

## Religious Interpretations of Near-Death Experiences Based on the Teachings of Shia Islam

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### Abstract

Although most philosophers and theologians have simply disregarded the results of more than forty years of scholarly endeavor in near-death experiences (NDEs), many scholars believe that religious teachings have great potentials for explaining different dimensions of such experiences. Using a descriptive-analytical design, the results of the present study indicate that if NDEs are considered glimpses into the afterlife, as problematic as it is to prove this claim, NDE elements conform to the prevailing spirit of Islamic eschatology derived from Shia hadiths. However, there are some conflicts and inconsistencies. Thus, recognizing the authenticity and significance of opposing epistemological propositions, a focus on their disciplined interpretation, and analysis of their compatibility with other credible and related propositions, along with a comprehensive, accurate, and valid understanding of NDEs and the interpretive nature of reports, can greatly reduce such conflicts and inconsistencies. Other inconsistencies, as well as some of the most controversial issues in science and religion so far, will await further scrutiny by scholars and theologians.

**Keywords:** death, afterlife, near-death experience, Islamic eschatology, Shia hadiths.

### Introduction

Most followers of the major religions around the world do not limit the scope of human life to the material and worldly life, and each, with their own narratives, advocates the continuity of human life and consciousness in another realm of existence. Belief in the system of punishment in the afterlife, which generally emphasizes bipolar images representing the destiny of the virtuous and the wicked, is another common feature of most of the world's major religions. These commonalities, along with some other less common characteristics, have led to a thought-provoking connection between NDEs and the eschatological teachings of the major religions.

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Thus, it seems that, according to some religious teachings, NDEs can provide a brief look at the afterlife.

A near-death experience is a subjective experience in which a person experiences a sense of separation from the physical world during the process of clinical death. At the beginning of this experience, one may experience the sensation of death and the surprise caused by this feeling. Nevertheless, their calmness tends to last and they will not feel any pain. Following this soothing consciousness, the experiencer may come up with an out-of-body presence. Some experiencers have described detachment from their body as similar to removal of one's clothing or molting. One may feel the passage through a tunnel during the stage of entering darkness. Passing through the tunnel, they may notice a glowing light at the end of the tunnel. In the face of radiant light, the experiencer may see recognizable spiritual forms in that light. When the experience is coming to an end, one may feel that one is rapidly ascending to the radiant light. According to many experiencers, this radiant light is in heaven or some other level of consciousness. During this ascent, the experiencer may encounter a luminous being. This luminous being, according to the experiencers, is considered God, a spiritual being, or a mass of energy. Meeting with the luminous being immerses the experiencer in the feeling of unconditional love emanating from this being. Meeting usually occurs at the end of the tunnel or on the way through it. Conversation with the luminous being and other visitors is non-verbal and subjective in nature and is similar to a telepathic conversation. During this encounter, experiencer may have a broad and complete review of their life, and they are likely to observe the events of life and go through a sense of self-judgment. During each of these stages, and especially in the final stage of the experience, the person may be reluctant to return to their former life. Experiencers mostly have positive effects on their lives through such experiences, and most of them think that facing death, in addition to removing the fear of death from their existence in an incredible way, also gives more meaning to their personal lives (for a detailed description of the characteristics and effects of NDEs, see Moody 1975; Moody 1978; Moody 1988; Ring 1980; Sabom 1982; Geryson 1983; Morse 1990; Bremmer 2002).

Over the past decades, researchers have examined hundreds of reports of NDEs and found that, regardless of their age, race, religion, or nationality, NDEers provided relatively similar narratives of the event in terms of quantity and quality, in such a way that some believe that the

possibility of hallucinations and mental disorders in NDEs should be considered very doubtful. Currently, transpersonal explanations of NDEs seek to prove that these experiences originate primarily in the spiritual realm, rather than originating from mental disorders or being the product of illusions or subconscious and possibly conscious psychological processes (Moody 1975, 1977, 1988; Morse 1990; Ring 1980, 1985). On the other hand, some researchers claim that their physiological, psychological, and sometimes mythological explanations, without considering NDEs as a proof for the afterlife or the possibility of the existence of consciousness independently of the physical body as a prerequisite for its authenticity, are able to adequately account for all the various dimensions of NDEs (see Engmann 2014).

