

Finding God in Near-Death Experiences, Art, and Science

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Religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion.
—Paul Tillich¹

Introduction

What can near-death experiences (NDEs) tell us about God? Can science explain the full range of NDEs? Neurologist Oliver Sacks thinks so. On the contrary, cardiologist Pim Van Lommel's research on hundreds of patients leads him to believe that the current views on the relationship between the brain and consciousness held by most physicians, philosophers, and psychologists are too narrow for a proper understanding of the phenomenon.

When words are inadequate to express the transcendent beauty of NDEs, perhaps art can help. The trend in contemporary art is to express God symbolically. The beauty of nature and of science, with their underlying mathematical order, point beyond themselves to a transcendent and immanent God.

Why do both atheist and believing scientists use the God word?

What Can Near-Death Experiences Tell Us about God?

Near-death experiences have many features in common: out-of-body consciousness, movement through a dark tunnel, entering a world light,

meeting an angelic person, God, predeceased relatives, a life review, experience of a barrier, return, and awakening.² No two experiences are identical and no single feature is found in every NDE. Over 80 percent of surveyed people who experiences an NDE expressed a strong increase in their concern for others and that life has greater meaning and purpose.³

Eben Alexander, M.D., author of the best-selling *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey to the Afterlife*,⁴ had an NDE in the fall of 2008. Before this, he had thought he understood what happened to the brain when people are near death and had always believed there were good scientific explanations for the heavenly out-of-body journeys described by those who narrowly escaped death. However, after seven days in a coma during which his brain showed complete absence of neural activity in all but the primitive portions, he experienced something so profound that it gave him a scientific reason to believe in consciousness after death. This included meeting his deceased sister whom he never knew he had. He was able to verify this later.

Here is the conclusion of Alexander's *Proof of Heaven*:

There is no scientific explanation for the fact that while my body lay in coma, my mind—my conscious, inner self—was alive and well. While the neurons of my cortex were stunned to complete inactivity by the bacteria that had attacked them, my brain-free consciousness journeyed to another, larger dimension of the universe: a dimension I'd never dreamed existed and which the old, pre-coma me would have been more than happy to explain was a simple impossibility.⁵

But that dimension—in rough outline, the same one described by countless subjects of NDEs and other mystical states—is there. It exists, and what I saw and learned there has placed me quite literally in a new world, a world where we are much more than our brains and bodies and where death is not the end of consciousness but rather a chapter in a vast, and incalculably positive, journey.

Eben Alexander's answer to Oprah Winfrey's⁶ question, "Did you see God?" is similar to many theologians' idea of the Divine. Alexander answered that God is neither a "he" nor a "she," but infinitely powerful, all knowing, infinite love, transcending time and space, symbolized by a brilliant orb of light and expressed by the sound "Om." God does not have a face. Alexander's transcendent experiences are difficult to express in words. He said it is "like trying to write a novel with only half the alphabet."⁷

Can Science Explain Near-Death Experiences?

Neurologist Oliver Sacks, M.D., who considers himself to be a non-militant atheist, ironically chose the title “Seeing God In the Third Millennium” for his article offering a naturalistic, scientific explanation of Alexander’s NDE. Sacks believes the NDE occurred when Alexander’s cortex was returning to its full function. For Sacks, NDEs can occur in 20 to 30 seconds, even though they seem to last much longer because the concept of time may seem variable or meaningless. Sacks put it this way:

Hallucinations, whether revelatory or banal, are not of supernatural origin; they are part of the normal range of human consciousness and experience. This is not to say that they cannot play a part in the spiritual life, or have great meaning for an individual. Yet while it is understandable that one might attribute value, ground beliefs, or construct narratives from them, hallucinations cannot provide evidence for the existence of any metaphysical beings or places. They provide evidence only of the brain’s power to create them.⁸

For Sacks, Alexander’s NDE was not proof of Heaven. However, Sacks would, I believe, be open to the possibility of “seeing Heaven in a wild-flower,” to use William Blake’s metaphor.⁹

Let’s now examine the decades of NDE research on hundreds of patients, who had survived cardiac arrest, as summarized in Pim van Lommel’s book, *Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of the Near-Death Experience*.¹⁰ Van Lommel provides scientific evidence that the near-death phenomenon is an authentic experience that cannot be attributed to imagination, psychosis, or oxygen deprivation. He shows that our consciousness does not always coincide with brain functions, and that, remarkably and significantly, consciousness can even be experienced separate from the body. Neuroscientists are still investigating the nature and source of consciousness. Progress in this area of research will undoubtedly shed new light on the nature of NDEs.

