DIVINE ENCOUNTERS:

Light and Ecstasy in Religious and Near-Death Experiences

Brian A. Bain, BA, MA

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Foreword

The human encounter with divine light and the ecstasy surrounding that encounter has been well documented. The major religions of the world have all recorded numerous accounts of this phenomenon. In the Western world today we find the same experience being reported by psychiatrists and their patients, and by people who have undergone "near-death" experiences. This provides us with a new foundation for approaching the subject of human spirituality: we find an experience which is common to people who are from entirely different cultures, and can be found throughout history.
Introduction

The 20th century has witnessed a proliferation of accounts of experiences with a super brilliant "living light," usually associated with feelings of ecstatic joy. At the turn of this century, Canadian psychiatrist Richard Maurice Bucke published an intriguing work entitled Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind. Dr. Bucke argued that experiences of "Illumination," far from being a symptom of mental instability, were in fact a feature of highly evolved human minds. Bucke himself had had such an experience, which he described as follows:

All at once, without warning of any kind, [Dr. Bucke] found himself wrapped around, as it were, by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire -- some sudden conflagration in the great city. The next instant he knew that the light was within himself. Directly after this came a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness, accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination almost impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning flash of the Brahmic splendour which has ever since lightened his life. Upon his heart fell one drop of the Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of heaven.1

Bucke went on to interview 50 or so others that he had run across who had had similar experiences. One was the case of "C.M.C.," who had this to say about her experience:

...It was the gladness and rapture of love, so intensified that it became an ocean of living, palpitating light, the brightness of which outshone the brightness of the sun. Its glow, warmth and tenderness fill(ed) the universe...2

The experience of "C.M.C." was typical of those whom Dr. Bucke had interviewed. The prominent psychiatrist went on to surmise that this is a feature of a late stage of human evolution. This latter claim might be doubtful; one look at the ancient texts described in the pages to follow show that such experiences were reported often in the past. However, the breadth and clarity of people's profound spiritual experiences in this century, both within and outside of traditional religious bounds, set off Bucke's work as a pioneering effort.

Shortly after Bucke's work, psychologist William James published his now classic Varieties of Religious Experience. In this work, James acknowledged the pioneering effort of Dr. Bucke. He went on to describe the many and various kinds of religious experience. James confirmed the modern day persistence of the type of encounter that Bucke had focused on. As an example, James drew upon the autobiography of a man called "J. Trevor":

...suddenly, without warning, I felt as if I were in Heaven -- an inward state of peace and joy and assurance indescribably intense, accompanied with a sense of being bathed in a
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warm glow of light...

...When [experiences such as this] came, I was living the fullest, strongest, sanest, deepest life... I was aware that I was immersed in the infinite ocean of God.3

Remarkably similar to these accounts, but in ever increasing numbers in recent years, are those found in near-death experiences. In 1975, psychiatrist Raymond A. Moody, Jr., published his ground-breaking account of these occurrences in Life after Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon -- Survival of bodily Death. In this work, Dr. Moody accumulated some 150 interviews of people who had been pronounced clinically dead, but had been resuscitated, and lived to tell what happened to them on "the other side." While the accounts do vary somewhat, the similarities are most remarkable. Typical is the experience of a patient who was hospitalized for a severe kidney condition, and had lapse into coma:

During this period when I was unconscious, I felt as though I were lifted right up, just as though I didn't have a physical body at all. A brilliant white light appeared to me. The light was so bright that I could not see through it, but going into its presence was so calming and wonderful. There is just no experience on earth like it....4

A proliferation of personal accounts of this kind of experience, as well as scientific studies of the phenomenon, followed Dr. Moody's book. Among the more noteworthy in the latter category include Dr. Kenneth Ring's Life at Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience (NY: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980). After having interviewed over 100 people who had had the experience under investigation, Dr. Ring was able to confirm most of Moody's findings. Life at Death was able to factor out such considerations as religious background as a determining factor in what people experienced. In fact, Ring concluded, reports of near-death experiences remain remarkably similar regardless of the person's upbringing.

A decade later came Dr. Melvin Morse's Closer to the Light. Morse, a Seattle area pediatrician, examined some near death experiences of children in order to see if there were any significant differences between these reports and their adult counterparts. Children were good subjects because they had not had time to absorb many adult conceptions about death. Typical of these is the story of "Bill," who at the age of nine had accidentally inhaled gasoline, and was suffocating:

All of a sudden I couldn't move. I found myself floating into a dark tunnel. I saw light and the closer I floated to it, the more I liked it. When I got to the portal opening to the light and was just ready to step through, I felt a combination of relief, joy, and pleasure. I just wanted to be inside the light.5

Morse also concluded that reports of near-death experiences are for the most part stable and consistent, whether recounted by children or adults.

Personal accounts of the near-death phenomenon continue to enjoy wide circulation. Not the least of these was Betty J. Eadie's 1994 bestseller, Embraced by the Light. This author tells of her own near-death experience, which turns out to be considerably more detailed than other reports. The core experience immediately following "death," however, is still quite typical. In hospital for surgery, Eadie found herself becoming weaker and weaker. After hearing a "soft buzzing sound," she felt herself leave her physical body. A deep darkness surrounded her, and she felt herself moving forward through it. A "pinpoint of
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light" appeared in the distance. Getting closer, this light -- "far more brilliant than the sun" -- had the figure of a man in it. Next,

*I saw that the light immediately around him was golden...
I felt his light blending into mine, literally, and I felt my light being drawn to his... And as our lights merged, I felt as if I had stepped into his countenance, and I felt an utter explosion of love.*

Eadie identified this light with Jesus, and went on to describe a moving account of her life "after death," as well as events in her life following recovery.

Another bestseller that year in the same category was Dannion Brinkley's Saved by the Light. Having been struck by lightning, Brinkley experienced a classic near-death episode. He left his physical body, and looked at himself being slid into the ambulance. The medical technician pronounced him "gone," and he saw the eye of a tunnel approaching toward him. The tunnel eventually engulfed him completely, and he heard the "beautiful sound of seven chimes ringing in rhythmic succession." Then,

*I looked ahead into the darkness. There was a light up there, and I began to move toward it as quickly as possible.... Ahead the light became brighter and brighter until it overtook the darkness and left me standing in a paradise of brilliant light. This was the brightest light I had ever seen.... It was as though I were seeing a mother, lover and best friend. As the Being of Light came closer, these feelings of love intensified until they became almost too pleasurable to withstand...*

Brinkley goes on to describe how he gained some remarkable psychic abilities after his "return," including the ability to foretell certain future events. Remarkably, he goes on to tell us that he had a second near-death experience during an operation that was supposed to mend a heart weakened by the lightning strike.

In 1995, Brinkley followed up with a new book, entitled At Peace in the Light. He reports that he continued to have psychic episodes, such as foretelling major world events. Very interesting in relation to his own near-death experience is Brinkley's account of a gentleman named Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Wilson is reported to have had a mystical experience, without having been "near-death" at all. Brinkley relates Wilson's story as follows:

*Suddenly, my room blazed with an indescribably white light.... I was seized with an ecstasy beyond description. Every joy I had known was pale by comparison. The light, the ecstasy -- I was conscious of nothing else for a time.*

The similarities between all of these reports are quite compelling. Indeed, while this is far from being an everyday occurrence, descriptions of this kind have been made throughout history and across cultural boundaries. This book will show in detail that these kinds of experiences are a core component of human spirituality, and can be found extensively in every major religious tradition in the world.

Several attempts, however brief, already have been made to compare these modern era experiences with the historical encounter with Divine light and ecstasy in mystical religious writings. In Life After Life, Raymond Moody himself found some significant parallels. Moody noted the vision of blinding light
witnessed by St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Moody also makes reference to The Tibetan Book of the Dead, which offers counsel concerning the many things that we might encounter after death, including an encounter with a "clear, pure light." Finally, Moody recounts the experiences of Emanuel Swedenborg, an 18th century Swedish scientist. Swedenborg claimed that the soul survives bodily death, and described the "Light of the Lord" which permeates the hereafter, a light of ineffable brightness," which Swedenborg himself had glimpsed.9

In a follow-up work entitled Reflections on Life after Life, Moody found more parallels. For example, the Venerable Bede, an 8th century English monk, told the story of a man who had a near-death experience. After several interesting encounters, the "dead" man came across a clear, bright light. So bright was this light that it seemed "greater than the brightness of daylight, or the sun's rays at noon."10 Moody also made reference to Leo Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich, which describes the death scene of Ilyich in terms of being in a dark, cavelike space; of having a flashback of his past life; and at last, of entering into a brilliant light.11

In 1978, Frederick H. Holck, Professor of Religious Studies at Cleveland State University, wrote a journal article that draws some interesting parallels between near-death and mystical religious experiences. Holck adds to Moody's reading of The Tibetan Book of the Dead that "non-physical existence is to the knowing one blissful consciousness in its purest form." In the same vein, in Zoroastrianism, a dead person is said to experience as much joy in three days as one would normally experience in a lifetime. Holck also pointed out that Plato's myth of Er makes reference to a brilliant, pure light. Moreover, such references are not restricted to near-death experiences: Hinduism's Bhagavata Purana tells a story of a couple who, praying for Divine help, fell unconscious, and "a light suddenly flashed." In the Jewish extra-canonical tradition, we read of a "radiant light," an "immeasurable light in heaven" in the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Book of the Secrets of Enoch, and the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. In Buddhism's Saddharma-smritiyupasthana Sutra, we find that when someone approaches death, "he sees a bright light, and being unaccustomed to it at the time of his death he is perplexed and confused."12

In a particularly superb study, Carol Zaleski has found similar parallels in the medieval Christian tradition. When it comes to visions of Divine light, both Gregory the Great's Dialogues and Dante's Paradiso tell us about an "illuminated unifying vision." While reserving judgement on the validity of near-death accounts, Zaleski acknowledges that the medieval accounts that she has examined bear "striking resemblance" to the modern near-death encounter with a Divine Light.13

The parallels drawn to date between modern day and more classic encounters with the light Divine and its unsurpassed joy are quite valid. However, most authors begin by drawing broad similarities between the near-death experience in general and comparing that with religious writings. This book will narrow the focus, to see what happens when we compare the actual encounter with Divine light and ecstasy in near-death experiences, and similar reports in the mystical teachings of the world's major religious traditions. The volume, depth and breadth of the similarities is compelling to say the least.

The most exciting result of this comparison is the commonality of language that is used to describe the Divine encounter. Even across cultures, throughout time, and with the imperfections of translation we find strikingly similar words being used to tell us what such an experience is like. For those of us who can't accept the precepts of atheistic materialism, it would seem that the onus is on the latter to explain how these experiences can be so consistent. While descriptions of God, "the gods," or Ultimate Truth
vary wildly from tradition to tradition, we now have a "thread that binds" not only the major religions of the world, but also non-religious spiritual experiences.

The human spiritual encounter with light and ecstasy is also deeply meaningful. It has given lasting new meaning to countless people worldwide, and throughout history. Recognizing this as a fundamental aspect of human spirituality will help bind humanity together, rather than set groups apart. For the individual, the realization of this kind of spiritual knowledge will bring about a depth of feeling that would otherwise be beyond our wildest imagination.
A Word about Mysticism

It is almost regrettable that the word "mysticism" has been chosen to apply to the form of spiritual expression that we are about to describe. It evokes -- as the root of the word suggests -- something mysterious, even weird. In fact we are simply talking about an experience, an awesome experience to be sure, but one that has often been felt by perfectly normal, ordinary, rational people.

Classically, mysticism has been used to describe a direct experience, or even union, with God. God does not mean the same thing to everyone in every culture, however. He may be a she; personal or impersonal; outside of us or inside of us; or, the whole concept can get so abstract that the word "God" cannot apply at all. While there is no single term to accommodate all definitions, the term "Divine" will be used here as being preferable to contrived jargon or no terminology at all.

While the mystical experience often takes on different forms, it is generally regarded as an area of commonality in the field of comparative religion. The mysticism that we are about to examine here makes this abundantly clear. We frequently see instances of communion, or even complete unity with the Divine. Most significantly, the language used to describe the mystical experience of light and ecstasy across religious traditions is almost exactly the same as those who have reported the same encounter in near-death experiences.
The Light of lights

The *Upanishads* were compiled between 800 and 500 BC. These contain voluminous references to topics in religious mysticism. Clearly, the writers of these texts had witnessed the Divine Light and its ecstasy. The *Upanishads* spend a great deal of space devoted to this experience and what it means.

One of the principal texts in this collection -- the *Chandogya Upanishad* -- tells us of what we are likely to encounter after we die. In a dialogue between Prajapati, one of the main characters, and the god Indra, we are told that

...this body is mortal. It has been appropriated by Death. [But] it is the standing-ground of that deathless, bodiless Self (Atman)... that serene one, when he rises up from this body, reaches the highest light...1

The *Yogakundalini Upanishad* adds that after a person's body "wears off," he or she attains "a disembodied state," after which the person "discards the body," as if "moving through the air."2 The "highest light" that the emancipated "Self" reaches is Divine by nature. Divinity goes by many names in Hinduism (e.g., Indra, Vishnu, Siva, Purusha, Brahma, or Brahan). However, the tradition is very clear on the point that these are just different manifestations of one Divine reality. This divinity is "higher than the highest, greater than the great, and naturally brilliant," according to the *Naradaparivrajaka Upanishad*.3 Vishnu, so says the *Skanda Upanishad*, is the "Light of all Lights."4 The *Kaivalya Upanishad* goes on to identify the One who is formless, wonderful, all-pervading, indestructible and Lord of all:

*He only is Brahma.*
*He only is Indra.*
*He only is Vishnu.*
*He only is Self-Shining...*5

The "real seat of Vishnu," then, dawns on man "as the form of light."6 Brahma is seen as the light of an endless sphere.7 The "Brahman-OM" is "the highest light, the foundation and sovereign lord of all...."8 Brahma is light, says the *Maitri Upanishad*, and the mystic symbol OM is "a leader, brilliant, sleepless, ageless [and] deathless...."9 Brahma, "the limitless One," is that "shining form which gives heat in yonder sun.... Unending are the rays of him."10 Brahma is "self-shining," "self-luminous," and "shines by his own brightness." As He shines "does everything else shine after."11 As we find in the *Brahmarahasya Upanishad*,

Brahma is the Light of lights.
He is Self-luminous.
He is Supreme Light.
He is ultimate light.
He is an embodiment of Light.
By His Light all else shines.\textsuperscript{13}

Another of the great scriptures of Hinduism is the \textit{Bhagavad-Gita}, written perhaps in the 2nd century B.C.\textsuperscript{14} The \textit{Gita} deals with our topic in compelling fashion. According to this text, as with the Upanishads, the Light of the spiritual path is glorious and Divine:

\begin{quote}
If there should be in the sky \\
A thousand suns risen all at once \\
Such splendour would be \\
Of the splendour of that Great Being.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

This brilliance "illumines the entire universe."\textsuperscript{16} Within the Divine light abides "supreme peace and the eternal abode."\textsuperscript{17} Whoever encounters this extraordinary light achieves "incomparable bliss,"\textsuperscript{18} and "the highest happiness... happiness beyond end."\textsuperscript{19} That this light is divine in origin is abundantly clear:

\begin{quote}
With infinite power, \\
without beginning, middle or end, \\
With innumerable arms, \\
moon and sun eyed, \\
\textit{I see Thee}, (with) \textit{Thy blazing}, \\
\textit{oblation-eating mouth}, \\
\textit{Burning all this universe} \\
\textit{with Thine own Radiance...} \\
\textit{Filling all the universe} \\
\textit{with splendour,} \\
\textit{Thy terrible rays consume it,} \\
\textit{O Vishnu!}\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}
Hinduism

Experiencing Divine light and supreme bliss is not only well recognized in Hinduism, but is one of its ultimate goals. From Hinduism we gain a clear and abundant sense of the value that this tradition places on the subject at hand. Hindus discovered very early in their history the presence of this divine phenomenon, and have written about the sublime encounter extensively.

Hinduism derives its name from the inhabitants of the Indus River valley in Northwest India, and are therefore known as (H)-indus. Around 1500 BC, Aryan invaders from the north conquered the Indus valley. They brought with them the language of Sanskrit, which is used throughout the voluminous literature of classical Hinduism. This literature includes the mythical stories of the gods in the Rg Veda; the sacrificial rituals in the Brahmanas and the Sama, Yajur, and Atharva Veda; epic accounts in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana; the mysticism of the Upanishads; and the synthesis of all these in the Bhagavad-Gita. The Gita is the latest of the collection, and was completed in the 2nd century BC.

Hinduism is a remarkably versatile religion, and for the most part very tolerant of differing religious views. The ultimate goal in most forms of Hinduism is to achieve liberation (moksha) from the material world. This can be accomplished in several ways. The way of karma, or action, emphasises exercises that are designed to physically untangle the spirit from the body. The way of jnana, or knowledge, would have one consider the true nature of reality in order to gain the ultimate goal. Lastly, the way of bhakti, or worship, allows one to pray either to a specific God or any number of gods, depending on the person and the situation.

However, in classical Hinduism, it is only appropriate for the priestly class, the Brahmins, to achieve moksha in this life. Otherwise, if one is born of a lower class, then one must properly perform the duties of that class, and the caste within the class, in order to be reincarnated into the next level above. Failure to do so could result in one being reincarnated lower in the social order, or even into the animal world. The righteous Sudra, or working class, would then aspire to ascend to the Vaisya, or Mercantile class; the Vaisya to the Kshatriya, or ruling class; and the Kshatriya to the Brahmin class. The Brahmin who performs all the duties that can be expected might achieve this final release from an otherwise endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Hinduism has several major schools of thought. The Nyaya and Vaishesika schools hold that a personal Creator has arranged particulate forms of matter (atoms, if you will) to form the cosmos. The Mimamsa school emphasises the role of ritual, and familiarity with the Vedic scriptures. The Sankhya system emphasizes the achievement of liberation through proper thinking. Yoga emphasises proper action, through exercises and meditation, to achieve moksha. Vedanta sees a divine reality that transcends the everyday world of the senses, and deals with the relationship between God (Brahman) and the soul (Atman).

Within Vedanta, views differ considerably about what the relationship between Brahman and Atman
means. The 9th century philosopher Sankara maintained that Brahman and Atman are ultimately identical. Ramanuja, in the 12th century, held that the two are at once distinct and united, just like the body and the soul. In the 13th century, Madva proposed that Brahman and Atman are completely distinct.

The 19th century saw several outstanding Hindu philosophers and reformers. Ram Mohan Roy re-emphasized the importance of religious devotion and worship. Ramakrishna saw a single divine reality underlying all of the world's faiths. Mahatma Ghandi sought to reform the social order through non-violent revolution. Aurobindo, after having been imprisoned for taking part in violent attacks against the British in Bengal, had a religious experience which inspired him to wed Hindu spirituality with modern science.

