

April 2012



# The Christian Universalist

Published monthly by the Christian Universalist Association  
[www.christianuniversalist.org](http://www.christianuniversalist.org)

## PREACHING THE KINDNESS AND EVERLASTING LOVE OF GOD

The 4th annual conference of the Christian Universalist Association  
September 21-23, 2012

Murray Grove Retreat and Renewal Center, Lanoka Harbor, New Jersey

Keynote: **“The Judaic Foundations of Christian Universalism”**  
Stan S. Seidner, Ph.D. Retired Professor, University of Texas



Stan S. Seidner

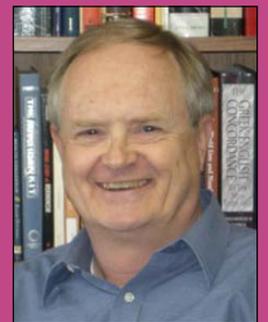
Seidner, who was ordained a Jewish Rabbi, is now a Maronite Catholic. He has published extensively and holds many memberships, including the Academy of Religion and the International Association of Christians and Jews.

Power Point: **“The Roman Catholic Trend toward Salvation of All”**

David S. Sielaff, Executive Director, Associates for Scriptural Knowledge.

Sielaff holds an M. A. in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. The Associates for Scriptural Knowledge was founded by Ernest L. Martin.

**Murray Grove Retreat and Renewal Center** is located at the spot where **John Murray** preached his famous sermon at the chapel built by **Thomas Potter**. Visit the Murray Grove web site for this amazing story at: [www.murraygrove.org](http://www.murraygrove.org)



David S. Sielaff

For more information and registration forms, contact CUA Coordinator Rich Koster at: [richkoster.cua@gmail.com](mailto:richkoster.cua@gmail.com)

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## *The Christian Universalist*

*The Christian Universalist* is a digital newsletter published monthly by *The Christian Universalist Association (CUA)*, with news, information and commentary for anyone interested in Christian Universalism. Editorial reports, letters to the editor and photos are welcome.

Deadline is the 24th of the month preceding the month of publication. Reports and photos may be emailed to the editor at [patmor123@gmail.com](mailto:patmor123@gmail.com). Please send all photos and illustrations as separate JPEGs at high resolution of at least 300 dpi.

Opinions expressed are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect those of *The Christian Universalist Association*.

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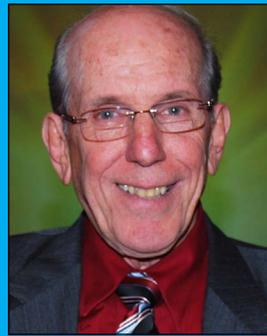
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### **Board of Directors**

Kalen Fristad, Chair; Mary Keller, Vice-Chair; Sharon McCauley, Treasurer; Marquis Hunt, Steven Rowe, Mikal Rasheed, Judy Sheriff, Susan Smith, David Spatz, Eric Stetson, John Licitra, Stan Seidner, and Sheila Hansen.

The **CUA** is an international movement of persons, groups, congregations, and ministries, spreading the Good News of the grace of God for the salvation of all people. The **CUA** holds conferences, publishes literature, and sends out this monthly digital newsletter to members and others.



## *From the Editor*

**Pat Moauro**

*Pat Moauro, Editor of The Christian Universalist, can be reached at [patmor123@gmail.com](mailto:patmor123@gmail.com)*

### **Universalists to gather at Murray Grove**

People of like mind enjoy associating with each other. Why? Mainly, it's because we as humans find it encouraging to be with others who, in the main, believe essentially as we do. Such interaction is understandable.

The folks here in the Christian Universalist Association (CUA) are not much different. They love to gather together with those of like faith and belief in the beautiful and grand hope of Universalism - also known as Universal Reconciliation, Universal Restoration, the Blessed Hope, the Larger Hope, the Wider Hope, and the Victorious Gospel.

