

The role of psychological typology in religious experiences: First insights from the Alister Hardy Trust database

Richard A. Vroom

*Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies
Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands
Email: ravroom@icloud.com*

Abstract

This study explores the relationship between psychological typology and religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs) by analysing firsthand accounts from the Alister Hardy Trust Database. From 624 narratives, 100 were selected that contained a clearly described RSE and sufficient data to infer psychological type using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) framework. Through qualitative coding in ATLAS.ti, we examined patterns in MBTI preferences and mystical features as defined by James, Stace, and Happold. Findings show a strong presence of introversion (I) and intuition (N), with INFJ as the most frequently identified type (41%), followed by INFP (24%) and INTJ (17%). Extroverted mystical experiences were more commonly reported than introverted ones, suggesting that even introspective individuals may externalise spiritual perception. This challenges assumptions about the inward nature of mysticism. The study offers new insights into how personality influences RSEs and holds implications for pastoral theology, spiritual counselling, and the psychology of religion.

Keywords: Alister Hardy Trust database; psychological type; religious and Spiritual experiences (RSEs); Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI); qualitative analysis.

Introduction

We based this article on a presentation given at the 2024 Conference of the Religious Experience Research Centre, organised by the Alister Hardy Trust. It is only a summary of a more extensive study undertaken as part of a PhD in the empirical psychology of religion at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. The article explores the relationship between personality typology and religious and spiritual experiences, as reflected in the Alister Hardy Trust Database. These are first impressions.

Religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs) have long captivated scholars across disciplines, offering profound insights into human consciousness, belief systems, and the perception of the transcendent. These experiences, often described as encounters with a higher power, the divine, or an ultimate reality, shape moral frameworks, influence life

trajectories and provide meaning in the lives of those who experience them. However, a fundamental question remains: Are certain personality types more predisposed to RSEs than others?

This study explores the intersection of psychological typology and religious experience, utilising the Alister Hardy Trust Database, one of the most extensive repositories of firsthand spiritual encounters. Established by Sir Alister Hardy, the database comprises thousands of personal accounts from individuals who responded to Hardy's central question: 'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?' This vast collection provides an empirical foundation for investigating how personality type influences the nature, interpretation, and impact of RSEs.

The origins of the Alister Hardy Trust

Sir Alister Hardy was fascinated by transcendental experiences and sought to study them by collecting firsthand accounts systematically. His outreach efforts, including talks and publications, attracted many responses. These responses, documenting extraordinary encounters, were eventually digitised and compiled into the Alister Hardy Trust Database, which now serves as a key resource for research into religious experiences (Hardy). A recent example of research using the Alister Hardy Database was Dr Zsuzsanna Szugyiczki of the University of Szeged, Hungary. She researched characteristics of traditional and modern mystical experiences (Szugyiczki, 2023). Access to the database requires a login code provided by the Alister Hardy Religious Research Centre. As of 12 November 2024, the database contains 6,679 accounts organised into five series. For us, series one and two are essential because they contain the original collection of written accounts and the accounts submitted online. However, this last input method was discontinued due to misuse, leaving only a few usable entries.

Our series provided an initial dataset of 5,809 accounts for examination and analysis. This subset offered the most relevant material for exploring correlations between Personality Typology and RSEs, ensuring a robust and meaningful scope for qualitative

analysis. The other series do not have the focus we are interested in¹. We selected accounts between 1,000 and 1,500 words to give us sufficient text to analyse. This criterion yielded 624 accounts suitable for coding². We analysed the accounts for the eight MBTI preferences and RSE characteristics.

Defining religious and spiritual experiences

One of the primary challenges researchers face is defining what constitutes a religious or spiritual experience (RSE). Jeff Astley (2020) gives a possible definition of what we are discussing. He states:

Spiritual, religious, sacred, supernatural, transcendent, or mystical experiences are terms used for human experiences that appear to the person undergoing them (or to others) to convey or imply some sort of contact with or knowledge about a power, presence or reality beyond themselves and their 'sense' experience, and frequently beyond the realm of Nature, the physical or whatever is located in space and time (Astley, 2003).

We are talking about forms of awareness of 'something beyond' or 'something more'. These forms of awareness are significant in people's ordinary lives and often form the cradle of the growth of a religion. From these 'extraordinary' awarenesses, moral attitudes and beliefs, values, and practices are generated upon these experiences. The experiences are formative in the quest for meaning and develop a fundamental life orientation. In Astley's definition, we find other terms like 'sacred', 'supernatural', and 'transcendent'. We will restrict ourselves to religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs).

William James ([1902] 2002) mentioned four critical dimensions of RSEs: the ineffability, the noetic character, the transiency, and the passivity of the experiences, characteristics

¹ Series 3: Contributions from a research program focused on near-death experiences (NDEs); Series 4: Accounts related to studies on angels and communication with the afterlife; Series 5: Submissions from a project focused on the Tamil Nadu region of India.

