

Fox, Mark *Religion, Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience* 2003 Routledge £12.99
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Mark Fox has written an encyclopaedic survey of NDE's, making extensive use of our archives. He also relates NDE's to comparably religious and 'crisis experiences'. This book will be compulsory reading on our MA module 'Near-death experiences'.

Scholars such as Lindbeck, Katz and Cupitt reject the evidential status of religious experiences, arguing that they are a product of expectation generated by language. Fox shows that such theories do not do justice to the data. Experiences can come to people with no expectations. They are surprised by them and have no language to describe them.

NDEs provide prime facia evidence for believing that when the heart stops beating, consciousness comes apart from the body, observes the attempts at resuscitation, 'meets' deceased relatives and friends and feels embraced by an all-understanding light. Later the resuscitated persons respond to life in a new way, feeling transformed by their experience. 72% say they are no longer afraid of death.

Concerning the evidential character of such experiences, Fox comes to two cautiously balanced conclusions: firstly that naturalistic explanations for NDEs do not suffice to account for them; secondly that the evidence is insufficient to prove the reality of the soul or life after death. Some readers may be disappointed by this, but there are good reasons why most people take for granted the naturalistic assumptions on which scientific work is based, and on which technology flourishes. It is right to demand the highest standard of evidence for phenomena that challenge such assumptions.

In an academic work that seeks to persuade people to take NDEs seriously, Fox is justifiably cautious. However some of his data is capable of more positive interpretation. Pam Reynolds underwent a pioneering operation for which all blood was drained from her brain and no brain activity could be detected. Her heart was stopped, and her body temperature lowered. She was temporarily 'dead'. After resuscitation she amazed doctors by reporting in detail what they had done during the operation. Fox argues that since not all her statements were correct we should suspend judgement. I think this is unnecessarily rigorous and attach more significance to the doctors' high estimate of her overall accuracy.

I am also more impressed by 'observations' during NDEs from congenitally blind people. Fox is critical that a central witness claimed to see perfectly, yet had no awareness of colour. But colour is something for which a blind person would have no analogical awareness. Hence I am more impressed by what he observed than by his failure to identify redness. Fox also noted that two of the best NDE cases came from the same hospital and claims this is 'statistically impossible'. I disagree. Inevitably NDEs are only reported from hospitals where someone is interested in them. Despite these disagreements, I am impressed by this work. It is scholarly and readable. It deserves to be influential.

*Reviewed by: Paul Badham, Director, AHS and RERC.
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