Religions have a longer historical tradition for finding meaning in death and life than science. The resurrection showed that the transforming power of God’s eternal love in Jesus was stronger than death.

The lasting life-transforming effects of NDEs can hardly be explained as neurophysiological artifacts. Finally, no neurophysiological finding can explain the full range of near-death phenomena. Words are inadequate to express the transcendent beauty of NDEs. Perhaps art can help.

How Does Art Portray God?

Theologian Paul Tillich experienced a Divine Presence when seeing the painting of Botticelli's *Madonna with Singing Angels*. His excerpts from his "One Moment of Beauty" are as follows:

Strangely, I first found the existence of beauty in the trenches of World War I. At 28, I became a chaplain in the German army and served for five ugly years until the war ended. To take my mind off the mud, blood and death of the Western Front, I thumbed through the picture magazines at the field bookstores and discovered Botticelli's *Madonna with Singing Angels*.

After the war, I hurried to the Kaiser Friederich Museum. Gazing up at the painting, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself. It shone through the colors of the paint, as the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church. As I stood there, bathed in the beauty its painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken.

That moment has affected my whole life, giving me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth. I compare it with what is usually called revelation in the language of religion. I know that no artistic experience can match the moments in which prophets were grasped in the power of the Divine Presence, but I believe there is an analogy between revelation and what I felt. In both cases, the experience goes beyond the way we encounter reality in our daily lives. It opens up depths experienced in no other way.¹¹

Tillich believed Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) was the greatest Protestant painting of his day because it illustrated the Protestant principle of prophetic judgment and protest. *Guernica* was a small town in northern Spain where the Fascist countries, Germany and Italy, used saturation bombing to obliterate it. Tillich regarded *Guernica* as profoundly religious because it expressed so honestly and powerfully our anguished search for ultimate meaning and our passionate protest against cruelty and hatred. It did not have, however, any explicit religious content.

Paradoxically Tillich was critical of Dali's *Last Supper* (1955), at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. This large oil on canvas painting does have religious content. Tillich regarded Dali's representation of Jesus as too idealized and somewhat effeminate, "kitsch," or commonplace. Tillich, who was forced to leave Germany when the Nazis relived him of his academic position in 1933, was not that well versed in English.

He thought that the appropriate translation of “kitch” was “junk.” Since Tillich was a respected art critic, the curator of the National Gallery of Art mentioned this in a telephone conversation with Dali in Spain, to which Dali replied that he was not drunk when he made the painting.

Contrary to Tillich, I love Dali's *Last Supper*. I have stood in front of it many times at the National Gallery of Art. Its rectangular dimensions, 66 inches by 106 inches, have the divine proportion. Each time I discovered something new, such as being present with Jesus and his disciples and also the right and left symmetry of the disciples. Jesus's outstretched arms grasping the base of the dodecahedron, a symbol of the universe, is awesome.

Contemporary art is depicting God more symbolically than in the past. The influential Russian abstract painter and art theorist Wassily V. Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*¹² showed how artists of the early 20th century expressed the Divine through their abstract paintings.

Michelangelo's 1505–1512 Sistine Chapel ceiling showed God as an old man imparting life to Adam. *God as an Architect* (1794) by William Blake was a water colored relief etching of a wise white-haired man symbolically creating and measuring the world with a divider.

In Vincent Willem van Gogh's 1890 version of Rembrandt's *The Raising of Lazarus*, van Gogh depicts himself as Lazarus being raised through the compassionate outreach of two women. Instead of Rembrandt's figure of Christ standing above Lazarus's grave, van Gogh painted the blazing sun—as a symbol of Divine Love. He always said that he only painted what he knew . . . he had never seen Christ, but he believed in the Divine that flowed through Christ. For Van Gogh the sun, as the source of our life on earth, symbolized the Divine Creator.

The neglect of artistic expressions of beauty in many Protestant churches and our neglect of nature's divinely created beauty contributes to the declining main-line church membership. People fill this vacuum by expressions of God in the popular media. Theologian Paul Tillich believed that the Protestant Principle of prophetic judgment should be courageously balanced by Roman Catholic substance and tradition.