² There are 4070 accounts under 1000 words and 817 above 1500 words not examined. 25 Accounts in our set appeared to contain just a short text and the text of a filled in survey of another study. These accounts were discarded because we could not analyse them.

we find echoed in other authors. Stace (1961), for instance, concentrated on mystical experiences, a subcategory of RSEs, by gathering data through empirical studies and surveys. His distinction between introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences (Stace, 1961, pp. 62 – 85) is constructive. In his view, the extrovertive mystical experience is a precursor to the introvertive mystical experience, or the introvertive mode is the source of all the other mystical experiences.

The two core characteristics of extrovertive mystical experiences are the ‘unifying quality’ and the ‘inner subjective quality.’ This experience involves perceiving unity within the external world rather than withdrawing into inner consciousness. It transforms how an individual sees reality, revealing an underlying oneness in nature and existence.

The two core characteristics of the introvertive mystical experiences are ‘ego quality’ and the ‘temporal-spatial quality.’ This type of experience is characterised by an inward turn, where external reality fades away, and the experient perceives an undifferentiated unity and loss of ‘ego’. The experience is deeply internal, beyond sensory perception and seems beyond time.

The five common characteristics of both introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences are ‘noetic quality,’ ‘ineffability,’ ‘positive affect,’ ‘religious quality,’ and ‘paradoxicality’ (Stace, 1961; Anthony, Hermans and Sterkens, 2015). Happold ([1963] 1990) finds in the mystical literature seven common characteristics significant to a mystical experience (Happold, [1963] 1990): ‘the quality of ineffability,’ ‘the noetic quality,’ the ‘quality of transiency,’ the ‘quality of passivity,’ the ‘consciousness of the Oneness of everything,’ the ‘experience of a sense of timelessness’ and the ‘diminishing of the awareness of the ego’ (or the flattening out of the ego). The characteristics or dimensions of the RSE thus found will be used in the Atlas.ti software when coding the accounts in the Alister Hardy Database.

The study of RSEs has become a genuine research topic within the various disciplines of history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and theology. Often, we encounter mixtures of approaches, demonstrating how all the scientific fields overlap. We know that mystical experiences have received more attention than the more general RSEs because of the many written testimonies of these experiences and the research to measure precisely these kinds of experiences. Various psychometric instruments were developed specifically for this aim. Among others, we mention the Mystical Experience Scale developed by Stace (1961), which categorises mystical experiences into introvertive and extrovertive types based on key characteristics such as ineffability, unity,

and loss of self. Building upon Stace's theoretical framework, Hood's Mysticism Scale (M-Scale) (Hood, Hill and Spilka, 2018) was developed to measure mystical experiences empirically. The M-Scale consists of items that assess the extent to which individuals report experiences aligning with Stace's core mystical characteristics, including a sense of unity, transcendence of time and space, and ineffability.

Similarly, drawing upon the analysis of mystical literature by Frederick Happold ([1963] 1990), which identified common themes in mystical experiences across religious traditions, Francis and colleagues developed the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale (Francis and Loudon, 2000). This scale measures an individual's mystical orientation, emphasising dimensions such as the perception of divine presence, unity with the transcendent, and a deep sense of spiritual reality. These instruments contribute to the psychological study of mysticism and spiritual experiences by quantifying mystical tendencies in both religious and non-religious contexts. The field of RSEs is broad, and the part of mystical experiences is relatively small and specific. Though we can label mystical experiences as a subcategory of RSEs, we discovered in our analysis that people do report RSEs that could be labelled a mystical experience.

Through this literature review and data analysis, we identified eight hallmarks of RSEs, focusing on characteristics at the time of the experience and afterwards.

These dimensions guided our analysis of the Alister Hardy Trust Database accounts.

These include:

- Transiency: The experiences are often short-lived,
- Paradoxicality: They present a new dimension, upending the experient's worldview, and
- Passivity: The experiences happen to the individual without conscious effort
- Ineffability: The experient often struggles to describe the experience. (Happold, [1963] 1990)

After the experience, additional hallmarks emerge:

- Positive effect: The RSE brings about a positive change in the individual's life
- Religious quality: The individual often interprets the experience through a religious lens
- Noetic quality: The RSE feels deeply real and significant

- Significance: The experience leaves a lasting, life-changing impression. (Happold, [1963] 1990)

We added Stace's distinction between introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences (Stace, 1961, pp. 62 – 85) because this proved constructive.

- Introvertive mystical experience
- Extrovertive mystical experience

Psychological Type and religious experience: What are we looking for?