However, many scholars believe that religious teachings can explain the dimensions of such experiences, but since the issue of NDEs has been discussed mainly in the Christian West, the most popular answers and theological commentaries on the issue have also often been offered by a few Christian theologians. Hence, Islam and Judaism have remained largely silent on this issue. In Christianity, despite the reaction of some philosophers and theologians, the Catholic Church has not taken any official position on the matter (Fox 2003, 11).

Some scholars believe that the potential of religions such as Islam, which in their Sufi traditions have great capacity for analyzing such phenomena, has not yet been exploited, and therefore, Muslim theologians have considerable potential to study such phenomena (Fox 2003, 345). In addition, as we will see below, the narrative heritage of Muslims (especially among Shias) has a higher capacity to explain the various dimensions and components of NDEs than the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

In the following section, we will discuss the power of the eschatological propositions of Shia Islam in accounting for NDEs and explaining their various components and dimensions.

### **Phenomenal Descriptions of Death in Shia Hadiths**

The survival of humans in the afterlife is one of the most convincing principles of Islamic theology. In Islamic teachings, the description of the phenomenon of death and the details of life after death are given more elaborately than in Judaism and Christianity. In addition to many verses of the Holy Quran, the hadiths left by the Prophet of Islam and his Ahl al-

Bayt in Shia and Sunni narrative societies provide a relatively comprehensive description of the quality of death and subsequent events based on eschatological teachings of Islamic theology.

According to Islamic teachings, the afterlife can be considered in three stages. The first stage is the occurrence of death. The second is entering the world of purgatory and the initial reckoning, which is accompanied by the enjoyment of divine blessings or being caught in purgatory torments. At this stage, sometimes referred to as the “grave world,” some who are in an intermediate position must temporarily undergo a period of refinement and purification, after which, through the intercession of God's friends, they become worthy of enjoying the divine blessings (Saduq 1982, 288). The third stage is the general resurrection and the final reckoning of all human beings, which is sometimes referred to as the “day of the blowing of the trumpet” (Kulayni 1986, 8:73). Presence in purgatory, compared to the last great resurrection, has been interpreted as a dream. According to Imam Baqir, death is like a long sleep that ends with the beginning of the resurrection (Saduq 1982, 289). Sometimes the occurrence of death and subsequent resurrection has been compared in Islamic traditions with the process of falling asleep and waking up (Majlisi 1984, 7:47).

The advice that is recommended in the Islamic hadiths about the dying person shows the influence of the last mental states of the person on the quality of life after their death. Good faith in God and belief in His infinite mercy in the forgiveness of sins and the acceptance of small virtues are among the recommendations that have been considered very effective for the deceased (Fayd Kashani 1996, 8:265). Indoctrination of Shahadatayn (the two testimonies) and names of religious leaders to the deceased to counter the efforts of demons who try to force a person to polytheism and infidelity in religion (Kulayni 1986, 3:123) is one of the things that are very much in line with the recommendations and descriptions in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This work is one of the sacred texts of Tibetan Buddhists and belongs to the Nyingma tradition, which was written in the eighth century AD, after being passed down from generation to generation. The purpose of this book is to teach the art of dying and leaving the body and how to connect earthly consciousness to the transcendental realm. The text of the book, which is to be read on the bedside of dying people according to special instructions, teaches them how to get liberated and perished in the light of truth in the middle stage (*bardo*) of death and resurrection, by listening to the teachings read on their bedside. The teachings of the book cover the three stages of death moments (*chikhai bardo*), dreamy moments after death (*chonyid bardo*), and prenatal events (*sidpa bardo*). The descriptions that this work gives of near-death events bear remarkable similarities with the reports of near-death experiences.

Some Shia hadiths point to the meeting of the dying person with the Prophet of Islam, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and other members of Ahl al-Bayt. When the dying person meets these people, he cannot return to the world forever (Fayd Kashani 1996, 8:261). Therefore, there should be no mention of such encounters in NDEs, but according to some available reports, some of the experiencers who followed Ahl al-Bayt, despite seeing their leaders during the experience, have resumed their lives (Nasiri & Avini 2007).