As far as Hindu mysticism is concerned, one does not need to look far to investigate the experience under examination. The Hindu scriptures themselves, particularly the *Upanishads*, are rich with such literature. The encounter with light and ecstasy is as deep and profound in this tradition as one can find in any other, modern or ancient.
The Hindu Path to Light and Bliss

To perceive this Light of all lights and ultimate bliss, the Hindu tradition has several methods for the attainment of the same. The author of the *Katha Upanishad* says that those who say, "'That is this' (i.e., the soul is Brahman), think of the indescribable supreme happiness." The same author then goes on to ask, "How then may I come to know of it?"\(^55\)

In Yoga, the emphasis is on physical and mental preparation. Various exercises have been devised to prepare the physical body for Divine realization. But unlike some of the "Yoga" that is being practised in the West, in the Hindu tradition Yoga is much more than just a "get fit" class. One is expected to do considerably more than just perform a series of stretching exercises. All that is preliminary. The encounter with light and bliss comes through inward meditation. In Hatha Yoga, one of the last steps toward Divine realization is

\[
\text{With a steady mind and half closed eyes,}
\text{fixed on the tip of the nose...}
\text{He who can see the light which is the all,}
\text{the seed, the entire brilliant,}
\text{...approaches Him, who is the great object.}^{56}
\]

Similarly, in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, we find that "the undisturbed flow of the ultra-meditative causes Subjective Luminosity.\(^57\) Through proper techniques, the Yogi is able to obtain "knowledge of the subtle, the veiled, the remote...."\(^58\) Finally, the Yogi is able to attain the goal of the quest, when "the cover of light is destroyed."\(^59\)

The *Bhagavad-Gita* tells us that the path to Divine realization is through appropriate effort, concentration, and the renunciation of material concerns:

\[
\text{He whose self is unattached}
\text{to external sensations}
\text{Who finds happiness in the self,}
\text{Whose self is united with Brahman}
\text{through Yoga}
\text{Reaches imperishable happiness.}
\]

\[
\text{Thus, continually disciplining himself,}
\text{The Yogi whose mind is subdued}
\text{ Goes to Nirvana, to supreme peace,}
\text{To union with me.}^{60}
\]
The Upanishads echo many of the same sentiments. The seeker of Divine Light is asked to "meditate solely on Brahman, which is Self-luminous and all-pervading." A wandering ascetic who has renounced material possessions "is truly rich, for, with the thought, 'I am He,' he transcends both knowledge and ignorance, both pleasure and pain. He shines with his own light." When "worldly wisdom is destroyed... diffusing itself everywhere... He himself shines always within, like a light within a vessel." The devotee is encouraged to "meditate in the middle of the lotus of the heart, Parameswara (the highest Lord),... who is the object of supreme love... alone being of the nature of light only."

Hinduism is in fact very versatile on this issue. The path of devotion, such as one would find when a Jew or a Christian prays to and worships God, is a perfectly appropriate way of coming nearer to the Divine. Most Hindus do pray to a God or several gods. Appropriate as well is the path of jnana (knowledge), which is preferred by those of a philosophical persuasion. Which method, or even which tradition one chooses depends on the individual. As Sri Ramakrishna put it, many roads lead to the top of the mountain -- just get yourself onto one of those roads if you hope to make progress.

The ultimate identification of the soul with God might cause some consternation amongst some Westerners. In the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, such statements are considered blasphemous. But as we shall see when we come to the Western mystical traditions, while no complete identification is made, the "gulf" between God and man is certainly narrowed considerably.

Regardless, these concerns should not obscure the clear and obvious conclusion that, in this chapter, we have been looking at a core human experience with supernatural light and accompanying ecstasy. A number of Hindu scriptures convey expressions of this profound encounter over and over again in a compelling, even awesome fashion. Even within Hinduism, interpretations differ as to exactly what this means, as do the names that are attached to this rapturous illumination. There is no doubt, however, that the experience of the supreme bliss and brilliance of the Divine is firmly rooted in the Hindu tradition.
In Hinduism, encountering God often involves deep feelings of rapture and bliss. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* tells us that "he whose world is Brahman becomes an ocean, the one seer, free from duality.... This is his highest bliss."\(^{21}\) In other *Upanishads* we find that this "supreme bliss" is held very dear by Yogins.\(^{22}\) Brahman is "the all-illumination, the bliss greater than the great, the form of eternal bliss... the supreme nectary essence." He is also "the great one of the nature of bliss, that which illuminates all illuminaries."\(^{23}\) The Yogi who comes to realize Brahman "becomes immersed in an ocean of bliss." That "brightness which is indescribable" is also "the nature of unrivalled bliss."\(^{24}\)

Whoever reaches this "all-pervading" and "ever resplendent" source of all light also enjoys "supreme bliss by his attaining the state of Brahma."\(^{25}\) The "wise who perceive Him" come to realize that "this is it." Thus "they recognize the highest, indescribable happiness."\(^{26}\) The "blissful Immortal that gleams forth" can be seen by the wise.\(^{27}\) Once one is capable of "seeing the real bliss-form through Yoga," then "even in the burial ground, life is in the garden of bliss."\(^{28}\)

Hindu scriptures other than the *Upanishads* agree on this point. The *Vedanta Sutra* states quite plainly that "God is All-Bliss."\(^{29}\) The *Yoga Sutras* claim that this highest realization is "the acquisition of extreme happiness."\(^{30}\) According to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, knowledge of the Divine leads the devotee to "supreme peace."\(^{31}\) The Hindu sage Ramanuja, commenting on the *Upanishads*, agrees that Brahman possesses "infinite bliss."\(^{32}\)

The *Upanishads* go on to claim that light and bliss are essential components of the human soul. This "soul (Atman) is obtainable by truth.... Within the body, consisting of Light, true is He...."\(^{33}\) Similarly, "the light of man is the soul."\(^{34}\) Atma (or Atman) is "the nature of the jyotis (light)... illuminating all."\(^{35}\) This Atma is "golden or effulgent Light into which all the universe is absorbed."\(^{36}\) The "Self-Light alone" is "immaculate,"\(^{37}\) and Atman "shines by Its own light...."\(^{38}\) Knowledge of the Self (which is Atman) leads to *moksha* (liberation), which is "the entire removal of all kinds of pain and the attainment of Supreme Bliss."\(^{39}\) For the true seeker of Divine knowledge, "the self alone becomes his light."\(^{40}\) The Atma is "the nature of happiness, which is Supreme Bliss."\(^{41}\) The same point is made poetically in the *Kundika Upanishad*:

```
Stirred by the wind of Illusion
the waves of the whole universe
Repeatedly rise and fall
within me, the ocean of bliss.\(^{42}\)
```
The Upanishads say that God and the human soul both have characteristics of light and bliss because Brahman and Atman are essentially the same. In a famous commentary on the nature of truth, the Chandogya Upanishad relates the following:

\[
\text{That which is the finest essence --} \\
\text{this whole world has that as its soul.} \\
\text{That is Atman. That art thou, Svetaketu.}\]

This point is made even more explicitly in the Maitreya Upanishad:

\[
\text{I am free from space and time.} \\
\text{Mine is the joy of the unclad...} \\
\text{My form consists of total light;} \\
\text{The light of pure consciousness am I.}\]

The same Upanishad goes on to say that "the light which shines higher than this heaven... is the same as this light which is here within a person." The Taittiriya Upanishad spells out that "the knower of the unity of the human person with the Universal Being attains unhampered desire." The latter Upanishad goes on to make the same point in verse:

\[
\text{Oh Wonderful! Oh Wonderful! Oh Wonderful!} \\
... I am the first-born of the world order; \\
Earlier than the gods,} \\
\text{in the navel of immortality!} \\
\text{Who gives me away,} \\
he indeed has aided me! \\
\text{I, who am food,} \\
\text{eat the eater of food!} \\
\text{I have overcome the whole world!}\]

Other Upanishads tell us that "this shining immortal person who exists as a human being -- he is just this Soul, this Immortal, this Brahma, this All." That which "disappears in Indra becomes Indra only... that which disappears in bliss becomes bliss only." Another inquires, "May I behold that light which is thy loveliest form! He who is that Purusha, he I am!" The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad makes the same point quite explicitly:
This self is like honey to all creatures.
All creatures are like honey to this self.
And that Person in this self,
who consists of light,
who consists of immortality,
that indeed is he who is that self.
This is the immortal.
This is Brahman.
This is the All.\textsuperscript{51}

Similarly, the \textit{Maitreya Upanishad} makes very clear identification of the soul with God, in several verses:

\begin{quote}
I am Siva...
I am the Seer of all...
I am the emancipated One...
I am the Light...
\end{quote}

\textit{There is no doubt that he who has realized himself thus, is Myself.}
\textit{Whoever hears (this) once becomes himself Brahman, yea, he becomes himself Brahman.}
\textit{Thus is the Upanishad.}\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{quote}
The Supreme Being, who is eternal, 
pure, enlightened, free, true, 
subtle, all-pervading, unique, 
and an ocean of bliss, 
-- I am He, the inner essence. 
Of this I have no doubt.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

Among the most compelling statements to this effect are found in the \textit{Bhagavad-Gita}:
Also this is said to be
the light of lights
That is beyond darkness;
It is knowledge,
the object of knowledge
and that which is to be
attained through knowledge.

It is seated in the hearts of all...
For I am the foundation of Brahman,
Of the Immortal and the Imperishable,
And of everlasting virtue,
And of absolute bliss.¹⁵
The Brilliance

The experience under investigation is described quite plainly in certain Zen texts. After a series of Zen exercises, one disciple found that he was "astonished that unnoticeably the Zen hall and myself were radiant in an absolute light." All this time he experienced an unspeakable feeling of happiness."¹ Another Zen text describes the experience poetically, hinting that the inward self, fully realized, reaches cosmic proportions:

*The mind mirror illumines all ingenuously.*
*Its penetrating, limitless rays reach everywhere in the universe.*
*Without exception everything is reflected in this mirror.*
*The whole universe is a gem of light beyond the terms of in and out.*²

Zen and like-minded schools of Buddhism do not recognize the concept of God as such, so the examples above are attempts to describe pure experience. However, most other Buddhist schools and texts that refer to a Divine Light do so in reference to a cosmic, God-like Buddha. The *Dhammapada*, dating as far back as the 6th century BC, tells us that "the sun shines by day, the moon shines by night; continually, day and night, does the luminous Buddha shine."³ Other texts tell us that "the brilliance of Buddha's light is measureless."⁴ Buddha, "the Great Enlightened," is "brilliant... highly bright."⁵ The "Enlightened Teacher Buddha" has "illuminated all nations with the bright light of the doctrine... thinking in the brightness."⁶ Buddha, the "World Honoured One," is "Light Brightness."⁷ In a very famous passage from the *Lotus Sutra*, written around the 3rd century CE, we read that

*The Buddha emitted a light from between his eyebrows,*
*manifesting signs that are rarely seen.*
*This light illumined the eastern direction,*
eighteen thousand Buddha lands...
*One could see how these Buddha lands adorned with numerous jewels,*
*shone with hues of lapis lazuli and crystals,*
*was due to the illumination of Buddha's light.*⁸

The brilliance of the Buddha's light is often said to be indescribable. In the Sutra of the Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, written in various versions between the 5th and 13th centuries CE, we read that "no words can fully describe [the brilliance] of this light." That having been said, the author(s) go on to say that "the Buddha of Immeasurable Life is a billion times as [bright as] the jambunada gold of the Yama heavens." Further,
The Buddha of Immeasurable Life
has eighty-four thousand features;
each feature has eighty-four thousand
secondary attributes;
each secondary attribute sends forth
eighty-four thousand rays of light;
each ray of light shines out over
the world of the ten quarters;
and those sentient beings
who are mindful of the Buddha
are embraced [by that light],
ever to be abandoned.9

In the 8th century texts of the Mahayana -- a branch of Buddhism meaning the "Greater Vehicle" -- the light of Buddha is said to be "beautiful," "extremely powerful," "incomparable," of "infinite splendour" and "infinite brilliance."10 The body of Buddha issues forth "brilliant rays," and is called the "King of Light."11 These images were applied to a mythological account of the Buddha's birth. When the newborn Buddha was first "gazed at, though of such surpassing brightness, he attracted all eyes like the moon. With the radiant splendour of his limbs, he extinguished like the sun the splendour of the lamps; with his beautiful hue as of precious gold he illumined all the quarters of space."12

The Flower Ornament Scripture, written between 359 and 710 CE, contains an overwhelming number of references to the Buddha as a Divine Light. Most of the references are in verse. To quote just a few examples:

The Buddha's great light of knowledge
Illumines all lands in ten directions...

The Buddha-body is peerless, it has no compare;
Its light shines throughout ten directions...

Traversing all realms of existence for countless ages,
His light is everywhere as pure as space...

Emanating inconceivable nets of lights,
Everywhere purifying all conscious beings...

All the lights in the world
Cannot match the light of a single pore of the Buddha --
This is how inconceivable the Buddha's light is...13

The great ocean of worlds has no bounds;
Its circumference of jewels
is pure and multicolored...

Made of masses of diamonds,
Also raining beautiful jewels,
Their jewel atmospheres
are unique and different,
Radiating pure light beautifying everywhere.  

Buddha emanates a great light...
That light touches all with its glow,
Pervading the whole cosmos.  

The Buddha sits on the site of enlightenment
Pure and clear is his great radiant light,
Like a thousand suns emerging
Illumining all over space...

Illuminating the world
With light that has no end.

Behold the Buddha's body
With webs of light so pure...
Filling the ten directions.  

I see the great pure light
Of Buddha’s ocean of worlds
Calmly realizing enlightenment
Pervading the whole cosmos.

The Buddha's body emanates great light
With physical forms boundless and totally pure,
Filling all lands like clouds...

From each hair pore appear clouds of light
Filling all space, emitting great sound:
All dark places are illumined,
Causing the pains of hells to disappear.  

One light illumines boundlessly
Filling all lands in the ten directions,
Causing all worlds
to gain great brightness...\(^{18}\)

The scripture goes on to say that the "Buddha is a boundless treasury of light." A great assembly "all saw the Buddha's body emit a hundred trillion infinities of inconceivable great lights."\(^{19}\)

Many other Buddhist texts also identify the Buddha as a super-brilliant being of light. In the *Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, we find that the "Buddha's radiance none shall be able to succeed."\(^{20}\) The Buddha's body is said to be of a "wonderful brightness."\(^{21}\) The "brilliance of a trillion suns, moons and pearls" are "outshone by the pure lights emanating from the mouth of Sakyamuni Buddha."\(^{22}\) Similarly,

The lights of the World-Honoured One
Illuminate all the countless Buddha-lands
Throughout the ten directions.
The brilliance of the sun, [and] the moon...
Cannot bear comparison
With the brilliance of the Tathagata (Buddha).\(^{23}\)

Very interesting in the context of near-death experiences is the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, written sometime in the 8th century CE. After we die, we are told, we can expect to encounter the "Clear Light of Reality." When we do, we are advised to "try to abide in that state." The "radiance of the Clear Light of Pure Reality" is "naturally void... the All-Good."\(^{24}\) The Tibetan text tells us that "in that state... being experienced by thee,"

in an unbearable intensity,
Voidness and Brightness inseparable, --
The Voidness bright by nature
and the Brightness by nature void...
The Brightness [is] inseparable
from the Voidness.\(^{25}\)

Further, we are told that
Thine own consciousness,
shining, void and inseparable
from the Great Body of Radiance,
hath no birth, nor death,
and is the Immutable Light
-- Amitabha Buddha...

Recognizing the voidness of thine
own intellect to be Buddhahood,
and looking upon it as being thine
own consciousness, is to keep thyself
in the divine mind of the Buddha.26
Buddhism

Like Hinduism, various scriptures in Buddhism explicitly identify the experience of light and ecstasy as one of its primary goals. Also like Hinduism, the goal itself goes by many names: nirvana, enlightenment, nothingness, or Buddha-realization. In each case, however, we find that these terms are used to apply to a profound, ineffable experience.

Buddhism grew out of Hinduism, beginning with a young man of the Kshaitriya class named Siddhartha Gotama. Gotama was born around 563 BC, in northern India. Although not a Brahmin, the lad saw fit to contemplate the nature of ultimate reality, and attained perfect enlightenment. From this point on he was known as the Buddha -- the "enlightened one."

It is likely due to the fact that Gotama was not born into the Brahmin class that Buddhism could not find a home within Hinduism. Gotama in fact rejected the whole Hindu class and caste system, and promoted enlightenment for everyone. In this way Buddhism became a missionary movement, and enjoyed more success outside of India than it did within.

Gotama the Buddha perceived that in contrast to his state of enlightenment, this world was full of sorrow and impermanence. To overcome this sad state of affairs, the Buddha advocated following four Noble Truths. First, we must recognize that life is suffering. Second, the root of suffering lies in craving. Third, we can eliminate suffering by eliminating craving. Fourth, craving can be eliminated by following the Noble Eightfold Path. This includes maintaining the right views, aspirations, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and contemplation. Examples of right conduct include abstaining from taking animal life; from wrong sexual relations, such as fornication and adultery; from drugs and liquor; and from violence. Anyone can become a Buddha by properly applying these principles.

However, depending on the school, there is some room for dissention as to how the methods are applied. In the largest school, Mahayana, individuals can pray to a Buddha to enlist help along the spiritual path. In the older school, Theravada, prayers are considered meaningless, because the Buddha does not exist as some sort of god, but as a state of being. The Mahayanists counter that the Theravadins might be correct ultimately, but if prayer and worship help a person achieve enlightenment, then such practices should not be discouraged.

The Mahayana form of Buddhism moved into China and South-East Asia by the first century CE. From China, Buddhism moved into Korea and then Japan in the 6th century. By the 7th century, again, the Mahayana form had moved into Tibet. The tradition remained largely the same here, but had added to it new practices known as Tantrism. This often misunderstood form of Buddhism includes using sexuality as a means of achieving or at least symbolizing the union of the human and the Divine: the two become one. This form of Buddhism later spread in to Mongolia, Nepal and Bhutan.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism sets as its ultimate goal the achievement of a profound mystical experience. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism has always claimed that anyone can and should achieve this. The exception
would be for compassionate reasons, where a bodhisattva would delay reaching enlightenment, so that another person could be helped along the path. We should not be surprised, then, to find that the kind of experience under investigation can be found extensively in the Buddhist tradition.
The Buddhist Path

Buddhists have devised various methods for seeing the divine brilliance and achieving supreme joy. Depending on the sect and/or scripture, different emphases have been placed on exactly which way best achieves the goal. The *Maharatnatuka Sutra* emphasizes "good works." A story is told of some disciples who wanted to know, "why does this great, auspicious light appear in the world? ...What is this light, which causes us to be overwhelmed by great joy and to be pure in mind?" The response from certain "Buddhas" (individuals who had already attained enlightenment) was that "this light is cultivated through such good roots as kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity...."34 Similarly, one devotee wrote that he had

...a light called *The Clouds of Pure Illumination*;
It arises from the innumerable good roots
I have accumulated. In the past, when I saw sentient beings
Afflicted with many kinds of disease,
I gave them medicines out of pity
To restore their health,
And thereby I attained that light.35

Other parts of the same *sutra* emphasize the need to detach oneself from craving, a central theme in Buddhism:

*One who realizes the emptiness of the eye*
Can eradicate desires forever;
Free of desire,
He can emanate various lights.36

One can also attempt to extinguish other negative impulses:

*I vow to acquire the immeasurable light*
Of a Tathagata, illuminating
All Buddha-lands in the ten directions;
*I vow to eradicate All desire, hatred, and ignorance*
And to eliminate the miserable
realms of the world...

