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**IMAGINATIONS OF PARADISE AND HELL  
IN DESCRIPTIONS OF NEAR-DEATH  
EXPERIENCES: A COMPARISON WITH  
CONVENTIONAL CHRISTIAN IMAGERY**

Bachelor's Thesis

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# Table of contents

INTRODUCTION .....	4
Explanation of choice of topic .....	4
Purpose of research .....	5
Methodology .....	6
Work structure .....	7
I THEORETICAL PART .....	8
1. The status quo of near-death experiences .....	8
1.1. Main elements of near-death experiences .....	9
1.2. The pineal gland, out of body experiences and consciousness .....	9
1.3. The light at the end of the tunnel .....	14
1.4. Life review .....	15
Conclusion .....	16
II EMPIRICAL PART .....	18
1. Characterisation of good and bad experiences .....	18
2. Christian Heaven, Hell and Purgatory as defined by a dictionary .....	20
3. Near-death experiences .....	21
3.1 Heaven .....	22
3.2 The Being of Light .....	25
3.3 God .....	27
3.4 God's light .....	29
3.5 Tunnel .....	31
3.6 Unconditional love .....	32
3.7 Feeling of home .....	33
3.8 Angels .....	35
3.9 Demonic beings .....	37
3.10 Hellish landscapes .....	39
Conclusion .....	41

DISCUSSIONS .....	43
General observations and challenges .....	43
Methodological reflections .....	43
Questions for further inquiry .....	44
Implications for the research community .....	44
Reflection on contributions.....	45
CONCLUSION .....	46
Findings and key results .....	46
Addressing research questions.....	47
Broader implications .....	47
Research Limitations and Future Directions .....	48
Final thoughts.....	48
Bibliography .....	49
Kokkuvõte .....	53

# INTRODUCTION

## Explanation of choice of topic

The inspiration behind this work takes root in my innate interest in dreams and religion. Already during the first phases of studies I started pondering on the idea of my thesis topic and *dreams and religion* was the first idea which later grew into interest in near-death experience studies. I initiated contact with a supervisor who was ready to help and guide me into the world of near-death experiences. Quickly it was established that even though there was some research into the topic of near-death experiences in Estonia, it should definitely be continued and developed. Some of the most notable studies already done are Annabel Parts' bachelor's thesis on the topic of "Near-death experiences and self-myth: pilot research based on ten interviews", Roland Karo's article called "Forcing the River of Styx: a tactical sketch" as well as private research of Karl Käsnapuu – his book called "Surmalähedased kogemused: mis saab elust pärast surma?" (Eng. "Near-death experiences: what happens to life after death?") (Käsnapuu, 2023). Exploring this specific field I will be able to find out what are the most common patterns in people's near-death experiences and whether they align with classical Christian views on Heaven and Hell. The goal of the research is to see: 1) to which extent these visions reflect Christian beliefs; 2) are there typical patterns of vision that are common to NDE but are not found elsewhere. If this research is going to be continued, we could arrive at the very bottom of the most essential questions in religion, finding both practical as well as theoretical base knowledge of our belief systems. An aspect that cannot be left aside is that we would be able to study people's beliefs and their importance to themselves and challenge the main line of science. My research will bring out the most common symbols and visions in near-death experiences thus giving the near-death experience research community an overview of what the most typical near-death experience might look like and try to find parallels with conventional Biblical Christian imagery. In the field of religious studies, we learn what and how affects people and how people become the way they are in the context of religion. This research evaluates whether traditional religious

practices such as attending church, reading religious literature, and participating in a religious community exert a stronger influence on individuals' beliefs and experiences than external factors, such as cultural and societal influences, in shaping perceptions of near-death experiences and religious symbolism.

The language of the paper is English due to the base material being in English. It is also important to note that all the terms and experiences that have become the base material for this research are also in English and when trying to translate terms and personal experiences of people into a different language we might either lose the meaning or change it to the point where it becomes inunderstandable. Since Estonian and English are very different it could simply change the results of the research if all the base material for this research was translated into Estonian. In addition, the research of NDEs in Estonia is very scarce so I concentrated more on international sources. By writing this research, it becomes accessible to the international research community allowing for broader dissemination, collaboration and recognition, bridging Estonian and international research on near-death experiences. It could enrich global discourse by making underexplored perspectives accessible while maintaining the accuracy of terminology and cultural nuance that might be lost in translation. This ensures broader dissemination and fosters collaboration on a subject with profound theoretical and practical implications.

## **Purpose of research**

In this thesis the concept of near-death experiences will be discussed and what type of Christian symbolisms can be found in them. The idea is yet again to see: 1) to which extent these visions reflect Christian beliefs; 2) are there typical patterns of vision that are common to NDE but are not found elsewhere. It is important to highlight that the near-death experiences taken from the [nderf.org](http://nderf.org) database and the people who reported them are not necessarily related to each other because it ensures that the study captures a diverse range of individual experiences rather than patterns shaped by shared cultural, social, or personal connections. This separation strengthens the reliability and generalizability of the findings

by reducing biases that could arise from group influences. It also underscores that the research focuses on the universality or variability of NDE themes, making the results applicable to a broader understanding of near-death experiences across different contexts.

## **Methodology**

In this thesis the database that is going to be used as a source of examples of real life cases of near-death experiences is [nderf.org](http://nderf.org). The purpose of this specific database is to collect near-death experiences from all over the world, from anyone who is willing to share their experience, in one place for further research purposes. When sharing their experiences, the people are asked to fill out a questionnaire after writing their story so that those interested can see the effects of the experience in question or be able to analyse it with ease. The database has divided the stories into different categories with the purpose of making it easier for the researchers to find necessary information for their particular field of study. The database does not require any sort of registration or payment to be able to use it. The creator of the website, Jeffrey Long, was one of the people who put the field of study of near-death experiences on the world scale and made it easy and accessible for research to anyone interested. Jeffrey Long is himself a radiologist specialising in oncology. He founded the database in 1998 when he wanted to find out for himself if near-death experiences are real or not. As a result of his research his book “Evidence of the Afterlife: The Science of Near-Death Experiences” became a New York Times bestseller and currently he is considered to be one of the leading NDE researchers. Jeffrey Long works alongside Jody Long, who is the webmaster for the Near Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF) for the past 20 years and provides support and a forum for NDErs and those who want to know about the afterlife, and their mission is to spread awareness about near-death experiences and give support to those who have experienced them. With creating the database, they hoped to make the people reading the experiences more empathetic and compassionate and get people to live their life without fear. ([https://www.nderf.org/pages\\_about.html](https://www.nderf.org/pages_about.html))

For the purpose of bringing out a good overview of the content of the mentioned database I have analysed the first one hundred published stories brought out in the *Exceptional NDEs* category in this database to ensure a big enough variety and possibility of Christian symbolisms. The experiential accounts were selected based upon inductive coding, keeping in mind the purpose of the project. That is, accounts that had little or no references to the realm of the Beyond comparable to Christian beliefs were excluded.

The next step of the research was to upload all the selected experiences to a program called QDA Miner Lite. The purpose of using this program in this research was to be able to find certain codewords in the selected experiences with ease and to be able to have some sort of statistics about them to know what kind of symbols or visions were most common. To be able to put together a picture of what does a statistically most common near-death experience look and feel like to people who have experienced them. And to simultaneously be able to compare it to Raymond Moody's list of elements that are present in near-death experiences and be able to draw out parallels between Heaven and Hell in examined near-death experiences and conventional Christian picturings of it.

## **Work structure**

This research paper is constructed in 4 main parts: Introduction – which gives an overview of the paper; First part, the theoretical part – which covers what we know about near-death experiences so far; Second part, the empirical part – which concentrates on the personal research of the writer and the Discussion of the results – where I will interpret and analyse my findings.

# I THEORETICAL PART

## 1. The status quo of research into near-death experiences

The study of near-death experiences (NDEs) has evolved significantly since Raymond Moody's "Life After Life" (1975), which established NDEs as a field of academic inquiry. Today, NDEs are studied through interdisciplinary approaches, with dozens of books and hundreds of articles exploring their psychological, neurological, and spiritual dimensions. International databases like [nderf.org](http://nderf.org), managed by Jeffrey Long, serve as foundational resources for global research.

Research by P.M.H. Atwater estimates that approximately fifteen million U.S. citizens have experienced NDEs, with only 12-20% of these occurring during actual life-threatening situations (Atwater, 2007: 9). Atwater also highlights that children are particularly prone to NDEs, with studies showing that around 70% of critically ill children report such experiences. These accounts often range from out-of-body experiences to encounters with divine beings, raising questions about the role of consciousness and whether it exists beyond the brain. Verified details in NDE narratives further challenge materialist explanations, suggesting that the experiences might reflect more than neural activity (Atwater, 2007: 3-18).

In Estonia, NDE research remains limited but growing. Contributions such as Karl Käsnapuu's „Surmalähedased kogemused: mis saab elust pärast surma?“ (Käsnapuu, 2023) and Annabel Parts' „Surmalähikogemused ja omamüüt“ (Parts, 2022) explore personal narratives and cultural contexts. Arne Hiob, in „Inimene ja teispoosus“ (Hiob, 2021), addresses the compatibility of NDEs with Christian tradition.

The connection between NDEs and Christian theology reveals alignments and challenges. Many NDEs feature divine beings and peaceful afterlife imagery resembling Christian Heaven (Revelation 21:4). However, discrepancies, such as universal salvation or culturally specific depictions, raise questions about their theological implications ([christianscholars.com](http://christianscholars.com)).

NDE research offers profound insights into consciousness, spirituality, and cultural beliefs, contributing to both global discourse and localized understanding. Yet there are many questions that are still unanswered.