Following verse 159 of Surah Al-Nisa, some Shia hadiths stated that the followers of other religions in the past and the future would undoubtedly meet the Holy Prophet and Imam 'Ali at the time of death (Majlisi 1984, 6:188). In a narration, Imam 'Ali also said to Harith Hamdani: "Whoever dies will see me, whether a believer or a hypocrite" (Majlisi 1984, 6:181). According to some Islamic traditions, the philosophy of the presence of the Holy Prophet and the saints of God at the bedside of believers on the verge of death is to help them leave the worldly life in an easier and more enjoyable way. Of course, this will be sad and tormenting for the wrongdoers (Majlisi 1984, 6:194).

In the Quran, the two concepts of "agony of death" (Q 50:19) and "hardship of death" (Q 6:93) refer to the depth of the agony and difficulty of death in the Islamic view. With a brief look at the Islamic eschatological hadiths, we come across narrations and hadiths that describe death as an extremely difficult experience. In some of these hadiths, the experience of death is described as more difficult than cutting the human body with a saw and cutting its flesh with scissors (al-Ghazali, n.d., 15:128). Even the death of the great prophets of God has sometimes been considered very sad and difficult. Al-Ghazali cites a significant portion of these themes in *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* (The revival of the religious sciences) as well as *Kimiya-yi sa'adat* (The alchemy of happiness), and the image he ultimately depicts of death is deeply frightening, painful, and sad (al-Ghazali, n.d., 129 & 1393, 2: 323-24). However, Fayd Kashani in *al-Mahajjat al-bayda'*, while contradicting such hadiths, believes that the image of death in Shia hadiths is completely different from what al-Ghazali speaks of. The Shia image of death is two-sided. In Shia hadiths, death is considered as a bridge that brings the virtuous believers to their greatest joys at the height of pleasure and enjoyment and releases them from the world's suffering, and separates the wicked disbelievers from the pleasures to which they are accustomed in the world at the height of hardship and shows them

the promised torment. Death is very lovable and pleasant for the followers of God and those who know it (Fayd Kashani 1996, 8:248). In Shia hadiths, the main reason for the believers' fear of death is their lack of knowledge about the benefits of death and the blessings that will be bestowed on them after that. In addition, issues such as attachment to worldly blessings and committing wrongdoing are among the factors that cause fear of death.

Imam Hasan al-‘Askari defines death as “acknowledging something that does not exist” and in explaining it, quoting Imam Sadiq, he says: “Whenever a believer dies, he is not dead and the infidel [even in this worldly life] is dead” (Fayd Kashani 1996, 8:258). Sometimes death, in general, and without being attributed to believers and infidels, has been called an indescribable horror that cannot be grasped by the minds of people of the world (Amadi 1987, 161).

The most important conflicting descriptions of death in Shia hadiths are presented in the table below (Fayd Kashani 1996, 8: 255-58).

Table 1: The Descriptions of Death in Shia Hadiths

Believers' death	Disbelievers' death
Taking off the dirty clothes and unfastening the heavy chains	Taking out elegant clothing and putting on ragged and rough clothes and entering horrible houses
A dream full of joy and happiness	A terrifying sleep
Inhalation of a pleasant odor, followed by a good night's sleep with the disappearance of all of one's pain and suffering	A life more painful than a snake and a scorpion bite
The means of purifying the believers and atoning for their past sins	It is the last mercy that comes to them so that, after that, no good deed remains in their records
A traveler who returns to his/her relatives after a long time	The escaped slave restituting to his lord

In Islamic sources, there is a concept called “angel of death,” which is represented in two conflicting forms: Believers meet this angel in the most beautiful way possible and at the peak of kindness and compassion, whereas disbelievers will find it extremely ugly and disgusting. The

presence of the angel of death and his companions to take the lives of dying persons has been emphasized both in the Quran (Q 32:11) and in the Shia hadiths (Majlisi 1984, 6:144, 167). In Shia hadiths, meeting the angel of death is considered one of the three great difficulties of human life (Saduq 1983, 1:119).