Our analysis of psychological typology is based on Carl Jung's theory of psychological types, as operationalised through the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Briggs Myers et al., 1998). The MBTI is a self-report assessment designed to measure an individual's preferences in four key psychological dimensions:

1. Extraversion (E) vs. Introversion (I) – This dimension reflects where individuals direct their energy and attention. Extraverts are outward-focused, energised by social interactions, and prefer active engagement with the external world. Conversely, introverts are inward-focused, gaining energy from solitary reflection and deeper internal processing.
2. Sensing (S) vs. Intuition (N) – This scale measures how people prefer to take in information. Those with a sensing preference rely on concrete facts, details, and direct experiences, while intuitive types focus on patterns, possibilities, and abstract meanings.
3. Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F) – This dimension reflects how individuals make decisions. Thinking types prioritise logic, objectivity, and principles, whereas feeling types consider emotions, values, and the impact on others when making judgments.
4. Judging (J) vs. Perceiving (P) – This final scale measures how people approach structure and organisation. Judging types prefer order, planning, and decisiveness, while perceiving types favour flexibility, spontaneity, and adaptability.

Combining these four preferences determines each individual's psychological type, resulting in 16 distinct personality types (e.g., ISTJ, ENFP, etc.).

For our analysis, we identified linguistic and thematic markers within the texts that could be mapped onto these MBTI preferences, enabling us to infer a possible psychological type for each account.

Introversion/extraversion*Introversion (I):*

- 'I enjoy spending time alone.'
- 'I prefer deep, one-on-one conversations.'
- Example from the database: 'One of the things I have always valued, in connection with my religion, is a few quiet moments of meditation alone each day...' (Account 000375)

Extraversion (E):

- 'I get energised by being around people.'
- 'I enjoy meeting new people and making new friends.'
- Example from the database: 'I told Dr. Robinson, and he said, "Somebody must have helped you!" I told him no... My mind was in a bit of a mess. I felt I must tell people about it, but when I told them, I could see they thought I was odd.' (Account 000600)

Sensing/iNtuition*Sensing (S):*

- 'I focus on the present and what is real.'
- 'I trust experience over theories.'
- Example from the database: 'For a few seconds only, the whole compartment was filled with light... I never felt more humbled. I never felt more exalted.' (Account 000385)

iNtuition (N):

- 'I focus on future possibilities and big-picture thinking.'
- 'I enjoy thinking about the meaning behind things.'
- Example from the database: 'It was a beautiful morning and I stood looking out of the window over the fields. I was overwhelmed with happiness. I had tuned in to the infinite; again, I do not understand it...' (Account 000375)

Thinking/Feeling*Thinking (T):*

- 'I make decisions based on logic and objectivity.'
- 'I enjoy analysing problems and finding solutions.'
- Example from the database: 'We are correct if we speak about mysteries when something occurs beyond the power of human understanding. I think it seems to prove my transcendental experience beyond myself.' (Account 000009)

Feeling (F):

- 'I make decisions based on values and feelings.'
- 'I prioritise personal relationships over tasks.'
- Example from the database: 'For about half an hour we were able to talk almost normally about ourselves and the family with a great sense of unity and purpose.' (Account 000871)

Judging/Perceiving

Judging (J):

- 'I prefer structure and organisation.'
 - 'I enjoy planning and scheduling.'
 - Example from the database: 'I keep a diary of all meditations and messages received.'
- (Account 000007)

Perceiving (P):

- 'I prefer flexibility and spontaneity.'
- 'I enjoy exploring new opportunities and changing plans.'
- Example from the database: 'It seemed very natural that once I had got used to "sitting in this place," I should want to know more about these emotions...' (Account 200028)

The Process of Coding

We used the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti 2025) to systematically code the textual data for two key aspects: MBTI preferences (E/I, S/N, T/F, and J/P) that indicate a particular Psychological Type, and the 10 characteristics of a Religious or Spiritual Experience (RSE) (see above).

Our approach involved identifying verbal expressions in the texts to map to these predefined categories.

Since our analysis was based solely on textual data, we focused on language patterns, descriptions, and thematic elements aligned with MBTI personality indicators or RSE characteristics. However, not all accounts within our selected set of 1,000–1,500 words provided sufficient content for both types of coding. Sometimes, a text clearly described an RSE but lacked enough information to determine MBTI preferences. In other cases, the text allowed for MBTI coding but did not present a clear RSE.

Finally, some accounts contained neither a discernible RSE nor sufficient content for MBTI analysis. All records that did not meet our dual criteria were categorised under labels such as 'religious biography,' 'dreams,' 'psychoses,' and 'paranormal experiences,' among others. Ultimately, we identified 100 accounts with a clear RSE and sufficient textual evidence to infer a possible Psychological Type.

