in the field of Mormon NDEs (Zaleski, 1987:110).

Marketplace' in late-modernity, America. Charting the trials and tribulations of the NDE movement will flesh out my argument that the NDE appeals as an 'exotic' curiosity to 'spiritual consumers", as opposed to heralding a new spiritual or religious age (as was hoped by the founders of the IANDS).

4.2 Mapping the Terrain

The NDE, despite having real cross-cultural currency, is a peculiarly American phenomenon.[5] It has appealed to both the New Age market and the Christian one: it is laden with enough Christian imagery to appeal to many believers (although there has been a contingent conservative Christian denunciation of the majority of the field as Satanic),[6] and exotic enough to appeal to the New Age demographic. The NDE has been variously interpreted; some believe that "The underlying message of the NDE is consistent with the general revelation of God" (Sabom, 1998:222), while other Christians see NDEs as "...another angel of light- the one called Lucifer, the Deceiver" (Rawlings, 1993:35). For those more inclined towards the New Age "there is still the profound evolutionary meaning of the NDES... (it) may in some way prefigure our own planetary destiny, the next stage in evolution, the dazzling ascent towards Omega and the conscious reunion with the Divine" (Ring, 1984:269). It seems evident that these different understandings of the NDE represent a struggle of authority over who has the correct interpretation, but this seems only half the story. The category of the NDE itself emerges out of the same discursive formulations that created these differing religious perspectives. As Foucault argued "The identity of a statement is subjected to a second group of conditions and limits: those that are imposed by all the other statements among which it figures, by the domain in which it can be used or applied, by the role and functions it can perform" (1969:116). In this section I shall explore the emergence of the "Spiritual Marketplace" of late twentieth century America in order to ground the discourse of NDEs in their point of origin. In doing so I build my argument that the initial NDE researchers misunderstood the nature of the appeal of their work. By examining the reasons why NDE literature was

[5] The fact that Margot Grey's *Return From Death* (1985) would be labelled "cross-cultural", despite being a British based study, should render this a fairly uncontroversial assertion (Zaleski, 1987:111).

[6] The first warning shot across the bow came from Maurice Rawlings in his book *Beyond Death's Door* (1978). Rawlings, a conservative Christian and cardiologist, was the first to flag up hellish NDEs that he felt were being suppressed by NDE researchers. All sides rubbished his methodology, even if his reporting of Hellish NDEs would later be born out by other NDE researchers. His 1993 book *To Hell and Back* was also roundly condemned, with the conservative Christian Michael Sabom taking him to task for repeating stories with key details changed (a point that Rawlings freely admitted to, believing it better to save souls than be accurate [Sabom, 1998:165-167]) and not publishing any kind of actual results of his studies. Nevertheless, in this book, Rawlings was to postulate a New Age conspiracy at the heart of the IANDS, a point picked up on by Sabom (1998), and one I return to in this text.

so popular, I also establish why stories of the NDE did not translate into a 'golden age' of religion, or even a New Religious Movement.

Carol Zaleski has argued "...we are in the midst of a widespread revival of popular interest in return-from-death stories and popular deathbed visions... we are witnessing what Eliade has identified as a "cultural fashion" which should claim our attention because it has something to teach us about the direction our society is taking..." (Zaleski, 1987:97).[7] Whilst Zaleski might have her finger on the cultural pulse in this quote, I maintain that a 'cultural fashion' is not necessarily synonymous with the 'hunger for a religious narrative in one's life'. As I will establish, it was the confusion of the two that led to difficult times for NDE researchers as their original hopes and dreams did not come to fruition.

The first book on NDEs was published in the 1970s, and it therefore seems pertinent to briefly outline the contours of the 'Spiritual Marketplace' from which it emerged. The mid 1960s through to the early 1970s was the "time of the 'counterculture'" where New Religious Movements (NRMs) grew up alongside fervent political unrest (Robbins, 1992:2). Nevertheless, after Vietnam, and due to the recession of the late seventies, "student activism seemed to decline abruptly..." Wade Clark Roof argues that "A young generation of Americans born after World War II who reached maturity in the 1960s and early 1970s ... had rebelled against institutional authority... the culturally established bourgeois faiths especially felt the brunt of that rebellion... The rallying cry was to turn inward, to look to one's own experience" (1999:146). This, "combined with a persistence of other countercultural values," led to a "favourable setting for the upsurge of countercultural religiosity which was also part of a broader American 'Return to Religion' " (Robbins, 1992:3).[8] This 'return to religion' brought an increased upsurge in "Evangelical-Pentecostal-Fundamentalist movements as well as guru groups and quasi-religious therapeutic movements" (Robbins, 1992:4). Against this background, the waning of the famous NRMs of the seventies (ISKON, The Unification Church) were offset slightly by " 'World Affirming Movements' which helps persons to cope with stress..." and "...the

[7] Reflecting Eliade, Zaleski holds to the idea that there is an underlying 'homo religiosus' of human beings, and the desire to get in touch with the 'religious symbolic' is redirected into other "journey" narratives, such as space travel. I criticise this in chapter 6, but for now make note of the fact that one could be convinced of one's own immortality (in the Freudian sense of not being able to imagine ones own non-existence), and the NDE might therefore act as a reassurance of this by blurring the distinction between real and unreal in post-modernity, without having to postulate the need for an ontological 'religious' impulse, which itself seems to smack of the Christian idea of one "needing" God in their lives.

[8] Christopher Lasch offers a more acidic leftist analysis: "After the political turmoil of the sixties... (and)... Having no hope of improving their lives in any ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating healthy foods, taking lessons in ballet or belly dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East... Harmless in themselves, these pursuits... signify a retreat from politics and a repudiation of the past" (cited by Carrette and King, 2005:54-55).

'New Age' groups (appeared) increasingly to appeal to middle aged adults..." (Robbins, 1992:10-11).[9] By the mid-1980s the focus had switched, in part, from the NRMs of the 1970s to the New Age.[10] An increasingly polarised religious scene saw many within the Conservative Christian fraternity become alarmed at the influence of New Age ideas in the public sphere, whether in educational establishments, self-help groups, and even the military (Robbins, 1992:10-11). The discursive formations that structure the NDE were, in part, polarised among the New Age/Fundamentalist Christian axes, and the concept lay suspended between these two whilst a struggle for authority occurred over the signification of these narratives. Thus, the NDE "...functions in different ways at different times and reflects a specific ordering of social relations" (Carrette and King, 2005:30), a point to which I return later.

The transition of the counter-cultural baby-boomer of the sixties into the 'spiritual consumer' of the late seventies onwards was brought about by increasing age and affluence. The sociologist Steve Bruce argues that the main consumers of New Age literature are middle-class and are arts and humanities educated (1999). Because of this education, they are often sceptical of scientific expertise, and Bruce argues that this is (in part) due to the increasing specialisation of the expert researcher: it is *less* easy for their research to be translated into layman's terms, and this, combined with increasing scepticism towards the merits of science, has meant that the educated layperson "...has read three paperbacks and is not easily cowed" (Bruce, 1999:166).[11] Nevertheless, there "...are people in the New Age Milieu... who are keen to prove their case to sceptical scientists... (m)ost often the new idea is

---

[9] Against the distinctions between "world affirming, world denying and world accommodating" typology offered by the influential sociologist of religion Roy Wallis, Carrette and King argue that such a distinction "is insufficiently focussed on attitudes towards capitalism and consumerism" and "...naively assumes uniformity about the 'real-world' even though "...this is precisely one of the major points of contention between different traditions and world views" (Carrette and King, 2005:21).

[10] After the rescind of the 1965 Oriental Exclusion Act "an increasing number of gurus and swamis began to visit or settle in the United States (Melton, cited in Robbins, 1992:2), which coincided with a massive increase in interest in Buddhist and Hindu ideas, particularly on College Campuses (Robbins, 1992:2). Burnt out political activists were frequently viewed as recruits to the NRMs, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1970s, and the drugs culture that was popular on the coasts of the US fuelled both intake into movements like ISKON (where they sought a purer high), or into the religiotherapeutic groups conceived off as a successor to the fading "hippy era" of the 1960s (Bellah, cited in Robbins, 1992:3).

[11] Against thinkers such as Roof, Stark, and Bainbridge (the latter two whom he analyses in some details, 1999), Steve Bruce (1996, 1999) believes that the 'deregulation' of the 'religious market' inevitably leads not to a resurgence in spiritual interests (or people on 'spiritual quests') but rather leads to a superficial 'pick and mix' that does not replicate the 'religiosity' of the past. One could amend Bruce's work in light of the work of Fitzgerald (2000) in order to contextualise the emergence of the categories 'religion' and 'religiosity'-although in doing so I read Bruce somewhat against the grain of his own work. As an empirical modernist he grants little time for post-modern thinkers such as Baudrillard (whom I utilised in the last chapter), sociologists such as Brian Turner who utilise post-modern theory, and (one would presume) the wider post-structuralist enterprise that informs my work. Nevertheless, his work harbours genuine insight, and even if he might not agree with the wider academic location that this work springs from (particularly the emphasis upon 'social-construction' within my work), I will show how his ideas inform and parallel my own argument at various places throughout the remainder of this chapter and beyond.

supposed to be plausible because it is traditional, but one also finds the language of science being invoked whenever possible..." (Bruce, 1996:206). Such a trend is easily detectable within NDE literature, with NDEs being linked to the Otherworld Journey narratives of the middle ages (Zaleski, 1987), Medieval Mystics (Cressey 1993), the wisdom of the Greeks (Moody, 1975, 1999, 2005), as well as the timeless wisdom of the 'science' of death manual *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Moody, 1975, Zaleski, 1987). This is of course combined with reference to the scientific marvels of the Operating Theatre and in "... so far as the New Age is hostile to any facet of science, it is the supposed close-mindedness and authoritarianism of the professional scientific and medical communities which is criticised..." (Bruce, 1996:206). New Age proponents, therefore, combine a textual approach that sees "...Ethnological sources... plundered for theories and therapies " (Bruce, 1996:209), and involves a "conspicuous attempt to appeal to as large a number of adherents of different forms of esoteric knowledge... by showing that their ideas really are interlocking"[12] (Bruce, 1996:208).[13] Despite this, "...many New Agers combine criticism of the scientific and medical establishments with the belief that what they are doing will someday be recognised as science" (Bruce, 1996:209).

These insights are directly relevant to NDE research. Segments of the discursive formations that interlink with NDE research are based in the discourse of medicine (as discussed in the last chapter), but there were wider conditions of emergence in the American religious marketplace. With the appropriation and commodification of Eastern religious ideas to be bought and sold within the "spirituality" market (I focus on this in chapter 6), NDE literature found itself within a market demographic that had been the rebellious counter-culture of the sixties but had become young professionals, affluent, and interested in religious ideas. Similarly,

---

[12] In his book, *The Light Beyond* (1980), Raymond Moody quotes Transpersonal Philosopher Michael Grosso, who states "All these spiritual events have common threads. There are some interesting relationships between certain deep NDEs and prophetic NDEs... And there are links between some UFO contacts and those amazing patterns of collective apparitional experiences called Marian visions, where the Virgin Mary appears on walls and other objects in town..." (Moody, 1988:140). I have not focussed on Transpersonal Psychology as a specific area of analysis, although I do allude to it at points in this chapter, and in chapter 6. As Wulff points out "(r)esearch on the near-death experience might be excluded from transpersonal psychology... for some of its components have long interested parapsychologists" (Wulff, 1997:622). Whilst I would argue that Wulff sets up a very static demarcation between some very fluid discourses, he does reinforce the point that initially NDE research did not emerge form Transpersonal Psychology, but (I have argued) from the domain of medicine. Thus, whilst there may well be a crossover as the signification of the category NDE slid amongst "Science", "Medicine", and the 'Spiritual Marketplace', Transpersonal Psychology focused on consciousness expansion rather than life after death.

[13] Hugh Urban (2003:226) discusses the work of Paul Heelas on this particular area: "...beneath the tremendous diversity, there are some basic unifying themes that pervade many of the phenomena that we label New Age... the dominant tropes include 'the celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity"- that is, the fundamental belief in the inherent divinity of the individual self and an affirmation of many basic values of Western modernity, such as 'freedom, authenticity, self-responsibility, self determinism, equality, and above all, the self as a value in and of itself"

these people would probably have had no real experience of death, and in the prime of their lives; therefore scientific evidence of a religious afterlife would touch on many of their concerns, without necessarily asking for any world rejection or religious commitment.

According to Roof, this "...notion of a "spiritual marketplace" is itself captivating, with the image of a quest culture shaped by forces of supply and demand" (Clark Roof, 1999:10). This 'quest culture' is centred on "the commodification of religion as spirituality" (Carrette and King, 2005:15), and "nowhere is this greater emphasis upon the seeker more apparent than in the large chain bookstore" (Roof, 1999:7). In amongst this menagerie, NDE literature takes its place, and appeals to "not just... theologians and journalists, but... ordinary people in cafes, coffee bars and bookstores across the country" (Roof, 1997:7). The consumers who occupy these spaces and buy such literature seek "... a self styled custom built spirituality purchased in the marketplace..." (Carrette and King, 2005:81). Wade Clark Roof notes that, in these chains, "the old 'religion section' is gone and in its place ...(are)... popular topics such as angels, Sufism, journey, recovery, meditation, inspiration, Judaica, astrology, gurus, Bible, prophecy, Evangelicalism, Mary, Buddhism, Catholicism, esoterica, and the like" (Roof, 1999:7). In amongst this eclectic range of religious choices the "...most popular are books on near-death experiences, angels, and the invasion of aliens", followed by books on "ancient wisdom", including "Buddhism, Native American spiritual experiences, feminist spirituality, and assorted New Age teachings", followed by "self-help books", and tailed by "religious fiction" (1999:99). One should note the fact that NDE literature shares its primary position with books on alien invasions; instead of appealing to the religious consumer overcome with existential anxiety by promising positive scientific evidence for the afterlife, NDE literature simply satisfies the curiosities of the (post) modern spiritual consumer. Wade Clark Roof, quoting Jack Miles, argues that, in amongst this literature, "The case for belief need not be established, but rather only 'the case for unbelief [should] be somewhat neutralized"'(Roof, 1999:47). As I suggested in the last chapter, the NDE blurs the distinction between 'real' and 'unreal', and so takes its place amongst a wider simulacra that neutralises not only the case for 'unbelief', but also the threat that death might be the end of existence.

This point is felt even more acutely in an interview with one of his respondents, 'Vicki Feinstein', about her religious faith:

> 'What about other religions? Did you check any others out?' I enquired. 'Oh yes' she said. I read all the books I could on Buddhism'. 'What about this religion did you like?' 'I like the fact that it encouraged me to focus on

> myself... I also like *Star Trek*- is that a religion? I don't know.' 'Why *Star Trek*?' I asked curiously. 'I like the fact that people all work together, to explore and expand the world we live in. Doesn't matter who you are, what race, sex, religion, whatever planet you come from...' (Roof, 1999:31)

According to Clive Seale, "... in late modernity personal experience is increasingly mediated by television, newspapers, magazines, novels and other such cultural products of communication and representation" (1998:122): books on religion are understood alongside *Star Trek*, and the continuum between religion and fiction becomes blurred. Religious consumers constructing this 'self-styled spirituality' purchase NDE literature alongside other self-help, New Age and fiction literature, an important point that I shall return to in tracing why the discourses surrounding the NDE did not translate into the society-transforming phenomena that many hoped. We should therefore be careful about reading too much into what the NDE tells us about the *need* for a religious narrative in the West. As Steve Bruce has cogently pointed out, just because Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* has sold millions of copies, it does not mean that Britain has become a nation of nuclear physicists (Bruce, 1999:161); and just because the NDE has become a subject of interest in the popular media does not mean that it should be regarded as indicative of a *spiritual* rebound within wider western culture. This will become more apparent as my argument dissects the wider feuds between NDE researchers, a feud brought about by the lack of spiritual revolution that was predicted in the early days of the NDE movement. I discuss these early days next.

4.3 The Founders of NDE Research

> "...man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible. But to do that a man must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in a very sober sense of the word." (Weber, from Owen, 1994:123)

In the last chapter I examined the specific conditions of emergence that allowed the concept of the NDE to be reported and be accepted within the wider public sphere. I argued that the Doctor appeals both as a Hero and as a Priest in the reporting and publication of NDE literature, and that the sacred space of the Operating Theatre became the focal point for the establishment of evidence of the existence of another world, because it represented an exotic 'other' outside the realms of public experience. But there is another side to the appeal of these accounts: NDEs happen not to the researchers that report them, but to members of the public. Because Raymond Moody, Michael Sabom and Kenneth Ring were not making an altar call for a particular New Religious Movement (or "cult"), but were instead allowing people

from all walks of life talk about their own experience, they were exposed to the wider public in ways that other, more exclusivist sects were not. At the same time, these founders were imbued with a sense of charisma and mystique; we have the *Doctor as Hero/Doctor as Priest* talking about experiences that happened within the inner sanctum of the Operating Theatre (and therefore not privy to everyone) and then allowing the individual to recount his or her own tale.[14] In NDE literature we see the opportunity for people to become 'ordinary heroes' (Seale, 1998:91). NDE literature thus mirrors Clive Seale's analysis of the 'revival of death' in Palliative Care; "... in late modernity new forms of heroic narrative have replaced the traditional masculine warrior hero. These new forms emphasis inner journeys... made readily available through a variety of media representations and institutional practises" (1998:119). In this section I map out further the emergence of the discourse surrounding NDEs by analysing the original work of the three main founders of NDE research, how they perceived their original research remit, and how this intersected with the wider 'Spiritual Marketplace' backdrop of its day. I therefore subdivide my previous analytical category *Doctor as Hero/Doctor as Priest* (which describe the general cultural perceptions of the medical features of NDE literature) into three facets, reflecting each of the three Doctors who initiated NDE research: I analyse Raymond Moody under the label of the 'everyman', Kenneth Ring under the label of the 'spiritual seeker', and Michael Sabom under the label of 'Christian cardiologist'. In this way I locate their work and the wider appeal of NDE literature as a whole and as it appealed to the aforementioned 'Spiritual Marketplace'.

[14] I use the term 'charisma' specifically in relation to Max Weber here. Although far beyond the remit of this thesis, there is a parallel between the history of the NDE movement and the transformation of charismatic authority into bureaucratic structures. Weber argued, "By its very nature, the existence of charismatic authority is specifically unstable... The charismatic hero does not deduce his authority from codes and statues, as is the case with the jurisdiction of office... His power rests upon this purely factual recognition and springs from faithful devotion. It is devotion to the extraordinary and the unheard-of, to what is strange to all rule and tradition and which is therefore viewed as divine. It is a devotion born of distress and enthusiasm (1991:249). Weber's analysis of the charismatic authority requires modification. (Initially) none of the NDE founders claimed any particular divine mandate, nor do they completely reject the very modern foundations of western society. Nevertheless, it has become evident that with the advent of modern medicine, a considerable number of people have been, thanks to medical innovations and recovery techniques, brought back to report experiences that, prior to Moody, had no traditions or group through which to garner acceptance or understanding. The support network that emerged as part of the IANDS gives testimony to the "devotion born of distress and enthusiasm"; the distress of having an experience such as the NDE in a society without a comparative dominant tradition through which the experience is understood, and the enthusiasm that is rallied behind the charismatic authority that brings legitimacy and acceptance to the individual whom has had an NDE. I shall draw upon the parallels of the history of NDE research and the 'bureaucratisation thesis" in the footnotes of this chapter.

The philosopher and psychiatrist Raymond Moody first coined the category NDE in 1975. He became interested in what he would later call NDEs whilst a philosophy undergraduate, when he heard the physician George Ritchie recount the near-death experience he had during World War 2. After receiving a PHD in philosophy, Moody taught Plato's *Phaedo* at East Carolina University. The ensuing discussions surrounding the questions of immortality prompted some students to come forward and report experiences like the ones he had heard from Ritchie.[15] When Moody enrolled in medical school in 1972, with the desire eventually to teach the philosophy of medicine, he began collecting accounts similar to the ones he had already come across; 150 of those would make up *Life After Life*, which was published in 1975. Against Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's claim in her foreword that Moody's work will "confirm what we have been taught for two thousand years- that there is life after death" (quoted in Zaleski, 1987:101), Moody himself stated "I am not trying to prove that there is life after death. Nor do I think that a proof of this is presently possible" (quoted in Zaleski, 1987:101).[16] According to Zaleski, NDE researchers like Moody, Ring and Sabom "... consider themselves medical or psychological investigators rather than psychic sleuths" (Zaleski, 1987:101). As was made clear in chapter 2, the psychical researchers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were often of a substantial academic pedigree, and parapsychologists of the later twentieth century have often subscribed to an exacting scientific rigour. The desire for NDE researchers to distance themselves from 'psychic sleuths' seems to be indicative of the need for disciplinary closure (and a desire to appear more 'scientific', as psychical research and Parapsychology have often enjoyed a less than stellar assessment in the eyes of the wider scientific fraternity). Unlike the 'psychic sleuth', Moody claimed to have little background in the paranormal or the occult. Zaleski states,

---

[15] George Ritchie had his NDE during WWII after being left standing to attention in sub-zero temperatures by an over-zealous second lieutenant, (although his account was not published until three years after *Life After Life*, and would go on to sell 200 000 copies) (Bailey and Yates, 1996:88-89). After being hospitalised, he woke up in his bed one night, got up to walk around, only to have a hospital orderly walk right through him. After a period he flew through the air to Richmond, Virginia, only to realise upon arrival that he was dead. As he felt too young to die, he then decided to go back to the hospital. Merely upnn thinking that thought, he instantly found himself back outside the hospital. Upon seeing his own dead body, he tried to fit back into it. He stated "...I still carried the concept that when one died, he/she slept until judgement day when he/she would be judged... Suddenly an amazing thing happened. The light at the end of the bed got brighter... Then three things happened simultaneously. *Something deep inside of my spiritual being said, 'STAND UP. YOU ARE IN THE PRESENCE OF THE SON OF GOD.'* I was suddenly propelled up and off the bed. Out of the brilliant light at the head of the bed stepped the most magnificent being I have ever known. The hospital walls disappeared and in the place of them was a living panorama of my entire life... " (Ritchie, 1978, reprinted in Bailey and Yates ed., 1996:89-99, emphasis in text).

[16] In the afterword to the 25th Aniversary edition of *Life After Life*, Moody reiterates that "...(d)oes that mean that at last there is scientific proof of the afterlife? No, but it does mean that a major step has been taken that puts the idea of the afterlife on more secure footing" (Moody, 2000:171).

> ...(c)ontemporary near-death literature thus seems to say of Moody what was once said about the formidable Immanuel Kant: you can think with him, you can think against him, but you cannot think without him... Moody himself is uncomfortable with his conspicuous role. In a recent interview he remarked that press reports were inflating the importance of his evidence for life after death by a circular logic: 'The argument was that these findings were enunciated by the eminent Dr. Moody. And why was I the eminent Dr Moody? Because I enunciated these findings!' Moody withdrew from the lecture circuit when he began to feel that such publicity was drawing attention away from more scientific studies (Zaleski, 1987:103).

Moody's 'everyman' traits extended to his withdrawing from the potential cult of celebrity that had arisen around the early NDE movement. Of course, such a withdrawal may have added a certain element of mystique. This apparent humbleness on behalf of Moody meant that, unlike other new-religious or counter-culture movements, which demanded total adherence or rejection of the values of Western society, his investigations were cast in the light of scientific investigation and required no altar call or life commitment, thus appealing to a broad spectrum of consumers.

The success of *Life After Life* (which, according to Mark Fox [2003], has sold almost 14 million copies in three decades) stands testament to this approach, and has earned Moody the moniker "grandfather of NDE research" (Zaleski, 1987:97). Michael Sabom describes the first time that he met Moody, at the first meeting of NDE researchers:

> I'll never forget my first impressions when I walked through the door. My eye caught a glimpse of a man in the corner of the pine-panelled parlour, rocking back and forth in a brightly painted white wicker rocker and listening attentively as others noisily conversed around him. Sensing this may be the man about whom I heard and read so much, I immediately walked over and introduced myself. "Are you Dr Moody?" I asked somewhat tentatively. "No, I'm Raymond," he replied, as an ear-to-ear smile broke out on his warm friendly face. And it has been "Raymond" ever since. (Sabom, 1998 :131-132)

This humble approach of Moody, combined with the fact that he brought accounts of the after-death religious revelations of the everyman and woman, facilitated a public exposure denied to the prophets of the New Age, and his book had excerpts printed in the Readers Digest and other newspapers (Zaleski, 1987:262). Zaleski continues,

> In great demand on the talk show circuit is the "near-death experiencer" who appears, escorted by sympathetic psychologists, as a latter day Lazarus bearing clinically tested tidings of the afterlife... Every year, the theme of

> revival from "clinical death" resurfaces in novels, documentary films, and fantasy or horror movies- complete with special effects... As one television commentator put it, "Now, in the twentieth century it's fashionable to be dead and come back and talk about it"... (Zaleski, 1987:97)

Zaleski indicates what was discussed previously; namely, the NDE as a cultural entity, exists alongside movies and novels, between the special effect and the talk show. Further, we see how the NDE reflects the story of the everyman, but is justified by the "sympathetic psychologist". In Moody's case, the authentication came from a psychiatrist who came across as 'down to earth' as many of those people who's stories he reported.

This 'down to earth' appeal begins with Moody's assertion that "(t)his book, written as it is by a human being, reflects the background, opinions, and prejudices of its author..." (Moody, 1975:xxv), a factor that instantly set him apart from New-Age gurus who purported to have the exclusive way to the enlightenment (and with whom his book would share a shelf). At the same time, it reinforced the idea that he was an 'everyman' like the people reading his work. He states right up front that "...I have never been close to death myself", although "(i)n hearing so many fascinating experiences... I have come to feel as though I have lived through them myself..." (Moody, 1975:xxv). Further, he writes that he "...is not broadly familiar with the vast literature on the paranormal and occult phenomena..." although "... I feel confident that a wider acquaintance with it might have increased my understanding of the events I have studied (and) I intend now to look more closely at some of these writings..." (Moody, 1975:xxv-xxvi). This was a promise that he was to keep and one that caused some controversy (I will return to this later in the chapter). In 1980 he qualified this with the following proviso:

> The interesting results of these studies of medical patients who have nearly died should not be used as an excuse for allowing the entrance of spiritualism, with all its bizarre trappings, into medicine. Presumably, for as long as there have been human beings, shamans have pretended to put their clients into touch with the spirits of the departed. The history of the fraud and fakery associated with such dealings is too well known (and too ancient!) to bear repeating. The validity (if any) of such performances is best assessed by professional illusionists, not by medical doctors (Moody, quoted by Sabom, 1998:145)

The focus, for Moody, remains tight on the results of 'medical patients' and not on 'spiritualism'. Because of the apparently 'age-old' fraudulent activities of shamans and spiritualists, the spotlight must remain on the investigations of 'medical doctors' and the phonocentric utterances of the everyman/woman 'patient'. Underlying this seems to be the assumption that the individual NDEr would feel far less compunction

to make up this experience, as compared to a spiritualist "pretending" to put their "clients" in "touch with spirits". What Moody seems to be offering, then, is a clean break with the past; authorised by the careful examination of medical doctors, the experiences of the everyman/woman patient come to the fore and offer the spiritual consumer a narrative that indicates death is not necessarily the end, and the heroics of the everyday individual have led to the affirmation of a religious realm that does not depend on creed or dogma.

In terms of Moody's religious affiliation, he explains "...I have grown up having a "religion" not as a set of fixed doctrines, but rather as a concern with spiritual and religious doctrines, teachings, and questions... I believe that all the great religions of man have many truths to tell us, and I believe that no one of us has the answers to the deep and fundamental truths with which religion deals..." (Moody, 1975:xxvi). The deep fundamental truths of religion can be, according to Moody, understood as an answer to the way that human beings deal with death, and he discerns two general ways in which people speak about death. *Either* they approach it through the metaphors of sleep (and Moody talks specifically about Socrates eloquent homily, as reported by Plato [Moody, 1975:3-5]), *or* humans regard death as a transition phase, of which he states,

> ...(this view) disavows the notion that death is annihilation of consciousness. According to this other, perhaps *more ancient* tradition, some aspect of the human being survives even after the physical body ceases to function and is ultimately destroyed. This persistent aspect has been called by many names, among them psyche, soul, mind, spirit, self, being, and consciousness... the notion that one passes into another realm of existence upon physical death is amongst the most venerable of human beliefs... In short, we are faced with two contrasting answers to our original question about the nature of death, both of ancient derivation, yet both widely held today. Some say death is annihilation of consciousness; others say with equal confidence that death is the passage of the soul or mind into another dimension of reality (Moody, 1975:5, italics mine)

Although initially seeming like an odd move- after all, Moody discusses Socrates as an example of the *former* way of understanding death (that is, as an eternal sleep)- he has something else in mind when describing the "more ancient tradition". In a move that has parallels amongst NDE researchers (both believers and sceptics) he goes on to trace the belief in the afterlife to rituals carried out by the Neanderthal precursors to the human race. This "more ancient tradition" is one that is understood in line with evolution (Moody, 1975:5). Reminiscent of Psychical Researchers, scientific explanations for our ultimate origins lie not far from the surface even here and, like William James's emphasis upon the extremes of abnormal states used to transcend

the strictures of naturalism (and the rise of Darwinism), these accounts of extreme religious experiences need to transcend and/or assimilate evolution. [17]

From this grandiose assessment of the two ways that humans have approached death in their history, Moody moves on to discuss his gradual accumulation of 150 cases of NDEs given to him. He collected three types of accounts: first, the experiences of those "pronounced clinically dead by their Doctors" and resuscitated; second, those who have reported been very close to death via injury or illness; third, the experiences of those who had actually died whilst describing their deathbed visions, visions which have been recounted by a third party (Moody, 1975:8). For the purposes of *Life After Life,* and against the Psychical Researchers that were discussed in chapter 2, he disregards the third option, saying,

> ...(first) it helps to reduce the number of cases studied to a manageable level, and second, it enables me to stick as close as possible to firsthand reports. Thus, I have interviewed in great detail some fifty persons upon whose experiences I am able to report. Of these, the first type... are more dramatic than those of the second type... *Indeed whenever I have given talks on this phenomenon, the "death" episodes have invariably drawn most interest. Accounts in the press have sometimes been written so as to suggest they are the only types of cases with which I have dealt...* However... I have avoided the temptation to dwell only on those cases in which a "death" event took place... cases of the second type are different from, but form a continuum with, cases of the first type (Moody, 1975:9, italics mine)

The emphasis is switched from the third person accounts of deathbed visions (as exemplified by Osis and Haraldsson and discussed in chapter 2), which have been reported third hand, to the reports of the individual experiencing the afterlife first hand. To argue that first-hand accounts imbue NDE narratives with a 'closer', unbiased picture of the afterlife seems almost naïve; after all, one could respond by arguing that the bedside observer of the dying remains in a more rational level-headed state than someone at the brink of death who has returned. What it does seem to signify is a switch from the investigation of the survival-after-death of one's relatives and loved ones (as exemplified in psychical research) to the potential experiences of one's own death. As the realities of death have become hidden in the public sphere in modernity, death itself becomes exoticised as the 'other'. It is no surprise that the media were most interested in the traumatic cases that have involved the individual actually 'near-death'.

For the bulk of *Life After Life,* Moody discusses the fifteen facets of the NDE that make up his composite account as recounted in chapter 1. These facets are Ineffability (1975:15-16), Hearing the News (1975:16-18), Feelings of Piece and Quiet

[17] I explore this in Chapter 5.

(1975:18-19), The Noise (1975:19-20), The Dark Tunnel (1975:20-24), Out of Body (1975:25-45), Meeting Others (1975:45-49), The Being of Light (1975:49-55), The Review (1975:55-65), The Border or Limit (1975:65-70), Coming Back (1975:70-77), Telling Others (1975:77-82), Effects on Lives (1975:82-87), New Views on Death (1975:87-92), and Corroboration (1975:92-102). No single person reported all fifteen of these components (the highest being twelve). From this, he proceeds to deal with questions that he has been asked about these phenomena. He states, in answer to the question as to why they have not been reported before now, that

> To talk about life after death seems somewhat atavistic to many who feel perhaps feel that the idea belongs more to our "superstitious" past than to our "scientific" present... persons who have transcendent experiences which lie outside the realm of science as we know it are ridiculed... In addition... a lot of what we hear and see every day goes unregistered in our conscious minds. If our attention is drawn to something in a dramatic way, however, we tend to notice it thereafter... (Moody, 1975:123)

He responds to other criticisms by noting that he has discerned no difference between males and females (1975:123); [18] that he does not believe that people's stories has grown arms and legs in the intermittent months or years between having the experienced and being asked about it (or seeking Moody out to tell him) (1975: 126-128); [19] that these experiences are shaped by religion but do not reflect anything in the Bible (1975:128); [20] that, due to the nature of these experiences they neither give evidence for, nor rule out, reincarnation (1975:129-130); [21] that suicide survivors who have had NDEs seem to indicate that the only sins that exist are killing oneself, a sin comparable with killing another, something reminiscent of the arguments of the church fathers and Kant (Moody, 1975:132);[22] that he has no cross-cultural evidence

---

[18] Interestingly, Kenneth Ring noticed a gender difference in his analysis. According to Ring, those who have what he calls a core experience (which I come to in the body of the text) are *most* likely to have had an illness, followed by an accident, and then suicide, if they are male (1980:106). If they are female, the converse is likely to be true, and Ring could not decipher any reason for this. Michael Sabom also noticed that female patients were more likely to "meet others" during their NDE, an aspect also appearing more-so in "labour groups" as opposed to "professional groups" (1980:56). Again, like Ring, he could decipher no explanation for these variations that were statistically small, but significant.

[19] A point agreed on by Sabom (1982).

[20] I discuss this further in section 4.4. Sabom clarified this in his Atlanta Study in the early 1990s; according to him, the NDE did not lead to a decrease in religious affiliation, in fact, in his study, conservative Christians, liberal Christians, and "God believers" all increased their attendance at church, with conservative Christians showing the biggest increase. Sabom correctly points out that the location of his study, Atlanta, would have some bearing on this, whereas the IANDS generally utilises a pool of NDErs from the East Coast (and therefore traditionally more liberal) area of the States (1998:131-140).

[21] Kenneth Ring (1984), on the other hand, noted an increase in belief in reincarnation, a point substantially disputed by the conservative Christian Sabom, and discussed in section 4.5. Sabom's Atlanta study found that 30 percent of his respondents had changed their belief prior to the NDE, whereas, only 8 percent did post NDE, which he took to mean that the NDE did not significantly alter a person's belief.

[22] According to Greyson, "...experients placed significantly lower values on social status, professional and material success, and fame... Although (according to E.S. Shneidman) a less fearful attitude towards death has been associated with an increase in suicidal thoughts... near-death experients paradoxically express

at all (Moody, 1975:132); [23] and that, although by definition the people whom have come back are not dead, there are difficulties of defining a "point of death", and thus people are nearer to the other side during these experiences than at any other time or place (1975:134-139). Other researchers would continue to pick many of these questions up, but what is important to note is the *kinds* of questions being asked. In amongst these questions we move from queries related to gender demographics, from questions related to the Bible, from the possibilities of reincarnation, to medical inquiries as to the point of death, and so forth. These are not questions of contacting visitors on the other side (the kinds of questions that psychical researchers focussed on as discussed in chapter 2), or of how these experiences reflect the authoritative teachings of the church.[24] Despite Moody's assertion that NDEs have been commonplace but have gone unnoticed, the kinds of questions being asked are somewhat different to the questions that would be asked to establish the legitimacy of the experiences of (say) St Theresa of Avila, or St John of the Cross;[25] as Steve Bruce (1999) has pointed out, there has to be a line drawn between noticing things that have not previously been spotted, and looking at a blank wall until a pattern emerges. It is not enough to argue that the focus of our gaze has fixated on the NDE 'now'; we must ask why it is only *now* that we have discerned this particular category.

That there may not be any pattern at all is a fairly contentious argument, and will not be fully explored until chapter 6. Moody thinks, "...these reports of near-death experiences are very significant"(1975:163), and so he paves the way for future researchers to pick up the baton by stating that "... (e)nlightenment on this subject is needed by many members of many professions and academic fields", by physicians and ministers dealing with the hopes and fears of people facing death (1975:163-164), and by psychologists and psychiatrists dealing with the emotional traumas faced by NDE survivors (1975:164). He concludes by noting that "...more than academic and professional issues are involved", and if the NDE really is a glimpse into another realm, then it would have "...very profound implications for what every one of us is doing with his life" because "...it would be true that we cannot fully understand this life until we catch a glimpse of what lies beyond it" (Moody, 1975:164). Out of all the initial founders of the NDE discourse, Moody would make the most modest predictions for the implications of the NDE for humanity, although his work still

---

stronger objections to suicide... These profound changes in attitudes and in behavior have been corroborated (by Kenneth Ring) in long term studies..." (Greyson, in Cardena, Lynn and Krippner ed. 2000:320).

[23] The cross-cultural question is a fairly neglected issue. I return to this in chapter 6.

[24] Of course there is a solace in meeting dead relatives during the Western NDE; my point is not to dispute this, but to point out that the gaze has become focussed on the patient who undergoes the experience as opposed to the spirit of those already dead.

[25] See Chapter 6

harbours a discernible trace of idealism for what NDE research could potentially achieve.

Kenneth Ring: The "Spiritual Seeker"

In 1982, at a conference in Charlottesville, Moody stated, "...I would not recommend my books now, but rather defer entirely to Kenneth and Michael's books" (Zaleski, 1987:103). Moody thus set the bar for others who went out armed with his model and who used it as the benchmark to test against. As one of these researchers, Ring entered the NDE into "various networks and various fields of use" and "integrated [the NDE] into operations and strategies in which its identity is maintained and effaced..." (Foucault, cited in Lopez jr, 1998:46). In 1975 Ring was a Professor of Psychology from Chicago and was galvanised after reading *Life After Life*. Prior to coming across Moody's work he had felt spiritually adrift and while "vainly seeking 'the answer'" he "'happened' to read Moody's book" (1980:17).[26] Clearly Ring, as representative of the 'spiritual seeker', believed that some force or agency had directed him towards Moody's text. Nevertheless, he felt Moody's research required bolstering via a more rigorous method of qualitative interview and data analysis.[27] In his introduction he name checks both Kübler-Ross and Moody, maintaining that "The fact that these mutually supporting sets of findings were reported by two highly credible physicians, one eminent and the other persuasive in print lent a certain 'scientific aura' to these accounts" as opposed to the kind of un authenticated testimony that appears regularly in *The National Enquirer* and *The Reader's Digest*" (Ring, 1980:19). The duality of the NDEr/Researcher is maintained: for the discourse of NDEs to be successful, the popularist 'everyman/woman' element must be authorised by the medical Doctor (and *not* the parapsychologist or 'psychic sleuth'), and even though Kenneth Ring singles out the 'scientific aura' of these accounts, perhaps a more incisive discernment would rephrase this as the 'medical aura'.

---

[26] He states "I took myself that summer to a nearby convalescent home and offered my services as a 'volunteer.' I was, I guess, hoping that some old wise person, contemplating his own imminent death, might offer me some clue as to what I might do to escape the feeling of 'spiritual death'.... Instead, I spent most of time playing cards with people in desperate physical straits... And our conversation were mostly about how adroitly someone had played a hand of bridge or when the refreshment cart would arrive..." (Ring, 1980:17). This is something that tallies with the observations of Julia Lawton as discussed in the last chapter; those who have had to face the unavoidable prospect of death for months or even years, and end up in the Hospice, are not necessarily likely to be asking the same questions or recounting the same stories as someone struck down in the middle of their life via cardiac arrest. Further, reflecting the work of Lawton, one could speculate as to how terminally ill people, faced with their own demise, might be rather reticent in discussing their views on spirituality with an able-bodied healthy man in the midst of a spiritual crisis.

[27] He states "...existing studies all suffer from methodological failings... These shortcomings, when combined with the unscientific status of Kübler-Ross and Moody studies, dictate that more rigorous research programs be undertaken... The implications of Near-Death Research are far too momentous to be allowed on such an inadequate foundation" (Ring, 1980:22).

Ring recognised that, in the works of both these Doctors, the rigours of scientific research had not been maintained and he felt that four areas in particular needed to be addressed: 1) How common the NDE was, 2) Whether or not it makes a difference as to how one dies (he therefore compared NDEs in illness, accident, and suicide attempts), 3) a more substantial analysis of the religious influence, if any, on the NDE,[28] and 4) the life-changes that occurred post-experience (Ring, 1980:24-25).[29] His study, to become the basis for his book *Life At Death* (1980), featured a sample of over one hundred people. Of this sample, 48 percent had what he identified as a "core experience",[30] whilst 26 percent had what he judged as an especially deep experience. Zaleski writes about Ring's results:

> After listening to the patient's story, the interviewer would probe for features of Moody's composite near-death experience, following a list of such pointed questions as "Did you actually think you were dead?" "...were you ever aware of seeing your physical body?" "Did you at any time experience a light, glow, or illumination?" "Did your life- or scenes from this life- ever appear to you as mental images or memories?" On this evidence critics may consider that... the near death report is as much a collaborative effort as the medieval vision narrative (Zaleski, 1987:106).

Zaleski notes several differences between Ring's and Moody's studies. Ring rarely reports a buzzing noise, approaching a second border, or having a second body. However, Zaleski still finds him wanting to stay as close as possible to Moody's model. She states:

> Despite Ring's effort to listen impartially to the evidence, this description suggests that he wishes to reconcile his findings with those of Moody. The sound, the tunnel, and feelings of loneliness are features that occur only rarely in the reports Ring collected; yet he includes them in his model narrative buffered with "mays" and "ors" as if they were options that he is unwilling to rule out, if only out of loyalty to his predecessor (Zaleski, 1987:106,107).

Ring's stripped-down, more cautious "Five Element" model of the NDE was accepted by subsequent researchers in their studies (Fox, 2003:30). Ring began the first quantitative assessment of the NDE, and whilst the statement of the NDE was initiated in the work of Moody, it was Ring (and later Sabom) who grounded it in the

---

[28] He concludes, "... religiousness is unrelated either to the likelihood or to the depth of the core experience" (Ring, 1980:134). Further, he noticed that prior knowledge of the NDE before one's experience actually decreased the chance of having a core experience (Ring, 1980:136).

[29] He states "...core experiencers tend to become more religious following their near-death episode, noneperiencers do not" (Ring, 1980:173).

[30] His pared down model features the five elements of 1) Piece and Well-Being, 2) Separation from the Body, 3) Entering the Darkness, 4) Seeing the Light, 5) Entering the Light. He found in his sample of NDErs that there was a decrease in numbers of people who had the five elements the further along someone was; he therefore termed this the "core-experience" and distinguished between people who had the core experience (and how many elements that they had) and those who had not.

"operations and strategies in which its identity is maintained and effaced..." (Foucault, cited in Lopez Jr, 1998:46). As Ring has indicated, NDE stories existed in similar forms in the West (even in publications such as the *National Enquirer*), but they required the authority of science in order to really catch public attention; the graphs, charts and appendices therefore become a way of entrenching the identity of the category as a legitimate one to discuss as the object of scientific investigation.

In the last chapter of his book, Ring moves from his rigorous quantitative analysis to speculations as to the meaning of the NDE. Introducing the chapter, he states that he will "remove his white lab coat" (Ring, 1980:254), something that he is not particularly comfortable with because of the scientific nature of the body of his text. He reminds us that while "still having on my scientific garb" (Ring, 1980:254), he deals with NDEs not after-death experiences, which is "the correct *scientific* position" to take (1980:254, italics his). Nevertheless, his beliefs on the subject are that

> My own understanding... leads me to regard them as "teachings"... In this respect, core experiences are akin to mystical or religious experiences of the kind that William James discusses so brilliantly in his classic lectures on the subject...I have come to believe that the universe... has many ways of 'getting its message across'. In a sense, it wants us to 'wake up'... Could it be, then, that one reason why the study of death has emerged as one of the dominant concerns of our time is to help us to become globally sensitised to the experience of death precisely because the notion of death on a planetary scale now hangs, like the sword of Damocles, over our heads? (Ring, 1980, 255-257)

Reflecting the trend to recount the experiences of the everyday individual, Ring argues that "...the experiences we have discussed in this book happen, for the most part, to ordinary men and women who have neither the religious inclination... nor the charismatic gifts to become prophets in any serious, sociological way..." (1980:255).[31] As opposed to the emphasis upon the miracles of the Saints in the Middle Ages (who were receptacles for the grace of God through their Christian piety, and therefore

[31] Weber argued that charisma is achieved through negotiation; people have to ascribe the charismatic leader with charisma, and they have to believe that the charismatic leader is capable of offering them a divine mandate that they cannot get through any other means. Alan Bryman states "...as Weber recognised, a leader cannot be said to be charismatic unless his or her claim to be charisma has been validated by others. Thus the followers form an integral element in charisma" (1992:50). This becomes difficult when part of the appeal of the NDE is not through the charismatic leader *per se*, but is diffused to the 'everyman/woman. Despite Ring's recognition of the sociology of this, he fails then to see how his hoped for 'planetary transformation' might therefore not unfold as he envisioned. For instance, In 1919 Weber stated that "(t)he fate of our age, with its characteristic rationalization and intellectualisation and above all the disenchantment of the world is that the ultimate, most sublime, values have withdrawn from public life... It is no accident that our greatest art is intimate rather than monumental, nor is it fortuitous that today only in the smallest groups, something pulsates, which formerly swept through great communities like fire and welded them together" (quoted in Turner, 1992:17). There is therefore something about the construction of the public and private sphere in modernity that negates the possibility that Ring hopes for.

'extraordinary') the authenticity of the NDE account (in part) hinges on the *normalcy* of the NDEr.[32] Ring therefore conceived of the NDE as a 'seed' that "...seems to represent the potential for development and self-actualization" (1980:256) in everybody, and not an experience reserved for the pious or the extraordinary. Ring's less scientific beliefs were to become further developed through the 1980s (a point of contention for other NDE researchers) and would reflect the apocalyptic fears of the age, which I return to.[33] At the conclusion of *Life At Death*, Ring's thinking on this matter is less developed; he sees the NDE as one of the paths to these experiences of another realm, but not the only one, and being physically close to death as a sufficient cause but not a necessary cause of such spiritual awakening (1980:264). The living can also learn the spiritual insights gleaned via having an NDE, and it would become Ring's mission to foster the therapeutic aspect of the NDEs. In doing so, Ring reflected a wider trend within "religious literature" in America, which was "...saturated with themes on the self, much of it either implicitly focussed on personal growth... far more so than was true in earlier decades of the century" (Roof, 1999:102). This emphasis upon seed experiences and personal growth epitomised the growing trend that saw "journey language" mesh with "humanistic and developmental psychology" (Roof, 1999:102). In the early work of Ring, we see the trend towards deflecting the ontological uncertainty of the time period (which I discussed in section 4.2) by focusing on the health of the inner self (Roof, 1999:105). This uncertainty was evident right across the spectrum of religious expression at this time, and I turn to the Christian response nest.

Michael Sabom: The "Christian Cardiologist"

Working concurrently to Ring's initial study was Michael Sabom, who as a cardiologist, garnered access to patients in his normal day-to-day routine and set about analysing Moody's model against the reports gathered from his patients. Sabom read *Life After Life* at the behest of his research associate, social worker Sarah Kreutziger, who asked him to field medical questions about the NDE at a church meeting. He was unconvinced by its anecdotal style, and was not sure if it was non-fiction (1982:18).[34] After asking his own patients about them, and to his surprise

[32] See chapter 6.

[33] This seems to fit within the worries of the baby-boomer generation who "...are concerned about safety from pollution and nuclear disaster, born out of a fear of nuclear war and international conflict; safety and peace as concerns never really go away for a generation for whom the memories of Vietnam continue to be vivid" (Roof, 1999:283).

[34] In 1998, Sabom was to clarify this by saying " I remember thinking that, for someone with a PHD and an MD behind his name, Moody was horribly unscientific" (Sabom, 1998:175).

finding them reporting experiences along the lines of the Moody model,[35] Sabom set up his research with Sarah Kreutziger, and conducted a study over a period of five years, starting in 1976. Like Ring, Sabom felt that a systematic analysis was needed. To this end, he interviewed patients from his intensive care unit whilst Kreutziger interviewed in the Kidney Dialysis unit. What set their approach apart from Ring and Moody was that they did not advertise or seek out cases through newspapers, journals, or organisations. Rather, during their rounds they would ask if the patient encountered anything unusual whilst unconscious, allow the patients to discuss what had happened, and from there they would bring up the Moody model.