Rev. Rob Bell is, in my view, popularizing Tillich's existential theology. Bell's videos give us images of the Divine in the many facets of everyday life. For him *Everything Is Spiritual*.¹³ His best-selling book, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*¹⁴ envisions a loving God who does not necessarily condemn people to eternal torment in the place called Hell. This angered many conservative evangelicals and contributed to Bell's resignation from the Mars Hill megachurch that he founded. His latest book, *What We Talk about When*

We Talk about God,¹⁵ shows how traditional ideas about God have grown stale and dysfunctional. Bell believes that God is with us, for us, and ahead of us.

At the conclusion of Tillich's popular *Courage to Be*,¹⁶ he stated that the source of the courage was the God above the God of Theism. An example of the God who must be transcended is the rhetorical-political abuse of the name of God, as when Saddam Hussein said that he would win the Gulf War because God was on his side. Tillich would have preferred Abraham Lincoln's idea that the question is not whether God is on our side, but are we on God's side? For Tillich, the God of theism would be a being but beside other beings (hence finite and provable), an invincible tyrant who controls and determines everything and allows us no freedom. God is not a finite being but the ground and abyss of all being.

Why Do Both Atheist and Believing Scientists Use the God Word?

Tillich, I believe, would have criticized physicist Leon Lederman for labeling the Higgs boson *The God Particle*¹⁷ to gain support for the national expenditure of the billions of dollars required to construct the super particle collider needed to prove its existence. Many physicists dislike the term, including Peter Higgs, who regards it as inappropriate sensationalism. When Lederman was asked why did you call it the God Particle, he answered that there were two reasons: One, the publisher wouldn't let us call it the Goddamn Particle, though that might be a more appropriate title, given its villainous nature and the expense it is causing. And two, there is a connection, of sorts, to another book, a much older one.

Elaine Pagels was more theological when she wrote in *Newsweek*:¹⁸ "It is called the God Particle because you cannot see it and everything depends on it."

Albert Einstein once said, "I want to know God's thoughts. The rest are details."¹⁹ He also said, "I don't try to imagine a God; it suffices to stand in awe of the structure of the world, insofar as it allows our inadequate senses to appreciate it."²⁰

Einstein's contemporary, Paul Tillich observed the original unity of science and religion in antiquity.²¹ There was no conflict, as science had not emerged from natural philosophy. According to ancient mythology, nature was explained by the action of the gods. Conflicts arose, however, as scientific laws replaced ancient mythology and cosmology. Darwin's Theory of Evolution, was opposed by some churchmen who sensed the dehumanizing and amoral implications of this new science. Tillich himself was

strongly opposed to the depersonalizing forces of our technological society, which deprive the creative self of its selfhood. Rather than demonizing technological societies and deifying pretechnological ones, however, Tillich wanted to hold them in creative dialectical tension, as is evident in his following encounter with Albert Einstein.

In his essay, *Science and Religion*,²² Einstein enjoined religion to do away with the kind of Personal God who would break the laws of nature to perform miracles. Tillich in response said that he agreed with Einstein in the sense that “God is supra-personal.”²³ Tillich believed today we know what the New Testament always knew—that miracles are signs pointing to the presence of a divine power in nature and history and that they are in no way negations of natural law.

Mathematical physicist Paul Davies²⁴ is in basic agreement with Tillich. Davies wrote: “I do not cling to the notion of God as a miracle-working cosmic magician, who makes a big bang and then intervenes as a cosmic repairman (intelligent design). A God who can create a self-creating universe with laws is much more majestic. As an emergentist, I believe in a hierarchy of principles, with the laws of physics at the bottom level and emergent laws operating at higher levels. Thus, we have laws of complexity, such as self-organizing chemical cycles. There are Mendel’s laws of genetics when life appears. The high-level laws do not violate the lower level laws, nor are they reducible to them. They supervene on them.”

Paul Davies’s book, *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World*,²⁵ is a follow-up to his *God and the New Physics*.²⁶ He argues that the existence of consciousness in the universe cannot be a byproduct of mindless, purposeless forces. We are truly meant to be here. Though he is not religious in a conventional sense, Davies believes that the rationality of the universe, the fact that humans can understand how the universe works, is evidence of purpose and meaning. Davies points out that the fact that the universe’s deepest laws can be expressed mathematically strongly suggests that there is more to our world than meets the eye. By the means of science, we can truly see into the mind of God.