### **1.1. Main elements of near-death experiences**

Raymond Moody is the person who coined the term “near-death experience” in 1975 and at this point has studied them for over 50 years (<https://www.lifeafterlife.com/about>). In his opinion most common elements of a near-death experience include: the difficulty of expressing in words an experience of such nature, or ineffability; the feeling of dying; moving through darkness or a tunnel, a cave, a cylinder, a valley; the sense of joy, love and peace; encountering the presence of deceased loved ones and other entities; visions of beings of lights, guardian spirits, and so on – communication with these beings without words, by the power of a mere thought; the perception of separation of the physical body, or out-of-body experience; a life review, or a panoramic view of the proper life, or specific event that had happened in life; many people report hearing certain sounds, some of which are described as unpleasant (such as noise, buzzing, ringing sounds); and finally, the decision of conscious return. (Moody 1975: 19-99 via Corazza, 2008: 28)

It is important to note that often an NDE does not incorporate all or even most of these features. As Moody confirmed: “I have found no one person who reports every single component of the composite experience.” (Moody 1975: 19-99 via Corazza, 2008: 28)

### **1.2. The pineal gland, out of body experiences and consciousness**

Many people have tried to link near-death experiences to certain parts of our brain and are thus trying to find God in our brains. One of the most popular parts of our brain that has been linked to near-death experiences is the pineal gland. Many great thinkers in the area of spirituality of the human body have been trying to explain the connection and prove it. In

the 1954 publishing of Descartes' writing it was mentioned that Descartes had said: "Although the soul is joined with the entire body, there is one part of the body (the pineal) in which it exercises its function more than elsewhere [---] (the pineal) is so suspended between the passages containing animal spirits (guiding reason and carrying sensation and movement) that it can be moved by them; and it carries this motion on to the soul. Then conversely, the bodily machine is so constituted that whenever the gland is moved in one way or another by the soul, or for that matter by any other cause, it pushes the animal spirits, which surround it to the pores of the brain." (Descartes 1954: 375 via Corazza 2008: 8)

Ornella Corazza argues that it can be said that Descartes identified the part of our body that accounts for the immaterial mind, which operates to effect changes in the physical world. That part of the body being the pineal gland that is located between the left and the right brain. At the same time, in his earlier years Descartes argued that the human soul could not be reduced to an abstract "something" that is confined within the human body (Corazza 2008: 8). Of course, nowadays scientists have found this theory to be unrealistic.

Corazza also brings out the point made by Rupert Sheldrake in 1996 in his "Natural Grace": "The soul, the animate principle, was withdrawn from the whole universe and also from the body. The world was deanimated and was effectively regarded as an automatic machine with no soul, no spontaneous life, and no purpose of its own, animals and plants became inanimate machines, and so did the human body. The only part of the material world that was not entirely mechanical was a small region of the human brain, the pineal gland, where the rational conscious mind of the human being somehow interacted with the machinery of the nerves. The old view was not that the soul was in the body, but that the body was in the soul. Now the soul survived only inside our heads." (Sheldrake 1996: 15 via Corazza 2008: 9)

This historical development has culminated in attempts to explain *all* mental phenomena in terms of brain activity and the search for the soul *within* the human brain. To start from the already mentioned pineal gland theory: the pineal is an unpaired gland between the thalamic bodies behind the habenular commissure whose main job in the human body is to produce melatonin and to receive information about the light-dark cycle from the environment by the production and secretion of the mentioned hormone, melatonin.

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK550972/>) The pineal gland has a history, from ancient Egypt, where it was seen as the eye of Horus, as well as in many religious traditions, where it was considered the seat of the soul, the third eye, etc. Recent incarnations of these notions have suggested that N,N-dimethyltryptamine secreted by the pineal gland at birth, during dreaming, and at near death produce out-of-body experiences. Scientific evidence, however, is not consistent with these ideas. The pineal gland of an adult person weighs less than 0.2 g, and its main function is to produce about 30 µg of melatonin per day, a hormone that regulates circadian rhythm through very high affinity interactions with melatonin receptors. It is clear that very small concentrations of N,N-dimethyltryptamine have been detected in the brain, but they are not sufficient enough to produce psychoactive effects. Alternative explanations are presented to explain how stress and near death can produce altered states of consciousness without invoking the intermediacy of N,N-dimethyltryptamine. (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29095071/>)

More recent and more serious speculations on how the brain can mediate NDEs are found in the book “The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation”. There, in their meta-analysis “Explanatory Models for Near-Death Experiences”, Bruce Greyson, Emily Williams Kelly and Edward F. Kelly discuss three main types of explanations for near-death experiences: physiological, psychological and transcendental.

- **Physiological Models:** These include theories like cerebral anoxia (oxygen deprivation), temporal lobe seizures, and neurochemical responses (e.g., endorphin release), which attempt to explain NDE phenomena through changes in brain function during life-threatening events.
- **Psychological Models:** These suggest that NDEs may arise from depersonalization (a coping mechanism during trauma), culturally influenced expectations, or post-event memory construction.
- **Transcendental Models:** These posit that NDEs indicate consciousness might exist independently of the brain, supporting the survival hypothesis or parapsychological phenomena like out-of-body experiences.

While physiological and psychological theories explain *some* aspects of NDEs, they fail to account for the *full scope* and depth of these experiences. The authors argue that

transcendental explanations, although controversial, provide more meaningful insights into the nature of consciousness and its potential independence from the physical brain. (Greyson, Kelly, Kelly, 2009: 213-234)

Arne Hiob's book „Inimene ja teispoosus“ delves into various theories explaining near-death experiences (NDEs), offering insights from both scientific and theological perspectives. Hiob discusses the following key theories:

- **Physiological theories:** These suggest that NDEs result from biological processes during life-threatening events. For instance, cerebral anoxia, lack of oxygen to the brain, can lead to hallucinations and tunnel visions commonly reported in NDEs. Additionally, the release of endorphins during extreme stress may produce feelings of euphoria and detachment, contributing to the sensations described in NDEs.
- **Psychological theories:** These propose that NDEs are manifestations of the mind's coping mechanisms in the face of imminent death. The "expectation hypothesis" suggests that individuals experience phenomena aligned with their cultural or personal beliefs about the afterlife. Similarly, the "depersonalization theory" posits that NDEs serve as a defense mechanism, allowing individuals to detach from the trauma of dying.
- **Spiritual theories:** These assert that NDEs provide genuine glimpses into an afterlife or spiritual realm. Proponents argue that the consistency of NDE reports across different cultures and the profound impact on individuals' lives indicate encounters with a transcendent reality. Hiob examines how these experiences align with Christian eschatology, considering them potential evidence of life beyond death.

Hiob critically evaluates each theory, acknowledging the contributions and limitations of scientific explanations while exploring the theological implications of NDEs. He emphasizes the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to fully understand the complexity of these experiences. (Hiob, 2021: 160-217)

In an article published in latest issue of Usuteaduslik Ajakiri, which is a peer-reviewed journal with an international editorial board that publishes articles on theology, religion, and related topics (<https://ojs.utlib.ee/index.php/UA/about>), the authors, Roland Karo and Annabel Parts, argue for the possibility of consciousness existing independently of

a functioning brain, challenging the materialist view that ties consciousness exclusively to neural activity. The authors present compelling examples where NDEs occurred despite significantly impaired or absent brain function. One of the striking cases was an individual experiencing heightened awareness during cardiac arrest when measurable brain activity ceased, leading to flatlined EEG. The individual reported vivid experiences, suggesting that consciousness can persist even in states of severe brain inactivity. Another example involves verified out-of-body perceptions during NDEs, where individuals describe accurately observing events from a position outside their physical bodies, even in highly monitored medical environments where physical sensory perception was impossible. The authors advocate for a paradigm shift in the scientific study of consciousness, arguing that these anomalies cannot be adequately explained by materialist theories alone. Instead, they suggest that consciousness may exist independently, a perspective that could open new avenues in neuroscience, philosophy, and spiritual inquiry. The article references Raymond Moody, a pioneer in NDE research, for introducing the concept of NDEs in scientific discourse, and Sam Parnia, whose clinical studies on cardiac arrest and consciousness provide empirical evidence of awareness during flatlined brain activity. These contributions are crucial as they challenge materialist models and legitimize the study of consciousness beyond the brain. (Karo, Parts 2024)

A book that supports Karo and Parts' theory is "Lucid Dying" written by Sam Parnia and published in August of 2024. Parnia's research highlights that, in some cases, bursts of heightened brain activity resembling hyperconsciousness occur during the transition from life to death. This suggests that consciousness may persist beyond the threshold of biological death, a finding that disrupts the binary view that death marks the absolute end of awareness. Parnia connects these insights to observed NDEs, which frequently include vivid perceptions, detailed memories, and profound insights, despite the lack of measurable brain function and/or cardiac arrest. (Parnia, 2024)

These observations underscore the need to rethink the relationship between the brain and consciousness, particularly considering evidence suggesting that consciousness may persist independently of the brain under certain conditions, such as during NDEs. While the pineal gland has been theorized as a potential source of out-of-body and near-death

experiences due to its production of N,N-dimethyltryptamine, research indicates that the gland does not produce sufficient quantities of N,N-dimethyltryptamine to have significant psychoactive effects. All other currently existing hypotheses on the neurophysiological substrates also fail to explain the phenomenological depth of NDEs. This challenges the idea that such experiences are purely neurochemical phenomena and supports alternative models of consciousness, in which awareness may not rely solely on physical brain activity.

### **1.3. The light at the end of the tunnel**

A phenomenon that is found in almost every near-death experience is the light at the end of the tunnel. This light is usually described as the brightest light ever seen, yet it does not hurt the eyes of the person experiencing the phenomenon. The enveloping light gives a sense of love and comfort to those having the experience and never does it seem to be evil in nature. It is usually described to be golden white or silver white and is often described to be God's light.