Of course, like any other spiritual/religious believers, not everyone professing to believe in Universalism agrees with each other about every doctrinal detail. However, this core belief in the grace of God and the ultimate salvation of all people is so strong among believers that Universalists are, by and large, united and tolerant of each other's varying beliefs. There are ultra conservative Universalists and ultra liberal Universalists, and most seem to get along fairly well. At least in public gatherings.

That's why the annual conferences held by the *CUA* are looked to with great anticipation by most members. This year, the 4th annual conference is scheduled for September 21 to 23 at *Murray Grove Retreat and Renewal Center* in Lanoka Harbor, New Jersey. This is the spot regarded by many as the birthplace of Universalism in America.

The keynote address, "*The Judaic Foundations of Christian Universalism*", will be given by **Stan S. Seidner**, Ph.D., a retired professor, University of Texas, and newly appointed member of the *CUA* Board.

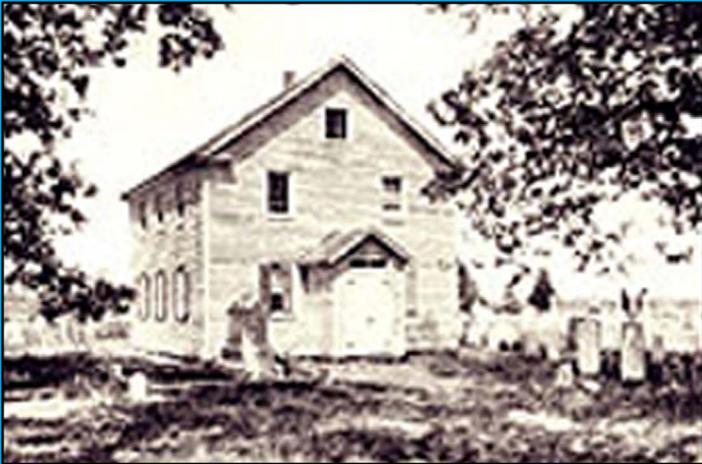
**David S. Sielaff**, Executive Director, *Associates for Scriptural Knowledge*, will give a Power Point presentation: "*The Roman Catholic Trend toward Salvation of All*".

For more information and registration forms, contact *CUA* Coordinator **Rich Koster** at: [richkoster.cua@gmail.com](mailto:richkoster.cua@gmail.com)

Perhaps we should even consider associating more with those with whom we may disagree strongly. Who knows, we might even learn something new. Peace and joy.

*Pat*

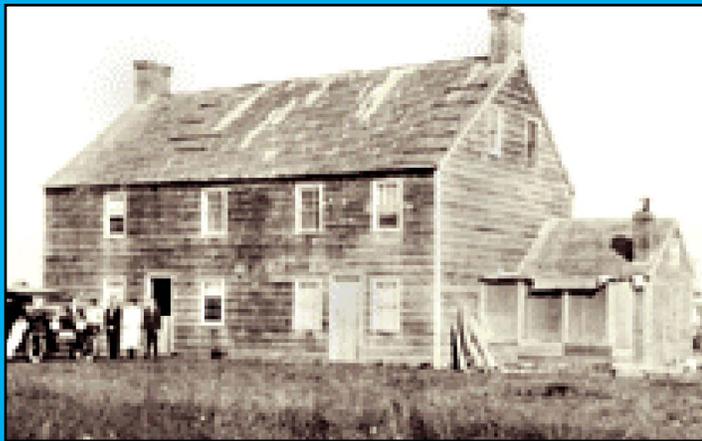
# Murray Grove: "Where Universalism traditionally began"