Sabom's aim was "not to repeat what had already been said" or "offer new anecdotes for their own sake" but rather to "offer fresh observations on the content of the experience, the people who encounter it, *and the clinical setting in which it occurs*" (1982:12, emphasis mine). Like Ring, Sabom would entrench the statement of the NDE by applying a more rigorous scientific method, and it would be the scientific evidence established in the clinic (and therefore defined, one presumes, against unscientific "...'far out' descriptions of the afterlife and such", Sabom, 1982:15) that sets the NDE apart from its conceptual relatives. With his research assistant, Sabom set out to establish seven key points: 1) do patients really have these experiences near-death? 2) did they follow a consistent pattern?,[36] 3) how common was the NDE?,[37] 4) what were the specific socio-economic, ethnic and religious backgrounds of the NDErs?, [38] 5) were these experiences influenced by the patient's

[35] According to Sabom, his initial questioning style reflected his scepticism. A patient, whom he interviewed twice, informed him that the first time they met he thought that Sabom was out to disprove the experience (1982:). Despite Sabom's hostile tone, his respondents' experiences had the same contours as Moody's NDE, and he took this to mean that, unlike (say) Kenneth Ring (who could be accused of leading questions), the NDE was not influenced by the bias of the interviewer. Of course, the point could be made that questions asked in a negative tone could still unconsciously shape the interviewee, but despite this, I think there is little doubt that there is an experience here that these researchers have uncovered, or, to put it another way, the cultural construction is not necessarily happening between interviewer and interviewee, but is due to the wider episteme that both find themselves in.

[36] For questions 1 and 2 Sabom answers affirmatively, as I detail in the body of the text.

[37] Sabom started with 116 cases of people who had been near death. Of these, he excluded 10 surgical patients who underwent anaesthetic (which may alter the phenomenology of the experience), although he was to later turn to these experiences for the potential for apparent psychic verifications of hospital procedures. Of these cases, he utilised 78 whom he did not know whether or not they had experienced an NDE (so as to conduct his study in blind fashion). Of these 78 candidates, 34 (43 percent) reported an NDE, some people having had more than one, raising the experience tally to 42. This was compared to the 156 close-to-death events that had occurred in the group of 78 (irrespective of whether or not the NDE occurred), bringing the overall figure to 27 percent. Sabom therefore concludes that the NDE is a common event (1982:82).

[38] Like Ring, Sabom notes that fewer people who had prior knowledge of the NDE actually had one (1982:84). The NDE is more *likely* to occur in patients whom have suffered a cardiac arrest in hospital and been under for more than one minute (note that this is different from discussing the *content* of the event, as mentioned in footnote 35) (1982:86).

religious background or medical procedure?, [39] 6) was the reduction of fear after the NDE to do with the NDE itself or did all people who had a close brush with death display the same lack of fear?, [40] and 7) do the reported paranormal recollections of hospital procedures match up to the actual surgical procedures of the operation (1982:18-20)? [41] Sabom was particularly interested in the last point; as a cardiologist he could check the recounted details both against his experience and against the medical notes of the surgical procedures. He therefore had access to the sacred space of the Operating Theatre, and could provide a window on to a realm hidden from the wider public view.

Out of all three of the original founders of the NDE movement, Sabom was the only one who explicitly flagged up his medical experiences. Ring, as a psychologist, would not have had any, while Moody, as a Psychiatrist, would have had some, but not in the same "front line" sense as Sabom, who, by his own estimate, had actively participated in over 100 resuscitations by the time he started his initial study. As a stylistic approach, Sabom often introduces his chapter with descriptions of surgical events.[42] Chapter 1 begins with his recounting of a "code 99" situation of medical emergency in July 1970, which "As you might have guessed... is medical shorthand for a patient in 'extreme distress'... In essence, it identifies the condition of a patient *near death*" (Sabom, 1982: 13, italics his); chapter 2 opens with hospitalisation of a man with "...severe metabolic disorder associated with the Gullian Barr Syndrome (a paralysing neurological disorder of uncertain etiology)" (1982:30), before Sabom recounts the patient's NDE; Chapter 3 opens on a 52 year old patient about to receive cardiac catheterisation, which Sabom footnotes with the explanation "(this) is a specialized X-ray technique performed by cardiologists to reveal the presence and extent of damage to the heart and major blood vessels" (1982:43). This trend continues for most of the remaining chapters. In Sabom's work we get an explicit

[39] No significant differences were noted along race or class backgrounds (1982:86). Further, Sabom and Kreutziger could discern no difference in different medical situations, time of unconsciousness, or recall after the event (whether days, months, weeks, or years- the phenomenology remained consistent) (1982:86). Nevertheless, subsequent research has indicated that NDErs are more hypnotisable, can remember their dreams more often, are more adept at using mental imagery, and disclose significantly more childhood trauma, although it is unclear whether this indicates a potential NDE-prone personality, or whether or not these have occurred after the NDE (Greyson, in Cardena, Lynn and Krippner ed. 2000:320).

[40] People who have had an NDE near death are significantly less afraid of death than those who have had a brush with death but not had the experience (1982:88-89).

[41] Sabom noted that there is significant recall of surgical procedures as compared to a hospital control group asked to "imagine" what a cardiological surgical procedure entailed (1982:119-161). I discuss this in Chapter 5.

[42] In an open letter to Sabom in 2000, Kenneth Ring picked up on this, by stating "... I had noticed earlier in your book (*Light and Death* [1998]) that you liked to employ novelistic touches... particularly at the beginning of chapters, to heighten the dramatic effect of some of the cases you presented. Take, for example, the opening passage on your chapter on Pam Reynolds... 'The Midas Rex Whirlwind bone saw, rotating at a constant 73 000rpm, was deftly handled by a surgeon like a brush in the hand of an artist. A loud whirling noise... filed the sterile air of the operating room. Brain surgery was about to begin'..." (2000:219).

sense of the theme of the *Doctor as Hero/Doctor as Priest*, of the technological interventions and techniques used, and we get to peek into a world of life and death to which the majority of the western population do not have access.

In the course of their study, Sabom and Kreutziger rejected any patients who were emotionally or psychologically disturbed and patients who had undergone anaesthetic. Their study concluded that NDEs did not lead to conversions from religion to another (in other words, Hindu's never saw Jesus) and broadly fell into line with Moody's model, although they paired it down even further from Ring's homogenisation. The "noise" category was removed altogether, and only 3 percent of candidates reported a life review. Mark Fox(2003:33/34) discusses some of the other differences that Sabom and Kreutziger reported:

> Whilst an impressive total of 54 percent of respondents reported a visit to a 'transcendental environment' this environment on closer inspection seemed to include a wide array of figures and elements... subjects also reported some rather more bizarre encounters, including an encounter with two khaki clad military figures who tried to dissuade an NDEr from returning to life...

Nevertheless, the contours of the story were broadly like the one told by Moody and Ring, even if the *religious* differences that would cause so much conflict were already visible, even here. In concluding his book, Sabom's interpretation of the NDE is more modest than Kenneth Ring's. He argues that we see some evidence of mind/brain dualism (1982:252,253). Further, as a scientist and a physician, he does not say for sure that we have concrete evidence, but the sheer scope of these stories has "made him humble in the ways of the universe" (1982:254). Rather than speculate on the *purpose* of the universe, as Ring does, he finishes on a biblical quote from Corinthians (1982:255).

In fact, the religious differences between the founders of the NDE movement become apparent in the conclusions of their respective books: Moody in *Life After Life* promises to investigate occult literature more thoroughly even if he was to have some misgivings about the practises of spiritualism; Ring, in *Life At Death,* is concerned with the therapeutic nature of the NDE and its potential planetary implications; and Sabom ends his book, *Recollections of Death,* with a biblical quote from Corinthians. By 1982, when Sabom published *Recollections of Death*, the *International Association of Near-Death Studies* had been launched, and these three researchers were on good terms; nevertheless, the differences in emphasis and religious inclination laid the groundwork for the trouble to come, trouble that, in turn, reflects much about the construction of religion in secularised, (post) modern

West. In order to explore how the initial impetus of the NDE movement became an institution with its own bureaucracy, I turn to the formation of the IANDS.

4.4 The formation of the International Association of Near-Death Studies

In the last section I discussed the three main founders of NDE research and gave a brief summary of their initial projects; I focused on these three because they were (and probably are) the most recognised of all researchers in the NDE fields. Of course, in the years between 1975 (when Moody published *Life After Life*) and 1982 (when Sabom published *Recollections of Death*) there was both a flurry of interest in the subject matter and a meeting of various likeminded parties either involved in early NDE research or intrigued by it. This organisation would become the *International Association of Near-Death Studies* (IANDS), an"... organisation of astonishing diversity, with no party line, and it has undergone many changes over the years..." (Ring, 2000:234). The many changes alluded to here by Ring can be encapsulated in a tension between the scientific veneer of NDE research and the religious impulses that drove it. There are parallels here to the 19th century desire for a "science of religions", discussed in Chapter 2, and these equivalencies are brought to light in the work of Fitzgerald:

> ... a barely concealed theological premise is packed into the 'science' of religion... scholars realised that... to maintain any credibility, it must not be seen as an overtly missionary organisation propagating a new religion of its own... (Fitzgerald, 2000:37-40)

Nevertheless, in the early days of the NDE movement the initial excitement of these new discoveries and their success in the public eye meant that the religious neuroses, into which these experiences tapped, were hard to keep concealed. In this section I therefore recount the origin of the IANDS as told by a succession of presidents of the organisation (and I therefore quote extensively from their own recollections). In doing so I build my argument that the IANDS is not an institution that policed the statement of the NDE, but one that emerged into the wider cultural discourses of the American "Spiritual Marketplace", an institution that is itself caught between a number of discourses (scientific, philosophical, New Age, Theological to name but a few) that had an interest in reinterpreting the NDE along their own particular discursive axes. Whilst there was an undeniable religious drive to investigate the NDE, the interpretation of these investigations would lead to different conclusions about just what the NDE signified.

Carol Zaleski recounts that the initial impetus of the IANDS was Moody, who saw to it that those NDE researchers who had written to him were encouraged to get in touch with each other (1987:110). According to the institution's website, however, the IANDS was the idea of Moody's research assistant John Audette, who recognised the need for such a body after setting up a meeting between Moody and Kübler-Ross in early 1975.[43] Audette recounts,

> "...(S)everal other researchers began to contact Dr. Moody to ask questions and to seek assistance in designing research efforts of their own. Near-death experiencers began to write also in search of more information". Members of the clergy and the interested public began to contact Dr. Moody as well, with questions, invitations to speak and so on... He began to appear on numerous talk shows and also granted a number of media interviews... Audette helped Dr. Moody manage what had become a truly overwhelming mountain of interest... Mr. Audette suggested to Dr. Moody that he spearhead the formation of an international association that would bring researchers, experiencers and the general public together in further pursuit of their common interest in NDEs.[44]

In November 1977, the first meeting of the "Association for the Scientific Study of Near-Death Phenomena" took place, and present were (amongst others) Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Bruce Greyson, John Audette, Dr Michael Sabom, and Dr Sarah Kreutziger[45] From this initial gathering, and a further meeting in Spring of 1978, John Audette took the helm of the initial organisational duties of the Association. The original statement of purpose for their organisation reads that they would: "Sponsor and promote further scientific enquiry into near-death experiences and related paranormal phenomena"; "Encourage the exchange of ideas and the communication of findings among individuals concerned with the systematic investigation of near-death phenomena"; "Disseminate information about near-death phenomena to the media and to the general public directly"; "Provide a forum for those who have had near-death experiences"; and finally, "Facilitate the application of knowledge emerging from near-death research in appropriate settings, that is, in hospitals, Hospices, nursing homes, funeral establishments..." (Appendix V, Ring, 1980:282-283).

---

[43] http://iands.org/history.php#h1 (accessed:16/02/06)

[44] ibid.

[45] Michael Sabom recounts "It all started one warm, fall weekend in Charlottesville, Virgina, in November 1977. A group of eight to 10 persons interested in the near-death experience had been called together by Raymond Moody to exchange ideas on NDE research. Moody's book... was still on the bestseller list, and we represented the small handful of scientists who were beginning independent research... As we flew in that Friday afternoon... we had little idea that this weekend would lead to an association that would shape the world's understanding of the near-death experience for decades to come..." (Sabom, 1998:131) Ring recounts that "...-the five of us, Audette, Moody, Greyson, Sabom and I- were to remain in very close contact over the next few years and enjoyed a wonderful and warm fellowship as we plotted the course of our still nascent field of near-death studies, and its organisational vehicle, IANDS" (Ring, 2000:216).

The medical and scientific bases are quite clear in the original statement of intent in the NDE. Of those early days, Kenneth Ring (2000:216/217) remembers that, as opposed to the grandiose New-Age vernacular that would explicitly adorn his work (and others) in the 1980s,

> I use the noun "researchers" here quite deliberately because, essentially, that is what we principally regarded ourselves, I think. Moody, though not a trained researcher, had nevertheless unwittingly inaugurated our field by conducting the research for *Life After Life*... As physicians, psychologists and social scientists we were primarily interested then in establishing the NDEs credentials as a valid phenomenon worthy of careful scientific investigation and scholarly concern...To be sure, all of us understood even then that in advocating the study of the NDE we would be arousing and possibly threatening vested religious or spiritual interests, and we were all aware that NDEs had spiritual and religious import, but we did not band together either to serve or undermine those institutions.[46]

There is no doubt as to the initial scientific veracity of the enquirers, although Ring himself did come to this line of research through a spiritual crisis, and Sabom heard of the NDE through someone at his church; by the subject matter's very nature, religious concerns would lie not far beneath the surface.[47]

Others from the initial meetings remember the grand scientific purpose of NDE research in terms not quite as humble. Of those initial days, Audette recalls (and I quote in full):

> From the outset... I believed that the scientific study of NDEs, by virtue of the conclusions independently reached by a number of different researchers, had enormous power to unify religions and cultures through the universal cornerstone insights they provide, which are as follows... We are all one. There is no duality. There is only universal oneness... There is survival of

[46] During the so-called "Religious Wars", which I discuss in section 4.4, Ring took umbrage at Sabom's recollection of him at the initial IANDS meeting. Sabom describes Kenneth Ring in the following way: "Aside from Raymond, the person furthest along in NDE research at the time (in 1977) was Ken Ring... Ken's full beard and long brown curly hair would have given him the appearance of an Old Testament prophet if it hadn't been for the blue jeans and brown penny loafers he was wearing at the time (Sabom, 1998: 132). It is interesting that Sabom draws parallels with biblical imagery when describing Kenneth Ring. This description was written twenty years after the initial NDE researcher meeting, and significantly during the start of the "religious wars" between Moody, Sabom, and Ring, thus perhaps providing a "prism" through which these memories were filtered. The point I wish to draw here is that religious imagery still saturates these accounts of the founders of the NDE movement, and in Sabom's account we see the juxtaposition of the biblical prophet and the everyman, again indicating the appeal that such figures might have to the public at large. He stated "...you got the clothes and the hair right but actually I was beardless at the time... as I still am. But given that you represented me... as the prophet of 'the Omega Religion' I could not help reflecting afterward whether you had already been subtly preparing the reader for my emergence as the would be head of this *faux* religion... "(Ring, 2000:220).

[47] Sabom would go to some lengths to stress his adherence to rational scientific research, stating in his first book "Unscientific- that is something I would never be. Years of medical training had convinced me that if one pursued the scientific method ... most, if not all of the unanswered questions of the universe would be eventually be answered in one form or another" (1982:14). Nonetheless, despite his protestations that "Christian beliefs in life after death served the purpose of guiding proper worldly behaviour and of relieving anxieties about death and dying" (Sabom, 1982:14) he did hear about the NDE through an adult Sunday School class at a Methodist Church (1982:15).

> consciousness beyond death... The purpose of life is to love each other and care for each other, to grow intellectually, and to be happy...celebrate life...have fun...enjoy!... There is a God, one God, who is all-knowing and non-judgmental and who is the manifestation of pure unconditional love... There is no reason to fear death for it is only a door that leads to something incredible and indescribable... We are responsible for what we say, what we think and what we do. In the presence of absolute love and knowledge, we will judge ourselves one day and we will have no choice but to continue to repeat the process until we get it right... [48]

Audette's hopes seemed to reflect certain New Age trends that "...argue that traditional religions have failed and new forms of spirituality should be embraced to unite people to the earth, the cosmic reality, and to hidden mystical powers" (Carrette and King, 2005:82). Carrette and King's assessment of this approach is stark: "In such a situation, *salvation through the spirituality market covertly provides new resources for sustaining the materialistic culture that they are ostensibly seeking to resist...* " (2005:83, emphasis theirs). Whilst Audette and his fellow founders were not necessarily selling a spiritual product *per se*, they failed to recognise the similarities between their own work and the work of others in the wider 'Spiritual Marketplace', nor did they realise the nature of the marketplace that sold the fruits of their work for consumption. The appeal of the NDE 'product' would rest on "The vacuous nature of the 'Spiritual Marketplace' which "creates a greater demand and need for some kind of 'real', 'pure' or 'authentic' experience, always just out of reach, like the inner contentment that consumerism promises but never fulfils" (Carrette and King, 2005:83). The NDE, by taking place outside of the everyday public sphere in the sacred space of the operating theatre would be "out of reach" for the vast majority of spiritual consumers. According to Carrette and King "Capitalist spirituality only raises the desire for ever-new versions of spirituality that reinforce our private and isolated world. In the end, such spiritualities are too easily co-opted by the desiring mechanisms of consumerism" (2005:83). There is little more private than the frontiers of life and death in the Operating Theatre, but, despite the appeal of such an experience, it would not be long before the NDE would lose its 'newness' and assume its place alongside other religious, mystical and New Age accounts.[49]

It would not be too disingenuous to suggest that the more modest written work of the early pioneers were cut from the same cloth as Audette's hopes and dreams for what fruit further NDE research might yield. Certainly, their later work would be more explicit about such matters. [50] Audette remained at the helm until

---

[48] http://iands.org/history.php#h1 (accessed 16/02/06).
[49] I.P. Couliano, writing in 1991, notes "the peak of the NDE vogue has only recently passed" (1991:30).
[50] http://iands.org/history.php#h1 (accessed 16/02/06). Reflecting the later work of Kenneth Ring, Audette seems a little giddy on the possibilities that NDE research would open up: "The NDE teaches us many

1980, at which point Ring took over, renamed the organisation the IANDS, designed a new logo that combined the tunnel of light with the yin-yang Taoist symbol (Zaleski, 1987: 111), and got a journal up and running. *Anabiosis*, later to become *The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, was initially edited by Ring, who promptly passed the reins over to the Psychiatrist Dr Bruce Greyson (who, ironically, had opposed the idea of such a journal in the first place, and who continues to edit it to this day.)[51] Greyson, like Audette, initially bought into the euphoria generated by the buzz surrounding the NDE, and recollected the following about the early days:

> When we first started this organization, now more than two decades ago, we had both dreams and fears of great magnitude, of near-death research transforming science and medicine and indeed all of western civilization, and of meetings of NDErs quite literally bringing the house down with their resonating energies.[52]

Having heralded this new discovery of scientific evidence of life after death, the hopes reached the fervour of religious revival. Many expected the paradigms of science to be changed as they knew it, and some of the very foundations of Western belief to be shaken to the core. Nevertheless, this has not happened in quite the same manner as was initially envisaged. Greyson continues,

> Now that I am 20 years older and more experienced, if not wiser, my hopes are more humble and at the same time more profound: that this work we are doing will transform not civilization, but men and women - and children - one at a time, as they struggle with the effects of their spiritual awakenings or with their yearning to have such an awakening... I no longer expect or need a scientific revolution... What I wish for IANDS in the new century is not that it shake the materialistic foundations of Western civilizations, but simply and

---

things, but clearly it teaches that we should live our lives not for the things of this earth, but for the marvellous journey that begins when we leave this earth, hence there is the need for every thinking person to re-evaluate one's values and priorities while on earth. All we take with us is our record of deeds...that's it...I have long felt that this area of inquiry presented a novel opportunity to link science and religion. When the message of NDEs is fully understood and comprehended by humanity, there is the potential for "higher civilization" and for massive transformation in the nature of political, economic and social science systems on a global level. I am glad IANDS continues some 24 years after its founding. I hope one day it will evolve into the force for positive global change that I always thought and intuited it could be. God knows, the world should be better for it." (http://iands.org/history.php#h1, accessed 16/02/06).

[51] Greyson recounts "I vehemently opposed the idea. I believed that if we started our own journal, no one outside the field would read it, and our work would go unnoticed by the greater scientific community. I thought it would be better for the field in the long run if researchers had to publish their work - admittedly against the odds - in mainstream journals, where it would be readily available to scholars unfamiliar with the phenomenon" (http://iands.org/history.php#h1). Of course, it would be difficult to get published in scholarly journals if one was too vocal about the more New Age elements of NDE research, like, for instance, the late 70s worry that Greyson and Ring had where they "...dreamed of some day holding annual conferences with hundreds of experiencers - and seriously fretted about the potential physical damage to a building in which we tried to put hundreds of experiencers, all vibrating with their heightened energies at the same time!" (http://iands.org/history.php#h1, accessed 16/02/06) There is here more than a passing similarity to Weber's insight as to the tension in a new sect- does it remain in the world and become watered down by the very thing that it reacted against, or does it homogenise and risk becoming insular?

[52] http://iands.org/history.php#h1 (accessed 16/02/06)

> more importantly that it continue to help individual experiencers and seekers open their hearts to the love that is our reason for being[53]

The circumstances of the two decades after this initial euphoria brought some lean times. In 1985, Greyson retired from the presidency of the IANDS, which was taken over by John Alexander. Alexander faced difficult situations; the IANDS had gone from a voluntary organisation to recruiting some fulltime staff members, and it was a recurring anxiety as to how these staff members were going to be paid. Alexander recounts,

> The pioneering work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Raymond Moody had been followed by the embryonic scientific studies of Ken Ring, Bruce Greyson, and others. Popular interest was unfolding and the first television programs featuring NDEs had aired. We had no doubt about the topical interest; it was how to tap into the general public that seemed to elude us. The critical topic at every quarterly board meeting was how to raise funds to insure institutional survival until the next meeting[54].

As mentioned previously, just because *Life After Life* sold multiple million copies, does not mean to say that there were a million converts waiting to send in money to the IANDS. Ironically, the very tone that Moody used in his initial work (modest in scope and moderate in religious vision) that caused his book to be such a success also meant that many of the people buying the book might be of another religion interested in the topic, or be a New-Age book buyer who also consumed books on other spiritual topics, or perhaps someone newly bereaved looking for a sliver of hope in their situation, and so on. A book that promised unconditional love from the other side no matter the sin, religion, or creed, is not one that would encourage strong devotion, world-renouncing asceticism, and (crucially) financial tithes. If the NDE, as a cultural sign, acts as a buffer against the grim realities of death, allowing many to have their curiosity sated without dwelling on the future, then the lack of financial aid or investment is what might be expected. Consequently, Alexander was running an organisation that was enormously successful at telling people that everything would be okay no matter what, and, as a consequence, an organisation that was also broke.[55]

---

[53] ibid. Again this is similar to Weber's insights into the unstable movement founded on a charismatic authority; for those that stay within the movement, if things do not plan out the way that they were initially thought to, then the teachings of the movement become reinterpreted to fit in with the circumstances. As Bryman points out, "...leaders often seek to construe apparent failures in terms that will be favourable to them..." (1992:65).

[54] ibid

[55] In 1989, once the first offical IANDS conference was held, the then President Elisabeth Fenkshe (who took over from Alexander, and served from 1986 until the early 90s, when Nancy Evans Bush took the post) found that the organisations bank balance increased tenfold. I have more to say about the nature and purposes of these conferences in the next section (http://iands.org/history.php#h1, accessed 16/02/06).

Once the initial euphoria surrounding the NDE died down, a schism began to develop in the movement:

> Two major camps evolved. On one side were the scientists who wanted to better understand the underlying nature of the phenomenon we mistakenly called NDEs. The implications of that question were so overarching they would lead to an understanding of the meaning of life itself - or so we thought. The other faction was comprised of experiencers and caregivers. They were not so much interested in being studied as in obtaining help for those who had been traumatized by a psychologically overwhelming situation, one for which most had no preparation. Don't study me, help me, was their plea... [56]

This occurred precisely because there was no "party line" for the IANDS; trying to provide a forum for all points from the religious to the philosophical, the scientific, and the sociological meant that there was no unifying strand within the movement. Additionally, according to Nancy Evans Bush,

> The utterly normal pattern of "coming down from the mountaintop" after a rapturous experience is no less difficult for an organization that for an individual who has had a radiant NDE. IANDS was in that "coming down" period by the time I became president, out of its early Eden days and learning to make its way in the world like any other small non-profit organization. For an association whose founders were predominantly academic and whose membership largely believed its purpose to be essentially idealistic and spiritual, the necessity for mundane business practices was an often painful exercise, sometimes felt to be even a betrayal of organizational purpose. I would characterize that period as transitional, when IANDS' survival depended on its ability to learn how to function as much from practicality as from idealism, and from management principles as well as charisma...[57]

The initial 'charisma' of the NDE founders, specifically Moody Sabom and Ring, had subsided. Again, Evans-Bush notes that the organisation never witnessed the global alteration brought about by expanding knowledge of the NDE that was expected, and has had to redefine her hopes that (reflecting chaos theory) there is a subtle butterfly effect brought by the knowledge of the NDE, that "...a small shift of attitude here can emerge as a significant force for changes there; that a single impetus to goodness in one individual can make a difference for those that life touches...".[58]

The current president of the IANDS, Diane Corcoran, reflects the sentiment that there is work to be done in spreading the message of support from the organisation. She states,

> Although the emphasis has changed with different boards, the organization basically has remained on a steadfast course of recognizing and honoring the near-death experience. *We have avoided the temptation to become a multi-*

[56] ibid
[57] ibid.
[58] ibid.

> *experience or multi-focus organization*... I would like for IANDS to be as well known as other organizations which support important health issues, such as the American Heart Association... I hope all of you will join me in this vision of increased service and an organization recognized around the world... If each of us would utilize the power of prayer, recognize the resources available to assist us in focusing our energy and share our feeling with others our goal can be achieved.[59]

The official line then, apparent throughout the preceding quotes from the organisations' presidents (from 1977 to the present), is that although the IANDS has not spearheaded any global revolution, there is still an urgent role in supporting patients who have had these experiences, and despite the tensions, the IANDS displays a united institutional front to serve this purpose. Nevertheless, there has been real conflict between the original founders of the NDE movement that has played out in the public arena (both in books and the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*), a conflict that exemplifies the tensions of discussing the purpose of NDE research within a discourse that seeks to facilitate a multitude of perspectives. I turn to this next.

4.5 The Religious Wars

According to the official statements of the IANDS, there has remained unanimity of purpose in their organisation, despite the trials of twenty years of organisational history. This has accommodated the "coming down from the mountaintop" that Nancy Evans-Bush described, and the transition form the initial euphoria surrounding the NDE, into an organisation capable of providing support for those who have had an NDE. Nevertheless there has been a bitter conflict between the original trio of NDE researchers both through their books and the journal of the IANDS. In this section I argue that the 'religious wars' of the NDE founders stem from the fact that, as an organisation, the IANDS covers so many bases that it has no disciplinary glue to bind it together. Even though the IANDS has a singular *focus* (the NDE), the category itself has emerged in a specific cultural context, and has been subject to different understandings in different locations (much like the category 'mysticism' discussed in the first chapter).

For Moody (1993, 1999) the NDE should be understood alongside a whole host of other folk traditions and attempts to communicate with the dead (such as mirror gazing). The NDE becomes reinterpreted along this continuum, and the attempts of the IANDS to keep the focus on the NDE itself are (according to Moody) a sign of ideological policing. Ring's work through the 1980s saw the NDE as a "seed

[59] ibid.

experience" which foreshadowed the next wave of planet-wide spiritual evolution (1984). In his view, a more fruitful line of investigation was to focus on the after-effects of the NDE, and its planetary implications, as opposed to the experience itself. Finally, the increasingly religious Michael Sabom (1998) grew alarmed at the religious trends his two friends were taking, and stressed that the NDE was an involuntary experience granted by God that blessed some individuals with a vision of the afterlife, but drew the line at voluntary dabbling in psychical phenomena. Clearly, these divisions were incompatible as the 'gaze' of each researcher ordered the NDE according to their own predilections.

During the 1980s and 1990s researchers from a variety of fields took the discursive statement of the NDE out and substantially road-tested it. For instance, one of the major innovations was looking at precisely what kind of changes occurred post-NDE, both positive (as mentioned in the preceding sections) and also negative, where spouses and family members found it hard to deal with the changes that the NDE brought to peoples' lives.[60] Also, studies were done to establish the status of NDEs in children.[61] Additionally, reports of Negative or Hellish NDEs began to be seriously investigated, with some commentators incorporating them into their NDE model.[62] Others proposed that the hellish facet was caused via the biology of the dying brain, whereas the heavenly part reflected a "real" experience.[63] Further research was undertaken into whether there existed an NDE prone personality, how

[60] According to Greyson, "Emotional problems following NDEs include anger and depression at having been 'returned'... The experients may have problems fitting the experience into their traditional religious beliefs, values, or lifestyles... Difficulty reconciling the new attitudes and beliefs with the expectation of family and friends can interfere with maintaining old roles and lifestyles that no longer have the same meaning" (Greyson, in Cardena, Lynn and Krippner ed. 2000:329).

[61] In his book *Closer to the Light* (1990), the Paediatrician Melvin Morse recounted his investigations of NDEs in 12 children, whilst comparing their experience to a substantial non-NDEr control group. His conclusions fitted into the standard Moody template, although backed up by the questionable assumption that a childhood NDE would be less free of cultural bias (Fox, 2003:50). This was followed by a subsequent analysis of adults whom had underwent NDEs as children, *Transformed by the Light* (1992), and Cherie Sutherland's *Children of the Light* (1995), which again was reminiscent of the Moody template.

[62] See, for instance, P.M.H. Atwater (1994), who herself had an NDE with a negative element, and who revised the Phenomenology of the NDE model to include 1) a seed experience (welcoming darkness), 2) an unpleasant or hell-like experience, 3) a Heaven experience and 4) a transcendent experience.

[63] Kenneth Ring proposes that hellish NDEs are caused by the attempt to resist the NDE, and/or a reaction to inadequate anaesthesia (Ring, 1994:5). Nancy Evans-Bush who argues *if* the biological explanation is inadequate for transcendental NDEs, *then* it is surely inadequate for the NDEs that researchers might not necessarily like the implications of (Evans-Bush, 1994:47-54). The much-maligned fundamentalist Christian NDE author, Maurice Rawlings, has also stated "I have offered several negative NDE patients for these authors to personally interview (including Drs. Kübler-Ross, Ring, and Moody) but they have declined, the cases apparently presenting a glitch for data already published... Negative cases would be a stumbling block to New Age faiths..." (Rawlings, 1993:101).

frequent the NDE actually was,[64] and how the phenomenology of the experience might change depending on the type of accident that provoked the NDE.[65]

This list is merely a sample of the kinds of questions asked about the NDE, and represents the "associated field", "...which is not the real context of the formulation, the situation in which it was articulated, but a domain of coexistence for other statements..." (Foucault, 1969:129). As a result, the NDE is defined via an analysis that asks certain types of questions and enunciates a series of answers. I reiterate that I am not arguing that the NDE is a complete social construction, but rather that these kinds of questions could not have been asked in other religious cultures and discourses and that, as I have begun to show, this is often forgotten in sweeping grandiosities about the motivations for religious belief. Instead, these sweeping grandiosities are reflective of the concerns that structure the present. Consequently, to eviscerate the "context of formulation", I suspend further analysis of the quantitative research in favour of the *religious* backdrop of this field.

In August 1980, just before he assumed the presidency of the IANDS, Kenneth Ring had the following to say about the religious undercurrent of NDE research:

> I don't think that any of us involved... ever believed that by proclaiming ourselves an Association interested in the *scientific* study of near-death phenomena, we could thereby preclude religious issues from entering our concerns... So let us be honest, then, and admit that co-extensive with our commitment to investigate near-death phenomena in an impartial and scientific fashion there exists, at least for most of us, deep rooted religious and spiritual implications of our findings... there is a dangerously narrow line between questions of *religious import* and those of *religious doctrine*. As soon as we step over that line, we run the risk of both unnecessary factionalism and hortatory research... If NDE research ends up simply providing new swords with which to wage old religious wars, I will regret very bitterly my involvement with this work... (cited in Sabom, 1998:133, emphasis in text)

Two months before making this cautious assessment, Ring had been reminded of the unorthodox Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin at a lecture, and was particularly taken by the notion that humanity was evolving towards an "Omega Point", which he took to be one of the pioneering innovations in evolution in the twentieth century.[66] Inspired by this, he utilised a number of NDErs whom he had met in the "NDE Hotel"

---

[64] A famously quoted George Gallup statistic is that 5% of the US population has had one, although Greyson disputes this figure, saying that the reality may be much lower (Greyson, in Cardena, Lynn and Krippner ed. 2000:316).

[65] Susan Blackmore (1993) puts forward the most comprehensive argument for how different ways of dying can influence the phenomenological variables of the NDE. I discuss this in the next chapter.

[66] Ring recounts "... Teilhard spoke of the various levels of evolution- matter life and consciousness- and argued that human evolution was headed towards a transhuman state he called the 'noogenesis', the birth of a unified planetary mind aware of its essential divinity... (called) 'The Omaega Point' ... " (1984:253).

(a meeting place for NDErs based around Ring's own home - by his own estimate, "more NDEs have been recounted after dinner than in any other single location in the world" [Ring, 1984:25]), to ascertain the effects that the NDE had on peoples' lives. In order to establish this, he drew upon a sample of 42 interviews, 174 questionnaires, and 62 letters from NDErs. Of course, in doing so, the methodological rigour that characterised his previous book was openly jettisoned as he specifically selected the members he wished to interview. Furthermore, "...these interviews consisted of 'informal but far reaching conversations' during which 'strong feelings of love' were exchanged- emotions that Ken later admitted 'transcended the relationship between interviewer and interviewee' " (quoted and discussed in Sabom, 1998:134). This meant that "...the reader must be prepared to consider issues that science along is not equipped to resolve", issues that cannot "...be decided by reference to the canons of scientific enquiry" (quoted in Sabom, 1998:134).

From this research, he concluded that the NDE was a seed experience that would take time to mature, and in order to fully understand it, one had to take account of the after effects that it kindled. Accordingly, he believed that NDE researchers had merely witnessed the garden after the sowing, and did not stick around to see the full flowering of the plants (1984:27-28). Thus, his study asked his sample group to rate in hindsight the changes in their life thanks to the NDE, and measured their self-esteem, their concern with spiritual matters (as opposed to organised religion), their propensity for prayer, their feelings of purpose for their lives, their sense of societal equality, and their belief in life after death. Additionally, he reported that NDErs testified to additional psychic phenomena, precognition, increased intuition, and most controversially, psychic visions of the future. He reported that NDErs were able to predict "geophysical changes, earthquakes, increased volcanic activity, landmass changes, meteorological changes, supply and economic breakdowns, the possibility of nuclear war, and a final, more positive vision of a new era of peace and human unity..." (Fox, 2003:40). Contrary to the medical flavour of earlier NDE research, he concluded that one did not have to be near death in order to have an NDE, but rather the NDE took its place alongside the deep spiritual insights garnered from meditation, chanting, kundalini yoga, and so forth. Those who had experienced these life-changing spiritual awakenings were no longer homo sapiens, but "...maybe homo noeticus" (cited in Zaleski, 1987:108). Humanity would not make it far into the 21st century, and the cataclysmic visions he reported would bear witness to the coming golden age. As Teilhard de Chardin had foreseen, the NDE now gave evidence to the theological belief that the future would culminate

in humanity's arrival at the Omega Point.[67] It seemed evident to Ring that "...a significant numbers of persons have already evolved or are evolving toward that form of consciousness and that the NDE can be viewed as an *evolutionary device* to bring about this transformation" (Ring, 1984:9, italics his).

Heading Towards Omega was published in 1984, and out of all three founders of the NDE movement, Kenneth Ring was the one to stay most involved with the IANDS and NDE studies in general.[68] Raymond Moody, on the other hand, has flitted round the edges of the NDE "mainstream". Moody's next book, *Reflections on Life After Life,* was published in 1977, followed by *The Light Beyond* (1988) and *Life Before Life* (1990) with journalist Paul Perry. In the latter, he discussed his nine previous lives that included a "proto-human" (an evolutionary ancestor), an African Boy, a muscular boat-builder, a hunter of woolly mammoths, someone about to be hurled into the lion's den in Rome, a nobleman from the same place and era, a Middle Eastern Artist, and a female artist (quoted in Fox, 2003:52).[69]

From there, he began to wonder whether it would be possible to replicate facets of the NDE without having to be close to death. Thus "If one could replicate the near-death experience and bring it about in people of good-health then it seemed possible that those powerful after effects could be used in grief therapy" (Moody, 1993:xvi). Whilst wondering this in a bookstore in 1987, "a book fell off the shelves and dropped at my feet" (1993:xvi). This book was one on 'crystal gazing'. and through this 'coincidence' Moody went on to investigate the potential of mirror-gazing as a means for healthy people to contact the dead. To this end, he devised a method of mirror-gazing utilising techniques he apparently learnt from ancient Greece. In his own words

> ... I remembered that Herodotus wrote about a place called the Oracle of the Dead... I remembered... that Herodotus described the place where somebody sent a delegation and that they saw a ghost there. And so I shuffled through that that night... I figured at the Oracle of the Dead they went and they saw the spirits in mirrors. And, incredibly I looked at everything I could about the Oracle of the Dead and one of the books I found said indeed that what they found in the central apparition hallway was a huge bronze cauldron. So I

[67] In the words of Michael Sabom "...(a) new religion was proposed- one that would "incorporate and yet transcend the traditional Christian perspective", (and) would evidence "a marked shift towards Eastern Religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and spiritual universalism"... (Sabom, 1998:135). Five years prior to this assessment, Maurice Rawlings (1993:42) had the following to say; "Finishing his coffee, (Dr Jerry Jones) and we both looked out at the first few drops of rain. 'It seems to me that some religion of universal salvation is coming,' I said, 'where accountability of all traditional faiths... will be replaced by the new global faith... A religion promoted by Near Death experiencers who say you cannot lose... ' "

[68] His work on NDEs in people born blind is discussed in the next chapter.

[69] Moody states in an interview online: "That was about 10-15 years ago. I got fascinated with doing those past life regressions and I did them with a lot of my students and colleagues. As you know my interest in this in not exactly like that of a parapsychologist..." (www.spiritual-endeavors.org, accessed 09/05/06).

> knew it would work...The Greeks called their facilities for doing this psychomanteums, which were Oracles of the Dead, in effect... So I decided to make my own psychomanteum[70].

After long periods of mirror-gazing, people testified to spirits meeting them and actually coming out of the mirror; Moody thus perceived the psychomanteum as a mechanism to help grieving relatives get over their loss and deal with unresolved issues (Moody, 1993).

It is plain to see then that Moody has moved far away from the original impetus behind the original NDE movement. In his book *The Last Laugh* (1999), he bemoans the theoretical dead-ends of 25 years of NDE research, stating that parapsychologists are working from false premises by trying to make the study of the paranormal scientific, that sceptics are propagating a "social crusade" in their attacks, and that Fundamentalist Christians who see the NDE as a satanic deception are "...deadfannies, stiffs, bores, nuisances, uptight dogmatists, broken records, and wet blankets" (1999:x). *The Last Laugh* based itself on the relatively astute observation that the "...paranormalist is obliged by the truth, you have to stick to the facts...Where does the public most often encounter parapsychologists or talk about the paranormal? On the talk shows. Most people who are involved with the paranormal have it as a leisure time activity. It has a very pronounced overlap with folklore..."[71]. He believed that the way forward for this research was "playful paranormalism" (like his work with the psychomanteum) and that NDE researchers needed to change the "rules of engagement" in order to break through the epistemological limitations that characterised their prior research. He states,

> The observations I reported in *Life After Life* are just one small part of a much larger overall research project I have been conducting since 1963. This project has culminated in the production of a multimedia self-instructional program... (Moody, 2001:171)

Like Kübler-Ross before him, Moody has moved from heralded and innovative early work into his own New-Age flight of fancy; though he still feels that the psychomanteum can really help grieving relatives (one assumes at a cost), his own religious journey, like that of his predecessor, means that he has moved too far outside the medical discourses to really contribute anything to NDE research. His own 'spiritual quest' caused consternation with other NDE researchers (and 'spiritual consumers'). Consequently, he proclaimed "Those fans who want all their near-death

[70] www.psychomanteum.com (accessed 09/05/06)
[71] ibid

experience entertainment to be just as they are used to enjoying it. They want more of the same old same old... An appreciable number of them have bunched themselves together into a special interest hobby club..." (Moody, 1999:169). Moody recollects that "I've been *persona non grata* with the (IANDS) since 1989, the last time they wanted me to speak at their convention" (Moody, 1999:169).[72] Rather than wanting to hear "...about the latest wrinkles in my studies of near-death experiences and related extraordinary states of consciousness..." -by which he means mirror gazing- "... they had wanted to rehear the same old stuff- again!" (Moody, 1999:169). A "self certified expert on NDEs... A woman named Nurse Kookoran or something like that..."- possibly IANDS president Diane Corcoran-"... was quoted as saying 'Raymond is off on a tangent'" (Moody, 1999:170). Moody's estrangement from the IANDS led him to the conclusion that they "...have gotten hung up on NDEs. They are too touchy about someone going outside the bounds of what they think they already know about the subject" (1999:169). For Moody, the IANDS acts as an ideological force to maintain the focus on the NDE, a somewhat ironic accusation given that its journal has published articles on mirror gazing, kundalini, transpersonal psychology, and a whole host of other interdisciplinary perspectives on the NDE (and Michael Sabom would later accuse the IANDS as being the propagator of an NDE religion which I discuss below). To bemoan the focus of the IANDS conference (which he compares to a 'religious revival', Moody, 1999:170) seems a somewhat harsh assessment in light of the fact that it potentially provides the only support network for survivors of this experience. Moody's assessment is even more insipid given that he claims to want to help people through their grief.[73] The 'everyman' Raymond Moody, growing frustrated with (what he sees as) the limitations of NDE research thus seems to invert the very facets of his original work that made the discourse of the NDE seem so appealing.

With Kenneth Ring making overtures towards the New Age through the 1980s, and Raymond Moody proposing both past-life regression and mirror gazing in

---

[72] According to the feminist scholar Susan C. Gunn, "...Moody's claim to have been (estranged from the IANDS since 1989)... is strange given that on November 1st 1997 he delivered the keynote address at the IANDS conference in San Antonio. His name was on the program well before hand, so it seems reasonable to assume that he did not just invite himself..." (2001:56).

[73] Susan M. Gunn (2001:57) assesses Moody's attitude: "despite Moody's explicit repudiation of the role of the expert and his self identification with 'ordinary people'... I find myself drawn again into his phallocentric subtext of domination and control. Moody's dismissal of (the) IANDS as a 'special interest hobbies club' has a familiar ring to feminist sensibilities; it reverberates to the patriarchal voices of male literary critics and commercial publishers repudiating and dismissing female and ethnic voices for refusing to play what they think of as their game by their rules. It has the texture and taste of sour grapes." Her assessment can be seen to parallel my own assessment (specifically my arguments in chapter 3) that the violence of the NDE encounter could be seen as masculinist (as the surgeon struggles to dominate, transform and control the situation in order), as compared to the more feminist emphasis of Kübler-Ross of rebirth into a higher realm.

the 1990s, the increasingly conservative Michael Sabom grew more concerned with the direction of NDE research. Sabom states,

> The more embarrassing question is why I left the research scene after my work gave scientific credibility to the near-death experience. The answer is I felt I had no more to say. An attorney from Georgia wrote me. "You left your readers standing before the door of occult knowledge, saying 'knock here if you wish.' " I'm afraid he was right... (Sabom, 1998:16)

After writing *Recollections of Death*, Sabom wrote that his "love for the scriptures has grown" (1998:193), and in 1993 he joined the Presbyterian Church. In 1995, Sabom attended a séance in Atlanta, Georgia, introduced by Moody, and featuring the medium George Anderson. During this "Dog and Pony show", Moody "sat stone-faced and silent", and Sabom recollected, "...the Raymond Moody I knew was a medical doctor, not a witch doctor... But that night I felt he had blurred the distinction..."(Sabom, 1998:144-145). Building on a conservative interpretation of the Bible, he argued that, although an increase in spiritualism seemed to be a common factor post-NDE for many people who had gone through the experience, in reality they were playing with demonic factors out of their control. Thus, "...psychic dabbling is a little like entering the cage of a man eating tiger. You may or may not be eaten... (t)he significant point is that once you enter the cage the initiative passes to the tiger..." (Brooks Alexander, cited in Sabom, 1998:163).

If Raymond Moody was encouraging people to play with the Devil, then according to Sabom, Kenneth Ring was lining up to be his New Age prophet of a counterfeit NDE religion. In *Heading Towards Omega*, Ring asked his highly selected group whether or not the NDE led people *towards* or *away* from a conservative Christian interpretation, and concluded that the NDE promoted spiritual, rather than religious growth (Sabom, 1998:134). Additionally, he has since argued that the NDE led to a further belief in reincarnation (Ring, 1997, cited in Sabom, 1998:138). However, *prior* to this, one of Ring's students, Amber Wells, had interviewed a group of IANDS-registered NDErs, and found that none had reported any increase in understanding of reincarnation *during* their experience (cited in Sabom ,1998:138). Regardless, 70 percent of these same IANDS respondents still reported a strong belief in reincarnation which was reminiscent of "... much of the New Age literature...", a view that was the outcome of "reading, discussions with others, and personal reflection" (Wells, cited in Sabom, 1998:138). This belief in reincarnation was further replicated in the non-NDE reporting IANDS control group, and Sabom states that this represents "... a prevalence in belief in reincarnation three

times greater than that found in the general population of the Eastern United States, where Wells' study was conducted. Clearly, IANDS participants are not a cross-section of the general population and... share common views on topics such as religion and reincarnation" (Sabom, 1998:138). This led to Sabom specifically testing whether or not this increased belief in reincarnation was due to the NDE. When the results of his Atlanta study came back in the resounding negative, he began to suspect foul play (Sabom, 1998:139). This increase in belief in reincarnation was not the result of the NDE itself, but was, in fact, due to the NDE research process.

Far from being the anodyne, benevolent and forward-looking organisation portrayed by the IANDS in their official documentation, Sabom began to suspect a conspiracy in its ranks.[74] In 1985, Margot Grey published her book *Return From Death* and, aside from being the first serious researcher to flag up negative or hellish NDEs[75], concurred with Ring that NDErs had indicated that all religions were the same, and the NDE led away from tradition religion. According to Sabom, this was no coincidence; Grey had lived at the NDE hotel and had interned with Ring (1998:134). Chuck Flynn, a sociology professor, had argued in his book *After the Beyond* (1986) that although the NDE displayed a broadly Christian outlook it affirmed a universalist interpretation that saw salvation in all of the world's religious traditions (Sabom, 1998:135). Flynn himself drew upon many of the same NDE accounts that had been acquired at the NDE Hotel under the tutelage of Ring (1998:136). In 1988, Phyllis Atwater recorded that two-thirds of her group discarded their religious affiliation (Sabom, 1998:135). Atwater got her start in the early days of the IANDS writing for the newsletter, a position that Ring persuaded her to take up (Sabom, 1998:137). Finally, in 1990, the Australian researcher Cherie Sutherland concurred with these statements, and in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, reported that "... 80 percent see no value in organised religion, 78 percent never attend any church, and only 6 percent claim to be religious..." (cited in Sabom, 1998: 136). Sabom states

> What concerned me was not having a friendship with Ken Ring or holding membership in IANDS... [but that] the independence of the replication of these major NDE studies might be compromised... (Sabom, 1998:137)

---

[74] Interestingly, Maurice Rawlings also suspected the same conspiracy, but with Sabom as part of it. He states "In his temple replica for mystical experiences, Dr Moody advises caution to students as they attempt to conjure spiritual encounters... Even when demonic influences were already evident, investigators would maintain that negative near-death experiences never occurred... Kenneth Ring... constantly notes that 'nobody reported to me experiencing images of hell'. Dr Michael Sabom, before moving to Emory University, has also stated he encountered no hell reports... These "all good, no bad" statements from Dr Ring and from Dr Sabom, both members of the International Association of Near-Death Studies... seems to be in direct conflict with other members of this organisation..." (Rawlings, 1993:80).

[75] See Chapter 5.

At the centre of all this was Kenneth Ring; he "heavily endorsed books written by these four researchers, and new swords were forged to fight new religious wars" (Sabom, 1998:136).

