Jens Schlieter. *What Is It Like To Be Dead: Near-Death Experiences, Christianity, and the Occult*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxxii + 344 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19088-884-8. $36.95.

The last half-century has seen near-death narratives become almost quotidian, expressed through written memoirs, the establishment of focused websites such as the International Association of Near Death Studies (IANDS), and even a collection of TedX talks.[1] Most of the research posits itself firmly in one of two camps: either a medical reductionist approach, which insists that near-death experiences are the result of physiological changes in the brain occurring during the death process, or an expansionist viewpoint, which argues that reductionism cannot account for many of the commonly reported traits and suggests that a nonlocal consciousness, one that is not confined to a specific space such as the brain, might account for similar traits frequently reported by near-death experiencers.

In the midst of this debate, Jens Schlieter's monograph, *What Is It Like To Be Dead: Near-Death Experiences, Christianity, and the Occult,* takes a determinedly constructivist position, a detailed historical approach that seeks to explain the escalating increase in reported accounts of near-death experiences, a trajectory that he believes began in the early modern period. Schlieter's primary argument is that near-death narratives are a form of existential "religious discourse" (xv) that "cannot be separated from the individual's former conscious (or unconscious) reflection on death, the afterlife, and the soul" (xx). Although he concedes that the consequent narrative structures of the experiences may accurately describe the events, Schlieter argues that such accounts should not be viewed at face value, but are the products of the unique history of Western Christian religious tradition

1. International Association of Near-Death Studies, https:/iands.org. One example of a TedX talk is Joseph Geraci, "The Near-Death Phenomenom." Filmed September 2013 at TedX Wilmington. 13:56. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzSa5IX0mqA

combined with six evolving trends: (a) the increased institutionalization of biomedical practices including successful revival of technically deceased people; (b) the greater acceptance of psychedelics; (c) a heightened focus on individual religious experiences; (d) the continuation of spiritualist, esoteric, paranormal and occult traditions and their intersections with "New Age" spirituality; (e) the popular success of Indian yogic traditions; and (f) the favorable reception of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in the 1930s (xvii).

Schlieter argues his thesis in five parts. In Part One, he contends that modern narratives—including those collected by Dr. Raymond Moody, who is popularly believed to have reinvigorated interest in near-death experiences with his bestselling work, *Life After Life* (1975)—display clear religious origins and function as religious approaches to the existential problem of facing mortality. Four "meta-cultures" are affected by these accounts: the Christian, gnostic-esoteric, and the spiritualist-occult, all of which are religiously based; and the Naturalist, which incorporates the views of science, philosophy, and psychology in actively denying that anything other-worldly is indicated. Schlieter maintains that all four meta-cultures are implicated in the rise of reported near-death experiences.

In Part Two, Schlieter questions the viewpoint that narratives drawn from medieval visions echo the same themes present in contemporary near-death accounts. He suggests that this is not the case; there is a gap in the historical research between 1300 and 1975 (46), and it is "post-Moodian beliefs" (67) that have colored current and historical interpretations of near-death narratives. Schlieter chronologically examines Western autobiographical near-death narratives as examples of the introduction of different strands of death discourse. For example, starting with Michel de Montaignes' account written in 1580, Schlieter notes a transition from "an overly religious otherworldly journey [to a] biographical and worldly perspective" (55). The writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) are seen to reflect both accepted aspects of Christian metaculture and the introduction of gnostic-esoteric and spiritualist-occult currents.

The early nineteenth century introduced the first near-death types of narratives that appeared to be generated by psychedelic drugs (opium, hashish). There is an extensive section on Theosophy, astral travel, and South Asian yoga, all of which Schlieter believes merged with psychedelic experiences, to introduce the expectation that autoscopic events would "certainly reappear at the hour of death" (133). The European reception of Walter Evans-Wentz' (1878-1965) 1927 translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is seen as playing "a central role for the emerging belief of cross-cultural elements of near-death experiences and especially encouraged individuals to report out-of-body experiences" (153). These different currents were consolidated into near-death discourses between the 1930s and 1970s, which then also show the influences of Aldous Huxley, Carl Jung, Timothy Leary, and Stanislav Grof.

Part Three hypothesizes that the increasing medicalization of death, including dying in isolation at hospitals or hospice rather than at home, is "mirrored in a critical discourse on the uncomfortable dehumanizing anonymity of dying in institutions" (228). As resuscitation protocols—including those for coma patients—were advancing, the question of when someone is actually considered deceased became more existentially and medically complicated. At the same time, institutional changes in Christian, primarily Protestant, churches led to an increased emphasis on autonomous spiritual experiences. All these changes led to the rise of a cultural trend marked by a search for authenticity in life and the "'imperative' of individual experience" (xxviii).

In Part Four, Schlieter's "aim [is] to show that the reports bear witness to the fact that the . . . memoirs are—in the way they are formed and reported—embedded in social communities and the collective, communicative memory" (xxix). Regarding this section as an excursus, he postulates that a "death-x-pulse" (derived from a Freudian "wake up call") that consists of "a sudden trigger within consciousness that brings forth the possibility of its own nonexistence, that is, death" is responsible for "at least a number of near-death narratives" (261). The

dying consciousness will then search internally for memories, metaphors and religious beliefs to contextualize this moment of existential crisis.

