

Tours of heaven in light of the neuroscientific study of religious experience

In this paper I will interact with two central chapters of Patrick McNamara's "The Neuroscience of Religious Experience", that is, chapters five and six that deal with the neurology and neurochemistry of religiosity. Drawing on McNamara's conclusions in these chapters, I will turn to early Christian apocalyptic texts that describe tours of heaven and ask the question of how far the available neuroscientific evidence and models can help us make sense of these reports. A perennial question in the research of such literature is whether there is any actual religious experience behind the accounts. I will argue that the best approach is one that combines knowledge about the neurological bases of religious experience, the role of tradition and beliefs shaping experience at subconscious and conscious levels, and the different ways in which memory and textual transmission influence the preserved forms of the seer's story.