

NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES IN CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENTS FROM THE 19TH TO THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract

In this article we summarize the scientific, philosophical and religious views on the near-death experiences of the last two centuries. These situations, which in terms of form and intensity vary, can be either visions or extracorporeal experiences. While Parapsychology and some eastern religions accept that they are either reincarnations or contacts with the souls of the dead, the Orthodox Christian Church insists that this is not a real round trip to the other world, but a death trance (*suspended animation*). In any case, we need other systematic investigations to respond to such phenomena.

Keywords: *Near death experiences, extracorporeal experiences, conscience, after life, visions, Heaven, hell, death.*

Introduction

The subheading of this work refers to Christian environments. The choice made divided the study into two environments, that of the West, as represented by Western Christianity and Western Philosophy and that of the East, as represented by Eastern Religions and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Much of the work analyzes the philosophical, psychological and theological differences in East and West perceptions of death and not just the phenomenon of return to life in the narrowly understood sense of "death experience". The 19th and 20th centuries, on which this work focuses, was the period of flourishing in the field of near-death experiences.

Research methodology.

On a few issues, it is easy to present disagreements about what life really is, what death is and where the dividing line between them is located. What should be done is to compare the phenomenon of life with the phenomenon of death. Next, the researcher will have to trace this faint line, separating one situation from the other. Of course, this is not the only way to do such research, but it was the most appropriate, based on the science of Psychology of Religion and the available material.

Usually, the subject of death experiences is approached by science not from the perspective of theoretical sciences and the Psychology of Religion. Through

Science and philosophical trends, which emerged during its formation, the psychological, philosophical and religious background of western Europeans was formed. This strong need to "scientificize" by the Western man shaped not only the Christian perceptions of the West, but also other religious movements within it. The problem in the relationship between spirit and matter, which Christianity reveals theologically and Science studies, cannot be missing from a work that deals with the boundaries between life and death. The Eastern Orthodox perspective has maintained a quite different attitude towards the subject of death experiences and their perspectives.

We see that the phenomenon of death experiences is multifaceted. Researchers emphasize different points, depending on their ideological background. Individuals who experience them, regardless of religion or nationality, vary considerably, especially between the Eastern and Western worlds. An important factor of these differences is found in the philosophical and theological conditions and the relationship between the material and the spiritual world.

The most important omission of this work is the non-analysis of the Christian environments of East and West, in further Confessions, in particular those of the Western Christianity, Protestants, Roman Catholics, etc. Also, references to the religion of people who experienced the near-death experiences, or researchers of the experiences, were almost non-existent. The reason for this basic omission, the in-depth reference to the perceptions, experiences and opinions of each Christian Confession, is due to the lack of relevant information from the available material. The few references to specific works were isolated and fragmentary. This may be related to the fact that Christianity focuses mainly on the final state of the soul and only secondly deals with the experiences, which relate to the first moments after death.

There is a great gap in the Orthodox Christian perspective of the near-death experiences. Most writers, who focused on the Orthodox teaching on death, usually repeated certain stories of ordinary people and Saints, who "came back" from death, without mentioning in more detail the phenomenon of modern research of near-death experiences.

The only exception was Father Seraphim Rose (1934-1982), who analyzed from an apologetic perspective the subject of modern near-death experiences. At this point I have to say that the theological views of Father Seraphim (2004) are not scientifically substantiated, as Science has not been officially positioned on what exactly awaits man after death, or even on whether there is an Afterlife. Moreover, we will see that Father Seraphim's views on death have supporters, but do not fully represent all Christians.

The most difficult thing about this work was not the study of death, but the study of the phenomenon of life. What really constitutes life also determines the limits of death. The central axis of this study is the relationship of Western Philosophy, Science and Christian Theology, with matter and spirit. Differences in the correlation of matter-spirit from different materialistic, theological, psychological perspectives were necessary to be analyzed, because the connection and disconnection of matter and spirit marks the boundaries between life and death and there can be no mention of death without these clarifications.

Basic definitions.

The term "near-death experience" was created in the mid-1970s by the American doctor Raymond Moody (2001), who recorded the experiences told to him by his patients. As hypnotist Rosemary Guiley (1950-2019) explains in her work <*The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits*>, the term "near-death experience" is quite broad. It has been used to describe a variety of phenomena by people, who have come or believe they have come, very close to death. Throughout history and around the world, similar cases have been recorded. With the advancement of modern medical science, which enables valid intervention in order to save lives, which are at risk, we have the possibility to record such incidents.

But there is confusion about the definition of "clinical death", as there are several misunderstandings about whom we define as 'clinically dead'. As the cardiologist and Professor of Pathology of the University of Athens, Prof. Avramidis (1926-2020), explains, "clinical death" can be reversible. The "clinically dead" is at one stage, a path to biological or definitive death, in which man can return to life. In cases where a man returns to life, he may have experienced some near-death experience. The term 'clinically dead' is also used for people who appear to have died or are considered dead, such as in the event of electric shock, drowning, etc. The earlier cardiorespiratory resuscitation begins, the more likely it is to return to life, points out Prof. Avramidis (2007).

Near-death and extracorporeal experiences are not a modern phenomenon, although they occur more frequently since the 19th century. According to Father Seraphim (2004), interest in them was becoming more intense in the 20th century, especially in America, as public opinion begins to look beyond the theories of Materialism and Atheism. Interest in religion is currently rekindling. Professor of Philosophy David Lund (2009) informs us that research into death experiences has mainly attracted the interest of cardiologists, psychologists and parapsychologists.

It is a common belief that near-death experiences only take place in patients who are clinically dead. However, according to Rosemary Guiley (2007), research has shown that the majority of people were not at all close to the process of biological death, although they themselves had this experience and this perception. Some of these testimonies fall into the category of paranormal phenomena research. Rosemary (2007) informs us about a survey conducted in the United States in 1982. The survey showed that about 8 million adults reported experiencing near-death experiences.

