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The Contribution of the Study of the Near-Death Experience to the Christian Concept of Resurrection

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Abstract

The near-death experience (NDE) is argued to be strictly a feeling that the percipient regards as a reality, yet some say it is strictly a brain malfunction that allows visions of various images to be seen and stored in human memory. Percipients of the NDE have reported a feeling of separation from their physical bodies. They claim that there is a spiritual body in them that rises above, leaving their physical bodies behind during their near-death experiences. Christians have a fundamental belief that Jesus was resurrected from death with a physical body that was also spiritual or supra in nature, and they also believe that those who died in Christ shall be resurrected, but with what kind of body shall they be resurrected? The NDE is a pre-death experience while resurrection is a post-death experience. However, both experiences suggest the emanation of a unique or supra being from the body and, while resurrection encourages a reunification of the body and soul, the NDE encourages a separation between the body and the soul. The question regarding the nature of the resurrection body is the focus of this research. The researchers argue that the study of the NDE can contribute to elucidating the nature of the resurrection body. This research is literary and comparative in approach because the views of various authors are evaluated in the search to establish

the connection between the resurrection body and the NDE supra body.

Introduction

Resurrection is generally a term that suggests a revival or a resuscitation of the body and the soul after physical death (see Agai 2024a:269-270). This definition connects with the view propagated by Bronner according to which resurrection involves the rising of the dead from their graves in an expected future life. She added that the word *resurrection* might have originated from the Latin word *resurrectus* which means to 'rise again' in connection with the rising of the body and the soul from death (Bronner 2002:2). There are two variables involved in the definition of resurrection and these are the body and the soul. Hick (1985:275) noted that the body created post-resurrection is celestial or spiritual. An individual's spiritual body or *soma pneumatikon* is expected to have similar personality-features as before he or she died (Agai 2024a:273).

There is another concept that is referred to as 'resuscitation' that is sometimes incorrectly used interchangeably with resurrection. For example, a number of people regarded the restoration of the life of Lazarus by Jesus and that of the widow's son by Elijah as 'resurrection' (Agai 2024a:261–262). This, in connection with resurrection, can be contested because while the *dead* were recorded to have been restored to life as demonstrated in the Bible, there is no record that they had a celestial body after their restoration. The creation of a new celestial body is vital in the definition of the Christian perspective on resurrection (Agai 2024a:270–271). Yet, it is important to note that what connects resurrection with the cited stories of Lazarus and Elijah is the view that the body and the soul were likely reconnected. Adewoye (2024) also emphasised the importance of the body in defining resurrection.

Another author, Katherine Sonderegger, agreed that resurrection and resuscitation are two separate things. She said that an individual does not die again after resurrection and those who are resuscitated would have to die again before they could be resurrected: 'resurrection is when death is no longer in front of us, but behind us' (Sonderegger 2013). The concepts of

resurrection and resuscitation make it possible to connect this study with modern developments in near-death experience research. The near-death experience (NDE) suggests a form of restoration to life of people who claimed to have died but were resuscitated. The people who experienced the near-death in most cases might have gone through a life-threatening situation that resulted in their physical incapacitation. Their mental strengths might have been active during their experiences as their minds recorded stories they told others after their restoration (Muller 2021).

Furthermore, it is important to note that the resurrection of the dead is fundamental to the Christian faith, to the point that the apostle Paul explained that, without resurrection, the Christian faith would have been but vanity '[a]nd if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain' (1 Corinthians 15:14, NIV). This and other comments highlight the importance of the resurrection of the dead to the Christian faith. But can the study of the NDE or resuscitation contribute to the study of the resurrection of the dead? How can the dead rise with a body that is either physical or spiritual? This subject was also debated in the past by, for example, Platonist philosophy, which regarded the human body as evil and thus questioned its possible resurrection (Strauss 2014:1–2); likewise, the Samaritans, Sadducees, Essenes, Pharisees, and others also debated the subject (Agai 2015b; Cervantes 2016).