*I shall acquire the limitless,
superb, awesome light*
Which can outshine the brilliance
*Of suns, moons, gods, pearls,*
Or any other source of light.\textsuperscript{37}

Other texts emphasize the need to think, as opposed to act, correctly. The \textit{Shurangama Sutra} says that

\begin{quote}
In response to a thought, 
defiling objects vanish, 
Becoming pure and wonderful 
Perfect brightness...
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
If there is residual defilement, 
one must still study. 
When the brightness is still ultimate, 
That is the Tathagata (Buddha)...\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

The \textit{Flower Ornament Scripture} also emphasizes the role of knowledge in achieving the ultimate goal, but adds that there is a Divine as well as a human element in the attainment of that end:

\begin{quote}
The Buddha cultivated many practices 
over ocean of eons 
In order to extinguish the ignorance 
and confusion of the world. 
Therefore his purity is the most radiant light: 
This is the realization 
of the mind of Light Power.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Just as when those born blind don't see the sun 
It is not because there is no sun 
appearing in the world -- 
All those who have eyes can clearly see it, 
Each doing their work 
according to their occupations, 
So it is with the lights of the Great Being -- 
Those who have wisdom all can see, 
While ordinary folk with false beliefs 
and low understanding 
Cannot perceive these lights at all...
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
So it is with the Great Being's lights: 
Those of deep knowledge are all illumined, 
While the ignorant, with false beliefs 
and poor understanding 
Are not able to see these lights at all.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

The \textit{Book of the Dead} emphasizes the role of meditation, prayer, and a teacher-guide -- preferably a \textit{guru} -- to help dying people attain the blissful, Clear Light. "It is best," says the Tibetan text, "if the \textit{guru} from
whom the deceased person received guiding instructions can be had." This *guru* will "set thee face to face before with the Clear Light...." The book advises us to "pray to the Five Orders" of those who have passed into Happiness (or who have attained *Nirvana*). By "thus praying, one recognizes one's own inner light." We are advised to meditate properly before we die. Those who do "will recognize the Clear Light at the moment of death," and will not need to have the book read to them. In order to prevent rebirth in another womb, we are told to "meditate, without any thought-forming, upon the clear, vacuous Clear Light." This will allow us to break the otherwise never-ending cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and consequent pain and suffering. This will allow the aspirant to achieve the highest goal:

...Along the bright light-path of undistracted listening, reflection, and meditation,
May the Gurus of the inspired line lead us...
May we be placed in the state of perfect Buddhahood.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism encourages its followers to attain a certain state of being, one in which the distinctions between God and man become obscured. In Buddhism, however, this goes by different names: *Nirvana*, the Void, Emptiness, Nothingness, Buddhahood, even the Buddha himself. Each of these names are often associated with feelings of supreme bliss, and radiating a pure, brilliant light. In each case, we can also see that this encounter has left the impression in the authors' minds that this is the ultimate object and meaning of life.
Nirvana

There is not much doubt that supreme happiness is felt when one encounters this "Buddha-light." The Lotus Sutra asks, "why from the white tuft between his eyebrows of our leader and teacher does this great light shine all around?" The same work answers that this was done in order to "adorn and purify" the world, and to fill believers with "joy and delight."27 The Book of the Dead tells us that the Clear Light is "blissful."28 A Mahayana text says that "His light, pure and immense, makes all sentient beings feel joyful in body and mind."29

The Flower Ornament Scripture details this theme extensively. Seeing the "Pure Light... gives rise to joy." The appearance of the Buddha causes "all to give up suffering and attain peace and bliss." The exceptional joy and happiness of those who encounter the Buddha is told throughout this sutra:

The Buddha in vast eons past
Amassed an ocean of joy, endlessly deep;
Therefore all who see him are glad...

The Buddha showers the rain of truth without bound,
Able to make the witnesses greatly rejoice;
Supreme roots of goodness are born from this.
Such is the realization of Exquisite Light...

All who see or hear receive benefit,
Causing them all to dance for joy...

In the past Buddha cultivated an ocean of joy --
Vast, boundless, beyond all measure;
Therefore those who see are all delighted...

To save all beings in all the worlds:
This is the liberation of Blissful Happiness.

I see the independent power of Buddha,
His light filling the universe...
Causing delusions to vanish and joy to abound:
This is what's seen by Immutable Light.30
Illumined by the Buddha's light,
All beings are peacefully happy;
All pains of existence cleared away,
Their minds are full of joy...

Everyone's paying reverent respect,
All greatly joyful at heart...
Gazing at the King of Truth.\textsuperscript{31}

Those people who are "doing all sorts of bad things and suffering all sorts of misery and pain" are "being hindered by this from seeing the Buddha." Therefore the enlightened should help others "attain ultimate bliss... immeasurable bliss... undying bliss, and the bliss of universal knowledge."\textsuperscript{32} This achievement ends suffering -- the ultimate goal of Buddhism. The end of suffering, as one can imagine, is ultimate joy. This final liberation from pain goes hand-in-hand with the point at which we encounter the divine light:

\textit{There is a supreme concentration}
\textit{called peace and bliss}
\textit{Which can universally save}
\textit{and liberate all sentient beings,}
\textit{Radiating a great light, inconceivable,}
\textit{Causing those who see it to all be pacified.}\textsuperscript{33}
The Light Divine