The question of whether death experiences belong to paranormal phenomena cannot be answered with certainty. Professor of the Psychology of Religion at the University of Athens, Dr. Spyridon Tsitsigkos (2011), points out that some research correlates the perception of parapsychic phenomena, such as appearances of visions, ghosts and other unusual visual stimuli, such as auras, with the geomagnetic field. The geomagnetic field can affect parts of the brain, which are associated with the perception of visual stimuli and space, such as the occipital and lateral lobes. Some of these distortions may be inherited as predispositions to parts of the brain, which may increase the chances of perceived parapsychic phenomena.

Visions of a deathbed and death experiences

Lund (2009) explains that before the advancement of modern medicine, which increased the chances of resuscitation, research focused on dying people, who were seeing visions. Of course, those who returned to life were able to tell us their own experiences, as opposed to the dying, who recounted their experiences, only to those who were present by their deathbed.

In the case of visions from the deathbed, the testimonies come not from the patients themselves, but from the doctors, nurses and relatives, who were Present. Although they are indirect narratives, they have significant value as tell-tale elements and are among the most recent experiences, Lund (2009) points out.

Lund (2009) informs that Dr. Karlis Osis (1917-1997) did a pilot research on the visions of the dying. While this interest in death experiences has existed for a long time, there has been no systematic investigation of these narratives. The first pilot research was conducted by Osis (1961), according to paranormal authors Brad Steiger (1936-2018) and Sherry Steiger (1945-2020). In his book *<Deathbed Observations by Physicians and Nurses>* (1961) Osis published the results of his research. The questionnaires and the following surveys revealed some interesting phenomena that require scientific study and evaluation. For example, in some cases, collective visions of both dying patients and doctors present or relatives were mentioned collectively. In several cases, experiences of extra-sensory interactions with patients were reported on behalf of doctors and nurses. Many of these experiences affected those who observed or experienced them. As a result, they changed their personal philosophy and lifestyle.

One of the most interesting results of Osis' research was that the near-death experiences had no link to brain injuries or degenerations. On the contrary, the experiences appear to have manifested themselves more strongly in patients with control of their senses and in complete alertness. Osis (1961) observed that this pattern is compatible with the theory of the afterlife of consciousness, as the more intact the physical and mental functions of the patient were, the more intense and experience. According to Brad and Sherry Steiger (2003), Osis (1961) himself pointed out: *"Most of the evidence, which goes hand in hand with the theory of postmortem existence, was mainly in patients who were not under the influence of sedatives or other medicines; environment"*. He also added that those patients who were under the influence of sedatives, those who had been diagnosed with some pathology, who were hallucinating, or those who had reduced perception and communication with the environment or some conscious damage, were more likely to experience experiences that are not consistent with the theory of consciousness after death.

As the philosopher Colin Wilson (1931-2013) observes, what one would expect is that most of the people who were approaching death would be frightened. Although the experience of pain was relatively common, Osis (1961) found that fear was not the dominant emotion in these reports. On the contrary, a large proportion had feelings of deep peace and euphoria. One in twenty even had various visions of a "paradise", or a "promised land" or beautiful cities.

Experience levels

Since the mid-1970s, distinguished researchers from death experiences, such as Dr. Raymond Moody (2001), Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1926-2004) and Dr. Kenneth Ring (2006), with their research, made these cases known to the wider public. The research of Kenneth Ring (2006), Raymond Moody (2001), Michael Sabom (1954) and other researchers converge on many points, Brad and Sherry Steiger (2003) inform us. The surveys contain thousands of different reports of death experiences. However, they give the impression that they repeat the same story, as if it were a single book, comments Colin Wilson (1987). Raymond Moody (2001) was particularly impressed by how often the same descriptions were repeated.

According to Colin Wilson (1987), the strongest argument in favor of the afterlife is that the same pattern cannot be repeated in hundreds of different stories and are all false or products of some vivid, uncontrollable imagination. Constantly, as Brad and Sherry Steiger (2003) describe, the passage through some kind of dark tunnel is mentioned, with a light at its end and the "incarnate" sensation that follows. Usually, patients see that their consciousness has been cut off from the physical body. They are not subject to all space and time commitments as before. During the out-of-body experience, due to their "incarnate" condition, they are unable to communicate with family members, medical staff and their friends, as long as they are not perceived by them.

Many say, however, that they encounter other spiritual entities with which they communicate without difficulty. Over and over again, some kind of telepathic communication is described with a well-intentioned "bright entity" or with Guardian Angels or dead relatives and friends. Quite often, meeting with some "bright entity" is accompanied by a brief review of life.

Some recount that some angelic entity leads them to heaven. Then there is the feeling that consciousness is at a limit or border, between life and death, but it does not pass it, and, ultimately, the return to life occurs. This feeling, that they must return to life, is often not accepted with positive feelings, but with intense discomfort, as most wish to stay in this status. Moody (2001) calls this recurring pattern a "*core experience*".

Lund (2009) agrees with the stages of the death experiences mentioned by the researchers, but is hastening to clarify that there are not all, stages in all death cases in exactly the same order. In other words, it is not a specific set of experiences, but a 'mosaic' of common experiences, which tend to be repeated.

On the other hand, Moody (2001) believes that "luminous existence" is the most striking common element of all other experiences, contained in the model of death experiences. Also, the meeting with this "light" exerted the greatest influence of all other experiences. Those who experienced it report that it is a "light", which quickly increases in size and brightness, which magnetizes them and emits a sense of love, peace and heat, as described by the Metropolitan of Naupactus and Saint Vlasios, Hierotheos Vlachos (2010), but also by Father Seraphim (2004). Everyone treats it as an existence, which has been sent to them, with a specific purpose. Usually, the meeting evolves as a kind of mental dialogue or a direct transfer of thought, Moody (2001) recounts. The "light" asks

them various questions about whether they are prepared to die and urges them to make a review of the events of their lives.