This research is relevant because it raises a debate on the need to study the modern concept of the NDE in connection with the resurrection of the dead. The idea is to attempt to inform Christians on the contribution of modern science, particularly regarding the NDE, to the study of the resurrection of the dead. The researchers enquired about the 'being' or the 'component' or the 'body' that rises from the dead and is connected to resurrection. The researchers further attempted to establish some connection between the 'ethereal being' or 'soul' that rises from death at resurrection with the 'being' or 'supra being' that rises from or dominates the human mind or thinking faculty during an NDE. The researchers are aware that there exist some differences between the NDE and resurrection but their interests pertained to the contribution of the NDE to the study of resurrection. It thus becomes pertinent to look into the debates regarding the perceptions of the human body in connection with both resurrection and the NDE.

The Perception of the Human Body

There is a need to understand some theological and scientific debates regarding the perception of the human body and its connection with resurrection. This is important because it shows that the study of the resurrection is not outdated research. Agai has noted previously that the resurrection concept is still relevant in modern society as people question the whereabouts of their deceased loved ones (2017:2–5). It is also important to note that religious perceptions of the resurrection of the dead have contributed to the scientific study of the relationship between the soul and the body. Modern developments in parapsychology, in which extra-sensory perceptions like telepathy, hypnosis, etc. are studied, are contributing to the academic convergence and divergence of scientists and religious scholars. The brain-body or mind-body relation is vital to the study of the debates about how the resurrection of the body from death can take place (Agai 2024b:2–3). Scholars have, over the years, challenged the view according to which human souls are separate from their bodies; this is vital because there are Christians who think that the body is separate from the soul while others believe that the body and soul are a single entity.

There is a traditional view according to which humans are divided into body and soul. In other words, the soul is likely bound to be resurrected and is thus immortal while the body is mortal. Joshua Mugg and James T. Turner referred to the concept of the separation of the body from the soul as *dualism* or *constitutionalism* and they argued that previous scholars who supported this view had mistaken the true meaning of the concepts, the reason being that God had to resurrect bodies. They favoured *animalism*, which necessitates that God resurrect bodies for human existence (Mugg and Turner 2017:121–122). In other words, the body is needed to contain the soul. This view is also backed by Adewoye (2024) who argued persuasively that Jesus' incarnation, death, and ascension with a human body suggest the relevance of the human body in matters that pertain to resurrection.

The traditional view regarding the separation of the body from the soul in the afterlife might have been influenced by Platonian and other Greek philosophical thoughts, which regarded as sacred the non-material world

(Cooper 2009:34). It may be recalled that Plato believed that the best or the ultimate reality for existence pertained to unseen things or *ideas*; likewise, Greek philosophical thought promoted the view that matter is evil and God might not have created out of matter (Agai 2017:30–50). Bible believers are of the view that the body is one of God's creations, created out of matter (Genesis 1–2). But, according to John W. Cooper, some modern theologians have rejected the existence of humans as dualistic beings. Cooper emphasised that:

Modern theologians have advocated more monistic views of human nature and repudiated dualism as residual Greek philosophy that is incompatible with holistic Hebrew thought. (2009:34)

To them, the human body is just a single component that cannot be and is not separated.

However, disagreements among Christians over perceptions of the separation of the body from the soul could be explained by the notion that Christians do not interpret doctrine and scholarship the same way (Cooper 2009:34). One of the theologies that reigned during the medieval period is the view according to which a disembodied soul necessarily required a body that had to be conjoined in the resurrection (Mugg and Turner 2017:124). This type of perception might have promoted the idea of the separation of the body from the soul. Cooper said that an exegetical and historical study of scripture did not suggest that the body is separable from the soul; instead, the body and soul are a single entity with varied functions. He noted that biblical words that are used to denote humans suggest humans are single beings and not divided into body and soul:

Genesis 2:7 states that God made Adam as a soul or living being (*nephesh chayah*), forming him from the dust of the ground and giving him the breath of life (*neshamah*). A human does not *have* a soul but *is* a soul, a single being consisting of formed earth and breath/spirit (*neshamah*, a synonym of *ruach*). In philosophical terms, a human being is

one substance, entity, or thing constituted of two distinct ingredients or components. (Cooper 2009:36)

