Antonianum XC (2015) 289-318

ABOVE THE BRIGHT BLUE SKY: A CRITIQUE OF NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES – ARTEFACT OR REALITY?[1]

Summary: Near-Death Experiences (NDE) are almost certainly brain-engineered events, rather than shadowy excursions to a kind of postulated "otherworld", since they terminate abruptly with resumption of conscious-awareness. NDE are personally idiosyncratic, related to subjects' cultural, historic, and geographic backgrounds, the recalled semantic content underlining their banality and bizarreness. Such material fails to inform us about existence beyond a proper death, as opposed to a clinical "death" from which there is reasonable expectation of recovery. There is also a marked chasm between NDE and true, classical spiritual encounters with the divine, as well as with conceptualisations of "heaven"- both being inconsistent with dogmatic (Christian) understandings about the afterlife.
Much attention is given over to the details of NDE phenomenology, rather than to subjects' post-experiential changes throughout their subsequent lives. It is possible that a minimally-damaged brain is the factor which predisposes certain people to undergo NDE, so that in the event of a severe metabolic or psychological crisis, alterations in subjects' behavioural phenotypes are brought about. That is a view which is open to further experimental study.

Sumario: Las experiencias cercanas a la Muerte (ECM) son casi con seguridad eventos generados por el cerebro, en lugar de oscuras excursiones a una especie de "otro mundo" postulado, ya que terminan abruptamente con la reanudación de la auto-conciencia. Las ECM tienen un carácter personal idiosincrásico, relacionadas con los antecedentes culturales, históricos y geográficos de los sujetos; su contenido semántico recordado resalta su banalidad y extrañeza. Este material no puede informarnos sobre una existencia más allá de la muerte, en contraposición a una "muerte" clínica de la que existe una expectativa razonable de recuperación. También hay una marcada brecha entre ECM y encuentros verdaderos, espirituales clásicos con lo divino, así como con las conceptualizaciones del "cielo" – ambos son incompatibles con la comprensión dogmática (cristiana) sobre el más allá. Se presta mucha atención a los detalles de la fenomenología de las ECM, en lugar de los cambios post-experienciales de los sujetos a lo largo de sus vidas posteriores. Es posible que un cerebro mínimamente dañado sea el factor que predispone a ciertas personas a sentir ECM, por lo que en caso de una crisis metabólica o psicológica severa, se provocan altera-

---

[1] This paper is based on a lecture given at Antonianum Pontifical University, Rome in May 2014. I am grateful to Rev. Professor Lluís Oviedo for inviting me to give this talk and for his kind hospitality during my visit.