Murray Grove Chapel rebuilt in 1841



Murray Grove Meeting House Today



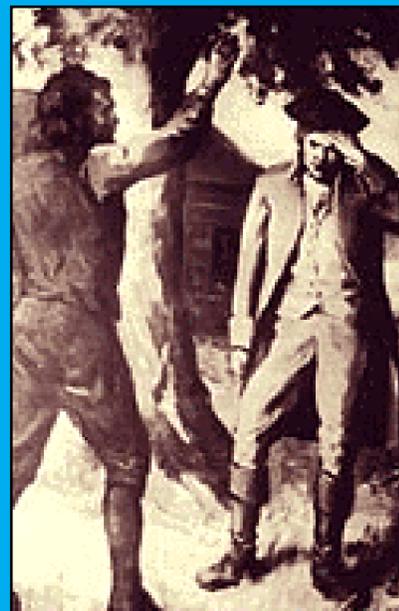
The Potter Homestead



At Thomas Potter's urging, John Murray gives the first Universalist sermon in America.



Thomas Potter spies the brig "Hand in Hand" from afar, where it had run aground on a sandbar off Cranberry Inlet. See article about Thomas Potter and John Murray on page 4.



Thomas Potter and John Murray meet.

## Thomas Potter waited patiently 10 years for Universalist John Murray

In the mid-1700s, **Thomas Potter**, a member of a locally prominent family, was farming the land that is now Murray Grove, in Good Luck, New Jersey. Though unlettered, Potter was a successful and deeply religious man.

Probably a Quaker Baptist, he had caught wind of a radical new theological current called universalism: the idea, against strict Calvinist predestination, that all human beings will ultimately attain salvation.

Based on his understanding of scripture as read to him, he worked out his own strong beliefs. He sought out those with knowledge, and with similar views, including visiting ministers, inviting them to his home to discuss current issues. About 1760, after his wife Mary had grown tired of hosting such discussions in her house, Potter built a meeting-house for the express purpose of housing a preacher of the universalist gospel.

But, for 10 years, he never found one. However, he persevered in his faith that one would be provided him, in the face of his neighbors' skepticism.

At the same time, in England and Ireland, a young man with an intense interest in religion and a natural talent for public speaking was reaching a life crisis. **John Murray** had first converted from conventional Anglicanism to Methodism. Then he was convinced by universalist doctrines he read about and heard in London. As a result, he lost his position in the Methodist church - and soon after losing both his infant son and his beloved wife to illness - he was barely rescued from debtor's prison.

Downcast and distressed, he was determined to give up religion altogether and make a new life for himself in America. Murray booked passage on the brig "Hand in Hand", bound for New York. Diverted first to Philadelphia, they were on their way back up the Jersey coast when they swept over a sandbar in a fog just off Cranberry Inlet (which no longer exists) into Barnegat Bay.

The captain unloaded some of the cargo onto a smaller local vessel, which he asked Murray to oversee. The brig, now lighter and the wind having shifted, was able to return to the open ocean; but the wind changed again and the smaller boat was unable to follow.

The "Hand in Hand" proceeded on to New York, leaving Murray, the boat, the sailors and the cargo behind, trapped in the bay. They came ashore and when Murray went in search of provisions he was directed to the Potter home. **Thomas Potter** had seen the vessel stranded, and met him with: "I have longed to see you. I have been expecting you a long time!"

When Potter learned of Murray's background, he was convinced that this was the preacher of universalism for whom he had been waiting, sent to him by providence. Murray pro-



Entrance to Murray Grove Meeting House

tested that preaching was now in his past, that he wanted nothing more to do with it. Besides, he had to leave as soon as the wind allowed his boat out of the bay.

Potter responded, "The wind will never change, sir, until you have delivered to us, in that meeting-house, a message from God."

Finally, they agreed that, if the boat were still stuck in the bay the following Sunday, Murray would preach in Potter's meetinghouse. If it were freed before then, he would depart with it. The ship was still there on Sunday. Murray did in fact preach a sermon on universalism to Potter and his family and neighbors, on September 30, 1770.

As soon as he was finished, a sailor ran up to inform him that the wind had turned, the ship was free, and they could now leave for New York. Murray departed, but soon returned to Good Luck and his friend Potter. Freshly inspired, he stayed in this area for several years, traveling around to the nearby towns and villages, preaching universalism to enthusiastic listeners.