If the body cannot be separated from the soul, does this suggest that the death of the body means the death of the soul? The bodies that experienced near-death have not been certified brain dead but are, in most cases, completely inactive. Why are the people who experienced near-death able to compose and explain their experiences accurately? What is that entity that is assumed to have left the body to experience and explain their experiences? One implication to note is that the monistic view propagated by Cooper, Mugg, and Turner suggests that the experiences of people who went through near-death are not proof that the body can be separated from the soul.

If the resurrection of Jesus is to be taken as a historical fact, it thus suggests the oneness of the body and soul because Jesus was resurrected with both a physical body and a spiritual body. It is difficult to understand how this is possible. Paul also described the resurrection body as spiritual (1 Corinthians 15). The view of most modern theologians like Cooper is that the body is a single entity with varied features, including a dualistic existence that can be experienced at death and resurrection. Cooper surmised that 'although human life is holistic, some kind of dualism is actualized at death' (2009:36). It is also important to note that while resurrection encourages a cojoining of the body and soul, the NDE emphasises the separation of the body from the soul or mind. It is the soul that is believed to journey to the worlds of the dead, allegedly leaving the physical body behind. Understanding this background can serve as a guide in the debate regarding the alleged separation between the body and the soul in connection with either resurrection or the study of the NDE.

The Problem of the Resurrection Body

The biblical concepts regarding the resurrection of the dead are important for Christians, primarily the resurrection of Jesus because he was resurrected with a body that was both physical, because it was seen and felt, and celestial, because it ascended. There seems to be an increase in debates over whether Jesus was a historical person (a normal human being with a physical body like

any other person) or a pseudo-being (a supernatural person) or a person who never truly existed. Some scholars are of the view that, even if Jesus existed, his resurrection might not have been a reality but a psychological manipulation transferred as historical knowledge from generation to generation, which made people believe that he truly died and was resurrected (Craffert 2011:4–6).

On this debate, Atkinson pointed out that this kind of study of resurrection from a psycho-anthropological perspective might have started in the 1880s (2011:1). Such study shows that Jesus might not have died and resurrected; instead, his disciples and followers had visions of him in addition to what they heard about him. The view is that ideas regarding the reality of Jesus' resurrection are psychological phenomena generated through brain activity in the form of repeated electrical stimulation of the visual and auditory cortexes, which makes the individual regard a vision as reality (Atkinson 2011:9). Craffert said '[p]ost-resurrection experiences of Jesus were visionary experiences reserved for specific individuals and does[sic] not require a physical body' (1999:116).

Atkinson said that Jesus' followers' view on resurrection as a historical fact originated as a result of their fear of the unknown and as a search for comfort from their sufferings, and, as a result, they created hope for themselves about resurrection and in particular the resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, those who doubted the resurrection of Jesus and regarded it as a psychological misapprehension thought that Paul only had a vision of Christ, yet he claimed to have seen him physically. Luke attempted to confirm whether Jesus was resurrected by offering him food to eat, indicating that he might have doubted whether Christ truly resurrected, while Thomas sought for a proof because he doubted also (Atkinson 2011:1–10).

Pieter Craffert of the Department of Ancient and Biblical Studies at the University of South Africa noted that the cultural surroundings of Jesus' disciples, the writers of the gospels, the early church, and Jesus' other followers might have made them believe Jesus' resurrection was a historical event. In other words, the reality of Jesus' resurrection as a historical event

could be attributed to a functioning of the culture-brain nexus (Craffert 2011:3). Craffert added:

The neuroanthropological suggestion is that it never was about a physical event in time-space that could be seen objectively but about a culturally approved experience that constituted consensual reality for those involved [...] it will be suggested that the historian's choice is not between fact or fiction but how to deal with the historicity of cultural realities. (Craffert 2011:2–3)

