

## BOOK REVIEW

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**The Omega Project: Near-Death Experiences, UFO Encounters, and Mind at Large, by Kenneth Ring.** New York, NY: William Morrow, 1992, 320pp, \$20.00

In *The Omega Project* Kenneth Ring has taken another major step into previously untested waters. One may or may not agree with all of his conclusions, but one must admit they are thought-provoking.

Ring begins with an apologia for having entered the Unidentified Flying Object (UFO) domain after years of eschewing "weird" phenomena and studying the relatively "straight" field of near-death studies. His pioneering work in near-death experiences (NDEs) should be well known to all readers of this *Journal*. In *Heading Toward Omega* (1984) he began to expand the NDE horizons and examined reports of extraordinary experiences that were similar to those reported by NDErs but were instead reported by individuals who were not close to death at the time. Further, and more importantly, he went on to address the meaning behind these experiences.

In many ways *The Omega Project* is a continuation of that work. The reader should be aware that Ring makes assertions that will be regarded as truly profound or extremely outrageous, depending on one's point of view. As a scientist he has issued appropriate caveats about his findings and statements; some may find this more like waffling. He does admit his theoretical constructs do not answer all the questions raised by the study of these diverse phenomena. Given the complexity

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of those phenomena, I find it unlikely that any single approach will adequately explain all their aspects.

The book opens with a description of the various phenomena, supported by anecdotal data designed to provide a basic understanding of each area. Ring assumes that people reading the book, while knowledgeable in one area, may not have the same degree of familiarity with others. This material is presented in an interesting and readable manner.

The second section conveys the results of an extensive study of 264 participants that was conducted to examine the similarities between people who report NDEs and those who report having had encounters with UFOs, popularly known as "abductees." Many now agree that this term is a misleading and unfortunate choice; to quote Steven Greer: "If you were lifted off the bow of the Titanic, were you abducted or rescued?"

In addition to the NDErs and UFO experiencers, two limited control groups were established, comprised of people interested in one of these phenomena. This selection does not constitute an unbiased sample, as the participants were self-selected and ostensibly were positively predisposed towards the subject. There are a number of other caveats, as Ring points out, that must be taken into account prior to extrapolation of his findings beyond their explicit meaning.

Ring notes that he relied on respondents' own reports of their background experiences and that no investigation was conducted to determine the validity of their assertions. The purely subjective aspect of this study will be pointed to as a major flaw in scientific protocol. Participants were given an extensive battery of tests, some with prior validation and others designed for this project.

The project had three main purposes: "to assess through careful and systematic study the relevance of a number of psychological factors, such as fantasy proneness, to the question of genesis and form of extraordinary encounters" (p. 114); "to determine the degree to which NDErs and UFOers . . . were, as children, already more open to the realm of paranormal experiences" (p. 115); and "to see to what extent persons who relate extraordinary encounters . . . were, again as children, sensitive to what we shall simply call for now *alternate realities*" (p. 115).

Ring divides the aftereffects into two categories: psychophysiological changes and shifts in belief and personal values. In addition he attempts to rectify some of the well known weaknesses in previous near-death studies by providing a more solid statistical basis for assessing the value changes that have been reported.

His findings are important and are worth the investment of time to read in detail. They clearly indicate that people who have extraordinary experiences frequently have a predisposition or are sensitized to alternate realities. Ring addresses the ability for psychological absorption, and as he has reported previously, he finds that childhood abuse and trauma are a significant factor in creating the capacity for psychological absorption, though he is quick to point out that other factors may also stimulate this ability. He also notes that none of the groups were comprised of psychologically dysfunctional people. He is careful not to pathologize the experiences simply because the experiencers may have had an unhappy childhood; to paraphrase Ring, these do not appear to be "strange people having strange experiences."

The psychophysiological changes reported by both NDErs and UFOERs are extremely interesting. Six areas are identified as subject to significant change by both experiential groups. One of these areas is a sensitivity to electricity; many of these individuals reported malfunction of sensitive electronic equipment after their experiences. This is frequently coupled with increased psychic ability, such as healing or psychokinesis. Other shifts reported included changed temperature and blood pressure, expanded mental functioning, emotional fluctuations, and psychoenergetic changes such as a decreased need for sleep and unusual energetic sensations.

At this point in the book Ring makes the astounding assertion of the Omega Prototype; that is, the meaning behind the events leading to these psychophysiological changes is nothing less than the evolution of the human species. The concept of speciation in humans is not a new thought; Ring himself addressed the point in *Heading Toward Omega* (1984). Readers must determine for themselves whether they are prepared to accept this thesis on the meager data provided. Nonetheless, it is thought-provoking.

The reported shifts in beliefs are also extremely significant, indicating changes that in many cases are tantamount to an entirely new world view. Ring details the results of each of his psychological instruments; the bottom line is a more positive view of life and a focus on love as the ultimate value.

In Chapter 9, "Heading Toward Oz," Ring himself makes an abrupt shift. He suddenly seems to take a reductionist view and addresses an electromagnetic model of a possible cause of anomalous experiences. The shift is, in my estimation, far too precipitous. Many readers will, I suspect, have great difficulty following Ring's train of thought; in fact, I had to call him and inquire what he really meant. In this chapter Ring takes the reader on a complex journey through electromagnetic

stimulation, excitation of the hippocampus, and into imaginal realities, a journey far too complex to cover here. Frankly, I thought this chapter distracted from what is otherwise an excellent, readable text.

In the final chapter Ring explores the meaning behind the Earth changes scenarios many experiencers report. His interpretation will be viewed as controversial, but is, in my mind, a very important and timely view. Whether or not the Gaia hypothesis is valid, the critical nature of global environmental issues cannot be denied. This is an important adjunct to works such as Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance* (1992).

Throughout the book Ring brings up the concept of extraordinary experiences as part of a prototypical initiation process. He points out strong similarities between the events described by extraordinary experiencers and those in shamanic or other initiatory procedures. Of course this raises a question about who or what is conducting the initiation, and for what purpose.

In *The Omega Project* Ring has again proved that he is a step ahead of most of us researchers. This provocative work is well worth careful consideration by scientists and lay readers. It provides an excellent jumping off point for theoretical dialogue and for many studies yet to come.

## References

- Gore, A. (1992). *Earth in the balance: Ecology and the human spirit*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Ring, K. (1984). *Heading toward omega: In search of the meaning of the near-death experience*. New York, NY: William Morrow.