Islamic teachings on how human life is taken at the time of death are not the same. Following various verses of the Quran, 'Allama Tabataba'i believes that those who take the human life at the time of death differ in terms of their proximity to, or distance from, the truth: Some people's lives are taken by God, some by the angel of death, and some by other angels and the followers of the angel of death (Tabataba'i 1968, 76).

According to Shia hadiths, after death, believers meet not only the angel of death or his companions, but also a beautiful angel who represents their deeds. He evangelizes them and makes arrangements to receive them. On the other hand, disbelievers and evildoers face a severely miserable person who threatens them about the torments and hardships that lie ahead. After this stage, two interrogative angels ask both groups about their Lord (Allah), religion, and Prophet, and then, according to their deeds, send them to heaven or hell (Fayd Kashani 1996, 8:303-305). In Islamic traditions, the two interrogative angels (Nakir and Munkar) appear terrifyingly to ask the questions. However, they take different attitudes towards believers and infidels after asking questions. The voices of these two angels are as strong as thunder and their eyes are as penetrating as lightning (Fayd Kashani 1996, 8:310).

Shia hadiths stipulate that only a few human beings are rescued from the pressure of the grave (Fayd Kashani 1996, 8:311; Kulayni 1986, 3:236). However, some hadiths from Imam Sadiq state that the questions in the grave are only asked from those who were sincere in their faith or disbelief. Others are completely excluded from these questions and answers (Fayd Kashani 1996, 8:310). According to some Shia hadiths, the oppressed, those with moderate faith are excluded from the questions asked in the grave. The same is true of mentally retarded people, children, and immature Muslim children. According to some hadiths, if these people have records of a righteous deed and have not expressed enmity with Ahl al-Bayt, a way will be opened for them to the Paradise in the West so that they will all be embraced by the breeze of happiness. On the Day of Judgment, the deeds of these people will be judged according to the divine command, and according to God's decision, they will go to heaven or eternal hell (Qummi

1984, 2:260). Some hadiths also highlighted the reception of dying believers by angels at the time of death (Majlisi 1984, 74:27).

Shia hadiths have repeatedly pointed to the visit of the dead to their families. These visits will be made weekly, monthly, and annually, depending on one's status before God. Some hadiths state that the deceased person visits their family as a gentle bird and is affected by their sadness and happiness (Kulayni 1986, 3:230). 'Allama Tabataba'i has considered such narrative descriptions of the embodiment of spirits in material forms (Tabataba'i 1968, 95).

Some verses of the Holy Quran indicate that people are aware of all their actions and behavior after death. In some of these verses, as in some NDE reports, the individuals themselves are considered the main judges of these actions:

- "On the Day of Judgment, we shall bring out for him a scroll, which he will see spread open" (Q 17:13);
- "And when the scrolls are laid open" (Q 81:10);
- "Read your records, you are a sufficient auditor for yourself this Day" (Q 17:14);
- "On that day, all will then be informed of what they have sent forth and left behind" (Q 75:13);
- "Man will be a witness against himself" (Q 75:13).

'Allama Tabataba'i believes that the expression "Read your records" is a kind of reminder of a person's deeds (Tabataba'i 1968, 141). Shia hadiths stated that a person reads their records on the Day of Judgment (the minor resurrection or death) as if the person themselves remembers and observes all their deeds by the will of God. This reminder is so detailed and precise as if they have done those deeds at that moment ('Ayyashi 2001, 2:328).

According to Islamic teachings, what liberates a believer from difficulties in the afterlife, in most cases, are the good things they have done to the public or their love for others. According to a hadith from Imam Sadiq, six characteristics can rescue a person from agony in the afterlife: A righteous child who seeks forgiveness for the deceased, leaving a Quran to be recited by others, a water well that one has dug and others use it, a tree that he planted, the water that he made flowing, and the good tradition that he left behind and is the source of action for others (Majlisi 1984, 6:293-94).