In responding to Sabom's charges, Kenneth Ring stated that "...Sabom's two books, separated by the better part of two decades, together can well serve to illustrate the trend of things- and to my mind it is an insidious one- in the NDE movement from the beginning days to the present moment where we stand on the edge of a new millennium..." (Ring, 2000:217). Ring highlighted several key areas where Sabom out-and-out misrepresented him (2000:217-222), picking him up for proposing a new-religion, which Ring himself could not find advocated anywhere in his text (2000:212). Further, he corrects Sabom's conspiracy theory that is "tinged by... paranoia" (Ring, 2000:224). To date, Ring's friend Phyllis Atwater interviewed more than 3000 people, the vast majority of whom Ring had never met (Ring, 2000:224). Margot Grey and Ring did not stay in frequent contact, although they knew each other, and both have actually had their share of academic disagreements; Ring had been surprised upon reading her work that some of her conclusions were so close to his own (Ring, 2000:225).[76] Ring states,

> So much for my purported influence Mike. One might just as well say that Charles Darwin influenced Alfred Russell Wallace. We just independently were hearing the same thing... Much the same thing was true for the other researchers that you name, and I could give you more supporting details there, too, but perhaps I have now made it obvious that the only conspiracy that existed was in your head... (Ring, 2000:225)

Ring no longer believes that Humanity is heading towards an Omega point, and he himself states that he was "no longer walking, much less leading the way, toward Omega" (Ring, 2000:226). This is because, "...unlike you (Sabom), I have remained pretty close to the NDE movement all these years..." (Ring, 2000:226). He states,

> History has shown... the disappointment that comes when invariably the dream does not manifest, as a fact, and must be rationalised away... I am much older now, and I no longer glow with roseate optimism about humanity's future... I still believe in NDEs though... (Ring, 2000:227)

[76] According to Zaleski, "...Grey follows Kenneth Ring almost exactly, finding the same core experiences with the same five phases, the same spiritual and paranormal effects, and arriving at the same conviction that we are about to witness an 'evolutionary' transfiguration of our species. Although it was written before *Heading Towards Omega* appeared, Grey's book not only shared a New Age ethos, but also appears to have been shaped by Ring's (1982) article on 'Precognitive and Prophetic Visions in Near-Death Experiences'" (Zaleski, 1987:111).

In contrast to the charge that he was setting up a new religion, Ring concurred that "I myself have been a bit dismayed at the almost religious or missionary tone at these IANDS conferences", even though it was "understandable... providing an opportunity for a large bunch of NDErs to gather together in a safe and mutually self-affirming environment... my tolerance of these excesses is limited and I sometimes have the feeling that I am at a kind of revival meeting..." (Ring, 2000:235). These feelings culminated in the 1998 meeting, where Ring felt that the keynote address was overtly Christian; he was amused at the "New Religion" accusations from right-wing Christians, and wondered if they had attended the same conferences he had (2000:236). Even for the man who had set up the NDE Hotel, the revivalism apparent at IANDS meetings seemed sensationalist, although one could plausibly argue that a conference marketed with this religious bent would probably do better than a conference marketed as a dry academic discussion, especially when book-stalls, videotapes, New Age therapies and other services and goods (discussed quite freely on the IANDS website) are factored into the financial equation.

The very fact that the IANDS published articles of conflict between the founders of the NDE movement negates the idea that there is a crude New Age conspiracy. Despite the wars between the founders of the discourse of NDEs, a certain amount of care should be taken to note the deeper similarities that structure their perspectives. Sabom and Ring have each had eschatological views of the end-times that, to some extent, mirror each other; Sabom and Moody have both seen conspiracy in the IANDS (the former a New Age one propagated by Kenneth Ring, the latter an institutional emphasis upon the NDE itself); Moody and Ring have both shared disgruntlement about the revivalist elements of the IANDS. In these thinkers we see that "The psychological language of the small-group movement betrays an underlying anxiety out of a deep seated disjunction of modern culture" (Roof, 1999:127). Even though the category of the NDE represented a singular focus, the wider strata of the religious culture of late-modernity America means that the category has been pushed, pulled, dissected and transformed, whilst the attempts to lock down the category's signification by each of the founders of NDE research was ultimately rendered futile by the very 'Spiritual Marketplace' that ensued the success of NDE literature in the first place.

4.6 Conclusion

In the last chapter we saw how the initial founders of the NDE movement described themselves as Doctors, not Witch Doctors. In this chapter, we have seen that barely two decades after this initial assertion, these same founders accuse each other of

becoming Witch Doctors again. Throughout this chapter, the signification of the NDE slides from its location within the sacred space of the Operating Theatre: in Ring's case it was a 'seed experience' that heralded the next step in spiritual evolution and had planetary implications; in Sabom's case, it signified a potentially Satanically inspired experience used as a front for a new 'NDE religion'; in Moody's case, it signified but one manifestation of an experience that anyone could have by gazing into a mirror for prolonged periods of time. Unlike 19th century Psychical Research investigations that sought to find evidence of the posthumous 'other', or those who were attracted to spiritualism in order to contact dead loved ones, the market for popular NDE literature is most certainly composed of 'spiritual consumers' who were affluent, comfortable, and seeking to reassure themselves of their *own* continuous existence. Thus, the initial euphoria surrounding the "everyman" psychiatrist, the "spiritual seeker" psychologist, and the " Christian cardiologist", and their evidence for an afterlife, faded as the movement they spawned turned into a bureaucratic institution, leading the Psychiatrist (Moody) to lament twenty five years of "dead-end" research, the psychologist (Ring) to ruefully look back on some less than cautious pre-millennialist religious predictions, and the cardiologist (Sabom) to see a New Age conspiracy burying the Christian truth beneath New Age vernacular.

In a western, post-modern 'Spiritual Marketplace' that could accommodate multiple perspectives and research beliefs, the IANDS could not help but foster disunity and dispute between its members, being neither scientific nor religious, neither philosophical nor theological. The problem is that the IANDS is organised around an experience that is itself located within a network of discursive relationships; therefore, delineating the precise line between subject and object is a nigh on impossible task. So, for the New Age book buyer, the NDE represents another interesting experience amongst meditation, chanting, mirror gazing, lay-lines, crystals and so on; for the psychologist it represents a puzzle to be solved about the neurological mechanisms of the dying brain; for the Conservative Christian the experience should be read via the lens of the Bible and represents a possible satanic deception. Because of this, trying to retain any kind of closure on the concept has been impossible; even though an initial attempt was made to have it carefully segregated out from other mystical, out-of-body and/or New Age accounts via its scientific and medical credentials, the inability to dissect it away from various other similar experiences has meant that they have seeped in round the sides. Further, in a religious marketplace that is always changing, today's scientific evidence of the afterlife is old-hat by tomorrow. As Moody rightly recognised, most people's familiarity with the occult is through talk shows, theatrically staged events or through

the wider popular media about the subject, not through technical journals trying to retain a scientific rigour. Nevertheless, arguably, his own written history reflects a trend that Steve Bruce has identified:

> ...these movements exist in a market for the services and commodities that they offer. They must compete with new brand names entering the market more effectively packaged or more closely geared to the latest market needs... (Bruce, 1996:191)

Moving from NDEs to past-life regression and on to mirror gazing shows either a hunger to accommodate multiple religious and spiritual perspectives, or a savvy eye on the need to repackage ones' product periodically to remain in the public eye (or both). To its credit (especially for those whom have had an NDE) the IANDS has at least tried to retain its original vision, even if its eclectic membership and inter-member spats seem somewhat parallel to organisations such as the worldwide Anglican Church. Nevertheless, because of this focus, the IANDS has become an American institutional structure that sits somewhat uncomfortably between the (paradoxically conservative) Parapsychology and Transpersonal Institutions.

Sabom's conspiracy theory about the IANDS, that the NDE research has been guided via religious interests, is an intriguing but ultimately shortsighted analysis. It is certainly possible that NDE researchers and NDE subjects have had an implicit bias towards New Age beliefs, although the bigger forces that shape the NDE are implicit in his work as well as the work of Ring, Moody, and others. Rather, this disagreement is what Foucault identifies as an "... *intrinsic* contradiction... ", a type of contradiction "...that [is] deployed in the discursive formation itself... " (Foucault, 1969173). In this chapter I have performed the necessary task of reporting what these initial researchers innovated in the NDE discourse, and have highlighted the disputes that have occurred (which, in Foucault's terms, would be an example of the 'intrinsic contradiction'). Stories of the NDE have generated widespread public interest, but this interest has not translated into the kind of religious "golden age" predicted by many NDE researchers, precisely because the images associated with the NDE, and the books about it, sit alongside other "interesting experiences" to be filed between books on kundalini, alien invasion, and out-of-body meditation. I have argued that these disputes are caused by the wider construction of religion and the distinction between public and private in the West, and I shall discuss the wider '*extrinsic* contradictions' between the NDE construction of religion and religious experience in Chapter 6, where I utilise other constructions of death and mysticism as a means to explore the meaning of these terms in the present. Before that, I will

explore precisely what the role is of science in NDE research, and how it has further shaped and transformed questions of religion and the afterlife. I turn to this next.

Chapter 5: Science and the NDE

5.1 Introduction

(We live in) a society that can afford to send men to the moon and instruments to Mars to determine if there is life on another planet, but (we know) little about life and death on planet Earth (Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in Osis and Haraldsson, 1977, ix)

In this chapter I shall examine how the category 'science' has shaped, and intersected with, the concept of the NDE. It is already evident that this category "science" carries enormous influence in the present debate, not only for the NDE researchers themselves, but also for the consumers of the NDE 'product'. In chapter 3 I indicated that the technological aspects of medical intervention hold an (almost fetishistic) allure within NDE literature. In chapter 4 I argued that the 'spiritual consumer' might well be attracted to the language of 'science' (especially if conjoined with such terms as the noun "mysticism" or the adjectives "eastern" and/or "esoteric"), but not necessarily in the same way as Kenneth Ring (1980) or Michael Sabom (1982) in their groundbreaking scientific NDE studies. This category therefore signifies different things for different groups of people interested in the NDE, and functions at a number of different levels in this debate. In this chapter I intend to tease out the different significations of 'science', how these significations function at different levels of this debate, and how these significations enshrine (and take their part in transforming) modern understandings of 'religion', 'mysticism', and 'death'. Thus, I explore "the threshold above which there is a difference and below which is a similitude" (Foucault, 1966:xxi). This similitude is represented in consensus on what the categories 'religion', 'mystical experience', and 'death' actually are. In doing so, I (indirectly) add weight to my argument of chapter 3, as many of the cases discussed take place in or around the Operating Theatre or medical ward (an exotic sacred space cut off from 'public' access), and foreshadow my argument in the next chapter, which looks at *other* constructions of death and mysticism.

In this chapter I therefore examine the 'construction' of science, the 'function' of 'science', and the 'limits' of science, in the discourses that intersect with the category NDE. In section 5.2 I explore the different constructions of "science and religion" and "evolution", and show how the understandings of these categories have moulded this debate. In section 5.3 I provide a summary of the biological explanations of the NDE in order to explore how it is located alongside a continuum of biologically based experiences in order to differentiate the NDE *from*, or locate the NDE *within*, this spectrum. I resist, for the most part, critically engaging with this

debate, preferring to explore just how the NDE is understood and categorised alongside other physiological, and psychological experiences (I therefore highlight the deeper structures that define the rules of engagement). In 5.4 I explore how the "White-Crows"[1] of NDE research are used within an *either/or* binary that falls into the trap of looking for that "one special case" that we have already seen befuddling parapsychological research. I focus specifically on the Pam Reynolds case, as reported by Michael Sabom (1998) and commented on by Greyson (2000), Ring (2001), Moody and Arcangel (2001), and Fox (2003) *et al.* In 5.5 I argue that, whilst these white-crows are extremely impressive, by the very rules of engagement implicitly agreed upon by NDE researchers, they ultimately prove inadequate. It is always possible to postulate a "naturalist" explanation for these experiences, and so the debate enters the realm of just what evidence would be required to overturn certain key fundamental metaphysical assumptions that structure scientific naturalism. I conclude in section 5.6 by arguing that the discourse of Psychology is being used to try to neutralise religious experiences brought into the scientific, and therefore empirically verifiable domain, and tries to return the NDE to the domain of private subjective experience by postulating hypothetical biological correlates.

In discussing this I do not intend to become bogged down in 'realist'/'anti-realist' debates about whether science has a legitimate referent, or whether it gives us access to the real world, other than to spell out the following two provisos: my position on these matters is broadly in alignment with the 'promiscuous realism' proposed by analytical philosopher of science John Dupré (1993:2), which allows scientific research a legitimate referent in the world whilst taking on board the fluidity, mistakes, and diversity that characterise the history of science.[2] Second, it seems to me that two fundamental *metaphysical* assumptions that characterise modern science are that of causality and replicability.[3] As we have seen in chapter 2,

---

[1] See Chapter 2 for my definition and discussion of the 'white-crow' in relation to psychical research and parapsychology.

[2] As John Dupré (1993:11) recognises "...there are large areas of science in the sociological sense that, at least to the casual glance, have at best highly questionable claims to truth or credibility. One reason why it is important to dispose of the myth of scientific unity is that one might, in principle, judge that macroeconomics, or mathematical population genetics... has claims to credibility on par with palmistry or tarot reading, without being committed to making the same claim about mechanics or immunology". Further, "the history of science has shown that empirically successful theories have often turned out to be false... Once we pay due attention to the history of science, we see that the inference from empirical success to theoretical truth is a very shaky one" (Okasha, 2002:64). For instance, philosophical anti-realists (who dispute how much access to non-observable reality science can really give us) such as Larry Laudan have pointed to such examples as the existence of Phlogiston, which in the eighteenth century was assumed to be something that an object released when it burnt into the air (Okasha, 2002:63). Modern chemistry has long since disproved this, although it was a fundamental part of the bedrock of eighteenth century chemistry, and one that fitted in with the empirical observations of the time

[3] I am aware that Quantum Physics seems to throw a spanner in the works of classic Newtonian causality, but this is the exception that proves the rule: the fact is that the *assumption* of physical cause and effect has

modern parapsychology is divided over whether or not paranormal phenomena will *ever* be explainable via recourse to the physical laws of the universe (perhaps presently undiscovered) or whether ESP is fundamentally outside these laws, a fact that has drawn a great deal of scepticism from scientists unconvinced by evidence of the statistically-small replication of positive results in ESP studies. This is relevant here because, by the NDEs very nature, we deal with a realm on the very limits of possible human experience, a realm that is not accessible to experimentation with any great ease, that is more often than not anecdotal and can therefore not be controlled for sensory leakage (it is hard to *eliminate* the possibility that patient x might have heard his/her Doctor talking about the operation whilst semi-conscious, and reconstructed this as an out-of-body experience after the fact), and that, if accepted, might open the boundaries of science to a whole host of other New Age/religious phenomena. *And yet*, as established in the last chapter, NDE researchers (such as Bruce Greyson) still hope to be welcomed into the fold of mainstream science with their research into the afterlife. In order to tease out the reasons for this discrepancy, I turn to the wider constructions of science and religion in NDE literature.

5.2 Science, Religion, Evolution and the NDE

In this section I explore the similitude of the understanding of science and religion that permeates the debate surrounding the truth or falsity of the NDE. Presently, I analyse the binary of 'science/religion' that is axiomatic in this debate, before moving on to where 'evolution' sits within the wider picture. The construction of the dichotomy science/religion implies a presence of objective, public rationality in the former, with subjective, irrational, private belief in the latter. Russell T. McCutcheon discusses the political relevance of this binary construction:

> ...whereas the equation of "religion=irrational=superstition=survival" once figured prominently within the work of European intellectuals, thereby allowing them to demarcate themselves rather dramatically from the

---

allowed an enormous amount of successful research to be carried out, so much so that the arrival of quantum indeterminacy was extremely vexing for a great many scientists. Additionally, quantum indeterminacy seems to transcend the classic laws of cause and effect, but still allows for replication of results. Thus, light may either be waves or particles depending on the gaze of the observer, but light does not suddenly change into lead if the experiment is repeated. (Note here that I am not arguing that the emphasis upon causality and replicability *separate* science from non-science, but rather form part of the metaphysical basis that scientific research is carried out on- there are of course scientific ideas that are not explainable by causal laws [quantum physics], and are not replicable in the lab, *a la* the foundations of evolutionary theory). This is extremely important when we consider just how NDEs could be 'scientifically' proven, or herald a new age of scientific religion, as hoped for by the NDE researchers discussed in the last chapter.

> "uncivilised" masses, today many scholars use "religion = good = apolitical = tolerant" to help make a very specific sort of liberal democracy possible. Depending on which manner and in which context one employs the term, a very different Other (i.e. them) and Self (i.e. us) result... (McCutcheon, 2004:179)

McCutcheon's definition of the *former* way of looking at religion is still very much in evidence in the debate surrounding NDEs, especially in the work of psychologist and sceptic Susan Blackmore (1993, 1999), whose work I will analyse momentarily. I should reiterate here that I am not arguing that this binary definition of science/religion renders the search for biological explanations of religious states *necessarily* false. Rather, the definition of 'religion' present in this debate homogenises a vast array of exceedingly complex social and cultural discourses into a tiny (somewhat polemical) straitjacket.[4]

The binary of "Science/Religion" is evident in both the 'believer' and the 'sceptic' camp, and I initially examine the relationship between believer and sceptic as epitomised in the debate between the 'believer' Dr Michael Sabom, and the 'sceptic' Dr Richard Blacher. Michael Sabom gives the following account of an exchange that he had with Dr Richard S. Blacher in the pages of *The Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1979:

> ... Dr Blacher suggested that the NDE was a 'fantasy of death' and warned 'the physician must be especially wary of accepting religious belief as scientific data'... My response... ended with the plea that 'equal caution should be exercised in accepting scientific belief as scientific data'... none of the proposed medical or scientific explanations for the NDE could fully account for the NDE. Dr Blacher published a rebuttal to my remarks... '*I do not think one has to apologise for scientific belief if one does not accept the ideas of spirits wandering around the emergency room*'... (Sabom, 1982:245, italics mine)

In this quote, we see the sign "science" mean two different things; for Blacher, science has provided the most parsimonious explanation for our existence, and the interesting anecdotes that Sabom has turned up should have no place in a scientific discourse. For Sabom however, as with psychical researchers and parapsychologists,

[4] McCutcheon (2004:180) provides a concise example of the dangers inherent in such a definition: "... there seems to be something rather significant and all too practical at stake in reading such behaviour as ... the organised suicide-by-burning deaths of a small number of South Vietnamese citizens in the 1980s as a specifically religious or Buddhist issue... there is something going on when we call such behaviour a 'self-immolation' rather than, say, a suicide or a desperate political protest". See also chapter 1 for an expansion of this point.

empiricism overrides the comfort of parsimony; the *facts* of the NDE suggest that the only explanation is a religious one, and to reject this is to be dogmatic. [5]

Just as Blacher and Sabom squabble over the signification of science, they imply a signification of religion that is defined *against* science. For Blacher religion is superstitious nonsense, but Sabom implicitly endorses a construction, at least, of religion as unscientific belief. For instance, during the exchange Sabom provided the following response:

> I agree: one should not have to apologise for a scientific belief that does not accept an idea yet to be confirmed by observation and analysis... I began this study of NDEs with the firm conviction that the scientific method of investigation is the best approach for advancing our knowledge of natural phenomena... But to say that an idea has not yet been accepted in a scientific sense does not mean that such an idea should not at least be scientifically considered as a possible explanation for an unexplained phenomenon. For it is the premise of objective neutrality which has made the scientific method such a useful investigative process... (Sabom, 1982:245-247)

Both Sabom and Blacher agree that the scientific method is the best methodology for investigating phenomena such as the NDE. For Blacher, what he terms a 'scientific belief' is preferable to a 'religious belief', because a scientific theory relies on a body of knowledge that has been established as the way the world works, or, the ontology of the scientific world-view describes the world as it really *is*, as opposed to religious views that rely on traditional stories as their benchmarks to validate the truth or falsity of a theory. In both perspectives, a construction of religion is reproduced that suggests that it is a subjective belief, an internal state, which is superseded by the analysis of science.

---

[5] Of course there are specific reasons for the medical surgeon to control the space that they operate in, and cast a penetrative gaze into the patient, especially in situations of medical emergency. According to Foucault "...the balance of experience required that the gaze be directed upon the individual and the language of description should rest upon the stable, visible, legible basis of death... The structure in which space, language and death are articulated... constitutes the historical condition of a medicine that is given and accepted as positive... Disease breaks away from the metaphysic of evil to which it had been related for centuries... "(Foucault, 1963:242-243) The key is the breaking away of death from the 'metaphysic of evil'; pathological medicine operates within a field that has clear boundaries demarcated that structure the 'space, language, and death', boundaries that are challenged by the idea of 'spirits wandering around in the emergency room'. Suddenly, the ordered, categorised space of the surgeon is open to a whole other discourse that medicine has historically defined itself against. Moreover, if we consider that the medical gaze was part of the Hospital's panopticon, that "the hospital building was organized as an instrument of medical action" (Foucault, in Rabinow ed. 1984:190), then the thought that a religious realm might occupy and even supersede the all-seeing gaze of the Doctor is, in fact, disconcerting for those working within the medical fraternity, who, as I have argued in Chapter 3, have traditionally retained a somewhat God like status in the Operating Theatre. Thus, Blacher seems perplexed at the idea that "...I locate the phenomenon in the patients psyche... The alternative to the intrapsychic location would be one of something (the soul?) leaving the person in reality and hovering over the table..." (cited by Sabom, 1982:245).

Blacher's approach is indicative of an understanding of the relationship between science and religion that is most explicitly articulated in the NDE field by Susan Blackmore. She (1993: xi) states:

> Of course this comforting thought (survival after death) conflicts with science. Science tells us that death is the end and, as so often, finds itself opposing religion...[6]

Blackmore uses the sign, "science", to signify a certain definition and purpose of the scientific body. By stating, "Science *tells us* that death is the end... Science finds *itself* opposing religion..."(1993:xi, emphasis mine) she strategically defines 'Science' as establishing facts it cannot verify: there is a unanimous view amongst scientists about death and religion, views caused by the irrevocable facts uncovered by this institution. Blackmore's description of the scientific body finding "itself" opposing religion is designed to exclude any suggestion of bias or ulterior motive in research; it leaves the reader with a picture of writers such as Blackmore humbly doing her scientific duty, only to come (quite unintentionally) into conflict with those who are biased by crude beliefs. In contrast, her use of the generic sign, "religion", eliminates a whole host of responses possible from those people who are religious. This dichotomy of "science =objective/neutral", and "religion=fallible/wistful", attempts to redefine the contours of the debate so that the only perceived response available for religious people is to reject the truths established by science, a rejection caused by prior commitments to religious beliefs.

However, an analysis of the history of the rise of science and concomitant decline in religious beliefs goes against Blackmore's assertions of a polarised fight between the two.[7] Although a thorough analysis of the history behind the decline of

---

[6] As I have argued throughout the footnotes of this section, the emphasis on belief in the supernatural as the key to defining religion could be considered a particularly modern, Western perspective. Fitzgerald, in his analysis of religion in Japan, discusses the problems of reading this interpretation into Japanese cultural discourses: "religion (in Japan) is not concerned with salvation, doctrine, belief, or with universalistic kinds of principles either in moral or metaphysical terms. Typically it is ritualistic, particularistic, and a kind of inchoate group consciousness" (Fitzgerald, 1993:317). Unlike India, Japan does not seem to feature "much scope for soteriology" (1993:319), and the difference between the 'religions' of Japan that we identify as Shinto and Buddhism are merely "surface plurality" that are "superficial" (1993:320). Fitzgerald does not deny that the Japanese have a conception of the afterlife, but rather that the majority of Japanese have eschatological or theological conceptions that are somewhat vague when compared to, say, Hinduism. To focus on their beliefs as the 'key' to their religion misses the emphasis upon the household as the defining nexus of Japanese society, and how the school system transmits the rituals that maintain social order, a social order of which Temple and Shrine practises are themselves a part (Fitzgerald, 1993:317-334). In short, many of the traditional religious interactions and exchanges of Japanese society do not exist to reinforce the beliefs of the faithful against the heathen, but rather to maintain a complex social order that is concerned with purity and pollution. Blackmore's concerns about creation/evolution and religion/science would seem to bear little relevance to the 'religious' household members in Japan.

[7] I cannot possibly do justice to such a huge area of Western history in this thesis, but for some interesting ideas on the topic, see, for instance, Roger Lundin (1999:4), for an argument that links the rise of individual

religious beliefs in the West is far beyond the scope of this section, Blackmore's reading of the situation is highly dubious. To take one instance, according to Steve Bruce (1996, 1999), the roots of the current decline in religious belief in the West are not because of science *per se.* [8] Rather, the increasing location of religion in the private realm outside of the public sphere in modernity led to a diminished space for religion in people's lives. He states,

> ...we must eliminate one persistent but misleading explanation of secularisation. It is not the case that religion has declined because people have become better educated and less credulous... Committed atheists -the sort of people who join rationalist or humanist associations... believe that religion has declined because people have become better educated and less credulous... there are features of modern society which make them unconducive to religion... the fragmentations of societies and social life, the disappearance of community and the growth of massive bureaucracies... and increasing rationalization (Bruce, 1996:38-39).

Blackmore's insinuation that we currently bear witness to a neurotic interaction between the subjective believer clinging to evidence for the afterlife, and the cold hard facts decreed by the objective body of science, are simply not borne out by the preceding analysis.[9] What I suggest, therefore, is that Blackmore's construction of

---

autonomy with the Lutherian idea that we could discern God's will individually, which was a short step away from then realising that we could *not* discern God's will individually (as people all thought different things), ultimately leading to religious pluralisation. Bruce argues that this pluralisation led to an element of uncertainty, and eventual decline of belief (1996:45, I return to this in the text). Drew Leder (1992:119) argues that the post-Descartes understanding of the universe as a mechanical place led to the further segregation of religion from the world as nature was stripped of its sacredness, a point that Charles Taylor (1989:234) argues reduced the place of religion in the Protestant West almost to vanishing point. See also *Religion and the Decline of Magic* by Keith Thomas (1971) and Talal Asad's arguments mentioned in chapter 1 of this thesis.

[8] Steve Bruce argues"... some primitive societies were so permeated with religion, superstition and magic that it is hard to separate religion from other parts of these worlds. Things we would regard as mundane and this worldly, such as hunting or fishing, were enmeshed with religious ritual... The social institutions of modern societies have become sufficiently specialised for us to see religion as a distinct sphere of activity... " (Bruce, 1996:25). Bruce's arguments have enormous worth, particularly for this debate, but his modernist stance on the dichotomy of 'primitive'/'modern' (and his implication as to a lack of ritual in Western discourses- one presumes that hunting or fishing in the West would be just as ritualised) means he ends up short-circuiting his analysis via an adherence to the sign 'religion' signifying a belief in the signifier supernatural. It *seems* only a short distance from his recognition to Fitzgerald's argument that "Religion cannot be taken as a valid analytical category as it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of life" (2000:4), but one that Bruce is unwilling to make. As I have indicated in the first chapter, the separation between religion and the secular is a relatively recent development in the history of ideas, and, according to King (1999), and Fitzgerald (2000), it is not just in 'primitive' societies that one would have difficulty applying the category of 'religion' to, but that the category effectively constructs its subject outside of the secularised West. Rather, *it is the West that is odd for having made this distinction in the first place.*

[9] Moreover, according to Bruce, it was not science that killed off God, but technology. He argues "...quite irrespective of the extent to which we are aware of it, modern technology brings with it a... certain style of thought, that is difficult to reconcile with a sense of the scared... Any 1990 Volkswagen Golf radiator will fit any 1990 Golf... The clash of ideas between science and religion is less significant than the more subtle naturalist ways of thinking about the world. Science and technology have not made us atheists. Rather the fundamental assumptions that underlie them...-the material world as an a amoral series of invariant

this grandiose debate between religion and science, one that sees its current incarnation in NDE research, tells us more about the concerns about a select group of people within the West, than it does a 'battle of civilisations'. Nevertheless, the wider cultural discourses of scientific ideas of evolution, the natural/supernatural dichotomy, and the biological basis of religious experience enjoy enough cultural currency to shape the particular contours of this debate.

As we have already seen in the last chapter, in NDE literature there are overt references to evolution by such thinkers as Kenneth Ring who, in the nineteen eighties, predicted that NDErs represent a 'missing link' between our current homo sapien species and a new, species, *Homo Noeticus* (1996:194). At the time, Ring thought that "Could it be that the near-death experience is itself an *evolutionary mechanism* that has the effect of jump starting individuals into the next stages of human development...?" (Ring, 1996:193). It almost goes without saying that this idea of evolution rests on a fundamental (but popular) misconception of evolution theory that reads teleology into purposelessness. In effect, evolution becomes an elevator with salvation at the end of it (Midgely, 1992).

The concept of evolution is not always as blatant, or as extravagant as Ring's less than scientifically minded statements. The point is that it is *there*, its presence taking its place in wider concerns about religious belief in the age of science. Raymond Moody talks about the rituals surrounding death amongst a tribe of Neanderthal people:

> This persistent aspect has been called by many names, among them the psyche, soul, mind, self, spirit, being, and consciousness. By whatever name it is called, the notion that one passes into another realm of existence upon physical death *is among the most venerable of human beliefs*. There is a graveyard in Turkey which was used by Neanderthal men approximately 100 000 years ago. There, fossilized imprints have enabled archaeologists to discover that these ancient men buried their dead in biers of flowers, indicating that they perhaps saw death as an occasion for celebration... (Moody, 1975:5, italics mine)

Like Moody, Osis and Haraldsson discuss the religiousness of our Neanderthal ancestors:

> The concept of post-mortem survival seems to have been with us at least since the Neanderthal people began burying their dead and anointing them with

relationships of cause and effect, the componentiality of objects...-make us less likely than our forebearers to entertain the notion of the divine" (Bruce, 1999:17).

> reddish earth, some one hundred thousand years ago... mute evidence that our hominid ancestors were not wholly materialists... (1977:5)

Similarly, Carol Zaleski opens the first chapter of *Otherworld Journeys*, entitled "A Wide Angle View" by discussing the ritual cannibalism that *homo erectus* undertook to take care of their dead, to the cemeteries of the Neanderthals uncovered in France and Uzbekistan, to the elaborate funeral practises of the Cro Magnon period (Zaleski, 1987:11-12). She states:

> We know that we all die, and that knowledge invades our consciousness, shapes our artefacts and our sciences; it will not let us rest until we have found ways, through rituals and stories, theologies and philosophies, either to make sense of death, or failing that, to make sense of ourselves in the face of death... it galvanises the imagination, giving rise to some of the most vivid images of our cultural repertoire... (Zaleski, 1987:12)

Additionally, Paul and Linda Badham (1982:47) discuss the challenges of evolution to a belief in the afterlife by noting that "At what point in the evolutionary chain our ancestors are described as humans is of less importance than the fact that the line has to be drawn somewhere... if man alone were immortal we must say that one generation of hominids were so apelike at their death they passed into oblivion, while the next generation was significantly manlike to be heirs of eternal life... " In these quotes there is a thematic thread reminiscent of the work of religious studies scholar, Mircea Eliade, of whom Richard King states "The claim that the defining feature of humans is that they are *homo religiosus* (Mircea Eliade) should also be seen... as a response to an intellectual development in which religion has often been marginalized and 'explained away' in terms of a higher-order meta discourse" (King, 1999:14). We see this in the Moody quote that I used to introduce this section, where "...the most venerable of human beliefs" is that which sets humans apart from other animals, a single defining trait that one can see threaded throughout human history. Indeed, Zaleski's work utilises this by arguing that "...we are witnessing what Eliade calls a 'cultural fashion,' which should claim our attention because it has something to teach us about the direction our society is taking" (Zaleski, 1987:97). [10]

[10] Further, "Perhaps the otherworld journey motif is 'camouflaged' (as Eliade would put it) in the modern lore of space travel which, like the fantastic voyage legends of the past exemplifies what might be called the lure of the edge"(Zaleski, 1987:4). To argue that something is 'camouflaged' is to indicate that it true nature is now hidden, but the overtones of a universal religious impulse here stray dangerously close to 'homo religiosus'. I return to this in the next chapter.

What is important to note is that evolutionary stories form a backdrop even amongst those who believe that the NDE is indicative of an afterlife; the category of evolution must be navigated in order to legitimise the story being told. Like Eliade's reaction to the reductionist theories of religion of the 19th century, this proposition of religiousness as being a universal phenomenon could, arguably, be seen as a reaction against the perceived atheist or agnostic implications of evolution. The sceptic Susan Blackmore exemplifies this approach. She argues,

> The problem with evolution is, and always has been, that it leaves little room either for a grand purpose in life or for an individual soul... There is no future heaven towards which evolution progresses, and no ultimate purpose. It just goes along. Yet our minds have evolved to crave purposefulness and cling to the idea of a self because that will more efficiently keep the body alive and perpetuate its genes. In other words, our evolution makes it very hard for us to accept the idea or our own evolution and our own individual pointlessness (Blackmore, 1993:xii)

The remit of this thesis precludes an analysis of whether the version of the selfish gene theory proposed here is the best way to understand the driving force behind evolution;[11] whether the gene itself is actually the best level of explanation for understanding our phylogenetic development;[12] whether "science", even the science espoused by evolutionary and/or cognitive psychology, would agree with this understanding of the self as an illusion;[13] and what, if anything, evolution can say about the point, or pointlessness, of our lives.[14] Blackmore's oratorical statement, like her declamatory musings on the relationship between science and religion spoken of previously, hinges on the understanding that religion is a conglomerate, disembodied entity that is prone to decreeing truths to the uneducated superstitious masses. Despite being British and based in Bristol, Blackmore refers to the Evolution/Creation debates in the USA as indicative of this "homo religiosus" of human beings, one hard wired into their genetic make-up (1993:xii). Nevertheless an investigation of the sociological analysis of religious belief in Britain would seem to indicate that it is possible for large groups of people to be perfectly content without the need for religious narratives (Bruce, 1996,1999). Whether or not there is a case

[11] See, for instance, the Professor of Genetics Gabriel Dover (in Rose and Rose ed. 2001:50)
[12] ibid.
[13] Even in the work of academics and scientists closest to Blackmore there is disagreement. See for instance, the linguist Steven Pinker for a Libertarian view of the self, (Pinker, 1997:141-148), and the philosopher Daniel Dennett for a compatibilist argument for the self (2003).
[14] Steven Pinker (2002) is very clear on this front, showing how evolutionary theory has been used to support both the political left and right. In addition, he builds on the classic Humean distinction between facts and values in order to argue that evolutionary theory cannot, and should not, impinge on our moral decision making.

for religion being hardwired into our cognitive systems it is certainly evident that the reasons for people being religious are multifarious and complicated, a nuance completely absent from Blackmore's assessment.

As Carrette has pointed out, "Psychology does not suddenly invent or discover the human being out of neutral experimentation, it rather draws on pre-existing models of the human being from the wider culture and then develops a language from this basis..." (Carrette, from Jonte-Pace and Parsons, ed. 2001:117). That the preceding positions pay heed to the evolved need for religion in Homo Sapiens, makes reference to the religious rituals of Homo Erectus, or predicts the rise of the next stage in human evolution, Homo Noeticus, all illustrates that evolution lurks in the backdrop of the discursive field of this debate. Nevertheless, I wish to be careful in discussing either how evolution has shaped human's brains to feel the need for a religious narrative, or how religiousness separates us out from humanities' animal relatives, because our *own* construction of religion can easily slide into a *universal* understanding of religion. In order to illustrate this, I use the following thought experiment from Steve Bruce:

> Imagine you are born into a small stable society- the anthropologist's tribe by the lagoon- in which everyone believes that the giant squid is God... Every day, in hundreds of small bits of interaction, the divinity of the squid is evidenced by such things as explaining bad weather by the anger of the squid... In such a world, the idea that the squid is God is not an idea, it is a fact... Now imagine that a sudden increase in population and in the ease of travel means that the Squid tribe come into contact with three or four other civilisations, none of which worships the squid. Suddenly the belief in the squid is not a fact, it is a belief, and a belief that is earnestly contested. The Squid tribe may still have faith in the Squid and may even start missionary societies... but they can never return to... taken for granted worldviews (Bruce, 1996:45)

Bruce's example flags up the point that the construction of religion as an intense belief is itself prompted by challenges to the opening up of non-belief as a real possibility. As I shall indicate in the next chapter, when the existence of God (and/or the afterlife) is assumed to be a foundational pillar of the world, the need to prove religion (a la the NDE) is less important than, say, going on a pilgrimage to the shrine of a Saint. It would be all too easy to read the religious insecurities associated with religious "belief" in the post-enlightenment West into a universal, psychologically based desire for religion worldwide, a feature that seems to be apparent in the aforementioned analysis (and one that I go on to discuss in chapter 6). An analogous point is the desire to seek a neurobiological understanding of religious experience; for

Blackmore, it is but a small step from talking about the tunnel of light being caused by anoxia in the brain (1993:97), to dismissing religion as a cognitive induction brought about by the brain having evolved to make sense of the world. According to Carrette (talking about the neurosurgeon Michael Persinger but equally applicable here) "On the grounds of empirical correlation between certain experiences and the temporal lobes... Persinger is able to disregard entire technicalities of knowledge about the history, method, and study of religion. The status of science, as a powerful explanatory discourse, serves as an excuse for doing the hard work of cultural, social, and linguistic analysis" (Carrette, 2002:lvii). The continuing emphasis upon "homo religiosus" misses the difference between how (what we now call) religion has operated in different times and cultures. Before I discuss this in more detail, I will move from the wider scientific backdrop that structures this debate to the direct point of engagement between biology and the NDE. That is, NDE researchers hope to show how potential biological explanations are inadequate in explaining the NDE, and how, therefore *ipso facto*, the NDE is evidence for an afterlife.

5.3 Explanations of the NDE

In this section I shall explore how the discourse of NDEs is aligned, categorised, compared and contrasted within the discourses of Psychology, Psychiatry, and Neuroscience. I shall resist, for the most part, a critical analysis of the various positions available so as not to dilute my analysis of how the NDE is classified alongside other physiologically based experiences.[15] In doing so, I refine my focus from illuminating the understanding of religion as a private, subjective internal state or belief (defined against the public body of scientific knowledge), to tracking the key assumption that the best 'evidence' for religion comes from intense religious states, a move that ultimately still understands religion through the lens of a mental phenomena that may (or may not) transcend physiological correlates. In addition, I build my argument that the NDE's signification is fundamentally indeterminate, and the attempt to maintain conceptual closure on *who* or *what* counts as an NDE relies on a preconceived notion of what the NDE is in the very literature that sets out to establish the validity of the category in the first place.

The NDE founders (Moody, Sabom, Ring) were aware of potential non-religious explanations of the NDE, and given their psychiatric, medical, and

[15] This directly ties into chapter 6, where I compare these medically understood experiences against other mystical experiences in order to show what they are not.

psychological backgrounds, attempted to pre-empt the postulation of explanatory correlates of the NDE by utilising two strategies. On the one hand, they hoped to show such reductionist explanations as inadequate; the best explanation was therefore the "life after death" one. On the other hand, these biological explanations are disproved by NDE "white-crows" (which I examine in the next section). For their part, "reductionists" have moved from initially dismissive medical or psychological classifications and single-faceted physiological explanations[16] to complicated multifaceted models that integrate complex neurological interactions, pharmacological postulations about ketamine, endogenous opoid peptides and other chemical interactions in the brain,[17] as well as observations based on studies done on people under extreme physiological stress (whether through the forces of gravity, lack of oxygen, or excess carbon dioxide).[18]

What will become evident is a kind of theoretical arms race, where one side develops either more comprehensive (but still fairly hypothetical) biological models, and the other side tries to out-do this by finding increasingly foolproof "white-crows" to transcend these explanations. I wish to explore the threshold that demarcates the differences of these positions, and the underlying similarities that structure how these religious experiences are understood. In order to introduce this, I utilise a succinct delineation of the possibilities by sceptic Susan Blackmore:

> The first choice could be termed the 'Afterlife Hypothesis'. This suggests that the NDE is a glimpse into life after death. There are many versions of this hypothesis but most often they claim that the tunnel is some kind of passageway to the next life, the bright light is the light of heaven or the world beyond, and the people one meets in that world are the real surviving personalities of people who have died before and with whom one will spend an eternity after death... The second choice could be termed the 'Dying Brain Hypothesis'. All the phenomena of the NDE are believed to be products of the dying brain; hallucinations, imaginings and mental constructions that will ultimately stop when the brain's activity stops (Blackmore, 1993: 3-4).

This definition sums up the assumed philosophical positions available, and also sets the tone for researchers to try and disprove her the naturalist explanation of the NDE. At the frontier of medical interventions into death, questions of religion and

[16] For instance, Sabom discusses being confronted by other physicians proposing that the NDE was caused by anaesthetic (1982:230), prior expectation of the old and infirm looking forward to the arms of Jesus (1982:228), Dreams (1982:226), and other categories that I discuss in the body of the text.

[17] Greyson summarises the research areas thus: "serotonin... glutamate or endopsychosins acting on N-methyl-D-aspartate, (NMDA)-phencyclidine receptors... an interaction between muscarinic, NDMA, adrenocorticotropic hormone, and enkephalin systems...NDEs have been hypothetically localised in the limbic lobe, primarily the hippocampus... in a locus along the Sylvian fissure on the right temporal lobe... and in Reissner's fibre in the central canal of the spinal chord.... At the moment such models are speculative and have not been tested..." (2000:334-335).

[18] The most extensive of these is postulated by Blackmore (1993) and is discussed in the body of the text.

mystical experience become homogenised into the afterlife "hypothesis" and the dying brain "hypothesis", and the validation of the truth of the afterlife is dependent on the ability to differentiate the NDE enough from the symptoms of other physiological correlates.

In *Life After Life* Moody orders the possible explanations of the NDE in the following way. Having spent 139 pages arguing for the NDE as indicating evidence of an afterlife, he moves on to other possible explanations of the NDE. Moody first considers "Supernatural Explanations" (such as the Devil deceiving people), a point he cannot see any evidence of due to the positive, life-changing effects of the NDE (1975:141). This eliminated, he then considers "Natural Scientific Explanations" that include possible pharmacological explanations (1975:141-147), possible physiological explanations (1975:147-148), and possible neurological explanations. He states,

> ...it is generally agreed by most medical scientists and laymen that certain drugs cause delusional and hallucinatory mental states and experiences. Futhermore, we are now passing through an era in which there is intense interest in the problem of drug abuse, and much public attention has focussed on the illicit use of drugs such as LSD, marijuana, and so forth, which do appear to cause such hallucinatory episodes. Finally there is the fact that even many medically accepted drugs are associated with various effects on the mind which may resemble the experiences of dying (Moody, 1975:142).

So the NDE is located beside, but has to be differentiated from, other pharmacological agents, and the wider post-1960s drugs scene. In particular, he mentions the effects of ketamine (which shall crop up in other possible biological explanations of the NDE), a drug used as anaesthetic during cardiac arrest (Fox, 2003:145) and one that causes patients to be dissociated from both pain and their wider environment.

Additionally, he reports an account of a patient who had been given nitrous oxide in the dentist's chair, and who had an experience that caused her to feel as if she was spinning in a spiral that led her up to a place where she met angels, even though the experience seemed vague and she was still aware of the doctor and nurses around her (1975:143). She was also unconcerned about death (1975:143-44), and knew that she was bound for heaven, despite the fact that, prior to this, she had been concerned about being hell bound (1975:143). Moody, however, postulates that despite these similarities, the "brilliant light is not personified" and "no ineffable feelings of peace and happiness occurred" (1975:144). Further, he states that he chose this case specifically because of its similarities with the NDE, whereas most drug-related accounts have a wildly variable phenomenology (1975:145). He also notes

"...one woman who "died" twice attributed her lack of an experience the first time to her anaesthetized condition. The second time, when she was under no drugs at all, she had a very complex experience..." (Moody, 1975:146).

The role of drugs in religious experience does not, according to Moody, necessarily have to be *causal*, but could be *correlated* with allowing access to another realm. He states,

> Through the ages *men* have turned to psychoactive compounds in their quest to achieve other states of consciousness and to *reach other planes of reality*... in the well-publicised rituals of the peyote cult found among American Indians... the peyote cactus plant (which contains mescaline) is ingested in order to attain religious visions and enlightenment. There are similar cults all over the world, and their members share the belief that the drug they employ provides a means of passage into other dimensions of reality... The experience of dying could, then, be another such pathway, and all this would help to account for the resemblance of drug induced experiences... to near-death experiences (Moody, 1975:146-147, italics mine)

Perhaps it is just mere coincidence that this is tagged on just after a story about a female patient sitting passively in a chair receiving nitrous oxide. Nevertheless, the masculine language of "men" undertaking a "quest" to "reach other planes of reality" reflects a constructed schemata where NDEs sit alongside the drugs experiences of shamans throughout history, the order generated here means that the complicated discourses of religious experiences and institutions are re-orientated around those mystical experiences that most resemble what NDE researchers are looking for *now* (I return to this in chapter 6).

After examining the pharmacological possibilities, Moody moves to examine "Psychological Explanations", which include isolation research (1975:155-159), and dreams, hallucinations, and delusions (1975: 159-161). Research into isolation, and anecdotal evidence of shipwrecked individuals, has produced phenomenological similarities to the NDE, including panoramic life reviews and (in the case of shipwrecks) "...sailors stranded alone in small boats... have described hallucinations of being rescued, often by paranormal beings almost like ghosts or spirits..." (Moody, 1975:156). Moreover, reported similarities have included time distortions (1975:156), disassociation (1975:176), "resistance to going back to civilisation" (1975:156), feeling " 'at one' with the universe" (Moody, 1975:156), and, upon return, a "profound change in values" (Moody, 1975:156). Despite this, Moody thinks that isolation cases and research do not indicate a satisfactory explanation for the NDE because there is no known physiological explanation for these experiences either. Further,

> Throughout history mystics and shamans have sought solitude in the wilderness in order to find enlightenment and revelation... Isolation, therefore, may very well be, along with hallucinatory drugs and close-calls with death, one of several ways of entering new realms of consciousness (Moody, 1975:159)

These new realms of consciousness cannot, according to Moody, be explained via "different factors- drugs in one case, cerebral anoxia in another, isolation in yet another, and so on..." (Moody, 1975:159), because "...what is most generally reported is manifestly not what is commonly imagined... " and further "...the persons I have talked to are not victims of psychoses..." (Moody, 1975:159-160). The thrust of Moody's overall assessment of these positions is that, for each possible explanation, the NDE is different enough from analogous experiences (whether physiologically or psychologically based) so as to disallow these non-afterlife explanations. Secondly "...there is the fact that independent corroboration of a kind exists for certain of the reports of out-of-body episodes..." (Moody, 1975: 160), a point I shall return to in the next section.

Kenneth Ring begins his analysis of the possible causes of the NDE by looking at Noyes and Kletti's work on depersonalisation, work picked up and examined by other NDE researchers discussed below. He states, "...the phenomena associated with the prospect of impending death, such as a sense of peace and well-being, feelings of bodily detachment, a panoramic life-review, and mystical transcendence are all to be understood as ego-defensive manoeuvres to insulate the individual from the harsh realities of imminent annihilation..." (Ring, 1980:207). Further, they also provide a neurological explanation for the life review:

> Noyes and Kletti have postulated that some aspects of the core-experience (for examine the panoramic life review) might be traceable to seizure-like neural firing patterns in the temporal lobe... Although some similarities exist between experiences induced by temporal lobe stimulation or associated with temporal lobe seizures... and the core experience, many differences are also apparent... (Ring, 1980:213)

According to Ring, the fact that people meet dead relatives (in some cases, relatives that the NDEr had no prior knowledge of their demise) negated this interpretation, and "if near-death experiences are merely elaborate denial reactions, it is hard to see how they could provide the basis for such extraordinary accurate perceptions..." (Ring, 1980:208). He continues,

> Noyes and Kletti seem to fall prey to the well-known tendency of orthodox psychoanalysis toward facile reductionism. In this respect it might be more important to listen carefully to the testimony of Near-Death survivors than to follow the predilections of Freud... as Kübler-Ross has pointed out, this view would point out that small children who are dying would ordinarily fantasize their parents... Yet they *never* do- unless one or both are dead. Instead they appear to see other relatives or religious figures[19]... (Ring, 1980:208)

Further, within the experiences themselves NDErs can, according to Ring, differentiate between hallucinations and "real" NDEs (1980:208). Reflecting Moody, Ring argues that "drug–related conditions were associated with an impairment of the NDE" and that (utilising the work of Osis and Haraldsson) 80 percent of people who had deathbed visions were not on any form of medication (1980:212).