Guru Nanak clearly referred to spiritual attainments in this life as being akin to the experience of death: "every day do I die and every day do I come back to life..." This meant that the Guru could attain an NDE-like experience without actually dying physically. The *Adi Granth*, also, mentions specifically the vision of the Divine Light in the same context as "overcoming death":

```
Pray to the Lord, to the True Guide,
That in Him thou mayest meet the Beloved Friend.
In this meeting the soul is happy
And death dies of its own disease
May I live in the [Divine] Name,
May the name in me be indwelling.

Without the Guru to teach us, we walk in darkness,
Without the Word, we have no understanding.
The Word of the Guru is light,
His Word's light leads to the Truth.
There, Death has no existence.
His light is joined with Light....
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The *Adi Granth* makes frequent reference to the human encounter with a Divine Light: "God, being Truth, is the one Light of all." God "shines out in His own splendour." Moreover, "His brightness shineth forth" with "the blaze of the splendour dazzling like the sun."

Guru Nanak added more on this issue in other writings. For Nanak, God is "the light of all light." The light of God "illuminates land and seas." God is "the embodiment of light; the lamps of the sun and moon and all their light emanate from Him...." God is "pure light"... the "ever pure light." This "all-wise Being of light sits on the throne eternal." God's light is "infinite," and God Himself "is immaculate and all light."

The *Adi Granth* also makes it clear that this Divine Light can be found within one's self: "the Eternal Light indwells in the human mind, and the human mind is the emanation of that light." Further, "the best light is the Light of God in the heart." Ultimately, the Sikh aspirant wishes to be immersed in the Divine light, as was Guru Nanak: "as waves blend with water, so my light is blended with the Lord's Light."

Nanak goes on to say that "in Thy creatures is Thy light..."; indeed, "in every heart there is the same light...." In this ultimate union, "our light blends with the light eternal," and Nanak encourages followers to "merge your light with the light eternal." As the guru himself would put it,
Within every body
Is the Lord hidden;
Within every body
Is His light.

Searching his body, his home,
By the master's instructions one finds
the Name revealed within.
Sikhism

One of the most interesting parallels to be drawn between near-death experiences and the religions of the world can be found in Sikhism. Though relatively recent on the world scene, in this tradition we find many examples of an encounter with Divine light, as well as the accompanying ecstasy. The Sikh faith states quite explicitly this kind of experience not only awaits the person who is about to die, but with proper faith can also be realized in this life.

Sikhism traces its roots to a man named Nanak, the first Guru of the Sikh faith. Nanak was born in 1469 CE (AD) in what is now Pakistan. By early adulthood, Nanak believed himself to have been called by God, and embarked upon a spiritual mission. This included the message that "there is no Hindu here, nor a Muslim," implying that spirituality comes from within, not from labels. He adhered to a monotheistic form of belief, while recognizing the validity of meditation. Nanak's poetry comprises 974 poems which were later included in the Adi Granth, the canonical sacred scripture of the Sikhs.

Following Nanak came a succession of ten gurus, two of which are especially germane to this study. Guru Arjun (1563-1606) was the 5th in the succession. Arjun built the Golden Temple at Amritsar, which even today is considered to be a central place of worship throughout the Sikh world. He was also the first to start compiling the Adi Granth, and authored the Sukhmani, a collection of highly spiritual poetry and prose which later came to form part of the Adi Granth.

The tenth and final guru of the Sikh tradition was Gobind Singh. Like some of the Sikh gurus before him, Singh was obliged to engage in war with both Hindu and Muslim forces. The Sikhs met with some stunning victories, but were defeated on one occasion due to divisions on the basis of caste within the Sikh ranks. From that point on Guru Singh worked to unite the faithful by "obliterating the differences" between Muslims and Hindus, and the various classes and castes. Singh also instituted external signs of Sikh devotion that have lasted until the present day, namely wearing unshorn hair; a comb for the hair; a steel bracelet signifying the omnipresence of God; a special set of drawers to signify chastity; and a sword, symbolic of resistance to evil. Singh re-compiled the last and most recent version of the Adi Granth. However, even though he wrote many highly spiritual works, he never included them as part of the Sikh holy book.

The writings of these gurus give us some of the sharpest parallels with modern NDEs of any of the world's religions. The Sikh tradition makes frequent reference to these kinds of experiences, although often in the context of the attainment of that state of being in this life. Sikhs achieve this state of being through a combination of devotion, meditation, proper actions, and familiarity with the Divine Word.

Sikhs do not consider death to be simply the end of physical existence. Rather, death is separation from God, whether in this physical existence or in the spiritual life to come. By contrast, union with God overcomes death, and is perfect joy -- the ultimate bliss. This can happen either in this life, or following physical death. In fact, if one does not overcome death (i.e., the separation from God), then one will be trapped in an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This cycle is ultimately undesirable, because it
means being tied to maya -- to lies and misperceptions -- which necessarily keep one distant from the Divine. By becoming aware of Divine truths, however, such as those taught by Guru Nanak, the tradition tells us that we can realize God and overcome death forever. As Nanak says,

_No one can comprehend the Creator, who is beyond human grasp, immeasurable. The soul is deluded by maya, drugged by untruth. Ruined by the demands of greed (such a person) repents eternally, but he who serves the One knows Him, and his cycle of birth and death comes to an end...._²
The Method

Sikhs employ a variety of means to find their way to the true God. These include meditation, devotion, and proper thoughts and actions. The gurus are examples of those who wrote and spoke with Divine authority. In the absence of those leaders, their writings serve the faithful today as guide and guru.

Meditation is one of the means and is mentioned in a number of sacred writings. Nanak says that we ought to "meditate on His Name at morn, wet with the ambrosia of daybreak." One's mind ought to "meditate on the Lord and get bliss." The servants of the guru "meditate on the Word, and they find the quintessence of God within." And, "he who meditates on the Word and knows himself, realizes Him." By contrast, those "who have not meditated on the Name, ... will suffer the cycle of birth and death."14

The Adi Granth, too, holds meditation in high esteem: "Honoured are they in His shrine [w]ho meditate upon Him." Through meditation on the name of God one attains "the height of happiness." A 15th century disciple named Dhanna said, "I centred my mind on the Lord in deep absorption, [i]t entered into my heart that He is one."15 In Arjun's Sukhmani, similarly, tells us that we "must meditate upon and remember the Name of God...."16 Gobind Singh says that we ought to "dwelleth upon God's Effulgent light, night and day, and thinketh not of another."17

Certain ethical standards are also expected of the faithful. The Sukhmani states that those "whose mind's evil desires vanish from his heart," and who, "having conquered (controlled) his evil instincts, frees himself from the five deadly sins." Those sins include lust, anger, greed, false love, and ego.18 For Nanak, "the desires of the mind dissolve" when "the lotus of the heart is upturned to be filled with nectar," and one "merges in the primeval Lord." By the "practice of the Word... erased is vice from with [the] mind...."19

Devotion, in all its forms, is also an important means to realize the Light of God. For Nanak, "one attains bliss through devotion to God." It is through "loving adoration of Him that one attains unto God." Therefore we ought to "pray to the true guru." We are further encouraged to "worship thy Lord with Love."20 The Adi Granth states that when we "pray to the Lord, ... the soul is happy."21 The Sukhmani agrees that we obtain the gifts of God "by making earnest prayers." Even "the worst sinners, brutes, sprites, fools, and stone?hearted people obtain union with Him , by worshipping and remembering Him and His Name." Those who remember the Name of God "and sincerely worship Him, shall be remembered." The "mortal is advised to sincerely love the True Guru, with full devotion." We "must meditate upon and remember the Name of God in the company of the true saints." Similarly, we ought to "[p]ray to God on the society of true saints." We are further encouraged to "worship thy Lord with Love."22

The faithful are frequently reminded to remember and repeat the Name of God. The Sukhmani defines the Name of God as "the Supreme Power and Light of God." One "gains union with God... by remembering Him and repeating His Name." By remembering the Name of God, "the Divine Light shines within the heart." Only "some very rare man tastes the Nectarine Name," so only "very fortunate ones repeat the
Similarly, Nanak enjoins us to know God by knowing His name, and familiarizing ourselves with the Word of God with the help of the Guru. These are all interrelated; the Guru can be understood as one of the ten gurus, or their words that have been recorded in the holy scriptures. To know God and His Name, the Nanak tells us to look within ourselves:

Searching his body, his home,
By the master's instructions one finds
The Name revealed within.

Subsequently, those "who are imbued with the Name remain intoxicated with bliss day and night." We attain this "treasure of love through the guru.... by decorating herself with the Word, the bride merges herself in the Lord." By "hearing the Word, devotees ever live in a state of bliss... they are absolved of all sins and sorrows." One realizes God "through the unstruck melody of the Word, by the guru's grace... it is through the guru?saint that one attains to God." Meeting with the guru, the believer "becomes the embodiment of bliss, of unparalleled beauty and incomprehensible." In the poetry of the Divine Word,

If we are dyed in the Name
We attain to our home of immortal bliss.

Ask of thy Guru what he commands
To guide thy life.
"Give abode to the Word in thy mind
And let the pain of ego be burned out.
In the state of sahaj, unite with the Lord;
And merge in the truest of the true." 24

In Sikhism, uniting with God and experiencing His light and bliss are integral components of the sacred writings. To experience the Divinity within oneself is to experience, in a sense, death itself. Death is a state of bliss; the object for the devotee is to escape the otherwise endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Only by uniting with the True God within can we achieve permanent escape from this present life of suffering, and lies. To do that in Sikhism, one must meditate, pray, and live by the Word of God.
The Primal Joy

The encounter with the Divine, says the *Adi Granth*, is a joyous, even rapturous occasion. This is the case because God is "the Primal Joy." God forever exhibits "supreme bliss." Those "saints who know divine bliss... speak of [God] as the all-pervading Primal Joy." Moreover, "those whom God has chosen... enjoy divine rapture." As with the Divine light, however, "the Lord, the Primal Joy, indwelleth." This allows the aspirant to attain the "bliss of oneness" with God.9

Nanak makes it abundantly clear that the Divine encounter is full of joy and ecstasy. We read that those "who are imbued with the Name remain intoxicated with bliss day and night." With the vision of the Divine the follower "attains to the sublime state of bliss." Through "union with God" we "experience the rapture." By hearing "the wisdom of all scriptures... devotees ever live in a state of bliss." Only when "this body... attains unto the all-pervading God is it in bliss." Union with God is "the embodiment of bliss." Nanak invites us to

.. Abide in your own home  
And attain to the home of bliss.  
Drink in the elixir of God,  
Be in everlasting rapture.

For Nanak, "God is the source of all bliss." Consequently, "he who turns away from the Lord... will not know the ecstasy of divine love." With God's grace, the body whose "tongue loves the taste of truth... is in a state of ecstasy." By "practising the nectar-Name... one attains to pure bliss." Using the analogy of a marriage betrothal, Nanak says the following about the Divine union:

... I love my spouse with body and mind;  
I am intoxicated with his presence.  
I am dyed in His love  
And abide in the bliss of His Name...10

For Nanak, "all gladness and emancipation is in hearing the divine melody within." The guru thus "intoxicated" with the divine sounds "relinquishes all other music." When one attains to God, then "within one rings the blissful unstruck melody."
He who realizes the Word
Achieves bliss;
For him music is played
Without hands,
For him there are beats of time
Without feet,
He knows the word;
All joy is his....\textsuperscript{11}

Guru Arjun's \textit{Sukhmani} echoes these descriptions of experiences involving Divine light and rapture. In this work we read that the Name of God is "the Supreme Power and Light of God." Further, Arjun tells us that "the divine light shine[s] within." Moreover, the light of God... shines within every body." The human soul is thus able to unite with the Divine:

\begin{quote}
As water blends with water;
So the light (soul) (of such devotee)
merges in the Divine Light...
\end{quote}

Similarly, the \textit{Sukhmani} tells us that God confers upon devotees "supreme bliss" and joy:

\begin{quote}
Supreme joy comes with a favouring glance of God.
Only some rare man tastes the Nectarine Name.

Those, who taste It, are satiated.
Such ones become perfect and never worry or lose faith (in God).

They are filled to the brim with the sweetness and joy of love.
The yearning (to meet God) appears within them, in the company of saints.

They forsake all others and take shelter (of God),
Divine Light dawns within them, (and) they meditate (on Him) day and night.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Guru Gobind Singh expresses similar views. Singh said that "he who dwelleth upon God's Effulgent Light, night and day, thinketh not of another." Further, one who is "illumined with the single-pointed light of God... [is the] purest of the pure." As Singh himself would put in his "Song of Bliss,"
I am in ecstasy, O mother, 
for, I have attained to my Lord. 
Yet attained have I to my Lord, 
all-to-spontaneously, and, 
within my mind 
Ringeth the music of bliss.¹³
Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, received instruction from a revelation that occurred around the beginning of the turn of the seventh century CE. A voice came to him and said, "Read!" Muhammad, being illiterate, responded to the voice that he could not read. The voice said that "it is the Lord Most Bountiful who teacheth by the pen, [who] teacheth man that which he knew not" (Qur'an, Surah XCVI, 1-5). Then the voice said, on two separate occasions, "O Muhammad, thou art God's messenger, and I am Gabriel." The vision accompanying this voice was exceptionally bright, so much so that Muhammad had to turn away his face "from the brightness of the vision..."1

The Qur'an is quite specific about who would be the source of this kind of Light:

Allah is the Light
of the Heavens and the Earth...
Light upon Light,
Allah guideth unto His light
whom he will....(Qur'an Sur. XXIV, 35).

Often quoting this passage, the Sufi tradition of Islam makes frequent reference to the vision of a Divine Light. As a mystical tradition, Sufism is that form of Islam that emphasizes the need for a direct experience with God. Sufis routinely describe an experience with a Light once a devotee reaches a certain level of contemplation, usually accompanied by intense feelings of joy, even ecstasy. As with the Qur'an, the poetry in this tradition is an exquisite expression of the Divine presence that the Sufi encounters. A few introductory examples will help illustrate:

The Essence of the First Absolute Light,
God gives constant illumination,
whereby it is manifested and it
brings all things into existence,
giving light to them by its rays.

Everything in the World
is derived from the Light of His Essence
and all beauty and perfection
are the gift of His bounty,
and to attain fully to this illumination
is salvation.2
Divine Encounters - Islam - The Supreme Radiance

Within a Magian tavern
the Light of God I see;
In such a place, O wonder!
Shines out such radiancy...

I take refuge in the Light
of Thy glorious Countenance
which illuminates the heavens.

Thou art the Light of Light
and Lord of Lords accompanying all things.
Glory to Him whom nothing resembles,
the All-Hearer, all-Seer.

O God. Thou art hidden from us,
though the heavens are filled
With Thy light which is brighter
than the sun and the moon...

There is naught in the Universe
save one Light!
It appears in a variety of manifestations.
God is the Light;
its manifestations, the Universe...

Sufis frequently dwell on the identification of God (Allah) with the Light. For the 13th century Sufi Muhyiddin ibn 'Arabi, "God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth." God is "the embodiment of light, and the source of all illuminations." The Divine Light is not like any other light, however. It is unlike anything ordinary people see from day to day. Ibn 'Arabi tells us that "His light is brilliant." Even more than that though, the phenomenon is really beyond description. Like so many other Sufis, ibn 'Arabi has recourse to poetry to describe the indescribable:

Ocean's a drop from my pervading Sea,
Light but a flash of my vast Brilliancy...

When one perceives the Divine Light fully, everything else disappears. The person then realizes that this is really "the very light of the Absolute [God] as such..." The 13th century Indian Sufi Maneri tells us that God's "very brilliance blinds me to whatever descends." This Light is "a thousand times more luminous than that of the sun," Maneri says. Nuri, a 10th century Persian Sufi, explains that the "light of God... is the first thing to appear when God wants to guide a person on the mystical path...." For Sufis, it is abundantly clear that the Divine Light, however difficult to describe to those who have never seen it, is both beautiful and perfect:
In Thy perfect light,
Loverhood I learn.
To Thy beauty bright
Line and Rhyme to turn...

Ne'er from my nostrils went
Thy sweet and familiar scent
Ne'er vanished from my sight
Thine image bright....15

To see God, to see the Light, is one of the primary goals of Sufism. The 18th century Naqshbandi Sufi Nasir Muhammad 'Andalib said that one should "strive to bring himself towards this light...."16 Once again, though, the most exquisite sense of being drawn to the Light is provided in poetic form. Mansur al-Hallaj lets us know that once one becomes aware of the presence of God and His Light, there is no turning back:

You understand our God is a consuming fire.
The rose opens to the light,
the Narcissus leans to the shade...
But at some point His Light
penetrates our eyes, destroying our shades...
If we are roses we are drawn to light.
We do not think about the end.
There is none.17

Or, as other Sufis would express it:

Lord, plunge me into the sea
of the Light of Thy majesty
that I might come forth with
the shining of that majesty upon my face...
I as Thee by Thy Name of Light
and by Thy Countenance that is Light,
O Light of Light...
to veil me in the Light of Thy name...
for Thou art the Light of all
with Thy Light.18

O Light of Light
who dost illumine
the obscurity of non-being
with the effulgence of Thy Light,
make Thy Light of... each part of me,
till I shall be only Light,
and flooded with the Light
of Thy Unity.19
Just before his death, the 18th century Indian mystic Mir Dard prayed for the following:

O God, give me
light in my heart
and light in my tongue
and light in my hearing

and light in my sight
and light in my feeling
and light in all my body
and light before me
and light behind me.

Give me, I pray thee,
light on my right hand
and light on my left hand
and light above me
and light beneath me.
O Lord, increase light within me
and give me light
and illuminate me.

20
Islam

The Islamic tradition is rich in references to a Divine Light. The holy book of Islam, the Qur'an, makes clear and specific reference on the subject. By far the most numerous references, however, are found in Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. Here we find not only visions of the Light, but also frequent descriptions of the joy and ecstasy that so often accompanies this vision.

Islam means submission, submission to the word of God (Allah). An individual who thus submits is a Muslim. Allah is the one and only God, the creator of the universe. He is the same God who has revealed himself to, and is worshipped by, Jews and Christians.

Muslims accept the legitimacy of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. However, the final and inerrant sacred book is the Qur'an. Allah let His word and will be known through a revelation to the prophet Muhammad, who recorded, in the Qur'an, everything that Allah had revealed to him.

The Islamic calendar begins in 622 CE, when Muhammad went on a migration, or "hijra," from Mecca to Medina in the Arabian peninsula. The prophet's message having been rejected at first at Mecca, Muhammad found a more receptive audience at Medina. The prophet quickly established the latter as the first Muslim theocracy.

Muhammad then turned his attention to the military conquest of Mecca, which was accomplished even though the forces of Islam were greatly outnumbered. Several military engagements followed, and after the prophet's death in 632 CE, the Islamic empire expanded tremendously. Within a century, the empire extended westward to Morocco, as far east as the Indus valley in India, and well into Asia Minor to the north. The people of these areas remain predominantly Muslim today.

Islam has come to be broadly divided into two major sects: the Sunni and the Shi'a. This division started over who had the rightful claim to the caliphate, i.e., the successor to Muhammad. The Shi'a maintain that their leader, their "Imam," has rightful succession and is divinely inspired. The Sunni, or "orthodox," reject Shi'a claims. Today, Shi'as predominate in Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan, whereas Sunnis predominate in the Arab states and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

While Muslims differ on some points of belief, they generally believe that Muhammad was the last in a line of prophets which includes Moses and Jesus. Thus Muslims consider Jesus to be inspired by, but not the incarnate son of, God. But then not even Muhammad was perfect, according to Islam -- only Allah is. Likewise, written traditions about the prophet contained in a collection known as the "Hadith," while revered, are not beyond scrutiny by Muslims either.

Muslims are expected to adhere to the "Five Pillars" of Islam, which involves several religious, ethical and social duties. The first of these "pillars" is the recitation of the creed, "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His prophet." The second includes praying 5 times daily, with a special devotional day on
Fridays. The third involves almsgiving; the fourth requires fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan; and the fifth a pilgrimage, or hajj, to Mecca. The hajj should be performed by Muslims at least once in one's lifetime.

Ethically, Muslims are expected to abstain from gambling, drinking alcoholic beverages, and eating pork. Further, these outward conformities to the faith are to be matched by an inner conviction. Both the letter and the spirit of the Qur'an and God's will are to be adhered to.

Those who do follow Islam righteously will enter a splendid paradise after death. Those who do not -- those who follow the ways of the Devil (Iblis) -- will have to endure the relentless fires of hell.

The mystical tradition of Islam is known as Sufism. While it is not a major feature of Islamic scripture, as it is in Hinduism and Buddhism, it is a significant feature of the tradition and can be found in either of the major sects. By the 8th century CE, we find the appearance of Sufi writings in various parts of the Muslim world. The movement grew steadily and and found several notable proponents in the centuries to follow. The magnificence of Sufi poetry bears superb witness to the experience of divine light and ecstasy.
The Sufi Path

Consistent with, although not unique to, the Islamic tradition is the means by which one attains the vision of God. 'Iraqi asks, "He is a Light, how shall I see Him?". This question is answered in a number of ways. Ibn 'Arabi says that "the Beatific Vision... impregnates the elect with Divine Light, each experiencing the vision according to the knowledge of the Divine dogma, or dogmas, gained by him on earth." For Maneri, pureness of heart is the key: "When the mirror of the heart is thoroughly cleansed of the rust of human nature and selfish qualities, it becomes capable of reflecting lights from the extrasensory world.... As purity of heart increases, so too do the power and frequency of these lights...." Conversely, the lack of such purity is an obstacle to the Sufi. As Rumi tells us,

Would you have eyes and ears
of reason clear,
Tear off the obstructing veil of greed!
The blind imitation of that Sufi
proceeded from greed;
Greed closed his mind
to the pure light....

Above all, though, consistent with the central meaning and message of Islam, God leads to His light those whom He chooses. Sixteenth century Sufi Shah Abdul Karim expressed this sentiment poetically:

God, the best of proposers,
will unite the lover
and the loved one...
He guides us to the Fount of Light,
to Himself,
So to our source we all return....

Ultimately, the last stanza tells us what might well be the destiny of us all. If that source is the same one to which the Sufis refer, then that holds a bright promise for the life after this one, to say the least.

Given the sharp parallels, it is clear that Sufi mystics have plenty in common with other mystical traditions. The encounter with the Light, and the associated feelings of love and supreme happiness are too obvious to ignore. Given this common ground, we should not be at all surprised by differences. Sufis interpret their experience according to the precepts of the religion in which they were raised. The most stunning fact is that even though the traditions under investigation are otherwise chasms apart culturally, and ages apart in time, the common experience still shines through clearly.