## **The Approach of Shia Teachings to Explaining NDEs**

Although a relatively large volume of first-grade Islamic texts is devoted to discussions about the occurrence of death and the quality of life after death, many aspects of this domain of human life are still unknown. Accordingly, 'Allama Tabataba'i argues that what is stated in the Quran and hadiths about purgatory, or our so-called afterlife, are just generalities that are mentioned as examples and are by no means a complete explanation of the subject (Tabataba'i 1968, 96). On the other hand, accepting the relatively symbolic nature of some of the teachings of Islamic theology and the Semitic religions, in general, can redefine our understanding of the quality of the afterlife. The difficulty of rational understanding of such matters has sometimes led some scholars to rule on imitatively in such matters (Fayd Kashani 1996, 8:308). Accordingly, we must consider all these limitations and difficulties when exploring the Shia eschatological approach to explaining NDEs.

Unfortunately, since the issue of NDEs in Islamic countries has not been addressed so far, there are no reliable statistical and analytical studies of Muslim NDEs to be used for comparing the content of such experiences based on the teachings of Islamic theology. Nevertheless, a general analysis can still be performed based on the content of the existing reports. Thus, following the discussions of the Shia eschatological teachings, it can be argued that these teachings largely conform to the general content of NDEs. The most important of these similarities are:

1. Belief in the existence of an immaterial and matter-independent essence in man;
2. Continuity of consciousness after death;
3. The possibility of observing the events of the material environment and the events around the corpse by the person who has passed away;
4. Recalling actions and judging them by the individual and experiencing the consequences;
5. Meeting religious figures or the angel of death and his companions;
6. The newly deceased is welcomed by believers on the eve of entering the other world;
7. The great influence of public benevolent actions in determining the fate of a person after death.

However, there are some other descriptions of the phenomena of death and the events that follow in Islamic teachings that are not found in or differ from the content of reports of near-death experiences. The most important differences are as follows:

1. Describing death as a horrific event;
2. The terrifying presence of two questioning angels of death;
3. The vast majority of humans face the pressures of the grave;
4. Meeting with religious figures on the verge of death as a sign of the inevitable and irreversible occurrence of death;
5. Seeing the Holy Prophet and Imam 'Ali on the verge of death by followers of other past and future religions.

Obviously, some of the above cases, especially items 2 to 5 that are promised after the complete and permanent occurrence of death, are not comparable to the accounts provided by people who have had near-death experience because defenders of religious explanations of this phenomenon, at best, have interpreted it as a brief and transient account of the afterlife, and thus, it cannot be compared with eschatological propositions referring to the irreversible posthumous period. Regarding the other features reported in accounts of NDEs about which the Islamic teachings have remained silent, 'Allama Tabataba'i argued that the Islamic teachings have limited themselves to mentioning exemplary generalities in this regard, and therefore, one should not expect to trace a complete description of death and the details of life after it in Islamic works. However, some cases conflict with the content of existing reports of near-death experiences. Thus, the following points can be taken into account to resolve inconsistencies in NDE reports and religious instructions.

First, the description of death as a horrific event is often denied by many experiencers, and these people consider the experience of the so-called death to be the most beautiful and relaxing experience of their lives. In some cases, they wished to have that unique and unforgettable experience repeated for them. However, most researchers have underestimated the incidence of unpleasant experiences. Atwater claims that the figure is much higher than what others have estimated (105 unpleasant experiences among seven hundred near-death experiences). She considers the reluctance of experiencers and researchers to present and record such experiences as the main reason for this underestimation (Atwater 1992). Nevertheless, it seems that the number of pleasant experiences is still relatively higher than

unpleasant experiences, and this, at first glance, challenges theological teachings. We will further show that the relatively higher number of NDEs, if considered as glimpses into the afterlife, does not necessarily contradict the eschatological teachings of Shia Islam, and at least the philosophical reading of Islamic teachings justifies this discrepancy. It should be noted that (moral, natural, and metaphysical) evil has always been one of the general concerns of mankind, especially among religions that believe in a God with attributes such as absolute knowledge and power and pure goodness. Hence, philosophers and theologians have constantly sought to find a means of reconciling evil with the goodness of the universe and its creator. One aspect of the issue of evil that has been questioned in the Abrahamic religions, in general, and in Islam, in particular, consists in some interpretations of the scriptures about the punishment of a countless number of sinners. According to some thinkers, the reality of such a thing can be incompatible with the pure goodness and wisdom of God in the creation of creatures, most of whom deserve to be punished and reprimanded in the Hereafter. This challenge has also been addressed by the pioneers of the three great philosophical schools in the Islamic world, including Avicenna, Suhrawardi, and Mulla Sadra. According to these philosophers, the world has been created as the best system in which, despite the existence of ignorance and obedience to lust and anger among human beings, most people will enjoy salvation and happiness. Besides, there are different types and levels of salvation, happiness, and perfection, and thus the majority of human beings, despite not being free from ignorance and error, can be saved from suffering and torment of hell (see Ibn Sina 2008, 335-36). These philosophers believe that the diffusion of countless bounties and blessings on beings, especially human beings, of which free will is one manifestation, inevitably brings with it a small amount of evil, and God's avoidance of the occurrence of this small amount of evil means avoiding the creation of beings with their current conditions, which it is not compatible with the divine existence.