He eventually left again, making his way to New England, earning ever greater popularity. He found a permanent home in Gloucester, creating and ministering to the Universalist church there - the first in this country - and later in Boston. He was instrumental in the organization of Universalism as a denomination in 1793.

At Potter's death, probably during the Revolutionary War, his will left the meeting house and the acre of land on which it sat to Murray. Murray was unable to claim it before his own death in 1815. It passed into the hands of a local Methodist congregation. The original building was taken down, and the current chapel was built on the site, in 1841.

*Thank you to Murray Grove Retreat and Renewal Center for this article and photos on pages 3 and 4.*

## From the Coordinator

... Rich Koster

### 'God's ways and thoughts are exalted high above our own'

*"As the heavens are exalted above your ways . . . ."*

Isaiah 55:9, in the context of the verses before and after, is such a remarkable statement. Of course it is from the mind of the prophet, but may we not see here a cue to one of those early revelations from God that stands out and above all the culturally constrained strivings of the people of Israel to discern the nature and purpose of life, the universe, and its Creator? The Bible is such a very human library of writings! But yet do we not, here and there, catch a glimpse of divinely-revealed truth transcending the crud and cruelty that spoil the pages of so much Scripture?

When I see at night the beauty and wonder of the starry starry skies, so vast and amazing as we are seeing for the first time with our satellites and space probes and huge new scopes, this word from the prophet comes to mind:

***For as the heavens are exalted above the earth, so are my ways exalted above your ways, and my thoughts above your thoughts.***

Note that the word is "above" and not just "different"! Strange as it may seem, some people use this verse to explain why they cling to the old crazy belief about endless torment in Hades/hell, saying that they just have to accept it since God's ways and God's thoughts are "higher" than our own.

But it does say, "above", no? Not just different, but "exalted" and high! How can anyone say that the idea of endless torment for billions of souls is "above" our ways and our thoughts? I mean, we are talking here about the Creator of the universe; and if *looking at* the starry starry skies means anything at all it means that for sure the ways and thoughts of their creator must be far exalted above ours. That is, **better**.

This is one reason I am what some people call an "ultra-universalist", and for me that means there is **no need for a purgatory** where we get a second chance to "get it right" so that we can earn our way into heaven after all. We are saved by grace and grace alone, and there is nothing we can do or say, in this life or the next, that moves us up some spiritual ladder so that we are fit for the kingdom. If this idea doesn't fit *our* view of justice, perhaps



*Rich Koster*

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it is because the ways and thoughts of God are exalted and higher than is ours. Just consider for a moment the parable Jesus told about the workers in the vineyard.

This is also why I still hold that the cross of Christ needs to be front and center in our CU teaching and preaching. Perhaps the problem some CU folks have with it is that it just doesn't jive with our own ideas of justice and fairness? And it doesn't. **Aren't we glad?**

With the Apostle Paul in his letter to the churches in Galatia, I say, "As for me . . . I will boast only about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; for by means of the cross the world is dead to me, and I am dead to the world." And with the writer of Ephesians I believe that "it is by God's grace that you have been saved . . . . It is not the result of (our) own efforts but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it."

Now that is a crazy thing to say, no? God did it all in the cross of Christ? Come on, that's nonsense! Paul even said so straight out in 1 Corinthians 1:23ff. You mean, we're free to do as we please? The world doesn't work that way.

No it doesn't. But God does. And it's why it is called **grace**.

But don't forget that in this life you will still reap what you sow. (Galatians 6:7-9)



Sheila Hansen



Stan S. Seidner

## “A generic God” and “universal afterlife” emerge from studies of Near Death Experiences

This article by **Ken R. Vincent**, was first published in *De Numine*, No. 51 (9-13), Autumn 2011, as “What the Near-Death Experience and other Spiritually Transformative Experiences Teach Us About God and Afterlife”. It is reprinted here with permission.