There is more to the Sufi path than the experience with light alone. Sufis often describe the feelings that go along with the Vision as "joyful," "loving," "blissful" and "ecstatic." The thirteenth century Persian Sufi Fakhruddin 'Iraqi described the state of this relationship as "perfect joy."21 Ibn 'Arabi says that "rapture and ecstasy is the intensity of love, and the quality of ecstasy and rapture first became manifest in the high and rapturous and ecstatic spirits to whom the high God revealed Himself from His Beautiful Awesomeness, [becoming] enraptured and ecstatic in the lights of God..."22 When Sufis see the "all-beautiful, all-loving" God and His Light, they reach a state of ecstatic trance.23 Again Sufi expressions on this matter are best said poetically:

...all the earth's joys
are dust beneath the feet
Of those entrancing memories of Thee.

In a state of separation
I felt sad and distressful,
In union I felt my self-consciousness
and my self-hood had bereft me.
Joy came to dwell in my soul
And now do I keep my body and soul
in a state of bliss.24

Alas, that He
Should ever be perceived in ecstasy...
Ecstasy touches but the forms,
which flee before His radiant Divinity...

It were more meet that He
Who with such bounty brought me ecstasy
Should of His boundless grace
Sweep clean my spirit of its every trace.

When first He came to me,
When first He
stirred my soul to ecstasy,
I knew that He would bring
Gifts far beyond the mind's imagining.25
And so shall Attar shattered be
And rapt in sudden ecstasy
Soar to Godly vision, even
beyond the veils of earth and heaven.26

The power and beauty of the verses is stunning -- and no wonder. R.A. Nicholson explains that "ecstasy affords the only means by which the soul can directly communicate and become united with God."27 Maneri explains that one will know that the light a mystic sees is from God if it is accompanied by bliss: "a sense of inner bliss arises within him so that in that very bliss a person knows that what he is seeing is from God Almighty and not from any other source."28 So, says one Sufi, Truth itself is known in ecstasy.29

This blissful, joyous, ecstatic state is part of the intense love that the Sufi and God share. Khwaju of Kirman explained this relationship poetically, as a kind of love that is without bounds:

In ocean waves of love Divine
The lover's soul is not aware
of tranquil shores
And those who watch the ocean waves
from tranquil points of distant shores
Are not aware of shoreless love.30

Nuri explained the mystic love of God this way:

So passionate my love is,
I do yearn
To keep His memory
constantly in mind;
But O, the ecstasy with which
I burn
Sears out my thoughts,
and strikes my memory blind!

And, marvel upon marvel,
ecstasy Itself is swept away:
now far, now near
My Lover stands,
and all the faculty
Of memory is swept up
in hope and fear.31

...And I adore thee, Light Divine
Lest lesser lights
should make me blind.32

The ninth century Persian poet Yahya b. Mu'adh says of Divine Love that
The lover joys to dwell  
In love with Love;  
Yet some, as strange I tell,  
Do love reprove  

About God's Love I hover  
While I have the breath,  
To be His perfect lover  
Until my death.\(^{33}\)

This ecstatic joy, the love of and for God, and the vision of the Divine Light was not without its difficulties, however. Such an intensely desirable experience compelled the mystic to get closer and closer to God. In the end, some became so close that they could no longer tell the difference between God, His Light, and themselves. Nuri says that "I looked one day at the Light and I did not cease looking at it until I became the Light."\(^{34}\) This happens when the Sufi "contemplates all the time on the light of God and forgets everything, even his own self."\(^{35}\) Rumi put it this way:

What is to know of the Unity of God?  
It is to extinguish oneself  
in the presence of the One.  
Shouldst thou desire to be  
as bright as day...  
He who loses his separate existence  
The result of what he does  
is always full of bliss.\(^{36}\)

I am plunged in the Light  
like the sun;  
I cannot distinguish myself  
from the light.\(^{37}\)

As the stone that is entirely  
turned into pure ruby...  
Through oneness with the Light...  
Strive that thy stony nature  
may be diminished  
So that thy stone may become resplendent  
with the qualities of the ruby...  
The qualities of self-existence  
will depart from the body  
The qualities of intoxication (ecstasy)  
will increase in thy head.\(^{38}\)

Fakhruddin 'Iraqi echoes Rumi's assessment:
Mansur al-Hallaj took sentiments such as these to their logical conclusion. Hallaj declared, in Arabic, "Ana 'l-Haqq," meaning "I am the Truth," or "I am God." Orthodox Muslims took this to be blasphemy of the worst kind -- no man can declare himself to be God. As in Judaism and Christianity, Sufi mystics generally came close to identifying the soul with God, but most fell short of any such absolute identification. 

Still, the main point is well taken: the closer one gets to the Divine Light, the more one's self becomes One with the Divine.

The visions of light and feelings of ecstasy have broad and clear similarities with other mystical traditions and with near death experiences. However, like other traditions, Sufism is unique when it comes to interpreting what the mystic encounters. For example, Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, is seen by some Sufis as "light from God's light." According to these mystics the prophet of Islam shows the searcher "the way unto his own soul where he finds the reflection of God's light and the 'light of Muhammad.'”

Fakhruddin 'Iraqi expressed this view poetically as follows:

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Praise belongs to God
Who made effulgence the face of
His Friend Muhammad
with Beauty's theophanies,
that it sparkled with light...
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The Splendour

As with Christianity and Islam, Scriptural references about the Divine Light are not abundant in Judaism, but are certainly present. The writer of the book of Psalms refers to God as He "who coverest thyself with light as with a garment..." (Ps. 104:2). The book of Daniel tells us that God "knoweth what is in the darkness, and the Light dwelleth with him" (Dan. 2:22). The prophet Ezekiel witnessed a very dramatic vision of God:

And I looked, and behold,
a whirlwind came out of the north,
a great cloud,
and a fire infolding itself
and a brightness was about it...

And I saw as the colour of amber,
as the appearance or fire round
about within it...
I saw as it were
the appearance of fire,
and it had brightness round about.

As the appearance of the bow
that is in the cloud in the day of rain,
so was the appearance
of the brightness round about.
This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD...
(Ezekiel 1:4, 27-28).

Together with this vision were images of various creatures and a man. Fire was also among these creatures, "and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning" (Ez. 1:13-14). The Lord went on to tell the prophet that Israel was a rebellious nation. Because of its wrongdoing before the Lord, the nation was in exile, and captive to other nations. The prophet was to tell Israel to change its ways, to do what was right before God. To aid him in his task, another vision of God appeared, and the spirit of God entered Ezekiel so that God would speak to Israel through the prophet (Ez. 3: 23-27). One day in front of the elders of Judah, the book of Ezekiel tells us that
Then I beheld, and lo a likeness
as the appearance of fire...
as the appearance of brightness,
as the colour of amber.

And... the spirit lifted me
up between the earth and the heaven,
and brought me in the
visions of God to Jerusalem...
(Ez. 8:1-3).

Like other prophets of Israel and Judah, Ezekiel spoke for God to set the nation straight from its errant ways. In Ezekiel's case this was done in one of the most stunning and captivating visions of God and His bright light ever told.

Further references to the Divine Light are found in the writings of Philo. Philo felt that "of all things, light is best," first because it drew mankind's attention upwards to heaven. Even more than that, though, light is "pre-eminently beautiful." This Divine Light is not perceptible to the senses -- i.e. through one's eyes -- but it can be seen through the mind,

for the intelligible as far surpasses the visible
in the brilliance of its radiance, as sunlight
assuredly surpasses darkness day and night...

This Light which is accessible to the mind is to Philo the source of all light -- what we see with our eyes is simply varying degrees of dimness away from pure light. Philo would call this pure, brilliant light

'all brightness,' to signify that from which
sun and moon, as well as fixed stars and planets
draw... for that pure and undiluted radiance is
bedimmed so soon as it begins to undergo the change
that is entailed from the intelligible to the sensibly
discerned for no object of sense is free from dimness.

To Philo, all that we see is a dim version of the pure light, the light of God. We can never see God with our eyes, though; it would be far too bright. Only through the mind can we "see" God, whom Philo identifies with this brilliant radiance, the purest of all light:

... for He Himself is His own light.
For the eye of the Absolute Existent
needs no other light to effect perception,
but He Himself is the archetypal essence
of which myriads of rays are the effluence,
none visible to sense, all to mind.
So how does the mind go about finding God's light? Philo tells us that to see this, we must practice virtue and pursue the truth. "Life," says Philo, "has no clearer light than truth."5 The lover of virtue is "set on fire by the brilliant appearance of the beautiful...."6 At this point, longing to see the Great King Himself, "pure and untempered rays of concentrated light stream forth like a torrent, so that by its gleams the eye of the understanding is dazzled."7 Finally one reaches "that most brilliant and truly divine light of virtue."8

For Philo, this place of brilliant light and perfect virtue is Eden. Eden is a place of "profound content (sic) and joy."9 This is the consummate end for the perfectly righteous person; Philo tells us that "the soul's feast is the joy and gladness which the perfect virtues bring, and by perfect is meant virtues unspotted by all the tainting evils to which the human race is liable."10

As a Jew living in Alexandria, Philo was certainly influenced by Hellenistic (Greek) culture. The ideas of the Stoics and Plato are unmistakable. And so, very clearly, was he influenced by his own religious heritage: the entire discourse we have seen so far was a commentary on Hebrew Scripture. Not so culture-bound, however, was Philo's description of the Divine Light. Once again we find an account of someone who has "seen" this super-brilliant light -- an experience which is accompanied by unsurpassed joy.

Beyond Philo, the Rabbinic literature also makes reference to this brilliant, Divine Light. David Shapiro tells us that "we read in the Sifra that, while man cannot see the glory of God during his lifetime, he can see it at the time of his death.... Hence, we have such expressions as the righteous envisioning 'the brilliance of the Divine presence' in the afterlife. There are also Talmudic reports of a pillar of light which precedes the bier of the righteous."11

By far the most numerous references to the Divine Light, however, comes with Jewish mysticism -- the Kabbalah. In the Zohar (meaning "splendour"), we find once again the mystic yearning to get closer to God, to see His Light, and feel the joy that so often accompanies that contact. As we might expect, the Zohar interprets the experience with the Divine in a uniquely Jewish way. The similarities between the Jewish encounter with the Light and the accounts from other cultures, however, is unmistakable.

The Zohar tells a story of Rabbi Isaac, who, when

he opened his mouth to expound
the Torah, a pillar of cloud
reaching from heaven to earth
appeared and stood before us,
and in it a great light shone.12

Rabbi Abba, travelling with him, said that he, too, was "privileged to see that light," which he identified "certainly" as having seen God (I, 29). God, according to the Zohar, designates Himself Ein-Sof -- "Limitless" -- who, as the Cause of causes, called his crown the "Source," an "inexhaustible fount of light" (III, 131). This is a light "which illumines the supreme heaven, a light never ceasing..." (IV, 224). This is "the supernal primordial light.... When this light shone on what was below, its radiance spread from one end of the world to the other..." (I, 116). Compared to this Supreme Cause, "all lights are dark in its presence" (I, 94).

According to the Zohar, "God wrought the light as the medium for the creation of the world.... For all the
generations of heaven and earth were produced by the energy of that treasured-up Light..." (IV, 252). It was not until "He unfolded Himself in a covering of a supernal radiance of thought" that he created therefrom a world" (I, 111). God "summoned to issue forth from [His] complete Light which was in the centre of a certain radiance which is the foundation of the world" (I, 70). The Zohar's place in all this "is that from which were created all the creative utterances through the extension of the point of this mysterious brightness" (I, 63).

The Zohar illustrates this place of light poetically:

The secret Garden
In worlds of light hidden...

Its splendour sends forth
To the ends of Creation,
In the fullness of glory
Is revealed in its beauty
To the eyes made seeing --
The garden of Eden
(III, 10-11).

When God said, "Let there be light, and there was light," and "let us make man in our image, after our likeness," the Zohar gives us an indication of the nature of humanity. "'In our image' corresponds to light, 'after our likeness,' to darkness, which is a vestment to light in the same way that a body is a vestment to the soul..." (I, 92). Thus, man's spirit emanates "from the realm of holiness, to which his body is a vestment, as we read, "Thou clothest me in skin and flesh" (Job X, 11). Other animals such as ox, sheep, goat, deer, etc. are simply formed from another vestment (I, 86). This also explains why we cannot see God with our bodily eye: we can only perceive the vestment of darkness around God's light.

The soul, however, can see the Divine Light. We read in the Zohar that

The essence of man is his soul;
the skin, flesh, bones and sinews
are but an outward covering, the
mere garments, but they are not the man.
When man departs from this world, he
divests himself of all these garments...
skins are a garment which protects a garment,
 viz, the extension of the heavens which is

The mystical book goes on to tell us that "before a man dies he beholds a Divine Presence, towards which the soul goes out in great yearning..." (V, 106). The soul then leaves the dead person, "and the body returns to the earth." The "spirit returns to God who gave it (Eccl. XII, 7)," reads the Zohar, "both thus returning to their original source" (I, 21).
Judaism

The Jewish tradition makes numerous references to an encounter with a Divine Light. A few of these sources are Scriptural, a few Rabbinic, but most are mystical. Judaism shares with other traditions instances in which one encounters a brilliant, indescribable Light, often accompanied by feelings of great joy. Exactly what this experience means is interpreted -- as we would expect -- in a uniquely Jewish way.

Judaism derives its name from the Biblical "golden age" of the faith in the state of Judah in the 10th century BC -- hence the name "Judah-ism." Judaism was then and for the most part remains today a religion of a specific people -- the Jews.

Jewish ancestry can be traced back as far as a man named Abraham, who brought a tribe of Semitic nomads from Mesopotamia to Canaan (roughly the same area as present day Israel) sometime in the second millennium BC. By about the 13th century BC, the Egyptian pharaoh conquered much of the region and put the ancient Israelites into slavery. Later in the same century, a man named Moses guided these people out of slavery, and back to the general area that we now know as Israel. As tradition would have it, Moses and the ancient Israelites were led by Yahweh, their God. Yahweh, they came to believe, was the one and only God, who had chosen the Jews to be His people. Consequently, Yahweh entered into a covenant (binding agreement) with His people. Under this agreement, the people were expected to perform rituals for Yahweh and live up to certain ethical standards, and in turn God would show them favour.

Jewish tradition tells us that the ancient Israelites broke their covenant with God in a number of ways. As a result, God allowed His people to be carried away into exile in Babylon, in 586 BC. Yahweh's people were liberated from Babylon by Cyrus, King of Persia, in 538 BC. Cyrus allowed them to set up a semi-autonomous theocratic state in their homeland once again.

Even partial independence only lasted until the mid 4th century BC, when Alexander the Great defeated Persia and imposed Hellenistic (Greek) culture throughout all conquered lands. This was met with resistance by the Jews. Through the leadership of members of a Jewish family known as the Maccabees, the people of the covenant with Yahweh established an independent state in the region in the mid 2nd century BC.

The new Jewish state lasted until 37 BC, when the area fell under Roman occupation. Several rebellions were launched against the Romans, most notably one in 66 CE. The Roman army under Titus responded by crushing the rebellion, sacking Jerusalem, and destroying the temple of Yahweh. The period following this great defeat is known as the Diaspora, when Jews left their homeland and dispersed throughout the world.

Once again in exile, the Jews were persecuted just about everywhere they went. The most infamous and grotesque of these persecutions was the Nazi holocaust in the 20th century, in which millions of Jews were executed in mass genocide. Still, though, the people and the religion survived. In 1948, the nation of Israel once again came into being, with one of the express purposes being that the Jews "never again" allow such
persecutions against them to exist.

The holy scripture of the Jews is the Hebrew Bible, or what Christians would call the "Old Testament." This is further broken down into the Torah, or Law (included in the first five books of the Bible), the Prophets, and the Wisdom literature. The voluminous body of literature known as the Talmud gives interpretations of the scriptures.

Today Judaism is broken into three major branches. The Orthodox adhere to strict observance of Jewish laws and traditions at all times. This includes dietary restrictions; keeping the Sabbath (Saturday) as a day of rest, study, work and devotion; and wearing a cap or hat at all times. Reform Judaism, whose roots go back to the 19th century CE, seeks to return to an interpretation of the Bible that does not rely on the teachings of the Talmud. Further, Reformers extend Judaism to include Gentiles (non-Jews). Later in the 19th century, Reform itself split into a form now referred to as Conservative. This form of Judaism re-emphasized many of the more traditional observations. However, Conservative Jews also insist that Judaism must adapt to the times, so it is not necessary to adhere strictly to matters such as traditional dress.

The Jewish mystical tradition can be traced to prophetic Biblical sources, particularly some of the Prophetic and Wisdom literature. A much fuller expression of Jewish mysticism is found in Philo, a Jew who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, at the turn of the first century CE. Philo incorporated a form of Platonism into his reading of the Hebrew scriptures. The abundance of literature on Jewish mysticism comes in the medieval period, however, with the body of esoteric writings known as the Kabbalah. The primary expression of these teachings is found in the five volume collection known as the Zohar, most of which was likely written in 13th century Spain. Kabbalistic teaching influenced later Jewish writers such as the 16th century Spanish mystic Isaac Luria, and the 18th century movement known as Hasidism. While maintaining similar practices very similar to the Orthodox, Hasids seek inner illumination and joy through Divine awareness. As we shall see, the Jewish mystical tradition as a whole has plenty to say about the subject at hand.
The key, then, to attaining communion with the Divine Light, according to the Zohar, is to be righteous -- whether one is Jewish or not. To be righteous is to pray to God, and to study and obey the Torah. Prayer evokes "a certain illumination" (II, 212). It is actually "incumbent upon a man to offer up prayer and supplication each day so as to unite Himself with God" (II, 294). The earnest, devoted, and properly concentrated silent prayer, when heard by the Holy One, will result in a "feast on the supernal radiances that will stream with added brightness from the supernal world..." (II, 294-295). Further, "it is through the Torah that man can make himself worthy of that light" (I, 148). Knowledge of the Torah "means union with the Holy One" (V, 45). Those who study the Torah "are beloved before God," and their souls "ascend to the bliss above" (II, 370).

Various other Jewish mystics outside the Zohar echo sentiments similar to that book of Splendour. Rabbi Yehuda L. Ashlag, commenting on the writings of Hasidic Rabbi Isaac Luria, said that God's original goal was to favour humanity with "eternal joy and goodness." As God thought out this plan, thought itself stretched out as a light, comprising all joy and contentment, indeed the whole of creation.

Mankind, as part of the creation, shared with God in almost every respect the same spirit. The only difference was man's desire to receive. With respect to God, then, Man's desire is to receive the bliss and happiness that God wants to bestow. With respect to other people, problems arise because everyone wants to receive. Reversing this nature is very difficult, but it must be accomplished in order to become Divine in nature. It can be done "through Torah study and performance of Torah precepts with the motive of delighting one's Maker." Once we transform our will to receive into a will to bestow, we achieve the Creator's goal of giving mankind "ineffable bliss and happiness."13

Similar sentiments are found elsewhere in Hasidism. Meshullam Teibush Heller of Zbarah espoused the following:

The first aspect is that of one who performs the mizvah in order to fulfil what is written in the Torah... each and every one of the Kabbalists had unified and connected world with world and light with light and radiance with radiance and brilliance with brilliance through their clear and pure thought...14

Rabbi Shneur Zalman's Habad system of the 18th century was much the same in this respect. In this we find that God, the Ein- Sof, the Infinite One, "completely fills the whole earth temporally and spatially... everything is equally permeated with the Ein-Sof light."15 For Zalman, Torah study ought to be one's pre-eminent occupation, for
while a person occupies himself with words of Torah...

It follows [that at that time] the soul and these garments [of thoughts and speech] are also truly united with Ein-Sof.... Moreover, their unity is even more exalted and more powerful than the unity of God's infinite light with the upper [spiritual] worlds.

For the Divine Will is actually manifest in the soul and its garments that are engaged in Torah study, since His Will proper is identical with the Torah itself....¹⁶

One's attitude in studying is also important. While occupying oneself with the Torah, one must "harbour a great love for God alone, to do what is gratifying to Him alone, and not for the purpose of quenching his soul's thirst for God." Moreover, this is certainly not to say that one should not pray or engage in philosophical speculation about God. On the contrary, in addition to Torah Study one can attach oneself "to Him by intellect and thought... and in prayer and other blessings." Indeed this is the foundation of human happiness:

*The intellect of a created being delights and derives pleasure only in that which it conceives, understands, knows and grasps with its intellect and understanding, as much as it can grasp of the Blessed Ein-Sof light, through His wisdom and His understanding which radiate there....¹⁷*

Not surprisingly, the Jewish experience with the Divine Light and the joy associated with it is interpreted along strictly Jewish lines. Throughout any reference to the Light we find constant reference to the Torah, to prayer, and to various Jewish traditions. But equally clear is the great similarity between the actual experience of Light and bliss in both Jewish and non-Jewish cultures. In the mysticism of Judaism, as in other cultures, we find that while the Divine Light is invisible to the physical eye, the "mind's eye" can perceive it. This Light is utterly brilliant, far brighter than anything the physical eye has, or could ever have possibly, seen. This light is loving, and wants to become closer, even unite, with people on earth. Once this happens, the union is full of joy, bliss, and ecstasy. And, the encounter with this Light can be achieved either in this life, or in the life to come.
The Joy of joys

The encounter with the Light Divine is clearly joyful, loving, even ecstatic. The "King of Peace" is He Who emanates "the light of the supreme joy from the fullness of his joy" (IV, 98). After God "divided the light from the darkness"... light continued to emanate from the supernal radiance, and through that radiance to bring gladness to all" (I, 143). When "the Holy Ancient One reveals Himself... all the worlds are irradiated with joy" (III, 270). When "the loving kindness of the Ancient One is manifested... all is satisfaction and joy...." When "the streaming, inexhaustible light" bursts forth "in splendour and beauty," be prepared for "the joy of joys" (III, 272). The light of God evokes a "stirring of all joy, all felicity, all illumination and all freedom" (II, 250). The "place to meet the Most High King" is that place "from whence there issues all light, all blessings, and all joy, to cause all faces to shine..." (II, 282-283). God is the "Wine which gives light and joy to all... the joy of love and mercy, the source of all life and joy" (IV, 16). When someone's spirit reaches the heavenly realm, "there is an effulgence of light all around...," and a "transcendental holy bliss and sublime delight..." (IV, 193).

Not everyone gets to see these things and feel these feelings, however. Consistent with Jewish notions of justice, only the righteous have access to the Divine Light -- darkness is for evil ones. Consequently, God hides the light from evil ones. "The radiance which God produced at the time of Creation illumined the world from one end to the other, but was withdrawn in order that the sinners of the world might not enjoy it, and it is treasured for the righteous..." (I, 120). Indeed, "God created man in the world and gave him the faculty to perfect himself in His service and to direct his ways so as to merit the enjoyment of that celestial light which God has hidden and reserved for the righteous..." (I, 148). The mysteries of the world to come "are imprinted in light such as no eye can look upon, nor can our imagination comprehend the measure of joy and delight which the Holy One, blessed be He, has in store for the righteous..." (IV, 48-49). God even created the Garden of Eden "in order to satisfy His own ardent desire for joyous and continual communion with the souls of the righteous..."(III, 360).