In their 2018 case study called "Shedding Light on the Tunnel and Light in Near-Death Experiences: A Case Study" Janice Miner Holden and Saharnaz Loseu from the University of North Texas tried to tie the effect of the light at the end of the tunnel and euphoric feelings during near-death experiences to a physical/chemical effect – carbon dioxide retention, hypoxia – reduced oxygen to the brain or anoxia or absence of oxygen in the brain, and the so-called "tunnel vision". The case that they studied was a person who had experienced G-LOC (gravity induced loss of consciousness) tunnel vision and an NDE with after-death communication. This case was unique since the person trained to be a pilot and had also experienced an NDE – a very unique combination, indeed.

One of the examples that support this correlation that Holden and Loseu investigated was an observation made by a physician James Whinnery already in 1997: when Air Force pilots experience loss of consciousness during high acceleration their visual field contracts and the so-called effect of "tunnel vision" happens and that is their last memory before loss of consciousness. When the pilots came to awareness again, the first thing they experienced was "coming out of the darkness of a tunnel or bright sunlight". So it was noted by Whinnery

that any physiological process such as gravity loss or cardiac asystole that results in loss of oxygen in the nervous system could result in symptoms of tunnel vision. (Holden and Loseu, 2015: 27-43)

So having only theoretical proof that NDEs could simply be linked to lack of oxygen Holden and Loseu took it upon themselves to prove or disprove that statement based on the case study that they conducted. Their results indicated that the experiences with G-LOC and NDE were only a little similar, with one similarity and several differences, meaning they were qualitatively different.

When comparing the light at the end of the tunnel phenomenon to tunnel vision then they were successful, whereas when comparing a near-death experience to a gravity induced loss of consciousness then due to various factors the conclusion was that they are very different. One of the key factors that disproves the theory that hypoxia or anoxia cause near-death experiences is that if it turned out to be true, then every time someone experiences one of the two states they should also experience a near-death experience. This, clearly, is not the case, and in many near-death experience cases hypoxia or anoxia do not occur. The conclusion? The two states are not necessarily connected and their similarity is in all likelihood a coincidence. (Holden, 2018) This further proves that materialist hypotheses may not be adequate to explain NDEs.

#### **1.4. Life review**

One of the elements of near-death experiences that Raymond Moody emphasizes is the so-called Life Review. It is a phenomenon where people going through Near-Death experiences see their whole life play out in front of them, usually like a film or in panoramic view from their first moments of consciousness leading up to their near-death moment and sometimes even moments that would happen after their experience, would they either choose to stay or return to their bodies. Usually depending on personal beliefs of a person they either see their current lifetime or previous lifetimes as well. Life review happens almost always from the third-person view and can include details that the person who is experiencing it

might have long forgotten about. (Long, 2014) Sam Parnia argues that life review can be seen as further evidence to the theory that the mind is more than brain function. His point is that even if the life review has brain correlates we have to ask: what is the *evolutionary function* of it. To what kind of existence is the mind preparing us through NDEs? Clearly, if the life review contains a kind of an evaluation of one's good deeds and wrongdoings, it must have something to do with what happens *next*. (Parnia 2024: 104ff)

## **Conclusion**

The study of near-death experiences (NDEs) has long fascinated both scientists and spiritual seekers alike, but despite extensive research, no one has fully explained the entire experience or the mysterious elements that accompany it. Many scientists have attempted to connect NDEs to physical or medical phenomena, such as the involvement of the pineal gland or the effects of G-LOC (gravity-induced loss of consciousness), but these attempts often fail when considering the whole experience. While certain physiological phenomena, like hypoxia or changes in brain activity, may account for some aspects of NDEs, they do not explain the full depth and transcendent nature of the experiences, particularly the vivid and detailed visions that individuals report, some of which include elements outside the realm of ordinary human perception.

The theories of Raymond Moody and other researchers have provided important frameworks for understanding the common elements in NDEs, such as the sense of separation from the body, encounters with divine beings, and the life review process. However, the ineffable nature of these experiences' challenges materialist explanations, suggesting that NDEs may involve something *beyond* the physical workings of the brain. The mystery surrounding NDEs points to the possibility that consciousness could persist beyond death, challenging the traditional scientific view that consciousness is solely a product of brain activity. As research progresses, it becomes clear that while scientific models may explain *certain* physiological aspects of NDEs, they do not capture the full experience or its spiritual implications.

Learning about the history of NDE research has been instrumental in analysing and categorizing the near-death experiences taken from the NDERF database, particularly in identifying key terms and dividing the experiences into three groups: positive, neutral, and negative. Moody's identification of common NDE elements was especially helpful in guiding the analysis and understanding what to expect from the cases studied. Despite scientific efforts to explain NDEs through physical and medical phenomena, it is clear that these experiences contain a transcendent, unexplainable element that challenges conventional scientific understanding. Thus, one must recognize that NDEs may require not just scientific, but also spiritual and philosophical approaches to fully grasp their significance.

In conclusion, while attempts to explain NDEs through medical or neurological means provide useful insights into certain aspects of these experiences, they ultimately fall short of explaining the full scope of what is reported by individuals. The inclusion of transcendental theories in NDE research offers a more holistic understanding of these profound and mysterious experiences, underscoring the need for a multidisciplinary approach that combines science, spirituality, and philosophy to explore consciousness and the afterlife.

## II EMPIRICAL PART

### 1. Characterisation of good and bad experiences

The near-death experiences covered below were chosen from [nderf.org](https://www.nderf.org) which is managed by Jeffrey and Jody Long (<https://www.nderf.org/Archives/exceptional.html>). [Nderf.org](https://www.nderf.org) is a comprehensive archive of thousands of near-death experience narratives submitted by individuals worldwide. The section *Exceptional NDEs* was specifically chosen due to it offering a higher likelihood of including religious symbolism, a central focus of the research. Religious symbols provide insights into the overlap between personal spiritual experiences and established Christian belief system. By analysing these narratives, it becomes possible to identify recurring themes and patterns that align with or diverge from traditional Christian theology. The research employed inductive coding with QDA Miner Lite to assess whether experiences contained Christian symbolism, categorising them as suitable or not suitable for the study. In this research context, the terms “suitable” and “not suitable” refer to the relevance of near-death experiences to the study focus on Christian symbolism and belief system.

- “Suitable” NDEs are those that include references, imagery or symbolism that align with or are comparable to themes found in Christian theology. These might involve descriptions of Heaven, Hell, divine beings, light at the end of the tunnel or other motives tied to religious narratives in Christianity. For example, accounts with mentions of angelic beings, the presence of God or landscapes resembling biblical descriptions of Eden or Hell would fall into this category.
- “Not suitable” NDEs are those lacking religious symbolism or containing themes that are too abstract, non-religious or unrelated to Christian beliefs. These accounts might focus solely on personal emotions, undefined experiences of peace or secular interpretations without any identifiable links to the Christian framework.

Out of all cases 40% proved to be useful, forming a workable sample of experiences with connections to Christian beliefs. This targeted approach ensures the research directly

engages with its key questions about the relationship between NDEs and religious frameworks.

Using the statistical overview of the chosen most notable symbolisms were chosen for a comparison with conventional Christian viewings of Heaven and Hell. The chosen codes were developed based on their frequency of appearance in the selected NDEs and their relevance to the study's focus on Christian theology. The coding process aimed to identify recurring themes and motives that could be compared to conventional Christian descriptions of Heaven and Hell. The codes (henceforth *code* or *codeword*) were divided into three categories: positive keywords, neutral keywords and negative keywords. Positive keywords included Love (174), Heaven (48), Angels (50), God (76), Being of Light (30), Jesus Christ (14), Place (16), Home (28), River (22) and Throne (4). Neutral keywords were Light (260), Universe (16), Tunnel (46), Warm (12) and Cold (2). Negative keywords were Hell (14), Creature (10), Demon (2). In total, 826 words were coded. Here is why each category and its respective keywords were chosen:

- **Positive Keywords:** Words like Love, God, Angels, Heaven, and Being of Light were selected because they appeared prominently in NDE accounts that depicted overwhelmingly positive and uplifting experiences. These terms also have direct parallels in Christian texts, symbolizing divine presence, spiritual ecstasy, or paradise. Less frequent but significant keywords like Jesus Christ and Throne were included because of their specific theological significance.
- **Neutral Keywords:** Terms like Light, Tunnel, and Universe were categorized as neutral because they can appear in both positive and negative NDE narratives. For instance, while light often symbolizes divine warmth, it could also appear in experiences perceived as cold or distant. The neutral classification allows flexibility in interpreting these elements across different contexts.
- **Negative Keywords:** Words like Hell, Creature, and Demon were chosen to represent distressing or terrifying aspects of NDEs, especially those aligned with traditional depictions of Hell. Their inclusion highlights the contrasting experiences within the dataset.

These keywords were derived from inductive coding, meaning that patterns emerged naturally during the analysis of the NDE narratives. The statistical overview of their occurrence provided a foundation for exploring connections between NDEs and Christian concepts of the afterlife, using conventional sources like the Bible and theological literature for comparison.

The inclusion of specific codes like “God” and “Jesus Christ” was essential for examining the religious symbolism, as these figures are central to Christian theology. Other codes like “Tunnel” and “Light” were chosen due to their frequent mention and symbolic importance in both spiritual and secular NDE interpretations.

As a source for conventional Christian viewings of heaven and hell the following literature was chosen: “Maailma usundid” (head editor Christopher Partridge), “Luterliku dogmaatika alused” (Arne Hiob), “Kuradiatlas” (Edward Brooke-Hitching), an internet article published on Christian History Institute called “Three Views of Hell”, and the Bible.