Ring also utilises the work of Osis and Haraldsson to dispute the role of cerebral anoxia (lack of oxygen to the brain) in NDEs, even though heart rate failure and respiratory failure would cause anoxia. Whilst vague about the phenomenology of experiences triggered by anoxia (Sabom would be more explicit), he argues that the work of the two aforementioned parapsychologists indicates that the majority of patients who had deathbed visions were both conscious and coherent (cited in Ring, 1980:214). Furthermore, like Moody, Ring ponders whether or not physiological processes such as anoxia could in fact lead to altered states of consciousness that give us access to another realm (Ring, 1980:214-215). In any case, anoxia alone cannot provide us with a physiological explanation for the full phenomenology for the NDE (Ring, 1980:215).

After querying, but not pursuing, the question of endorphin's role in the NDE, Ring concludes that a biological explanation would have to be able to explain

> ...the out-of-body state, paranormal knowledge, the tunnel, the golden light, the voice or presence, the appearance of deceased relatives, beautiful vistas, and so forth... A neurological interpretation, to be acceptable, should be able to provide a comprehensive explanation of all the various aspects of the core experience ... (Ring, 1980:216)

Of course, enmeshed within this statement is the assumption that the core-experience is universal, and that to explain this universal experience one must have a

[19] This is, of course, completely unfair to Freud. First, Freud can be accused of many things, but psychoanalysis has enough nuances to shrug off this criticism. A Freudian would presumably respond by arguing that the meeting of dead relatives, as opposed to ones who were alive, was completely consistent with the impact that loss would cause upon the infant or child's psyche. Additionally, as I report below, there have been cases where (for instance) the voice of God turned out to be the voice of a game show host who was still alive, implying that this is not quite as clear cut as Ring makes out.

thorough, multifaceted neurological explanation (a challenge Susan Blackmore was to undertake in her 1993 work, Dying To Live, to which I return below).

Kenneth Ring references Michael Sabom's arguments about biological explanations of the NDE in Life At Death (1980:), even though his book precedes the cardiologist's by two years. By far the most scientific and comprehensive of the initial NDE founders, Sabom structures his analysis by considering whether the NDE is caused by subconscious absorption of information (1982:211), conscious fabrication (1982:215-218), subconscious fabrication (1982:218-220), depersonalization (1982:220-225), autoscopic hallucination (1982:225-226), dreams (1982:226-228), prior expectation (1982:228-230), whether it is drug-induced or caused by hallucination (1982:234), endorphin release (1982:234-236), temporal lobe seizure (1982:236-238), and altered states of consciousness (1982:239-244).

He begins his analysis of potential materialist explanations of the NDE by pondering whether or not the assumption of unconsciousness made by medical professionals could be at times fallacious, or, put another way, whether the assumption of unconsciousness is a subjective one. He states, "...Suppose... that the person whom we had assumed to be unconscious was in fact not unconscious at all... the sense of hearing is one of the last things to go when a person loses consciousness. A severely injured or sick individual can lie motionless with closed eyes and barely perceptible vital signs and still hear what is being said..."(Sabom, 1982:211). Nevertheless, despite hypnotised patients giving accurate accounts of their medical team's conversations whilst under general anaesthesia (1982:211), these accounts lacked visual components, something that cannot be said for NDE accounts of out-of-body experiences during surgery. Sabom states that "aurally perceived knowledge will be perceived by the patient and will later be recalled as verbal, non-visual impression..." (Sabom, 1998:212).

This ties into a wider perception that the NDE is caused by subconscious fabrication, and Sabom (1998:218) queries "...Could the NDE have been formulated out of a subconscious human need to overcome the threat of extinction and to survive ultimately as a 'spectator', as suggested by... Freud?" He continues

> ...many persons... described their experiences as if they had been a spectator or a disinterested observer. If the NDE were such a subconscious fabrication, I would expect it to appear each time the person's ego perceived a serious threat of death... This was not the case. Several persons in this study encountered multiple separate Near-Death crisis events but could later recall only one NDE. Moreover, the crisis event that *was* associated with an NDE was sometimes the one perceived by the person (and documented in the medical record) to have been the *least* life-threatening... (Sabom, 1998:219)

Additionally, Sabom recounts the story of a rather unfortunate individual who had two "crisis events" on two separate occasions, both of which led to NDEs- in the first one, the patient found himself crawling up a hill towards a bright light and his Mother's outstretched hands (1998:219), and in the second, he found himself floating above his body, witnessing his attempted resuscitation in the hospital (Sabom, 1982:220). According to Sabom, why "...should the subconscious mind... find it necessary to formulate two completely different patterns of 'ego-survival' on two separate occasions?" (Sabom, 1998:220). He concludes that such a Freudian interpretation cannot explain the NDE, as it "...maintains a basic structure independent of the whims and fantasies present in the subconscious minds of various individuals...." (Sabom, 1998:220).[20]

From a Freudian interpretation, Sabom goes on to consider Noyes' similar theory of "depersonalisation", which is sparked as a defence reaction to impending danger. According to Sabom, Noyes' theory hinges on the perception of imminent death to trigger depersonalisation, which can cause "...altered perception of time, an increased speed of thoughts, a sense of detachment, a feeling of unreality, a lack of emotion, a revival of memories, a sense of harmony or unity with the universe, and sharper vision or hearing" (Sabom, 1982:222). He then combines this with the arguments of Dr Richard Blacher, who argues that the NDE occurs during the gradual commencement of cardiac arrest, while in Stokes-Adams attacks (where there is an unexpected cessation of the heart leading to loss of consciousness) the NDE does not occur (Sabom, 1982:222). *Contra* Blacher, Sabom recounts several cases of patients with "sudden loss of consciousness" (1982:223) who have had NDEs, and argues that such patients have no time to "appreciate the imminence of... 'death' in a psychological sense..." (Sabom, 1982:223).

After considering, and eliminating, Autoscopic Hallucinations (where a person sees a physical double of him or herself, an experience that is frightening but in no way similar to the phenomenology of the NDE [1982:226]), he goes on to consider the relationship between NDEs and dreams, which he also discounts because of the "realness" that many NDErs recount of their experience (1982:228).

---

[20] This is a clear misreading of Freud. Freud believed that "(t)he ego (carried out) dream work, the complex mental operations that transform unconscious thoughts and images into well defined dream fantasies. These manifest images... of latent fulfilment" (Wulff, 1997:270). Freud would not dispute the phenomenological variance within dreams, and sought to "bypass the ego's unconscious defensive manoeuvres and uncover the repressed mental content" (Wulff, 1997:270). That two NDEs had the same underlying structure whilst displaying subjective differences would not pose any problem for a Freudian; in fact, one could respond by arguing that it is Sabom who has the explaining to do as the two experiences were subjectively different, if sharing the same motifs. If I go to church I would expect it to be the same every time I walk in- why does the gates of heaven change if I approach it twice?

Further, reflecting Moody and Ring, he focuses on the differences between prior conceptions of death and the actual phenomenological experiences that NDErs have, one that changes religious views and lives in general (1982:229-230).

With prior expectations discounted, Sabom goes on to discuss the role of drugs in the NDE, mentioning Morphine Sulfate as one medication regularly used in cardiac pain relief. The medical situations that patients found themselves in often necessitated the use of pharmacological agents. Nevertheless, like Moody and Ring, he notes "...medical studies of the content and structure of drug-induced hallucinations have found these experiences to be highly variable and idiosyncratic..." (Sabom, 1982:231). He quotes the following NDE case, noting that this "bad NDE" occurred after sedation for an operation (it should be noted that the statements about Negative NDEs had yet to emerge in the NDE discourse, and so Sabom seems to assume that the negativity here comes from the drugs):

> ... I had a vision that my one Doctor came and sat on the edge of my bed and said 'Look, tell us where that timebomb is.' I never would think of a time bomb... and then it felt like we were sitting in a restaurant together... and my friends were sitting around having dinner and the doctor said 'There are two many people here who are going to get hurt. We have to know where the bomb is!"... after a while I woke up and my nurse said, 'You said some of the wildest things when you were asleep... (recounted by Sabom, 1982:231)

From this, he argues that this "...man's postoperative delusion is clearly different from an NDE... The NDE on the other hand is characterised by a clarity of thought and 'visual' perception"[21] (Sabom 1982:231-232). Sabom utilises the case of another individual who had both spectator "hallucinations" and an NDE, and who states "... I had hallucinations then but they weren't the same. They were real (the hallucinations), that is, they weren't like a dream yet they weren't the same as I felt in an ambulance... in this experience [NDE] where I lifted out my body, it was me!"[22] (quoted by Sabom, 1982:232).

---

[21] As Stephen Braude points out, "...perhaps we should be careful when experiencers retrospectively report their cognitive clarity... we must remember that drug users, dreamers, and hypnotic subjects offer similar- and presumably equally reliable – testimony regarding altered states" (Braude, *Out-of-Body Experiences and Survival After Death*. Originally published in the *International Journal of Parapsychology* Vol 12, no 1, and reprinted online at the url, www.survivalafterdeath.org/articles/braude/ obe.htm. Accessed 24/04/2006.)

[22] Blackmore quotes the story (1993:164) of a New Zealand man who's heart stopped for thirty seconds, and his NDE featured his interest in walking: "It was so real and vivid and consistent... in fact so totally un-dream-like! I actually walked most of those one and a half hours conducting lucid conversations... If I were a religious person... I no doubt would have had a religious trip. As it was, I'm a tramper, so I went tramping instead!" We see here none of the religious imagery of the NDE, and yet the NDEr reports that it was "real". This should give pause for thought as to the difference between NDEs and other mental states, as it is (one assumes) a universal occurrence to have dreams that feel real, until one wakes up.

Sabom moves on to consider the role of endorphins in the NDE, and notes that a massive release of the chemical in the dying brain would lead to feelings of bliss (Sabom, 1982:234), and that injections of the chemical into the cerebrospinal fluid of fourteen terminal cancer patients, of which twelve reported complete pain relief in the first five minutes (1982:235). These patients however, reported pain relief for 22 to 73 hours, a "...finding at variance with the NDE itself, where painlessness occurs only during the NDE itself. As soon as the experience ends, physical pain abruptly returns" (Sabom, 1982:235). Additionally, the fourteen patients who had the cerebrospinal injection of endorphins could still feel touch and the puncture of an IV needle, whereas NDE patients who report out of body experiences often seem surprised at seeing their bodies punctured by needles and feeling no sensations (Sabom, 1982:236).

Sabom's penultimate analysis involves Temporal Lobe Seizure, and he quotes an unnamed Professor of Neurology who argued "...These experiences as reported by Moody are nothing more than temporal lobe seizures" (Sabom, 1982:237).[23] Sabom then refers to the work of Dr Wilder Penfield, whose electrical stimulations of the temporal and parietal lobes produced sensory illusions (which included visual distortions of the size and location of objects, distortions of sound, and feelings of

[23] It has been argued that the physiological *origin* of a religious state should not be used to dismiss the *validity* of it. The classic exponent of this position was William James (1902[2002]:16-17) who argued that "Scientific theories are organically conditioned as much as religious emotions are... we should doubtless see 'the liver' determining the dicta of the sturdy atheist as it does those of the Methodist under conviction anxious about his soul... (Medical Materialism) is sure, just as every simple man is sure, that some states of mind are inwardly superior to others, and reveal to us more truth, and in this it simply makes use of an ordinary spiritual judgement. It has no physiological theory of the production of these its favourite states, by which it may accredit them, and its attempt to discredit the states which it dislikes, by vaguely associating them with the nerves and liver, and connecting them with names connoting bodily affliction, is altogether illogical and inconsistent... When we think certain states of mind superior to others, is it ever because of what we know concerning their organic antecedents? No!" There is some strength to James' argument when we consider how NDEs might be dismissed, somewhat lazily, as temporal lobe epilepsy. Certainly, as Carrette points out in his 2002 introduction to James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) the political *function* of such medical materialist explanations is often to secure a very narrow definition of religious experience against the discourse of science, a move that has political ramifications (see, for instance Daniel Dennett's polemical *Religion as a Natural Phenomena* [2005] for the full political implications of such an understanding of science and religion, especially in a post-September-11th world). Nonetheless, the strength of a Jamesian-style argument against more comprehensive biological explanations of the NDE is somewhat diminished when one analyses the *purpose* of this debate surrounding the truth or falsity of the NDE. James was arguing for his own pragmatic interpretation of religious states (that is, one should judge them not on their physiological basis, but by the transformation that they bring to people's lives), a move that, for those arguing that NDEs represent an experience of another realm, might seem eminently reasonable, although somewhat limiting if conceived of as the *ultimate* way to evaluate NDEs (the whole thrust of this debate is, after all, to establish firm foundations for a belief in the afterlife). A parallel move, and one that has already been mentioned by Moody, is to argue that temporal lobe epilepsy might be the way that we connect with this other realm. Such an argument is fraught with philosophical difficulties, including (but not limited to) where the burden of proof lies (is it not the whole point of pro-NDE arguments to *establish* the existence of another realm with new evidence?), and, *if* the NDE has a well established biological correlate, whether an appeal to the existence of the afterlife is really the best explanation available from our range of possible explanations (biological/medical materialism, super-psi, or the aforementioned existence of the afterlife). I return to this in the body of the text.

remoteness), "feelings of fear, sadness, or loneliness" (Sabom, 1982:237), visual and auditory hallucinations (which included threatening figures and replays of life events [1982:237]), and "forced thinking" where the subject's mind was congested by involuntary and intrusive ideas and thoughts (Sabom, 1982:238). Nevertheless, Sabom finds this explanation unsatisfactory as people's perception during the NDE is clear and undistorted. NDEs are emphatically peaceful and stress free (1982:238), the senses of smell and taste are absent from the NDE in contrast to temporal lobe seizures (1982:238), the Life Review of the NDE is a structured, ordered event unlike the involuntary replay of single events during the aforementioned temporal lobe stimulation (1982:238), and there is an absence of involuntary thought during the NDE (1982:238).

Sabom concludes by discussing anoxia and hypercarbia (Sabom, 1998:241-244), under the general banner of "altered states of consciousness". Anoxia causes irritability, lack of focus, lack of concentration, problems in remembering, and slowdown of reasoning, all of which stand in sharp contrast to the NDE (1982:240-241). Hypercarbia, where cessation of blood flow stops the transportation of carbon dioxide out of the lungs, can cause experiences similar to the NDE, and patients who underwent CO_2 experiments with the psychiatrist L.J. Meduna in the fifties reported visions of bright light, bodily detachment, revisiting past-memories, "...ineffability, telepathic communion with a religious presence, and feelings of cosmic importance and ecstasy..." (1998:242). The physiological symptoms that these subjects displayed whilst hypercarbic were similar to the ones displayed by NDE patients during cardiac arrest, leading Sabom to recognise that hypercarbia could be a possible trigger for the NDE (1998:241), and that Meduna's recognition that facets of the physiological functions of certain parts of the brain could be affected independently of personality; this could have equal import in the case of NDEs (Sabom, 1998:243). Sabom, however, has on record the case of an NDE experient who had has blood oxygen and carbon dioxide levels checked during his cardiac arrest. His blood levels were higher than normal because of the processes of resuscitation, whilst his carbon dioxide levels were lower than normal. This, combined with the fact that the patient accurately described witnessing his own blood being drawn whilst out of his body (1982:244), leads Sabom to conclude that hypercarbia cannot explain the NDE alone.[24]

Thus, the preceding NDE researchers have all shown that they are aware of the potential similarities between NDEs and a spectrum of other physiological and psychological phenomena. Because of the role of biology and psychology in shaping

[24] This case has caused significant controversy. It is quoted by Greyson (2000:333) as evidence against the role of these physiological processes in the NDE, although Blackmore argues that this test is not a reliable indicator of levels of oxygen in the brain (Blackmore, 1993:52).

our understanding of the ontology of humanness, the NDE is understood in lineage with, but carefully differentiated from, these other medical and psychological conditions, and backed up with the argument that "... understanding how the television works does not yield any information regarding from where the images and sounds arise... " (Strassman, quoted in Greyson, 2002:338), a point that several authors have echoed.[25] Nevertheless, the fact that the NDE is so closely aligned with a spectrum of other, more physiologically explainable, experiences has meant that sceptics have queried whether a more parsimonious explanation is viable.

The Psychologist Susan Blackmore (1993) proposes a robust biological model for how the brain generates the illusion of the NDE as it dies. Blackmore (1993:6-7) begins her argument by outlining the various conclusions that are possible in the debate about NDEs. She states that there are four main arguments for the reality of an afterlife that can be established from NDEs:

> 1) The 'consistency argument' is that NDEs are similar around the world and throught history. The only possible explanation for this... is that NDEs are what they appear to be- the soul's journey out of the body... consistency it is argued, amounts to evidence... 2) The 'reality argument' is that NDEs feel so real that they must be what they appear to be... feelings of reality... amount to evidence... 3) The 'Paranormal argument' is that NDEs involve paranormal events that cannot be explained by science... No purely materialist hypothesis can explain the paranormal so paranormality amounts to evidence...4)The transformation argument' is that people are changed by their NDE's, sometimes dramatically for the better- becoming more spiritual and less materialistic. This proves... that they have had a spiritual experience involving another world... (Blackmore, 1993:6-7)

Against this, Blackmore notes two arguments for a naturalist explanation of the NDE. She ascertains that

> 1)The 'consistency argument' is that NDEs are the similar throughout the world and throughout history ... everyone has a similar brain, hormones and nervous system and that is why they have similar experiences when they die

[25] I discuss some of these in the body of the text, and note here William J. Serdahely's argument that "... it is possible that the disinhibition... in the visual cortex and especially in the temporal lobes with its concomitant neural excitation may be the physiological condition that 'opens the gate,' so to speak, to release the soul from the physical body. After all, if there is a soul, then it has to interface with the physical body somehow..." (Serdahely, 1996:51). Nonetheless, from Descartes' attempt to locate this interface in the pituitary gland onwards, the linking of soul with brain has been a notoriously unsuccessful endeavour, and, given the evidence that links personality, speech, and emotion with different parts of the brain (and their corresponding alterations with brain trauma or injury) a sceptic such as Blackmore would undoubtedly respond that the 'soul' or 'spirit' was an unnecessary level of explanation. Whilst beyond the scope of this chapter, I should also note that I am unconvinced by the attempts to utilise quantum physics as a potential explanation of the soul/brain link for all the same reasons that Daniel Dennett (2003) outlines in his arguments against the use of quantum physics in the freewill/determinism debate.

> ... 2)The 'just like hallucinations argument' maintains that all features of the NDE can occur under other conditions... (Blackmore, 1993:6-7)

In expanding upon these two arguments, she makes several points: the tunnel of light is caused by visual cortex stimulation in the dying brain brought about by lack of oxygen (1993:97); the noises heard by NDErs are caused by cerebral anoxia in the temporal lobe and/or stimulus to the cochlea (1993:212); feelings of euphoria are caused by endorphin release and fearful experiences caused by morphine antagonists (1993:58,203); life reviews are caused by endorphin and enkephalin release in the temporal lobe and the limbic system which reduces the disinhibition threshold and can set off seizures (1993:203); and out-of-body experiences are caused by the brain generating an alternative model of reality as it tries to make sense of the stimulus caused by dying (1993:175-178). In the theatre of the mind, the NDE is explained as one last monumental audio-visual experience, the glorious finale before the final curtain call.

Crucial to her argument is that the NDE displays a spectrum of experiences that are analogous to other, less life threatening, experiences and situations. So, tunnels of various descriptions have been described in drug-related experiences (1993:68-73), temporal lobe epilepsy has been noted to cause visions of dead relatives (1993:206), pilots who have lost consciousness during extreme-gravity tests have been noted to have visions and exhibit feelings of euphoria on regaining consciousness (1993:62), and life-review and out-of-body experiences have been noted to occur in non-life threatening situations (1993:62). For Blackmore, the NDE is not a singular experience, but a spectrum of experiences that she hypothesises occur according to the different physiological affects that certain types of dying entail: people who suffer from cardiac arrests are more likely to have an out-of-body experience, whilst people for whom the imminent threat of death is both sudden and unexpected show a higher occurrence of the life-review (1993:218).

Nevertheless, such a precise biological schematic needs a universally decipherable NDE that the brain causes, something that is far from clear.[26] Given such a detailed model to explain the NDE, critics were quick to show how facets of

[26] Cross-cultural studies have shown a far higher element of cultural construction than she allows for. In an article entitled *The Absence of Tunnel Sensations in Near Death Experiences from India* (1994) Allan Kellehear, Ian Stevenson, Satwant Pasricha, and Emily Cook have the following to say: "(c)ases investigated in India now number 45, and not a single informant has reported the experience of a tunnel... Blackmore's strategy of developing biological theories for the NDE before examining the cultural prevalence of their phenomenology reflects both a strangely backwards set of priorities and an overconfidence in what the cross-cultural material might yield..." (1994:110-112). Further, Kellehear provides an analysis of cross-cultural 'NDEs' and suggests that, in many cases, the Tunnel, the OBE, and the life review are absent, whereas the 'otherworld' and supernatural 'other beings' seem to crop up (1996:33).

her argument were inadequate. William J. Serdahely posits four questions for the dying brain hypothesis. First, "...if the out-of-body experience (OBE) is, as Blackmore claims, due to the brain's reconstruction of memories and the possible tactile and auditory input while the NDEr is unresponsive, then why would we not expect out-of-body perceptions from a supine, or for some NDErs, prone perspective?" (Serdahely, 1996:42). After disputing the research on which Blackmore's work is based, and accusing her of making a fallacious argument to authority[27], Serdahely goes on to give two "white-crow" examples that give positive evidence for the "afterlife hypothesis", which I discuss in the next section (1996:46). The second question that Blackmore needs to answer is "...how the dying brain hypothesis explains the overwhelming feelings of unconditional love experienced during some NDEs" (Serdahely, 1996:46), as she provides no evidence of "neurotransmitters and/or cortical structures", a point that is also applicable to her inadequate dealings with hellish NDEs (1996:48). Third, Serdahely queries how Blackmore's precise biological model explains the phenomenological variance *within* the classic Moody-type NDE. He focuses specifically on life-reviews and tunnels of light, and argues "(c)onsistency is what one would expect from either the dying brain or the afterlife hypothesis. Variance within the patterns identified by Blackmore, while seemingly incompatible with the dying-brain hypothesis, is just what one would expect with the afterlife hypothesis[28]" (Serdahely 1996:50). Fourth, he asks "whether neural disinhibition could possibly be a causative factor in the separation of the "true self," spirit, or soul from the physical body" (Serdahely, 1996: 50). Utilising an example of seven year old Patrick, whose NDE did not feature his mother, father, or any living relatives, but rather his two deceased pets, and he enquires "... if there is a random firing of disinhibited neurons, then why do these neurons almost always produce images of deceased loved ones?" (Serdahely, 1996:52).[29]

---

[27] He states "Blackmore committed a fallacy in logic, the appeal to authority, by citing an authority in one area- hallucinations- as an authority in another- memory reconstruction" (Serdahely, 1996:44). In regards to the case in question, Serdahely argues "... so there we have it: Blackmore's *Dying Brain* hypothesis needs a birds-eye view to explain OBEs, and the birds-eye proposition is predicated on Nigro and Neisser's article, which they wrote describing a preliminary article study based on an unrepresentative sample... " (Serdahely, 1996:44). Nevertheless, while Blackmore's argument might be weak, and the work she utilised unrepresentative, but to dismiss it under the rubric of an appeal to authority is to commit a fallacy of its own: the genetic fallacy. The aforementioned study might be small, it might even make the proposition less likely, but the burden of proof is therefore on Serdahely to prove it wrong: the sample might be inadequate, but still *correct*. Serdahely confuses the origin of this research with whether or not it is true. (That is, he does not say that because the sample was unrepresentative it is *improbable*, nor does he cite other evidence that *disproves* Blackmore's case).

[28] To reiterate a previous point, the brain is perfectly capable of producing variance; one only has to look at dreams to see this.

[29] According to Keith Augustine "...Some NDErs report seeing living persons in their NDEs. (Peter) Fenwick reports the case of a woman who encountered her live-in partner after a hysterectomy had caused heavy bleeding and an NDE:... 'As I said, the feeling of calmness was indescribable. I heard music.... I heard someone calling me. I turned and saw his face at the other end of the tunnel. It was Fabio [the man she

Whilst the strength of these four challenges is disputable, it does bring up philosophical issues as to the relationship between correlation, causation, and the inference to the best explanation. Kellehear states,

> ... I can also equate tunnel sensations with travelling through real tunnels. This too is a parallel (and) has a genuine correspondence with the NDE tunnel experience... As even Blackmore and Troscianko admit, simulation is the best they can do since "obviously we cannot open up someone's cortex and apply the hypothesised stimulation that way..." (Kellehear, 1996:131)

Similarly, Michael Sabom disputes the explanatory strength of such multifaceted dying brain models by stating that

> ...the dying brain hypothesis which attempts to explain the NDE on the basis of endorphins, hypoxia, and temporal lobe seizures cannot adequately account for the NDE. To do so would be like confusing bronchitis and pneumonia- there may be similarities, but the *trained medical observer* knows that they are fundamentally different conditions with different symptoms and methods of treatment (Sabom, 1998: 180, italics mine).

To the untrained, non-medical observer, Blackmore's case may seem more robust than it is usually given credit for; nevertheless, proponents of the afterlife hypothesis also utilise their "white-crow" cases as a means to show that the paranormal explanation remains the most convincing.

In this section I have argued that the gaze of the researcher has been cast along a continuum of biologically based experiences in order to differentiate the NDE from, or locate the NDE within, this spectrum. We have seen how "...in this culture, medical thought is fully engaged in the philosophical status of man..." (Foucault, 1963:245); at stake is the ontological foundations of what it means to be human. In the next section, I examine the "white-crow" cases cited, cases used to show how the afterlife "hypothesis" is the best explanation for the NDE.

---

was living with]....'... But Fabio was alive and normally conscious during his girlfriend's NDE, so he could not have possibly really been calling her inside a tunnel to another world... William Serdahely has presented many examples of NDEs that include classic NDE components but which do not quite fit the popularized Moody model of the NDE. For example, Serdahely reports a case of a woman whose NDE was triggered by a sexual assault: 'One of the female NDErs saw a living female friend in her 'windsock' tunnel. The friend told her to go back to her body'" ((http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/keith_augustine, accessed 03/08/06).

5.4 The NDE "White Crows"

During Moody's original discussion of the various explanations of the NDE, he states "...there is the fact that independent corroboration of a kind exists for certain of the reports of out-of-body episodes. Though commitments to others prevent me from giving names and identifying details, I have seen and heard enough to know that I am continually baffled and amazed..." (Moody, 1975:160). Other researchers would not share Moody's discretion. In Bruce Greyson's 2002 summary of NDE research, he provides a scrupulous and exacting analysis of various physiological and psychological explanations before concluding with these accounts (in effect, he saves these accounts until last):

> Several researchers have collected cases in which individuals were later able to describe with uncanny accuracy what was going on around them while they were ostensibly unconscious... Some of these descriptions may be attributable to high base-rate guesses about events likely to have occurred or to retrospective reconstruction of a scenario based on objects and events glimpsed prior to or after the period of resuscitation... Some experients report additionally that, whilst ostensibly "out of the body", they became aware of events they could not have perceived normally even if they had been conscious, events occurring at a distance outside their sense organs. Ring and Lawrence... published details... for which they obtained independent corroboration of unconscious patients accurate out-of-body perceptions... Some of these perceptions included highly unlikely objects, such as the plaid shoelaces of a nurse who was present only during the resuscitation and not before or after, and unexpected objects in locations where patients did not have access (Greyson, 2002:339)

The implications of this *seem* clear; if these cases are watertight, then no matter the plausibility of the "dying brain" hypothesis, there is something going on here above and beyond the realms of cause-and-effect analysis. Susan Blackmore recognises this challenge and states, "...(i)f the evidence changes in the future and truly paranormal events are documented then certainly the theory I have proposed will have to be overthrown- along with a lot more of psychology, physics, and biology..." (Blackmore, 1993:262). The stakes are therefore high in these cases. She states "We are presented with cases that sound like evidence of paranormal perception during NDEs. If they are, it matters crucially to our understanding of life, death, and human nature in all its complexity..." (Blackmore, 1993:116).

Nonetheless, there are problems with collecting anecdotal stories, often described months or years after the fact, and checking them with the relevant surgical and/or medical teams. Moody (1998:113) states, "These experiences provide us with- as I have mentioned before- very little scientific knowledge (it is difficult, if not

impossible, to verify, and the data is all anecdotal)..." In fact, the challenges for the diligent NDE researcher are even greater than the psychical researchers and parapsychologists talked about in chapter 2 by the very definition of being near-death in a clinical environment. Blackmore is extremely lucid on this particular front. As a parapsychologist who initially started as a "believer", her frustrations at a lack of results with ESP experiments that were supposed to produce results (and had done so for other paraspychological researchers), and detailed investigations into the apparent "white-crow" cases, had only turned up negative results, "Chinese whisper" cases that had grown arms and legs, or out and out fraud. In the case of NDEs, Blackmore discusses how the ability to hear is the last sensory faculty to go "offline" during impending unconsciousness (1993:122), a factor that, when combined with the difficulties of administering anaesthetic during medical crisis situations, means that sense of touch might be still be intermittently available. This might indicate how (analogous to her dying-brain hypothesis that posits a multifaceted set of natural processes that when combined, generate the "NDE experience") these paranormal verification stories are generated via a combination of subconscious reconstructions after the fact.[30]

Due to the currency of apparently unverifiable NDE accounts, there is the possibility that these NDE accounts become exaggerated during their initial publication, quoting and re-quoting in other sources, and that this, combined with appearances on TV shows and/or transformation in the popular media, means that these experiences seem a lot more impressive than they actually are. Blackmore discusses two cases of this. In the first case, she states,

> William Serdahely recently published some cases of NDEs in children... A 7 year old boy, Pat, was fishing with a friend from a stone bridge when he fell off... and hit his head on a rock... He was in a coma all that day and the next, regaining consciousness briefly the next day... the little boy described how he had seen himself entangled in a fishing line, the police officer coming to rescue him, the ambulance ride, and the trip in a blue, orange and white helicopter with three persons on board besides himself. Later he went into a dark, black timeless tunnel and met with his dog and cat, both of whom had died when he was only three years old. This fitted with Serdahely's finding that when children have NDEs and all their loved ones are alive, they tend to have animals or other alternative beings there to meet them. It also fits Ring's suggestion that you don't need both the 'presence' and dead relatives because both serve the same function... Serdahely has been trying to contact the mother to confirm these details but has received no replies. This is just one of

[30] Utilising research done on patients who have been "aware" under a general anaesthetic, Blackmore reports that "In one study 85 percent of the patients recalled hearing noises or conversation, only about 40 percent felt pain, and a third recalled seeing something..." (1993:122).

> many cases that may or may not be potential evidence, but, frustratingly, we cannot find out (Blackmore, 1993:126)

According to Blackmore, Serdahely has experienced better results with the case of Ben Bray, a boy whom was reported in the tabloids as stating, "I went to Heaven and talked with God", a story tagged with the headline "Boy, 6, snaps out of coma and bares startling proof" (Blackmore, 1993:126).[31] Despite the fact that the boy's mother later confirmed that many of the details of this particular case were exaggerated, she did report that Ben had got the details right about the colour of his grandfather's hair (he had met both his grandfathers during the NDE), something he could not have learnt during his life as, in the photographs he had seen, both men had grey hair (Blackmore, 1993:127). Blackmore responds by pointing out that

> ... brown and black are both descriptions that could cover a wide variety of hair colours and the probability of getting them right by chance are quite high. This case is hardly the 'startling proof' of popular headline... I mention this case because it is typical of the sort of account that gets embellished in the popular press and gives the impression that yet more proof is forthcoming. If cases like this were the weaker ones just adding to a bulk to a large body of properly corroborated and stronger cases then it would not matter... (Blackmore, 1993:127)

Blackmore also records the case of 'Maria', as reported by Kimberly Clark, a 'white crow' that, in 1993, had been "widely reported" (Blackmore, 1993:127) and was considered to be "excellent evidence" (1993:127). 'Maria' was brought into hospital during cardiac arrest and gave an account of an out-of-body experience that mentioned a tennis shoe on the third floor ledge of at the north side of the hospital building, a shoe that had a "...worn patch by the little toe and the lace under the heel" (Blackmore, 1993:127). Clark retrieved this shoe, but only after trying many patients' rooms on this level (Blackmore, 1993:128). Despite the apparent intriguing verification of this story by social worker Clark, Blackmore concludes that this "...is sadly one of those cases for which I have been unable to get any further information... Perhaps it may yet be possible, but until then I can only consider it as fascinating but unsubstantiated..." (Blackmore, 1993:128).[32]

---

[31] Again, another indication of the popularity of NDEs in the wider cultural sphere as I recounted in the last chapter.

[32] In a superbly written sceptical piece, Keith Augustine critiques the "Tennis Shoe" case. He cites Hayden Ebbern, Sean Mulligan, and Barry Beyerstein, who investigated: "(t)hey placed a running shoe of their own at the place Clark described and then went outside to observe what was visible from ground level. They were astonished at the ease with which they could see and identify the shoe... Clark's claim that the shoe would

As opposed to the roughly chronological order that has characterised my analysis of the NDE field thus far, I have initially focussed on Blackmore's work in this section in order to highlight the difficulties in finding cases that can appease the sceptics exacting gaze.[33] In one sense, the history of paranormal research has been characterised by frustrations and fraud. When investigations into psychical phenomena moved from the Victorian parlour into the laboratory, the extravagant, extraordinary feats reported in the nineteenth century failed to materialise under controlled conditions. This is the reason that Blackmore would give for her sceptical approach, although there is a further point as to what would cause Blackmore to revise her "dying-brain" hypothesis in favour of the afterlife, which I discuss in the next section.

Mindful of these kind of objections to out-of-body verifications of hospital procedures, Sabom's initial investigation made the intriguing move of setting up a control-group to *imagine* what a cardiac surgical procedure would consist of. In doing so, he hoped to pre-empt the kind of criticism that Blackmore would publish eleven years later, and he was mindful of the potential influence of other factors during the recollection of cardiac procedures. Sabom's research into cardiac patients who had reported features of their operation specifically probed them for details that the layperson would not know (1982:117). He states,

> A person familiar with the CPR protocol might be able to reconstruct a believable version of events of his own resuscitation... The majority of people reporting an autoscopic recollection of their own cardiac arrest procedure were 'seasoned' patients who had had multiple exposures to the equipment and procedures used in modern intensive care unit facilities... Moreover, there awareness of their cardiac condition might have made them more attentive than the average person to CPR protocol portrayed on television, in the

---

have been invisible from ground level outside the hospital is all the more incredible because the investigators' viewpoint was considerably inferior to what Clark's would have been seventeen years earlier. That is because, in 1994, there was new construction under way beneath the window in question and this forced Ebbern and Mulligan to view the shoe from a much greater distance than would have been necessary for Clark." In addition, he comments, "Their 1994 'test shoe' was so conspicuous, in fact, that by the time they returned to the hospital one week later, 'someone not specifically looking for it' had noticed it and removed it... It is quite likely, then, 'that anyone who might have noticed the shoe back in 1977 would have commented on it because of the novelty of its location' and Maria could have heard such a conversation and consciously forgotten about it, incorporating it into her out-of-body imagery" (http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/keith_augustine, accessed 03/08/06).

[33] There have been "white-crow" responses used to disprove Blackmore's arguments in *Dying To Live* (1993). William J. Serdahely notes two such cases, one of which is as follows. In the first case, "...having floated out of her body and looking down on the operating room, one of my interviewees noticed that the surgeon that was operating on her was not the doctor she had authorized for the operation. She told me her attorney later discovered her medical records were missing, with the two doctors involved acknowledging off the record in a private meeting that her out-of-body perception was accurate..." (Serdahely, 1996:46). Of course, patients testimony to this effect is not the kind of proof that Blackmore would accept, a point that Serdahely acknowledges when he states "...I share (these cases) with the reader knowing full well Blackmore's argument that they do not offer incontrovertible proof of OBEs" (Serdahely, 1996:46).

> movies, and the like... During the 'post-event' interview... (m)any admitted that they had previously viewed television programs or other re-enactments of CPR... (Sabom, 1982:118-119)

Out of his control group of twenty-five patients, twenty made at least one significant error, including the role of mouth-to-mouth procedures in a hospital environment; the procedure for cardiac massage; the shape, role, function and procedure of utilising the defibrillation equipment, and so forth (1982:120-121). According to Sabom, the backgrounds of these patients

> ...were similar to those reporting autoscopic NDEs... and who had been consecutively admitted to a coronary care unit... These twenty five controls were seasoned cardiac patients with an average duration of known heart disease exceeding five years, including prior hospitalisation for a heart attack... heart catheterisation... open heart surgery... elective cardioversion... cardiac arrest without an NDE... and cardiac pacemaker implantation... (Sabom:1982:119).

Sabom goes on to examine six cases where he felt that cardiac procedures were correctly verified, and discusses the possibility that the information of hospital procedures had been deciphered either from prior knowledge or from information provided by hospital staff after the procedure:

> It is usually appropriate to explain to resuscitated patients that their 'hearts stopped beating' and that an 'electric shock' was used on the chest to stabilise cardiac rhythm, but there is no conceivable reason to supply the details reported in the typical NDE- the insertion of a plastic airway, the checking for a cartoid pulse or papillary response of the eye, the drawing of arterial blood from the hand or groin, the movement of the needles on the face of the defibrillator... (One patient) described 'a shot in the groin...' ... The procedure he is describing is not a shot but the drawing of blood from the femoral artery... (Sabom, 1982:159-160)

Despite this, Blackmore questions Sabom's research by arguing that "the control group differed in a much more important respect, one that Sabom does not mention" (Blackmore, 1993:120). Blackmore's point of dispute is that the patients who gave an *accurate* description of their procedure had actually experienced a specific procedure on which to report, whereas the control group were asked to imagine a more general, non-specific account. The former would have "...had any residual sensory activity... they might have heard things and felt things that were going on and this would allow them, in their vivid imaginations, to piece things together more accurately..."

(Blackmore, 1993:120). Accordingly, "Sabom's control group was not really a control group at all because they did not have access to anything like as much information as the real patients" (Blackmore, 1993:120).

Another heavily publicised avenue for NDE researchers has been the search for NDEs in blind people. In *Heading Towards Omega* (1984), Kenneth Ring reported the case of an extremely near-sighted person who came out of her body and could read the data on the machine situated behind her; she exclaimed, "Jesus, I can see! I can't believe it, I can see!" (Ring, 1984:42, cited in Blackmore, 1993:129). Blackmore notes that Kübler-Ross reported accounts of "several totally blind people who were able to share with us in their NDE and they were not only able to tell us who came into the room first, who worked on the resuscitation, but they were able to give minute details of the attire and clothing of all the people present" (Kübler-Ross, 1987, cited in Blackmore, 1993:129). As was characteristic of the Hospice founder, no actual logs or details were ever cited to back this up (1993:129). Further, Blackmore investigated a case of a girl named "Sarah", which was reported by a physician named Larry Dossey, who had an out-of-body experience that displayed paranormal verification of her surroundings despite being born blind. Dossey, however, admitted to Blackmore that this was a composite (effectively fictional) account (Blackmore, 1993:131). Finally, Blackmore cites Kenneth Ring's discussions with the cardiologist Fred Schoonmaker, who had a case on file of a congenitally blind woman who had correctly identified the number of people in the room during surgery (fourteen) and who could identify shapes, but not colours (cited in Blackmore, 1993:132). Nevertheless, despite Ring urging Schoonmaker to publish, he did not, leaving Ring to lament another interesting but futile anecdote (cited in Blackmore, 1993:133).

Nevertheless, Kenneth Ring carried on his search, publishing his work in this area under the title *Mindsight: near-death and out of body experiences in the blind* (1999), with Sharon Cooper, where he gathered thirty cases of NDEs in blind or partially sighted people that included a visual component. His book contains the case of Vicki Umipeg, a forty-five year old woman who became conscious whilst floating above a male doctor and female nurse, after she had been brought in from a car crash. Vicki saw her own body lying on the table beneath her, recognised her wedding ring and her father's wedding ring on her hand (her ring had unusual orange blossoms on it [Ring, 2001:60]). After this, she ascended through the roof and enjoyed a panoramic view of her surroundings, heard beautiful music, and was sucked in a dark tunnel towards the light (Ring, 2001:61). She 'rolled out' and found herself in an areas with trees and flowers, and was greeted by two school friends who had been retarded and blind, but were now "in their prime" (Ring, 2001:61), before

seeing her caretakers from school, and then her grandmother. Finally, after swelling with the feeling that she knew everything, she met Jesus who told her it was not her time, but before sending her back to Earth made her watch a life review of her entire life (Ring, 2000:62). Despite all this visual detail, Vicki had been born completely blind, an overload of oxygen in her incubator damaging her optic nerve beyond repair (Ring, 2001:60), and attested to not understanding the "concept of vision" (Ring, 2001:60).

Ring also discusses the case of Brad Barrows who, as a boy in 1968 in the Boston Centre for Blind Children, stopped breathing due to pneumonia. When he stopped breathing, he ascended from his body, witnessed his blind flatmate leaving his room to get help, and then continued on his way through the roof, before describing the streets that had recently been cleared of snow (2001:63). After this, Brad was sucked up through a dark tunnel and found himself walking through an "immense field", and was "puzzled by the sensation of sight" (2001:64). He heard beautiful music that praised God, and approached a glittering stone structure where he met a man he did not recognise, but emanated love (2001:64). The man, "...without a word, gently nudged Brad backward, initiating a reversal of the experience" (2001:64). Brad, like Vicki, had been born blind (Ring, 2001:64).

Further cases that came to light included a man whom had been in a car crash age nineteen and lost his sight. His NDE later in life saw him recover his vision, and he had a "comforting vision of his deceased grandmother across a valley" (Ring, 2001:66). Ring and Cooper also interviewed a patient who had been born blind, and their NDE saw them witness a library with 'thousands and millions and billions of books, as far as you could see..." (Ring, 2001:65). Nevertheless, despite these cases, Ring recognises the possibility that they "...represent some kind of fantasy or complex hallucination on the part of the blind..." or "simply an expression of wish fulfilment" (Ring, 2001:65).

So, Ring set out, wherever possible, to verify the cases that he came across, including a case where a surgeon accidentally cut the superior *vena cava* of a patient, and then made the error worse by stitching it up, a mistake that caused a catalogue of complications, including blindness. Post-op, the error was discovered in the recovery room, and whilst the patient was taken back in for an angiogram, her gurney was jarred against an elevator door, triggering an OBE (Ring, 2001:66). During her experience, she saw both the father of her son and her current lover looking shocked, a fact verified by the latter (whom she had had been out of touch with for several years). Additionally, "...the respirator on her face during this accident would have partially occluded her visual field and certainly would have prevented the kind of

lateral vision necessary for her to view these men down the hall... according to indications in her medical record... she appears to already have been completely blind when this event occurred" (Ring, 2001:67).

Whilst impressive, these cases would *still* not stand up to the scrutiny that sceptics such as Blackmore would require in order to minimise sensory leakage. Additionally, as Ring correctly identifies, these cases of out-of-body vision are not quite as clear-cut as would initially appear. Because many of the cases uncovered were with people who are born blind, the individuals in question were hesitant to say that they had actually had a visual experience, because they had never *actually had one before*, and therefore could not check these experiences with prior knowledge. In the case of Brad, he stated, "whether it was seen visually, through my eyes, I could not say... I mean, you have to remember, being born blind, I had no idea those images were visual..." (Ring, 2001:68). Furthermore, "... the blind often use vision verbs far more casually and loosely than sighted people..." (Ring, 2001:69). Vicki has stated to Ring and Cooper that she enjoys 'watching' television, and has employed such expressions such as 'look at this' (Ring, 2001:69). Ring state,

> ...it is beginning to appear (that) it is more a matter of their knowing, through a still poorly understood mode of generalised awareness, based on a variety of sensory impressions, especially tactile ones, what is happening around them... However these experiences may have been coded originally, by the time we encounter them they have long come to be expressed in a particular linguistic form. And that form is the language of vision, since our ordinary language is rooted in the experiences of sighted persons and is therefore biased in favour of visual imagery... Clearly this is not simple 'vision' at all, as we commonly understand it, but almost a kind of omniscience that completely transcends what mere seeing could ever afford... (Ring, 2001:69-70)

Despite this, Ring still considers the out-of-body experience as the most cogent, parsimonious explanation, even if he recognises the difficulties in this particular position (Ring, 2001:70).

Again, we have several anecdotally delivered, partially confirmed cases that *seem* to indicate that something is going on beyond recourse to a naturalistic cause-and-effect examination, although these cases fail to meet the kind of publicly verifiable evidence that is sought by many within the field. Perhaps the most interesting NDE ever recounted, one reported by Michael Sabom in 1998, provides the best evidence for the so-called afterlife 'hypothesis'.[34] This 'white-crow' was

[34] This case has been discussed by Mark Fox (2003:209-210). Fox maintains that the 'Minsight' cases are "even more impressive" than the Pam Reynolds case, although I think the sensory control over the Pam

recorded under strictly controlled conditions because the patient, Pam Reynolds, was diagnosed as having an aneurysm that was inoperable by standard techniques. I introduce this by quoting Bruce Greyson's succinct summary, as the case provides the lynchpin in his argument for life after death in a recent summary of the field:

> Because the size and location of the aneurysm precluded its safe removal by standard neurosurgical techniques, she was referred for hypothermic cardiac arrest... during this procedure she met all the accepted criteria for brain death: Her electroencephalogram (EEG) was totally flat, indicating no cerebral activity; auditory -evoked potentials ceased, indicating cessation of brainstem function; and blood was completely drained from the brain, effecting absence of any brain function...The patients eyes were taped shut and moulded speakers were inserted into her ears to emit 100-decibel clicks and block out any other auditory stimulation... The patient reported subsequently that she was awakened out of anaesthesia by the sound of the pneumatic saw, felt herself pulled out of the top of her head, and viewed the operating room from above the neurosurgeon's shoulder. She accurately described the 20 doctors, nurses, and technicians in the room, most of whom she had never met, and several peculiar details of the unique pneumatic saw used to cut open her skull, the cardiac surgeon's surprise at finding the initial femoral artery too small to use, and the music playing in the operating room when she returned to her body but was still conscious...The meticulous monitoring of this patient allows common physiological explanatory hypothesis to be addressed. The case cannot be explained by temporal lobe seizure activity, because brains waves were continually monitored[35]... It cannot be explained by reconstruction based on overhead conversations during the experience, because the moulded speakers in her ears blocked out any possible hearing... It cannot be explained by reconstruction based on observations before and after she was anesthetized, because she accurately described people, equipment, and events that were not observable either before or after the procedure... (Greyson, 2000:39-41)

Whilst the surgeon was cutting off a part of Pam's skull for surgery, a female cardiac surgeon went to perform a cardiopulmonary bypass through the femoral artery and vein in the patients' groin, before having to switch legs as they were too small in her right leg; Reynolds witnessed this switch from outside her body and recounted them discussing it (1998:42). At some point after this, Reynolds reports being pulled into a vortex, like "...the Wizard of Oz..." (Reynolds, quoted in Sabom, 1998:44), before encountering a light that multiplied into figures *made* of light. These figures included her Grandmother, her Uncle Gene and other family members, who would not let her

---

Reynolds case puts it closer to a "White Crow" status, a fact borne out by Greyson (2001) neglecting to mention the Mindsight cases in favour of a detailed analysis of the Pam Reynolds case in his overview of the field.

[35] Sabom states "... Clinically, such seizures are detected by abnormal brain wave patterns on the EEG. Her brain EEG was continually monitored... Futhermore, her surgeon, Dr Robert Speltzer told me that he 'has never known anyone to have a temporal lobe seizure during this procedure.' He felt it would be 'extremely unlikely' that such a seizure would occur since Pam's brain had been silenced with massive amounts of 'barbituate protection'..." (Sabom, 1998:184).

progress any further (Sabom, 1998:45). After feeding her a sparkling substance, her Uncle took her back down the tunnel, where she witnessed her body lying beneath her, which "...looked terrible, like a train wreck. It looked like what it was: dead" (Reynolds, quoted in Sabom, 1998:44). Once the cardiopulmonary bypass machine was switched back on, and warmed blood flowed back into her body, her heart required two jolts via the defibrillators taped to her chest in order to restore regular cardiac rhythm, and Sabom puts this procedure around about the same time as Pam Reynolds "dove" back into her body, "like diving into a pool of ice water", which "...hurt!" (Reynolds, quoted in Sabom, 1998:46).