More specifically, and uniquely Jewish, is the view that Israel will lead the way of the righteous. Israelites "saw eye to eye the splendour of the glory of their Lord..."(III, 280). When the Israelites stood at the Red Sea, they "all held the Divine glory eye to eye, and when their singing was ended their souls were so filled with joy and ecstasy that they refused to continue on their journey, desiring yet more perfect revelations of that glorious mystery " (III, 187). Israel is blessed by God because "the Holy One, blessed be He, has chosen them above all the other nations of the world" (IV, 100). God will, "at the proper time cause to shine on Israel that sun which he stored away at the time of the Creation, out of sight of sinners" (II, 273). At that time "the Holy King will restore [Israel] to its place, to unite itself with her in perfect bliss..." (III, 172).

This is not to say, though, that access to the Divine Light and its joys are restricted to the nation of Israel:
while Israel are the foundation of the divine light from out of which issues forth light for the whole world, yet when heathen nations come to accept the glory of the Holy One and to worship Him, then the foundation of the light is strengthened and all its rays are unified... (III, 215).

God will first open "a tiny aperture of light, then another somewhat larger, and so on until he will throw open for them the supernal gates" for Israel, and for "the righteous among them" (II, 152).
The Divine Light

Even without frequent references, the New Testament is far from silent on the topic of God's luminous characteristics. In 1 John 1:5, we have spelled out for us that "God is Light." When the apostle Peter was in jail, God sent a liberating angel, "and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell from his hands (Acts 12:7).” In the introduction to the Gospel according to John, we are told that

There was a man sent from God
, whose name was John.
The same came for a witness,
to bear witness of the Light,
that all men through him might believe.
He was not that Light,
but was sent to bear witness of that Light.
That was the True Light,
which lighteth every man
that cometh into the world (John 1: 6-9).

That Light was Jesus, the Word of God, the Son of God, who also was God. The apostle Paul tells us that Jesus was "the brightness of [God's] glory, and the express image of his person..." (Heb. 1:3). Paul ought to know; formerly known as Saul, he was an enemy of Christians. Saul tried all he could to discredit Jesus' teaching. One day, on his way to Damascus to round up Christians, Saul came upon a remarkable sight:

And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus:
and suddenly there shined around him
a light from heaven:
And he fell to the earth,
and heard a voice saying unto him,
Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?
And he said, who art thou, Lord?
And the Lord said, I am Jesus
whom thou persecutest... (Acts 9: 3-5).

Needless, to say, this experience had quite an influence on Saul, as it resulted in his conversion to Christianity.

The early theologians of the church, also, made reference to God as Light. Clement of Alexandria, writing in the 2nd century, tells us that "the divine Word, the Light who is the archetype of light, is a genuine son of mind...." Jesus has allowed us to see the light because he "has made clear the mind that lay buried in darkness, and sharpened the 'light-bearing eyes' of the soul." For those who have received the divine vision, Clement would have us all say,
"Hail, O Light."
Upon us who lay buried in darkness
and shut up in the shadow of death,
a light shone forth from heaven,
purer than the sun
and sweeter than the life of earth.
That light is life eternal,
and whatsoever things partake of it, live...

O pure Light!
In the blaze of the torches
I have a vision of heaven and of God...¹

Similar views are expressed by 4th century theologian Gregory of Nyssa. Commenting on the Biblical story of Moses encountering a "burning bush," Gregory interprets this as a symbol of the way the Divine light works through humanity. The "light shining from the bramble bush" represents the "Radiance which shines upon us through this thorny flesh and which is... the true light and truth itself." God is the light, so "what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light."²

At the turn of the 4th century, St. Augustine had more to say on the topic. Augustine addresses God as "Thou true-speaking Light," one whom he had seen in "Thy brightness." With the "eye of my soul," Augustine says he saw

the Unchangeable Light....
He who knows the truth knows that light;
and he that knows it knoweth eternity...
Thou didst beat back the infirmity of my sight,
pouring forth upon me most strongly
Thy beams of light...³

This light is generally regarded as being beyond description by those who have seen it, because it is beyond the grasp of the physical sense of sight. Consequently, the mystics of the Christian tradition occasionally use "negative" terminology to describe the indescribable. Pseudo-Dionysius, the Eastern Orthodox mystic, used this kind of language extensively:
"Trinity!! Higher than any being, 

any divinity, any goodness! 
Guide of Christians 
Higher in the wisdom of heaven! 
Lead us up beyond unknowing and light 
up to the farthest, highest peak 
of mystic scripture. 
where the mysteries of God's Word 
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable 
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence. 
Amid the deepest shadow 
they pour overwhelming light 
on what is most manifest 
Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen 
they completely fill our sightless minds 
with treasures beyond all beauty." 

The anonymous *Book of Privy Counselling*, probably written sometime in the 15th century, likewise refers to God's "luminous darkness." In *The Dark Night of the Soul*, written in the 16th century, St. John of the Cross asks of his own work, "Why, if it is a divine light (for it illumines souls and purges them of their ignorances), does one call it a dark night?" The mystic answers this by way of analogy:

...the clearer and more obvious divine things are 
in themselves, the darker and more hidden they are 
to the soul naturally. The brighter the light 
the more an owl is blinded; and the more one looks 
at the brilliant sun, the more the sun darkens the 
faculty of sight, deprives it and overwhelms it 
in its weakness. 
Hence when the divine light of contemplation strikes 
souls not yet entirely illumined, it causes spiritual 
darkness.... 
This divine and dark light causes deep immersion of 
the mind in the knowledge and feeling of one's own 
miseries and evils; it brings all these miseries into 
relief so that the soul see clearly that of itself it 
will never possess anything else....

Most other Christian mystics prefer to use language drawn from ordinary life to describe this extraordinary Light. St. Symeon, the mystic "New Theologian" of the Eastern Orthodox church, wrote extensively at the turn of the first millennium (1000 CE) in an attempt to describe what this Divine Light is like. In *The Discourses*, Symeon acknowledges that God is "the Light that is ineffable, inaccessible." God shows Himself in "the form of an incomprehensible, inaccessible and formless light...; still, He appears clearly and is consciously known and clearly seen, though He is invisible." On the other hand, Symeon tells us unequivocally that
We bear witness that "God is light," and those to whom it has been granted to see Him have all beheld Him as light. Those who have received Him have received Him as light, because the light of His glory goes before Him, and it is impossible for him to appear without light. Those who have not seen His light have not seen Him, for He is the Light, and those who have not received the Light have not yet received grace...  

Symeon tells us that "the sudden flash" of Divine light "exposes every defilement of thought and deed." Therefore, if our souls were as pure as Christ's, "then the whole immaterial body of your soul will be full of light. But if the mind be evil, that is, darkened and extinguished, then this body of yours will be full of darkness." Hell, then, according to Symeon, is this "darkness of the soul." The mystic asks, "He who is blind in the eyes, how will he read the letters that are in the light when he does not see the light?" Similarly, "He who is blind in his mind and has not the mind of Christ... in himself, how can he consider the thoughts that are stored up in the light of Christ?" Symeon does "not think that such a person will ever be able to contemplate things that are spiritual, immaterial, and full of light in a place that is material and in darkness."  

Instead God only "imparts of His own brightness" to the extent that those who have entered into union with Him "have been purified." This is an inner vision; Christ "is not the light of the world as though he were seen by the senses, but as contemplated by the mind." The Lord might be called "light" and "sun," but "He is greater than every light and greater than the sun...." The saint knows that "you will enjoy the vision of Christ transfigured and shining more brightly than the sun...." Symeon tells us of his own encounter with the Light Divine:  

"...I perceived a Divine warmth. Then a small radiance that shone forth. Then a Divine breath from his words. Then a fire kindled in my heart, which caused constant tears to flow. After that a fine beam went through my mind more quickly than lightning. Then appeared to me as it were a light in the night and a small flaming cloud... What a marvel! At once I realized that He whom I had thought to be in heaven was within me...."  

In his search, Symeon had heard stories from others who had had similar experiences. The "apprentice of a venerable father" told stories of "divine illuminations sent from heaven to those engaged in the spiritual struggle, consisting of a flood of light, and conversations between God and man." A man the saint knew named George had a similar extraordinary experience:  

"...suddenly a flood of divine radiance appeared from above and filled all the room.... He saw nothing but light all around him and did not know if he was standing on the ground.... he was wholly in the presence of immaterial light and seemed to himself to have turned into light...."
Other Christian mystics relate stories that sound much the same as the ones we have just seen. Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th century nun, tells us that she had numerous visions of God. In the first one, she saw "a wonderfully beautiful image. It had a human form, and its countenance was of such beauty and radiance that I could have more easily gazed at the sun than at that face...." For Hildegard, God is "the true light that shone forth in eternity before the origin of everything." Jesus, the Word, "was the light that has never been concealed by a shadow... the principle of all order and the Light of all lights, and it gives light of itself." God told Hildegard that

...I, who am without beginning, am the fire by which
all fires are enkindled. I am the light that covers the
dark places so that they cannot grasp the light.
Therefore, light does not mingle with the dark places,
and therefore the darkness does not come to the light.12

Speaking of her visions, Hildegard tells us that

The light that I see is not bound by space. It is much,
much more light-filled than a cloud that carries the sun
in itself. There is nothing in it to recognize of height,
length, or breadth. It was described to me as the
"shadow of the living light"....13

For Hildegard, God "gleams with such splendour that its brilliance dazzles your eyes. For no-one -- so long as he or she is burdened by a mortal body -- can gaze upon the transcendent Godhead that illuminates everything." God is "the brightest of lights which can never be extinguished." 14

In turn, the light of God "gives light to all living things." Living creatures are "sparks from the radiation of God's brilliance, and these sparks emerge from God like rays of the sun.... For there is no creature without some kind of radiance -- whether it be greenness, seeds, buds, or another kind of beauty."15

John Ruusbroek, writing in the 14th century, echoed similar views. In "The Spiritual Espousals," this mystic says that "our Lord Jesus Christ... is a beam of eternal light, a ray of God's glory, and a spotless mirror in which all things have their life." For Ruusbroek, the light of Christ's glory is "infinite, incomprehensible, inaccessible, and fathomless, transcending all created light and every finite concept...." Beyond natural light, however, lies a dark abyss, and "in this darkness an incomprehensible light shines forth; this is the Son of God...." In contrast to everyday living, in which "all powers of understanding... are enlightened by merely created light are here like the eyes of a bat when confronted with the sun's brightness." But even though "God's resplendence shines there so brightly that all powers of reason and understanding are unable to go further... our spirit and God's spirit [do] cast a radiant light upon one another and... the two spirits incessantly strive after one another in love."16

The Venerable Marie of the Incarnation, in the 17th century, took this theme one step further. On one occasion, gazing before an altar, Marie had the sacred mystery of the Trinity flash before her. She said it was as if her soul "were suspended, and felt... an impression without form or figure, yet more clear and intelligible than any light.... My soul received the impression of this truth in an ineffable manner which deprived me of all speech; it was engulfed in this light." The venerable nun describes this newfound
relationship as "the mutual embraces of the soul and this most adorable Word who by the kisses of His divine mouth fills her with His spirit and with His life."\textsuperscript{17}

St. Catherine of Siena, in the 14th century, provides us with a prayer of thanks. Catherine thanks God that "in your light you have given me light." According to Catherine, God is

\begin{quote}
that light beyond all light who gives the mind's eye supernatural light in such fullness and perfection that you bring clarity even to the light of faith. In that faith I see that my soul has light, and in that light receives you who are Light....
...you yourself answered and satisfied me by flooding me with a gracious light, so that with that light I may return thanks to you....\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Gregory Palamas, an Eastern Orthodox mystic also writing in the 14th century, expresses views similar to the others. "The human mind," says Gregory, can "attain to that [Divine] light," and "become worthy of a supernatural vision of God." That vision, though "marvellous," is nonetheless "incomprehensible" and "unnameable." Still, the mind can contemplate the "creative and primordial beauty," and become "illumined by the radiance of God." Those who are judged worthy of this vision "are initiated unto Him, for He is Himself deifying light...." Christ is "indeed the true light, the radiance of glory," that "will remain for eternity, and has existed from the beginning."\textsuperscript{19}

Teresa of Avila, a 16th century saint, provides us with a wonderful metaphor of the Divine Light. St. Teresa tells us that "the brilliance of this inner vision is like an infused light coming from a sun covered by something as sparkling as a properly cut diamond." It is as if one were "shown another light so different from earth's light that if he were to spend his whole life trying to imagine that light,... he would be unable to do so." We encounter this light in the "Interior Castle" -- the soul. The soul is capable of reflecting the radiance of God "as is crystal capable of reflecting the sun's brilliance." Teresa wants us to know about the beauty and glory of the vision of God, and the consequences of rejecting him:

\begin{quote}
consider what it would mean to this so brilliantly shining and beautiful castle, this pearl from the Orient, this tree of life planted in the very living waters of life -- that is, in God -- to fall into mortal sin; there's no darker darkness nor anything more obscure and black....\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Reference to the Divine Light is also a major feature in the literature of the Society of Friends (Quakers). This is particularly true of the writings of George Fox, who founded the movement in the 17th century. In his personal journal, Fox claimed that "the Lord God hath opened to me by his invisible power... the divine light of Christ; and I saw it shine through all...." Unsure of the full meaning of this experience at first, Fox decided to start "searching the Scriptures." He discovered that many notable people before him had witnessed the same thing; indeed "that Light and Spirit which was before Scripture... led the holy men of God."\textsuperscript{21}

Through the ministry that followed his luminous vision, Fox turned his attention to showing this Light to others. At a "great meeting" that he had attended, Fox
Fox also tells us that this Light is to be found within ourselves: "take heed and hearken to the light within you, which is the light of Christ and of God." Once people perceive this inner light, they will be able to see both "their sins and Christ their Savior." Expanding on this theme, we read that when we see the Light we will be able to see clearly "all sin and evil and corruption that are contrary to it." Once one's "evil words and deeds and sins" have been thus highlighted, Christ, from whence the Light came, would come to "save them from their sins and to blot it out."

Some people evidently challenged Fox's preaching, claiming that the light of which he spoke was simply a natural light. Fox responded that the natural, created, made light is the sun, moon, and stars and this outward light. And dost thou say that God sent John [the Baptist] to bear witness to the sun, moon, and stars which are the made lights?

...For John came to bear witness to the light which was the life in the Word, by which all the natural lights were made and created.... And in him, to wit, the Word, was life; and that life was the light of men.

Also in the 17th century, Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme had powerful and compelling experiences with the Divine Light. Boehme argued that the Light and even the wrath and fire of God ought to, and once did, operate together harmoniously. However, "lord Lucifer... saw the Son of God, and fell in love with that high light, and moved and stirred himself so very much, intending to be equal with him, or indeed to be higher and brighter than he...." Consequently, "...when a creature elevateth itself too high or too much (as Lord Lucifer and this legions did), then the light extinguisheth or goeth out, and the fierce, wrathful and hot source, the source of the hellish fire, riseth up...." For this "Lucifer... was spewed out with his fire-spirit into the outermost nature, wherein he had kindled the wrath-fire." Thus this region now exists as a "house of death and hell, also an eternal, base, loathsome habitation for the kingdom of Lucifer, and for all Godless men." As we might expect from a Protestant mystic, it is an individual's task to reject the Devil and return to the Divine love and light through the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Boehme rhetorically asks, "O noble Light, and bright Glory, who can apprehend thy exceeding beauty?.... Shall I compare with the love of this world? No, that is but a mere dark valley to it." This Light, this "all-conquering love of God is... brighter than the sun...." Boehme tells us that "there is assuredly a pure glorious heaven " above, "in which God's Being together with that of the holy angels springs up very purely, brightly, beauteously, and joyfully...." For this mystic, "the Son of God is the light or source and fountain of joy...." The "Father's power... generateth the light... and is called, the Son."

Regarding the "spirit of man," Boehme believes that "there is hidden therein a spark of the light and power of God." Indeed, "in its substance the soul is a magical fire-source, out of God the Father's nature." This creates in man "a great desire for light, even as God the Father desires his heart, as the light's centrum." Thus when the soul is kindled or enlightened by the Holy Ghost, then it triumpheth in the body, like a
huge fire, which maketh the heart and reins tremble for joy." 39
Christianity

As with other major religions of the world, Christianity has a rich body of literature dealing with Divine Light and ecstasy. The material in the Hebrew Bible (referred to as the Old Testament by Christians) has been dealt with already in the section on Judaism, so it does not need to be repeated here. Like the "Old Testament," the Christian New Testament has several references that identify God as Light. The early theologians of the church also make such references. By far and large, however, the greatest number of references to Divine Light and ecstasy are made by the Christian mystics.

The Christian tradition as a whole focuses on the birth, life, death, and resurrection of a man named Jesus. Jesus was born a Jew, probably in Nazareth, around 4 BC (tradition would say 0). The story of Jesus is told in the New Testament which, together with the Old Testament, forms the Christian Bible. Jesus is said to have cured the sick, and preached the love of God; of one's self; one's neighbour -- even one's enemies. The New Testament tells us that Jesus is the Christ, i.e., the Messiah; he is also referred to as the Son of God, and King of the Jews.

These last two mentioned titles likely got him into trouble with both Jewish and Roman authorities. Jewish religious leaders would have objected to any claim to divinity by a human, and the Romans would have considered anyone who was referred to as King an insurrectionist -- only the Roman emperor could make such a claim. Exactly who wanted Jesus dead the most is a matter of historical debate, but at any rate he was crucified for what he said and for what others said about him. He died on the cross, and according to tradition was resurrected from the dead.

This fundamental belief in Jesus' triumph over death leads Christians to believe that Jesus was and is indeed the Son of God, and has the power to grant anyone eternal life. Although sects differ as to exactly what an individual needs to do to accomplish this, we find here a radical departure from the Jewish tradition of the day: non-Jews are now encouraged to enter the fold. Further, Christians-to-be do so not by following Jewish tradition, but by seeking salvation from Jesus.

Extending itself beyond its Judaic roots helps explain why Christianity was able to spread so widely -- everyone was now eligible to become a member. In spite of persecution by Roman authorities for the first few centuries of its existence, sometimes severe persecution, the new faith persisted. A change of fortune came in the early 4th century when the Roman emperor Constantine declared Christianity a religion to be tolerated in the empire. Christianity was henceforth able to exist and thrive even after the fall of Rome.

In 589, the church experienced a major split. The Western (now Catholic) church maintained that God's Holy Spirit emanated from both the Father and the Son, all operating within a single Trinity of Godhead. The Eastern (Orthodox) church accepted the Trinity, but rejected the concept of the emanation of the Spirit from the Son. Another dispute involved the veneration of icons, a practice that the Western church regarded as idolatry. The Eastern church responded that icons are for the illiterate as books are for those
who can read. At any rate reconciliation was not forthcoming, and the two branched off to become the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches.

Another major split came in the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation. Protestants reject the primacy of the Pope as head of the church, encourage a direct personal relationship between humans and God, and tend to emphasize familiarity with the Bible as opposed to participation in the sacraments. Protestant churches are many and varied, but as a group constitute one of the three great branches of Christianity.

Today, Christianity has the largest number of adherents of any religion in the world. Christian churches predominate in Europe, and in North and South America.

Christian mysticism has its roots in the Bible, although such references are not extensive. It also exists, albeit infrequently, with the Church Fathers. Traditionally, Christian mysticism as a category begins with Pseudo-Dionysius, a monk of the Eastern church whose writings date from about 500. The great volumes of Christian mysticism are found in medieval Europe, especially in the Catholic tradition, but also in Eastern Orthodoxy. Mystical encounters in Protestantism are quite extensive as far as joy in Christ is concerned, and occasional references to the Divine Light can also be found.
The Christian Path to the Divine Light

To experience God, Christian mystics largely adhere to practices that are common to the larger, non-mystical tradition. St. Symeon says that we will become worthy of the vision of Christ "when we have kept God's commandments," so that our hearts "be cleansed by tears and penitence." Symeon emphasises the need to repent from evil ways, "for penitence is the gateway that leads out of darkness into light." Accordingly, "repentance gives rise to the tear from the depths of the soul; the tear cleanses the heart and wipes away great sins." But even beyond "many tears," the mystic's path requires "strict solitude, and perfect obedience, with complete elimination of [one's] own will...." Even so, it is "those whom grace raises above the law" who "consciously receive in themselves the grace of divine light."57

In addition, of course, the "ascetic art" requires "the contemplation of the light." Symeon also highly recommends "an experienced guide or spiritual father, in order that one may learn the things that pertain to virtue and the difficult practice of the ascetic art." But even doing all these things to achieve this "ecstasy in the light," at best, one can only qualify oneself as "worthy;" the rest is a matter of divine grace.58

Gregory Palamas tells us that "intellectual illumination" is "visible to those whose hearts have been purified." As with Symeon, the "divine and inconceivable light" will only be seen by those "judged worthy." People "can only unite themselves to it and see if they have purified themselves by fulfilment of the commandments, and by consecrating their mind to pure and immaterial prayer...." One is able to see the Light "when the soul ceases to give way to the evil pleasures and passions, when it acquires inner peace and the stillness of thoughts, spiritual repose and joy, contempt of human glory, humility allied with a hidden rejoicing, hatred of the world, [and] the love of the sole God of Heaven."59