Despite the debate on whether Jesus' resurrection was a reality or not, Apostle Paul and other gospel writers created the views according to which Jesus was resurrected as a spiritual being. In the gospels, the Jesus who was resurrected had both physical and spiritual characteristics. He was seen by many after his resurrection; he ate and communicated with others; yet he mysteriously appeared and reappeared in various places and, most importantly, he ascended to heaven. These features are both physical and spiritual. The resurrection body of Jesus can hardly be classified or categorised as just one state of being. Using other descriptions of Jesus' resurrection body and Paul's view of the resurrection body, this research attempted to create a connection between the resurrection body and the near-death experience.

The Resurrection Body and the NDE Supra Body

The Features of the Resurrection Body

Roger B. Cook, a lecturer at the Open University, Milton Keynes, England, taught that Christ's teachings and activities post-resurrection were mainly generated by the state of coma he experienced, not by death and resurrection (Cook 1992:193–198). This research investigates the nature of the resurrection body of Christ and is also about Paul's definition of the resurrection body in relation to the near-death experience. It is important to note that one of the views propagated in the New Testament is that Jesus Christ was resurrected with a physical yet spiritual body (Heslop 2024).

According to Paul, the resurrection body of Christ shares similarities with the kind of body that Christians will have in the resurrection life: '[w]ho shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body' (Philippians 3:21, KJV; see Perman 2006:1–2). Elsewhere, he writes, 'we shall all be changed' (1 Corinthians 15:51, KJV). According to some New Testament passages, the resurrection body of Jesus walked through walls (John 20:19) and Jesus' resurrection body will not die again (Kreeft 2000:15). The apostle Paul also described the resurrection body as that which is imperishable, powerful, heavenly, immortal, and supra natural (1 Corinthians 15:40–53).

However, it is difficult to comprehend logically or scientifically the specific nature of the resurrection body. In the postmodern world, it is pertinent to raise concerns about how a dead body can become a new body through resurrection (Cervantes 2016:15). If Paul were to be around at this time, the Corinthians would have raised the same question they did then: 'But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?"' (1 Corinthians 15:35, NIV).

Scholars have provided several definitions regarding the nature of the resurrection body. Yet there is no single, universally acceptable view regarding the specific nature of the resurrection body. Kreeft (2000:15) said that the resurrection body is a continuation of the former body but in a changed form, whereby the resurrection body is a *super* pre-death body. Badham noted that the major difference between the resurrection and pre-resurrection body is the continuity of the personality of the individual (1976:85). Hick (1985:278) said that the resurrection body is strictly a celestial body; he referred to it as *soma pneumatikon*. Apostle Paul described the resurrection body as a mystery (1 Corinthians 15:51).

The NDE and What It Is Not

Raymond Moody, a philosopher-psychiatrist, invented the compound name 'Near-Death Experience' (1977:200–203). He interviewed 150 people who experienced near death. He believed that the near-death experience is not evidence for a life after death; instead, he taught that his sampled percipients only came *close to death* in an experience he referred to as the 'near-death' (Moody 1977:121). In addition, it is important to note that the NDE is not

scientifically regarded as proof for resurrection beliefs (Agai 2024b:2). Percipients of the NDE have often reported seeing themselves as having a spiritual body or a celestial body or a kind of supra body that is different from their physical bodies. Kingsley Kinya and Agai (2023:8) noted that those who experience the NDE do see themselves as having a body that is not natural but superhuman, possessing unique abilities to operate supernaturally.