However, there is no criticism of any kind of these questions. In other words, they are not part of a more general 'crisis', but are questions that are being asked to help them take responsibility for their lives and their deeds. Sometimes, questions are accompanied by a kind of flashback to events in their lives. Venerable Metropolitan Hierotheos (2010), as well as Father Seraphim (2004), confirm that this is one of the special characteristics of modern near-death experiences.

Although this "light" is without a specific form, it leaves them with a sense of having a personality of its own. The identity attributed to it by those who have experienced it varies according to their religious background, Moody (2001) explains. Others call it Christ, others consider it "Angel" and others identify it with some deity.

Father Seraphim (2004) notes that Dr. Erlendur Haraldsson (1931) and Dr. Karlis Osis (1917-1997) refer to the experience of "light" as "bright existence" and "bright forms", but not Christ or spiritual being, deity or angel, as usually interpreted by those who interpret it have experienced. Father Seraphim (2004), Osis and Haraldsson (1977) come to a fairly reasonable conclusion, that for the most part, the interpretations given by the dying to the visions of the entities, which appear to them, depend on their personal, cultural and religious background.

The person, experiencing a near-death experience, usually feels at the time of death asphyxiation or severe pain. Some say they feel they are passing through a tunnel, at the end of which they see the light. When they go through the tunnel, they come out of their bodies and see it from another angle of space. This, to some, creates relief, while in others, it causes discomfort and confusion, Wilson (1987) points out.

In the first case, feelings of calm and acceptance of death prevail, while the person feels surrounded by the presence of loved ones of dead persons, relatives and Friends. According to Wilson (1987), in the event that the person has not accepted his death, he is embarrassed or even panicked, as he attempts to communicate with the people about the environment, they are fruitless. With the sole exception of animals, which sometimes perceive them, no one else seems to see them, listen to them or try to communicate with them. What they perceive as their body is now permeable as air, making contact impossible through touching. If feelings of confusion and denial of death persist, these spirits may be trapped on earth indefinitely, Wilson (1987) concludes. Similar death experiences are recorded by Dr Moody (2001).

Near-death experiences and extracorporeal experiences: similarities and differences

Father Seraphim (2004), however, believes that the out-of-body experience is not exclusively related to death or death experience. When the out-of-body experience does not occur in a person on the verge of death, then it can take longer than an out-of-body experience of a dying person. In such cases, it has been reported that the person acquires the ability to enter a different environment,

with a different atmosphere. Visions in this case are not just fleeting visions of some kind of garden or gate, but acquire a consistency. It looks like a kind of visit to an unknown world, as Father Seraphim (2004) explains.

Colin Wilson (1987) describes the phenomenon of extracorporeal experiences. He explains that in extracorporeal experiences most people report having the feeling of floating outside their body, with which they are connected, through a silver thread or string. Often, they have the ability to perceive events in remote places. They also experience a feeling of euphoria and freedom in this situation, while on their return to their bodies, on the contrary, they experience intense dissatisfaction, even in the earth.

Rosemary Guiley (2007) gives us some interesting information about the near-death experiences and extracorporeal experiences that accompany them. Often, a sense of peace, a ceasefire, or a sense that the person is dead, as well as some out-of-body experience, is mentioned. During the out-of-body experience, the person has the feeling that he is being driven over his body. Several experience a feeling of "pulling" through a tunnel, leading to a "light". Many describe meeting with heavenly entities or with dead friends and relatives, dressed in white floral garments. Heavenly entities can be a guardian Angel, a guide or the Supreme Being, showing them a summary of their earthly life. Finally, their reluctant return to life follows.

Although some report negative experiences, the majority record positive experiences, according to Rosemary (2007). Most develop a stronger inclination towards spirituality or faith in God. Some, however, face difficulties in adapting to everyday life.

Religious faith doesn't seem to affect whether someone has a death experience or not, Rosemary (2007) observes. But due to the differentiation of stories from culture to culture, it seems that their content is changing. Most, who had a near-death experience, report that their fear of death has disappeared and that they now believe in the afterlife. Some acquire psychic abilities.

Rosemary (2007) assumes that a near-death experience allows access to higher levels of consciousness, as it resembles the experiences of the shamans. Seraphim (2004) agrees with this finding. As he informs us, the Shamans, after being initiated, come through ecstatic, extracorporeal, situations in contact with "other worlds" and with Spirits. Initiation then allows them to consciously enter similar, ecstatic, extracorporeal situations.

But contact with "spiritual" worlds is not limited to out-of-body experience, stresses Father Seraphim (2004). Drug testing experiments, in particular LSD in the dying, resulted in the production of experiences that looked quite like death experiences. Dr. Kübler-Ross (1969, 1991, 1999) also participated in these experiments, Father Seraphim (2004) points out. The dying reported that they were living a brief flashback to the early events of their lives, that they were seeing a vision of blinding light, visions of the dead and other Spirits. They also considered received messages of spiritual content, such as teachings on reincarnation, on a world religion, and so on.

The relationship of matter and consciousness in Western civilization

The absolute separation of matter and consciousness is stressed in all aspects of the Western philosophical and religious spirit, due to the strong influence of Neoplatonic philosophical views. These dualist conceptions passed within Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The Western Christian has either demonized matter and body, or he has absolutized it (deification), resulting in religious indifference. In the case of demonization of matter, life, for the believer, becomes a series of legal and moral requirements, to God's "satisfaction". Death is understood either as punishment or as an inevitable natural event.

For the religiously indifferent, materialist, man, life becomes a struggle to acquire material goods. With the absolutization of matter, man turns into a secularized way of life, far from any notion of traditional religious/spiritual. Death as an existential question is silenced.