John Ruusbroek says that we must first die to ourselves, then be "born again" in order to achieve the mystic experience. In the darkness of sin, being without God, "though living he dies...." Once one surrenders one's will to the blissful Divine light, "though dying he comes back to life." When one is "in the abyss of this darkness in which the loving spirit has died to itself... an incomprehensible light is born and shines forth...." We must still practice "spiritual exercises" so that we can "escape all temptations, all outbursts of emotion, and all the incitements of flesh and blood." Beyond that, those who "place more faith, hope and trust in God than in their exercises and works will be raised up above their rational understanding to the divine light." For those who try all that but fail because of human weaknesses, "then it falls on the fathomless goodness of God to bring the work to completion." Through this divine act of grace, "God bestows his light, and through that light the person responds with a free and perfect conversion."60
Teresa of Avila emphasizes that "the door to this [soul] castle is prayer." Hildegard of Bingen spent a good part of her productive life composing spiritual songs that are still widely listened to today. For Hildegard, "the holy prophets... composed not only psalms and hymns... but also invented many musical instruments as sonorous accompaniments." They did this "so that human beings would..., with thoughts of heavenly bliss,... be enticed to praise God."62

For George Fox, one essential first step is to believe in the Light in order to become a "child of the Light." By "believing in the Light, you shall not abide in the darkness, but shall have the Light of life and come... to witness the Light that shines in our hearts." However, the Scriptural message, and having someone exhort the need to turn to the Light, are also important. On one occasion, after about three hours of preaching, Fox said that

...at last I felt the power of the Lord went over them all and the Lord's everlasting life and truth shined over all. And the Scriptures were opened to them and their objections answered in their minds and every one of them turned to the light of Christ, the heavenly man, that with it they might all see their sins and see their saviour....64

According to Fox, we need to witness the Light and the Spirit before we can hope to "know God, or Christ, or the Spirit aright...." Once witnessed, the Light allows us to see all "our evil ways, and deeds, and words...." If we love this light, "it will teach [us] righteousness and holiness." For this founder of the Society of Friends, the belief in and love of the Light is essential to living a holy and righteous life.

Jacob Boehme, again true to his Lutheran heritage, tells us that one "may not see God unless he is born anew." After we die, provided that we haven't gone the way of the Devil, Boehme tells us that when we "breakest through the death of the flesh, then thou seest the living God.... the life of the light in God riseth up in the dead or mortal flesh, and generateth to itself, from or out of the dead, another heavenly or living body, which knoweth and understandeth the light." Similarily,

...if thou in the spirit breakest through the death of the flesh, then thou seest the hidden God. For the mortal flesh belongs not to the moving of life, so it cannot receive or conceive the Life of the Light as proper to itself; but the Life of the Light in God rises up in the flesh and generates to itself, from out of it, another, a heavenly and living body, which knows and understands the Light....

Even before death, Boehme tells us that one can see God. To do this, "with the inward eyes we must see in his light: so we shall see him, for he is the Light; and when we see him then we walk in the light." Also, if one were to "liftest up thy thoughts" and "consider where God is.... And when by faith thou drawest near to God who rules in holiness in this dominion, then thou layest hold on him in his holy Heart." When this is done, says Boehme, "then thou art as God is...."

These various means of getting closer to the divine light and its ecstasy are not mutually exclusive, of course; it is more a question of emphasis. We can often find elements of a point that one mystic or saint emphasizes as a sub-theme in another. Generally, the message is that people can do certain things to help qualify themselves for the Divine encounter, but ultimately the choice of whether one will participate in the light and joy of God is a Divine perogative.
Unmistakable in all of these Christian encounters with Divine light and ecstasy are the distinct parallels with the other traditions that we have looked at already. The variations in the description of the experience generally revolve around the name we call it, and what it means. The closer we get to a description of the experience itself, however, the more similar the accounts become. Regardless of the time period, or the culture, the continuity of this extraordinary phenomenon persists in a strikingly similar fashion.
The Ecstasy

By contrast, say all the mystics, life in the presence of God is not only full of light, but supreme joy and bliss. Teresa of Avila tells us that union with God "is above all earthly joys, above all delights, above all consolations, and still more than that." As with Marie of the Incarnation, St. Teresa says that the "soul is left so much in love that it does for its part all it can to avoid disturbing this divine betrothal." God gives the soul "raptures... true raptures." This "quick rapture of the spirit... is such that the spirit truly seems to go forth from the body." Once experienced the person wants to tell everyone, "for the joy is so excessive the soul wouldn't want to enjoy it alone." Almost every time God shows himself "the soul is in rapture."40

John Ruusbroek says that in "meeting the light, the heart experiences so much delight that it cannot contain itself but bursts out in a cry of joy... of jubilation." The heart "swims in a state of bliss...." In "this light the spirit immerses itself in a rest of pure bliss... blissful love." The encounter brings "consolation, peace, joy, beauty, riches, and everything else that brings delight is revealed in God to the enlightened reason without measure...." Union with God brings about "blissful unity." Beyond this, if one "wishes to penetrate further into this blissful love with his active love, all the powers of his soul will give way and will have to suffer and endure the penetrating truth and goodness which is God himself."41

Hildegard lets us know that the just "love God of whom they can never have too much but from whom they have bliss forever and ever." By comparison, "there is no true joy in sinning," but "just as God has established heaven in the full joy of heavenly things,... the soul accomplishes in joy its good deeds of a heavenly nature." Further, God "wished to bring humanity back to the bliss of heaven." In one vision, the "Lord of the Universe" told Hildegard that he would show her "the bliss of eternal life." Ever since her childhood days, these visions "brought joy to [her] soul."42

St. Symeon states quite plainly that he who "perceives the light in his soul... is in ecstasy." Symeon felt "a great spiritual joy... the ineffable joy of that Light." When the Divine Light appears, "it fills one with joy," and carries one "up to heaven." The "infinite light of His gracious Godhead" brings "unutterable and unending joy." To "live with the ineffable light" also means to live with "joy unspeakable." When Symeon's friend George had his vision of the light, described earlier, George was "filled with tears and with ineffable joy and gladness." For Symeon, as well, the vision of God brings "joy and consolation." This "unexpected marvel" filled his "heart with joy, so much so that it seemed to me as though my body partook of that unspeakable grace."43

George Fox likewise makes frequent reference to the wondrous joy that accompanies the luminous Divine encounter. The light of God turns the mind into a dwelling place "of endless joy and peace."44 Through "power and light you will see God," and "through which your hearts will be filled with God's love."45 Moreover, the power and love of God "will be your joy and refreshment."46 For Fox, to "live and walk in the spirit of God is joy, peace and life."47

Jacob Boehme similarly contends that "heaven is a pleasant palace of joy."48 Within the Divine Trinity of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, "The Son of God... is the moving springing joy in all the
powers of the Father, and shineth in the Father." This means that "paradise is the divine joy... the unutterable joy of God." To encounter God is to encounter an "elevating, penetrating spirit, a triumphing or joy, an elevating source of laughing." While this kind of "rapturous state rarely continueth long," when it does,

"Oftentimes when his soul eateth of the divine love-essence, it bringeth to him an exulting triumph, and a divine taste into the temperament itself. So that the whole body is affected and even trembleth for joy, being lifted up to such a degree of divine sensation, as if it was on the very borders of paradise."

Other Christian mystics concur with these assessments. Gregory of Palamas says that "through the mysterious sweetness of his vision he is ravished beyond all objects." Catherine of Siena writes that with "that light I sense my soul once again becoming drunk!" Marie of the Incarnation says that she would need "the powers of the Seraphim... to be able to narrate what transpired in this ecstasy and rapture of love." Thomas Merton, a 20th century mystic, speaks of "our joy in the bosom of the serene darkness in which His light holds us absorbed." This "joy of emptiness, of nothingness,... is the true light that shines in everyone... It is the light of Christ."
Terrifying Encounters

Not all Divine encounters are as pleasant as the ones described in the preceding chapters. In fact, some are downright horrible. In accounts of near-death experiences, only a few rare cases of terrifying or "hellish" reports have been noted, in sharp contrast to the more positive variety. Frightening Divine encounters are also relatively rare in the world's mystical literature, but it can be found. In the scriptures of the world's major religions, however, we find that hellish or frightening encounters are at least as common as the blissful luminous vision.

The issue of the validity of "hellish" NDEs was first raised by Maurice Rawlings, initially in Beyond Death's Door (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1978), and more recently in To Hell and Back (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993). Rawlings contends that positive NDE accounts have been overemphasized to the point that negative ones are ignored. In fact, says Rawlings, some people who have an NDE actually go to "Hell" before being resuscitated! For example, when one patient's heart beat stopped, he later reported that he

... was floating, pitch black, moving fast. The wind whistled by and I rushed toward this beautiful, blazing light. As I moved past, the walls of the tunnel nearest the light caught fire. Beyond the blazing tunnel a huge lake of fire was burning like an oil spill. A hill on the far side was covered with slabs of rock. Elongated shadows showed that people were moving aimlessly about, like animals in a zoo enclosure.

An old stone building was on the right, mostly rubble, with different levels of openings crammed with people trying to move about.

Down the hall I saw an old friend who had died. The last I recall, they were dragging the river for him; he had been involved with gambling. I yelled to him, "Hi there Jim!" He just looked at me. Didn't even smile. They were talking to him around the corner when he started screaming. I ran, but there was no way out. I kept saying "Jesus is God." Over and over I would say, "Jesus is God."

Someway, somehow, I got back as you were putting in the stitches. I loved every one of those stitches. Only God could have gotten me out of a mess like that. I'll never forget it. 1

For Rawlings, this is one of several examples that indicate not only that Hell exists, but that the Devil can portray himself as a Being of Light. All the positive near-death accounts, then, are not necessarily to be taken at face value. The impression of "salvation for all" that the luminous spirit leaves could very well be a trick of the Devil to keep people from accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Other experiencers reported that they had the impression that they went straight to a hell-like environment in a brush with death. As George Godkin of Alberta, Canada reported in 1948:
I was guided to the place of the spirit world called Hell. This is a place of punishment for all those who reject Jesus Christ. I not only saw Hell, but felt the torment that all who go there will experience.

Another patient, who had more than one near-death experience, discovered on the first one "snakes and fires and things so horrible that it resulted in a religious awakening." After having converted to Christianity, this person had a second clinical death that "produced a wonderful, heavenly experience, the one that he wanted in the first place." Similarly, a patient who was resuscitated at the Knoxville football stadium found himself

...moving through a vacuum as if life never ended, so black you could almost touch it. Black, frightening, and desolate. I was all alone somewhere in outer space.

I was in front of some kind of conveyor belt which carried huge pieces of puzzle in weird colours that had to be fitted together rapidly under severe penalty from an unseen force. I knew it was Hell, but there was no fire or heat or anything that I had expected.

I was alone, isolated from all sound, until I heard a mumbling, and I could vaguely see a kneeling form. It was my wife. She was praying at my bedside. I never wanted to be a Christian, but I sure am now. Hell is too real.

Religious sources, of course, offer plenty of support for any contention that some otherworldly encounters are frightening. The Hebrew Bible (the Christian "Old Testament") is replete with such references. During the exodus from Egypt to Israel, Moses is said to have led his people to the top of mount Sinai to receive the ten commandments. They came to the mount,

And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled...

And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly (Ex. 19:16-18, KJV).

This God who appears in smoke and fire was even more terrifying to His enemies. Because of the misdeeds of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, the latter received "brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven," to the point that when the Hebrew patriarch Abraham looked "toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain,...the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace" (Gen. 19:24, 28). Just prior to leading the ancient Hebrews out of captivity in Egypt, "the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire ran along upon the ground; and the LORD rained hail upon the land of Egypt." Through this action God killed "all that was in the field, both man and beast; and...every herb of the field..." (Ex. 9:23).

In the Book of Job, God permitted Satan to destroy the family and possessions of a righteous man named Job, and inflict Job himself with boils all over his body. God answered Job's cries for an answer to his plight "out of the whirlwind" (Job 38:1). God posed the righteous man with a series of questions,
on how a measly mortal could possibly understand the ways of the LORD. God inquired of Job,

Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook?...
Who can open the doors of his face? his teeth are terrible round about....
Out of his mouth go burning lamps, and sparks of fire leap out.
Out of his nostrils goeth smoke, as out of a seething pot or caldron.
His breath kindleth coal, and a flame goeth out of his mouth (Job 41:1, 14, 19-21).

The point of this interrogation, of course, was to impress upon Job the might of God. If Leviathan is a creature of awesome horror, then how much more powerful must the LORD then be, to be able to "draw out Leviathan with a hook?" Moreover, Satan appears as one of many in the celestial court, and does not inflict evil except as God allows. In the Book of Job, as elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures, the fearful omnipotence of God is far beyond the comprehension of humans, even beyond the most terrifying of His adversaries.

In the New Testament gospels, Jesus preached a message of love and peace. However, in the book of Revelation, the cosmic Christ is identified with the terrifying warrior God of the Hebrew testament. The Son of God has "eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass" (Rev. 2:18; cf. Dan. 10:6). The seer of the New Testament had a vision in which

... heaven opened and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.
His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns, and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself.
And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called the Word of God.
And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.
And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God (Rev. 19:11-15).

These heavenly forces are pitted against those of a horrible beast, "a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads." This dragon is identified with "that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world...." For the discerning, the author of the New Testament book gives a clue as to the identity of the beast: "...it is the number of a man, and his number is six hundred threescore and six" (666) (Rev. 12:3, 9; 13:18). Divine forces are foretold to be victorious eventually, with the beast and those who worshipped his image to be "cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone" (Rev. 19:21).

It is difficult to imagine a more terrifying conflict in which to be embroiled. Many modern scholars suggest that this is a cosmic representation of a battle taking place at the time of writing, between the Christian branch of Judaism and the Roman empire. As with Rev. 17:9, "the seven heads are seven
mountains,..." i.e., the seven hills of Rome. In Hebrew, letters have numerical equivalents, and "666" can be seen as the sum total of the numerals associated with the name "Nero Caesar" and perhaps those of other Roman emperors. It is quite possible that the New Testament writer believed that a cosmic conflict was also taking place, of which contemporary troubles were an earthly manifestation. At any rate it is clear that some Biblical writers viewed the Divine encounter as being at least as terrifyingly awesome as a demonic vision.

The Islamic tradition makes frequent reference to hell as the abode of evil-doers. Followers are given vivid outlines of the pleasures following death for those who follow Allah, and equally graphic descriptions of the horrors of hell for those who don't. The Qur'an says that "for those who disbelieve, garments of fire will be cut out for them; boiling fluid will be poured down on their heads" (Surah XXII, 19). Hell is a place where transgressors find both "a boiling and an ice-cold draught" (Surah XXXVIII, 58). Winds are "scorching" and water "scalding" (Surah LVI, 42). The downcast evil-doers will be

Toiling, weary,
Scorched by burning fire,
Drinking from a boiling spring,
No food for them save bitter thorn-fruit
Which doth not nourish nor release from hunger
(Surah LXXXVIII, 3-7).

The enemies of the gods in Hinduism likewise have plenty to reckon with. In a hymn to Agni, the "god with fiery jaws," we find that his "flames are impetuous and violent; they are terrible and not to be withstood." The worshipper pleads with Agni to "always burn down the sorcerers... every ghoul." Similarly in the Atharva-Veda, a warrior calls upon the god Indra, and Indra's companions Arbudi and Nyarbudi to help in a military campaign:

Thy thunderbolt, O Indra,... shall advance,
crushing the enemies. Slay them that resist,
pursue, or flee, deprive their schemes of fulfillment!...
The arms, the arrows, and the might of the bows; the swords, the axes, the weapons, and the artful scheme that is in our mind... do thou make our enemies see, and spectres also make them see!
(And also make them see)... the spooks with fourfold teeth, black teeth, testicles like a pot, bloody faces, who are inherently frightful, and terrifying!...
Dissolved, crushed, slain shall the enemy lie,
O Nyarbudi! May victorious sprites, with fiery tongues and smoky crests, go with (our) army!

In the Bhagavad-Gita, the vision of a god of light is at once magnificent and terrifying. The mortal Arjuna has the following to say about the god Varuna:

http://lovinglight.com/bbain/terrifying/terrifying.htm
Seeing your mighty form with many mouths and eyes
O mighty armed, with many arms, thighs, feet
With many bellies and many terrible tusks
The worlds quake with fear and I do too....

I see your mouths, terrible with tusks
Resembling the fire of time the destroyer...\(^7\)

To this, Arjuna's Lord and God responded that He indeed is "time, destroyer of worlds."\(^8\)

Certain texts in Buddhism define the fate of those who reject scriptural authority. Such evil doers shall be assigned to "Avici Hell." The woes of this afterlife encounter is described in vivid detail:

Having died in this form,
They shall be endowed with
the bodies of monster serpents,...
Deaf, stupid and legless,
Wriggling about on their bellies
By little insects
Pecked at and eaten,
Day and night suffering woe
And enjoying no respite.
For maligning this scripture
They shall suffer punishments
such as these.\(^9\)

One of the major philosophical problems raised by all of these terrifying accounts is that we are never really sure whether the forces behind them are divine, demonic, or simply imaginary. The benign "being of light" in near-death experiences, for example, could be just Satan in disguise. On the other hand, in the scriptural accounts, God (or the gods) is (are) presented as being at both loving and dreadful. If both God and his cosmic adversaries are capable of presenting themselves as a loving light or as a fiery fearsome warrior, proper identification of one or the other is left in serious doubt. One wonders how the horrifying nature of these kinds of Divine encounters and hellish abodes could possibly fit with the same traditions that simultaneously espouse the existence of a benign and loving Being of Light. Which, if either, of these versions of the experience of God represents the true nature of Divinity?

Christian mystic Jacob Boehme developed an intriguing theology that attempts to explain these apparent contradictions. In the beginning, says Boehme, God was a unitary entity consisting of both loving light and fiery wrath. The wrath, however, was held in harmonious balance with the love and light. But then Lucifer, in the beginning one of God's most beautiful light-angels, decided that he wanted to be equal to or greater than Christ the Light. The greedy divine adversary utilized the fiery wrath of God in order to achieve his goal. However, because "the devil... was created in heaven, and carried the source of darkness in himself and brought himself completely into the darkness of the world, light is now painful for him.... Because he will not help to direct God's joyous drama he must now direct in God's wrathful drama and be an enemy to God."\(^{10}\) Thus, the devil became the prince of darkness and of a fiery hell. As we might well
imagine, this "fire in the darkness is a fire of anguish, and is antagonistic, and painful in its essence."\textsuperscript{11}

Boehme goes on to tell us that we experience hell in our own souls. For Boehme, "all sorrow, anguish and fear concerning spiritual things, proceedeth from the soul." This is because the soul is trapped, as it were, in the body. This "poor soul is entered into a strange lodging.... Whereby that fair creature is obscured and defaced, and is also held captive therein, as in a dark dungeon."\textsuperscript{12}

The mystic then explains that the soul is but a small particle, or microcosm of Divinity. Like the cosmic version of heaven and hell, the soul is partitioned, wherein "...the eternal darkness in the soul is hell, a source of anguish, which is called God's wrath; and the eternal light in the soul is the kingdom of heaven, where the fiery, dark anguish has been changed into joy."\textsuperscript{13} Hell is experienced when we lose sight of the light, "for when the light is extinguished, thou standest in the darkness. Within the darkness the wrath of God is concealed, and if thou awakenest it, then it burns in thee."\textsuperscript{14}

This is not to say, however, that we should be afraid of or run from these kinds of frightening images. Rather, a person

\begin{quote}
...should not be discouraged, dismayed, and distrustful, when the gates of hell and God's wrath meet him and present themselves before him.... We must suffer the Devil to domineer, rush and roar over us.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Interestingly, the Tibetan Book of the Dead offers similar advice to those who experience terrifying encounters after we die. We should not be afraid of the images that are before us; instead, we ought to face them to overcome them. In the Tibetan text we encounter a horrifying creature known as the "Great Glorious Buddha-Heruka," who is

\begin{quote}
dark brown of colour; with three heads, six hands, and four feet...; the body emitting flames of radiance; the nine eyes widely opened, in terrifying gaze; the eyebrows quivering like lightning; the protruding teeth glistening and set over one another;... the heads adorned with dried [human] skulls...; black serpents and raw [human] heads forming a garland for the body; the first of the right hands holding a wheel, the middle one, a sword, the last one, a battle-axe...\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Despite the fearsome characteristics of this apparition, the Book of the Dead makes it clear that we should "fear that not" and "be not awed." Visions can be expected following death, and is simply "the embodiment of thine own intellect." Rather, we should recognize it to be "the Bhagavan Vairochana, the Father-Mother. Simultaneously with recognition, liberation will be attained..."\textsuperscript{17} This will allow the person to achieve at-one-ness with the deity, and achieve Buddhahood.
In fact, if we are frightened by such images, and flee from them, then we are inviting the "blood-drinking [deities] of the Vajra Order." Similar in some respects to the former creature, these entities are "dark-blue in colour, with three faces, six hands, and four feet firmly postured; in the first hand [holding] a dorje, in the middle [one] a skull bowl...." Like the last creature, this one is simply "the embodiment of thine own intellect." Again we should "be not terrified," but believe in them as the Father and Mother and in doing so achieve Buddhahood. Continuing to fear these creatures sets one into a rather vicious cycle of encountering more and more horrible creatures, and not being able to achieve Buddhahood.

Christian mystic St. John of the Cross also says that we might very well expect to encounter a hellish darkness or fire before we see the light of God. This is sometimes necessary in order to purge the soul. By way of analogy, John tells us that "the loving knowledge or divine light we are speaking of has the same effect on a soul that fire has on a log of wood":