Relying on the opinions of his predecessors such as Farabi and Avicenna, Suhrawardi divides human beings into three groups: "elevated," "moderate," and "degraded," believing that the middle group, along with the first group, constitutes the majority of human beings. Therefore, one can hope for the salvation of the majority of human beings (Suhrawardi 2009, 234-35).

Following his predecessors, Mulla Sadra has explicitly spoken of the salvation of most human beings. Like his predecessors, he divides human beings into three groups: “perfect,” “middle,” and “imperfect,” placing the majority of people into the middle group and the minority to the imperfect group (Mulla Sadra 1981, 7:79-80). Even concerning the salvation of the majority of human beings in the hereafter, Mulla Sadra believes in a kind of argumentative obligation and explicitly speaks of the absolute dominance of the people of mercy and salvation in this world and the hereafter: “The people of mercy and salvation have a majority in this world and the hereafter” (Mulla Sadra 1981, 7:80).

Evidently, at least from the point of view of some Muslim thinkers and theologians, the salvation of most human beings can be justified based on philosophical and theological evidence. Thus, assuming that near-death experiences partly allude to the hereafter, pleasant experiences reported by a majority of people should not be considered immediately in opposition to theological teachings. On the other hand, this optimism towards the destiny of the majority of human beings has been strongly supported by mystics. Since the ontological and epistemological approaches adopted by mystics are based on the expansion of God's infinite mercy and love in all levels of existence, they have pursued the issue of the salvation of most human beings with greater vigor and depth. Ibn ‘Arabi believes that the human corporal existence and its totality is the same as God's mercy, which has always surpassed His wrath (which is also a form of mercy). Moreover, in the Hereafter, all beings will eventually enjoy God's grace and mercy, and God's wrath disappears after the establishment of penances (Ibn ‘Arabi, n.d., 3:346).

There is evidence in narrative and Quranic instructions confirming the salvation and ultimately the happiness of most human beings. Repentance in the world, penitence on the verge of death, forgiveness in the purgatory, the intercession of the intercessors in the purgatory and resurrection, and finally the intercession of God are some mechanisms through which one can achieve degrees of salvation even if they had not behaved and acted decently in the world. In addition, the kind of rewards mentioned in Islamic teachings for seemingly small and insignificant deeds indicate that God's mercy and forgiveness seek a means through which to provide salvation for human beings. In other words, according to Islamic teachings, “Paradise is given at a price not as an excuse,” indicating that one is rewarded in the hereafter based on their actions and behavior in the world.

Furthermore, it is believed that individuals cannot be worthy of God's incomparable grace by their own efforts alone, and it is God's grace and mercy that provide the means of salvation for human beings. This is a recurrent theme in the hadiths and prayers of the Ahl al-Bayt. For example, in one of his prayers, Imam Sadiq stated, "O God, treat us with your grace, not with your justice" (Mazandarani 2003, 10:191).

Second, sometimes an inaccurate understanding of the eschatological teachings of religions has placed NDEs under a disproportionate framework. There is no doubt that the eschatological teachings of religions confirm the hereafter upon the permanent and irreversible death. NDEs, on the other hand, are merely a glimpse of the afterlife, according to proponents of religious explanations. Accordingly, it is not possible to conclude from this so-called overview that NDEs contradict the doctrine of hell. In addition, the concept of suffering/torment has a special prominence that cannot be ignored when reviewing the events of a person's life and when experiencing the adverse effects of one's actions on others objectively.