As Wilson (1987) comments for many scientists, the study of Paranormal Phenomena is a challenge. At best, the difficulty of interpreting them causes shame and embarrassment. At worst, they are treated as a scandal. But this may be because of Science itself, but because of the philosophical attitude that some scientists hold to interpret its findings, Wilson (1987) explains. The dominant role in this way of thinking is the dualism and mechanistic perception of the world. Based on this perception, every material reality, including body material, is understood.

As the Professor of Doctrine Theology, Megas Farantos (1993), has pointed out, the holy Augustine (354-430), influenced by Neoplatonism, considered that cosmic reality is divided into spirit and matter. The spirit excels of matter, while matter has a shadowy, inferior existence. Augustine regarded God as a Neoplatonic Monad and as a One. He emphasized God's "substance" and "simplicity" over His triad. By also rejecting God's divine (undying) actions and "hypostatic properties", he further emphasized His transcendental "nature" and "substance". However, the over-emphasis of "substance" at the expense of God's "substantive idioms" was never accepted by the Eastern Orthodox Church, Prof. Farantos (1993) explains. This way of thinking was adopted — more or less — by the philosophical and theological thinking of the West. Logicism is largely due to Augustine's Neoplatonic view of the primacy of spirit over matter. The perception of a God distant and "absent" from the world, contributed decisively to the birth of the atheistic currents of the Younger Years, as concluded by M. Farantos (1993).

The interpretation of death in Western Christianity and the Eastern Orthodox Church

Metropolitan Hierotheos (2010) gives us comprehensively the perceptions of death, prevailing in Western Christianity. Western theologians, under the influence of Augustine, consider death to be God's punishment for man's sin. Based on this perception, God decided to punish the man with death. Death is inherited throughout the human race, through the inheritance of guilt for sin, committed by Adam. The holy Augustine considers that man inherits the guilt for

Adam's sin and it is as if he has sinned himself, against God, causing his death.

According to another theory, the devil acted as an instrument of God's commandments and executed His decision to punish the human race. Some Protestants accept death as a simple fact, with no metaphysical implications. In any case, death is God's creation. But according to Orthodox Christian Theology, God is not the culprit of death. Death could not be the creation of a good God, stresses theologian Nikolaos Vasiliadis (1927-2016), in his book *<The Mystery of Death>* (2010). In the Old Testament, it is stated that: "*God's death has not been done, nor is it the loss of lives. He built everything in it, and the life-saving generations of the world, and it is not in them a medicine of havoc, nor of the kingdom on earth... justice for the immortal*" (Wisdom of Sol. 1, 13-25).

Saint John Chrysostom (349-407) considers that physical death, with the humiliation it brings to man, is ultimately a spiritual antidote to his arrogance. Thus, even death becomes a blessing for man, although it also depends on the man himself, whether he will take it as a blessing or not.

The relationship between body and soul in Orthodox Christianity

As Professor Tsitsigkos explains, Saint John Chrysostom does not regard the soul as a static phenomenon, which can be limited to predetermined phenomenological types. He recognizes its mobility and dynamics and treats it as a living organism, constantly evolving. With the evolution of the soul, it is understood the development of its properties, which will help it to progress morally and spiritually. However, this progress is not a unilateral moral improvement, or an attempt at knowledge of God and self-making divine (self-divinization), which we often encounter in Western philosophy or in the currents of modern Occultism.

Mental strength and energy, according to Cappadocia Fathers, is found in every part of the body, but especially in the nerves and brain. Saint Chrysostom pays special attention to the brain and the heart, where it places bravery, but believes that the soul manifests itself throughout the body. The heart is symbolically the seat of deeper emotions and anger, the brain is the seat of accounting and desire is found in the liver. At the same time, Saint Chrysostom observes that it is impossible to clearly define the physical point of manifestation of the soul, as impassable and sacred, even more so in the case of the saints, where their body is a temple of God, Professor Tsitsigkos notes.

Professor Tsitsigkos informs us that the way of connecting body and soul is not fully explained, according to Saint Chrysostom. The placement of Saint Chrysostom is contrary to any dualistic view of soul and body, which considers the body as an opponent of the soul. The soul needs the body to express itself. According to the holy father, the body needs the soul to survive, as its "heat" is the one that holds the "clay" of the body. Body and soul, they work together and influence each other. The interaction of body and soul is shown by mental phenomena, accompanied by physical changes. Emotional states, affect the body, breathing changes, there may be changes in facial expression, various spontaneous reactions, such as laughter or crying etc. Even after separation from the

body, the soul may not feel the body, but it does not enter a state of consciousness. She maintains her self-consciousness, since she can perceive both the living and the sleeping. He also experiences all emotions, "unconscious" conflicts, "psychological" defense mechanisms, rejoices, regrets, hopes, experiences grief, guilt, remorse, etc.

Scientific interpretations of death experiences

According to Professor Tsitsigkos (2011), the near-death experiences, although they had attracted the interest of scholars since antiquity, have been researched mainly since 1882, since the founding of the *Company Mental Research*. As a multifaceted phenomenon, they were examined from many different perspectives, from a religious, apologetic, anthropological, philosophical, pastoral, psychological and psychiatric perspective. The only certainty is that among the researchers, there was no final agreement as to the explanation of these experiences, as the phenomena themselves presented several differentiations, despite their similarities. Some have claimed that these are brain center malfunctions or the activation of psychological defense mechanisms.

As Professor Tsitsigkos (2011) explains, mystic experiences were interpreted until recently in Psychiatry, mainly from a medical, biological context. Experiences of loss of ego or self, were perceived as a result of brain disorders, such as hyperactivity of the epileptic system of the temporal lobe, changes in the brain chamber, inactivation of the cortex of the brain, frontal or parietal lobe. Observations of psychedelic experiences, depersonalization or synesthesia, may be associated with the use of hallucinogenic substances, such as drugs, LSD, mescaline, psilocybin and even with the production of endorphins. Other possible interpretations linked these experiences to hyperthyroidism, epilepsy, hypnosis, mental retardation and anthropomorphic thinking.