The study of the near-death experience, and particularly that which pertains to the alleged *rising* of a new body during the experience, can contribute to the Christian study of the resurrection body; this is so because both the resurrection and the NDE supra body are seemingly celestial (see Greyson 2006:408). It is important to note that during the NDE, percipients do claim to have developed a new or supra body that leaves behind the physical body. Michael Potts defined *autoscopie NDE* as a feeling that involves the separation of the physical body from the ethereal body; it is

a sense of separation from the body and may include seeing one's physical body, as a well as seeing and hearing one's resuscitation. (Potts 2002:233–234)

There is no evidence that during the NDE the physical body is separated from the ethereal or spiritual body. The idea of the separation is basically a feeling believed by the percipient that his or her body is left behind. An experience is shared regarding some of the features experienced during the near-death:

Swift as an arrow, I fly through a dark tunnel. I'm engulfed by an overwhelming feeling of peace and bliss. I feel intensely satisfied, happy, calm, and peaceful. I hear wonderful music. I see beautiful colors and gorgeous flowers in all colors of the rainbow in a large meadow. At the far end is a beautiful, clear, warm light. This is where I must go. I see a figure in a light garment. This figure is waiting for me and reaches out her hand. It feels like a warm and loving welcome. Hand in hand, we move toward the beautiful and warm light. Then she lets go of my hand and

turns around. I feel something pulling me back. (Magis Center 2023)¹

Although the coherences in most cases of the NDE are universally similar, the background of the one who experiences the NDE determines the nature of the similarities or differences of the experiences. Some of the coherences experienced by NDE percipients include the vision being of light, the life review or life history or reminiscence period, the tunnel or narrow path experience, a feeling of peace and satisfaction, the hearing of strange sounds, the feeling of being out of the body, the presence of a border or a limit that allows entrance into another realm, a form rising into heaven, the experience of a supernatural rescue, the process of coming back into the physical body, the experience of being reluctant to return to the physical body, meeting others or meeting spiritual beings, cities of light or awesomeness, and a realm of bewildered spirits (Greyson 2006:395).

Raymond Moody added other coherent experiences that include a negative NDE and sometimes a positive NDE that included a deeper appreciation of life, less fear of death, a corroboration of out-of-body experiences, and sadness in discussing their experiences (1977:164–200). Other major coherences in the NDE are a resistance to return to earth, a surrender to a supreme being or supreme beings, and an experience of transcendence (Greyson and Khanna 2014:44). The feeling of separation of the physical body from the spiritual body or supra body is vital in this study, and this creates a need to compare the supra body with the resurrection body.

Similarities and Differences between the NDE Supra Body and the Resurrection Body

There are similarities and differences between the NDE supra body and the resurrection body. Both the NDE supra body and the resurrection body carry a personality continuity for the individual. That means the personality of the one who experiences near-death is carried alongside the NDE in an assumed afterlife experience. In the study of the resurrection body, that of Jesus, those who knew him were able to identify his personality (Badham 1976:85). When

¹ Originally from Pim van Lommel's book *Consciousness Beyond Life* (2010).

Jesus was resurrected, he knew whom he was. His disciples and others who knew him were able to identify him even though some doubted him (Luke 24:42, 1 Corinthians 15:5–6). In a similar manner, the percipients of the NDE do not become different people during their near-death experiences; instead, they continue with their personalities which emanate from their pre- to their post-NDE bodies. The NDE supra bodies had supernatural abilities to operate beyond the force of gravity, beyond time, and beyond distance. They could penetrate through ceilings, walls, and can travel long distances within a short period of time (Ma'Su'mian 1996:126). Christ's resurrection body showed similar features by passing through walls and by ascending up into the sky (John 20:19, Acts 1:9–11; Kreeft 2000:15).

In addition, both the NDE supra body and the resurrection body have a very high and more sensitive awareness of their being, their activities, and their environments. Their memories and level of environmental awareness are higher than those of ordinary human beings (Hampe 1979:65). Likely, both the resurrection body and the NDE supra body could not excrete urine or faeces or sweat or any other unwanted biochemical content. There is little or no record that the NDE supra body could eat normal food that other humans can eat. The resurrection body of Christ, in particular, ate food, but Paul's emphasis on the resurrection body is strictly spiritual, which would likely dissociate the resurrection body from eating and defecating. Paul referred to the resurrection body as incorruptible, powerful, heavenly, imperishable, and immortal (1 Corinthians 15:40–44).