It is interesting that Dr. Francis Collins, who led the international team that sequenced the human DNA genome, entitled his book, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*.²⁷ The “language of God” is wonderful and fitting metaphor for the molecular sequence by which genetic information is transmitted from one generation to the next via the DNA double helix. This stunning scientific achievement was also an occasion of worship for Collins. His book proposes the name “BioLogos” as a new term for theistic evolution.

“Bios” is the Greek word for “life.” Logos is Greek for “word,” with a broader meaning in Heracleitean Philosophy and Stoicism—namely, the rational principle ordering the universe. In Christian theology, “word” includes the Hebrew idea of a creative agent for all that exists, in addition to being an ordering principle. “BioLogos” expresses the belief that God is the source of all life and that life expresses the will of God. BioLogos represents the view that science and faith coexist in harmony and supports such scientific findings as (1) the universe is 14 billion years old, and (2) life evolves in accordance with Darwinian evolution. The spiritual and moral natures of humans are unique however as they were created in the “image of God.”

Dr. Francis Collins had a spirited debate with his fellow biologist, atheist Dr. Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*.²⁸ The front cover of *Time* magazine on November 13, 2006 entitled the debate “God vs. Science.” During the debate, Dawkins criticized the Biblical literalists who oppose Darwinian evolution. Collins defense was that of St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, 354–430 AD, who believed that the Biblical text should not be interpreted literally if it contradicts what we know from science and our God-given reason. At the end of the debate Dawkins noted that if there is a God, He has to be a lot bigger than how present religions represent Him.

Dr. Francis Collins’s BioLogos worldview is supported by evolutionary evangelist Rev. Michael Dowd, author of *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion will Transform Your Life and Our World*.²⁹ When Dowd was attending an evangelical college, he was greatly disturbed when he learned that the biology department was teaching Darwinian evolution. He was against it because its naturalistic explanations of the origin of the species did not involve God as described in the Bible. While at college, he became friends with other students who believed in Darwinian evolution. A few years later during a presentation of the scientific worldview, Dowd had an epiphany. He sought out science writer, Connie Barlow, and married her. They now travel around the United States giving talks supporting Darwinian evolution.

The TV Science Channel³⁰ recently aired the program, “Did we invent God? Did God invent humanity?” Dr. Andrew Newberg, author of *How God Changes Your Brain*³¹ has used brain activity imaging to answer these questions. He discovered that when believers meditate on God, their brain activity is the same as having a conversation with another person. This is not the case for atheists. This is neurological evidence that God is real for believers. This does not mean that God does not exist. Belief in a loving not punitive God and the practice of meditation and prayer are beneficial for mental and physical health.

Conclusion

During his NDE, Eben Alexander, M.D., experienced God as neither a “he” nor a “she,” but infinitely powerful, all-knowing, infinite love, transcending time and space, symbolized by a brilliant orb of light and expressed by the sound “Om.” God did not have a face.

The lasting life-transforming effects of NDEs can hardly be explained as neurophysiological artifacts. No neurophysiological finding can explain the full range of near-death phenomena. NDEs’ transcendent experiences are difficult to express in words. Artistic images can help.

Modern art, particularly abstract art, is depicting God and the Divine symbolically in contrast to Michelangelo’s anthropomorphic God. The neglect of artistic expressions of beauty in many Protestant churches and our neglect of nature’s divinely created beauty contributes to the declining main-line church membership. People fill this vacuum by expressions of God in the popular media.

Many scientists use God in their books as a symbol of their faith, which is not always that of traditional religions. However, physicist Lederman and neurologist Sacks have used God as way of gaining support for their point of view. Leon Lederman’s labeled the Higgs boson the *God Particle* to gain support for the national expenditure of the billions of dollars required to construct the super particle collider needed to prove its existence. It is ironic that neurologist Oliver Sacks, M.D., who considers himself to be a nonmilitant atheist, chose the title “Seeing God In the Third Millennium,” for his article offering a naturalistic, scientific explanation of Alexander’s NDE.

The beauty of nature and of science, with their underlying mathematical order, point beyond themselves to a transcendent and immanent God. God is in nature and nature in God. Science emerged from myth to math.³² God is in our beginning and in our earthly end. “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Revelation 22:13). God as Ultimate Reality transcends time: the eternal from which we emerge and to which we return at death.³³

Acknowledgment

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