Brain and consciousness

Science cannot easily answer the question of whether there is any non-material, spiritual substance in man except the body and brain. The scientific study, as neuroscientist Andrew Newberg (2018) explains, presupposes the existence of a specific, material, measurable size. Some scientists consider the soul to be a function of the brain. However, according to Newberg (2018), the soul does not appear to be associated with any specific brain function. As Newberg (2018) explains, the most important problem, from a neurotheological point of view, is that we don't know when a man is experiencing a near-death experience. Not only do we not know if someone is close to biological death, but even when the near-death experience occurs, there is no way to estimate exactly when it begins.

In most death experiences, it is assumed that the experience begins at the moment when man enters the state of death. However, in reality, we do not know whether this interpretation is correct. For example, the near-death experience could begin the moment when man regains consciousness and comes to life, i.e. just before he recovers and not just before he dies. But even if we knew at the time of the onset of the death experience, there would be several technical

problems with brain imaging. For example, electrical activity in the central parts of the brain, such as the amygdala, chamber and hippocampus, would be almost impossible to detect in this case. Without a heartbeat, blood flow to the brain wouldn't be possible either, creating additional signal problems that we would receive from the imaging system, Newberg (2018) explains.

Neuroscientist Mario Beauregard and journalist Denyse O'Leary in their work *<The Spiritual Brain>* (2007) develop a non-materialistic theory about the origins of the soul. Beauregard describes the dead ends, which a materialistic view can face when examining experiences of consciousness, which seem to defy the concepts of space and Time. In particular, Beauregard believes that in the field of Quantum Mechanics, there are many indications of an existence beyond the boundaries of matter and that all of them converge towards a non-material origin of the soul, beyond the limits of the brain.

Dr. Sam Parnia (2005, 2013) is another researcher of near-death experiences, who believes that consciousness is beyond the materialistic limits of the study of science. Newberg (2018) informs us that in 2008 Sam Parnia started a study. The study was done in order to investigate, if there is any spiritual factor, beyond the material limits of the body. This study was called "AWARE" (Awareness During Rescue). The study included 2,060 patients who had gone into cardiac arrest. Of these, 140 people had survived, who were invited to give an interview about their experience. The study was designed in such a way as to determine whether patients' consciousness could perceive the environment without the involvement of the brain. In most death experiences, patients feel they are falling over their bodies, looking up in the space. When a patient was waiting, they asked him if he had experienced a death experience or if he felt it came out of his body. If he had experienced a death experience, other questions followed. Of the 140 interviewed, nine of them reported an experience related to the death experiences. Two patients had detailed memories of the surrounding material, and in one case, the description was considered valid. However, in both cases, the experience took place in a different place from where the shelf with the hidden image was located, so there was no additional element. Therefore, Newberg (2018) concludes, although the results of the survey were interesting, the data are not sufficient for any conclusion for or against the existence of consciousness outside the body.

No brain activity can adequately explain the near-death experiences, as they are particularly complex. However, as Professor Tsitsigkos in his work *<Psychology of Religion>* (2011) writes, the most widespread theory of interpretation of death experiences is that of the "circular causality" of physicist H. Haken (1927). The theory relates to the interaction of the mind over brain neurons. The "circular causality" refers to an "epileptic type" neuroelectric activity of the temporal lobe, which begins in the mind of man. Thus, the mind produces according to the cultural background of man, the corresponding reactions and experiences, as Prof. Tsitsigkos (2011) explains.

In addition to doctors and nurses, more and more scientists in the field of mental health are giving weight to religious issues. In particular, in the field of Psychology, emphasis is placed on views related to Eastern religions, as

Tsitsigkos (2011) informs us.

Psychology Professor Bernard Spilka (2003³), combining various death surveys, along with an earlier psychological analysis of T. Hooper (1962) distinguished eight basic psychological perspectives on death: (a) death as a natural end to life, (b) indifference to death, (c) death as a refutation of hopes and ambitions; (d) death as a last test of courage, (e) death as something unknown, (f) death as loneliness and suffering, (g) death as a means of detachment from material commitments, (h) death as for an eternal reward or conviction.

Neuroscientist Newberg (2018) makes an effort to explain the stages of near-death experiences (such as the feeling of going through tunnels, meeting with "bright" entities and visions of religious figures and relatives), from the perspective of Neurotheology.

The sensation of going through a tunnel could indicate changes in the visual system, as the oxygen supply and blood flow decreases in some parts of the brain. Newberg (2018) assumes that the blood and oxygen supply is more maintained in the central parts of the brain, while weakening in the periphery. This alters the function of peripheral and central vision. Since central vision remains intact and peripheral vision is impaired, this could explain the sense of vision through a "tunnel". Other explanations could be found in some kind of epileptic seizure or hallucinations. However, Newberg (2018) does not rule out the possibility that consciousness actually passes through some kind of tunnel, as it separates from the body.

Regarding the sense of flashback, Newberg (2018) believes that weakening parts of the cortex of the brain could lead to greater activation of central parts of the brain, which are responsible for memory. The more intense activation of the hippocampus could therefore be responsible for the flashback of life, which refers to certain death experiences.

According to Newberg (2018), changes in the function of the amygdala and hippocampus could be responsible for visions of religious figures, or "light" visions. Especially if the parietal lobe is affected, the areas, which are relevant to social interaction and/or vision, then it is possible to create the sensation in interaction with various 'light entities', or with other persons, dead friends, relatives, etc.