More so, the resurrection body is not a separation between the physical body and the spiritual body. While there is a seeming separation of function in the body at death, the body and spirit are conjoined at resurrection. The NDE supra body is allegedly returned to the physical body after the near-death experience. But there are instances wherein NDE percipients may not return to their normal state of life to narrate the stories of their experiences because they have died. In other words, they spoke about their experiences during those experiences and passed away afterward (Greyson 2006:394). In the resurrection, there is no return to physical life, unlike most cases that pertain to the NDE, where the percipients return to normalcy to narrate their experiences (Sonderegger 2013).

The near-death experience is a universal phenomenon happening daily in different parts of the world. While resuscitation also happens daily in various parts of the world, resurrection as the formation of a new celestial body is hardly heard about. Most Christians believe that they have to wait for a particular day when all the dead will rise with their spiritual bodies in a resurrection life, unlike the NDE which happens daily. The resurrection body and the NDE supra body both possess features that are not fully coherent with the biological systems of humans and this makes both realities unique and relevant for study (Facco, Agrillo, and Greyson 2015:88). The general characteristics of all living things are nutrition, respiration, movement, reproduction, growth, irritability, and death (Kadhila 2010:3). The NDE supra body and the resurrection body are not clearly connected to the characteristics of living things, except as regards death; NDE percipients are still expected to die, unlike the resurrected.

Implications for African Society

The African community has high regard for the human body being resurrected in the afterlife. The Yoruba people of Nigeria for example arranged extravagant burial rituals for their deceased, with careful handling of the deceased body. They honoured the deceased body with a continual offering of food and water to the dead. They did this with a view to keep the deceased resurrected because, without the deceased body being catered for by the living, the deceased might cease to exist in the otherworld or cease to become an ancestor or cease to be resurrected or be thrown into a life of turmoil in the afterlife. The ancient Egyptians mummified and preserved the dead with a view that the deceased visited his or her mummified body to maintain a state of resurrection (Agai 2015a:1–7; see also Agai 2024b:1–5).

For the Christian community, while the New Testament emphasises faith in Christ alone as the only and major criterion for resurrection (Agai 2015b:1–3), the preservation of and catering for the deceased body by the living is not clearly condemned. Adewoye (2024) emphasised that Jesus' incarnation and ascension with a physical body suggest that the body is important in connection with death and resurrection, yet he deemphasised any view according to which the physical body would be resurrected. The near-death

experience encourages a view according to which only the spirit or soul shall possibly rise after the death of the physical body, while resurrection on the other hand encourages the view that the body and soul shall be united. However, the body that shall unite with the soul must be celestial, unlike the physical body humans have today. The study of the NDE is relevant in this case because it promotes the view that there is an ethereal or supra body in humans that will likely rise in the resurrection life. Furthermore, Zigarelli (2024) mentioned further relevance of the NDE to the study of the resurrection body. The NDE supports the notion that a supernatural realm exists, that supreme beings exist, that life review is a reality, that humans might live after death, and much more (Zigarelli 2024). Since the NDE is universal and likely understudied in Africa, this research promotes the need to begin to conduct further study on the subject.

Conclusion

The NDE is a phenomenon that is under study. No one has ever seen an NDE supra body except for the percipients who have allegedly experienced the NDE. With regard to resurrection, a person had to die before he or she could be resurrected, but during NDE the one who experiences it can be resuscitated so that he or she can narrate his or her experiences. It is also pertinent to reiterate that the NDE and the resurrection body are two separate realities. Paul's reliance on the analogy of Jesus' resurrection to expound the resurrection of other believers did not provide adequate information to describe the resurrection body. Similarly, the NDE supra body did not provide complete information about the biblical description of the resurrection body. However, the general study of the NDE and the NDE supra body in particular can provide some information regarding the nature of the resurrection body and particularly on the supra-uniqueness of the resurrection and the NDE supra body. This research, aimed at comparing the resurrection body with the NDE supra body, suggested that there are similarities and differences between both bodies. What is vital is the view that the NDE supra body adds to or gives knowledge regarding the nature of the resurrection body.

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