## **2. Christian Heaven, Hell and Purgatory as defined by a dictionary**

According to The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church “in Christian theology Heaven is the dwelling-place of God and the angels, and ultimately of all the redeemed, wherein they receive their eternal reward”. In the Old Testament (OT) language the word “heaven” or “heavens” denotes the visible sky and also the abode of God, conceived as in or beyond the physical heavens, where, for example, Jacob saw Him in a dream (Gen. 28:12f.) and whence He could “come down” upon the top of Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19:18-20, cf. 20:22); but it was also acknowledged that “the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain” God (1 Kgs. 8:27), who is omnipresent (Ps. 139:8-10). In the New Testament (NT) heaven as God's dwelling-place is still conceived as high above the earth: thus, Christ raised His eyes “to heaven” in prayer (Mk. 6:41, Jn. 17:1), and at His ascension seemed to the disciples to pass away from them upwards to heaven. The early Christians accepted the contemporary Jewish and Hellenistic conceptions of a series of heavens (cf. 2 Cor. 12:2-4), together with that of angelic and demonic powers existing in the heavens (e.g. Eph. 6:12, RV; cf. Rom.

8:38f), over whom Christ since His Resurrection and Ascension reigns supreme with the Father “far above all heavens” (Eph. 4:10).” (Cross and Livingstone, 2005: 745)

According to The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church “the word “hell” is used in English translations of the Bible to represent both the Hebrew “Sheol”, meaning the place of the departed, and the Greek “Gehenna”, which came to denote the divinely ordained place of punishment for the wicked after death. In Christian theology it normally signifies the place or state to which unrepentant sinners are held to pass after this life, whereas the redeemed go either to Purgatory or directly to Heaven. Its character is inferred from Biblical teaching, esp. Christ’s words in the Gospels about the fate of those who refuse the opportunity of entering the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Matt. 13:42; 25:30 and 41). In Rev. the “second death” (2:11; 20:14, etc.) is depicted symbolically as the fate of being cast into a “lake which burneth with fire and brimstone” (21:8; cf. 19:20 and 20:10). From such texts as this, often understood over-literally, the popular idea of hell was derived.” (Cross and Livingstone, 2005: 753)

According to The Britannica Encyclopaedia the word “Purgatory” means “the condition, process, or place of purification or temporary punishment in which, according to mediaeval Christian and Roman Catholic belief, the souls of those who die in a state of grace are made ready for heaven. Purgatory (Latin: *purgatorium*; from *purgare*, “to purge”) has come to refer as well to a wide range of historical and modern conceptions of postmortem suffering short of everlasting damnation.” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/purgatory-Roman-Catholicism>)

### **3. Near-death experiences**

An American author and near-death experience researcher Dr. Jeffrey Long defined near-death experiences as: “A lucid experience associated with perceived consciousness apart from the body occurring at the time of actual or threatened imminent death.” (<https://www.nderf.org/NDERF/Articles/NDE%20Overview.htm>)

Most common aspects of near-death experiences defined by Dr. Jeffrey Long include:

1. Difficulty in explaining the NDE.
2. Associated life-threatening event.
3. Separation of consciousness from the body.
4. The ability to see and hear details of events (which may be close or distant from the body) while unconscious.
5. Experiencing intensely powerful emotions.
6. Hearing distinctive sounds.
7. Passing into and through a dark tunnel.
8. Encounter with a bright light.
9. Meeting others.
10. Life review.
11. Seeing or visiting beautiful locations.
12. A sense of knowing universal order and purpose.
13. Reaching a boundary.
14. Awareness of future life events.
15. Decision to return.
16. Returning to the body.
17. Special gifts.
18. Changes of attitudes and beliefs.

<https://www.nderf.org/NDERF/Articles/NDE%20Overview.htm>

### **3.1 Heaven**

The keyword “Heaven” takes up 5.8% of all codes. Meaning that there were a total of 826 coded words and “Heaven” was marked by me 48 times. Thus, the code word “Heaven” takes up 5.8% of them. In most cases people cannot describe Heaven, but they do understand that that is where they are.

Ron K described Heaven as this: “What I'll call the 'Heavenly Plains' was full of loving peace. An infinite expanse of glorious light enveloped and permeated everything. This

light was evenly distributed and seemed to undulate gently with a force field.” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Iron\\_k\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Iron_k_nde.html))

Diane C could describe “Heaven” in more detail: “Words are inadequate to describe Heaven, as it is fantastic. I KNEW I was HOME. I knew this was where I'd come from to earth. In those seven minutes of death on earth, I experienced seven weeks of time or more. Who knows? I first came to an absolutely serene and beautiful countryside. This is where I saw animals (including unicorns) and they were so beautiful and contented, so full of LOVE. The grass, trees, and flowers were all so exquisite that my mind said so and in return, a vibration of Love flowed back to me from them. The water was so spectacular that I expressed this in my mind and the waters were living and sparkled back to me with love. There was melody or music all around, not unexpectedly, and perhaps because I love music so much. And God has permitted me several times in this life to hear this awesome music, fully more melodic and more beautiful than anyone could write while here on earth. Just suddenly playing and filling my soul with joy [---] He took me into this very massive structure, richer and more beautiful than anything we could ever create on earth. I realized that all paintings, all woven rugs, tapestries, carvings; all we create on earth that is beautiful has its seed from ” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Idiane\\_c\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Idiane_c_nde.html))

In the book of Revelations, we get a glimpse of what a Biblical Heaven looks like: “Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also, in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.” (Rev 4:4-6)

It could be said that the Biblical Heaven and the Heaven described by Diane and Ron are not similar, yet there are common factors. In all three cases Heaven feels grandiose, yet only in near-death experiences is it accompanied by love. In the Bible the description of Heaven is more symbolic and majestic, whereas in NDEs the feeling of overwhelming love, peace and belonging is present. Both the Biblical and NDE descriptions make Heaven seem extraordinary with elements of splendour and perfection. It could be brought out that there is a sense of divinity in the Biblical description of Heaven and the way it was described in the

NDEs, be it the “glorious light” in the stories or the throne of God in the Bible. When talking about the imagery, then, the biblical Heaven is described in great detail, such as thrones, crowns, lightning and sea of glass. In the NDEs Heaven is more earthly and has even fantastical imagery as music, beautiful and spectacular waters and even unicorns.

While the Biblical “Heaven” and the “Heaven” in NDEs are very different, the similarities can be found between the garden of Eden and “Heaven” in NDEs. Many people report seeing vibrant landscapes with lush greenery, crystal-clear rivers, and radiant light, often described as more beautiful and alive than anything on Earth. For example, David H. described being welcomed by tall trees, vibrant skies, and animals, with an overwhelming sense of joy and harmony. In the Biblical descriptions of the garden of Eden, the description of Eden includes a garden filled with light, pleasing to the eye, with rivers flowing through it, emphasising beauty and abundance (Gen 2:8-10). As in the NDEs, so in the garden a special bond between animals and humans can be observed. “Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.” (Gen 2:19-20) In this passage the special bond is highlighted similar to the welcoming joyful animals described in NDEs. These passages link the description of Heaven in NDEs with the Biblical depiction of Eden and the hope of restored paradise. In the Book of Revelation and Genesis the descriptions of Heaven and Eden correlate to each other. “The Tree of Life is central to Eden, symbolizing eternal life and divine sustenance.” (Gen 2:9). “The Tree of Life reappears in Heaven, emphasizing continuity between Eden and the restored paradise.” (Rev 22:2). Both Eden and Heaven represent divine harmony, abundant beauty, peace, and a profound sense of belonging. The vivid imagery and love-filled experiences reported in NDEs resonate deeply with these Biblical themes, especially those in Genesis and the Book of Revelation.

### 3.2 The Being of Light

The keyword “Being of Light” appears in 25% of all cases and takes up 3.6% of all codes. Since I analyzed 100 cases and the “Being of Light” appeared in 25 of them then we can say it appears in 25% or ¼ of all cases. Since there were a total of 826 coded words and I marked “Being of Light” 30 times, this particular code takes up 3.6% of all codes. Raymond Moody has listed *Being of Light* as one of his near-death elements and this term usually signifies a higher being that emits light in near-death experiences, but people do not want to call them God or Jesus Christ or any other known religious entity.

Lisa M., who had her experience in the year 2000, describes the Being of Light as follows: “In the midst of the light, stood a male figure. It was radiating this light, and radiating this totally unearthly complete unconditional Love. I was embraced by this being, or enveloped in its light, which felt like an embrace [---] The being of light knew everything about me. It knew all I had ever thought, said or done, and it showed me my whole life in a flash of an instant [---] The being was not judging me in any way during the life review, even though I saw a lot of shortcomings in my life. It simply showed my life the way it had been to me, loved me unconditionally, which gave me the strength I needed to see it all the way it was without any blinders, and let me decide for myself what was positive, negative, and what I needed to do about that. [---] The being of light showed me that all that was really important in life was the love we felt, the loving acts we performed, the loving words we spoke, the loving thoughts we held”. ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1lisa\\_m\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1lisa_m_nde.html))

Juliet N., who had her experience in the year 2002 perfectly described why the Being of Light does not get called God “Yet, what happened was the fact that no one passed judgment on me! I only felt the constant enveloping of divine love from the Being of Light that was always with me. What I came to realize, then, is that we judge ourselves! There was no "he-god" sitting on some throne, passing judgment on me, (not that I even expected to see such a being in the first place).” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1juliet\\_n\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1juliet_n_nde.html))

Joyce H., who had her experience in the year 2005 also gives us insight why the Being of Light is not a traditional Christian God “Suddenly I was in the presence of a Being of Light. I could not see the face, could communicate, but not in words or pictures even – in

some connection of oneness. I experience that connection in meditation frequently, but I cannot explain it very precisely. It is beyond words and other kinds of experiences. The emotions are always enhanced. I feel joy so deep that my whole self-leaps with gratitude; I feel peace; I feel awe and belonging. I did not have a specific life review, but felt everything about my life and me was known, understood and not judged. I was profoundly loved.“  
([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/ljoyce\\_h\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/ljoyce_h_nde.html))

The Bible references the idea that no one has or can see God's face directly and live, this emphasising God's holiness. A notable passage is found in Exodus, where God speaks to Moses: “'But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.'” Then the Lord said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”” This passage shows that when a person is alive, He is willing to show Himself only partly, but no one can live and tell the tale of seeing His face. His face is inaccessible to humans in their mortal state. In Timothy Paul writes of God: “who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.” (1 Tim 6:16). These verses explain the idea that God's light, rather than His face, is what humans perceive when encountering Him. This is consistent with many NDE stories, where the “Being of Light” is often understood to be God or His divine essence.