_The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as (the) wood is prepared for transformation into (the) fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and making it give off any water it contains. Then it gradually burns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odor. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents that are contrary to fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as the fire itself...._19

Both the Christian mystics and the Tibetan Book of the Dead offer some intriguing insights into the phenomenon of hellish experiences. We find that such frightening images can be overcome, and should not be feared. Frightening experiences in a religious or near-death context can be faced bravely so that a person can move on to a more positive state of being.

Interestingly, while these negative images have parallels across traditions, the same cannot be said for "hellish" near-death experiences. In the latter case, there are relatively few reports. Rawlings' examples come primarily from evangelical Christians. This would suggest that near-death accounts of this sort are culturally bound, and probably reflect the expectations of the experiencer. While negative near-death experiences clearly have strong parallels with several major religious traditions, there is not as yet sufficient grounds to support their existence as a common human experience associated with dying. In the words of psychologist Kenneth Ring, who affirms the cross-cultural reality of the more positive variety of near-death experiences, the negative versions "merely reflect the fact that hell is actually the experience of an illusory separative ego fighting a phantom battle."20
A New Focus for the Future

With modern accounts of near-death experiences and the wealth of world religious traditions at our disposal, we are now in a position to propose refocussing our attention on spiritual experiences themselves, not just specific religious interpretations of them. This is not to minimize or attempt to make redundant the differences between traditions; without differences, human expressions of spirituality would not be nearly as rich. However, the differences are abundant and often readily apparent. The common thread, the truth that binds, is more elusive and difficult to define. The thread is there, though, and this is where humanity desperately needs to direct its efforts now.

This approach is necessary because the modern Western preoccupation with materialism has left the present generation increasingly devoid of spiritual meaning. This sounds cliché by now, but it is more true than ever. And why not? Material reality appears to be so real, so consistent. Spirituality in the form of religion or even philosophy changes drastically from tradition to tradition and from person to person. What makes one tradition or spiritual philosophy better than the other? The purely materialistic world view, on the other hand, does not need to prove or demonstrate the existence of any truth beyond that which we can see, hear, touch, taste or smell. It is no wonder, then, that such an obvious world view as materialism has gained so many adherents.

Spiritual world views still exist, though, and in many forms. It is this author's contention that these persist, and will continue to persist, because of spiritual experiences. Such experiences come in a variety of forms, but typically are enough to transform one's view of reality. The mystical experience, in particular -- of which the near-death experience is one form -- is the one that we have examined and will now use to "sew the thread" of a common human spirituality.

Mystics often say that the mystical experience is extremely rare. That very well might be true, if we expect to find exactly the same experience, let alone exactly the same interpretation of the experience, in every reported instance. Viewed more broadly, however, the mystical experience in all its forms might very well be much more common than is generally assumed.

Mystical experiences range from a feeling of elevated spiritual joy to visions of Divinity to oneness with the universe. In this book that we have focused more specifically on the mystic encounter with light and ecstasy. We have seen that this aspect of mysticism is directly parallel to the kinds of reports of an encounter with a "being of light" in the near-death experience. This demonstrates that the same experience can be found across cultures and throughout time. It also suggests that with the growing number of reports of near-death experiences, the phenomenon is not as rare as some might believe.

An even more common form of the mystical experience is that of spiritual ecstasy alone. If we just look at the component of ecstasy recorded in this book, the parallels with modern Christian revivalism are hard to ignore. In the latter movement, the experience of joy in Christ or the Holy Spirit is a cornerstone of the
movement. Revivalist, 'born-again' or 'charismatic' Christians report a depth of religious feeling that has to be considered at some level a form of mystical experience. Given that this form of religious expression is quite common, so too then must be this aspect of the mystical experience.

The interpretation of exactly what that experience means for that category of Christian is often, of course, at variance with the interpretation of others who have undergone the same kind of encounter. Nonetheless, reports of the phenomenon are found well beyond the Christian fold. Again this suggests that the experience itself is not so rare; it is more likely that specific interpretations of the experience that make an individual or a movement seem so unique or special.

One of the most common forms of the mystical experience, then, is the joyful encounter with a loving spiritual being -- the kind so often reported in various forms of religious revivalism. Related to this, although not quite as common, is the encounter with Divine Light, as we have seen throughout this book. Probably the least common is the complete union of the soul with the Divine, of which we have seen some notable examples in this book.

Other phenomena, such as the perceived separation of the soul from the body, might very well be included as aspects of the mystical experience. These are all part of a journey toward a single end: spiritual communion with the Divine. The vision of spiritual light and the feeling of ecstasy lets us know that the Divine not only exists, but exists in resplendent and loving glory. Union allows us to catch a glimpse of what very well might be the final resting place of humanity, the soul's ultimate destination.

This leads us back to the concept of the self which was brought up by Susan Blackmore in the previous chapter. In the final analysis, there might very well not be an "eternal" human soul, as Blackmore suggests. If we become truly and fully immersed in the Divine, this could not leave much room for personal identity. Blackmore was arguing in favour of a more immediate extinction of the personality, but since she raised Buddhist philosophy in support of her contention that "there is no self," then we will examine that concept in the light of the larger Buddhist tradition.

Blackmore was, consciously or otherwise, quoting the views of the Theravada ("the school of the elders") sect of Buddhism. This an ancient but minority view in the Buddhist tradition. The majority view is found in Mahayana ("greater vehicle") Buddhism, who also agree that ultimately, there is no "self" as we perceive it in this life. Meanwhile, however, we do have perceptions in this life which not only seem real but which we have to work with, regardless of ultimate reality. One of these present realities is the concept of personal identity. The concept of self is perfectly acceptable as long as we are making any distinctions at all between ourselves and other things.

The extinction of the self in Mahayana Buddhism is very much like the identification of Atman and Brahman in the Hindu tradition, and similar to the union of the soul with God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Mahayana Buddhism, it is perfectly legitimate to worship God or the gods -- this will help draw us closer to the Ultimate Enlightenment. Once we do achieve enlightenment, however, both the gods and the self disappear, because we realize that all is One.

Blackmore was therefore making a "quantum" leap to that tenet of Buddhism that holds that ultimately, there is no self. This is a far cry from the conviction of the majority stream of Buddhism that says that as long as we are in this life and not One with the highest reality, the concept of the self is perfectly legitimate. Considerable qualification is needed, then, before we can accept Blackmore's contention that
the Buddha would support her claim that there is no soul to survive bodily death.

That being said, Blackmore does raise an interesting challenge to her opponents in the field of near-death phenomena because those who have undergone a near-death experience have not been "dead" for very long. What happens after this initial process? Does the perceived "disembodied soul" continue to exist in a separate existence, either in heaven or (heaven forbid) in hell forever? If we accept the doctrine of reincarnation, does this mean that we are going to be born, die, and be born again forever? Or, as Blackmore and others would have it, do we simply cease to exist the moment after we die?

An analysis of the mystical experience can help us understand and perhaps even reconcile the near-death experience with the major religious traditions of the world. Even in its most elementary form, the mystical experience is awesome, to say the least, as is the near-death experience. If we can imagine what it would be like to be as awe-struck as the experiencer, it is easy to see why someone might view this as some spiritual being that is much greater than and separate from oneself -- i.e., God. On the other hand, one might conclude that since this happened within oneself, then there might just be much more to oneself than previously assumed -- even to the point that Divinity resides within oneself.

Those who have a mystical experience while they are members of a given tradition are more than likely to interpret the experience within the doctrine of the tradition concerned. This often leads to an identification of the experience with the interpretation, e.g. "God's Holy Spirit has come to me," or "I have experienced nirvana." Unfortunately, too strict an adherence to an all-encompassing interpretation of such a deeply felt experience can lead to fundamentalism, intolerance, and even cultism. The near-death phenomenon is particularly refreshing this way, because the focus is still on the experience itself, and the interpretations generally make reference to the pure experience. Such a focus would be very helpful in breathing new spiritual and intellectual life into religion.

After all, if profound spiritual experiences do not have relevance in religion, than what does? All major religious traditions have plenty of examples of these occurrences, both historically and more than likely even within their own memberships. Further, by looking at the religious experiences of traditions other than one's own, we would see how others could develop different ways of looking at a common spiritual source.

Clearly some religious experiences exist other than mystical ones. Some are downright terrifying, others visionary without any relation to the mystical vision. The mystical experience is only unique because the language used to describe it is so similar from tradition to tradition. Near-death experiences are largely consistent with mystical accounts, which speaks well for the continuity of the phenomenon. If we can broaden near-death research to include more fully the religious mystical experience, then we can deepen our understanding of both fields. And if we keep both fields focused on the experience itself, then we might very well come up with new and better interpretations of it.

Meanwhile, recognizing a common human spirituality has great personal and social value. For the individual, this might very well be the sense of spiritual meaning that so many find lacking in a materialistic society. For society, it means a removal of the veil of bigotry that has characterized too many religious movements for far too long. Society would grow to appreciate our common spiritual heritage as we share our experiences, while being able to respect the various ways that we interpret them.
Near-Death Experiences in Retrospect

By now it should be abundantly apparent that the positive human encounter with Divinity -- with light and ecstasy -- spans cultures and the ages. Whether it be a Hindu yogi centuries before Christ was born, or a middle class, not especially religious person in the United States, the phenomenon continues to be reported in surprisingly similar terms. While there is no firm agreement on exactly what -- or who -- it might be that the experiencer encounters, it can be said that the person considers it to be profoundly real; the ultimate; the experience par excellence. For the Jew, Christian or Muslim it is God. For the Hindu it is the discovery of the true soul (Atman), which happens to be identical with the true God (Brahman). Buddhists refer to it as the Ultimate Reality; nirvana; the Clear Light of the Void, or Buddha. A modern near-death experiencer might well also believe that he or she has encountered God, or the person might simply use more descriptive terminology such as "an unconditionally loving Being of Light." Divinity, of course, means different things to different people. The description of the experience itself, however, remains remarkably consistent no matter who is telling it.

However, the near-death experience has not gained general acceptance by scientists and academics as being any sort of an encounter with the Divine by a "soul" that survives death. In fact, a fairly extensive literature has developed criticizing contending the contrary. The trouble with these critics, though, is that not all agree on exactly what the cause of the experience might be. Theories range from the influence of an unusual flow of brain chemicals; to the reaction of the dying brain to reduced levels of oxygen; or to purely psychological factors such as dreams, hallucinations, or wish fulfilment. While all of these criticisms offer interesting possibilities, none of them rise above the level of speculation. In short, the critics have no better claim to what the experience really means than anyone else.

Still, critics have raised many points that are well worth considering. One possibility is that the experience could be induced under the influence of drugs. As Aldous Huxley first published in 1954, drugs such as mescaline can induce mystical states very similar to the ones that are under investigation. In The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell, Huxley wrote,

What are the common features which this pattern imposes upon our visionary experiences? First and most important is the experience of light. Everything seen by those who visit the mind's antipodes is brilliantly illuminated and seems to shine from within. All colours are intensified to a pitch far beyond anything seen in the normal state, and at the same time the mind's capacity for recognizing fine distinctions of tone and hue is notably heightened.1

Huxley's observations led in part, of course, to the 1960s drug culture. Well known authors, as well as respectable academic researchers, investigated the validity of drug-induced mystical experiences. In 1966, researchers Walter Pahnke and William Richards found that LSD could produce experiences that correspond to the essential categories found in the literature dealing with mysticism. These include unity, changes in one's perception of objectivity and reality, transcendence, sacredness, paradoxicality, ineffability, transience, a very positive mood and positive changes in attitude and behaviour.2 Similarly, author Alan Watts, philosophy of religion professor Huston Smith, and psychoanalyst Stanislav Grof have
concluded that psychedelic drugs such as mescaline, LSD and psilocybin are capable of inducing mystical experiences.  

Further, psychedelic drugs seem to be able to induce NDEs or something very much like an NDE. Ronald Siegal found that PCP can induce an experience very much like an NDE. This includes images of tunnels and lights; out-of-body states; spirit guides, and a life or memory review. Siegal concludes that this indicates that NDEs are some form of hallucination that uses images already stored in the brain. Similarly, J.W. Provonsha found similarities between NDEs and experiences induced by psychedelic drugs, and carbon dioxide. Provonsha asks rhetorically if NDEs are, by extension, really the work of psychochemicals. This would mean that the NDE is really an experience of the dying process, not death itself. D. Scott Rogo, in the same vein, has reviewed the literature on the parallels between NDEs and the effects of anaesthetics, particularly ketamine. He concludes that while no direct causal parallel can be drawn between the two, the parallels are strong enough to cast doubt on purely metaphysical explanations of the NDE.

Interestingly, psychedelic drugs can even have some of the beneficial after-effects as those who have undergone an actual NDE. Walter Pahnke found that the majority of terminally ill cancer patients who were administered LSD benefitted from the treatment. The after-effects included lessened anxiety and depression, as well as a reduced fear of death. William Richards also concluded that after having been administered LSD, one third of terminal cancer patients experienced dramatic improvement in outlook regarding their condition. Death was no longer regarded by these patients as an end to all personal existence, but rather "as a transition to different type of existence." Stanislav Grof found similar, but even more positive results: 27 of 31 patients administered LSD showed improvements in the same areas noted by Pahnke, and those who had "peak" experiences such as unity, transcendence, and sacredness ended up having the most positive and lasting attitude changes of all.

By extension, some argue that the brain itself can manufacture chemicals that act very much like their artificial psychedelic counterparts. Endocrinologist Daniel Carr has argued that beta-endorphins and similar brain chemicals that are released during the dying process might very well trigger the NDE. Even changes to blood pressure in the inner ear can produce the sensation of rising out of the body, floating away in space, and even near-death visions.

Several critics of the metaphysical model of the near-death experience argue that levels of oxygen to the brain -- of which varying levels are found in people who are about to die -- can trigger images commonly reported in NDEs. Richard S. Blacher, in an early rebuttal to Raymond Moody's claim that the NDE constitutes evidence of the survival of bodily death, claims that those who have had NDE-like experiences of the type that Moody describes are likely suffering from hypoxia. Neurologist Ernst A. Rodin claims that NDEs are simply hallucinations or delusions caused by the deprivation of oxygen to the brain, and says so on the ground that he himself had had a near-death experience.

Critics of this brand of critic have plenty to say in rebuttal. First, of course, not all of those who have had an NDE were under the influence of any drugs or anaesthetics. Moreover, beta-endorphins cannot in and of themselves account for the whole of the NDE, only perhaps the part dealing with feelings of well-being or ecstasy. Cardiologist Michael B. Sabom takes exception to Blacher's claims that NDEs result from hypoxia. Sabom counter-claims that persons suffering from that condition typically end up with a confused and muddled memory, quite the opposite of the clarity found in the NDE. Further, Sabom claims that Rodin's personal experience might not be a genuine NDE at all.

oxygen deprivation to the brain typically induces a "toxic psychosis," but this is not at all the kind of report given by those who have had an NDE. Rather the latter "never have been more alive and aware."

Other critics have used psychological counter-explanations of the metaphysical model of the NDE. In another response to Ernst Rodin's article mentioned above, Nathan Schnaper supports Rodin's contention that NDEs are probably delusions or hallucinations. Schnaper extends Rodin's thesis, however, to include other possible sources for the experience. These include considerations of physiology (hypoxia, anoxia, etc.); pharmacology (ketamine and other anaesthetics and pharmaceuticals); and psychology (dissociative reaction, panic, psychosis etc.). The great public interest in the NDE phenomenon is best understood as death denial.

Ronald K. Siegal also contends that NDEs are hallucinations, brought about by psychological and neurophysiological factors, although he admits that those processes are not yet fully understood. Like Schnaper, Siegal maintains that NDEs are a product of a human imagination longing for an afterlife. Jan Ehrenwald agrees that "most claims of survival near death or after resuscitation result from a blend of hallucinatory wish fulfilment and massive denial of illness in terms of defensive maneuvers." Russel Noyes, Jr., concurs that NDE occurrences such as depersonalization serve as a defense mechanism against the threat of death. The "life review" and other sweeping recollections are likely a result of the dying person attaching him/herself to memories that will act as reminders of their own existence. Susan Blackmore adds that while NDEs are indeed hallucinations, visions of a tunnel and/or a great light are most likely the result of activity in the visual cortex of a dying brain. Survivors transform these images into objective concepts drawn from sensory experience.

Psychoanalysts have come up with some possible explanations of the NDE phenomenon. According to Uri Lowenthal, the bliss felt during an NDE is an infantile regression to the memory of the bliss felt under a mother's protection. Likewise, the "dark tunnel" is a recollection of the mother's birth canal, and the "bright light" would be a memory of the mother's radiant face. Similarly, Glen Gabbard and Stuart Twemlow surmise that when viewed psychoanalytically, the "being of light" may represent an internalized parent. Mortimer Ostow and N. Lukianowicz agree that the NDE can be explained in part by ego wish fulfilment.

Some social scientists have concluded that NDEs are akin to dreams that seem very real. Anthropologist Dorothy Counts found that in New Guinea, the culturally structured nature of out-of-body and NDE accounts suggests that both are the product of a state of mind known as hypnagogic sleep. Similarly, Celia Green has argued that certain aspects of NDEs such as out-of-body experiences and the travel through a tunnel are very much like the lucid dream phenomenon, where the subject is aware that he or she is dreaming.

The field of sensory deprivation also has application to the near-death phenomenon. John C. Lilly observed that some subjects in sensory deprivation tanks experienced the "out of body" sensation. Even more suggestive is the story of two miners who were trapped underground for six days. The two had hallucinations that included people, a cross, a heavenly garden, and blue lights. The authors of this work conclude that under conditions as stressful as this, hallucinations serve to address perceived needs.

Psychological explanations of NDEs have raised some very interesting analogies from various aspects of the field. However, none as yet constitute proof that the NDE is caused by one factor or another. There might very well be some truth in some or all of these explanations, but we have not yet seen any definitive
In her 1993 book, *Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experience*, Susan Blackmore has tried to debunk all aspects of the metaphysical explanations of the NDE. She agrees that NDE accounts are consistent; however, this does not constitute proof of an afterlife. Blackmore draws upon various aspects of modern science to demonstrate her contention. For example, the joy and peace people experience are a result of "natural opiates released under stress." The "life review is consistent because the endorphins cause random activation and seizures in the temporal lobe and limbic system where memories are organized." Positive transformations in one's life can be attributed to the fact that one is now thinking about death, which in and of itself is enough to make one "less selfish and more concerned for others." Blackmore concludes that the dying brain hypothesis best explains the near-death phenomenon. She goes on to say that there really is no "soul" to survive death: "We are simply here and this is how it is. I have no self and 'I' own nothing. There is no one to die. There is just this moment, and now this and now this."29

Again, Blackmore has come up with some interesting possibilities regarding the causes of the NDE, but the work is really as conjectural as the metaphysical model. Even though the book is subtitled "Science' and the near-death experience," this is not a scientific analysis of the phenomenon. We only have a collection of various studies from various fields of science that, when put together, give us a physical and psychological alternative to the metaphysical understanding of the NDE. This is really an exposition of the author's and likeminded individual's beliefs, not anything that approaches scientific proof.

Further, as the mystical traditions of the world's religions have shown, one does not have to be near death in order to experience key elements of an NDE. In fact the encounter with the "Divine Light" and the accompanying ecstasy can be achieved by a number of means, none of which have anything to do with a dying brain. Until we see something more substantial from those who postulate a purely physical and/or psychological cause for the NDE, metaphysical arguments are still well worth considering.

One point that Blackmore raised that might well be worth developing further from a metaphysical point of view is the concept of self. Blackmore prefers what she defines as the Buddhist position that "neither self nor anything pertaining to self can truly and really be found."30 Unfortunately, whether intentionally or not, this leaves the impression that Buddhism advocates some form of pure materialism. This is far from the truth. While Buddhism does propose that ultimately the self does not exist, and that the truth beyond the self is nothingness, this does not mean that nothingness is "blackness," or has no intrinsic reality. On the contrary, as we have seen, some scriptures such as the Tibetan Book of the Dead speak of the "Clear Light of the Void." For Buddhists, the void is vividly real, the ultimate reality, and hardly the cynical non-existence tacitly referred to by Western atheistical materialists.

Ironically, Blackmore's reference to the Buddhist conception of self can lead us to a new metaphysical understanding of the nature and meaning of life and death. It might very well be that the soul does not continue to exist indefinitely beyond death, whether in "heaven" or in some form of reincarnation. Buddhist philosophy allows us to see that there might very well be a state of being beyond this life and even beyond the near-death experience. We will explore this metaphysic in the concluding chapter.