D. Lund (2009) explains that all materialistic interpretations of near-death experiences, come to a common conclusion, that near-death experiences are hallucinations and have no objective value. There, which differs from each other, is in what exactly causes these hallucinations.

A very popular materialistic theory, claims that these are physicochemical changes in brain function, derived either from anoxia, i.e. lack of oxygen, or hypoxia, i.e. excessive oxygenation of the brain. Some also consider that the near-death experiences come from damage to the temporal lobe or hallucinogenic substances.

Lund (2009) believes that the research of Moody (2001), and Osis & Haraldsson (1977) breaks down the theory of incomplete oxygenation of the brain. With all the research, Lund (2009) points out, there were people who experienced near-death experiences, having complete clarity and normal blood flow

to the brain, so they had normal oxygen levels.

More generally, genuine secret experiences do not seem to have anything to do with psychological exhaustion and isolation, but suggest some kind of artistic and philosophical creativity. On the basis of these new scientific approaches, those who experience similar experiences should not automatically be regarded as psychotic or neurotic, Prof. Tsitsigkos (2011) concludes.

According to Newberg (2018), the results of death experiences vary from person to person. A number of people say that no existing religious faith explains their experience. These people tend to turn to spirituality and no longer concern themselves with religiosity, in its conventional form. In many cases, however, death experiences match people's pre-existing faith. People, who belong to this category, deal with their religion more than before and become more active in their religious community. As Prof. Tsitsigkos (2011) informs us, in psychometric research, it was found that especially in older people, religious faith helps them on multiple levels. Not only does it reduce the impending fear of death, but it also helps the person feel that he/she deserves to be respected and carried weight.

Lund (2009) cites another materialistic theory, based on psychology. Her supporters believe that the person, who is experiencing a dying experience, is trying to cope with the fear and awe of death, with some psychologically defensive mechanism.

Psychiatrist Russel Noyes (1980, 1982-3, 2016) believes that a "psychological defense mechanism" catalyzes a person's sense of individual personality and leads him to "depersonalization". Others believe that near-death experiences are the products of a disorder that creates hallucinations, such as schizophrenia.

Lund (2009) rejects these versions. He believes that psychological considerations are insufficient to interpret the near-death experiences. Many people weren't afraid of death before they experienced a death, Lund (2009) explains. Moreover, many of them were not aware that they were in danger of dying until after the end of the experience. Therefore, the theory of a "psychological defense mechanism" to deal with the fear of death is unfounded, Lund (2009) concludes.

The theory of reincarnation

A key part of the Religions of Buddhists and Hindus is the belief in reincarnation, according to Professor K. Georgoulis (1965). Philosopher Socrates Gikas (1966) informs us that the cause of reincarnation is ignorance of the true nature of the soul-"Atman", as we read in one of the *Upanisades*. In Buddhism, the cause, leading to rebirth, is considered to be the very desire for life.

Several people claim that extracorporeal experiences instilled faith in reincarnation. Most claim to have been able to remember events from 'previous lives', through 'flashback', a hypnosis technique, by which events of the Past. Some scientists claim the same. *Theosophy* also adopts the faith in reincarnation. The occultist Annie Besant (1847-1933) explains that *Theosophy* evaluates the material world as a world of illusion and fallacy, where man is usually blinded. The rotation of reincarnations is believed that gradually allows for a person to

remain alert (Besant, 2002, 2003, 2207).

The process of death in Theosophy

In this day and age, as Father Seraphim (2004) said, faith in reincarnation, has become an integral part of Theosophy, Occultism and Spiritualism, and has significantly influenced today's popular glorification and religious perception. The theory of reincarnation is now quite widespread in the Western world. For the occultists, the soul after death, stays for a while in some "star field" and then returns to the earth, where it is reborn. According to Father Seraphim (2004), the use of terms such as, "star field" and "astral body", became popular among all occultists and psychics. Even when the same terms are not used, similar concepts are used, as the theoretical framework of Theosophy is considered a model of occult theory.

The "astral field" surrounds the Earth's world, but remains invisible to the average person, author Papastavrou (1958) explains. In the "astral field", each person will stay with his "star body" after death, for a shorter or longer period of time, according to Theosophy. Theosophy understands death as a long process of gradually excreting man's "Immortal Trinity" from his perishable bodies. Theosophical teaching believes that the complete purification of man can only occur when all the "shells" that entrap consciousness are broken and expelled. Mr. Papastavrou (1958) considers that the procedure can be divided into three episodes, "The Way of Return", "Withdrawal" and "Completion". The separation of consciousness from the physical body is only one stage of death, which they call the "Way of Requital".

In the next stage, "Leaving", consciousness eliminates the "stellar" and "lower mental" body. As long as its vitality lasts, it assimilates a part of the thoughts of earthly life. When the assimilation process is finished, the results of the collection of the "mental" are stored in its "higher" section, while the "lower mental", having completed the work disintegrates, according to Papastavrou (1958).

In the third and final stage of "Liberation" or "Integration", the "Immortal Trinity" remains liberated. Entering a state of meditation, it is joined by "Super-Soul". This only lasts as long as her *Karma* allows. After the permitted rest period, he is obliged to return to the material world and to be incarnated.

Death in the Tibetan "*Bible of the Dead*"

The Tibetan Bible of the Dead is a Buddhist text from the 8th century. It's a book about the dead, with instructions on the afterlife in which he will wander until the next rebirth.

Although reincarnation is undesirable, the consciousness of the deceased cannot have any spiritual development, as long as it remains in the intermediate postmortem state of the "Bardo", no matter if he's happy or unhappy there. For ordinary people, the next best possibility, except from the avoiding of reincarnation through the immediate release of "satori", is to be transmigrated into a human being. Reincarnation in a world other than man can delay him from his

cause. Only "satori" is considered to break the perpetual cycle of reincarnations and misery. The "satori" is conquered when the realization of the deceit of the "Samsara" becomes a reality and the thirst for existence in its illusory world fades. Essential for this effort, preparation in the concentration of the mind, under the guidance of a Guru, is considered.