### Latest two Board members welcomed

**Sheila Hansen** and **Stan Seidner** are the latest members of the *Christian Universalist Association (CUA)* Board of Directors to be appointed recently. Along with **John Licitra** of New Jersey, who was welcomed as a new Board member last month, the Board is now at full strength with 13 members.

**Stanley S. Seidner**, Ph.D., a retired Professor, University of Texas, was ordained a Jewish Rabbi, and is now a Maronite Catholic. He has published extensively and holds many memberships, including the Academy of Religion and the International Association of Christians and Jews (Israel), the American Academy of Religion, and the American Christian Counselor’s Association.

**Sheila Hansen** of Appleton, Wisconsin, is an ordained all-faith minister who has studied, and continues to study, a variety of biblical and religious concepts. From 2008 to 2011 Sheila served as Spiritual Director/Minister and founder of *Interfaith Spirit Quest*, an interactive ministry with the goal of discovering the spiritual philosophies of other religions and of bringing people of all faiths to an awareness of the the Universal Christ - Jesus.

Since 2011 she has been the founder, Spiritual Director and minister of *LifOvation*, a Christ-centered, interactive Community Center in Appleton, Wisconsin.

**John Licitra** is currently attending the New Brunswick Theological Seminary to prepare for a post retirement career as a hospital chaplain. John has been active in the last several years in the ministry of interfaith dialogue.



John Licitra

He serves as the New Jersey affiliate leader of the Interfaith Alliance and is a board member of the *Monmouth Center for World Religions and Ethical Thought*.

John said he views the theology of Christian Universalism as foundational for both the work of interfaith peace activism and for his future role as a hospital chaplain.



**Ken R. Vincent, Ed.D.** is the author of *The Golden Thread, God’s Promise of Universal Restoration*.

Visit Ken at: <http://www.universalist-herald.net/Mystical.html>.

### By Ken R. Vincent, Ed.D.

In 1975, the near-death experience (NDE) burst into contemporary consciousness with the publication of **Raymond Moody’s** famous book *Life After Life*. The public was newly fascinated, unaware that the phenomena had been described throughout recorded history (the story of Er in *Plato’s Republic* being the most famous example).

### Defining the NDE

In 1979, **Sir Alister Hardy** began his exploration of all types of religious/spiritual/mystical experiences with the publication of his book *The Spiritual Nature of Man* in which he reported that one “trigger” for these phenomena was the “prospect of death.” Working with cases from Hardy’s original sample, **Mark Fox** in his book *Religion, Spirituality, and the Near-Death Experience* labeled these “crisis experiences” because it was unclear whether some persons had been clinically dead. Fox found little difference between these “crisis” cases and other religious experience cases.

From the beginning of NDE studies, some researchers have included individuals who had only come “close to death” with those who were resuscitated after being clinically dead for a brief period of time.

In their effort to clarify the terminology, Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick in their book *The Art of Dying* coined the term “temporary death experience” to separate those who came near to death from those who revived following clinical death.

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## “A generic God” and “universal afterlife”

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Continuing this effort to define the characteristics of the NDE, **Vince Migliore** used a large sample from the files of the *International Association of Near-Death Studies* and published it in his book *A Measure of Heaven*. Comparing a sample of 193 accounts of clinical death to a sample of 189 accounts of “NDE-like” experiences (e.g., mystical experiences) that were not near death, Migliore found that the NDEs were more in-depth than the mystical experiences, but the difference was not statistically significant. Unfortunately, there is still no agreed-on definition of the NDE or other religious experiences in the literature.

### NDE Commonalities

People can and do have mystical experiences that resemble near-death experiences without dying. St. Paul’s out-of-body experience (OBE) in which he went to heaven is a famous example (2 Cor. 12). The NDE is unique among religious/mystical/spiritual experiences in that its “trigger” is clinical death, and we now have over 35 years of research that enable fascinating insights into what the NDE teaches us about God and afterlife.

