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This paper explores the relationships between afterlife beliefs, near-death experiences (NDEs), and shamanic journey traditions in Native American religions prior to significant external cultural influence. In ethnohistorical reports from missionaries, explorers, and ethnographers I discovered nearly 60 ostensibly documentary NDE narratives from the late 16th–early 20th centuries, spanning the North American continent. Crucially, roughly a third of these accounts include overt indigenous statements that local afterlife beliefs originated in NDEs. This is a virtual model of David Hufford’s experiential source hypothesis, i.e. that extraordinary experiences are commonly the basis for religious and supernatural beliefs.

Furthermore, according to indigenous testimony whole religious movements sometimes originated in NDEs. The Ghost Dance is perhaps the most famous example, though there are various others beginning as early as the mid-17th century. Through these kinds of movements, NDEs played a key role in responding to Christian missionary teachings and in negotiating cultural-political threats from European dominance. Although such movements have long been studied from sociological and political perspectives, the near-death experiential dimension has been widely ignored despite its centrality to them.

In order to arrive at a more comprehensive overall explanation of the relationships between Native American culture, religion, and NDEs, I have combined the most cogent elements from competing interdisciplinary theories. For example, Jesse Bering’s cognitive psychology experiments show that human beings are naturally predisposed to believe that we have souls which survive the deaths of our bodies. This complements the experiential source hypothesis: a universally intuitive belief in souls suggests that we would be generally receptive to experiences that seem to validate those beliefs.

Though focusing on the Native American data, the paper benefits from my cross-cultural research into the relationship between NDEs, culture, and religion in early civilizations and in indigenous societies. While accounts of NDEs share many common elements worldwide, those elements are embedded in matrices of clearly culture- and individual-specific material. This suggests that NDEs begin as pre-cultural or non-cultural events which cause experiences that are both culturally contextualized and cross-culturally thematically stable. Like any experience, NDEs are rooted in the contexts of those who have them. They are processed “live” by an enculturated individual, then recounted in socially, religiously, and linguistically idiosyncratic ways. In other words, how the experience is experienced varies by individual, resulting in narratives being interpreted and expressed in highly symbolic local modes. It is a symbiotic relationship in which culture-specific beliefs and individual expectation influence universal experience, and vice versa. For example, longstanding shamanic otherworld journey traditions account for the widespread cultural receptivity to NDEs among Native American peoples. Indeed, shamanic practices were often intended to actually replicate NDEs, which provided a road map for shamans to negotiate their culturally-situated shamanic “journeys.”