"Bardo" is the intermediate state between life and death. It is considered that its duration is symbolically 49 days. According to this Buddhist teaching, over the course of 49 days, various visions of "peaceful" and "wild" deities appear in the dead. But, in reality, all deities are a kind of psychic projections of the dead. If the visions continue, the dead will end up being transmigrated, which, according to Buddhist doctrine, is evil. The benefit, which is considered to be reaped by reading the text, is that it helps him overcome the misleading illusions that manifest themselves at the time of death and avoid being re-incarnated.

According to the author Evans Wentz (1878-1965), deities are personifications of divine powers and represent the contact of man's consciousness with the macrocosm. Man's consciousness, as a microcosm, is symbolically confronted with his own tendencies in the macrocosm. In particular, "peaceful deities" are the expression of the noble, pure feelings of man. It's the face impulses of his heart. The "peaceful deities" represent emotion and appear first, just as emotion occurs before reason. Here are the visions of "angry deities", which represent the brain's tendencies for rationalization and are not cute or beautified, but frightening. Just as maturity comes after the end of childhood, so do the "angry deities", appear after the dawn of the visions of the "peaceful deities", Wentz (1970) points out. According to Carl Jung (1875-1961) respectively, the world of the deities and spirits of "Bardo" is a personification of the "collective unconscious" of every man. Contrary to Christian conceptions, the afterlife in "Bardo" does not include any eternal punishment or reward. It is simply a means for the soul to satisfy its existing materialistic aspirations through a rebirth, as long as it has not been enlightened. The purpose of the text is to remember the dead, of the muscular teachings he had received while he was alive, from his gurus and teachers.

As Father Seraphim (2004) explains, those who believe in reincarnation do not particularly deal with the question of the origin or destination of the soul, nor do they believe in the Middle Crisis of souls, which leads to foretaste of hell or paradise, as Christianity teaches. Of course, they don't even accept the Final Judgment. They are content with a vague idea of immortality, which, however, differs from the immortality taught by Christianity.

In conclusion, we see that occultism evaluates the body as inferior to the spirit. Life is considered an illusion. Death from this perspective is a temporary release from the prison of matter. Western researchers of near-death experiences, having this philosophical and theological background, are led to the obsolescence of the material body or at the other end, to the absolutization of him.

Death in the Orthodox Eastern Tradition: A vestibule of eternal blissfulness or tortures

Orthodox theologians have a quite different idea of what life really is. Matter is a key component of man, as is his soul. The soul is recognized as a guide of the body, but the body is not underestimated, nor is its value overlooked. A paradoxical finding is that while in relation to Western theology, Orthodox theology, emphasizes matter as a key component of man, it is not driven to the impasse of a materialistic worldview.

Death, like birth, is inextricably linked to a life of struggles against the passions. Sources for the view of the afterlife of the soul offer both the holographic testimonies and the Lives of the Saints.

According to Father Seraphim Rose (2004), the teaching of the Church, as we find it in the Lives of the Saints, in the texts of the Fathers, but also in the reality of today's Orthodox Mass, has a characteristic simplicity. This characteristic simplicity, however, has become the target of critical commentary, by some, who consider it to make Christian teaching unattractive and unconvincing to the average man of the 21st century.

As for the experiences, from the moment of death, the Bible, the texts of the Holy Fathers of the Church, the Lives of the Saints, offer many, genuine, personal experiences, Father Seraphim (2004) explains.

The soul of man who dies is met by angels, according to Father Seraphim (2004). These angels have been sent at the time of death to accompany the soul on its afterlife. Both their mission and their human form and their actions are clear.

When the soul of man comes out of her body, she is driven into the air-space and tries to reach her heavenly dwelling. The charges are evil spirits, which inhabit the intermediate space between heaven and earth. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Father Seraphim (2004), trying to give an answer, in relation to the nature and location of paradise and hell, utilizes the teachings of Bishop Ignatius and the Saint John Chrysostom. What we know is the position of the Orthodox tradition, in which it becomes clear that paradise is "up", hell "down", paradise in "heaven" and hell in "earth's bowels". Therefore, it is a place, but not in our own space-time, otherwise every time a drill reached deep enough or a satellite passed around the earth, it would pass invisibly through some super-worldly place.

On the other hand, atheists try to ridicule the concept of paradise, so some Christians, in order to avoid materialistic accusations, end up that heaven does not exist "nowhere". There is therefore a great deal of confusion and ambiguity, as Father Seraphim (2004) observes, but on trivial matters and not on substance.

According to Father Seraphim (2004), beyond the general knowledge that heaven and hell are places, we do not need to know anything more, that only to them, that God opens the spiritual eyes, it's revealed. The important thing, as St. John Chrysostom points out, is not the exact location of paradise or hell, but understanding how we can enter the paradise and avoid hell.

Critics of customs, teaching to consider it "unrealistic" and dismiss it as a fictional narrative or a later addition. Father Seraphim (2004) disagrees with this approach, believing that the teaching of customs is based on the Scriptures and the Lives of the Saints and is not an arbitrary interpretation.

Father Seraphim (2004) stresses that the important thing is to be able to discern spiritual realities. These experiences do not manifest themselves in our own rough, material world and the concepts of space and time exist differently in airspace. What is certain is that human language is insufficient to fully render them.

Father Seraphim Rose (2004) characterizes the appearance of customs "litmus test" of authentic Christian teaching on death. Since this element disappears from the deadly experiences of the West, however impressive they may be, or if they have no explanation of modern medical science, they remain shallow, in relation to Orthodox teaching.

Father Seraphim (2004) joins those who critically see the phenomenon of modern near-death experiences, as he disagrees with the identification of "bright existences" and angels. He observes that angels, as presented in the Orthodox Christian Tradition, have a much more specific form, but also a mission, in relation to the amorphous and indeterminate 'bright beings'. Father Seraphim (2004) considers that the wrong correlation of "bright existences" and angels is due to the influence of modern materialism on the understanding of spiritual reality. According to Father Seraphim (2004), authentic Orthodox teaching is outside the framework of the western dualist Philosophy. Father Seraphim (2004) considers that the western's dualist thinking is oversimplified and not sufficient to interpret spiritual reality. Father Rose (2004) points out that even the occult has been influenced by these dualistic conditions of Western philosophy, thus spreading the same vague and false ideas about spiritual reality.

As a consequence of this confusion, when the secularized man expresses some curiosity about the spiritual world, he has almost no interest in whether this, which is the product of imagination, unusual human forces or if it is a sign of divine, angelic or demonic effect. At this point Father Seraphim Rose (2004) expresses his own interpretation of the "bright being", according to which, it is much more likely, it is a demonic temptation than an angelic presence. First of all, "light" doesn't lead the soul anywhere, it just stops it and takes a look back at the past events of life. Then it has no specific form, like the angels in the Christian secretariat and tradition, so the identification of this "light" with an angel, a guide of the soul in the afterlife course, it is logically impossible.

On the contrary, R. Moody (2001) rejects the version of demonic temptation, believing that if the "bright existence" were demonic, it would be an ambassador not for love, but for hatred, and that it would not leave good feelings and impressions. Father Seraphim (2004) considers that Moody's assessment of "bright beings" is naïve. In much of the Christian secretariat, demons choose to mislead their victims, presenting themselves and their work as a good thing.

The assessment of Father Seraphim (2004) is that each man, especially accepts the last hours, demonic temptations, which vary, depending on his expect-

tations and spiritual level. For those who believe in hell, demons appear in horrible forms, in order to torture a man through fear. For those who do not believe in hell, or if they believe, they may consider that they do not belong there, as some Protestants, who consider themselves "rescued", demons choose different ways to mislead them. However, it is not out of the question that demons appear to certain righteous Christians, who believe in hell, with a misleading appearance, as angels of light.

According to Father Seraphim Rose (2004), the only safe criterion for distinguishing between angelic and demonic deathly appearances, is offered by genuine, Orthodox Christian teaching. However, due to the widespread dissemination of the dualistic ideas of Western philosophy, the criterion of several Orthodox Christians has been alleviated. As a result, many Orthodox Christians find it difficult to believe that demons operate in "material" ways and not just on a symbolic level. Similarly, those Orthodox who believe in the existence of demons are regarded by others as "naïve" or "conservative". The angels reside in the heavens, passing only through the "air space", as divine messengers. Also, the souls of the dead simply pass through the "air space", passing through the Partial Crisis, to reach the partial foretaste of paradise or Hades, as a foretaste of Hell. The chances of souls leaving their bodies not encountering demons are slim, Father Seraphim (2004) concludes.

On the contrary, the Orthodox Christian Literature places greater emphasis on these issues and places particular emphasis on the outcome of the soul. While all Christian experiences of death confirm the existence of paradise and hell, the need for repentance in man's life, the struggle not to lose his soul, there is a judgment of man by God, none of this is found in Western near-death experiences.

The reason why the demonic nature of these spirits is not obvious to those who have some kind of death experience is because they haven't really died, they don't have the protection and the guidance of the angels, who lead the soul after death. On the contrary, demons in the cases of souls, passing through the process of actual death, from their region, manifest all their wickedness and hostility. In other souls, they choose to show some other form, to mislead them. Father Seraphim (2004) stresses that only in the cases of the God-given visions of righteous Christians can we speak of the real emergence of entities from the "other world", angels and saints.

It is only through the study of Christianity that man gradually becomes able to distinguish between good and evil. This knowledge and experience of the Christian, can, as long as it is in God's purposes, make him capable, to see spirits, initially through his spiritual eyes and then, through his physical eyes. This process is called the opening of the senses and occurs by divine concession. The opening of the senses also occurs at the time of death, when man enters with his soul into the spiritual world.

Father Seraphim Rose (2004) observes that the only reason all these events seem incredible and unreal to modern man is the lack of familiarity with Christian Secretariat and Faith. This lack of familiarity with the Christian Faith is rooted in the well-founded, modern materialistic concept, according to which

consciousness and body are identified.

Probably the reason why the ancient secretariat did not make such extensive reference to the first moments, after clinical death, is because of the Christian, the existence of the soul and the existence of life after death, is a given reality. The weight is given to god's revealed word and God's commandments, while there is no corresponding curiosity for explaining phenomena, as there is in modern man, Metropolitan Hierotheos (2010) concludes.

An Orthodox view of modern near-death experiences

Father Seraphim (2004) does not regard modern death experiences as genuine experiences of death, but as extracorporeal experiences, as they do not, in his view, go hand in hand with the real experience of death. Therefore, they cannot give us the true picture of what happens after death. All they prove is that consciousness is maintained after it is exited from the body. Father Seraphim (2004) believes that in fact genuine Christian experiences offer much more information about the state of the soul after death than modern near-death experiences.

Father Seraphim (2004) accepts that Christian teaching about the air world and the true paradise and hell, located outside it, can protect the Christian, from being seduced by teachings, derived from evil spirits. This danger, however, the Christian can avoid when he believes that experiences in airspace are not what they seem.

Modern, near death experiences, Father Seraphim (2004) concludes, are contrary to the traditional Christian teaching of the afterlife. They have more similarities to the experiences of psychics, Shamans and pagan mysteries than to Christianity, as they limit life outside the body, in a state of spiritual euphoria, without fear, only with peace and pleasures.

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