Sabom subsequently checked the timing of Reynolds' OBE (which, according to her, had started when she heard the buzzing of the saw) with the switching of the cardiopulmonary bypass, which corresponded with medical records (Sabom 1998:184). Further, her description of the Surgeon's saw as being like an "electric toothbrush" with "interchangeable blades" in a "socket wrench case" initially left Sabom extremely sceptical (presumably because they did not tally with his own knowledge of surgical equipment), but, a year later, when he checked Reynolds' account, he was astonished to find that she had given an accurate description of the Midas Rex Bone Saw (1998:186-187). Despite this, she perceived a groove in the saw that was in a different place on the model that Sabom examined, leaving a single note of caution in an otherwise astonishing case.[36] Sabom states, "For others, the inexactness which arises in the evaluation of these cases will be reason enough to dismiss them as dreams, hallucinations, or fantasies" (Sabom, 1998:189).

Bruce Greyson concludes his review of the NDE field by arguing that "Although these data are not compelling proof of survival, they provide convergent evidence that, when combined with data from other sources, may be considered suggestive of it" (Greyson, 2001:342). Blackmore herself looks at most of the same evidence (and none of the cases here negate her hypothetical explanation of the NDE) and concludes,

---

[36] Not everyone has been convinced by the Pam Reynolds' case. For a scrupulous analysis of the problems of this case, see G. M. Worelee, (http://www.mortalminds.org/reynolds.html, accessed 03/08/06), and Keith Augustine (http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/keith_augustine, accessed 03/08/06), who provides diagrams to explain how Reynolds' OBE happened after anaesthetic, but before the standstill operation. I note here, however, that these sceptical objections also rest on a series of 'what ifs' (it is possible, for instance, that Pam Reynolds picked up information about her procedure afterwards in discussion with her surgeon). The hypothetical "naturalist" explanations are considered superior, roughly using the logic of Hume's argument against miracles: we have x amount of inductive experience that confirms our theory that people hallucinate and do not come out of their bodies, and even though case y might initially present problems, the experience x far outweighs case y in our knowledge of how the world work, therefore x is a preferable explanation. I discuss this not to throw a spanner in the works of the sceptical case. Rather, I wish to merely consider what criteria would be required to establish a shift to accepting 'evidence' for the afterlife, if this is possible at all. I return to this in the body of the text.

> Many people have a strong desire to believe in life after death... The desire in itself can fuel the exaggeration of claims, the distortion of memory, the wild newspaper headlines and the tendency to make a big story out of a very weak case... it would not be surprising if there were many claims of paranormal perception in NDEs even if it never happened... Certainly I have found no evidence, yet, that convinces me that it does... (Blackmore, 1993:134-135)

And so, we reach the same impasse that I discussed in regards to parapsychology in chapter 2. Both sides of the debate look at the same cases and extrapolate different conclusions from it, a type of stalemate that seems intractable here. In the next section I wish to explore the construction of science used in this debate, not as a means to provide any kind of resolution to this stalemate, but rather to help shine a light on what both sides assume about science and religion.

5.5 The Contours of the Debate

I have established that the debate between believer and sceptic is locked into a pattern of engagement that seems to replicate the believer/sceptic debate in psychical research. Serdahely argues that, by pointing out the flaws in the dying-brain hypothesis, the afterlife hypothesis is therefore the most viable. He states,

> Variance within the patterns identified by Blackmore, while seemingly incompatible with the dying brain hypothesis, is just what one would expect with the afterlife hypothesis. I have proposed what I call the "individually tailored hypothesis"... (that) suggests that innumerable variations within the NDE are due to experiencers getting what they need from the experience in a way they can accept it, in order to facilitate their own psychospiritual growth. (Serdahely, 1996:50)

At this juncture, I wish to query, briefly, if we are really dealing with 'hypotheses' here. If, against Serdahely, I was to put forward a rival hypothesis where I proposed that Hellish NDEs were punishment for bad karma generated in a previous life and had nothing whatsoever to do with psychospiritual growth, would that count? And how could we test my hypothesis against Serdahely's? There is something erroneous about the way the term 'hypothesis' is being put to use in this debate; NDE researchers are quick to utilise the language of "hypotheses", but this is (even by generous estimate) a mistake, because we are dealing with realms here above cause and effect analysis.

For instance, if we take the Pam Reynolds case, there are (effectively) insurmountable problems in using this as a White-Crow. Sabom (1998:187) reports that Pam Reynolds got certain details of the pneumatic saw completely wrong in her description. One could argue that a mistaken little detail is nothing compared to a wealth of information that she apparently identified correctly (after all, eye-witness accounts of, say, the scene of an accident often vary); nevertheless, this indicates that we are dealing with a certain amount of *reconstruction* with this event. Second, Sabom is unclear as to whether Pam Reynolds was debriefed by her surgical team, or how much interaction went on in regards to the procedures of the operation afterwards. Her Surgeon went on record as saying that *something* intriguing had occurred (Sabom, 1998), which suggests that he did not believe she could have gleaned all the information from the surrounding environment; nevertheless, it is possible that she had gleaned information even unconsciously, in the long recovery process after such a gruelling operation. Further, if we assume for a second that something paranormal occurred, does this necessarily mean that we have evidence for an afterlife, *per se*?

Non-survival parapsychologists would argue that all such cases are indicative of is evidence for super-psi phenomena: during the process of dying, the brain ignites in one last final burst of psychic powers. Although this may seem like an odd move (is it not just trading one unverifiable reality for another?), it perhaps has the advantage of being more parsimonious, as non-survivalist parapsychologists are trying to infer the best explanation for this anomalous phenomena, and are therefore not multiplying explanations beyond necessity. To postulate a psychic realm that may still be tied to the observable universe, and one that may yet be explained by the discovery of a process that allows predictability and testability, is, on a certain line of reasoning, a preferable explanation to one that deals with a realm that we cannot empirically observe at all. The philosopher Stephen Braude, arguing for a non-survival parapsychological explanation of OBEs, states,

> OBEs have extremely vivid and distinctive types of bodily sensations... And those experiences seem at least as clear as many other bodily sensations. Still, that's no reason for concluding that that the sensations are veridical and that the person is genuinely located apart from the body... Many recreational users of mescaline or LSD experience the walls breathing... But neither the vividness nor the pervasiveness of the experience justifies concluding that the walls actually breathe... because the OBE is also compatible with explanations of the ESP, and because we have independent evidence for phenomenologically diverse and robust forms of ESP... (a) more cautious and

parsimonious would be that veridical OBEs are simply a particularly vivid (or imagery rich) subset of ESP experiences...[37]

According to Braude, we have no need to postulate another level of explanation above telepathy, clairvoyance, and psycho kinesis (pk). The kind of paranormal activity that would be required for the OBE elements of the NDE to occur would be substantially more than the kind of low-level evidence discussed in chapter 2, a point that Braude acknowledges when he states "I realise that this level of explanation might strike some as positing an unprecedented and implausibly high level of telepathic influence".[38] Like the researchers discussed in chapter 2, he appeals to anecdotal evidence of 'real-world' paranormal experiences, explaining "...it's risky... to extrapolate from experimentally- elicited behaviour to real life behaviour...(it) is analogous to inferring the full range of athletic abilities from the performance of people in straightjackets".[39] The NDE could, on this analysis, be comparable with "... a person's last breath (that) may linger briefly after bodily death. But it will dissipate quickly..."[40]

The diligent NDE researcher might respond by asking how parapsychologists would explain Pam Reynolds' visit to heaven, given that she was effectively brain dead. Given that differing NDEs around the world display different emphasis and differing religious experiences, scientific debate can offer little comment on this. Braude recounts an NDE that fitted the standard western NDE template, until the voice speaking to the NDEr turned out to be a living game show host.[41] Further, it is interesting that researchers like Kenneth Ring (1996) can argue that potentially frightening parts of the NDE are physiologically based, whereas the higher levels of the experience are not. If we accept that one part of the experience can have its basis in physiology, and if we accept that culture does seem to have an impact on the NDE, then would it not make more logical sense to postulate super-psi as the mechanism that is responsible for many of the extra-sensory parts of the NDE, with the dying brain and/or physiology providing the erroneous trip to Heaven? Or does this explanation not count as on equal footing with the orthodox NDE interpretation of events? And if we consider this a case of an Afterlife "Hypothesis" versus a Super-Psi "Hypothesis", then what experimental criteria could we set up to test between the two?

---

[37] Braude, S., *Out-of-Body Experiences and Survival After Death.* Originally published in the *International Journal of Parapsychology* Vol 12, no 1, and reprinted online at the url, www.survivalafterdeath.org/ articles/braude/ obe.htm. Accessed 24/04/2006.
[38] Ibid
[39] Ibid
[40] Ibid
[41] Ibid

The preceding analysis depends on an acceptance of ESP investigations giving evidence for NDE, something that Braude does but Blackmore emphatically does not. There is, however, another facet of Blackmore's argument that, whilst not spelt out, is ably summed up in her aforementioned statement that "The problem with evolution is, and always has been, that it leaves little room either for a grand purpose in life or for an individual soul..." Blackmore's implied argument, that we should accept a plausible biological and/or naturalist explanation over a supernatural one, is one that rests on a philosophical maxim called *The Inference to the Best Explanation* (IBE). Thus, to accept the NDE would mean a radical revision of the foundations of science; a better explanation would be to ignore the few hard-to-explain cases in favour of the scientific materialist understanding of reality. This is why she is dismissive of certain cases (like the shoe on the window ledge), preferring to reserve judgement until she can see all the facts herself. From the preceding discussion it seems as if she argues that, because the stakes are so high (effectively the entire scientific worldview) the evidence required to suggest an overhaul of her entire scientific-materialist position would have to be substantial.

At the same time Blackmore has argued, interestingly, that *she accepts the burden of proof.* She quotes Kenneth Ring, who states, "... (a)ny adequate neurological explanation would have to be capable of showing how the entire complex of phenomena associated with the core experience... would be expected to occur in subjectively authentic fashion as a consequence of specific neurological events triggered by the approach of death... I am tempted to argue that the burden of proof has now shifted to those who wish to explain near-death experiences away..."(Ring, 1980: 216, cited in Blackmore, 1993:260). Blackmore responds by stating "I am very happy to take on this burden" (1993:261). Nevertheless, despite some substantial critiques of her model, she has not gone on record as recognising that she was wrong, and that the afterlife "hypothesis" is therefore, by default, correct. In fact, in her article *First Person- Into the Unknown for New Scientist* in 2000, she states that she is giving up research into parapsychology and other anomalous phenomena because all her 30 years of prior research has turned up is fraud, hoax, or self-deception (Blackmore, 2000:55). She has even gone as far as acknowledging the apparently excellent results achieved in Auto-Ganzfield studies at the Koestler lab in the University of Edinburgh, but because of her own negative results in the field, she states that "the only honest reaction to the claims of psi in the ganzfield is for me to say 'I don't know, but I doubt it' " (2001:23).

This willingness to accept the burden of proof is not congruous with the rest of Blackmore's work; it does, however, serve the political end of making her book *Dying to Live* look more open-minded. She states,

> Some people believe that unless there is very strong evidence to the contrary, we should accept the dying brain hypothesis. I take a different view. Science has, after all, made some colossal blunders in the past... Our current materialism and its rejection of the idea of a spirit or soul might just be another great falsity... Instead I want to compare the two kinds of theory... A good theory is not one that explains everything. Anyone can think up theories of this kind- like the angels that push the stars around the heavens or the vital spirit which 'explains' the difference between life and non-life. Nothing can be done with such theories... Something better means a theory which explains why the world is this way rather than another. It excludes many possibilities and allows only a few... (Blackmore,1993:47,48)

Blackmore does not specify which "people" believe that unless one finds strong evidence for the afterlife hypothesis then one should accept the dying brain hypothesis. Nevertheless, the very reason that these unnamed critics do so, *is for precisely the reason that Blackmore goes on to discuss*: that a biological materialist explanation is a better explanation for the origins of our species and its place in the universe that allows for predictable, testable hypothesis. It is odd that Blackmore draws this flimsy line of segregation; she does not want to be seen as dismissing *a priori* the possibility that other realms exist (possibly leaving herself open to the accusation of being unfalsifiable), but realistically, she cannot entertain this in the scientific discourse within which she works, a point reflected in her comment quoted previously, where she states "...(i)f the evidence changes in the future and truly paranormal events are documented then certainly the theory I have proposed will have to be overthrown- *along with a lot more of psychology, physics, and biology...*" (Blackmore, 1993:262, italics mine).

The fact that Susan Blackmore considers "angels pushing the stars around the heavens" a theory, albeit a bad one (1993:48), should set off warning signals for those proponents of the so-called afterlife 'hypothesis'.[42] This is not to say that a statement

[42] Although not specified as such, the general tone of her remark suggest that religious people who believe in angels or spirits are propagating theories about the way the world operates. To give an example of why this is fallacious, in Plato's time, the Greeks were not interested in postulating hypothesis to why the stars in the heaven moved; as far as they were concerned, angels could have been behind them. Rather, as Plato states in *The Republic*: "The stars that decorate the sky, though we might rightly regard them as the finest and most perfectly visible things... are far inferior to the true realities; that is, to the true velocities, in pure numbers and perfect figures, of the orbits and what they carry in them..." (1993:277). What we could observe about the heavenly bodies was less important than what we could establish about the mathematical laws that governed them, and, accordingly, the Greek word for truth meant unhiddenness, not correspondence. Heidegger (1988:8) notes "...the meaning of the Greek word for truth, unhiddenness, has nothing to do with... correctness and correspondence. To be hidden and unhidden means something quite different to

like this cannot be entered into a scientific discourse, but to do so suggests that religious discourses, practises and rituals were really only "theories" to be tested as a means to understand the universe - it implicitly allows a scientific-materialist to talk about historical, cultural and social discourses that it really has no experience in, and will likely run ram-shod through. Moreover, by entering the NDEs into the scientific arena one will do little more than lean them towards a physiological and causal explanation, whether such an explanation is justified or not. This is because, even more so than parapsychology, there are methodological limitations in data collection that include NDEr reconstruction of events months after they occurred, and difficulties in verifying paranormal events. Nevertheless, as Carrette points out, "The appeal to 'Science' is a powerfully seductive move in Western society, because it holds the currency of authority and truth" (Carrette, 2002:lix).

As I have shown, NDE researchers *could* utilise the insights gleaned from the philosophy of science to challenge the sceptical metaphysical foundations of science. They do not. NDE researchers *should* recognise the possibility that perhaps they have reached the very limits of what empirical research can tell us about reality, and be clear that we have moved into metaphysics. This can be tempered with the recognition that all science depends on certain metaphysical assumptions. In the words of John Dupré,

> Such assumptions, concerning such matters as the unity or diversity of the world's ultimate concerns, or of the nature and prevalence of causality, are the kind of questions I take to be the domain of metaphysics...(the) founding metaphysical assumptions of modern Western Science, most notably those that contribute to the picture of a profoundly orderly universe, have been shown, in large part by the results of that very science, to be untenable (1993:2)

This is because what we set out to establish (the causal relationships that structure the universe) already assumes that our understanding of causality exists to be established in the first place (effectively Hume's *Problem of Induction*); we cannot know for certain that it holds true everywhere, at every time just because we have experienced it this way in the past. It would be an extraordinary coincidence that human intelligence had developed to such a point that the full extent of reality lay bare before us, and was now open to the full extent of our critical scrutiny.

---

correspondence, measuring up, directed towards... Truth as unhiddenness and truth as correctness are quite different things: they arise from quite different fundamental experiences and cannot at all be equated." Further, according to Foucault (1984:348) "It's quite clear from Socrates to Seneca or Pliny... that (the Greeks) didn't worry about the afterlife, what happened after death, or whether God exists or not. (Their) problem was: which Techne do I have to use in order to live as well as I ought to live?" Blackmore's extremely limited criteria the subtleties of other cultural discourses are dissolved in an understanding of religion as the by-product of neurological mechanisms making theories about the world.

Such an approach would recognise that there seems to be no universal method that characterises "science" as opposed to "non-science". Rather, scientists themselves are quite prone to conjecture, intuition, bias, even downright stubbornness. Dupré proposes that we should 'develop a catalogue of epistemic values' (1993:11) that include '...empirical accountability, consistency with common sense, and other well-grounded scientific belief" (1993:12), a move which allows researchers to recognise the fundamental disunity of the scientific enterprise, without descending into epistemic relativism. That this has not occurred, however, means that the debate about which side holds *either* the best explanation *or* the most full proof white crow will continue unabated, even though by these rules of this engagement the NDE researcher cannot win. As a result of this, the narrow entrenched understandings of science and religion are continually reinforced as universal.

5.6 Conclusion: Psychology and Religious Experiences

The preceding discussion has worked through an exhaustive array of different physiological, psychological and pharmacological explanations of the NDE and the possible objections to them. What is evident is the uncomfortable relationship between how the mental realm, a realm that engages with the amorphous and stubbornly unscientific thing called 'culture', can be understood in relation to physiology: this discomfort is evident on all sides. For the NDE proponent, the "real" NDE has to be filtered through a cultural lens, and physiology can affect the experience (hence the arguments over how medicine might cause hellish NDEs). This, however, leaves open the possibility for a physiological explanation. For the sceptic such as Blackmore, her precise biological model needs a precise NDE in order to maintain its explanatory power, and her opponents have been quick to point out experiences that confound such a model. Additionally, cross-cultural NDEs do not display such things as the tunnel of light, for which she has provided a precise biological schematic. Against the perception of the NDE as an experience somehow separate from other religious, drug-induced, or dreamlike states, it is evident that the break between the NDE and these other experiences are not clean; there is a certain amount of dissection involved. On the other hand, the NDE does not provide a precise enough experience to locate strictly in the physiology of the dying brain, and thus denies closure for those who seek a reductionist explanation.

I have therefore elaborated the wider discursive matrix in which these experiences are located. Following the work of Danziger, these experiences are "... not

raw facts of nature but elaborately constructed artefacts. However these artefacts are constructed according to explicit rational schemes accepted within a certain community of investigators..."(1990:3). The ordering of these experiences, and the categorisation that has located them within the aforementioned discursive field, is laden with the underlying structures of scientific rationality. Danziger states,

> The received view is based on a model of science that is reminiscent of sleeping beauty: The objects with which psychological science deals are all present in nature fully formed, and all that the prince-investigator has to do is to find them and awaken them with the magic kiss of his research (1990:2)

This is analogous with the NDE researcher trying to quantify, tabulate, and categorise the NDE; this experience is so far beyond the possibility of a direct analysis that the demarcation between observation and metaphysical speculation evaporates.

Throughout this chapter we have witnessed the medical overtones of NDE research, and the recounting of hospital procedures, as I highlighted in chapter 3. Additionally, NDEs have been categorised alongside isolation, drugs, and altered states of consciousness, with mysticism being described as an extreme psychological state. Finally, the debate has centred on just whether or not the patient was actually 'dead', or was merely 'swooning' and absorbing information whilst seemingly dead. In the next chapter, I interrogate the understandings of the categories of 'death' and 'mysticism', and argue that, as these categories are themselves culturally specific and have changed themselves over time, so too does the emphasis upon, and understanding of, the afterlife change in tandem.

Chapter 6: Death and Mystical Experience: The NDE as the exotic "Other"

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I argue that, within the discourse surrounding NDEs, death and mystical experience become coupled as the exotic other; they are the 'pre-eminently private, the non-rational, and the quietistic' (King, 1999:25). As I have indicated in previous chapters, the concepts of death and mysticism have themselves been realigned and redefined through the rise of modernity.[1] Both have been identified as romanticised reactions to the wider discourses that they define themselves against: mystical experience, understood through the work of William James, is studied as an intense psychological experience closed off to wider, everyday 'Public' access; death, in the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, is not something to be silenced as defeat for modern medicine, but embraced as a transition to another realm, and therefore understood as "the final stages of growth". Both of these understandings represent facets of human experience closed off to the wider, rational, secularised sphere of the West, and both are coupled in accounts surrounding NDEs. In chapter 3 I argued that within the sacred private space of the operating theatre the "exoticness" of human mortality becomes manifest; in this chapter I shall tie this to my argument that, within the public, secular realm of the West, the exoticness of extreme mystical experience holds an allure. In NDE literature, discussions of death and mysticism assume that these categories refer to fixed, stable realities (the finality of death, the ineffability of mystical experience). Against this, I shall show that these categories do not refer to stable realities, but have themselves signified different things in different times and places. By examining the entwining of these two, I cut against the grain of NDE research by arguing that the NDE is neither analogous to other mystical experiences in other times or places, nor is it similar to visionary or journey narratives discerned in other traditions and time-periods. Rather, it occupies its own unique discursive place in (post) modern Western discourses about religious experience.

I have previously explored the discourses that define the discursive place of the NDE; in this chapter I shall locate the NDE against what it is not. I shall therefore utilise the work of NDE researchers as a way in which to explore *other* constructions of death and mysticism in order to highlight the uniqueness of the NDE within its own cultural location (and it should be noted that I do not intend to provide a thorough examination of the relationship between death and mysticism, but rather

[1] See Chapter 1 and 3.

maintain focus on how the discourse of NDEs interconnects with these categories). The chapter is subdivided into two areas: the use and appropriation of mystical and journey literature in the middle ages, and the use and appropriation of Tibetan texts and religious accounts. The link between the two is made explicit by Kenneth Ring: "we have, in our own Western tradition NDEs that are almost *point for point* the exact equivalent of the *das-log* experience in Tibet. I'm referring to the medieval period" (Ring, cited in Bailey, 2001:149). The panoramic descriptions of hellish realms and heavenly vistas of the "Otherworld journey" literature of the early-to-middle medieval period becomes entwined with the experience of Tibetan *Delogs*, a genre of Tibetan literature about reincarnated laypeople who periodically visit the lands after-death on Buddhist holy days. Both types of literature become "conceptual resources" (Larson, 1987:152), appropriated for the purposes of proving a universal afterlife to which we travel once we die. This chapter therefore explores the homophonous entwining of death and mysticism through the allure of otherworld and mystical experiences in the Middle Ages and those in Tibet, both of which provide conceptual resources for NDE scholars.

In section 6.2 I begin my critique by examining how medicine and psychology have shaped our understanding of death, and compare this with how death has been conceived of in early Christianity and the Middle Ages. My argument rests on the thesis that our modern medical understanding of death has shaped how we comprehend what happens after we die. In section 6.3 I examine how theologians have looked for a common-core to the NDE, in the form of a religious narrative or emphasis upon an "otherworld journey" motif that gives evidence of a universal (Christian) afterlife. I carry this forward in section 6.4 by looking at the relationship between the modern discourse of mysticism and the NDE. I focus on how 'ineffable' this experience is, and tie this into the construction of mystical experience influenced primarily by the work of William James. In section 6.5 I draw these strands together by looking at how *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (henceforth the TBOTD) is used and understood within NDE literature.

6.2 Psychology, Death, Religion

In the preceding analysis of the NDE, a recurrent theme has been the difficulty of distinguishing between the subject and object; different religious, scientific, philosophical and theological disciplines bring different agendas to the fore and understand the NDE according to their own particular predilections. The problem is not just that the NDE is interpreted differently by different discourses; rather, any

discussion of the sign NDE struggles to maintain closure as an entity in-and-of-itself without dissolving into other cognates. This is not to say that the experience does not *exist*, but with the absence of a wider discourse or tradition within which to anchor the experience, it becomes a space of contestation, even amongst those who have had an NDE.[2] A similar point is made by Natalie Seremetakis in relation to the anthropology of death rituals, where she argues that what is needed is to "...treat death rites as an arena of social contestation, a space where heterogeneous and antagonistic cultural codes and social interests meet and tangle... [and to] analyse death rituals as integrities with their own temporal rhythms, transformations, and levels of engagement with and disengagement from the social order" (cited in Robben ed. 2004:13). My argument is built on the premise that the NDE is secured by (and defines itself against) a particular understanding of death. In this section I show how the sign 'death' has been transformed by the wider concepts of medicine and latterly psychology, before providing some brief historical examples to show how death and the afterlife have been understood differently.

The 'temporal rhythms' of death, as it fluctuates across cultures and time, have been almost completely ignored in the wider sphere of NDE literature. There are exceptions,[3] but, on the whole, the physical act of death, a universal human constant, has been conflated with the cultural understanding of death, which differs immensely. Much has been made of the philosophical argument that, by the very fact that NDErs are alive to recount their tale, they were never *really* dead in the first place. Moody, for instance, states,

> By the classical definition, death is the state from which you don't return. It is defined as irreversible. Hence, since all the NDErs returned, they were never really dead... One man I know was severely injured in an automobile accident and... was declared dead on arrival... Several hours later, attendants started to wheel the body off to another area of the hospital when the man twitched! Despite the absence of vital signs such as a heartbeat and functioning pupils, this man was alive and is so today... technically speaking, NDErs are never really dead... (Moody, 1986:77-78).

Sabom (1982:253) concurs, by recognising that "I cannot, of course, say for sure that the NDE is indicative of what is to come at the moment of final bodily death". It is impossible to define a *moment* of death (do we mean cessation of mental functions, cessation of brain function, cessation of heartbeat, cellular death, *et al*?), and to say, therefore, that NDErs have a window on to a realm after death is to miss the philosophical point. According to Paul Kurtz, "we have no hard evidence that the

[2] See chapter 4.
[3] Carol Zaleski stands out particularly in this regard, and I discuss this later in the chapter.

subjects actually died. Such proof is impossible to obtain; rigor mortis is one sign, brain death is another" (cited in Badham and Badham, 1982:72). Paul and Linda Badham quote the editorial of the June 1978 edition of *The Lancet*, who argues, "only a deliberate use of obsolete definitions of death can enable one to claim that anybody has, under clinical conditions, returned... by working definition...death is just beyond the point from which anybody can return to tell us anything" (cited in Badham and Badham, 1982:72). Because NDErs were not 'truly' dead, their experiences give us no understanding of what really happens to us after we die. Whilst NDE researchers have disputed this argument (especially in the light of the Pam Reynolds case discussed in the last chapter), it has been widely recognised that NDErs have not crossed the final threshold, which, by *definition*, is a point of *no return*. This recognition has led cautious scholars, such as Carol Zaleski (1987,1996), to propose more modest conceptions of the NDE as a window on to a murky intermediate realm ruled by religious symbolism; a point of contention for theologians, such as Mark Fox (2003), who seek evidence for their respective theological agendas.[4]

Nevertheless, to argue that NDErs do not pass the point of death is to assume that death has a point to pass (even if there is trouble demarcating precisely what this is). The assumption seems to be that in order to ascertain what lies beyond death one actually must be dead, even though researchers are unsure as to what death actually is. Behind this confusion, there is I think, the *a priori* assumption that the sign death signifies non-existence, although the opening up of this discursive space seems to be a relatively recent development in the history of ideas. Extracting some cogency from this philosophical thicket misses the peculiarity of our own understanding of death; the sign 'death' is linked within its own set of discursive factors. Within NDE literature, something akin to this observation has been made by the psychologist Robert Kastenbaum, who argues that if we define death along the lines of the "total and irreversible cessation of functioning", then the NDE is not evidence of life after death, but if we rather conceive of death as "...a variety of meaning states" then "it might be possible to show that the NDE occurred during these states" (Kastenbaum, in Bailey and Yates ed. 1996:259).[5] From this however, Kastenbaum does not push

[4] I discuss this later in the chapter.

[5] Similarly, Raymond Moody (1999:192) makes the following philosophically astute observation: "There is an unreliable tendency to take what people who survive an ordeal (like the NDE) seriously, although in some respects they aren't in any better position to talk about it since they weren't, in fact, dead... (I)f you reach it, and are aware you have done so, and come back from it, then you were never really there in the first place, because by the very fact that you have reached it, it would have receded far beyond your reach to an incomprehensible distance an in an unimaginable direction... (A) curious development has unfolded... millions of people now alive have returned from a situation that a century ago was simply designated 'death'... So by the criteria of 1890, even of 1930, life after death has indeed been proven. And this is the last laugh! Don't you get it?" Despite this quite lucid observation, Moody 'amuses' himself with discussing the 'playfulness' that characterises psychic phenomena across the 'ages', stating "paranormalism... replays

this insight any further; rather than exploring how a modern Anglo-American understanding of death shapes the NDE, he laments the lack of scientific research along the lines of Sabom's investigations into paranormal verifications of hospital procedures (discussed in the previous chapter). The recognition that death itself is structured by its cultural location is my point of departure for exploring how differing understandings of death alter how one conceives of the afterlife.

According to Foucault (1963:210), the modern conception of death as a final, biological, 'full stop', followed by the breakdown of the body, is one that has been fostered by the discourse of medicine. Before medical definitions of death came to prominence, the ontological fabric of death was understood differently: [6]

> ... we can see (in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) the deep-rooted refusal to link the end of physical being with physical decay. Men of the period believed in an existence after death which did not necessarily continue for infinite eternity, but which provided an extension between death and the end of the world... the idea of the Last Judgement is linked with that of the individual biography, but this biography ends on the last day, and not at the hour of death (Ariès, 1974:33).

Pathological understandings of the body meant that "...language found the locus of its concept; space then opened up the gaze to the differentiated form of the individual". Consequently, the " ...Gaze that envelops, caresses, details, atomizes the most individual flesh and enumerates its secret bites is that fixed, attentive, slightly dilated gaze which, from the height of death, has already condemned life". Foucault's point is that, with the advent of clinical medicine, 'death' became enmeshed within a clinical discourse that "atomizes" the flesh. Death is not a universal "...egalitarian saturnalia that unfailing compensated for fortune" (1963:211)- an understanding prevalent during the Renaissance- but rather "Death left its old tragic heaven and became the lyrical core of man: his invisible truth, his visible secret" (1963:211). Foucault's verbiage harbours the recognition that, once death had been removed from "the

---

the same old favourites again and again over the centuries, with the same stock character show up in slightly different situations, but... makes its familiar dramas seem new and exciting" (Moody, 1999:176). This is in fact the exact opposite of my analysis, and rather than note the peculiarities of our own constructions of the NDE in (post) modern times, Moody (1999) proposes an ahistorical concept of 'playful paranormalism" as the key to accessing the 'true' meaning of psychic phenomena.

[6] According to the Anthropologist Claes Collins, in Tibet "...we must extend our notion of "dying" to the entire period from the state of dying in our sense of the word, until some 52 days after clinical-death (that is 3-days of "unconsciousness" and 49 days of bardo, the liminal period until the next rebirth)..." (Collin, from Cederroth, Corlin, and Lindstrom ed. 1988: 66). It is interesting that our notion of "death" is inadequate to cover the meaning of the term used within *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and that Collin has to use the term "clinical-death" in order to provide us with a fixed point of reference through which to understand the conception of death that the text refers to - although it is important to stress that this fixed point did not exist within this worldview. Additionally, the term "science of death" seems itself to be coloured by the esoteric perspective of Evans-Wentz, which I discuss in 6.5.

dances of skeletons... on the underside of life" (Foucault, 1993:211) and located within the death of the cells, the organism, and therefore the individual self, the understanding of our own ontology became fundamentally altered; our physiological death became our 'lyrical truth', (as opposed to being God's creation, being stuck in the cycle of rebirth, and so forth). The NDE might seem like a way to overcome the 'lyrical truth' of death, but 'the gaze' still looks at the *physiological* death of the individual as its starting point for the NDE to overcome. Foucault states

> It is when death became the concrete a priori of medical experience that death could detach itself from counter-nature and become embodied in the living bodies of individuals... from the integration of death into medical thought is born a medicine that is given as a science of the individual... the experience of individuality in modern culture is bound up with that of death... [in the case of] Freudian man, an obstinate relationship to death prescribes to the universal its singular face... (Foucault, 1963:243)

Hence, myriad understandings of death become a universal death, and humanity presents to it a 'singular face'; religion is born out of the need to *repel* the fear of death, and the source of religion is located within the psyche (instead of the cultural nexus that structures the agent's understanding). With Freud's provenance in the discourse of clinical medicine, this understanding of clinical death becomes the locus for the drives to believe in religion (i.e. religion is caused by the need to overcome the *fear of death* by an *emphasis upon belief*).[7]

With the discourse of medicine being part of the discursive factors that shaped the NDE, and with the use of the NDE as evidence against bodily death being the end of the individual, it is no coincidence that Freudian ideas of death and religion come to the fore in explanations of the NDE. Freud's words from his 1915 essay *Thoughts for the times on War and Death* are quoted and re-quoted by Michael Sabom (1982:218), and Carol Zaleski (1987:170). Freud argued,

> Our own death is indeed unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we can perceive that we really survive as spectators. Hence the psychoanalytic school could venture the assertion that at the bottom no one

[7] Drawing on the arguments of Max Weber, Peter Berger and Jürgen Habermas, Wade Clark Roof (1999:61) provides the following argument in relation to the transformation of the idea of *belief*: "... the meaning of the word belief itself has undergone a shift away from its earlier connotations of an essential human activity to a more impersonal assent to an abstract proposition such as, for example, supernatural theism". Roof's argument deals specifically with the idea of the disenchantment of the modern world via the processes of modernity and rationalisation which "substitutes master for mystery... (which undermines) the wholeness of life-experience and robs the world of its remaining mysteries" (1999:61). This is, of course only one perspective on a huge area of western history (one that seems in danger of harbouring a romantic impulse for the pre-modern 'enchanted' world), and is itself far outside the remit of this discussion. Nonetheless, it seems that the emphasis upon *belief* is itself dependent on the real possibility of non-belief, and takes its vibrancy and urgency from this.

> believes in his own death, or to put it another way, in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.[8]

For Sabom (1982:218), the lack of an NDE in every patient who had a close brush with death negated the possibility that the experience was born out of a psychological drive to believe in our own immortality,[9] and for Zaleski, a psychoanalytical reduction of the NDE commits the genetic fallacy.[10] Nonetheless, engaging in such a debate (even in showing antipathy towards this type of analysis) indicates that such a reductive mode of thinking must be dismantled, transcended, or adapted. In order for a person to be aware of the unconscious forces that drive his or her belief in immortality, *knowledge* of his or her own mortality is therefore assumed as "the real". Discussing Freud's analysis in *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, Donald Lopez states, "When Freud asserts that it is impossible to imagine one's own

---

[8] Freud. states, "...our unconscious is just as inaccessible to the idea of our own deaths..." (Freud, 1915 [1964]:299), a fact borne out of the reactions of terminally ill patients who cannot comprehend their own impending demise (see chapter 3). There is, of course, a difference between arguing that the *fear of death* causes the so-called religious impulse, and the inability to *recognise the destruction of the self* causes the expression of a belief in life after death. These two propositions are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, my argument rests on the fact that fear of death implies knowledge of one's own non-existence that is itself based on medicine: I am perfectly happy to accept a psychoanalytical component may lay under this, that is, that the root of the notion of immortality is *caused* by the difficult idea of non-existence.

[9] I discussed this in the last chapter. For a scrupulous analysis of Freud's relationship to Religion, see Michael Palmer's *Freud and Jung on Religion* (1997).

[10] Zaleski states, "...the Genetic Fallacy rules much of the debunking of near death testimony" (Zaleski, 1987:180). Zaleski argues that many reductionist accounts of the NDE confuse the origin (i.e. potential biological correlates) and the function (what sociological and psychological roles they perform) with whether they are true or not. Nonetheless, Zaleski herself holds to a Jamesian 'pragmatic' notion of religious 'truth' (which I discuss later): James held that the fruits (not the roots) of religious conviction should be the axiom on which the truth-value of religion should be decided- a worthy point considering the dismissal of NDEs in some quarters- but this alters the parameters of what the genetic fallacy can be ascribed to (that is, the genetic fallacy seems to me to identify a confusion based on a *positivist* view of truth and falsity, *not* a pragmatic one). Robert Segal would respond to Zaleski's arguments by pointing out that a reductionist analysis would not dispute the fruits of the NDE (if they had anything to say about them at all). Rather, whilst a reductive explanation would not automatically rule out NDEs as evidence for a "real" reality, it would reduce the probability of them being "real" (in the objective, positivist sense) *if they themselves acted as wish fulfilment* (Segal, 1992:18-19). Put another way, scholars such as Segal would argue (on a related front), "(n)o social scientist ignores the believers point of view. Most social scientists do ignore the believer's explanation as the *ultimate* explanation of the believer's religiosity, but none ignores it as the *direct* explanation" (1992:5). This has parallels in NDE research, as biological reductionists do not necessarily dispute the fruits of NDE transformations, or the realness of the experiences to NDErs themselves (a point that Blackmore makes throughout her text *Dying to Live*, [1993]). Rather, Segal would argue (one would assume) that it would be extraordinarily unlikely if the experiences generated by the dying brain corresponded with a 'true' reality, the premise being that the 'real' world barely matches the kind of world hoped for by religious believers, and so is therefore less probable (as reality rarely matches what we desire). To say that the NDE is *less likely* to reflect an actual after-death 'reality' is not the same as saying that *if* the origins are fully biological it therefore *necessarily follows* that there is no afterlife. Segal would disagree with my emphasis upon social construction, and my point is not to dispute the force of his argument, but to contextualise it. Thus, the desire of the Pilgrim in the Middle Ages to act as an intercessor for loved ones, or the desire for the Middle Ages peasant to keep the dead in the grave and not walking around, or the desire for the 19th century psychical researcher trying to conversely contact the dead may well have an 'ultimate explanation' (although I am unsure as to how we could discern it)- the inability to believe in one's non-existence, for example. My point is that such an explanation can often miss the differences that it shares with other cultures and times.

death, he referred to the cessation of mental functions. But in the Buddhism of Tibet, consciousness never ceases, but passes through birth, death, the intermediate state of the bardo... and rebirth, until the achievement of Buddhahood" (Lopez Jr., 2000:244). Thus he wryly observes that, since the publication of the TBOTD, "...millions of readers in the West have used it to do what Freud thought impossible; imagine their own deaths" (Lopez Jr., 2000:243).

A Freudian could easily respond by arguing that such beliefs emerge from the psyche of the individual (and the group) in response to the fear of death, and my point is not to dispute such a perspective, but to contextualise how it works itself out in different cultural discourses.[11] As Foucault has shown, the ontological starting point of "the mortal body" is itself built on a clinical understanding of the physiology of dying. Therefore, whether Freud is correct or not in his analysis, the problem is that the expansion to a universal explanation is inchoate, hiding the lacunae of the "...temporal rhythms, transformations, and levels of engagement with and disengagement from the social order" (Seremetakis, cited in Robben ed. 2004:13) and of religious interactions with the transcendent.

In the field of NDE research, Susan Blackmore postulates just such a crude analysis of the "need to be religious". Her invective begins with the recognition that "There are very few of us who have not thought about our own deaths... As young children we begin to think about dying... It is inconceivable that mummy will ever be dead let alone me (sic)..." (1993:xi).[12] She continues,

---

[11] For instance, according to John R. Gillis, "Before the middle of the nineteenth century, Europeans and Americans lived on average only two thirds the number of years we do" (1997:42). Despite this, "Death did not hang over them as it does over us; they accepted mortality and could imagine an immortality beyond time itself, while we, unable to accept mortality, have substituted longevity for eternity" (1997:42). Gillis is correct in his analysis about the afterlife permeating the social fabric of the middle-ages, although he perhaps overstates his case by stating that they "accepted mortality"; the presence of Otherworld Journey narratives that I discuss in the next section, combined with the use of relics and the Cult of Saints suggests that people had death "hanging over" them. The fear, though, could be broadly classed as eternal damnation, not eternal non-existence.

[12] Blackmore continues "'If God made the world he'd have to have made himself first, wouldn't he!' While they are still too young to appreciate how seriously adults take their religion, children can still laugh at each other for believing the ridiculous... They can entertain real, un-real and half real worlds and play in all of them. That is, until they learn that only real things are important..." (Blackmore:1993,138). Ania Loomba (1998:138) comments on the post-colonial implications of this kind of analysis by stating "In Freud's writings... historical and cultural developments was visualised as akin to individual, psychic, and biological growth... A child's progress towards adulthood and social progress from savagery towards monotheism and patriarchy (Freud's criteria for human civilisation) are mapped on to one another. 'Primitives' are thus akin to children, and to the civilised 'neurotic' having not achieved the growth of the adult European." Blackmore displays little of the intellectual verve or written flair of Freud, and over-generalises almost to the point of caricature. For Blackmore, it is a difficult and counter-intuitive move for people not to believe in 'God', and far easier for them to retain their childlike neuroses (and, by implication) their primitive superstition. Most of all however, very few people have the ability to recognise that psychology leads to the concept of the 'no-self'; for those straining to transcend the religion hardwired into their cognitive modules, the upper echelon of western psychological enlightenment, according to Blackmore. is a westernised, psychological 'Buddhism'. This view of a psychological Buddhism is inherited from 19th century, and is discussed in section 6.5.

> It is no wonder that we like to deny death. Whole religions are based on that denial... The idea that God created us all for a special purpose is a lot more palatable than the idea that we got here through the whims of "chance and necessity"... People will fight and die, for the ideas that they like the best... Death is an idea that they do not like. The self is an idea that they do like; an everlasting self they like even better... (1993:xi-xii)

This brusque analysis underlies Blackmore's explanation for both the wider cultural appeal of the NDE and the psychological inferences that tie the divergent physiological causes of the NDE into a cohesive religious narrative. Blackmore's distinction between physiological death ('real' death), and the other cultural myths/narratives/rituals/discourses *et al* that religious people develop to respond to death harbours the assumption that 'they' share the same natural/supernatural distinction that segregates the religious realm from the natural world in the West, and that 'they' are illogical, childlike, and potentially warlike.

Of course, a nuanced Freudian reading could be sensitive to the cultural fluctuations of religious expression. The danger is that such an analysis often stamps out those types of subtleties in the act of explanation. In order to expand on this, I use the more nuanced interpretation of death and religion proposed by Bauman (1992:13) as paradigmatic of such an analysis. Bauman argues that, because we cannot imagine our own death, "(t)he conscience of death is, and is bound to be, traumatic". Reflecting Merleau-Ponty's recognition that "I can only grasp myself as 'already born' and 'still living'... grasping my birth and death only as pre-personal horizons" (cited in Bauman, 1992:13), the "horror of death" is therefore "the horror of the void". Consequently, "The very act of thinking death is already its denial" (1992:12-15), and one that "blatantly defies the power of reason", one that reason 'cannot deny' but only 'cover up'. The act of *being* pushes death into the realm of phenomenological incoherence, and yet, the invariable, recalcitrant experience of the death of others is a constant reminder of this paradox. Consequently, were humans truly immortal, they would not be able to strive for the 'heroic', and would be completely unaware of the concept of being 'mortal'. This is why the nature of immortality "evades our imagination, however much we strain it and however large the pool of allegorical skills we summon to our assistance" (Bauman, 1992:33). On this existential psychoanalytical reading, culture, society, and religion all stems from the staving of death; the "mortal roots of culture's immortality" mean "...culture is an elaborate counter-mnemotechnic device to forget what they are aware of" (Bauman, 1992:31). He continues; "man is a survivor", and "survival is a lifelong task... whatever is left will be locked up, in one fell swoop, at the moments of death"

(Bauman, 1992:33). Nevertheless, "the death of others is the benchmark of my own success", even if "a world that testifies to my ultimate triumph as a survivor... is unbearable" (Bauman, 1992:37).

Bauman's nuance allows him to recognise the diversity of cultural representations of death. He argues that "human reactions to death are ostensibly too complex and perhaps also too stubborn to be successfully challenged by any culture in a universally acceptable fashion" (1992:23). His grandiose explanations are evidently not meant to silence the polyvocality of cultural interpretations of death; he is not silencing meaning via causation. Nevertheless, his starting point in the 'philosophy of being' seems to assume a privileged position for the individual against the culture that maps the individual. As Flood points out (in regards to the phenomenology of religion but equally applicable here):

> (Such an analysis)... contains implicit assumptions about an ahistorical subjectivity – it entails a philosophy of consciousness – that is inevitably imported into practice, whereas the dialogical model I wish to support entails a philosophy of the sign. This means that rather than subjectivity (belief, cognition, inner states and religious experience) language and culture, the realm of signs become the locus of inquiry." (Flood 1999: 7)

Debating whether the philosophy of *being* supersedes the philosophy of the *sign* might seem a little like querying whether the academic chicken or egg came first. However, by recognising that "...the self is a sign-bearing agent embodied within social and historical contexts, within narratives, rather than a disengaged consciousness" (Flood, 1999:14), the balance between the complex subconscious/instinctual motivations of human behaviour and the narratives that shape the understanding of the self's own *being* can be redressed. As the historian Peter Marshall points out (in relation to an anthropological analysis of death, but equally valid here), "it would seem reasonable to expect that such dependencies require to be demonstrated on a case by case basis, rather than granted *a priori* status as universal ethnographic law... Cross-cultural comparisons can illuminate, but they can also pre-determine conclusions and encourage circularity in argument" (Marshall, 2002:3).

An analysis of the levels of engagement and disengagement with the social order reveals a multitude of engagements and disengagements with death.[13] For

[13] Paxton discusses what happened when Christianity was imported across Europe to nations who did not necessarily share the same language: "The old Roman *ordo defunctorum* was based on psalms of joy and triumph as the soul entered into the celestial Jerusalem... the emphasis in the old Roman rite was almost solely on the soul's passage and resurrection. There was little concern with the dying person and little participation by people in attendance... To the new communities of Christians of the early medieval West

instance, if we take the example of the early Christian church, an investigation of the sign is illustrative of the changes that occur to the understanding of the 'being' (or non-being) of death. As Paxton (1990:19) has shown, in the Mediterranean area there was no uniformity either amongst Jewish customs towards death or pagan ceremonies around the time of the birth of Christianity and the early church. Amongst the Jewish community, a shadowy conception of She'ol, or the land of the dead where the soul went to after death, had given way through Greek influence to a conception of resurrection and judgement by the conclusion of the second century (Paxton, 1990: 19). But there was no real agreement within Judaism by this point - the Pharisees had adopted a doctrine of resurrection and judgement, but the Sadducees had not, and "apocalyptic writing kept alive images of She'ol, often mixed with Greek or Egyptian ideas" (Paxton, 1990:20). This melting pot of small religious sects and mystery religions into which Christianity was born provided a diversity of perspectives from which a number of views on the nature of death and the afterlife were cultivated:

> The growing interest in the fate of the soul in the afterlife among both Jews and pagans accompanied a shift away from fear of the dead to fear for their welfare in the afterlife... Yet the coexistence of new and old attitudes and beliefs ensured that funeral rituals could work to both ends- protecting the living from the wrath of the dead and the dead from demons that might hinder their ascent to the upper regions (Paxton, 1990:20). [14]

What is important to recognise is that "(p)oints of contact between the living and the dead were... defined by the difficulties of separating the categories in the first place". This was caused in part by "no infallible test for diagnosing when death had actually occurred... From the deathbed through to the interment in consecrated ground, dying

---

however, death held more terror... In a world of disorder, among people for whom Christianity was an alien faith conveyed in a foreign tongue, the questions of personal salvation had less easy answers... Whereas the old Roman death ritual focussed attention almost exclusively on the state of the soul and its passage to the other world, rites of deathbed penance tended to focus attention on the dying person" (Paxton, 1990:202). There may well be a universal 'terror of death' found beneath conscious awareness, and it could well be that the functions and meanings of the roman rituals spoken of above worked to negate or diffuse such a terror. The point is that such ontological anxieties are themselves in flux depending on the wider discourses they find themselves in.

[14] The dead body, looked upon by Jews and pagans as something unclean and polluting, became instead a symbol of future hope, and Christians were "urged to handle them freely and without fear" (Paxton, 1990:25). Emphasis on bodily decoration or adornment was taken to be a sign of idolatry, and the crown placed on the heads of pagan dead was rejected, to be reserved for Christians lost in martyrdom (Paxton, 1990:25). Nonetheless, one must be careful not to romanticise the dying process and the handling of dead bodies. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall state, "...(Philippe) Ariès's contention that the adoption of intramural burial in the early Middle Ages, 'the dead completely ceased to inspire fear' is.. implausible... *Attitudes towards death in this period were often complex if not contradictory, stemming from the confluence of a number of factors: official doctrine about the afterlife, folkloric ghost beliefs, natural affection for the deceased, horror of the corpse...*" (Gordon and Marshall, 2000:8, italics mine).

envinced more of the character of an extended ritual performance rather than a singular transformative event" (Marshall, 2002:13).