I begin with **Jeff Long’s** “proofs of afterlife” from his book *Evidence of Afterlife* because of the magnitude of the sample (N=1300) and the fact that 613 subjects were given an objective questionnaire. They are as follows:

- 1) NDErs report increased alertness and consciousness
- 2) NDErs provide evidence from verifiable OBEs
- 3) NDErs blind from birth report a form of “vision” during their NDE
- 4) NDErs report experiences while under anesthesia
- 5) NDErs report life reviews that include experiencing the feelings of others
- 6) NDErs report seeing dead relatives, including people unknown to them who were identified to them later by viewing family photographs
- 7) NDErs who are children report having every NDE element of older NDErs, and this is true whether their account is told during childhood or as an adult who had the experience in childhood
- 8) NDErs who were non-English-speakers from Long’s database form the largest collection of cross-cultural NDEs and provide evidence that NDEs are the same all over the world
- 9) NDErs report that their lives were changed as a result of their NDE and, for the majority, the change was for the better

To this list of “proofs,” we can add the “Shared Death Experience” which Raymond Moody describes in his book *Glimpses of Eternity*. This occurs when a person or persons at the bedside of an individual who is dying expe-

riences the beginning of the dying individual’s first moments of death, including such things as alternate reality, mystical light, OBE, co-living the life review, unworldly or heavenly realms, and mist at death.

### Basis for World Religions

Over a century ago, **William James** in *Varieties of Religious Experience* made the case that, “The founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communication with the Divine.” His research was reinforced by the work of **Evelyn Underhill** who, in *Practical Mysticism*, proclaimed, “This unmistakable experience has been achieved by the mystics of every religion; and when we read their statements, we know they are all speaking of the same thing.”

In *Conceptions of Afterlife in Early Civilizations*, **Gregory Shushan** makes the case that the NDE is the basis for afterlife accounts in the world’s religions. His main points are: 1) There is a remarkable consistency among largely unconnected cultures and times regarding belief in life after death; 2) The core elements of these religious beliefs are largely similar to the core elements of the NDE, 3) These consistent beliefs in life after death contrast with the widely divergent creation myths of different religions.

In other words, the above studies taken together demonstrate the NDE to be a world-wide phenomena and that it is at the generic core of afterlife beliefs in the world’s religions. Organized religion is, at best, second-hand.

### Insights into God and Afterlife

Using the same tools that social scientists employ to study all other facets of human behavior, researchers have gained fresh insights into how humans experience God in the here-and-now and in the hereafter. The following nine findings are the ones I personally find most compelling:

1) God (aka, Ultimate Reality/Great Spirit) is with us and not distant. **Sir Alister Hardy** in *The Spiritual Nature of Man* states that, from the evidence, God is “partly transcendent, and felt as the numinous beyond the self, and partly immanent within him” and “the spiritual side of man is not the product of intellectuality.” In other words, the data from NDEs and other religious experiences indicate that the God of the panentheist is the Ultimate Reality; in the God We Never Knew, **Marcus Borg** makes a strong case for panentheism being biblical.

2) Judgment is a reality. In the NDE, the experiencer is often brought before a divine judge/being of light for a “life review.” This can be frightening, comforting, or both; nevertheless, it is awesome. Judgment is virtually universal in world religions.

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## “A generic God” and “universal afterlife”

... continued from page 7

3) Hell is not permanent. Hell is for purification and rehabilitation not eternal punishment. In *Universalism, the Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First 500 Years*, **J. W. Hanson** makes a good case that universalism was the dominant theology of early Christianity. In the West, it has been relegated to a minority position for the past 1,500 years; nevertheless, it is the norm in the religions of the East (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism).

Whether they use the word “universalism” or not, a large number of NDE and/or religious experience researchers have come to the conclusion that ALL people are unconditionally loved by God and that, in the end, ALL will be “saved” regardless of religion or denomination. A list of 20 researchers who express this view can be found at <http://universalist-herald.net/RelExpUniv.html>

But there is also a dark side. **Nancy Evans Bush** offers her analysis of distressing NDEs using 21 studies (N=1,828) in *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation* by **J. Holden, B. Greyson, & D. James**. Nine of these studies had no distressing NDEs, but the remaining 12 had a 23% rate of distressing NDEs. One of her blockbuster findings was that anyone not just “evil” people can face a “time of trial.” Evidence that hell is not permanent includes the fact that NDErs are rescued from hell when they call out to God (or in the West, Jesus).