Finally, Part Five argues that common features of near-death experiences—such as a tunnel, a life review, and an out-of-body-experience—have evolved over time and reflect changes in the cultural landscape. Schlieter suggests that the "experiencers themselves encourage a religious reading of their experiences" (295), which relates to a human need to search for a meaning or an understanding of a purpose behind the anomalous occurrence. The result is, Schlieter avers, that people do find themselves transformed, thus validating the religious episteme of the narratives. As he concludes, "near-death experiences are religious experiences par excellence" (311).

Schlieter's scholarly monograph is extraordinarily detailed, with a tremendous range of theoretical and historical source materials. It is dense and thought-provoking, and meant for a knowledgeable audience. Schlieter is at his strongest when he notes the temporal interweaving of cultural movements and academic discourses, and on elements of narratives as reflective of historico-cultural trends. To truly understand his argument, a broad knowledge of the historicity of post-modern spiritual trends, the cognitive model of religious experiences, narrative theory and current near-death experience research is very helpful.

The excursus of Part Four thus presents as the weakest section of the work. Schlieter's hypothesis that memories and narrative theory mechanisms explain the accounts of the experiences becomes commingled with the experiences themselves. Assuming a reductionist viewpoint, which only permits physiological explanations based on an encased consciousness, Schlieter argues that, during impending death, consciousness "refers to its own history, its existence as embodied consciousness, from an already detached perspective" (271). Having created its own narrative, consciousness then reawakes in the recovered near-death experiencer and proceeds to modify the recollection: "We should count with a revision process that will start immediately after the experience and will usually come to a close only when

the narrative configuration through internal and external retellings of what had happened and experienced has achieved a standardized form" (282). That is, the actual near-death experience *only* exists as a narrative.

This reasoning presents several issues with regard to near-death experiences. First, as noted, it is dependent upon a reductionist perspective; an expansionist viewpoint would accept the literal account of the event even while allowing for future revisions during retellings. Second, most of the actual memoirs are strictly descriptive and do not use metaphors. The only time memories arise in a narrative is if there has been a life review, which is somewhat rare; most research suggests life reviews occur in approximately thirteen percent of reported near-death experiences.[2] Third, Schlieter's hypothesis cannot explain the consistency among narratives across cultures, religions, time and even different age groups. For example, while arguing that the frequent near-death experience trait of moving through a dark "tunnel" to a light arises due to the increasingly common use of train travel in Britain, Schlieter does not address the fact that this trait also was (and still is) often present in the near-death narratives of non-Western cultures for which train travel was not quotidian. That is, a dark space with a light at the end is commonly reported in indigenous and other non-Western narratives.[3] Consequently, the experience precedes the advent of the metaphor and, while the meme might affect the telling of the narrative, it does not explain the universality of the "tunnel" experience.

The most significant concern is Schlieter's failure to distinguish near-death experience from other anomalous death experiences.[4] For example, Schlieter

2. Bruce Greyson, "Near-Death Experiences," in *Mind Beyond Brain: Buddhism, Science and the Paranormal*, by David E. Presti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 22–42, 35.

3. See, for example, Gregory Shushan, *Near Death Experiences in Indigenous Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

4. At least three forms of anomalous death-related experiences may be identified: near-death, empathetic-death, and coincidental-death. In the latter two cases, the person experiencing the event does not die and is not in fear of dying. In an empathetic-death occurrence, the experiencer has a near-death like experience in which they seem to accompany a dying person, reporting characteristics of near-death experiences even though they were in no danger of dying themselves and did not

mentions the Society for Psychical Research (145) with respect to deathbed coincidences, in which someone becomes aware of another person's passing through a weird, coincident event such as a dream, a stopped clock, or a vision of the person. However, while deathbed coincidences might assume culturally relative expression, they clearly cannot be relegated to a physicalist or a purely constructivist perspective. In a related fashion, Schlieter regards psychedelically induced experiences as producing similar visions and feelings as near-death events although there is substantial data to indicate that there are significant qualitative differences.[5]

Such oversights are probably due to the rapidly growing body of research on anomalous death experiences and, as such, should not detract from the book's strengths. Professor Schlieter has written an erudite and fascinating Western historical study that sheds light on the cultural interpretations of these personally transformative events. His knowledge of comparative philosophy and religious studies theory is inspiring. *What Is It Like To Be Dead* is well worth space on the bookshelf of any religious studies scholar.

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know that the dying person was passing. The coincidental-death experience is akin to the deathbed coincidences reported by the Society for Psychical Research. See von dem Hagen, "The Classification of Death-Related Experiences: A Novel Approach to the Spectrum of Near-Death, Coincidental-Death and Empathetic-Death Experiences" (MA thesis, Rice University, 2021).

5. von dem Hagen, 86. Pim van Lommel, et al., "Near-Death Experiences in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest: A Prospective Study in the Netherlands," *The Lancet* 358, no. 9298 (2001): 2044.