Peter Marshall's exacting analysis of the presence of the dead in pre-Reformation, 15th and 16th century England illuminates this further. The transitional nature of life and death meant that lepers were segregated from society, and underwent a ritual that took "the form of a mock burial service" (Marshall, 2002:13).[15] Thus, without a physiological understanding of a point of death (and no reliable indicator) the process of death served "gradually to relocate the departed in the society of the dead", and "the permeability of the barrier between life and death was further underscored by the perception that... death was not a final sentence with no possibility of reprieve" (Marshall, 2003:14).[16] Consequently, "despite precautionary measures, the dead sometimes did return"; it has been estimated that seventy five percent of ghosts that appeared were souls from purgatory, although a monk from Byland Abbey North Yorkshire compiled stories that "were distinctly theologically incorrect- reanimated corpses, bodies of the living possessed... Most of the Byland ghosts were not well-behaved supplicants from purgatory but grotesque spectres who wrestled with the living... " (Marshall, 2002:16-17). As Marshall recognises: "Direct encounters with the Dead were only ever the experience of a small minority".[17] What is important to extract from this is that the experiences with the

[15] According to Eamon Duffy (2005: 189) "The healing mediated by the saint restored more than health to the sick: it restored them to the community of the living." Additionally, Carole Rawcliffe (2002: 118) points out that "(s)ince the sick were widely perceived as liminal beings, inhabitants of an earthly purgatory somewhere between life and death, their ambivalent status must have seemed all the greater once they put on a pilgrim's robes and embarked on the quest for healing." Additionally, in the case of the last rites administered to a person who recovered, "Despite all the authorities could do to reassure them, many lay people believed that an anointed person could never again eat meat, or have sexual relations with his or her spouse" being essentially "a sort of animated corpse" (Duffy 2005: 313).

[16] Philippe Ariès (1974:14,15) states that "(o)ne of the aims of the ancient funeral cults was to prevent the deceased from returning to disturb the living... despite their familiarity with death, the Ancients feared being near the dead and kept them at a distance, honoring their sepulchres." Philippe Ariès's contribution to the academic exploration of death cannot be understated- see, for instance, Kellehear (1996:87), Bauman (1992:1), Jalland (1996,2000), Gordon and Marshall (2002) for uses and references to his work. It has, however, not been without its critics. Pat Jalland has pointed out that Ariès work is specific to Catholic countries (1996). Additionally, Ralph Houlbrooke (1989) is not convinced by the burgeoning movement of the "History of the Self' that Ariès spearheaded, and states "the relationship between the changes he sought to document are often highly obscure, and the choice of 'individualism' as the main motor of change seems an arbitrary one" (Houlbrooke, 1989:6). Houlbrooke's critique of the "History of the Self" centres on "the sorts of evidence which enables us to detect presence, such as 'the character, drama, or novel, the portrait and the biography or autobiography" (which) can usually be equally or more plausibly attributed to other causes. And their non-existence or disappearance do not in themselves demonstrate its absence or weakness" (Houlbrooke, 1989:7).

[17] In the words of Duffy, "For all the stories of apparitions and Purgatory spirits walking to disturb their survivors, it was orthodox teaching that the living hold no direct converse with the dead. For medieval people, as for us, to die meant to enter a great silence, and the fear of being forgotten in that silence was as real to them as to any of the generations that followed. But for them that silence was not absolute and could be breached...." (Duffy 2005: 328). As Swanson points out "Prayers and masses for the dead would assist the soul by reducing its torment, providing the basis for the whole movement of post-mortem commemoration in the later medieval period...Such prayers emphasized the mutuality of living and dead

dead were not necessarily located through the lens of the deathbed encounter (and internalised in the psyche as we see in NDE literature), but rather, were shaped by a more fluid and transient distinction between the realms of the living and the realms of the dead.[18] Marshall continues

> Encounters with an identifiable dead person were more commonly directed towards 'laying' the ghost, and fixing it irrevocably within its proper spiritual location. If there is any consistent narrative running through the apparition stories of the late Middle Ages, it is not one about maintaining contact between the living and the dead, but about ensuring the finality of their separation... We should take note here of Peter Brown's comment on late antiquity: 'the supernatural becomes the depository of the objectified values of the group'... *Late medieval period did not see ghosts because of a conscious desire to maintain personal contacts with dead friends, in the manner of nineteenth century spiritualists*... (Marshall, 2002:17, italics mine)

Unlike the understanding of death in the discourse of NDEs, death was not an 'exotic Other' but a grim familiarity; death was not the permanent "full-stop" of biology, but rather was a continuum that traversed physical, social, and religious discourses; death was a barrier that people often sought to *reinforce* as opposed to *investigate*.[19] Like the sociologist Lewis R. Aitken, one *could* infer that there are "a kaleidoscope of practises and beliefs concerning death", all of which are grounded in "collective ignorances about the causes and meanings of life and death". Additionally, it is quite plausible that "...(i)n ancient times, the death of a member disrupted the order of a social group, forcing a readjustment in roles and feelings" (Aitken, 1981:87). These diverse understandings of death are rooted in "thanaphobia" (Aitken, 1981:87), and have emerged from the kinds of psychological reactions thus far discussed. In undertaking such an analysis, the dangers of missing just how the supernatural becomes a 'repository' for the 'objectified' values of the group are rife.

The truncation of religious belief in the West, combined with the rise of the discourse of modern medicine and the consequent privatisation of death, thus laid the groundwork for death and the afterlife to become exoticised and romanticised as an "other" that "makes no sense" to the wider, rational public sphere in the West. Switching the focus from the being (or lack of being) of death to how the sign "death" is a source of contestation within different cultures and times allows the opportunity to avoid re-reading the past through the lens of the present (as far as this is possible).

---

which integrated all Christians into a continuum uniting the three elements of the church." (Swanson 1995: 37)

[18] According to Duffy "It was the religious complex of these last things, death, judgement, Hell, and Heaven, that formed the essential focus of late medieval reflection on mortality, coupling anxiety over the brevity and uncertainty of life to the practical need for good works, to ensure a blissful hereafter." (Duffy 2005: 308)

[19] "The neglected dead could be angry and dangerous." (Duffy 2005: 350)

I do not deny the possibility of the existential terror of death as a motive for religious expression, but I believe that the concerns about religion and death that we have now in the West are different from those in other times and places. There may be a common root in the human psyche that ties these responses together, but to say that the ontological terror of non-existence is the motivation that causes people to worry about corpses rising from the dead misses how people themselves are structured by their culture (for instance, how could we tell if this was the case, or if the ontological fear of non-existence was not "really" motivated by the fear of our ancestors returning from the grave and walking the earth?).[20] When there was a perceived danger of ghosts traversing the landscape, and when the needs of one's relatives in purgatory had to be considered, the appeal of the after death narrative did not hold the sway that the NDE narrative has held in the (post) modern West. This is not to say that after-death narratives did not have their place, and I discuss this in the next section.

6.3 Otherworld Journeys, the NDE and the 'Religious Symbolic'

> When (St Patrick's) purgatorial cave... was closed up by the pilgrimage authorities themselves in 1780, and the vigil was decreed to be held in church, there was no decline in the popularity of the pilgrimage. For its prime function was penitence, not the seeking of weird visions (Turner 1978: 128)

In this section I argue that the phenomenological category of the 'otherworld journey', as postulated by Carol Zaleski (1987, 1996), does not "articulate the [same] field of discourse" (Foucault, 1969:25) as the NDE. There are three reasons for this. First, the category 'otherworld journey' is a somewhat vacuous concept that is made to cover the Shaman visiting other realities, the pious medieval traveller finding a door on to another realm, the Christian visiting life after death, as well as stories of space travel in our (post) modern times, to name but a few 'variations' on the theme (Zaleski, 1987:3-15). A huge amount of historical, cultural, social and political minutiae must be sacrificed for the sake of this phenomenological schematic. Second, according to Zaleski the phenomenological themes that structure both the

[20] Bertram S. Puckle, in discussing the Middle Ages practice of burying suicide victims at the crossroads, remarks "...one of the prominent features of the treatment of the dead is the terror which all ages and all peoples have shown as the possibility of the return of a revenge-ful spirit, we are justified in thinking that the real object was to confuse the mind of the departed as to the direction of his former home, and the fact that it was a common practice to anchor the body down by driving a wooden stake through the heart tens to support this theory" (1926:152). On a different front, in his analysis of mortuary rituals of south Asia, Robert Hertz argues "death does not occur at one moment in time but is a drawn out process. The dead person is still considered to be part of society... The bereaved relatives fear the souls wrath for past wrongdoing, and are prone to appease the soul through sacrifices, taboos, and mourning..." (summarised by Robben, 2004:9). The fear of the 'rising of the dead' *seems* to be a more prevalent cross-cultural occurrence than the fear of non-existence. One could argue that the former fear is reducible to the latter, but I am unsure if this does not presume more than it establishes.

'otherworld journey' and the NDE reflect a wider need for human beings to interact with a "religious symbolic" that, in our (post) modern times, is deflected into other interests (such as an interest in 'space travel'). However, this idea of a 'religious symbolic' simply replaces "God" with a less explicit and substantially woollier theological category, and there remains an underlying Christian theme, one that is somewhat reminiscent of the idea that we have an inbuilt 'need' for religion (as defined by Western, Christian parameters). Third, Zaleski's emphasis on the (male) Shaman or Otherworldly Traveller seems indicative of the prominence given to an intense religious experience that the individual must seek outside of the confines of everyday life (a view I linked with William James in chapter 1). What links these three points together is my wider argument that the construction of an 'otherworld journey' narrative reads the past through the 'history of the present', and in doing so, replicates the construction of death and emphasis upon extreme religious experience that pervades NDE literature.

While I do not discount the possibility of phenomenological similarities between the NDE and the narratives subsumed under the category of 'otherworld journeys', I argue that such an approach substantially glosses over the differences between these discourses, for one of two possible reasons. *Either* there is a desire to legitimate the NDE as scientific evidence for the afterlife by appealing to the historical similarities between it and other experiences (Moody and Ring are two examples of this approach) *or* there is a desire to locate the NDE as the latest manifestation of a type of divine encounter that has a long historical lineage. The former approach often prioritises the NDE as providing 'scientific evidence' for the afterlife, whilst the latter seeks to return the NDE to the theological fold. In this section I shall focus on the latter, particularly the work of theologian Carol Zaleski and her text *Otherworld Journeys* (1987), a book held up by believer and sceptic alike as the seminal historical investigation into 'otherworld journey' narratives that parallel the NDE.[21] It is not my intention to dispute the historical accuracy of Zaleski's text, nor the theoretical nuance that she brings to the field (both of which are, without a doubt, immense). Rather, it is my contention that her theological perspective perpetuates the idea that the NDE is part of the modern manifestation of the need for a "religious symbolic" in people's lives, an Eliadean-style move that seems to rename "God" with a less explicit, but nevertheless theologically loaded term.[22] Categorising such a diverse range of discourses under the canopy of

[21] See, for instance, the sceptic, Susan Blackmore (1993:14-15), the sociologist Allan Kellehear, (1996:189), the Psychologist of Religion David Wulff (1997:622), and the theologian Mark Fox (2003:5).
[22] This is (perhaps) less of an issue than it is with Mircea Eliade, as Zaleski makes no bones about her theological location, and does not claim to be working as a secular historian of religion.

'otherworld journey narratives' makes her thematic analysis strain at the seams; such a voluminous history of everything renders the concept of otherworld journeys almost vacuous.

In constructing her argument for the religious symbolic, Zaleski recognises the differences between otherworld journey narration and modern NDE accounts. She states "we will find striking differences as well; gone are the bad deaths, harsh judgement scenes, purgatorial torments, and infernal terrors of medieval visions; by comparison, the modern other world is a congenial place, a democracy, a school for continuing education, and a garden of unearthly delights" (Zaleski, 1987:7). In tracking the variations of otherworld journeys she argues that a "comparative or cross-cultural approach" is required, and "(w)e must search for a common thread that will not be deflected by variations in content... That common thread is the story (and) the otherworld journey is a work of the narrative imagination" (1987:7). What ties the NDE with other 'otherworld narratives' is that

> In nearly all cultures, people have told stories of travel to another world, in which a hero, a shaman, a prophet, king or ordinary mortal passes through the gates of death and returns with a message for the living"(1987:3).

This journey can take on three different moulds: "celestial ascent", "descent into the abyss" or "the fantastic voyage" (1987:2-3).[23] Zaleski's project orientates the NDE in a lineage of 'motifs'. Her search for a common motif begins with reference to the Shaman of Eliade's writings. She quotes: "the Shaman is above all a specialist in ecstasy... the shaman is a healer, and a director of souls as well as a mystic and a visionary" (quoted in Zaleski, 1987:13). As a result, 'his' initiation "...may involve a harrowing ordeal such as having his flesh being devoured by demons or ancestor spirits. Reduced to his skeletal or spiritual essence, he is ready to set forth for the other world" (Zaleski, 1987:13). The shaman is nevertheless but one facet of the Otherworld journey motif, one that shares the phenomenological stages of "exit from the body", the "journey through the other world", and the "return to life" (Zaleski, 1987:6). Given the interest that other writers (such as Judith Cressy, whom I discuss in the next section) have had in the experience of mystics in the later Middle Ages, it is telling that she notes, in passing, that her examination leads her up until the early thirteenth century, after which

[23] Zaleski provides a fourfold typology that contextualises these themes; "The Otherworld Journey as Apocalypse" as epitomised by the apocryphal third century text 'The Vision of St Paul'; "The Otherworld Journey as Miracle Story" as featured in the Dialogues of Gregory The Great; "The Otherworld Journey as Conversion", a narrative story of a Northumbrian family man recounted by an eighth century monk; "The Otherworld Journey as Pilgrimage" as recorded in St Patrick's Purgatory. Such a narrative structure requires a certain amount of construction.

> ...the otherworld vision story tends to become a deliberate literary construction, self conscious and systematic in its allegorical themes and classical allusions, and without the connection it formerly had to experience-based reports...from the mid-twelfth century most of the visionaries are well-known saints (*usually women religious*) for whom mystical and allegorical apparitions are a *chronic* experience... these seers play a more *passive* role, receiving otherworld visitations rather than travelling out of their bodies to other realms..." (Zaleski, 1987:6, italics mine). [24]

As NDE survivors (apparently) share some similarity with these later mystical accounts, it seems odd to bracket these out from her 'otherworld journey' analysis. One possible answer to this is the active/passive dynamic alluded to in the preceding quotation; many of the visionary writers to which Zaleski refers actively enter the land of the dead, and the majority of them are male (thus we see some parallel with the psycho-analysis of heroism and death discussed in chapter 3).

In her selection of sources for her medieval analysis, the 'passive' female mystics of the late middle ages lack what one might term the 'violence' of other otherworldly accounts; the grand vistas of the Hellish realms; the panoramas of heaven. The male otherworldly traveller literally travels out of his body to see the afterlife, *but returns to eventual good health*, while the passive mystic has "chronic" experiences in her body; this reflects Jantzen's analysis of mysticism in the Middle Ages, when "women were conceptually identified with the flesh" whereas "men were identified with the spirit" (Jantzen, 1995:54). Thus, the male otherworldly traveller who leaves his body is set up as a priority over the female mystic, who does not leave her body (the implication being that the former carries more evidential weight than the latter). This itself bears some similarity to the sudden violence of the NDE account, as opposed to Kübler-Ross' emphasis on bodily death being the "final stages of growth".[25] As in NDE research, the person who has experienced the otherworld has recovered to full strength to retell his account. This is in marked contrast to the accounts of the passive mystic, which bear some similarity to the "feminine" recounting of the experiences of those chronic patients who, on death's door, report visions of another world. This binary is not necessarily carried forward by those writers more interested in the relationship between NDEs and mysticism (which I discuss later). Nonetheless, it does reproduce the appeal of NDE literature that I discussed in chapter 3; there seems to be an appeal in the *violence* of NDE accounts

[24] Zaleski argues that, as the Middle Ages progresses, a standardisation sets in amongst visionary literature. Accordingly, "The monk of Wenlock encounters vices that are particular to him... Although hardly idiosyncratic, they do not correspond to any standardisation of sins. By the fifteenth century, the systematisation of medieval views of sin and penance is evident in vision narratives..." (Zaleski, 1987:73).
[25] See chapter 3.

and the male surgeons who bring people round, as opposed to the feminine passivity of Palliative Care literature that seeks to alleviate the chronic illness of terminal patients.[26] Just as the NDE account seems to carry more cultural weight than the deathbed vision account put forward by Kübler-Ross, the otherworld journey narrative (in Zaleski's work) carries more weight than the 'chronic' female mystic. In providing a phenomenological typology for locating the NDE, Zaleski's demarcation of categories reproduces characteristics within modern NDE research.

In Zaleski's analysis of the human relationship with the divine there is what Michel de Certeau identifies as "...the language of... 'nostalgia' in relation to that other country" (1992:2). By 'other country' de Certeau refers to the romanticised notion of what has been, but is now lost. This is especially true in relation to the fracturing of these grand journey narratives of which, I argue, Zaleski seems to feel great loss: the majestic religious stories of that 'other country' become, submerged, deflected, diluted and inchoate in western (post) modern society. [27] It is telling that she puts parenthesis round the term " 'secular' " (1987:7) in her discussion of modern society, a move that implies that the 'homo religosus' remains, but is submerged within the present. In fact, she suggests that the otherworld journey motif "is 'camouflaged' (as Eliade would put it) in the modern lore of space travel... which might be called the lure of the edge" (Zaleski, 1987:4). This diagnosis of human orientation allows her to sum up that "...return-from-death stories developed within and alongside the apocalyptic traditions of late antiquity, flourished in the Middle Ages, declined during the reformation, and reappeared in connection with some of the evangelical, separatist, and spiritualist movements of the nineteenth century..." (Zaleski, 1987:5). There is however, a substantial difference between the medieval peasant's ambivalent relationship with death, the spiritualist's desire to contact those *already on the other side*, and the NDE account of situations where the violence and exoticness of the medical emergency may have as much a part of the appeal as the afterlife visions. Thus, whilst she recognises that "proof of life after death has not always been the purpose of (Otherworld journey literature); that particular interest is

[26] In a sense, the emphasis upon the soul leaving the body in NDE accounts sits in contrast to the NDE occurring in the body (as sceptics such as Susan Blackmore would have it), the former seeming to indicate a more 'objective' and therefore preferable, view. Whilst Zaleski hopes to provide a "non-reductionist" account that mediates between the view of the NDE as "objective proof" of life after death, and biological, psychological, and social "reductive" analyses, it is telling that, in the end, she opts to emphasise the kind of disembodied narrative that feminists such as Grace Jantzen (1989,1996) would be alarmed at, because it associates (female) flesh with subjectivity.

[27] According to Zaleski, "(t)here is no match here for the revelatory literature of the great religious traditions; and it seems unlikely that a Gregory the Great or Dante will emerge to shape Near-Death testimony into a religiously sophisticated or artistically ordered statement. Neither could the medieval visions we considered stand on their own, they thrived insofar as they exemplified a wider tradition..." (1987:204). I discuss this further in my conclusion.

characteristic of our doubt ridden culture...", she also maintains that "...the aim, although usually implicit, seems to be universal; to survey and reappraise the imagined cosmos, and to return to society with a message about our human place in it, about how we should live" (1987:100). While a strict phenomenological analysis might use this as a starting point for describing the essences of these narratives, in Zaleski's work there is an undercurrent of the need for something *more*; she seeks not so much to provide a useful category for further analysis, but rather to put her finger on just how the religious realm, hidden between lines of medieval religious texts and NDE accounts, communes with the self through the journey narrative.

Zaleski is careful to distinguish her project from a Jungian approach (1987:201), presumably because endorsing an archetypal interpretation of the NDE would be to impose a 'this world' interpretation, and she wishes to leave this experience in a symbolic realm (in some ways this is faintly reminiscent of negative theology, as I discuss below). Additionally, she disavows the application of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead,* which teaches that "afterlife visions are (are) a projection of the mind's own radiance" (Zaleski, 1987:201), one assumes because she wishes to hold that the otherworld visions are real as well as imaginary. To adopt either a Jungian perspective, or to embrace *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* would be to risk one's "impartiality" (1987:201). On a parallel note, whilst she is still at home with structuralist interpretations of myth,[28] one could infer that such an interpretation (which would stop short at elucidating the structural components of such myths and would not say anything about their validity) does not allow her the full intellectual apparatus for securing a space for the 'religious symbolic'. Similarly, an approach that treated "the otherworld journey solely as a metaphor or literary motif (would)... render it harmless... we attenuate the visionary virus until it is so weak that it produces immunity *instead of contagion*" (Zaleski, 1987:184, italics mine). The desire for the otherworld journey narrative to spark a 'contagion' seems like a theological neologism not too far removed from the language of revival, not the religious revival of fundamentalist Christianity but, rather, the reawakening of the self's relation to God for which Zaleski holds out hope, a reawakening that occurs in the phenomenological experience of "living" the otherworld narrative in one's consciousness.[29] Consequently, she links the symbol of the NDE to the "experiential

[28] Thus, she cites Alan Segal, who argues that the "heavenly journey" supplies a "structural pattern for nearly all the manifestations of Hellenistic Religion, including the Imperial cult; mystery religions; prophetic, sectarian, and apocalyptic movements in Judaism, the early Christian movement; Gnosticism, and latter forms of Jewish Mysticism" (Zaleski, 1987:19).

[29] She therefore parallels Mircea Eliade who proposes that "...ritual recitation of the cosmogonic myth implies reactualization of the primordial event... it follows that he for whom it is recited is magically projected in illo tempore, into the 'beginning of the World'; he becomes contemporary with the cosmogony"

dimension" of human experience, because "the otherworld journey motif remains potent only as long as it retains a hint of correspondence to a sensed, dreamed, or imagined reality... we imagine ourselves undergoing such an experience, we visualise the experience as taking place, in another world, and we sense that the image has further possibilities as yet unexplored" (1987:185). As a result, there is little difference between "those that have experienced near death visions and those who have only read of them" (1987:205), because

> We are all, in a sense, otherworld travellers. Otherworld visions are the products of the same imaginative power that is active in our ordinary ways of visualising death... the capacity of our inner states to transfigure our perceptions of outer landscapes; our need to internalise the cultural map of the physical universe; *and our drive to experience the universe as a moral and spiritual cosmos in which we belong and have purpose...* (the NDE) is one way in which the religious imagination mediates the search for ultimate truth (Zaleski, 1987:205, italics mine)

One suspects that the average football fan might understand the universe and cosmos, and their own teleological place in it, in a far different light from what Zaleski has in mind (that is, if they think about it all). Rather, her analysis seems built on the Husserlian phenomenological notion of bracketing out questions of objective truth in order to return to the experiences themselves, or, as Flood puts it, "return to the data given in our experience or consciousness" (1999:93), because the intentionality of consciousness does not necessarily distinguish between "real" experiences and "non-real" ones. By experiencing the NDE through narrative, one (in a sense) lives it and, in doing so, the Other of 'Ultimate Truth' can mediate with the individual.

To support her argument, Zaleski appeals to the work of William James, co-opting his pragmatism (1987:187) as a way to judge the NDE by its fruits rather than its roots, and so "If there is a validity to religious accounts of life after death, it is not because they offer a direct transcript of the truth, but only because they act as lure toward truth" (1987:197). She states:

> In evaluating religious ideas and images, theology deals with a range of disciplines that cannot be verified- *which even overflow our normal categories of thought.* One need not abandon the idea that there is an ultimate truth in order to recognise, that for now... pragmatic criteria must be used... a pragmatic method and a sensitivity to symbol must go hand in hand (Zaleski, 1987:191-192, italics mine)

(Eliade, cited by Segal, 2004:55). Segal states that this is, in effect, the "magic carpet" theory of myth, and argues that "The ultimate payoff of myth is experiential: encountering divinity. No theory of Myth could be more rooted in religion than Eliade's" (Segal, 2004:56).

Consequently, she wishes to walk a tightrope between recognising the 'NDE' as real and recognising the NDE as imaginary, and suggests that it would be "...fruitful to theologians to consider near-death visions as works of the religious imagination, whose function is to communicate meaning through symbolic forms rather than to copy external facts..." (Zaleski, 1987:186).[30] God is, in effect, so big, as to be unknowable through our limited human experience, so big that he transcends the boundary between real and fiction. Whilst William James looked to the edges of consciousness for his communion with the divine, Zaleski seeks to find the divine in the symbolic "ideas and images" in the conscious experiences of the self.

Despite the fact that Zaleski is keen to explicitly ground the notion of this 'religious imaginary' in the experiences of visionaries in the Middle Ages, there are implicit parallels with negative theology in her work. It seems inconceivable that a scholar such as Zaleski is unaware of the parallels with Pseudo-Dionysus, whose negative theology declared God "... 'hyperousios' or absolutely beyond being", nor the negative theological elements in Aquinas's reconfiguration, or in Meister Eckhart (Bradley, 2004:16). According to Arthur Bradley (2004:13), "the negative way names a theological tradition that insists that the divine cannot be understood in human terms because it is radically transcendent". This directs "... the *via negativia* to approach the divine not by positive or anthropomorphic language but by negative language, by paradoxical or contradictory language, or by insisting on the inadequacy of all language to describe His transcendence..." (Bradley, 2004:13). Thus, whilst one has to be careful not to push this parallel too far, it seems evident that Zaleski thinks that any attempt to translate the transcendent into the imminent is really impossible; instead, the language of religious symbolism is an eternal facsimile of that which-cannot-be-spoken-of. The other world after death is so far *above being* that the journey to it becomes an imaginary intermediate state where a person's imagination is turned inside out. The visions of those in the Middle Ages involves realms of hell, whilst the modern NDEr has a life review and is informed that hell is now on earth. Her extremely delicate position, wanting to hold that these otherworld journeys are both symbolic and real, has thus variously been represented as denying any

[30] Zaleski takes her cue from the visionary literature of the middle-ages that externalised inner 'deeds' into personifications used in judgements (Zaleski, 1987:72-73), and projects the inner state on to the visionary world (1987:73), She argues that "we should avoid the premature separation of "literal" from "spiritual" significance..." and "... the other world is a repository for our symbols; as the opposite pole to this world, it makes possible the alternation of current, or exchange of meaning, by which a symbol lives" (Zaleski, 1987:74). Accordingly, "even if we grant that near-death visions convey something real, there is no reliable way to formulate that something is... We cannot crack their symbolic code" (1987:199).

ontological reality of the NDE,[31] and not being positivist enough in appreciating the 'facts' of the matter.[32]

Both of these criticisms miss the wider theological implications of her work: the non-religious individual in the West has really lost touch with the religious-symbolic (somewhat similar to the 'Homo Religosus' urges of Eliade) and these impulses are therefore redirected into the otherworld journey of space-travel *et al.* Yet this romanticised notion of us, now, having lost our way and needing to find an outlet for such an otherworld journey silences the sociological, cultural, economic and political factors at play in structuring religion both now and in other times, and, when intersected with concerns raised about the category of 'religion' itself, seems somewhat reminiscent of smuggling Christian notions of "we need God, despite our disillusioned ways" into the fray. In making such a move, she replaces the word 'God' with the term 'Religious Symbolic', but the surrounding constellation of Christian theological themes remains the same. As I have argued one could see popular NDE accounts not necessarily as evidence for such a need for an otherworld journey motif, but rather as an inoculation against further 'spiritual' concerns as people go about their day to day lives in certain striates of western society.

The aforementioned analysis allows us to notice the enormous changes in western conceptions of the divine, a point that Zaleski's work sacrifices in favour of her analysis of the 'religious symbolic'. As Zaleski seeks (in the main) to bracket out the cultural, political, and social differences that structure religious symbolic experiences in favour of a phenomenological analysis of how the divine touches the human through the symbolic realm of the religious imaginary, such a sacrifice is relatively unobtrusive in her project. Thus, the "religious imagination... works not

---

[31] David Wulff (1997:622) summarises Zaleski's position thus: "[she] is likewise doubtful that the full range of near-death experiences can be accounted for by neuropsychological theories. She proposes instead that we conceive of the otherworld journey as the product of the religious imagination, serving both as a picture for orientating ourselves in the cosmos and as a system of instruction for moral and spiritual living. Translated into object-relations terms, NDEs may thus be thought of as illusionistic transitional phenomena, which help us to find ourselves at home in this world rather than our way in the next one." In contrast to this, Zaleski states, "At the risk of sounding cryptic, I would like to suggest that the NDE is at once both imaginative and real... I hasten to add that *the reality of the other world exceeds the imagination*, in this present life this reality is met only by means of imaginative forms. Hence, *if near-death experience is to be considered more than mere illusion*, it must be acknowledged to be at once imaginative and real" (1996:20-21, italics mine).

[32] According to Mark Fox, "Zaleski seems very confident in her knowledge of what the rules of the 'religious symbolic' are and are not capable of" (Fox, 2003:92). This seems like a clear misreading, as Zaleski seems to suggest that we *cannot* know the rules of the religious symbolic. Additionally, "Zaleski may not be listening sharply enough to what NDErs are saying... few... would agree with her that their experience was an imaginative construct. For them the NDE has a vividness and reality that sets it apart from any attempt to define it in terms of imagination or unconscious invention..." (Fox, 2003:92). Again, this is a somewhat staggering misreading; Fox, intent on arguing for a common-core of the NDE ascertainable through theological investigation, seems somewhat blissfully unaware that such a move might be equally objectionable to other religions who might see their traditions and narratives ransacked in favour of a 'universal core'. Indeed, his theological agenda seems to harbour the exact problem that he criticises Zaleski for, whilst being completely bereft of her subtlety.

only with universal patterns- such as death and birth- but also with culturally specific and idiosyncratic material, and that it can fuse the universal and the particular into a seamless narrative whole" (Zaleski, 1987:191). Nonetheless, when Zaleski states that "there is no sensory, imaginative, or intellectual form capable of fully expressing the transcendent... we cannot apprehend it or describe it in the direct and unequivocal manner with which we seem to know the manner of ordinary experience" (1987:191), we bear witness to (almost) exactly the same struggle that William James undertook in order to evade the limits of Kantian epistemology.[33] His recourse to a solution that was heavily indebted to German romanticism is played out along similar lines here, and Zaleski's fragile arguments for the symbolic imagination of the religious realm is heavily imbued with a romantic subtext. [34] While James sought to secure a space for discussing the afterlife meaningfully via the extremes experiences of 'solitary geniuses' (Zaleski, 1987:197), Zaleski seeks the communion of the divine via the symbolic imagery in the consciousness of the everyday individual: this symbolic imagery includes NDE accounts that might reawaken that which has been in lost in our (post) modern culture.

The similarities between the otherworld journey narrative and the NDE depends, however, on a theological diagnosis of the self. As Carrette points out (in the context of Foucault's ambivalent relationship with, and thematic parallels to, negative theology, but equally applicable here):

> Kirsteen Anderson's discussion... highlights the way 'mid-twentieth awareness projects on to language issues which previously were theorised around the concept of God'... This intriguing suggestion opens up the question of the relationship between God and discourse and creates the danger, so pervasive in many contemporary discussions of mysticism, that 'parallel structures and similarities of issues imply a shared object. This is a premature

[33] Zaleski (1987:197) recognises that "William James... (disregarded) the social side of religion in favour of its private dimensions and solitary 'geniuses'...". Her desire to realign James's perspective to incorporate the 'social' is nevertheless

[34] William James inherited his understanding of mysticism from the German Romantic tradition including thinkers such as Goethe, Schelling, Schiller, and Schleiermacher (Jantzen, 1989:297,299). He was influenced by these thinkers (Schleiermacher) in their attempts to circumnavigate the limits placed on our ability to have any knowledge of a divine presence by emphasis upon extreme religious experiences. Jantzen states "James was very much aware of the Kantian strictures... he held that Kant was mistaken in thinking that we could have no glimpse of a supernatural realm... (P)erhaps the margins of our consciousness or our subconscious minds might be the point at which 'higher spiritual agencies'... could directly touch us..." (Jantzen, 1989:296). Zaleski herself practically replicates this when she states "(i)n setting boundaries on the theoretical and practical use of reason, Kant established that God- as Absolute- cannot be the object of possible experience. Many theologians have since felt compelled to characterize religious experience as categorically different from all other kinds of experience and hence not recognizably empirical... A pragmatic view of religious experience has the potential to release us from some of these vetoes; as William James points out, the God of religious experience is a More rather than a categorically transcendent All. Perhaps God is willing to descend from the status of 'wholly other' in order to become available to human experience" (1987:246-247n).

> association, for the same gesture in one culture can have a very different meaning in another. (Carrette, 2000:98)

The parallel structures of the accounts of otherworld travels and the NDE do not necessitate a shared object- the "religious symbolic"- that binds them together. This is because, fundamentally, Zaleski's 'homo religosus' diagnosis of the human condition is a theological construction rather than a description of the inner needs of the self to commune with the divine. There is no doubt that the search for a common-core for the NDE and these other historical accounts may yield some fruit (and Zaleski's work is the epitome of nuance and sensitivity). The expense of missing just how these experiences are located within their own discursive frameworks is, however, a heavy price to pay. Her subsuming of other analytical categories such as the medieval 'pilgrimage' into the wider 'otherworld journey' category is based on her aforementioned theological diagnosis of the human condition, but without this in place, I am unsure as to why the discernment of a "journey" theme needs the 'religious' weight placed on it (in the Christian sense of God-as-the-other communing with human beings). In the next section I parallel this by examining the theological predilection for co-opting the NDE within the search for a common-core mystical experience.

6.4 The Category 'Mysticism' and the NDE

In the last two sections I have shown how the understandings of "death" and the "otherworld journey" in NDE literature mirror the concerns of the respective academics and scholars involved (the former being shaped by a clinical-psychoanalytic discourse, and the latter oscillating between the theological romanticism of Eliade and the emphasis upon the individual in James). In this section I explore the interconnection of the NDE with the category of 'mysticism'. I argue that the debate about the mystical properties of the NDE, or how similar the NDE is to mystical experiences, is itself based on the paradigmatic construction of mysticism as postulated by William James. I begin by analysing how NDE authors conceive of the intense, ineffable parallels between these two categories, noting the references to James' work. I then move on to the modern 'Christian Mystic' Judith Cressy, who argues that the NDE is an immature experience that needs to be to subsumed under a wider transcendental "mystic" category, an approach that replicates an emphasis upon the subjective ineffable element of the NDE. Finally, I compare this to certain facets of the analysis of Grace Jantzen, in order to show how

Cressy's analysis of mysticism does not highlight a universal core, but rather replicates a construction of religious experience indicative of 20th century Western society. The following perusal of the interconnection of the category 'mysticism' and the category 'NDE' will leave little doubt that the two share narrative similarities, although the line that divides the two is conceptually fuzzy. This fuzziness is caused by the fact that both categories are themselves constructed along post-Jamesian axioms, and therefore share his emphasis upon intense, ineffable, experiences, and bear little resemblance to the actual content of 'mystics' in other times and places. As my focus remains on NDEs, I do not intend to provide an exhaustive account of medieval mysticism, but rather seek to use select examples from the work of Grace Jantzen (1989,1996).

Raymond Moody's composite NDE model postulates that, when the NDEr returns, "...he tries to tell others, but has trouble doing so... he can find no words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes..." (Moody, 1975:12). Building on this he argues, "The general understanding that we have of language depends upon the existence of a broad community of common experience in which almost all of us participate... The events of those who have come near death... lie outside our community of experience, so one might well expect them to have some linguistic difficulties in expressing what happened to them" (Moody, 1975:15-16). The NDE is therefore ineffable. His category of 'ineffability' is also explored in the work of Sabom, who reports, "Most people who had encountered an NDE expressed great difficulty in finding the right words to describe their experience" (Sabom, 1982:32). Additionally, Ring asked his respondents whether or not the experience was difficult to put into words: twenty-four said that it was (forty nine percent), fifteen said it was not (thirty one percent) and seven thought the question was equivocal or irrelevant (fourteen percent). For Ring this ineffability is compounded by the fear of ridicule as well as the experience itself, leading him to conclude "Moody's assertion that the disclosure of near-death experiences tends to be inhibited because of anticipated ridicule and scoffing does receive some support from the spontaneous comments of some of my respondents... *His claim that many near-death survivors believe that the experience is essentially ineffable receives even stronger and more systematic support*" (Ring, 1980:87, italics mine). He continues "...these two factors contribute to keep these near-death episodes in the domain of private events..." (Ring, 1980:87). As I shall show, medieval mystics would themselves not be stymied by the private, ineffableness of their experiences, and would instead extol the virtues, perfect nature, or love of God (sometimes in more physical terms than one is used to hearing in the

present). Nevertheless, the ineffability of the NDE moves to the fore, and is assumed to be a defining characteristic of mysticism. I return to this point.

Building upon the apparent similarities between the ineffability of the NDE and the ineffability of mysticism. Susan Blackmore states that

> Both modern and ancient accounts (of NDEs)... can include a mystical experience, in which thinking and feeling fuse, unmediated awareness floods in, and the journey is suspended... I have been using this term as though it is self-evident what a mystical experience is... The experiences are often ineffable. Nevertheless there are some common themes. Oneness is the most obvious... Space and time seem largely irrelevant, even though the order of events may seem apparent. Love seems to spring out of everything... Such experiences can come about entirely unexpectedly in the midst of ordinary life; through prayer, fasting, meditation or... through taking drugs such as nitrous oxide, LSD or mescaline... (1991:15,146)

An account of a universal mystical experience dovetails neatly with her account of a universal NDE: so much the better for the biological circuits that generate these experiences. Mysticism is thus understood alongside drug use and altered states of consciousness; the emphasis is placed on the altered state (the subject) instead of the purpose of that state (the object), and thus prayer, fasting, medication or drugs become the means to an end. Blackmore's reading of mysticism is therefore understood through the prism of drug experiences, and the effects that one can achieve through altered states of consciousness. Even so, the very emphasis upon "ascetical practices, breathing techniques... (or)... taking drugs... would not have been thinkable for the constructions of mysticism of early and medieval Christianity" (Jantzen, 1996:318). Jantzen's point can be elaborated further: the experiences of mystics display a myriad of visions, and recount their messages through a variety of literary motifs and vehicles, but in the writings of Blackmore, the sign 'mysticism' is limited to a tiny component of the mystical diaspora of writers in the Middle Ages.[35] On all sides the reporting of an ineffable quality of the NDE bares similarities to the kind of mystical experience recounted by William James, a similarity not lost on NDE researchers.[36] This emphasis upon the ineffability of the NDE as parallel to the

[35] Thus, Meister Eckhart emphasised an intellectual mystical theology (1995:116-117) whereas Bernard of Clairvaux created a tapestry of visions and memorised scriptures in his visions (1995:L84-85). Both of these strands were male, and in complete opposition to the often erotic descriptions of female mystics such as Julian of Norwich or Hadewijch of Antwerp. In recounting these experiences, Jantzen shows just how different they are from what we would read about in current NDE literature.

[36] Raymond Moody states the following about James in his book *The Light Beyond*: "William James... said that this (the experience of light) is an experience that is noetic. It is self-certifying because it is a form of knowledge. It is so personal it is beyond words. And it is profoundly life changing. It is, pure and simple, an experience of light" (Moody 1988:175). According to Kenneth Ring, "These experiences clearly imply that there is something more, something beyond the physical world of the senses, which, in the light of these experiences, now appears to be the only mundane segment of a greater segment of reality" (1980:255).

extreme experience on the fringes of consciousness that William James discussed is, as Jantzen points out, a much narrower perspective on the mystical union of God that medieval mystics extolled. She states,

> In spite of the occasional broader understanding of experience as a progressive opening out of all of life to God, on the whole James concentrates on a much narrower notion of experience, studying the 'extremer expressions of the religious temperament'... He argues that the essence of an experience must be judged from its intenser manifestations, even though they may be one sided and exaggerated... we can see in this practice James' reaction to Kant... If there are supernatural powers, and if these powers can in any way communicate with human beings, then such communications will take place, according to James, at the fringes of consciousness, hence it is the fringes that must come in for the closest attention... (Jantzen, 1989:300-301)

As I discussed in chapter 1, such an emphasis upon intense psychological experiences can be traced back to a reaction against the desacralisation of nature, and the corresponding division of post-enlightenment society into the public and private sphere. Thus, though during the Middle Ages what we would now call mysticism existed alongside pilgrimage, relics, and the cult of saints, the narrow psychological emphasis employed by James and his followers misses the possible implications of this context, as well as the focus medieval mystics placed on the virtues of union with God. According to Richard King, "In the modern era... the traditional hagiographies and writings of the saints become adapted and designated as mystical... *Emphasis shifts from a focus upon the virtues and miracles of the saints to an interest in extraordinary states of mind*" (King, 1999:17-18, italics mine). King's point can be flipped around: why is it that the Cult of Saints, which was a huge feature of the European 'religious' landscape for hundreds of years, has remained conspicuously absent from discourses about the reality of life after death (or even the possibility of mystical communion with the divine)? The posthumous miracles of the saints, the acts and hardships of pilgrimage, the intercessions for oneself (and for those already dead) which played such a huge part of many peoples' lives are (for the most part) silenced in discourses surrounding otherworld journeys and mysticism, where 'universals' are constructed along the schematics of modern, private, individualistic concerns. Whereas the mystical accounts of the Middle Ages, or the 'Otherworld Journey' literature as discussed in the previous section, would have stood alongside

---

Therefore, "In this respect, core-experiences are akin to mystical or religious experiences of the kind that William James discusses so brilliantly in his classic lectures on the subject" (1980:255). Zaleski states that William James would "...interpret it to mean that there are many realms of consciousness screened off from one another. Very little concrete information can be transferred from one realm to other, for each one is darkness to the other, and to move between requires a kind of death" (Zaleski, 1987:133).

the virtues and miracles of the saints, the religious currency of the latter seems to have run somewhat dry (at least in non-Catholic countries).

From the 17th century onwards, the "...term 'mystical' appears to have become increasingly pejorative" and, as opposed to being seen as a transcendental timeless phenomena, criticism was directed at the "apparent novelty of the mystic- having a history, they argued, that spanned barely three or four centuries and usually originated with figures such as Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross" (King, 1999:18). An etymology of the term "mysticism" shows that, in its Greek origins (from the Greek word *muo*) it meant 'to close', and was attributed to the mystery-cults of the Graeco-Roman world, where it was taken to mean either the closing of the eyes or of the lips (1999:15). In medieval times, the word became entwined with the notion of mystical-theology, or divination of the hidden meaning of scriptures, an understanding that held up until the time of Luther, who thought that the Holy Spirit should make scriptural interpretation clear and simple. Thus, "Luther dismissed the 'twaddle'... of a mystical theology, which he condemns as more Platonic than Christian..."(King, 1999:16). As science began to define itself against "more expressive modes of thought"(King, 1999:16) it created the category of literature and

> Fiction became opposed to factual writing, subjectivity to objectivity... the multivocality of literature was seen as distinguishing it from the univocality of science... By the middle of the seventeenth century, 'the mystical' is increasingly applied to the religious realm alone, and the term disappears from the emerging scientific literature of the day... (King, 1999:17)

The changing discursive forces have meant that the category mysticism has undergone its own change in focus. NDE accounts, whilst languishing in glorious descriptions of the vistas of the afterlife, nevertheless owe part of their appeal to the "exotic otherness" of the psychic state itself.

Jantzen, in her exploration of the 12th century 'mystic' Bernard of Clarivaux, makes this point even more explicit. According to Jantzen, Bernard of Clairvaux, whilst displaying some of James' definition of mysticism, "...would find alien and unacceptable James' focus on levitations, trances, quasi-sensory visions, and other such phenomena" (Jantzen, 1989:308). As opposed to being fascinated by "...than these external, quasi-sensory, experiences of visual images... " Bernard was preoccupied with "...the deeply felt sense of the presence of God..."(Jantzen, 1989:304).[37] Rather than being preoccupied with "odd psychic states" Bernard is preoccupied with "opening one's heart to the deepest meaning of Scripture and

[37] Bernard's main preoccupation is "penetrating to the mystical meaning of the Scripture, a particular type of Scriptural exegesis characteristic of patristic and medieval writings" (1989:305).

encountering Christ" (Jantzen, 1989:305). Although there may be a certain experiential similarity with a Jamesian account of mysticism, "Spiritual experiences in the narrow sense are of unequal value" (Jantzen, 1989:308). The emphasis upon the ineffability of the experience, or even of the similarities with drug-induced experiences that Blackmore mentions above, distort these features of mystical accounts.

David M. Wulff constructs a definition of mysticism along these very lines, and argues that NDEs do not count as mystical experiences because they lack "the experience of union", whilst emphasising a "clarity of events", a "life review", and "meeting dead relatives", all of which set them apart from the ineffable mystical joining of the individual and the transcendent (Wulff 2001:397). Nevertheless, they share the idea that they transcend "the reality of everyday experience" to a higher realm" (Wulff 2001:397). This distinction is somewhat synthetic, in light of the recognition of the construction of mysticism (Jantzen, 1999, King, 1999). Mystical accounts in the Middle Ages (and I think specifically of St John of the Cross) are themselves laden with the kind of religious imagery that have caused comparisons to be made with the NDE (Cressy: 1993). Of course, one must be careful not to confuse contemporary accounts of mysticism with NDE research, not necessarily because, as Wulff would have it, they are particularly different, but because there is a struggle of authority centred on who or what has access to religious truth through their respective experiential accounts. For instance, the public interest in NDEs, coupled with such things as the brazen New Age rhetoric of Kenneth Ring proclaiming that the NDE heralds the Age of Aquarius, and the accusations of the IANDS setting up an NDE 'religion', meant that these claims to a universal mystical experience would not go unnoticed or unchallenged by those Christian theologians and philosophers interested in older debates about the potential wisdom to be gleaned from a universal mystical experience.

Judith Cressy a Christian minister, religious counsellor and NDE survivor is careful to maintain, "... we can now recognise the NDE as a mystical experience, and the NDEr as some kind of mystic... (however), on closer inspection not all NDEs are spiritually similar, and most NDEr's have not attained the heights of spiritual consciousness" (Cressy, 1994:63). Therefore, "The NDEr may desire to begin or continue a spiritual practise, preferably on one of the paths attached to the world's religions... through thousands of years, the understanding of the dimension of the spirit has been developed, and teachers have been trained and legitimised to lead the disciple into the other world and back again..." (Cressy, 1993:64). Cressy's project is to rescue NDE survivors from being categorised as "psychotic". At the same time, she

wishes to locate them in a lineage of mystical teachings from the (ahistorical and apolitical) world-religions. Nonetheless, the imbrication of mysticism within 'real-world' concerns remains conspicuously absent from her work, and whilst her counselling project for NDE survivors is undoubtedly of real moral and psychological worth, her loftier goal of locating the NDEr within such a universal 'tradition' assumes a great deal about what it means to count as a 'mystic' in other cultures and times. Thus, it is easy for her to conclude that "mysticism was... the Christian equivalent of spirituality in other traditions and I (therefore) use the terms interchangeably" (Cressy, 1993:63) when the social, political and even physical cost of being religious is so low.

Cressy begins her analysis by examining the mystical accounts of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. In St Teresa of Avila's case, Cressy (1993:63) recounts Avila's experiences during meditation, where "I thought I was being carried up to Heaven: the first person I saw there was my mother and father... I wish I could give a description of at least the smallest part of what I learned..." St Teresa continues "while the light we see here and that other light are both light, there is no comparison between the two and the brightness of the sun seems quite dull if compared with the other..." (Cressy, 1993:63). She continues,

> Unlike the mystic, NDErs return to an alien community rather than a monastery... They return to a culture dominated by secular materialism, with little understanding of and less interest in mysticism. They, themselves, may misunderstand their own experience... The conflicts and tensions that result may create pathology where previously only a penchant for mysticism existed... The sixteenth century Spanish world of St Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross *was equally dangerous* in a different way. Fear of the inquisition silenced many mystics. *St John did not speak openly about his mystical experiences, but disguised them in the metaphorical nuances of poetry*... Theresa appeared to experience the same events as an NDE... (Cressy, 1993:66, emphasis mine)

According to Jantzen (1989:299), quite the contrary to St John of the Cross hiding his ineffable experiences within religious language, he "... has a carefully nuanced philosophy of language along Thomist lines, and... is able to move from the genre of erotic poetry to that of academic commentary to convey his meanings with precision."[38] This emphasis upon the ineffableness of mystical experience again belies the influence of William James, and Jantzen states, "(this)... is, however, exactly in

[38] Jantzen (1995:133) argues that in female mystics of the Middle Ages "(t)he usual male anchoring in the mystical meaning of scripture is often absent, since the women did not have access to the education or the ecclesiastical position which would make possible for them the years of Bible study which many of the male writers enjoyed."

line with the preconception that mystical experience is of its nature ineffable..." (1989:299).