One very interesting case regarding the impermanence of hell is that of an 18th century NDEr, **Dr. George DeBenneville**, who died of a consumptive-like illness and revived 42 hours later at his wake. During his tour of heaven and hell, he saw angels taking people out of hell and into heaven when they repented. A full account of this experience can be found at: <http://www.christianuniversalist.org/articles/nde-debenneville.html>

Both **George Richey**, in his book *Return from Tomorrow*, and **Raymond Moody**, in his book *Reflections on Life After Life*, report accounts of people trapped in negative/hellish states as having beings of light standing by them, waiting to rescue them. **James McClenon**, in his book *Wondrous Events*, describes a 7th century Japanese account of a butcher having a hellish deathbed vision which turns positive when he begins chanting the name of the Amida Buddha. **Merete Jakobsen** notes in *Negative Spiritual Encounters* that the antidote for negative spiritual experiences is prayer and religious rituals.

4. JESUS is not an only child! Jesus is called “the only begotten son” four times in the Gospel of John and one time in the first Letter of John, but none of the other New Testament writers mention this. There are also a number of Bible verses which indicate that God is the King of the gods (Psalm 82:1, Daniel 2:47, I Corinthians 8:5). While

non-Christians sometimes encounter Jesus in their NDEs and mystical experiences, they also report encounters with other divine entities. Divine beings that individuals encounter are discussed in *Religious Experience in Contemporary China* by **Xingong Yao** and **Paul Badham**, and in *At the Hour of Death* by **Karlis Osis** and **Erlendur Haraldsson**. The latter book compares the death-bed visions and NDEs of people in India and the United States.

5. What’s in your heart, not what you believe, is what matters. Religious groups that declare that theirs is the only path to God and salvation are totally wrong. NDE and other religious experiences (e.g., after-death communications, death-bed visions) are replete with stories of people of all faiths and denominations in heaven.

6. “By their fruits you shall know them.” Virtually all of the books on the NDE and other religious experiences mentioned in this article speak to the fact that these events change people’s lives for the better, with some authors devoting a whole chapter to this finding.

7. The NDE implies mind-body dualism. In the *Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation*, **Jan Holden** notes that attempts to place targets in hospitals for NDErs to see during their OBEs have been unsuccessful to date; however, the sheer volume of veridical perception anecdotes over 150 years demonstrates the reality of NDErs being out of their bodies. Additional evidence for mind-body dualism is presented in **E.F. Kelly et.al.’s** *Irreducible Mind* and **Pim van Lommel’s** *Consciousness Beyond Life*.

8. Reincarnation is THE unanswered question. Reincarnation is an essential part of the belief system of Eastern religions. The “official” position in Western religions is “no,” although one-quarter of Christians in the UK and USA tell us that they believe this. The data supporting reincarnation is beginning to come in, as this is a major research area at the University of Virginia Medical School’s Division of Perceptual Studies. **Jim Tucker’s** book *Life Before Life* is based on 2,500 cases of reported reincarnation from the division’s files.

9. NDE is not without its skeptics. The NDE has attracted numerous detractors, many of whom offer only explanations rather than data. An excellent refutation of questions raised by major skeptics of the NDE can be found in **Bruce Greyson’s** chapter on the topic in the *Handbook of Near-Death Experiences: Thirty Years of Investigation*.

### Conclusion

The picture emerging is of a generic God and afterlife that are universal; its essential elements are an “off-the-rack” fit for all the world’s religions but a “tailor-made” fit for none of them. What is universal is from God; the remainder of religion is cultural. I pray that we continue this research.