Table 1: MBTI and RSE distribution

MBTI Type	I/E	S/N	T/F	J/P	Frequency (n=100)
INFJ	I	N	F	J	41
INFP	I	N	F	P	24
INTJ	I	N	T	J	17
ISFJ	I	S	F	J	9
ISFP	I	S	F	P	4
INTP	I	N	T	P	2
ISTJ	I	S	T	J	2
INTx	I	N	T	?	1
Extraverted Types (E-Types)	—	—	—	—	0

Table 2: Summary of MBTI dimensions

Preference	Count	% of Total
Introverts (I)	100	100%
Extraverts (E)	0	0%
Intuitives (N)	85	85%
Sensors (S)	15	15%
Feelers (F)	74	74%
Thinkers (T)	26	26%
Judgers (J)	69	69%
Perceivers (P)	31	31%

What does our data show:

- 100% of the dataset is introverted → No Extraverted types (E) appear in the sample.
- 85% are Intuitive (N) → Strong bias toward abstraction, meaning-seeking, and pattern recognition.
- 74% are Feeling (F) types → RSEs may be interpreted more through emotions and personal values.
- 69% are Judging (J) types → Suggests a tendency toward structure and long-term meaning-making.
- INFJ is the dominant type (41%) → This aligns with previous literature linking INFJs to mystical experiences.

We looked at the frequencies in the coding for extroverted and introverted religious experiences. In all the types with I and N, there were more extroverted religious experiences reported than introverted experiences (36 for 24). We would have expected more introverted experiences. Interestingly, when we look at the INT* types, there is a more even distribution between the introverted and extroverted religious

experiences (7 to 8). It raises the question of whether the T types in our samples are prone to have more introvertive experiences than the F types in our sample.

Gender appears to influence the type of religious experience recorded, although further analysis is needed in this area. Also, when reading the accounts written by men, these tend to be more factual and display more effort to signify the experience, thus blurring the original experience described.

The Alister Hardy Database is not an average/representation of a group of people. We noticed that more women responded to the Alister Hardy Question than men. Furthermore, when reading the accounts written by men, these tend to be more factual and display more effort to signify the experience, thus blurring the original experience described.

Conclusion

Analysing religious and spiritual experiences from the Alister Hardy Trust Database offers valuable insights into the intersection of personality type and spiritual experience. By focusing on the hallmarks of these experiences and expressions of psychological preferences, along with incorporating Stace's distinction between introvertive and extrovertive mystical consciousness, this research adds depth to our understanding of how individuals encounter the divine and the lasting impact of these encounters. Ongoing analysis promises to shed more light on the nuanced differences in how various personality types experience the transcendent.

This unique approach to looking for a religious and spiritual experience in written texts in combination with a psychological type opens new possibilities for research. It opens new insights into the field of pastoral theology and the psychology of religion. There might be better ways to engage with persons who record an RSE. If a person's psychological type is known and the person shares an RSE, an interview can be more fruitful and helpful. It is sometimes not right to ask, 'Where is God' in all this?' when the experient has an introvertive experience beyond concepts and ideas, beyond an experience of ego.

Gratitude

The author expresses gratitude to Prof. Leslie Francis and Prof. Carl Sterkens for their guidance and the Alister Hardy Trust for providing access to the invaluable database.

References

2025. ATLAS.ti Mac version 25.0.1. 25.0.1 ed. Berlin, Germany: ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH.
- Anthony, F., Hermans, C. and Sterkens, C. (2015) *Religion and conflict attribution: An empirical study of the religious meaning system of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students in Tamil Nadu, India*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.
- Astley, J. (2003) 'Spiritual learning: Good for nothing?' in Carr, D. and Haldane, R. (eds) *Spirituality, philosophy and education*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Astley, J. (2020) *SCM Studyguide: Religious and spiritual experience*. London: SCM Press.
- Myers, I.B., McCaulley, M.H., Quenk, N.L. and Hammer, A.L. (1998) *MBTI Manual: A guide to the development and use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®*, Palo Alto, Consulting Psychologist Press, Inc.
- Francis, L.J. and Loudon, S.H. (2000) The Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale (MOS): A study among Roman Catholic priests. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 11, pp. 99-116.
- Happold, F.C. ([1963] 1990) *Mysticism: A study and an anthology*. London: Penguin Books.
- Hardy, Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre [Online]. Lampeter, Wales, UK: The Hardy Trust. Available at: <https://alisterhardytrust.uwtsd.ac.uk>
- Hood, R.W., Hill, P.C. and Spilka, B. (2018) *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach*. New York: The Guildford Press.
- James, W. ([1902] 2002) *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. London: Routledge.
- Stace, W.T. (1961) *Mysticism and philosophy*. London: MacMillan & Co Ltd.
- Szugyiczki, Z. (2023) *Mysticism beyond time: A comparative study of traditional vs. modern mysticism*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Málnási Bartók György Doctoral School of Philosophy. Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/openview/107d0545ba599dd291ceca7aa01d159d/1?cb1=2026366&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar>