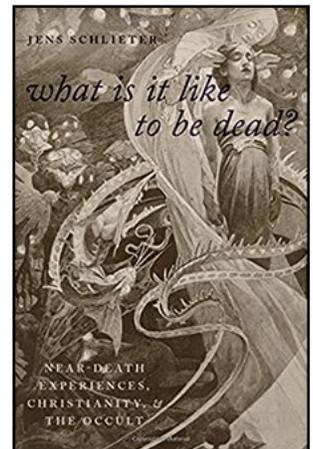


A Narrative about Narratives of Near-Death Experiences¹

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A Review of *What is it Like to be Dead? Near-Death Experiences, Christianity, & the Occult*, by Jens Schlieter. Oxford University Press, 2018, Pp. xxxii + 344. \$34.95. ISBN 978-0-19-0888848



According to the blurb of the reviewed book, Jens Schlieter (Professor of the Systematic Study of Religion in Bern, Switzerland) presented the first study “to document and analyze four centuries of near-death testimonies before the codification of the genre in the 1970s, offering the first full account of the modern genealogy of near-death experiences.” It seems, however, that in the 250 years between 1500, where Carol Zaleski’s (1987) earlier book on Medieval near-death experiences (NDEs) left off, and the publications of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), there were only very few NDE reports. Schlieter included only five in his study, the last one representing the account of Johann Schwerdtfeger (Kern, 1734), “probably the oldest report of an experience near death in a more focused sense” (p. 62; see also Nahm, 2012). The focus of Schlieter’s work clearly rests on the 19th and 20th Century, and this is where its strengths are.

The author collated numerous reports of NDEs and related topics from a huge variety of sources, some of which had been hardly discussed in the literature on Western NDEs, and he thus provided a valuable contribution to NDE studies. Schlieter shows, for example, that tunnels, panoramic life reviews, and autoscopies were absent in earlier NDE reports, thus suggesting their evolvement over time. Indeed, contents of NDEs are influenced by cultural conditions, and they also change throughout geographic regions over time, as highlighted already before by other authors (e.g., Kellehear, 2009; Nahm, 2009, 2011, 2019; Ohkado & Greyson, 2014; Shushan, 2018; Zaleski, 1987). Schlieter’s interpretation of these findings is that the content of NDEs and especially the retrospectively created reports of the alleged experiences are shaped by “the individual’s former conscious (or unconscious) reflection on death, the afterlife and the soul” (p. XX), being guided by wish-fulfilling self-suggestion and predefined “expectation, anticipation, and confirmation of the anticipated” (p. 5), as well as by retroactive imputations. The resulting reports would become “enriched by third-person comments” throughout the years and “harmonized with near-death reports of others” (p. 261), thus forming a “narrative.”

Admittedly, such factors may play a role in formulating NDE reports, but Schlieter seems to put too much emphasis on them. A closer look into the scholarly literature on NDEs shows that things are not that simple. To begin with, Schlieter’s repeated claim that NDEs must be treated as narratives but not as

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experiences that may comprise real or verifiable elements, and his frequent criticism of authors who did treat NDEs predominantly as experiences in the past (i.e., practically everybody who ever wrote about NDEs), are disputable. Schlieter even dismisses aspects of NDEs that contain elements corroborated by external observers when, for example, medical instruments were correctly identified by seemingly unconscious patients, since “the reporting parties often share the paranormal belief of the experiencers” (p. 4). Rebuking Michael Sudduth (2016), he maintains that because of the “general desirability of veridical accounts of paranormal experiences, shared by experiencers, reporters, and collectors of these reports”, NDE reports would not contain empirical data that could be utilized for properly performed studies (p. 4f). Yet, I don’t think that Schlieter’s suppositions are reasonable and reason enough to dismiss the many documented corroborations in their entirety (e.g., Holden, 2009; Rivas, Dirven, & Smit, 2016), regardless of their interpretation.

Regarding Schlieter’s claim that reports of NDEs are expectation-driven narratives shaped by previous widely known near-death reports, it remains debatable whether many of the reports he presents were really as widely known as he assumes. Moreover, he hardly touches distressing NDEs and their phenomenology, reports of which often do not contain the usual NDE elements and are obviously not in harmony with typical and widely known NDE reports (e.g., Bush, 2009, 2012). He also omits discussing the many examples in which the content of NDEs, according to the experiencers’ reports, flatly contradicted their expectations and religious world views (e.g., Abramovitch, 1988). The author furthermore barely considers NDEs of (very) young children, which are typically thought to be relatively free from cultural influence (e.g., Sutherland, 2009). Schlieter also asserts that the publication of Raymond Moody’s (1975) book had a substantial impact on the shaping of subsequent near-death reports, but the results of the few empirical studies performed indicate the contrary, namely that NDE reports did not differ in the years before and after 1975. Schlieter refers to one of these studies (Long & Long, 2003) and correctly emphasizes a methodological shortcoming of it. But he does not mention a second and more decisive study in which this shortcoming was not contained (Athappily, Greyson, & Stevenson, 2006). He likewise does not consider a study according to which NDEs are typically not embellished or changed over the years (Greyson, 2007), a finding that might lend at least some credibility to also the first study mentioned (Long & Long, 2003). Schlieter’s claim that NDEs must be treated as “event narratives” that are embellished and harmonized with previous near-death reports of others is additionally questioned by recent findings according to which the quality and richness of memories of NDEs differ from memories of usual and of imagined events (Moore & Greyson, 2017; Palmieri et al., 2014; Thonnard et al., 2013). Schlieter cited the last of these publications as support of his hypothesis, but its authors clearly concluded that “NDEs cannot be considered as imagined events,” rather, NDE reports seem to contain memories of highly emotional and “really perceived” events, i.e., of real experiences (p. 4).

When considering all these findings, it becomes obvious that Schlieter’s main hypothesis is not backed up by appropriate arguments. Taken with a grain of salt, it rather appears to represent a mere narrative about NDE narratives. Summing up, Schlieter’s book has two faces. On the one hand, it comprises a fascinating and very recommendable collection of previously neglected NDE reports and works dealing with them, and the author shows how features of typical Western NDE reports changed over time. On the other, the way he analyzes and interprets this material is unconvincing.

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