St Teresa of Avila's NDE featured an out-of-body spiritual experience, access to all knowledge of the universe, a 'life review', and a loss of fear of death (Cressy, 1993:68). Additionally, "Theresa often composed poetry at this stage and was unable to reason... ", she "exhibits the confused speech of the mystic that is often thought to be psychobabble", and she "was called mad", thus, she suffered "similar persecutions" to the NDEr (Cressy, 1993:69). Teresa suffered a 'pedestal effect', similar to that experienced by modern NDErs, where they are first elevated, then persecuted for their experiences. In fact, "Theresa's most serious persecution... came from those who believed she was possessed by the devil, as some fundamentalist Christians accuse NDErs" (Cressy, 1993:72). Thus, in this analysis, the NDEr would seem to be a proto-mystic. Cressy fails to mention, however, that Teresa of Avila utilised fairly explicit erotic language to discuss the union with God, as did other female mystics of her time, and there was no indication that such language should be taken figuratively (Jantzen, 1996:134). Indeed, descriptions of the mystical union of God, as exemplified in the 13th century mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg's account of God wishing her to be "naked" and aiming to satisfy her with his "superabundance" (Zan Brunn, cited by Jantzen, 1996:133), seem conspicuously absent from twentieth century accounts of mysticism, and especially from the mystical analysis of Cressy. Jantzen would undoubtedly point out that it is easy to miss such gendered language - and the dangers of it- when being a mystic is no longer a threat, and the rules of engagement already presume the subjective psychological nature of such accounts. To say that stories of the NDE pose a threat to those in modern secular society in the same way that mystics of the late Middle Ages risked the wrath of the Inquisition (which Cressy implies) seems to be a construct of the theological imagination more than an accurate analysis of the risks of coming out of the mystical closet in (post) modern society.

As I discussed in chapter 1, scholars like Jantzen have made much of how such comparative analyses miss the way that mysticism has been used as a means to enforce issues of gender construction. It follows that one probable reason that female mystics spoke of ineffable experiences was because they did not have access to the theological training that males did (Jantzen, 1993:158, King, 1999:19). Further, as Jantzen points out, there is a huge blind-spot in the academic study of mysticism (also evident in Cressy's work); that is, being a female mystic was a means to negotiate control of one's own body away from a male patriarchal society. Thus, when Catherine of Sienna restricted her food intake and devoted her life to God, the

extreme control that she exerted seems also to have been a means to avoid marriage. To read mysticism as an intense psychological state is to miss the dynamics of how this worked itself out in medieval society (just as querying whether NDEs are themselves 'real' or are subjective psychological experiences misses the wider cultural dynamics that have shaped these experiences). The gender dynamic that Jantzen highlights in a historical analysis of mysticism is, to a large degree, absent from the discourse surrounding NDEs (although it is possible to argue that there is a difference in emphasis between the early male NDE writers talking about the resuscitations, and Kübler-Ross's emphasis upon the birth into the next life). With religion relegated to the private sphere, it no longer harbours the same ideological weight as it would in medieval times; as Jantzen has pointed out, who counts as a mystic means a lot more if one is taken to be having direct communion with the almighty. Whilst the NDE remains a threat to the kind of scientific materialism espoused by Susan Blackmore, the very fact that Moody, Sabom, Greyson, Ring *et al* try to move religion out of private religious experience into the realms of scientifically verifiable evidence means that it is less of a threat than if God's existence was taken for granted by everyone. Thus, as Jantzen would undoubtedly point out, because the NDE is less of an ideological threat, it does not matter *who* has it. Cressy's attempt to locate the NDE as part of a richer religious tradition shows that the modern construction of mysticism still represents a struggle for authority. Nevertheless, her undeveloped nuance of the politics of religious experience means that it is easy for her to assume that the kinds of threats that medieval mystics faced are comparable to the psychological difficulties NDE survivors face now, an assumption that seems only possible in parts of the modern Western world.

6.5 The NDE and The Tibetan Book of the Dead

In the last three sections I have utilised NDE literature as a means to open up questions about the stability of the categories "death", "otherworld journeys", and "mysticism" respectively. By showing that these categories have no stable referent, and by alluding to alternative understandings of the categories 'death' and 'mysticism', I have attempted to 'make strange' the underlying structures that shape the contours of debate around these experiences. My previous section involved selective dips into the (Christian) history of the West, but in this section I move further afield and examine the interconnection between NDE literature and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (henceforth TBOTD). In doing this, I argue that the distance between NDE literature and the TBOTD is not one that spans the

geographical and chronological eons, but rather is quite a bit closer to home. Thus, common understandings of 'death' as a 'point of no return' (and the mystical experiences after it) are replicated in NDE engagements with the TBOTD.[39]

In the introduction to this chapter I quoted Kenneth Ring, who argued that the otherworld journey literature of the Middle Ages displayed phenomenological similarities to the *delok* literature of Tibet, the implication being that scholars just happened upon the similarities whilst sifting through cross–cultural material. This is not the case. Rather, the TBOTD is a text that has very much been 'constructed': the version of the text to which I refer for this chapter (actually a translation of seven books out of a seventeen book sequence[40]) is so laden with Western introductions and commentary that it itself seems to be more of a product of the Western imagination than analogous of Buddhist practises in Tibet. By examining the appropriation of the TBOTD within NDE literature I show how there is almost a complete reversal of the original function, understanding, and meaning of the text. What was originally a mortuary text read aloud by a Tibetan monk in the presence of a dying person- a text aimed at informing the dying as to the nature of what they faced next (and ideally helping them to escape the cycle of rebirth and achieved Nirvana and the eventual non-existence of the self)- became a text to be read by the living as a way to satiate their curiosity about the afterlife. The text also (somewhat ironically) provided parallels for the discourse of the NDE, a discourse that sought to give evidence for the eternal existence of the self. I begin by examining the discussion of the TBOTD within Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* (1975), before contrasting this understanding with the interpretations the English based Tibetan lama Sogyal Rinpoche, and the comparative analysis of Lee Bailey. These three represent the

---

[39] By examining how NDE research has engaged with the TBOTD, I make parallel moves to Gerald James Larson in his article *"Conceptual resources" in South Asia for "environmental ethics" or The Fly is still alive and well in the bottle* (1987). Larson argues that "(w)e appear to be using, albeit unconsciously, a particular metaphor that... is methodologically loaded and seriously misleading. If one substitutes the word "natural" for "conceptual" in the expression "conceptual resources" it becomes immediately apparent that we are using an economic metaphor in our undertaking. Since the Eighteenth century, Europe has been utilizing Asia to supply a variety of resources... What is methodologically loaded and seriously misleading is... that we are not interested in the raw materials in their natural state. We want, rather, to appropriate the raw materials so we can use them for making what we want... they must be detached or "dug out" as it were... Of course, we recognise that the market for the eventual product is worldwide or global... we can congratulate ourselves that what we are doing will subsequently benefit not only Asia but all people everywhere. This, of course, is exactly the rationale that the British used in India during the Raj" (Larson, 1987:152). Nevertheless, as shall become apparent throughout this section, the TBOTD does not represent "natural resources" (and post-colonial scholars might very well query whether this is a somewhat monolithic understanding of cultures) but has a very specific western location.

[40] According to David Germano, the text that we know as the TBOTD was itself part of the fourteenth century revelation to Karmalingpa entitled *The Profound Doctrine of Wisdom's Natural Freedom (in encountering) the Peaceful and Wraithful Deities* (Germano, in Lopez ed. 1997:458). Donald Lopez has pointed out that it has had more readers in its English version than it ever did in Tibet, and Tibetan Scholars would have recognised that its other title (*Bar Do Thos Grol*) to refer to the Mortuary texts of the Nyingma sect (Lopez, 1998:48-49).

perspectives of the NDE researcher, the 'Tibetan lama', and the religious studies scholar, although as I shall show, there is substantial common ground in their positions. In the writings of these four, the NDE and the TBOTD all point to a common perennial experience (although opinion varies as to whether the NDE or the TBOTD reveals more of this experience), as well as holding to death as a fixed point (implicitly assuming the construction of death discussed in 6.2), and an assumption of a "pure" religious experience unencumbered by the trappings of tradition and dogma (thus replicating a Jamesian understanding of religion as discussed in 6.3 and 6.4, as well as constructing religion along the contours of the spiritual marketplace, as discussed in chapter 4).

In dissecting this common ground, I utilize the works of Donald Lopez (1996, 2000) and tap into a strand of Post-Colonial analysis that has attempted to cast the TBOTD in its specific cultural location. For reasons of brevity and focus, I shall not, in any major way, discuss the intersection of the TBOTD with theosophy,[41] or the interest of Carl Jung and his psychological interpretation the text,[42] or the later Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert re-write in the 1960s which used the book as a metaphor for the various stages of the acid trip. Rather, I keep the focus on the NDE and, through this, I keep in mind the words of Donald Lopez, who argues that "(in the West) *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* must be read against something

---

[41] Evans-Wentz was not a Buddhist, but a theosophist. Before Wentz was to come into possession of the manuscript that became the TBOTD in India in 1927, he already subscribed to a nineteenth century American new religious movement that idolised Tibet as the "preserve of secret knowledge" (Lopez, 1998:50). In the words of Lopez, "The Theosophical Society was founded in New York by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott... It was in many ways a response to Darwin, yet rather than seeking in religion a refuge from science, it attempted to found a scientific religion... of spiritual evolution. The society was founded at the height of the late nineteenth century interest in spiritualism" (Lopez, 1998:50). The doctrine of spiritual evolution was therefore key to the theosophist movement, and for Wentz, the discovery of the doctrine of reincarnation in the TBOTD was a boon; in his eagerness, he took "...unjustified liberties with the text" (Lopez, 2000:N). In his 1927 preface he emphasised that he intended to suppress his own views, and merely be the mouthpiece for his Tibetan Sage, but nonetheless emphasised the parallels of the knowledge of the Holy Men in the East and those in the Occident, parallels that had a historical connection, thus reinforcing the doctrines of theosophy over the cultural and historical locations of the text itself (Lopez, 1998:53). By the time of the second edition (1948) Wentz was to elaborate on this in his preface, stating that the West had lost "its own tradition on the art of dying" (Lopez, 1998:56) and compared the TBOTD with the knowledge of the Egyptians (thus setting a trend for comparing the TBOTD with its apparent Egyptian counterpart). Thus, what was known to Christians through the middle ages and the renaissance "was a pre-Christian tradition", just as the Tibetan Art of the Dying was a pre-Buddhist one (Lopez, 1998:56).

[42] Jung's 'psychological commentary' to the TBOTD argued that "The world of Gods and spirits is truly 'nothing but' the collective unconscious inside of me" (Jung, 1938 [2000]:lii). These "ideas are primordial and universal, originating from an omnipresent psychic structure" (Jung, 1938 [2000]:lii). Instead he argued that Europeans should reverse the order of the Bardo states so that "one begins with the experience of the collective unconscious", then "moves to the state of collective unconscious", before finally to the "state in which illusions cease" (Lopez Jr, 1998:59). He critiques the narrow mindedness of Freud, whose psychoanalysis could only, at the most, discover intrauterine memories, and though "Western reason reaches its limits" (Jung1938 [2000],xli). Freud could have pushed his thinking further and thus proven reincarnation (Lopez Jr, 1998:58). Nevertheless, "Some might judge this particular condemnation to be disingenuous since Jung himself did not pursue the question of the existence of rebirth (beyond the symbolic level)..." (Lopez Jr, 1998:58).

else for its true meaning to be revealed, in order for it to provide liberation from the author's version of samsara, the cycle of rebirth" (Lopez, 2000:253).

The Tibetan Book of the Dead has its origins in a series of Tibetan mortuary texts read aloud by monks to the dying to help them after death; in the West the same text has become popularised as a New Age guide for the affluent living. Thus, the *Delog* accounts of Tibetan laywomen 'mystics' dying and reviving on certain days of the year, with the purpose of providing guidance for their communities, becomes parallel to NDErs visiting God. The Buddhist view of achieving liberation from the cycle of rebirth via the realisation of the impermanence of the self is forgotten in a genre that was originally birthed trying to prove that this very self was, in fact, immortal. According to King and Carrette (2005:86), the problem with these kinds of appropriations of Asian traditions by the so-called 'New Age spiritualities' is that "there is generally a failure to appreciate that this is not the total picture", and therefore, "...the wisdom of diverse ancient civilisations becomes commodified in order to serve the eclectic interests of 'spiritual consumers' in the contemporary New Age Marketplace".[43] As I argued in chapter 5, the early books of Moody, Sabom and Ring *et al* neither aimed to sell a commodified form of spirituality nor endorsed a particular New Age ethos. Nonetheless, they shared a conception of 'religion' and 'spirituality' that established their place on the New Age or Esoteric bookshelf with a minimum of fuss, and NDE texts would sell alongside books that endorsed common 'New Age' themes of the meetings of 'Western science' and 'Eastern mysticism'. These writers had their own NDE ideas appropriated within a wider 'New Age' sphere, and (in the case of Moody and Ring) sanctioned certain facets of New Age spiritualities, as the decades passed.

Raymond Moody notes the parallels to the TBOTD in *Life After Life* (1975). He begins his analysis by stating "(t)his remarkable work was compiled from the

[43] The TBOTD "...has been made to serve wide-ranging agendas in various fields of use, agendas that have more to do with the twentieth century cultural fashions of Europe and America than with how the text has been used over the centuries in Tibet" (Lopez Jr. 1998:47). These cultural fashions have included NDE research, which (in the English-based Lama Sogyal Rinpoche's 1992 re-write) has been cross-pollinated with Ian Stevenson's reincarnation research, Kübler-Ross's work on death and dying and a liberal sprucing of quotations from "...Montaigne, Blake, Rilke, Henry Ford, Voltaire, Origen, Shelley, Mozart, Balzac, Einstein, Rumi, Wordsworth, and the venerable Bede", an array of eclectic thinkers that "together creates a cosmopolitan eclecticism... what the book conveys is not a Tibetan Buddhist tradition but a universal message, a perennial philosophy..." (Lopez Jr, 1998:79). One must be careful, of course, to not construe the circumstances as merely a way street between the coloniser West and the colonised East. With the current political situation in Tibet, the Dalai Lama exile, and the occupation of this country by China, it has been pointed out that the construction of Tibet as a timeless land of wisdom suits the Tibetan cause (Lopez, 1998:8-9). Thus, in this particular case, the exoticisation of Tibet is encouraged in the West as a means to rally support (Lopez, 1998:8-9). Additionally, as Lopez has pointed out (one would assume, somewhat autobiographically), it was texts like the TBOTD that would initiate the interest of (those who would eventually become) scholars of religious studies, and those who would in turn seek to orientate these texts within their own discursive history (Lopez, 1998:113).

teachings of sages over many centuries in prehistoric Tibet and passed down through these early generations through word of mouth" (Moody, 1975:110). The TBOTD was eventually put to paper "in the eight century A.D", although it "was hidden to keep it secret from outsiders" (Moody, 1975:110). Perhaps reading the content of the book through the prefaces of Evans-Wentz, he states "...the wise men who wrote it regarded death, in effect as a skill- something which can be done either artfully or in an unbecoming manner"(1975:10). In actual fact, the last words of the dying person were said to dictate their next rebirth, but it was the seeds of previously accumulated karma that would influence the last spoken words of the dying [Lopez, 1997:442]. The idea that the TBOTD was part of a wider canon of 'the art of dying' literature (often held as analogous to the Egyptian work *The Book of Going Forth by Day*, or more commonly *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*) has been traced back to Evans-Wentz, who sought to establish the influence of the esoteric east on the "Good Death" literature of the Middle Ages (Lopez, 2000:k). The question of reincarnation, the wheel of samsara, the doctrine of accumulated karma, the different levels of reality (to name but a few doctrinal implications of the TBOTD) lurk somewhat uncomfortably in Moody's account of a text that instructs people in how to die (as opposed to seeing death as an opportunity for liberation).

Moody does acknowledge that the TBOTD "...contains a lengthy description of the various stages through which the soul goes after physical death" (Moody, 1975:112), although declines to actually detail these stages, presumably because stories of being visited by a multitude of deities and other facets of the after-death experience are too far removed from the NDE account to warrant specification.[44] Rather, he exclaims "the early stages of death which (the TBOTD) relates and those which have been recounted to me by those who have come near death are nothing

[44] According to Lopez, the TBOTD "...is the product of a chance meeting between a fourteenth-century Tibetan author, and a latter day eccentric, Walter Wentz from San Diego California. Since its publication in 1927, it has been reincarnated several times..." (Lopez Jr, 1998:47). As death occurs, the TBOTD describes a feeling of "pressure... a bodily sensation of clammy coldness which gradually merges into heat" (Collin, from Cederroth, Corlin, and Lindstrom ed. 1988:67). Thus, with the onset of unconsciousness, the dying person enters *Chikhai Bardo*, the first of three Bardo states, Bardo being the intermediary place between life and death (Collin, from Cederroth, Corlin, and Lindstrom ed. 1988: 68) and literally meaning "between two" (Lopez Jr, 1998:49). At this point, the soul faces the moment of "greatest possibility", that of being able to enter nirvana and escape the cycle of rebirth, by recognising true reality when the "profound state of consciousness called the clear light dawns"(Lopez Jr 1998:49). If the soul is unable or unwilling to achieve this state, then it will remain "numb" for three days before awakening and entering the second stage of Bardo, which lasts for two weeks - *Chönyid Bardo,* where fifty-eight wrathful deities and forty two peaceful deities unfold (Lopez Jr, 1998:49). In this state the soul will acquire a bardo body and is able to traverse the physical world, as well as being aware of other spiritual dimensions and frightening apparitions.[44] This leads to the final stage of the Bardo - *Sidpa Bardo.* During this stage, "the intellect will be driven... by the ever-moving wind of karma, in a grey, twilight-like-light, seeking rebirth. His spirit can rest at temples, stupas... " (Collin, from Cederroth, Corlin, and Lindstrom ed. 1988: 68). The spirit will be subject to visions of the six worlds of existence - hells, ghosts, animals, humans, titans, and gods - before choosing a womb for rebirth, a choice limited by the karma accumulated (Lopez, 2000:L).

short of fantastic" (Moody, 1975:112). Moody draws most of his similarities out of the three Bardo state, and re-describes this in the manner of the NDE "mantra" discussed in chapter 1. Thus, after death the soul enters a "swoon" and "he finds himself in a void- not a physical void, but one which is... subject to its own kind of limits..." (Moody, 1975:112). Like the classic Moody NDE, 'he' might hear "roaring, thundering, and whistling noises" (Moody, 1975:112). He might therefore awaken "in a grey misty illumination", and is thus "surprised to find himself out of his physical body" (Moody, 1975:112). He witnesses his close relations and acquaintances grieving over him, but, whilst trying to respond, they "neither hear nor see him", and, in despair, he remains at the place near death for a "period of time" (Moody, 1975:113). He notices that, in his shining body, he can travel instantaneously, and 'his' mind becomes "lucid" (Moody,1975:113). He may "...encounter other beings... and may meet... a clear or pure light... The Tibetans counsel the dying one approaching this light to try and have only love and compassion towards others" (Moody, 1975:113). Moody does not mention that the point of this light is to entice one towards the wheel of samsara, and back to the cycle of rebirth. The lama's job in overseeing the reading of (what we in the West call) the TBOTD is to help the person in the Bardo realms realise that the frightening apparitions are merely the outward mirror of their heads and hearts, and that, by recognising them for what they are, one can finally achieve liberation. Thus, in a sense, the light is a seductive "easy way out", and not the opening of the gates of heaven that is so indicative of NDE literature. This reflects Carrette's observation quoted previously: "the same gesture in one culture can have a very different meaning in another" (Carrette, 2000:98). In this case, the witnessing of light after death can have two profoundly different meanings for different religions: in Christianity, it represents the culmination of Christian hope, whereas for Tibetan Buddhism, it represents the path that (eventually) leads to more suffering.

Vaguely, Moody concludes on the idea that "The book also describes the feelings of immense peace and contentment which the dying one experiences" and also that one might find one's life judged in "a kind of mirror... all deeds both good and bad ... are reflected for both him and the beings judging him... there can be no misrepresentation; lying about one's life is impossible" (Moody, 1975:114). The cycle of rebirth, and the six worlds of existence, are therefore conveniently glossed over, as is the fact that to be able to recognise the initial "light" for what it is, one must have reached a high level of enlightenment, through the process of reincarnation, which is extremely difficult for the layman to achieve, leading them to seek a reincarnation

into a higher station.[45] Despite this, Moody concludes that "even though *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* includes many stages of death which none of my subjects have gone on so far as to experience... there is a striking similarity between the account in this ancient manuscript and the events which have been related to me by twentieth century Americans" (Moody, 1975:114). Even so, the actual details of this ancient text are kept somewhat obscure so that the twentieth century (potentially Christian) Americans reading his book would presumably not be too perplexed at the striking differences that Moody did *not* highlight.[46] The TBOTD has therefore been utilised as a parallel to the NDE narrative; but those professing to write from the perspective of Tibetan Buddhism have also not been slow to utilise the NDE as a preliminary trip into the Bardo realm.

The general gloss-over of the cultural location and finer subtleties of Tibetan Buddhism was not just the prerogative of western academics such as Moody; in 1992, Sogyal Rinpoche, a Tibetan Lama living in England, published *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Donald Lopez sums up Rinpoche's perspective: "Tibet is lost, and all that remains is its wisdom... (Rinpoche) places that wisdom in a global and ahistorical lineage of thinkers that no other author has ever cited" (Lopez, 1998:79). Additionally, Lopez reports that the Tibetan text is "...so thoroughly appropriated in Sogyal's work that its translation need not be included" (1998:79).[47] Easy access to spiritual enlightenment in the West is far away from having a Tibetan Monk carry out rituals on one's behalf in the hope of a better rebirth after death, with the eventual attainment of Nirvana being an extremely difficult proposition. Whilst not willing to

---

[45] The lama's duty, in reading this text to the deceased is to urge "the deceased not to give himself or herself over to the terror in fear of the chaos or otherness, but instead to self-recognise: to recognise the chaos and seemingly fierce process of change as part of who he or she is, to realise that the figures looming ahead are his or her projections as in a dream..." (Germano, in Lopez ed. 1997:459).

[46] As I have indicated in Chapter 4, *Life After Life* is laden Christian imagery and symbolism, and dedicated to "George Ritchie... and the One whom he suggested" (Moody, 1975:V). Whilst the TBOTD was already firmly established as an esoteric text, explicit crossovers would not occur until much later when NDE literature was becoming more laden with New Age overtones. Also, it is worth noting that since it's publication in the early part of the twentieth century, the TBOTD has sold around 525 000 copies, whereas in the thirty years of its existence, *Life After Life* has sold around 14 million: whilst the esoteric text has obviously had substantial appeal over its 80 years of being in print, it seems to have not reached the critical mass (nor public crossover) of NDE literature, I suspect for the reasons I have highlighted in chapters 3 through 5 (that is, the combined appeal of the exoticness of the Operating Theatre, the "normality" of its early researchers, and the medico-scientific evidence that permeates NDE literature).

[47] Donald Lopez locates Rinpoche in his own particular cultural lineage of academics, gurus and esoterics who have been interested in appropriating this text for their own purposes: "According to Evans-Wentz, Lama Kazi Dawa Samdup supported the esoteric view of rebirth as an evolutionary system in which regression to the brutish realms was impossible... (Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert)... concluded that it could probably be read as an eight-hour acid trip. Trungpa Rinpoche portrays the realms of rebirth as psychological states. Sogyal Rinpoche uses his discussion of the six realms as an opportunity to lampoon Californian surfers and New York bankers... Evans-Wentz, Leary, Trungpa, and Sogyal can all interpret the six realms as a matter of popular belief rather than fact because they have no real contract with practises of ordinary Tibetans. Their investments have been made elsewhere: in Theosophy for Evans-Wentz, in LSD for Leary, in transpersonal psychology for Trungpa, in the New Age for Sogyal (Lopez Jr., 1998:83)

reject totally the six realms of reincarnation, Rinpoche instead compares the realms of the Gods to Californian surfers living in virtual paradise, demigods to Wall Street Bankers, and the ghostly realm to those people in the Third World starving (Lopez, 1998:80); as Lopez dryly puts it, "Perhaps Sogyal believes that his audience would literally recoil at a literal rendering of the doctrine of the six realms of rebirth- as physical realms where beings are reborn after death" (Lopez, 1998:80).

This is carried over into Rinpoche's comparison of the NDE with the accounts of the after-death realms in the TBOTD. Rinpoche's account of the similarities between Tibetan Buddhism and the NDE gloss over the Mahayana philosophy, inherited by Tibetan Buddhism, that suffering is caused by ignorance, and ignorance is caused by belief in the self. So, as opposed to Western NDE accounts (and the searches of spiritualists in the 19th century) that feature meeting previously dead relatives or friends who are in Heaven, the Tibetan view is that enlightenment is only realised when is liberated from the *desire to hold on to such concepts of selfhood* (Lopez, 1997:20). Thus, (one presumes) the desire to establish evidence for the survival of one's relatives, one's friends, and one's own self, cuts against the entire point of trying to escape the cycle of rebirth. Rinpoche, untroubled by such doctrinal niceties, quotes liberally from Western NDE accounts, and draws similarities with the darkness and the tunnel (Rinpoche, 1996:164), the light (1996:165), the out-of-body experience (1996:165), and meeting others (1996:169). In discussing the process of "visiting different realms" he states, "In the bardo of becoming... the mental body will see visions and signs of different realms. A small percentage of those who have survived a near-death experience have reported visions of inner worlds, of paradises, cities of light, with transcendental music" (1996:169). The actual phenomenology of the experience of entering into the Bardo realm is left vague, as is the purpose of the rituals of the monk called to read the TBOTD out to the dying person in order to guide them, and the rituals performed by the relatives of the person in order to help them through the stages of rebirth. Likewise, hellish visions, including being sucked down into a whirlpool, feelings of intense cold or heat, and of people wandering the initial stages of the other realms aimlessly, vaguely reflect people about to be reborn into the "lower realms".

The idea of rebirth seems to be completely absent in Western NDE accounts, and the concept of a barrier that an individual reaches in the NDE seems absent in the TBOTD, but this does not trouble Rinpoche, who responds by saying that "... in the Tibetan Bardo teachings there are no parallels to this, because they describe what happens to a person who *actually dies*" (Rinpoche, 1996:171, italics mine). In Moody's work we saw an appropriation of the TBOTD as evidence for a universal

NDE, and in Rinpoche's work, we see an appropriation of the NDE as evidence for the bardo states of an ahistorical and universal Tibetan Buddhism. Rinpoche (writing from a western location) also inherits a western understanding of the difference between "near-death" and "actual death" that I discussed in section 6.2, capitalising on this to argue that the 'true' insights of the Bardo realm were only to be had in the latter category, although this itself replicates a Western understanding of "actual death" being a point of no-return. Like Judith Cressy's utilisation of the NDE as a proto-mystical experience, Rinpoche sees the NDE as a proto-Bardo experience, but one that must be subsumed to the wisdom of Tibet. This wisdom, however, seems to rely explicitly on Western concepts of death and the after-death as opposed to representing the texts, traditions and customs it purports to speak for.

Moody in his initial NDE research saw the TBOTD as bearing parallels to the experience he had uncovered, whilst Rinpoche saw NDEs bearing similarities to Tibetan religious traditions. According to the Religious Studies scholar Lee W. Bailey, the relationship between these two perspectives actually indicates a slow post-modern merging of science and mysticism. He begins his analysis "*Delog* deaths are an extraordinary tradition in Tibetan culture, strikingly akin to the Near-Death Experience... but there are revealing differences with important implications" (Bailey, 2001:140). Bailey is fairly shrewd in certain respects: he recognises that NDEs reflect the Western individual, as opposed to the Delog carrying messages to her family/community/society (Bailey, 2001:147); that some Delog's may "observe scenes of deliverance; some travel in the higher realms of the Gods, paradises, buddhas and bodhisattvas". He recognises that the "*delog* material gives evidence to the cultural materialist who argues that the contemporary Euro-American picture of the NDE is neither a standard nor a universal pattern"(2001:155). Nevertheless,

> Taking the reality of the unconscious images seriously is an essential first step in placing near-death phenomena in an interpretative framework that goes beyond the scientific, industrial cultural vision of literal truth, and adding to the discussion the realm of paradoxical and symbolic language (Bailey, 2001:157)

Bailey therefore notes, "NDEs, shamans, and *Delogs* in different cultures will seem radically different, but they do reveal archetypal similarities reaching over vast ages and distances..." (2001:157). Whilst Bailey praises psychoanalysis for "demonstrating meaningfully through psychotherapy the reality and meaningfulness of the unconscious psyche", he does not propagate a Jungian archetypal analysis explicitly. Rather, he concludes, "NDEs are a postindustrial, postmodern conundrum expanding Western consciousness beyond the narrow shaking certainties of industrial

consciousness and its associated traditional religions" (2000:157). Eschewing the sociological weight with which the term "postindustrial" was originally imbued, Bailey seems to equate post-modernism with the kind of 'meeting of western science and eastern spirituality' already evident in the aforementioned discussion of the discursive elements surrounding the creation of the TBOTD. He concludes with the observation that "We are witnesses of the awakening of a new spirituality, a healing global deepening of the soul that needs to *blend the best of scientific thinking with the best of mystical spirituality*" (Bailey, 2001:158, italics mine).[48]

Through the conduit of the NDE, we have therefore come a long way from the mortuary text read aloud to dying Tibetans, and the tradition of the Tibetan women who have returned to warn communities to observe rightful practises; rather, these concerns have become subsumed in the somewhat giddier claim of a 'post-modern' merging of Western science and Eastern spirituality. Thus

> The spiritual (is) at once both universal and personal, accessible not only through the great "world religions", but also, perhaps in a more pristine form, through Asian traditions or through shamanism, nature worship, or the cult of the goddess, what was once regarded as primitive (Lopez, 1998:79, italics mine)

The appeal of Shamans who travel in otherworld journeys becomes analogous with the individual in the West seeking a journey to help transform him or her spiritually. Whatever one thinks of the worth of the 'shaman' as an anthropological category,[49] the shift from the (sometimes dangerous) initiation ceremonies that the classic 'shaman' goes through in order to undertake 'his' otherworld exploration seem far

---

[48] In reading Bailey's aforementioned vacuous statement, one is almost tempted to invoke the Logical Positivist's Verification Principle (that is, if it were not fraught with philosophical and conceptual difficulties) as a means to query precisely *what this statement actually means*, or indeed whether it holds any meaning at all.

[49] According to the otherworld journey proponent I. P. Couliano, "Mircea Eliade defined shamanism not as a religion properly speaking, but as a 'technique of ecstasy', a system of ecstatic and therapeutic models whose purpose it is to obtain contact with the parallel universe of the spirits and win their support in dealing with the affairs of the group or of an individual... (this definition excludes) phenomena that can be defined as sorcery... According to this definition, shamanism is unknown on the African continent. However shamanism is identifiable in the religions of all continents (including Tibet)" (1991:38). Space does not permit an analysis of Couliano's phenomenological analysis of the shaman, save for the following curios. His analysis seeks to define the shaman as any individual who interacts with the other world, whether through sorcery, witchcraft and so forth across a range of cultures, religions, and times. In his vast analysis he does not stop to query the analytical worth of the category itself, which is made to cover a diverse range of medicine men, mystics, visionaries, witches and so forth. Thus (for instance) the aboriginal shaman is analogous with the aboriginal sorcerer (1991:44) a point that the author recognises, without ever stopping to ask whether his category legitimately identifies an anthropological characteristic, or whether it explains everything (and therefore nothing). Nevertheless, it is not my purpose to dispute *a priori* the anthropological worth of the category here. Rather, even in Couliano's analysis, one gets the feeling of the hardships that the shaman must endure in his or her endeavours, which seems to be almost the exact opposite of the spiritual consumer seeking spiritual transformation spoken of above.

and away removed from the New Age bookstore browser looking for a cure for spiritual malaise. In this transformation we bear witness to what Hugh Urban (2003:255) identifies when he argues "the dominant logic of late capitalism is 'pastiche' and 'bricolage'- the freewheeling syncretism of diverse elements drawn from disparate historical and cultural eras, patched together solely by the whim of the individual consumer". Writing in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, the Transpersonal Psychologist Michael Grosso proposes a "post-modern" shamanic turn for the future of NDE research, and opens up the possibility of the shaman being found in the everyman. Building on the empirical approach of psychical research, combined with the experiential approach of the Shaman, and utilising techniques from Sufi, Tibetan, and Chinese traditions, Grosso seeks to induce a means to a "deep process of self-transformation" (Grosso, 20001:12). NDE research takes its place as a facet of the "human experience", analogous with "archetypal constellation of psychic constants" which themselves can be located "everywhere in shamanic, mystical, and inspired states of being" (2001:12). Thus "...the importance of the "I" seems to thaw, melt, and fade away" (2001:13) and the NDE becomes another facet, not only of evidence for another world, but a tool for "self-transformation" (2001:12). As epitomised in the work of Grosso, "...spirituality emerges as the product of religious fragmentation and eclecticism, hidden in the psychological structure of individualism..."(Carrette and King, 2005:73). This recognition is born out by the emphasis of the individual Shaman appearing in various places through this chapter- thus "... it still reinforces the private state of consciousness and often uncritically reflects the value of individualism rather than the wider social domain" (Carrette and King, 2005:73).

6.6 Conclusion

In the modernist demarcation between public and private, both death and mystical experience have become entwined, in the discourse of NDEs, as the exotic other. In chapter 3 I argued that the reorganisation of the social sphere in modernity gave rise to the denial of death; in this chapter I have shown how the modernist discourse of medicine changed our constructions of death by locating it in the physiology of the dying body. Consequently, I contextualised psychoanalytical ideas of death and religion by showing how ideas of death have changed from *fear of hell* to *fear of non-existence*; both may well have deep psychological roots, but the former means that people in the Middle Ages did not need proof of the afterlife but rather protection from it, whilst in the (post) modern period, the question of non-existence has meant

that people have sought *evidence* for life after death. This is a fairly seismic shift. Nonetheless, the *desire* for evidence for life after death has meant a sifting through historical accounts for phenomenological similarities between the NDE and otherworld journeys of the Middle Ages, a process that glosses over the cultural differences of these time-periods in favour of defending an idea that people inherently need some kind of "religious-symbolic" in their lives. Such a search, as undertaken by Christian scholars such as Zaleski, replaces "God" with the "religious symbolic", and assumes a romanticised notion that people in the West are scrambling to find a religious narrative to orientate their lives; this is a subtly different position from arguing that, whilst people may well be convinced of their own immortality, such a desire can be played out within the wider discourses of post-modernity that inoculate the reality of biological death via a blurring of the real and the unreal. The former position assumes that we need to satisfy the God shaped hole in our lives, whilst the latter position assumes that God herself becomes another tool to propagate the everlasting self alongside the post-modern blurring of real and unreal.

Even so, to talk about God, heaven, and eternal life is to invoke the religious symbolic of Christianity, and in the last section of this chapter I explored how the desire to establish the "ecumenical theology" of NDEs (whether of mysticism or otherworld journeys) is really a constructive affair; thus, as Fitzgerald puts it "At one level ecumenical theology is designed to build bridges of... interfaith dialogue between the world religions, but it also articulates a relationship between imperialist western polities and their colonised native elites" (2000:23). The discussion about the TBOTD between Westerners such as Moody and lamas living in England (Sogyal Rinpoche) hides just how these Buddhist texts have been appropriated, transformed and reconstructed in the services of securing evidence of an afterlife for Westerners who live in the shadow of non-existence. This is almost a complete role-reversal from the purpose of eventually reaching the liberation of no-self towards which these Tibetan texts aim. Thus, as I shall expand upon in my conclusion, NDEs are not a universal experience that we can discern through the world, but rather the category "NDE" exists within its own sliding chain of signification.

Conclusion: Putting the Near-Death Experience in its Place

7.1 The Indeterminacy of the Category "NDE"

If experiences of the type which I have discussed are real, they have very profound implications for what every one of us is doing with his life. For then, it would be true that we cannot fully understand this life until we catch a glimpse of what lies beyond it (Moody's final sentence from *Life After Life*, 1975:165)

The afterlife of a phenomenon is part of its meaning, but this is a meaning opaque to those around at the time (Eagleton, 1983[1996]:190)

In this thesis I have argued that the appearance of the category 'NDE' depends on the Operating Theatre, and it is the Operating Theatre that has defined its conditions of emergence. I have then examined how the discourses of Medicine and the Modern Hospice Movement have caused the Operating Theatre (and therefore the NDE) to be an exotic sacred space cut off from public view, and from this, I have examined how the category of the 'NDE' has been transformed via its intersection with the discourse of 'Science", and its commodification on the "Spiritual Marketplace". Through exploring these discourses, I have maintained that the category 'NDE' has no stable referent, and is, in effect, indeterminate. Ever since Moody assumed "the role of the dead man in the game of writing" (Foucault, in Rabinow ed. 1984:101) and handed the category of the NDE over to others in the form of his written discourse, the exact signification of this category has remained frustratingly indeterminate for those who sought to interpret or explain it. This indeterminacy was evident right from the start of NDE research, although the attempt to locate the NDE in a lineage of other phenomena (whether in a universal history of mystical experiences, a western history of scientific investigations of the afterlife, or alongside other physiologically based conditions that might help explain it, to name but a few) has meant that, until now, the unstable nature of the category has been ignored in disputes over the "proper" signification of the NDE.

The initial emergence of Moody's work saw an attempt by his medical and psychological colleagues in the IANDS (Kenneth Ring, [1980] and Michael Sabom [1982]) to shore up the boundaries of the category of the NDE via their scientific research and quantitative analysis, but even in their early writings their religious differences were apparent. Ring saw the potential for global transformation towards a New Age; Sabom detected parallels to the Bible. As the 1970s turned into the 1980s, and the 'Spiritual Marketplace' (Roof, 1999) flowered in the West (and specifically America), a whole host of researchers saw in the NDE evidence for their own particular creed, sect, or interest. Kenneth Ring (1984), taken by the work of the

unorthodox Catholic Priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, looked at the NDE as a 'seed experience' analogous with other religious and mystical experiences, and categorized the NDE as a gateway to impending global transformations via a planet-wide spiritual evolution and the arrival of a New Age. Fundamentalist Christians such as the cardiologists Maurice Rawlings (1978, 1994) and Michael Sabom (1998) saw this influx of New Age thinking as part of a conspiracy. Rawlings maintained that there had been a suppression of Hellish NDEs in favour a universal NDE account that allowed people to attain salvation no matter what, while Sabom thought that Kenneth Ring was setting himself up to be the prophet of a New Age religion, intent on propagating religious doctrines. Both Rawlings and Sabom believed the NDE to be a potential tool of Satan as a means to lead the masses astray from the revelation of Christ.

Other, less evangelical Christian approaches also perused the NDE with interest, and saw in it evidence for their own positions. Theologians such as Carol Zaleski (1987, 1996) looked at the NDE as a somewhat impotent version of the great 'Otherworld Journey' narratives of the early Middle Ages, evidence that the 'homo religiosus' of humanity had not been extinguished but fluttered weakly, maintaining a link with the 'religious symbolic'. Christian 'Mystics' such as Judith Cressy (1993) saw in the NDE a 'proto-mystical' experience that needed to be subsumed under the great 'mystical traditions' of the world religions, and believed that NDE survivors should be directed towards their nearest mystic for guidance in such matters.

Psychologists such as Susan Blackmore (1993) also saw a relationship between the NDE and mysticism, but it was the mysticism caused by drugs, altered states of consciousness, and 'abnormal' brain functions such as temporal lobe epilepsy. To Blackmore, the NDE was not a singular entity but a conglomerate of physiologically based experiences that were dependent on the actual processes of dying (cardiac arrest patients were more likely to see a tunnel of light whereas drowning victims were more likely to have a life review). She believed the NDE should be understood alongside experiences of lack of oxygen, excess carbon dioxide, depersonalization, and temporal lobe epilepsy, to name but a few suggested physiological parallels. Between the believer/sceptic positions, parapsychologists such as Stephen Braude argued that the NDE was not necessarily evidence for survival, but rather could be explained via the 'super-psi' hypothesis where the dying brain lit up with one last psychic burst, before extinguishing. Thus, the NDE took its place in a schism that has run through parapsychology for decades (the survival/non-survival debate) and was aligned with medium research, cross-correspondence cases, and apparitions.

Conceptually further afield, but based in England, the 'Tibetan Lama' Sogyal Rinpoche (1996) argued that the NDE was itself a preliminary window on the Bardo realm spoken of in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and was the merest glimpse on the future location where a person's reincarnation (or liberation) is decided. Still, his account of this realm laid more emphasis on the language of the New Age than on the ascetic practices and religious doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism (Lopez, 1998). At the same time, Transpersonal Psychologists such as Michael Grosso (2001) and comparativist Religious Studies scholars such as Lee Bailey (2001) appropriated the NDE as a "conceptual resource" (Larson, 1987) alongside a myriad of other cultural and religious phenomena such as UFOs, visions of the Virgin Mary, the TBOTD, shamanism and whatever else appealed, under the rubric of a hollow 'Western science unifies with Eastern mysticism' banner that stated astonishingly little. For these thinkers (who evidently had not read Kenneth Ring's more giddy predictions of the 1980s, and his rueful recanting in 2001), nothing less than the dawning of a new spirituality was promised, and the NDE assumed its place amongst a veritable potpourri of New Age phenomena.

Even the temptation to return to the author, Raymond Moody, leads us no further forward in stabilizing the signification of the category NDE: in 1999, Moody himself attempted to obtain foundational closure on the NDE by writing his book *The Last Laugh*, which he announced should "be incorporated immediately into the earlier book for all serious purposes of reading, discussion, or scholarship" (Moody, 1999:xi). Seeking to redirect the thrust of NDE research, he argued that "i've tied the arguments of this, my latest volume, so tightly into (*Life After Life*) that if anyone could knock the chops out from under *The Last Laugh* (the first book) would come crashing down with it" (Moody, 1999:xvii). Nonetheless, his insistence that he had never actually argued that the NDE was proof of life after death (his publisher had apparently taken out the appendix detailing his skepticism [1999:7]), that "there *may be no such thing as life after death*" (1999:8, italics his) and his prescriptions for viewing the NDE as light entertainment and aligning it with his research into the therapeutic benefits of mirror gazing (1999:154-157), seems somewhat incongruous with the Moody of 1975. Thus, the NDE "cannot be sprung shut" or "rendered determinate by an appeal to the author" (Eagleton, 1983:119), and although Moody attempted "to play the role of the regulator", the category had already been assimilated into an almost "inexhaustible world of significations" "(Foucault, in Rabinow ed. 1984:118-119). Whilst the repeating of Moody's composite NDE account has inaugurated many written discussions of the NDE (including this thesis), his work cannot be returned to in order to close these discussions.

This thesis has therefore established that there is no fixed foundational core of the NDE. Rather, the category has been defined according to the shifting discourses with which it intersects. Without wishing to hold that the NDE is a complete social construction, I have maintained that the NDE has been chameleonic, changing shade to fit whatever background it has been cast against. In order to place the NDE in its own 'history of ideas' I have not simply pursued a textual deconstruction to show that the NDE slides away in an endless signification of deferred meaning (worthy as such considerations are), but have instead sought to explore the specific discursive formations that have shaped the emergence of this category, the discourses that have engaged with it, and the wider cultural scene to which it appealed. In this thesis I have therefore used a Foucaultian archaeological method as a means to establish my primary argument: the conditions of possibility that allowed the emergence of the category of the NDE were found in the Operating Theatre, and it is the Operating Theatre, and what it represents, *that have made these accounts possible.* By arguing that the NDE derives its initial uniqueness from the Operating Theatre, I have *not* maintained that the procedures of modern medicine have opened up a window on to another realm that is somehow more 'objective' than other mystical and religious experiences, otherworld journey narratives, or deathbed visions. Rather, as the last 30 years of NDE research (and 120 of psychical research/parapsychology) has shown, it is extremely doubtful if any 'objective' scientific evidence of the afterlife is actually possible in the first place. The common view that the NDE is separated from these other religious accounts by medical intervention, medical research, or scientific analysis does not, in actual fact, stand up to close scrutiny or, indeed, provide conceptual closure, and the history of NDE research bears testament to this. It is the exoticness of the Operating Theatre, the violence of the medical accounts (often of people in the prime of their lives and not the old and infirm), the (masculine) authority of the medical practitioner, and the 'everyman' or 'everywoman' reporting them, that has elevated the NDE above the popularity of other Mystical, New Age and/or esoteric accounts.

In order to contextualise this argument, my thesis was subdivided into three themes that represent the different axiomatic discourses with which the category of the NDE has interconnected: 'Medicine', 'Science', and the 'Spiritual Marketplace'. I explored the first two discourses' relationship with these experiences in order to outline the discursive formations of NDE research, and used the latter category in

order to explain why the discourse of NDEs had such initial success. In exploring these three categories I showed what makes the NDE unique, but (in keeping with my post-structuralist methodology) I started and finished this thesis by defining the category against what it is not. Thus, I have differentiated the NDE both from Psychical Research (in chapter 2) and other constructions of 'death' and 'mysticism'.

I argued that the NDE research shares little in common with psychical research and latterly parapsychology. Whilst researchers struggle to maintain conceptual closure over the category of the NDE, those enamoured with the possibilities it offers seek to locate it in a 'family tree' (Zaleski, 1987:97) with psychical research and (latterly) parapsychology. This approach, in its desire to construct a 'tradition of scientists looking at life after death' glosses over the fact that psychical research looked for evidence for the continued existence of the Other (and indirectly the Self), whereas NDE literature looks to discuss the continued existence of the Self (and indirectly the Other). Psychical Researchers looked to those already departed, where NDE accounts provide first person narratives that discuss the existence of the self on the other side, who might meet others. Against the arguments of Ring (1982:20), Zaleski (1987:97-99), and Parker, (2001:225), while there is no doubt that Anglo-American Psychical Research emerged out of (and engaged with) the tail end of 19th century Spiritualism, and that many of its founders were intellectual believers who sought evidence to soothe their ontological anxieties in a climate of the emergence of Darwinism and science in general (Myers and James particularly), it would be a mistake to see their interests as synonymous with (or embryonic of) NDE research. Because of high mortality rates and the general familiarity with death, the grim realities of death were not exotic: in investigating life after death, the real interest lay in contacting those who were already on the other side. Research into the potential for life after death was focused on the unconscious or subliminal undercurrents of the psyche that might possibly yield the answers to life after death. This emphasis upon third-person narratives continued in the later parapsychological investigations of Osis and Haraldsson in the 1970s. They analysed deathbed visions as recounted by nurses, instead of first-person recounted visions of the afterlife from people who "returned". This, I have argued, goes a long way towards explaining why *Life After Life* has been retained in the public consciousness (and sold 14 million copies), whereas *At The Hour of Death* (1977), a book marketed in a similar vein (and also with a foreword by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross), has not.

In order truly to understand why these first person accounts of people going to the brink of all possible human experiences and returning to tell the tale have been so popular, I looked to the discourse of 'Medicine' and its protégé Palliative Care. I

have argued the following inter-related propositions: It was the modernist denial of death, and specifically the denial of death within medicine, that cloaked death and turned it into a somewhat exotic affair. The emergence of Palliative Care, and specifically the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, sought to rediscover the agency of the dying person, and by focusing on death as a transition for the individual, she opened up the space for stories of deathbed visions within popular culture. Nevertheless, her accounts of people being reborn into higher realms of existence (the so-called 'cocoon into butterfly') did not hold the same mass appeal as Moody's accounts of people struck down in the prime of their lives and recovering with stories of visions of other realms. I therefore established in chapter 3 that the Operating Theatre acts as a kind of exotic sacred space in NDE literature, with the physician acting as intermediary between this world and the next. The (masculine) Doctor's heroic efforts to pull the individual back from the brink of no return are offset by the heroic individualism of the everyday person facing death (and the afterlife). This binary of the 'objective specialist' and 'everyday person' could itself be considered as a kind of conceptual signifier and signified for the sign 'NDE' (at least initially). The *function* of the sign NDE within Western culture would not necessarily be to provide positive evidence for life after death, however, but to reassure people that the self will not perish. Utilising the work of French Post-Modernist Jean Baudrillard (1993, 1994), I argued that the NDE exists alongside, movies, books, videogames, and advertising, and blurs the distinction between real and unreal.