These experiences give us insight that the Being of Light does not judge people. It only shows people what has happened in their life and lets them judge themselves while it only radiates unconditional love and happiness. In Christian theology the Final Judgement is a big topic where all people who have lived before and who are living now will all align in front of Jesus Christ who will judge them based on their actions and decide whether they will have a blissful life in New Jerusalem and those who will be deemed unworthy will suffer forever in the flames of Gehenna (Rev 20:11-15). Whereas in these experiences we can see that the judgement is passed on by people *themselves* based on the life review that the Being of Light shows them whilst having no judgement, only love and support. The NDE view of non-judgemental Being of Light contrasts sharply with Christian eschatology. Instead of the judgment being external and authority-driven, the judgement is more internal and a process

of reflecting on one's own actions. This difference may indicate that NDEs represent a deeply personal and subjective experience, unlike the Biblical one which is rooted in communal theological traditions. The life review in both of these contexts implies the importance of one's actions and thoughts in life, but the role of the Being of Light as an unconditional guide strongly contrasts with the authoritative role of Jesus in the Bible. If we take the Judgement Day as a way to show that the Biblical God is judgemental and his love needs to be earned and then previous Biblical books talking about an unjudgmental God, we have to keep in mind that John, the author of Revelation, positions himself within the prophetic tradition, addressing immediate concerns of his audience while pointing to future divine interventions. This dual focus aligns with Old Testament prophetic writings more than the narrative seen in the New Testament. Revelations shares characteristics with Old Testament apocalyptic texts, such as Daniel and Ezekiel (Bartelt, 2020). In the Old Testament, God is often portrayed as a stern and judgemental deity who enforces divine justice. In the Book of Ezekiel God pronounces judgement on nations surrounding Israel, emphasising His power and righteousness (Ezk 25-32). Whereas in the New Testament, God is depicted as loving, merciful and non-judgemental, offering grace to all. "For God did not send his Son to condemn the world." (John 3:17). "Do not judge, and you will not be judged." (Luke 6:37). These verses highlight His focus on love, grace and forgiveness.

### **3.3 God**

"God" is a mostly positive keyword meaning it has appeared in most positive experiences and also some negative ones, but since the majority were positive then it was also classified as a positive keyword. The keyword "God" takes up 9.2% of all codes. As I found the word "God" 76 times and there were 826 cases one can say that this particular code takes up 9.2 % of all codes.

Diane C in her experience in the year 2007 talked about God this way: "The battle was of the minds -- LOVE versus HATE. Love won because Love is linked to God. HE is LOVE, LIFE and LIGHT. A Trilogy. Life is also a trilogy and it is in the three forms we

identify theologically to God as Water, Air and Light or 'Living Waters', Breath of God, 'Light of the World' or however we wish to describe the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Much like the Sun being the Father, while the sunshine is the Son and the warmth of the sunshine is the Holy Spirit.” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Idiane\\_c\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Idiane_c_nde.html))

Ron K. as a result of his experience described God as such “To describe God as a Trinity or entity, however, misses the mark. 'God is a spirit, and should be worshiped like a spirit.' It is the benevolent force of love in our souls and has little to do with our physical appearance. On the contrary, we have shaped God in our image and assigned Him a pronoun. This humanizing of God is the reverse of how we ascribe human characteristics to a lowly mouse and call him Mickey. We anthropomorphize God. God is neither he, she, nor it. God is That which is. But, due to the restrictions of our languages and the frame of our reference, some pronoun must be used, so I use the common 'He.’” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Iron\\_k\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Iron_k_nde.html))

In these cases, the people didn't interact with God but rather learned about his essence during the experience as “the Truth”. As it can be seen it can be quite difficult to put into words what God actually is or what he represents. In the Bible God’s description is such: “His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” (Rev 1:14-16). As well as: “Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.” (Ez 1:26-28). Some of the similarities between the NDE’s and the biblical view of God are divine magnitude, ineffability and the presence of love and light. Interestingly enough neither the Bible or the people who experienced these NDEs can quite put into words who or what or of what essence God is. The Bible uses symbolic and grand imagery, while in NDEs focus is more on trying to articulate His essence using human language. Here comes one of the key differences –

essence vs image. People who experienced these NDEs talk about God's essence, but the Bible offers symbolic imagery of God's appearance (e.g glowing metal, full of fire, brilliant light). The second difference would be how people in NDEs and in the Bible learn about God's essence and role. In NDEs it happens indirectly, through feelings of love and divine truth, but in the Bible, it is rather a direct interaction (e.g Moses and the burning bush or Ezekiel's vision). Both the Bible and NDEs acknowledge God as beyond full human understanding, emphasizing qualities like love, light and truth, but NDEs tend to avoid describing what He looks like, focusing more on the essence. The Bible on the other hand uses more symbolic descriptions.

### **3.4 God's light**

In the research of 100 cases taken from the database [nderf.org](http://www.nderf.org) I classified light as a neutral keyword due to this keyword or code appearing in both positive and negative experiences. Based on the statistical analysis of the codes 260 out of 826 codes, meaning 31,4% of all codes, were connected to the phenomenon of light. In 55 out of 100, meaning in 55% of chosen experiences, people experienced the phenomenon of light at the end of the tunnel and in 95%, meaning 95 out of 100 total of chosen cases, did the ones experiencing the near-death experiences have an interaction with light. In 20 of the 100 chosen cases people identified light as God, in 2,1%, meaning 2 out of 95, of cases involving interactions with "Light", people said that they themselves would not call the light God, but others would and in 5.3%, meaning 5 out of 95, of cases involving interactions with "Light" people referred to the light as His light.

Sarah, who had her near-death experience in the year 1999, described the light to be yellow and illuminating. Stepping into the light transforms you and gives you the feeling of joy and love and the light talked to her, and the voice was full of happiness and bliss. Lisa, who had her near-death experience in 2000, described the light that she saw to be brilliant, and she got transported to a "world of light" where everything was made of, and radiated light. ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1sarah\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1sarah_nde.html)) In addition, Ron K., who had his experience in 2006 described light as "...infinitely more brilliant than the sun, yet it did

not hurt to look at. The colour defies a specific description, but a combination of white and silver comes close.” Those cases give a fair overview of how light typically appears in near-death experiences. ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Iron\\_k\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Iron_k_nde.html))

In the book of Revelation, we can read about God's light where the holy city of New Jerusalem is described. We do not get as much detail about the light as in listed near-death experiences, yet we do get an understanding about it. “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.” (Rev 21:23-24)

One can draw several similarities between the light that is described in the near-death experiences and how it is described in the Bible. Firstly, the light belongs to God. As mentioned above, in 20% of chosen cases people identified the light as God's light. Secondly the power and importance of light. In the Bible passage it is said that the light will hold importance to the kings of the world and the nations will follow it. As mentioned above, in 55% of all cases people saw the light at the end of the tunnel, which helped them through the mentioned tunnel, thus guiding them. The parallel that we cannot draw is that the people in near-death experiences described the light to be able to give them a sense of love and happiness, while in the Bible it only serves as a guiding and illumination tool that is emitted by God and/or the Lamb. In both accounts, light has transformative qualities, but the Bible emphasises the light's spiritual guidance and in NDEs light is transformative on a deeply personal level. In the Bible the focus is rather symbolic, emphasising its divine origin and purpose rather than its appearance. In NDEs the light is often described in vivid colours as a combination of white and silver ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Iron\\_k\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Iron_k_nde.html)) or yellow and illuminating ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Isarah\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/Isarah_nde.html)). In both contexts the light functions as a bridge to the divine with the difference that in NDEs it is a personal experience affirming the presence of God or divine love, but in the Bible it is a sign of God's authority and eternal presence.

### 3.5 Tunnel

The keyword “Tunnel” takes up 5.6% of all codes, meaning that out of 826 codes the word “Tunnel” appears 46 times. *Tunnel* is a neutral keyword since the phenomenon of a Tunnel exists in both positive and negative experiences even though it does not appear in every near-death experience. This keyword is also a part of the list that Raymond Moody originally put together.

Sarah had a negative experience that turned positive (As mentioned before, no experience ended in a negative way). “Soon I came to the entrance of a tunnel in the black. The tunnel seemed to be constructed of gray cloudlike material and wound far away and up to the right. Then it branched and I couldn't see where it led. From the branching on the right extended a yellow white light that helped to softly illuminate the tunnel.” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1sarah\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1sarah_nde.html))

Barbara J's story combines two keywords from Raymond Moody's list – tunnel and life review. “Then I turned around and saw this very, very bright light, and then I was in what seemed like a tunnel but it was a white, white, white color! (After all this happened I looked in paint stores and I couldn't find it anywhere!) It was a white color! Well I'm going up this thing and my whole life flashed before my eyes” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1barbara\\_j\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1barbara_j_nde.html)).