Third, in some cases, the existing conflicts cannot be attributed to the original and fundamental teachings of a religion, but these conflicts in part originate from the interpreted secondary propositions whose authenticity has not been fully established based on existing documentation and evidence. For example, Shia teachings assume that followers of all past and future religions will see Shia leaders at the moment of death. This assumption is not part of the eschatological principles of Islam and there are doubts about its authenticity.

Fourth, it should be noted that our understanding of NDEs is mainly based on the reports of this phenomenon that have been narrated by experiencers for some time after its occurrence. Many of these reports are intertwined with the interpretations of experiencers and their narrators. Thus, the cultural-religious backgrounds of experiencers can influence the descriptions and accounts of NDEs. According to studies, religious figures or enlightened beings never introduce themselves, but these are the experiencers who name or identify them based on their ideological assumptions. Accordingly, taking into account cultural-religious backgrounds in the illustration and interpretation of NDEs will be effective in resolving some conflicts.

Fifth, Islamic eschatological teachings have been silent on many details of the afterlife. Believers have also devoted themselves to such teachings

since it is not possible to rationally examine and evaluate them. Furthermore, since the subject is outside the grasp of human intellect and experience in such teachings, the use of symbolic and metaphorical elucidations is quite possible. Turning attention to the probably symbolic and metaphorical nature of some of the eschatological teachings may not reveal their similarity with the content of NDEs, but will probably eliminate some of the conflicts. Usually in such cases, “systematic interpretation” of these teachings will either reduce the severity of the conflicts or eliminate the conflicts.

Sixth, the failure to pay attention to the position and importance of the teachings in a theological system has sometimes led to controversies and inconsistencies. For example, it is commonly believed that sexual perversions are usually more repugnant than other moral vices, such as lying, slandering, talking behind someone's back, and abusing and ill-treating others, but sometimes religious teachings, especially the teachings of Shia Islam, are not so sympathetic to this popular view. There are narratives and hadiths whereby talking behind someone's back or usury is considered far more disgracing than adultery (‘Amili 1988, 12:281; Nuri 1987, 13:332) or lies and betrayal are deemed vices which, contrary to other vices and moral deviations, are not committed by any believer (Nuri 1987, 9:88), indicating that religious teachings are not sometimes consistent with the common beliefs among religious people. Accordingly, when examining the theological and moral implications of NDEs, one must consider the central position of theological teachings. The failure to take this into account has sometimes led to conflicting interpretations. Furthermore, NDEs tend to emphasize the positive influences of public benevolent acts and love for others, and in contrast, unkindness, resentment, and physical and psychological harm to others are considered the most distasteful moral vices of human life. It seems that this view is not only compatible with the moral teachings of Shia Islam, but also provides support for these teachings, and can be helpful in the development of morality and spirituality.

## **Conclusion**

If we can overcome the difficulties in proving the afterlife by relying upon NDEs, and if these experiences prove the continuation of human consciousness after death, reasonable compatibility can be established between the content of such experiences and Shia eschatological

propositions. Thus, Shia interpretations have adequate potentials for accounting for various aspects of NDEs. There is no doubt that these experiences are inconsistent with particular interpretations of religious teachings, but there are still some commonalities in the most general eschatological propositions in the first-rate texts of Shia Islam, that are in line with the content of NDEs.

The Abrahamic religions, in general, and Islamic teachings, in particular, have not considered themselves obliged to explain all the details of the afterlife and they have been silent on many details. However, they have provided symbolic and metaphorical illustrations of some issues related to the intangible domain of life. This makes it more difficult to examine phenomena such as NDEs in this context, but as pointed earlier, the existing adaptations seem quite significant. Furthermore, many conflicts and inconsistencies in this field can be reduced by recognizing the authenticity and importance of the conflicting epistemological propositions, focusing on their systematic interpretation, and analyzing their compatibility with other credible and related propositions, with a comprehensive, accurate, and reliable understanding of NDEs, and taking into account the interpretive nature of reports. Other controversies, as well as some of the most controversial issues in science and religion so far, will await further scrutiny by scholars and the efforts of religious scholars.

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