

# Controversy Rises over 'Deathbed' Visions

By RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE

The mystery of life after death, long the scholarly preserve of Scripture experts, theologians, and philosophers, has of late become a subject of investigation among members of the scientific community.

The investigation, in turn, has given rise to controversy.

A major portion of the research is focused on experiences of persons who were resuscitated after having been thought, adjudged, or pronounced clinically dead by attending physicians.

Dr. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., who holds a doctorate in philosophy as well as a medical degree, has described what he calls a "theoretically complete model" of the "typical near-death experiences" he has reported on in his book, *Life After Life*.

"A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving, very rapidly through a long tunnel.

"After this, he suddenly finds himself 'outside' of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body (on the operating table or hospital bed) from a distance as though he is a spectator."

The patient, watching resuscitation efforts, hears what is said, notes what is happening, but cannot communicate with anyone. Soon, his attention is drawn to the presences in the room — spirits of dead relatives or friends.

Then, "a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before — a being of light — appears before him. This being asks him a question, non-verbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous play-back of the major events of his life."

The patient next finds himself approaching some kind of "barrier or border," apparently representing the limit between earthly life and

Famed inventor Thomas Alva Edison is reported to have said, on his deathbed, "I see the great beyond."



the next life," becomes aware that "the time for his death has not yet come," and reluctantly "somehow reunites with his physical body" and recovers.

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D., a University of Chicago psychiatrist, whose pioneering studies of the dying process have been widely circulated and acclaimed, says Dr. Moody's studies are "corroborated by my own research and by the findings of other very serious-minded scientists, scholars, and members of the clergy."

But, while Dr. Moody is careful to say that he is not trying "to construct a proof" of the ancient doctrine of the survival of bodily death, Dr. Kubler-Ross has said that on the basis of her research and that of Dr. Moody and others she is convinced that there is life after death.

Some observers, however, feel that Dr. Moody and other researchers have been selective in reporting cases of near-death experiences.

Joseph Ludders, West Coast representative for the evangelical Christian Medical Society, states that "there are a number of case occurrences that we know of in the Christian Medical Society that are diametrically opposed to what Moody has reported."

A similar reaction has been expressed by the Nurses' Christian Fellowship, an organization that has developed extensive seminars on death and dying.

Christian response to scientific research on life after death has been sharply divided.

Some Christians have welcomed the inquiry as confirming their belief in eternal life, as did a Roman Catholic nun after a lecture by Dr. Kubler-Ross. "I'm pleased," said the nun, "if someone scientific can come out and proclaim life after death."

Other Christians, however, like Dr. Phillip J. Swihart, executive director of the Midwest Colorado Mental Health Center, reject the findings of Dr. Moody and Dr. Kubler-Ross as inconsistent with, or flatly contradictory to, the teachings of the Bible.

Dr. Swihart, and other critics, take sharp exception to Dr. Moody's claim that "in most cases (of near-death experiences) the reward-punishment model of the afterlife is abandoned and disavowed, even by many who had been accustomed to thinking in these terms.

"They found, much to their amazement, that even when their most apparently awful and sinful deeds were made manifest before the being of light, the being responded not with anger or rage, but rather, only with understanding and even with humor."

In his follow-up book, *Reflections on Life After Life*, Dr. Moody suggests that what his near-death subjects reported, experiencing in their meeting with the "being of light" was that judgment about their lives "came from within them."

"In this state," says Dr.



Moody, "(the subjects) seemed to have seen for themselves what they should and shouldn't have done and to have judged themselves accordingly."

But, says Dr. Swihart in his booklet, *The Edge of Death*: "It is clear that Moody's theology, shared in large measure by Kubler-Ross, makes the Biblical doctrine of grace irrelevant..."

"Moody does not view evil as God does, nor does he accept the Biblical teaching that we will not judge ourselves. Jesus Christ will judge us."

Stephen Board, executive editor of *Eternity* magazine, an evangelical monthly, suggests that the "being of light" might possibly be Satan himself, who, as Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians (11:14) "disguises himself as an angel of light."