In the Bible the “Tunnel effect” or “Light at the end of the tunnel” do not exist as such and thus no comparison can be made. The “Tunnel” is a common keyword between many near-death experiences and almost always is there a light at the end of it. Instead, Biblical descriptions of transitions into the afterlife are often immediate and do not involve intermediary stages like tunnels. The “Tunnel effect” is an element unique to NDEs rather than traditional Christian theology. Unlike the immediate transition described in the Bible, the tunnel introduces staged, process-oriented experience that does not exist in scriptures. The lack of tunnel imagery in scripture does not negate its potential validity in personal spiritual experiences, but rather highlights the diversity of ways individuals grasp spiritual transitions.

A parallel can be drawn between the “Tunnel effect” and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In Genesis it says: “After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Gen 3:24). This expulsion represents separation from the divine, while in NDEs, the tunnel is often a journey through fear or uncertainty, only to end in a peaceful light. This could symbolise a return to divine connection and love. This parallel could suggest that the “Tunnel effect” is, in essence, an *inverted expulsion*: a frightening journey that ultimately leads to light, showing the hope of redemption after humanity’s fall from grace. The fear that is felt during the movement through the tunnel could reflect the separation from God, while the light at the end symbolises the possibility of reunion with the divine.

### **3.6 Unconditional love**

Love is definitely a positive key word and makes up 21,1% of all codes experienced by the ones living through the near-death experience. In 75% or 75 cases out of the 100 people mentioned the feeling of overwhelming love. In many Biblical passages we get the confirmation that God loves his people, like John 16:27, Romans 5:8 and Jeremiah 31:3. In the Bible it is fairly easy to determine who is showing the love, be it God, Jesus Christ or people. In the near-death experiences it becomes a little more complicated because people feel either love from the light or it comes on its own.

One of the example cases would be Kathi B’s 2007 experience, which connects the feeling of love to the light at the end of the tunnel that she ends up reaching. “The light at the cave entrance grew larger and larger the closer I got to the mouth. It was incredibly bright, unlike the light of day that often has a tint to it, and this particular light was pure white. As I entered the light, I was surrounded by an immediate feeling of ultimate peace. I was home. I was surrounded by pure love and acceptance. I was fully connected to this peace and love. The closest I have come to feeling this sensation again has been at the birth of my two children.” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1kathi\\_b\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1kathi_b_nde.html))

Supporting the second statement about love appearing out of nowhere without light is Lisa M's experience in the year 2000 which she described like this: „Next thing I remember is feeling the most profound and utter sense of peace I ever felt in my life. Suddenly I was feeling completely safe, being enveloped and protected by something I can only describe as complete unconditional love. This love was all around me, it was everywhere, but at the same time it was also me, the one I was, my innermost essence. There was no longer any fear, no worries, no struggle for anything, and I could've gone on being wherever I was, and feeling the way I was forever“ ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1lisa\\_m\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1lisa_m_nde.html)).

Love is an essential element in Christian theology and Christians are taught that true Christians should love one another and forgive each other for their wrong doings. Love is also present in near-death experiences, yet the source of love varies and is not always determined. Some of the people have described the love to be “overwhelming”, “difficult to pass through and live in”, yet others call it “fulfilling” and “pure”. A huge burst of unconditional love is not always seen as the best feeling in the world, it varies from person to person. This variation in emotional response highlights the complexity of spiritual experiences and how they may reflect individuality. In the Bible, light is usually associated with either God or Jesus Christ (John 8:12). We can find similarities between NDE-based descriptions of love as “all-encompassing”, “pure” and “safe”, and Biblical teachings about God's love. In summary, there definitely are similarities between how love is described in NDEs and the Bible, but the difference comes in when one tries to define its source, since in NDEs love cannot always be clearly attributed to God or Jesus.

### **3.7 Feeling of home**

In many cases when having a positive NDE people refer to the place they arrive as “home”. Home was classified as a positive keyword due to a sense of security and belonging and takes up 3.4%, meaning 28 out of 826 codes and appears in 40%, meaning 40 out of 100 of the chosen experiences.

David H., who had his near-death experience in 1999, explained the feeling of home like this: “...Huge trees would tear out of the surface and stand tall before me. Birds of all

kinds would fly about the sky. All of God's creatures came out of the forest as if to greet me. This was the grandest welcome back home. Tears of joy and laughter are all of the words I can sum up from this experience [---] That is a comfort to me, and so is the knowledge that we have a home to go to when we have finished life's lessons and labor.” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1david\\_h.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1david_h.html))

In addition, as proof to the fact that an unknown place can feel like home during a near-death experience serves Gary D.'s experience in 2006: “ ...I was only seventeen and I wanted to experience more of life. So I continue to concentrate on not letting one single atom or cell cross the divide that was before me. Yet I had this uneasy feeling that I belonged there, that I originated from there. That this place was my home and that everything came from there, seen and unseen...”. ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1gary\\_d\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1gary_d_nde.html))

As “Home” serves as a positive keyword in this instance it is also accompanied by other positive descriptive words. An example of it could be Kathi B.'s experience which she had in 2007 and in which she uses the keyword “Home” as well as other positive words: “... As I entered the light, I was surrounded by an immediate feeling of ultimate peace. I was home. I was surrounded by pure love and acceptance. I was fully connected to this peace and love...”. ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1kathi\\_b\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1kathi_b_nde.html))

Home is usually associated with something good, something familiar and peaceful. Whereas in the Bible “home” as a concept is barely mentioned. In the English language words “home” and “house” have a big difference between them. Whereas for example in the Russian language the word “home” doesn't exist, and it can only be referred to as “house” (<http://www.speak-russian-like-russians.com/home-house-in-russian/>). Therefore, when people mention that they feel at “home”, it has a special and positive meaning to them and carries strong emotional weight. However it is noteworthy that the concept of “home” is not frequently discussed in the Bible, making it more unique to NDEs. While the Bible may not explicitly mention “home” in the same way, the idea of a divine or eternal home can be connected to theological concepts of heaven or divine presence since humans long for peace, belonging and connection to a higher source. Therefore, a parallel can be drawn between Home and Heaven. The phenomenon of “Home” in NDEs can be linked to the Garden of Eden, which by the Bible was the humanity's first home. In these experiences individuals

often encounter what feels like a return to a “spiritual home”, where they are enveloped by love and acceptance. This fits with the Biblical idea of returning to God’s presence, which we lost after the Expulsion. Just as the garden of Eden represented the perfect peace and fulfilment, NDEs may symbolise a brief glimpse of what was lost – the peace and union with God that humanity once experienced

### **3.8 Angels**

The keyword “Angels” takes up 6,1% or 50 out of all 826 codes. We are used to describing angels as men with blonde hair, wings and white robes while in the Bible they are described as something else.

Barbara J described an angel as such: “ I was standing in front of this BIG guy, who I think was an angel. He was holding this BIG book, and I think it was the lamb's book of life.” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1barbara\\_j\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1barbara_j_nde.html))

Commonly angels are accompanied by angelic singing and David worded it well: “The sounds of the Angels' singing was so beautiful, and thunderous and Glorious above me, I felt as if their sound vibrations were filled with wisdom, (so sophisticated) that these sound vibrations were actually creating life and myriad possibilities in the universe: that Angelic sounds were not just singing for the fun of it alone, but were creating with sounds.” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1david\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1david_nde.html))

In the Bible there are different types of angels and some of them are described as such: “In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings.” (Rev 4:7-8)

In the book of Ezekiel, the angels are described similarly: “The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, but each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. Under

their wings on their four sides they had human hands. All four of them had faces and wings, and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved. (Ezk 1: 4-24)

Their faces looked like this: “Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. They each had two wings spreading out upward, each wing touching that of the creature on either side; and each had two other wings covering its body. Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning.

As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like topaz, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel. As they moved, they would go in any one of the four directions the creatures faced; the wheels did not change direction as the creatures went. Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around.

When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, and the wheels would rise along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. When the creatures moved, they also moved; when the creatures stood still, they also stood still; and when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.” (Ezk 1: 4-21)

In the Bible we can find detailed descriptions of angels whereas in the near-death experiences people were unable to give many details about their appearance and rather were able to describe their actions and the feelings they made these people experience. Angels in NDEs bring comfort and guidance, thus the spiritual significance of the angel is more important than a detailed physical description. In David’s case angels were singing and their singing was not just beautiful, but creative, suggesting that the angels’ voices had a profound impact on the cosmos, creating life and possibilities. Yet again the focus is on the spiritual

and transformative role of angels rather than their physical attributes. Whereas as mentioned before the Bible gives a detailed description of different types of angels. The vivid imagery of fire, lightning and movement contrasts sharply with the simpler descriptions in NDEs. The angels in the Bible symbolise divine authority and presence whereas in NDEs the focus is on emotional and spiritual effects of angelic encounters such as a sense of comfort. The key difference between the description of angels in NDEs and the Bible lies in the level of detail and focus. While Biblical angels are complex and often intimidating, in NDEs angels are simpler and their role is to guide or comfort individuals. Yet in both cases angels can play a crucial role as intermediaries between humans and the divine.

### **3.9 Demonic beings**

Demonic beings as a code means creatures or demons found in hell that are not associated with Satan. When having a negative experience people tend to see demonic beings or creatures that wish to cause them harm in one way or another. Negative experiences make up a small percentage of near-death experiences, mostly people tend to either have a positive or a neutral experience, yet it is essential to acknowledge the complex interplay of individual, cultural and psychological factors in shaping these experiences. Around 20% of analysed experiences could be at least partially considered negative. Nonetheless some people experience hellish visuals that remain in their memory. A curious finding was that all analysed negative experiences ended in a positive way. The recurring motif was that of a person going through a negative experience and then God coming to help and save them and taking them away from presumed Hell. The keywords used for demonic beings “Creature” (10) and “Demon” (2) took up in total only 1.5% of all codes.