NDE researchers did not necessarily share this recognition and, from day one, their initial hopes for their 'scientific evidence of an afterlife' and their excitement at heralding a new age of religion was hard to hide. However, as I have shown, the wider cultural tectonics of the 'Spiritual Marketplace' shaped the contours of the understanding of the NDE. The consumer of NDE literature is not necessarily looking to have his or her ontological anxieties sated by evidence of the afterlife, but may just be happy to hear the suggestion that death is not the end of his or her own individual 'Self". They employ a 'pick and mix' approach in their religion and spirituality. Whilst the 'everyman' Raymond Moody, the "spiritual seeker" Kenneth Ring, and the 'Christian Cardiologist' Michael Sabom all variously appeal to a wide cross-section of people, this did not translate into the spiritual revolution hoped for by the founders of the IANDS. The IANDS therefore found itself embroiled in turbulent debates as to just what the NDE signified (as I discussed in 7.1). While their hoped for a religious 'golden age' never materialised, the so-called 'religious wars' erupted between the original three founders of NDE research. At the turn of the millennium, those that had previously set themselves apart as working not "...in darkened rooms in

circumstances contrived by witch Doctors, but in the bright light of emergency and operating rooms, presided over by physicians" (Moody, quoted by Zaleski, 1987:100-101) found themselves calling each other witch doctors. The medical focal point that had initiated these experiences was dissolved as a whole host of other religious, New Age, and esoteric interests came into play.

Running concurrent with these historical questions was the need to establish substantial scientific evidence for the afterlife, and I have therefore traced the role of the category 'science' in NDE research. The need to locate oneself within the discourse of science was evident from Raymond Moody onwards and has permeated NDE research, leading to everything from actual experimentation to the adaptation evolutionary narratives (just as it is used to provide part of the metaphysical foundations of scientific materialism in the work of NDE sceptic Susan Blackmore [1993]). From such macrocosmic considerations, I moved the focus down to how the gaze of the researcher has categorised NDE alongside a whole range of other physiological, psychological, or pharmacologically based phenomena. As Moody, Sabom, Greyson, and Morse (to name a few) were all MDs, they were all well aware of potential similarities between the NDE, and other, less supernatural experiences of the mind and brain. The initial attempts to distinguish a phenomenological difference between NDEs and these potential biological correlates was attempted, but proved a less successful strategy than pointing to such occurrences as paranormal verifications of surgical procedures, meeting relatives that one did not know was dead on the 'other side', and so forth. Although NDE research should not be located in a 'family tree' with psychical research in the 19th century, it *has* shared a desire for the "white-crow", that one special case that can transcend the scientific materialist view of the world, which characterised Psychical Research (although for psychical researchers, the predominance of scientific materialism was not as prevalent as it is now, and the psyche represented a mystery that might lead to confirmation of religious hope, whereas NDE accounts must transcend a more fundamentally entrenched view of the world). Whilst some extremely impressive cases have been uncovered (NDEs in people born blind, the 'Pam Reynolds' case) I have shown that these cases are always disputable and never as foolproof as 'believers' would like. This is because NDE research takes place at the very limits of human experience, a place so far outside the realms of scientific investigation as to spill over into the foundational metaphysical assumptions that anchor one's research in the first place.

Additionally, the prominence of the sign "science" has further illustrated three common themes of this thesis: first, the specific linking of medicine and scientific research in NDE literature (these debates have involved recounting medical

procedures and thereby reinforce the exoticness of the Operating Theatre); second, both sides of this debate replicate an understanding of mysticism as an extreme subjective experience brought on by isolation, drugs, and deliberately seeking altered states of consciousness; third, the medical understanding of the differences between *perceived* death and *biological* death is replicated. The NDE is secured and defined against this model of biological death and a psychological/physiological/ pharmacological model of mysticism, but when these understandings of death and mysticism change, so to does the understanding of the afterlife.

In order fully to understand the uniqueness of the NDE, I have therefore located the NDE against what it is *not*. I have explored how our understanding of the NDE is itself based on a culturally specific understanding of the categories "death" and "mysticism". Within the NDE discourse, "death" and "mysticism" become combined as the exotic other: both categories have been removed from the public sphere, with the former being exoticised in the private sphere of the medical ward, and the latter being defined (post-William James) as a private experience at the extremes of possible conscious states. Taking the former category first, I have argued that "death" emerges in its present understanding from modern medicine by way of Freud, an enormously influential development that has led to the common understanding of the 'fear of (biological) death' being a motive for belief in the afterlife. I have argued that such an understanding *assumes* a knowledge of biological death that has not existed until comparatively recently. Thus, as I indicated in chapter 3, medical understandings of death and medical intervention techniques have multiplied the states between life and death (and in doing so increased the epistemological and ethical quagmires surrounding these categories), but the common perception of death is that of a biological 'full stop'. I have argued in my thesis that this is why the 'Operating Theatre' has held such an allure in NDE literature: it seems to offer a window on a realm beyond this full-stop, even though NDE researchers seem at least dimly aware that their might be some problem with their use of the concepts of "near-death" and actually "after death".

Against this, I used examples from the late Middle Ages to indicate that death is a fluid concept: people have (in other times and places) wanted to keep the dead at arms length (i.e. in their graves and not rising from the dead and walking around) as opposed to wanting to commune with them (as we have seen in Psychical Research), or find evidence for their own after-death existence. Whilst I am perfectly happy to accept that, psycho-analytically, we are incapable of imaging our own non-existence, this can be held separate from the idea that people cling to religion out of a notion of a fear of death (which I suspect is tied up with the removal of death from the public

sphere, as discussed in chapter 3, and the renewed emphasis upon belief in an afterlife, when the Other of non-belief looms large in Western culture).

By arguing that our (Western) understanding of death is not universal, this has allowed me to make problematic the idea that there is a universal 'need' for "otherworld journey" narratives, an argument that, in the work of Carol Zaleski (1987, 1996), harbours a theological agenda of arguing that humans 'need' the divine (in this case postulated as the 'religious symbolic'). The solitary journey of the (male) Shaman 'actively' engaged in pursuing an Otherworld Journey bears a *thematic* similarity to the 'passive' (female) mystic seeking ineffable communion with the divine: both accounts feature solitary individuals seeking extreme experiences outside of 'organised' religion. This I have traced to William James, and noted that the reason the NDE has retained 'fuzzy' boundaries with modern accounts of 'mysticism' is largely thanks to James' influential work *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* (1902). In the limits of this thesis I have had little room to do justice to just how *different* the experiences of mystics in the Middle Ages actually were, but I have used the work of Grace Jantzen (1989, 1995) at least to point out some glaring differences in content and description. Jantzen has argued that the vast differences between the written works of male and female mystics of this time period can be traced to the different male/female dynamics in the Middle Ages, which were themselves shaped by the ecclesiastical power structures of the time. The reason that modern authors on mysticism (in this case, NDE commentator Judith Cressy, 1993) miss such a huge factor in the construction of mysticism is that they are so bound up in the public/private dichotomy (that implies that religious experience is *ipso facto* a private subjective experience and therefore not open to rational, public verification) that they fail to appreciate that modern constructions of mysticism (and NDEs) render little threat to the 'public' sphere of society, and this is why it is acceptable for women to speak vocally about having NDEs. Whilst NDEs threaten to move religion back into the 'public' sphere, the very fact that NDEs exist in the private sphere to begin with (that is, they are assumed by many to have biological or psychological correlates) somewhat neutralises the potential threat to the public/private split in Western society. Thus, when Judith Cressy maintains that modern NDE survivors share the same psychological alienation (and go through the same difficulties) as (female) mystics facing the Inquisition in the Middle Ages, the indication of how deep our Western constructions of secularisation and religious experiences becomes apparent. The similarities between an NDEr, who has had an experience that their friends and family might assume is psychological and subjective, (thus leading to alienation), and the (female) mystic, whose experience might possibly be considered

demonic (and thus led to the pyre), gives an indication both of the varying cultural currency of these respective experiences, and the blindness of contemporary mystical and NDE analysis to the social construction of mystical accounts in other times and places.

The fact that the full implications of the public/private division can remain so hidden is also evident in the assumptions of NDE researcher and authors spoken of in Chapter 4; whilst Moody, Ring, Greyson *et al* thought that they were offering publicly verified evidence of the afterlife (with global implications), in reality, their accounts were being read in the privacy of peoples' homes, a curiosity that helped satiate people's hopes that death might not be the end after all, but one that did not require any major change in their day-to-day lives.[1] The blindness to the implications of how NDE research fits into the wider 'spiritual marketplace' is evident in the appropriation of the narrative of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead.* A mortuary text initially used as part of a wider mortuary discourse, read over the dying/dead person in the hope of guiding them to Nirvana, liberation from the chain of rebirth, and non-existence, has become, in the West, a text appropriated to suggest evidence for the existence of the self after death. Whilst researchers such as Moody (1975:110) have looked at this text hopefully as evidencing some phenomenological similarities to the NDE (and, conversely, Tibetan Buddhists such as Sogyal Rinpoche have looked at the NDE as indicative of their own beliefs), such an approach misses the transformation that occurs when religious ideas from other cultures are appropriated as conceptual resources (Larson, 1987:152) to be used as tools for 'self transformation' for the New Age consumer.

This is not to say that there are no phenomenological similarities in the various religious accounts that I have discussed. Rather, as scholars such as Jantzen (1989, 1995), King, (1999), Lopez (1999), Flood (1999) and Carrette (2000) would undoubtedly point out, the history of emphasis on the 'other world' misses how the constructions of this category influences (and mirrors) the power structures in this world. The search for a common thread misses the differences in social fabrics. This is highlighted in Carol Zaleski's pondering as to just why NDE literature will not lead to a new religion:

> When we try to evaluate near-death experience, we may feel stymied by our own sophistication... we find ourselves effectively collared by the corollary that these revelations cannot legislate to – perhaps cannot even be shared with – the general public... Near-Death Literature is at its best when it is

[1] Or, equally possibly, shore up their own religious convictions- as I have established in the first part of the conclusion, the NDE has meant many things to many people; the point is that it has been interconnected with peoples' own particular predictions and convictions, not prompted them to form a new religious movement.

> modest and anecdotal; pressed into service as philosophy or prophecy, it sounds insipid. There is no match here for the revelatory literature of the great religious traditions; and it seems unlikely that a Gregory the Great or Dante will emerge to shape Near-Death testimony into a religiously sophisticated or artistically ordered statement. Neither could the medieval visions we considered stand on their own, they thrived insofar as they exemplified a wider tradition... near-death testimony breaks down into private testaments which, despite their common features, have not mustered the collective energy to produce a coherent world-view. (Zaleski, 1987:204)

Such recognition stops short at asking *why* is it that NDE narratives cannot perform the same function in our (post) modern society, a question that also remains unasked in wider NDE literature, but a question that I have attempted to answer. Whilst the NDE might bear phenomenological similarities to the 'otherworld journey' narratives, or the TBOTD, the search for comparisons misses the huge differences across times and cultures, starting with our own need to attempt to prove scientifically these realities in the first place.

In the end, the NDE is too far beyond the realms of scientific investigation for the veridical question to be answered one way or another, and too far into the indeterminate messy realms of human discourse to maintain conceptual closure as an entity in-and-of-itself. In this thesis I have left open the possibility that the NDE refers to another reality, just as I have left open the question that there are phenomenological similarities between it and other mystical or religious experiences. Moody is undoubtedly right in asserting, in the opening epigraph, that *if* the NDE was a window on to the afterlife, then the implications would be truly enormous. Nonetheless, returning to quotation by Eagleton, that "(t)he afterlife of a phenomenon is part of its meaning, but this is a meaning opaque to those around at the time" (1983[1996]:190), we would nevertheless have to be on "the other side" in the first –or last- place to really appreciate the enormity of such a recognition. Whilst on this side, I have argued that as long as we focus on the subjective psychological experience in an attempt to prove the NDE 'true' or 'false' (according to whatever criteria we read into it), we miss the specific historical, cultural, and social discursive factors that make this category unique.

Bibliography

Aiken, L.R. (1991) *Dying, Death, and Bereavement (Second Edition)*, Simon and Schuster, Massachusetts

Allen, D. (1997) *Culture and Self, Philosophical and Religious Perspectives, East and West*, Westview Press, Oxford

Alles, G. D. (2001) *Religious studies after Foucault: comments on Carrette*, Culture and Religion 2(1) 2001

Alvarado, C.S. (2000) *Out-Of-Body Experiences*, from Cardena, E., Steven, J.L.. Krippner S., ed. (2000) *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*, American Psychological Association, London

Alvarado, C.S. (2003) *On the Centenary of Frederic W.H. Myer's Human Personality and it's Survival of Bodily Death*, Journal of Parapsychology, no. 68 (3-43)

Adorno T, Horkheimer M (1973) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Allan Lane, London

Arras, J.D. ed. (1995) *Bringing the Hospital Home; Ethical and Social Implications of High Tech Hospital Care*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore

Asad, T (1993) *Genealogies of Religion*, John Hopkins University Press, London

Aries, P. (1974) [1994] *Western Attitudes Towards Death: from the Middle Ages to the Present*, John Hopkins University Press, published by Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, London

Armstrong, D. (1998) *Foucault and the sociology of health and illness, A prismatic reading*, from Welton, D. ed. (1998) *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford

Atkinson, P. (1995) *Medical Talk and Medical Work; The Liturgy of the Clinic*, Sage Publications, London

Atwater, P. (1994) *Beyond the Light: The Mysteries and Revelations of Near-Death Experiences*, Avon, New York

Atwater, P. M. H. (1996) *What Is Not Being Said About the Near-Death Experience*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, Routledge, London

Audain, J.D. (1999) *Gender and Trauma in the Near-Death Experience: An Epidemiological and Theoretical Analysis*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, 18/1 Fall 1999, Human Sciences Press, New York

Badham, P., Badham, L. (1982) [1984] *Immortality or Extinction?*, Macmillan, London

Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Bailey, L. (2001) "A Little Death": *The Near-Death Experience and Tibetan Delogs*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, 19/3, Spring 2001, Human Sciences Press, New York

Bain, B.A. (1999) *Near-Death Experiences and Gnostic Christianity: Parallels in Antiquity*, Journal of Near-Death Studies 17/3 Spring 1999, Human Sciences Press, New York

Barbour, I. (1997) *Religion and Science; Historical and Contemporary Issues*, HarperCollins, San Francisco

Barclay, I. (1988) *Death and the Life to Come; What happens when I die?*, Hodder & Stoughton, London

Barkow, J.H., Cosmides L., Tooby, J. (1992) *The Adapted Mind, Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Barrett, L, Dunbar, R, Lycet J ed. (2002) *Human Evolutionary Psychology*, Houndmills, Pallgrave

Barrett, W. (1986) *Death of the Soul; From Descartes to the Computer*, Anchor Press, New York

Bataille, G. (1962) [1994] *Eroticism*, Marion Boyars, London

Bauman, Z. (1992) *Intimations of Post Modernity*, Routledge, London

Bauman, Z. (1992) *Morality, Immorality and Other Strategies*, Polity Press, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford

Bauman, Z. (1997) *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, Polity Press, Blackwell, Oxford

Bauman, Z. (1998) *Postmodern Religion?* In Heelas P. ed (1998) *Religion, Modernity, and Post-Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford

Bauman, Z. (1998) [2000] *Globalization, The Human Consequences*, Polity Press, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford

Baudrillard, J., (1994) *The Illusion of the End*, Polity Press, Cambridge

Baudrillard, J., (1993) *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Sage Publications, London

Becker, E. (1973) *The Denial of Death*, The Free Press, New York

Beloff J. ed. (1974) *New Directions in Parapsychology*, Paul Elek, London

Beloff, J (1985) *What is Your Counter-Explanation? A Plea to Skeptics to Think Again*, found in Kurtz, P. ed. (1985) *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology*, Prometheus Books, New York

Beloff, J. (2001) *Physicalism and Parapsychology*, in Lorimer, D. ed. (2001) *Thinking Beyond the Brain, A Wider Science of Consciousness*, Floris Books, Glasgow

Bem, D.J. Honorton, C. (1994) *Replicable Evidence for Information Transfer*, from Psychological Bulletin, vol. 115, No.1, pages 4-18

Bennet, G. (1987) *The Wound and the Doctor; Healing, Technology and Power* in Modern Medicine, Secker and Warburg, London

Bernauer, J.W. (1990) *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Towards an Ethics of Thought*, Humanities Press International, London

Bevis, P., Cohen, M., Kendall, G. (1989) *Archaeologizing Genealogy: Michel Foucault and the Economy of Austerity*, from Smart, B. ed. (1994) *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments 2 Volume 6*, Routledge, New York

Bird, A. (1998) *Philosophy of Science*, UCL Press, London

Blackmore, S. (1987) *The Elusive Open Mind: Ten Years of Negative Research in Parapsychology*, Skeptical Enquirer, Volume 11

Blackmore, S. (1993) *Dying to Live- Near Death Experiences*, Prometheus Books, New York

Blackmore, S. (1995) *Parapsychology*, found in Coleman A. M. ed. *Controversies in Psychology*, Longman, London

Blackmore, S (1998) *Experiences of Annoxia: Do Reflex Anoxic Seizures Resemble Near-Death Experiences?* Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, NY

Blackmore, S. (1999) *The Meme Machine*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Blackmore, S. (2000) *First Person- Into the Unknown*, New Scientist, November 2000

Blackmore, S. (2001) *What can the paranormal teach us about consciousness?* Skeptical Enquirer, Volume 25

Bloch, M. and Parry J. (1982) *Death and the regeneration of life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Bjork, Daniel W. (1983) *The Compromised Scientist: William James in the Development of American Psychology*, Columbia University Press, New York

Bonenfant, R.J. (2001) *A Child's Encounter with the Devil: An Unusual Near-Death Experience with both Blissful and Frightening Elements*, Journal of Near-Death Studies 20/2, Winter 2001, Human Sciences Press, New York

Bowker, J. (1991) *The Meaning of Death*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Bradley, A. (2004) *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy*, Routledge, London

Braun, W., McCutcheon, R.T., ed. (2000) *Guide to the Study of Religion*, Cassell, London

Brewster, S., Joughin, J.J., Owen D., Walker, R.J., ed. (2000) *Inhuman Reflections; Thinking the limits of the human*, Manchester University Press, Manchester

Brooke, J. H. (1991) *Science and Religion; Some Historical Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Brown, B., Cousins, M. (1980) *The Linguistic Fault: The Case of Foucault's Archaeology*, from Smart, B. ed. (1994) *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments Volume 2 (1)*, Routledge, New York

Brown, B. (1981) *The Cult of Saints*, SCM Press Ltd, London

Brumblay, R.J. (2003) *Hyperdimensional Perspectives in Out-Of-Body and Near-Death Experiences*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, 21/4, Human Sciences Press, New York

Bruce, S. (1996) *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults*, Oxford University Press, New York

Bruce, S. (1999) *Choice & Religion; A Critique of Rational Choice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Burkhardt, F. H., Bowers, F., Skrupskelis, I. K., (1982) *The Works of William James, Essays in Religion and Morality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge

Burkhardt, F. H., Bowers, F., Skrupskelis, I. K. (1986) *The Works of William James, Essays in Psychical Research*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge

Burton-Russell, J. (1997) *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*, Princeton University Press, London

Bury, M. (1997) *Health and Illness in a Changing Society*, Routledge, London

Bush, N.E. (1994) *The Paradox of Jonah: Responses to "Solving the Riddle of Frightening Near-Death Experiences"*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, New York

Bryman, A. (1992) *Charisma and Leadership in Organisations*, Sage Publications, London

Carrette, J.R. ed. (1999) *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault*, Manchester University Press, Manchester

Carrette, J.R. (2000) *Foucault and Religion*, Routledge, London

Carrette, J. R. (2001) *Post Structuralism and the Psychology of Religion; The Challenge of Critical Psychology*, from Jonte-Pace, D. and Parsons, W.B. ed. *Religion and Psychology, Mapping the Terrain.*

Carrette, J.R. (2001) *Foucault, strategic knowledge and the study of religion: a response to McCutcheon, Fitzgerald, King, and Alles*, Culture and Religion 2(1), 2001

Carrette, J. R. (2003) *The Return to James: Psychology, Religion, and the Amnesia of Neuroscience*, in James, W [1902] (2002) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Routledge, London

Carrette, J. and King, R. (2005) *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, Routledge, Abingdon

Cederroth, S., Corlin C., and Lindstrom J. ed. (1988) *On the Meaning of Death: Essays on Mortuary Rituals and Eschatological Beliefs*, Uppsala, Stockholm

Certeau, M. D. (1986) *The Black Sun of Language: Foucault*, from Smart, B. ed. (1994) *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments 1 Volume 2*, Routledge, New York

Certeau, M.D. (1992) *The Mystic Fable*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago

Cherry C. (2000) *Experiences Near Death: Beyond Medicine and Religion by Allan Kellehear (review)*, from the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Volume 64.3, No. 860, July 2000, London

Chidester, D. (1986), *Michel Foucault and the Study of Religion, Religious Studies Review*, Vol 12, no 1 (1-9)

Christie-Murray, D. (2000) *Mindsight by Kenneth Ring and Sharon Cooper (review)*, from the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Volume 64.3, No. 860, July 2000, London

Clack, B. (2002) *Sex and Death*, Polity Press, Cambridge

Clark, D. ed (1993) *The Sociology of Death: theory, culture, practise*, Blackwell, Oxford

Collett, M. (1997) *At Home With Dying, A Zen Hospice Approach*, Shambhala Publications, Boston

Collins, J.J. Fishbane, M. (1995) *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, State of New York Press, New York

Cosslett, T. ed. (1984) *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Couliano, I.P. (1991) *Out of this World; Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein*, Shambhala, Boston

Cressy, J. (1994), *The Near Death Experience: Mysticism or Madness*, The Christopher Publishing House, Boston

Cressy, J. (1996) *Mysticism and the Near Death Experience*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Cuneo, A. (2001) *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty*, Bantam, London

Curd, M., Cover, J.A. (1998) *Philosophy of Science, The Central Issues*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, New York

Currie, I. (1978) [1995] *You Cannot Die; The Incredible Findings of a Century of Research on Death*, Element, Dorset

Currie, M. (2004), *Difference*, Routledge, London

Danziger, K. (1994) *Constructing the Subject; Historical Objects of Psychological Research*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Darwin, C (1859) [1964] *On the Origin of Species, a Facsimile of the First Edition*, Harvard University Press, London

Darwin, C. (1871) [1981] *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Princeton University Press, Chichester

Davis, S.T. ed. (1989) *Death and the Afterlife*, Macmillan Press, London

Dawkins, R. (1986) [1991] *The Blind Watchmaker*, Penguin, London

Dennett, D. (1996) *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, Penguin, London

Dennett, D. (2003) *Freedom Evolves*, Penguin, London

Derrida, J (1967)[2002] *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, London

Duffy, E. (2005) *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, Yale University Press, London

Dupre, J. (1993) *The Disorder of Things; Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science*, Harvard University Press, London

Eagleton, T. (1997) *Self-Undoing Subjects*, from Porter, R. ed. (1997) *Rewriting the Self, Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, Routledge, London

Edge, H.L. Morris, R.L., Rush, J. H. Palmer, J. (1986) *Foundations of Parapsychology, Exploring the Boundaries of Human Capacity*, Routledge, London

Eliade, M. (1952) [1991] *Images and Symbols, Studies in Religious Symbolism*, Princeton University Press

Ellwood, G.F. (2000) *Religious Experience, Religious Worldviews, and Near-Death Studies*, Journal of Near-Death Studies 19/1 Fall 2000, Human Sciences Press, New York

Evanz-Wentz, W.Y. trans. (1927) [1960] *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Feitel, H (1977) *New Meanings of Death*, Mcgrath Hill, New York

Fitzgerald, T. (1993) *Japanese Religion as Ritual Order*, Religion (23/1993)

Fitzgerald, T. (2000) *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Oxford University Press, London

Flood, G. (1999) *Beyond Phenomenology*, Cassell, London

Foucault, M. (1967) [1991] *Madness and Civilisation*, Routledge, London

Foucault, M. (1963) [2005] *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, Routledge, London

Foucault, M. (1966) [2004] *The Order of Things*, Routledge, London

Foucault, M. (1969) [2002] *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge, London

Foucault, M. (1975) [1991] *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin, London

Foucault, M. (1976) [1998] *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, Penguin Books, London

Fodor, J. [1998] (2001), *In Critical Condition: Polemical Essays on Cognitive Science and the Philosophy of Mind*, MIT Press, Massachusetts

Fox, M. (2003) *Religion, Spirituality, and the Near-Death Experience*, Routledge, London

Franz, M.L.V. (1987) *On Dreams and Death*, Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Freud, S. (1927) [1985] *The Future of an Illusion*, in *Sigmund Freud: Civilisation, Society and Religion*, Penguin, London

Gaines, J. (1994) *Machines that Make Bodies Do Things*, from Gibson, P.C. ed. (2004) *More Dirty Looks; Gender, Pornography and Power*, British Film Institute, London

Gardner, M (1985) *Parapsychology and Quantum Mechanics*, from Kurtz, P. ed. (1985) *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology*, Prometheus Books, New York

Gardner, M. (1989), *Science: Good, Bad and Bogus*, Prometheus Books, New York

Gentile, M., Fello, M., (1990) *Hospice Care for the 1990s: A Concept Coming of Age*, from Williamson, J. B., Shneidman, E. S. ed. (1976)[1995] *Death, Current Perspectives* (fourth edition), Mayfield Publishing, California

Gerth, H.H., Wright Mills, C. ed. (1948) [1991] *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Routledge, London

Gibson, A.S. (1994) *Near Death Experience Patterns from Research in the Salt Lake City Region*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, NY

Gibson, P.C. ed. (2004) *More Dirty Looks; Gender, Pornography and Power*, British Film Institute, London

Gilley, S. and Stanley B. ed. (2006) *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities c.1815-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England

Gomez-Jeria, J.S Saavedra-Aguilar, J.C. (1994) *A Neurobiological Model for Near-Death Experiences. II: The Problem of Recall of Real Events*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, NY

Gordon B. and Marshall P. ed. (2000) *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England

Gorer, G. (1965) *The Pornography of Death*, from Williamson, J. B., Shneidman, E. S. ed. (1976)[1995] *Death, Current Perspectives* (fourth edition), Mayfield Publishing, California

Gransham, L., Porter, R. ed. (1999) *The Hospital in History*, Routledge, London

Green, Celia (1968) *Out-Of-Body Experiences*, Hamish Hamilton, London

Green, F.G. (2003) *At the Edge of Eternity's Shadows: Scaling the Fractal Continuum from Lower Into Higher Space*, Journal of Near-Death Studies 21/4, Summer 2003, Human Sciences Press, New York

Greyson B., Evans, N.B. (1992) *Distressing Near Death Experiences*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Greyson, B. (2000a) *Dissociation in people who have near-death experiences; out of their bodies or out of their minds?*, From *The Lancet*, Volume 355, February 2000

Greyson, B. (2000b) *Near Death Experiences*, in Cardena, E., Steven, J.L.. Krippner S., ed. (2000) *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*, American Psychological Association, London

Grossman, N. (2002) *Who's Afraid of Life After Death?*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, 21/1, Fall 2002, Human Sciences Press, New York

Grosso, M. (1996) *The Archetype of Death and Enlightenment*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Gutting, G (1989) *Michel Foucault's archaeology of scientific reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Gutting, G. (2001) *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, University Press, Cambridge

Hall, S., Held, T., McGrew, T. ed. (1992) *Modernity and its Futures*, Open University Press, Cambridge

Hall, T. H. (1964) *The Strange Case of Edward Gurney*, Gerrard Duckworth and Co. London

Hastings, A. (2002) *The Resistance to Belief*, Journal of Near-Death Studies (21/2), Winter 2002, Human Sciences Press, New York

Have, H.T. & Clark, D (2002) *Facing Death: The Ethics of Palliative Care, European Perspectives*, Open University Press, Buckingham

Have, H.T. & Welie, J (2005) *Facing Death: Death and Medical Power, An Ethical Analysis of Dutch Euthanasia Practise*, Open University Press, Maidenhead

Heidegger, M. (1988) [2000] *The Essence of Truth*, Continuum, London

Hick, J (1976) *Death and Eternal Life*, Collins, London

Holton, B.J., Turner, B.S. (1989) *Max Weber on Economy and Society*, Routledge, London

Honderich, T. ed. (1995) *The Oxford Companion To Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Houlbrooke, R. ed. (1989) *Death Ritual and Bereavement*, Routledge, London

Hovelmann, G.H. (1985) *Evidence for Survival from Near-Death Experience? A Critical Appraisal,* in Kurtz, P. ed. (1985) *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology, Prometheus Books, NY*

Howard, H. (1982) *Darwin, A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press

Howarth, G., Jupp, P. C. ed. (1996) *Contemporary Issues in the Sociology of Death, Dying, and Disposal*, Macmillian Press, Basingstoke

Howarth, G., Kellehear, A., (2001) *Shared Near-Death and Related Illness Experiences; Steps on an Unscheduled Journey*, Journal of Near-Death Studies 20/2, Winter 2001, Human Sciences Press, New York

Hoy, D.C. (1988) *Foucault: Modern or Post-Modern?*, from Smart, B. ed. (1994) *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments*, Routledge, New York

Holzman, L., Moriss, J. ed. (2000) *Postmodern Psychologies, Societal Practise, and Political Life,* Routledge, London

Hume, D. [1779] (1991) *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Routledge London

Humphreys, S.C, King, H, ed. (1981) *Mortality and Immortality: the anthropology and archaeology of death*, Academic Press, London

Hyman, R. (1985) *A Critical Historical Overview of Parapsychology*, in Kurtz, P. ed. (1985) *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology*, Prometheus Books, NY

Jacques, C. T. (1991) *Whence Does the Critic Speak? A Study of Foucault's Genealogy*, from Smart, B. ed. (1994) *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments*, Routledge, New York

Jalland, P. (1996) *Death In The Victorian Family*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Jalland, P. (2002) *Australian Ways of Death: A Social and Cultural History 1840-1918*, Oxford University Press, South Melborne

James, W. (1902) [2002] *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Routledge, London

Jameson, F., (1991) [1997] *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press

Jansen, K. (1996) *Neuroscience, Ketamine, and the Near-Death Experience, The role of Glutamate and the NMDA Receptor*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Jantzen, G.M. (1989) *Mysticism and Experience*, Religious Studies, Vol 25

Jantzen, G. M. (1995) *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Jantzen, G. M. (1999) *Becoming Divine, towards a feminist philosophy of religion*, Manchester University Press, Manchester

Jonte-Pace, D. Parsons, W. (2001) *Religion and Psychology, Mapping the Terrain*, Routledge, London

Jungel, E (1975) *Death; The Riddle and the Mystery*, Saint Andrews Press, Edinburgh

Kastenbaum, R. and Aisenberg R. (1972) *The Psychology of Death*, Springer Publishing Company, New York

Kastenbaum, R. (1991) *Near Death Experiences: New Evidence for Survival?*, from Williamson, J. B., Shneidman, E. S. ed. (1976)[1995] *Death, Current Perspectives* (fourth edition), Mayfield Publishing, California

Kastenbaum, R. (1996) *Near-Death Reports, Evidence for Survival of Death?*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Katz, S. T. (1978) *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, Sheldon Press, London

Kellehear, A. (1993) *Culture, Biology, and the Near-Death Experience*, A Reappraisal, from *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* Vol 181 No.3

Kellehear, A. Stevenson, I. Parischa, S. Cook, E. (1994) *The Absence of Tunnel Sensations in Near Death Experiences from India*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, NY

Kellehear, A. (1996) *Experiences Near Death, Beyond Medicine and Religion*, Oxford University Press, New York

Kellehear, A (2000) *Eternity and Me, The everlasting things in life and death*, Hill of Content Pty Ltd, Maryborough, Australia

King, R. (1999) *Orientalism and Religion*, Routledge, London

Koch, G. (2004) *The Body's Shadowy Realm*, from Gibson, P.C. ed. (2004) *More Dirty Looks; Gender, Pornography and Power*, British Film Institute, London

Kritzman, L. ed. (1988) *Politics, Philosophy, Culture, Interviews and other writings 1977- 1984; Michel Foucault*, Routledge, London

Knoblauch, H., Schmied, I., Schnettler, B (2001) *Different Kinds of Near-Death Experience: A Report on a Survey of Near-Death Experiences in Germany*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, NY

Kübler-Ross , E. (1975) *Death: The Final Stages of Growth*, Simon & Schuster, New York

Kübler-Ross , E (1995) *Death is of Vital Importance; On Life, Death, and Life After Death*, Station Hill Press, New York

Kurtz, P. ed. (1985) *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology*, Prometheus Books, New York

Kurtz, P ed. (2001) *Skeptical Odysseys*, Prometheus Books, New York

Lamont, P. (2005) *The First Psychic*, Abacus, London

Lawton, J (2000) *The Dying Process, Patients Experience of Palliative Care*, Routledge, London

Leder, D. (1990) *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, London

Leder, D. (1998) *A Tale of Two Bodies: the Cartesian Corpse and the Lived Body*, from Welton, D. ed. (1998) *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford

Lindberg, C.L., Numbers, R.L. (1986) *God and Nature; Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science*, University of California Press, London

Lock, M. (1997) *Displacing Suffering: The Reconstruction of Death in North America and Japan*, from Robben, A.C.G.M. ed. (2004) *Death, Mourning, and Burial; a Cross-Cultural Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford

Lock, M. (2002) *Twice Dead, Organ Transplant and the Reinvention of Death*, University of California Press, Berkley

Lopez Jr, D. S. ed. (1997) *Religions of Tibet in Practise*, Princeton University Press, West Sussex

Lopez Jr. D.S. (1998) *Prisoners of Shangra-La, Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, University of Chicago Press, London

Lopez Jr, D. S. (2000) *Foreword/Afterword*, from Evanz-Wentz, W.Y. trans. (1927) [1960] *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Lorimer, D. (1996) *The Near Death Experience and the Perennial Wisdom*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, Routledge, London

Lotringer, S. ed. (1989) *Michel Foucault: Foucault Live interviews 1966-1984*, Semiotext(e), New York

Lovejoy, A. O. (1948) *Essays in the History of Ideas*, Oxford University Press, London

Lundin, D., Walhout, C., Thistelton, A.C. (1999) *The Promise of Hermeneutics*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Cambridge

Luis D. (1997) Michel Foucault on the Wreck of the Leviathan and the Constitution of a New Stylistics of Love, from Luis D. ed. (1997) Budhi; A Journal of Ideas and Cultures, Ateneo de Manila University, Manila, Philippines

Macey, D. (1993) *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, Random House UK, London

Marshall, P. (2002) *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Maruyana, T. C. (1999) *Hospice Care and Culture*, Ashgate, Aldershot, England

Mayr, E. [1964] *Introduction to 'On the Origin of Species'*, from Darwin, C. (1859) [1964], *On the Origin of Species*, Harvard University Press, London

McConnell R, A. ed. (1981) *Encounters with Parapsychology*, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh

McCutcheon, R. T. (1997) *Manufacturing Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

McCutcheon, R.T. (2004) *Religion, Ire, and Dangerous Things*, from the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March 2004, Vol 72, No 1

McDannell C.& Lang B. (1988) *Heaven: A History*, Yale University Press

Midgely, M. (1978) *Beast and Man*, The Harvester Press, Sussex

Midgely, M (1992) *Science and Salvation*, Routledge, London

Midgely, M (1999) *The Origins of Don Giovanni*, from *Philosophy Now*, Winter 1999/2000, Anja Publications, London

Midgely, M. (2004) *The Myths We Live By*, Routledge, London

McCrone, J. (2004), *On the Edge of the Known World; Are Psychic Phenomena Fact or Fantasy?*, New Scientist No 2438

Miller, K. R. (1999) *Finding Darwin's God; A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution*, Harper Collins, New York

Moody, R. (1975) [2001] *Life After Life*, Random House, London

Moody, R. (1988) [2005] *The Light Beyond*, Random House, London

Moody, R. (1993) [2006] *Reunited*, Random House London

Moody, R. (1999) *The Last Laugh*, Hampton Roads, Charlottesville

Moody, R., Arcangel, D. (2001) *Life After Loss*, Harpercollins, New York

Morse, M. (1996) *Parting Visions, A New Scientific Paradigm*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Morse, M., Perry, P. (1991) *Closer to the Light; Learning from the Near-Death Experiences of Children*, Transworld, London

Morse, M., Perry, P. (1992) *Transformed by the Light: The Powerful Effect of Near-Death Experiences on People's Lives*, Piatkus, London

Murphy, G., Ballow, R. O. (1960) *William James on Psychical Research*, Viking Press, London

Murphy, T. (1999) *Recreating Near-Death Experiences: A Cognitive Approach*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, 17/4 Summer 1999, Human Sciences Press, New York

Murphy, T. (2001) *Near-Death Experiences in Thailand*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, NY

Musgrave, A. (1993) *Common Sense, Science and Scepticism, A historical introduction to the theory of knowledge*, Cambridge, University Press, Cambridge

Myers, F.W.H. (1901) [1967] *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, University Books, New York

Norris, C. (1990) *What's Wrong with Postmodernism, Critical theory and the ends of Philosophy*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London

Norris, C. (1992) *Uncritical Theory*, Lawrence and Wishart, London

Norris, C. (1993) *The Truth about Postmodernism*, Blackwell, London

Norris, C. (1997a), *Against Relativism*, Blackwell, Oxford

Norris, C. (1997b) *Derrida*, Fontana Press, London

Novak, P. (2002) *Division of the Self: Life After Death and the Binary Soul Doctrine*, Journal of Near-Death Studies (20/3), Spring 2002, Human Sciences Press, New York

Okasha, S. (2002) *The Philosophy of Science, A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Oppenheim, J. (1985), *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Osborne, T. (1992) *Medicine and Epistemology: Michel Foucault and the Liberality of Clinical Reason*, from Smart, B. ed. (1994) *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments 1 Volume 2*, Routledge, New York

Osis, K. Haraldsson, E. (1977) *At The Hour of Death*, Avon, New York

Overing, J. (1985) *Today I shall call him "Mummy": multiple worlds and classificatory confusion*, in Overing. J. ed.(1985) *Reason and Morality*, Tavistock, London

Owen, D. (1994) *Maturity and Modernity; Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault, and the ambivalence of reason*, Routledge, London

Palmer, M (1997), *Freud and Jung on Religion*, Routledge, London

Parkes, C.M. Laungali, P, & Young, B ed. (1997) *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures*, Routledge, London

Parker, A. (2001) *What Can Cognitive Psychology and Parapsychology Tell Us About Near-Death Experiences?*, from the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Volume 65.4, Number 865, October 2001

Parker, I. (2000) *Four Story-Theories about and against Postmodernism in Psychology*, from Holzman, L., Moriss, J. ed. (2000) *Postmodern Psychologies, Societal Practise, and Political Life*, Routledge, London

Paxton, F.S. (1990) *Christianising Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe*, Cornell University Press

Pelikan, J. (1961) *The Shape of Death; life, death, and immortality in the early fathers*, Greenwood Press, Connecticut

Penelhum, T. (1970) *Survival and Disembodied Existence*, Routledge, London

Petersen, A., Bunton, R., ed. (1993) *Foucault, Health and Medicine*, Routledge, London

Perry, R.B. (1935) *The Thought and Character of William James* (Vols. 1-2). Little Brown, Boston

Pinker, S. (1997) *The Language Instinct*, Penguin, London

Pinker, S. (1999) *How the Mind Works*, Penguin, London

Pinker, S. (2002) *The Blank Slate; The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, Penguin, London

Porter, R., Hall, L. (1995) *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain 1650-1950*, Bath Press, Avon

Porter, R. ed. (1997) *Rewriting the Self, Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, Routledge, London

Porter, R. (2003) *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, Penguin Books, London

Poster, M. ed. (1988) *Jean Baudrillard*, Stanford University Press, Cambridge

Potts, M. (2002) *The Evidential Value of Near-Death Experiences for Belief in Life After Death*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, 20/4, Summer 2002, Human Sciences Press, New York

Puckle, B. (1926) *Funeral Customs: Their Origin and Development*, T. Werner Laurie Ltd, London

Rabinow, P ed. (1984) [1991] *The Foucault Reader, An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, Penguin Books, London

Randall, F & Downie, R.S. (1999) *Palliative Care Ethics; A Companion for all Specialists*, Oxford University Press

Rawlings, M. (1978) *Beyond Death's Door*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville

Rawlings, M. (1993) *To Hell and Back*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville

Reinhart, P. B. (2003) *William James and Near-Death Experiences*, Journal of Near-Death Studies 21/4, Summer 2003, Human Sciences Press, New York

Richards, G. (1999) *Putting Psychology in its Place*, Routledge, London

Ridley, M. (2003) *Nature Via Nurture*, Fourth Estate, London

Ring, K. (1980) *Life At Death*, Academic Press Canada Ltd, Toronto

Ring, K. (1984) *Heading Towards Omega*, William Morrow and Company, New York

Ring, K. (1986) *Near-Death Experiences: Implications for Human Evolution and Planetary Transformation*, Revision 8/2, Winter/Spring 1986, Heldref Publications, Washington

Ring, K (1994) *Solving the Riddle of Frightening Near-Death Experiences: Some Testable Hypothesis and a Perspective Based on A Course in Miracles*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, New York

Ring, K (1994), *Frightening Near-Death Experiences Revisited: A Commentary on Responses to My Paper by Christopher Bache and Nancy Evans Bush*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, New York

Ring, K. (1996) *A Note on Anaesthetically Induced Frightening "Near-Death Experiences"*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, New York

Ring, K (2000) *Religious Wars in the NDE Movement: Some Personal Reflections on Michael Sabom's Light and Death*, from *The Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 18/6, Summer 2000, Human Science Press, New York

Ring, K. (2001) *Mindsight: Eyeless Vision in the Blind*, in Lorimer, D. ed. (2001) *Thinking Beyond the Brain*, A Wider Science of Consciousness, Floris Books, Glasgow

Rinpoche, S. (1996) *The Near-Death Experience, A Stairway to Heaven?*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Rinpoche, S. (2002) *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying (Revised and Updated)*, Random House, London

Ritchie, G. (1991) *My Life After Dying*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Robben, A.C.G.M ed. (2004) *Death, Mourning, and Burial; a Cross-Cultural Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford

Robbins, T. (1992) *Cults, Converts and Charisma: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*, Sage Publications, New York

Rojek, C. and Turner, B. S. (1993) *Forget Baudrillard*, London, Routledge

Roof, W.C. (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace; Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey

Rorty, R (1991) *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Rose, N. (1997) *Assembling the Modern Self,* from Porter, R. ed. (1997) *Rewriting the Self, Histories from the Renaissance to the Present,* Routledge, London

Rose, S., Rose, H. ed. (2000) *Alas Poor Darwin; Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology,* Vintage, London

Sabom, M (1982) *Recollections of Death,* Corgi Books, London

Sabom, M. (1998), *Light & Death: One Doctor's Fascinating Account of Near-Death Experiences,* Zondervan, Grand Rapids

Sabom, M. (2000) *Response to Gracia Fay Ellwood's "Religious Experience, Religious Worldviews, and Near-Death Studies"* from *Journal of Near-Death Studies,* 19/1, Fall 2000, Human Science Press, NY

Said, E. (1978) [1995] *Orientalism,* Penguin Books, London

Sardar, Z., Wyn Davies, M. (2002) *Why Do People Hate America?,* Icon Books, Cambridge

Schrift, A.D. (1988) *Foucault and Derrida on Nietzsche and the End(s) of Man,* from Smart, B. ed. (1994) *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments 1 Volume 2,* Routledge, New York

Schwartz, G.E.R., Russek, L.G.S., Nelson, L.A., Barnsten, C., (2001) *Accuracy and Replicabilty Across Highly Skilled Mediums,* from the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research,* Volume 65.1, No. 862, July 2001, London

Scott, C. (1985) *Why Parapsychology Demands a Skeptical Response,* from Kurtz, P. ed. (1985) *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology,* Prometheus Books, New York

Searle, C. (1998) *Constructing Death; The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Segal, R. A. (1992) *Explaining and Interpreting Religion,* Peter Lang Publishing, New York

Segal, R. A. (1998) *Jung on Mythology,* Routledge, London

Segal, R.A. (2004) *Myth: A Very Short Introduction,* Oxford University Press, New York

Serdahely, W.J. (1996) *Questions for the "Dying Brain Hypothesis",* Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, NY

Sheldrake, R. (2003) *The Sense Of Being Stared At And Other Aspects Of The Extended Mind,* Random House, London

Shermer, M. (1997) *Why People Believe in Weird Things, Pseudoscience, Superstition, and other confusions of our time,* W.H. Freeman and Co, New York

Shamdasani, S. (2003) *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology; The Dreams of a Science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Shneidman, E.S. and Williamson, J.B. ed. (1995) *Death: Current Perspectives (Fourth Edition)*, Mayfield Publishing Company, California

Smart, B. ed. (1994) *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments*, Routledge, New York

Smith, D. (1999) *Zygmunt Bauman, Prophet of Postmodernity*, Polity Press, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford

Sokal, A. Brickmont, J. (1998) *Intellectual Impostures*, Profile, London

Sosa, E., Kim, J. (ed) (2000) *Epistemology; An Anthology*, Blackwell, Oxford

Sterelny, K & Griffiths, P.E. (1999) *Sex and Death; An Introduction to Philosophy of Biology*, University of Chicago Press, London

Sterelny, K. (2003) *Thought in a Hostile World, The Evolution of Human Cognition*, Blackwell, Oxford

Stevenson, I.. and Greyson, B. (1979) *Near-Death Experiences: Relevance to Questions of Survival After Death*, from Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Stokes, D. (1985) *Parapsychology and Its Critics*, from Kurtz, P. ed. (1985) *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology*, Prometheus Books, New York

Strenski, I. (1998) *Religion, Power, and Final Foucault*, Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol.66, No.2

Sudnow, D. (1967) *Death, Uses of a Corpse and Social Worth*, from Williamson, J. B., Shneidman, E. S. ed. (1976)[1995] *Death, Current Perspectives* (fourth edition), Mayfield Publishing, California

Swanson, R.N. (1995) *Religion and Devotion in Europe c. 1215-c.1515*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Targ, E., Schiltz, M., Irwin, J.H., (2000) *Psi-Related Experiences*, Cardena, E., Steven, J.L.. Krippner S., ed. (2000) *Varieties of Anomolous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*, American Psychological Association, London

Tart, C. (1996) *Who Might Survive the Death of the Body?* From Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Taylor, C. (1989) *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Taylor, E. (1999), *Shadow Culture, Psychology and Spirituality in America*, Counterpoint, Washington, U.S.A.

Thaler, S. (1996) *The Death Dream and Near Death Darwinism*, Journal of Near-Death Studies, Human Science Press, NY

Thomas, K. (1971) [1991] *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Penguin Books, London

Turner, B.S. (1993) *Max Weber; From History to Modernity*, Routledge, New York

Turner, V. and E. (1978) *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, Basil Blackwell: Oxford

Urban, H. (2003) *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion*, University of California Press, London

Verdery, K. (1999) *Dead Bodies Animate the Study of Politics*, from Robben, A.C.G.M. ed. (2004) *Death, Mourning, and Burial; a Cross-Cultural Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford

Visker, R. (1995) *Michel Foucault: Genealogy as Critique*, Verso, London

Von Hendy, A. (2002) *The Modern Construction of Myth*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington

Walter, T. (1994) *The Revival of Death*, Routledge, London

Webb, P. ed. (2000) *Ethical Issues in Palliative Care, reflections and considerations*, Hochland & Hochland, Manchester

Welton, D. ed. (1998) *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford

Wettach, M.D. (2000)*The Near Death Experience as an Product of Isolated Subcortical Brain Function*, from the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 19/2, Winter 2000, Human Sciences Press, New York

Wolman, B. ed. (1977) *Handbook of Parapsychology*, Van Nostrand Rienhold Company, New York

Weir, R.F. ed. (1977) *Ethical Issues in Death and Dying*, Columbia University Press, New York

Westfall, R.S. (1958) [1973] *Science and Religion in Seventeenth Century England*, University of Michigan Press

Widdison, H.A. (2001) *Experiences Near Death: Beyond Medicine and Religion, by Allan Kellehear* (review), Journal of Near-Death Studies 20/2, Winter 2001/2, Human Sciences Press, New York

Wilcockson, M. (1999) *Issues of Life and Death*, Houder & Stoughton, London

Williamson, J. B., Shneidman, E. S. ed. (1976)[1995] *Death, Current Perspectives* (fourth edition), Mayfield Publishing, California

Whitehouse, H. ed. (2001) *The Debated Mind: Evolutionary Psychology versus Ethnography*, Berg, Oxford

Wulff, D (1997) *Psychology of Religion, Classic and Contemporary Views*, John Wiley & Sons, New York

Yates, J. (1996) *Being of Light, Dreaming the Vision Onward*, Bailey, L. and Yates, J. ed. (1996) *Near Death Experiences, A Reader*, London, Routledge

Zaleski, C. (1987) *Otherworld Journeys,* Oxford University Press, Oxford

Zaleski, C. (1996) *The Life of the World To Come,* Oxford University Press, Oxford