"If there is no judgement, but only welcoming 'Being of Light' at the end of the trail" says Board, "the death of Jesus Christ was superfluous."

On the other hand, a Jesuit theologian at New York's Fordham University, has given a favorable review to a new book on near-death

experiences that in many respects supports the Moody-Kubler-Ross findings.

The book, *At the Hour of Death*, is described by the reviewer, Father John J. Heaney, SJ, in the March issue of the Jesuit magazine, *American*, as "the best and most thorough investigation of paranormal deathbed experiences we have to date."

The work, by two specialists in parapsychology, Dr. Karlis Osis, Ph.D., and Dr. Erlendur Haraldsson, Ph.D., is based on "deathbed visions" of patients reported by more than 1,000 doctors and nurses in the United States and India.

Using modern sampling techniques, questionnaires, and interviews, the authors gathered detailed data on 877 cases of terminal or near-death patients and subjected the data to computer evaluation and statistical analysis.

The patients were reported to have seen apparitions either of persons or places, or unexpectedly become serene or elated.

Father Heaney states that the authors of the study "make a good case in support of their conclusions that the evidence strongly suggests life after death" and that "neither medical, nor psychological, nor cultural conditioning can explain away death-bed visions."

Among the findings discussed in the book:

— While drugs, high fever, and uremic poisoning increase the number of purely subjective hallucinations, death-bed visions relating

to postmortem existence are relatively unaffected by medical conditions.

— The persons seen were mainly apparitions of dead relatives (United States) or of religious figures (India).

— Primarily, these figures had a "take-away" purpose, a purpose which, at times, contradicted the intentions of the patients.

— Places seen were mainly scenes of beauty, intense color, and peace.

— Deathbed visions often cut across individual, national, and cultural lines, showing similarities in the visions experienced by Indian or American patients.

— The content is often contrary to religious expectations, as presented in the Bible or the Hindu religious — classic, Bhagavad-Gita.

Dr. Osis and Dr. Haraldsson, as Father Heaney notes, clearly point out that there are subjective factors involved in the experiences. For example, Hindus do not see Christ, nor do Christians see Krishna.

"Yet," says Father Heaney, "their thesis is that there is a cross-cultural core of phenomena that suggests something objective beyond cultural differences and that the most coherent hypothesis is that the dying are experiencing a phenomenon of transition to another life."

The book, *At the Hour of Death*, adds the Jesuit theologian, "stands as a model for future research in this area" and "earns respect for its effort to combine scientific method with a real sensitivity about what is important to human beings."

## Jail Volunteers Get Thanks from Sheriff

St. Bernard's Seminary is among 75 organizations and individuals receiving Citations of Merit from the Monroe County Sheriff's Department for volunteer work to help county jail inmates.

The awards were sent to contributing agencies on instructions from Sheriff William M. Lombard, said Mrs. Frances Coleman, coordinator of volunteers at Monroe County Jail.

The recipients included

Rochester Interfaith Jail Ministry, Church Women United, Women's Jail Project, Alcoholics Anonymous, CHOICE, County Threshold Program, Empire State College, Good News Mission, Literacy Volunteers of Rochester, Teen Challenge, University of Rochester, Virginia Wilson Helping Hand Center, The Way International, many churches which provided religious inspiration and individuals who conducted classes.

## Open House at St. Mary's

St. Mary's Hospital has scheduled an open house from 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday, May 7. The public is invited.

Shuttle buses will be available to take guests to the hospital from Westgate Plaza, 2000 Chili Ave., at Brooks Avenue, from 1 to 5 p.m.

Open house highlights will include the newly redecorated Emergency and Outpatient Departments, the Professional Office Building,

Family Health Associates laboratories, Seton Hospice (a minimal care facility), Physical Medicine Department and several health screening tests such as blood pressure, glaucoma and pulmonary function.

Courtesy parking will be available in the adjacent ramp garage and in employee parking lots. Further information may be obtained from the Development and Community Relations Office.

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