In the description of her 1999 near-death experience, Sarah wrote: “As the object drew closer, I noticed that it was a fantastic demonic creature surrounded by flames with huge eyes and teeth danced toward me slavering and growling. There was menace in its gaze as it smashed its teeth and stuck out a long slobbering orange tongue at me. I was riveted to the "spot" in the dark where I stood. There seemed to be nowhere to go to avoid the thing as the creature was advancing at an increasing speed determined to intercept me. I stood my

"ground" and closed my eyes expecting to be engulfed in flames or devoured or both. Instead, I had an awareness of the creature slowly passing painlessly through my body and I turned an inward eye to it only to discover that the creature was laughing with glee as it melted through me. It exited with a pop behind me and suddenly I was flying forward very fast through the dark. [---] As I flew, two more of the demon creatures came toward me displaying different colours but still fearsome.“ ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1sarah\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1sarah_nde.html))

Joe G in his experience in the year 2004 went into great detail to describe the creatures he saw when having a negative experience: „Then I felt like I was pushed back into a wall and my arms pinned back to the wall. I felt totally helpless and then I saw what looked like hairball with shark teeth come at me. I looked to my right side and saw that the voices were little monsters that were turning into the hairballs and back into monsters. They were the ugliest looking things I have seen and yet to see. They looked like snakes crossed with bats crossed with something that had horns. They had bodies that were like that of a snake and it had wings. They arms and hands look like those of a bat. Their faces look like snakes and they had fangs like a bat and a snake. On the top of their heads, they had horns, but not like the horns of a bull or a ram. They had pointed horns but nothing that I could say was earthly. As they turned into hairballs, I asked what was happening to me. They laughed and told me to shut up and I could hear my feeling out loud. Then they started coming at me and as they did, I felt sick to my stomach. I remember feeling why is this happening? Where is my mom and where is God? Then I felt them feeding on me. I looked down at what I thought was my body and parts where gone. I then looked at them and my body parts where in their mouths. Then one of them said 'We told you already that this is your heaven and we are your God.'“ ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1joe\\_g\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1joe_g_nde.html))

For the Christian theology it is not common to talk about demonic creatures in hellish context. As an example of demonic spirits, we can take a small fragment from the Book of Revelations: “Then I saw three impure spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.” (Rev 16:3-14) Since the descriptions of demons in the Bible are quite scarce, but some people after their near-death

experiences can describe the demons in great detail we can conclude that the imagery of demons does not come from Biblical texts. Instead they could be influenced by cultural, psychological, or even personal experiences that interact with broader theological ideas about evil and suffering.

### **3.10 Hellish landscapes**

When describing negative experiences, it is also important to describe how people saw, smelled and felt hell, what they could see and hear. Some people had a detailed description of what they described as Hell. The code “Hell” takes up 1.7% of all codes, meaning 14 out of 826 codes were associated with hell.

Sarah in her experience in 1999 described Hell like so: “The first doorway I peered into resembled a classic Hell. There was the sound of shrieking and agonising screams. Naked human beings were strewn about a blasted landscape with pools of bubbling excrement and jagged boulders. Devils and other animals were torturing people in all imaginable ways; and people were also torturing each other. As I neared the doorway to this sinister scene, I felt a sucking sensation drawing me in like a whirlpool, and I found myself “flying” above the miserable landscape. The smell was putrid and the heat was almost unbearable but a part of me was fascinated by the seemingly infinite varieties of pain and anguish that was being inflicted on the inhabitants of this realm. Most of me wanted to leave so I had no difficulty and my feeling was that anyone could leave if they wished. I felt that no one or nothing had put those people in captivity except their belief in the agony they continued to suffer.” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1sarah\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1sarah_nde.html))

Juliet N in her experience in the year 2002, where she was not sure whether she was in Hell or Purgatory, described what she saw as this: “One pane revealed a scene that one might interpret as a “hell” or “purgatory” where faceless, grey coloured entities moved about aimlessly and moaned. They were clearly suffering and in great agony and anguish. I saw these souls as damaged souls – ones who had committed unspeakable atrocities during their previous incarnations. I have used the analogy of a soul being “retrograde” – much in the way

a planet will have the appearance of going backwards. The prevailing feeling that I had whilst observing these souls was one of deep compassion and a yearning to comfort them. I wanted so much to see them relieved of their horrible suffering. But, alas, as painful as this scene was, I was reassured that these souls were here only temporarily and that they, too, would heal and move back in a forward direction and ultimately return to the Light.” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1juliet\\_n\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1juliet_n_nde.html))

Joe G who had his experience in the year 2004 mainly described what Hell sounded and smelled like to him: “I then could smell what I thought was sulphur and death. Then the voices started to laugh and say that this is what my life caused me to have. I asked where I was and what was going to happen next. The voices just laughed some more and repeated what I said. I thought to myself that I had to be in hell, because this was not what my sister said happened to her. This is not how she said heaven was like. Then I could hear my thoughts out loud. The voices then said that there was not heaven for me. That this was the heaven that was to be mine. Then one of them said that it was feeding time.” ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1joe\\_g\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1joe_g_nde.html))

In the Bible there are only a couple small descriptions of Hell. One example could be taken from the Book of Matthew: “The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Mt 13:49-50). As well as from the Book of Revelations: “But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulphur.” (Rev 19:20). The descriptions of Hell in negative NDEs vary, yet they share common elements of suffering, anguish, and a sense of isolation. These NDEs offer vivid portrayals of torment, whether it be physical pain experienced by the person themselves, the emotional agony of suffering souls, or the suffocating stench of sulphur and death. However, a notable element in NDEs is the suggestion that these realms are not eternal. For example, in Juliet’s case she said that the souls she witnessed were not permanently lost but were in a process of suffering before returning to the Light, in contrast to traditional depictions of eternal damnation. ([https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1juliet\\_n\\_nde.html](https://www.nderf.org/Experiences/1juliet_n_nde.html)) This concept resonates with the

Biblical teaching of redemption and God's capacity for mercy, seen in passages like "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9).

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of near-death experiences highlights a profound interplay between personal, cultural, and theological perspectives, revealing both universal patterns and unique divergences. By examining recurring elements such as Heaven, the Being of Light, unconditional love, tunnels, and hellish landscapes, the study draws meaningful parallels with Christian theology while also identifying significant differences that deepen our understanding of these spiritual phenomena.

A recurring theme is the overwhelming prevalence of positive experiences. Whether through vivid depictions of Heaven, encounters with angelic beings, or transformative feelings of love, the accounts emphasise peace, joy, and spiritual renewal. This aligns with Christian ideals of a hopeful afterlife but shifts the focus from judgment to personal reconciliation and unconditional acceptance. The presence of the Being of Light, often described as a source of pure love and understanding, exemplifies this shift. Unlike the judgmental God often portrayed in Biblical texts like Revelation, the Being of Light in NDEs is non-judgmental, inviting individuals to reflect on their lives without fear.

Conversely, the study's exploration of negative experiences reveals the rarity and transience of such events. Even in descriptions of Hell or encounters with demonic beings, these narratives always resolve positively, emphasising redemption and divine intervention. This challenges the traditional Christian notion of eternal damnation, presenting a more fluid and transformative view of the afterlife.

The thematic elements of light, tunnels, and home serve as bridges between NDEs and Christian theology. The light, often associated with divine presence in both contexts, transforms from a symbol of guidance in the Bible to a deeply personal experience of love and comfort in NDEs. The tunnel effect, absent from scripture, introduces a transitional

journey unique to NDEs, often culminating in a reunion with the light. Similarly, the sense of home described in NDEs resonates with the biblical Eden, suggesting a spiritual return to humanity's origins of divine connection and peace.

In conclusion, the study of NDEs reveals both striking similarities to Christian theological concepts and distinctive elements that reflect deeply personal and subjective spiritual experiences. These narratives challenge rigid interpretations of the afterlife, offering a broader and more inclusive perspective on human spirituality and our longing for connection with the divine.

# DISCUSSION

In undertaking this research, my aim was to analyse near-death experiences to determine their alignment with or divergence from Christian theological concepts of the afterlife. Through a detailed coding process and analysis of 100 exceptional cases from the [nderf.org](http://nderf.org) database, I have identified significant patterns and raised pertinent questions that require further exploration.

## General observations and challenges

One of the key observations in this study is the prevalence of positive experiences, characterized by themes of light, unconditional love, and a sense of "home." These themes resonate with Christian notions of Heaven but often diverge in their emphasis on personal emotional experiences rather than theological doctrines. For instance, the imagery of Heaven in NDEs often prioritizes love and acceptance over traditional Biblical descriptions of judgment or authority.

Negative experiences, though less frequent, raise unique challenges for interpretation. While elements such as demonic beings and hellish landscapes appear, the eventual resolution of these experiences into positive outcomes suggests a universal tendency toward hope and redemption. This aspect raises questions about the interplay between cultural, psychological, and spiritual factors in shaping NDE narratives.

## Methodological reflections

The coding process revealed several limitations, particularly in the scope and diversity of the dataset. As the analysis relied heavily on an English-language database, the findings may not fully account for culturally specific NDEs that could provide contrasting or

complementary perspectives. This limitation underscores the need for cross-cultural research to identify universal versus culture-specific elements in NDEs.

Another methodological issue is the challenge of separating subjective experiences from objective patterns. While themes like light and tunnels are recurrent, their interpretation varies widely among individuals, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about their origins or meanings.

## **Questions for further inquiry**

Several important questions arise from this research, pointing to gaps that future studies could address:

1. **Universality of experiences:** To what extent do NDEs reflect universal human experiences versus culturally influenced narratives?
2. **Role of religious frameworks:** How do personal beliefs shape the interpretation of NDEs, and can these experiences inform broader theological discussions?
3. **Physiological versus transcendental explanations:** How can interdisciplinary research better disentangle biological processes from potential spiritual dimensions in NDEs?

## **Implications for the research community**

This study highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in NDE research. By integrating insights from theology, psychology, and neuroscience, researchers can develop a more comprehensive understanding of these experiences. My work also underscores the need for standardized methodologies in coding and analysing NDE narratives, ensuring consistency and comparability across studies.

Additionally, this research serves as a call to expand the scope of NDE studies to include diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. Such inclusivity would not only enhance the validity of findings but also enrich the global discourse on consciousness and spirituality.

### **Reflection on contributions**

This research has provided valuable insights into the intersection of NDEs and Christian theology, particularly in highlighting recurring themes and their spiritual significance. However, it has also revealed the complexity and limitations of interpreting deeply personal and subjective experiences. While this study offers a structured framework for analysis, it also raises more questions than answers, inviting further exploration into the mysteries of NDEs and their implications for our understanding of life, death, and spirituality.

# CONCLUSION<sup>1</sup>

This research set out to explore near-death experiences and their alignment with or divergence from Christian theological concepts of Heaven and Hell. By analysing 100 exceptional cases from the nderf.org database and categorising recurring patterns into positive, neutral, and negative keywords using the programme QDA Miner Lite, I have provided a structured insight into the overlap between NDE narratives and traditional Christian imagery.

## Findings and key results

Through inductive coding and statistical analysis, it became clear that while there are certain parallels between NDEs and biblical depictions, these experiences often introduce unique elements absent in conventional Christian theology. For instance:

- Positive keywords such as „Love“, „Light“, and „Home“ resonate with Christian themes of divine love and eternal peace but lack explicit ties to Biblical descriptions.
- Neutral keywords like „Tunnel“ and „Light at the end of the tunnel“ are not featured in Biblical texts but play a significant role in NDEs, symbolising personal journeys toward redemption or enlightenment.
- Negative keywords such as „Hell“ and „Demonic Beings“ occasionally reflect traditional Christian concepts but are more vividly described in NDEs, often influenced by personal or cultural interpretations.

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<sup>1</sup> AI was used to help create a proper structure for the chapter "Conclusion" and help to elaborate on the key points of the research. The AI programme that was used is called ChatGPT.

Interestingly, the research highlighted that most experiences end positively, regardless of how they began. This tendency toward resolution and hope aligns with broader spiritual themes but challenges the rigid dualism often associated with Christian eschatology.

## **Addressing research questions**

The study aimed to determine:

- To what extent do NDEs reflect Christian belief?
- Are there patterns in NDEs that are not found elsewhere?

The results indicate a partial reflection of Christian beliefs, with commonalities like the presence of divine beings and realms resembling Heaven. However, many experiences incorporate elements absent in Biblical texts, such as vivid landscapes or deeply personal connections to love and peace, suggesting that cultural and individual influences shape these visions.

Indeed, recurring elements like the tunnel effect, self-judgment during life reviews, and the pervasive feeling of "home" are unique to NDEs and offer profound insights into the human psyche's engagement with the afterlife. These experiences often reflect universal spiritual themes rather than strict adherence to religious dogma.

## **Broader implications**

This research underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding NDEs. The findings challenge the materialist perspective by suggesting that consciousness may extend beyond the brain, while also raising questions about the role of culture and religion in shaping individual experiences. For theologians, this research invites a re-examination of Biblical eschatology considering contemporary spiritual experiences.

For psychologists and neuroscientists, it highlights the need to explore the boundaries of consciousness and its relationship with the physical brain.

## **Research Limitations and Future Directions**

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The reliance on an English-language database may have excluded culturally specific experiences, and the subjective nature of NDEs poses challenges for objective analysis. Future research could benefit from:

- Expanding the dataset to include cross-cultural narratives to identify universal versus culture-specific themes.
- Investigating the physiological mechanisms behind shared NDE elements, such as the light at the end of the tunnel.
- Exploring the impact of personal belief systems on the interpretation of NDEs.

## **Final thoughts**

This research has provided a unique lens through which to view the intersection of spirituality, theology, and human consciousness. While it has demonstrated that NDEs are deeply personal and often culturally influenced, it also highlights their profound universal themes, such as love, redemption, and the search for meaning. By continuing to bridge the gap between religious studies, neuroscience, and cultural analysis, future studies can further unravel the mysteries of NDEs and their significance in shaping human understanding of life and the afterlife.

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## Kokkuvõte

### Paradiisi- ja põrgukujutlused surmalähikogemuste kirjeldustes: võrdlus konventsionaalsete kristlike kujutelmadega

Käesoleva uurimuse eesmärk oli uurida surmalähedasi kogemusi (SLK) ja nende vastavust või erinevust kristlikest teoloogilistest arusaamadest taevast ja põrgust. Analüüsid 100 erandlikku juhtumit nderf.org andmebaasist ja liigitades korduvad mustrid positiivseteks, neutraalseteks ja negatiivseteks märksõnadeks, kasutades programmi QDA Miner Lite, andsin struktureeritud ülevaate SLK-narratiivide ja traditsiooniliste kristlike kujutluste kattumisest.

#### 1. Leiud ja peamised tulemused

Induktiivse kodeerimise ja statistilise analüüsi abil selgus, et kuigi SLKde ja Piibli kujutluste vahel on teatavaid paralleele, toovad need kogemused sageli sisse unikaalseid elemente, mis puuduvad tavapärasel kristlikul teoloogias. Näiteks:

- Positiivsed märksõnad nagu „armastus“, „valgus“ ja „kodu“ kõlavad kokku kristlike jumaliku armastuse ja igavese rahu teemadega, kuid neil puuduvad selged sidemed piibellike kirjeldustega.

- Neutraalsed märksõnad nagu „tunnel“ ja „valgus tunneli lõpus“ ei esine piiblitekstides, kuid mängivad SLKs olulist rolli, sümboliseerides isiklikku teekonda lunastuse või valgustuse poole.

- Negatiivsed märksõnad nagu „põrgu“ ja „deemonlikud olendid“ kajastavad mõnikord traditsioonilisi kristlikke kontseptsioone, kuid neid kirjeldatakse NDEs elulisemalt, mida sageli mõjutavad isiklikud või kultuurilised tõlgendused.

Huvitaval kombel tõi uuring esile, et enamik kogemusi lõpevad positiivselt, sõltumata sellest, kuidas nad algasid. See suundumus lahenduse ja lootuse poole on kooskõlas laiemate vaimsete teemadega, kuid seab kahtluse alla kristliku eshatoloogiaga sageli seotud jäiga dualismi.

## 2. Uurimisküsimuste käsitlemine

Uuringu eesmärk oli kindlaks teha:

- Mil määral peegeldavad SLK-d kristlikku usku?
- Kas SLK-des on mustreid, mida mujal ei leidu?

Tulemused näitavad, et kristlikud uskumused peegeldavad osaliselt kristlikke tõekspidamisi, mille ühisosa on näiteks jumalike olendite ja taevaga sarnanevate maailmade kohalolu. Siiski sisaldavad paljud kogemused elemente, mis puuduvad piiblitekstides, näiteks elavaid maastikke või sügavalt isiklike seoseid armastuse ja rahuga, mis viitab sellele, et kultuurilised ja individuaalsed mõjud kujundavad neid nägemusi.

Tõepoolest, korduvad elemendid, nagu tunneli efekt, enesehinnang elu ülevaatamise ajal ja läbiv „kodu“ tunne, on SLK-dele omased ja annavad sügava ülevaate inimese psüühika seotusest surmajärgse eluga. Need kogemused peegeldavad sageli pigem universaalseid vaimseid teemasid kui ranget religioosete dogmade järgimist.

## 3. Laiemad tagajärjed

See uuring rõhutab interdistsiplinaarsete lähenemisviiside tähtsust SLK mõistmisel. Tulemused seavad kahtluse alla materialistliku vaatenurga, viidates sellele, et teadvus võib ulatuda ajast kaugemale, ning tõstatavad samas küsimusi kultuuri ja religiooni rolli kohta individuaalsete kogemuste kujundamisel. Teoloogide jaoks kutsub see uurimus üles vaatama uuesti läbi piibelliku eshatoloogia, arvestades kaasaegseid vaimseid kogemusi. Psühholoogide ja neuroteadlaste jaoks toob see esile vajaduse uurida teadvuse piire ja selle suhet füüsilise ajuga.

## 4. Uuringu piirangud ja edasised suundumused

Kuigi käesolev uuring pakub väärtuslikke teadmisi, ei ole see siiski ilma piiranguteta. Tuginemine ingliskeelsele andmebaasile võis välistada kultuurispetsiifilised kogemused

ning SLK subjektiivne iseloom tekitab objektiivse analüüsi jaoks probleeme. Tulevased uuringud võiksid kasu saada:

- Andmekogumi laiendamisest, et lisada kultuuridevahelisi jutustusi, et tuvastada universaalseid ja kultuurispetsiifilisi teemasid.

- kui uurida ühiste SLK-elementide, nagu näiteks valgus tunneli lõpus, taga olevaid füsioloogilisi mehhanisme.

- kui uurida isiklike uskumussüsteemide mõju SLK tõlgendamisele.

## 5. Lõplikud mõtted

Käesolev uurimus on andnud ainulaadse objektiivi, mille kaudu vaadelda vaimsuse, teoloogia ja inimteadvuse kokkupuutepunkte. Kuigi see on näidanud, et surmalähikogemused on sügavalt isiklikud ja sageli kultuuriliselt mõjutatud, toob see esile ka sügavad universaalsed teemad, nagu armastus, lunastus ja tähenduse otsimine. Jätkates religiooniuringute, neuroteaduse ja kultuurianalüüsi vahelise lõhe ületamist, võivad tulevased uuringud veelgi rohkem avada SLK saladusi ja nende tähtsust inimese arusaamade kujundamisel elust ja surmajärgsest elust.

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