

## **Twenty-first century perspectives on the varieties of religious experience: A review article**

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### **Introduction**

This article provides an extended critical review of a major work co-authored by two North American scientists, David B. Yaden and Andrew B. Newberg: *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Research and Perspectives*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022 (x + 430 pp; ISBN 9780190665678, hardback, £22.99).

As the title suggests, Yaden and Newberg's book follows in the tradition of William James's seminal 1902 text (which is still in print) but operating with the less restrictive category of 'spiritual experience'. The authors cover a wider field of traditions and cultures than James and draw on more recent surveys (including their own work, in particular the 'Varieties Survey' of 461 individuals representative of the US general population) and empirical studies mainly in the cognate disciplines of psychology, psychiatry, pharmacology, and neuroscience.

A scene-setting first part moves the reader from an overview of James and his book to contemporary work in psychology and brain studies, including an examination of the triggers of spiritual experiences – ranging from prayer (the most reported) to sex (the least); of spontaneous experiences, which are more common; and of the effects of these experiences (which are massively described as positive). Part II then delineates six broad and overlapping types of spiritual experience. While these possess 'fuzzy boundaries' and are neither immutable nor mutually exclusive (pp. 163, 272), they are claimed to reflect the way people report their experiences. This typology is comprised by the categories of aesthetic, mystical, numinous, revelatory, synchronous, and paranormal spiritual experiences. This is followed in Part III by a broader examination of the interpretation and integration of these experiences, including some philosophical reflections and clinical applications. The volume concludes with an extremely detailed index.

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It is a scholarly, careful, well-organised, and comprehensive academic work, yet one that manages to remain very lucid and readable throughout and always respectful of those who have testified to the experiences it surveys (see pp. 399-400). Its succinct summaries of other people's work are masterful, focusing on the key elements and providing brief, pertinent quotations, accompanied by carefully-chosen charts, diagrams, and tables from the literature where appropriate. Each chapter appends its own set of references; in many cases, specifically in Part II, these could double as very useful bibliographies of the key publications addressing the area under consideration.

Yaden and Newberg's volume deserves to become an essential addition to any library that is at all concerned with the study of religious and spiritual experiences. It will assuredly also become, for many years, a frequently referenced work in RSE publications and bibliographies. My only, very minor, misgiving about this work is its surprising number of proof-reading errors.

## **Content and Issues**

### ***Honouring and Updating William James***

The book's title is carefully chosen, as in many ways the work is an updating of and contains much commentary on William James's Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*, first published at the beginning of the twentieth century. The present work admirably fulfils its explicit aim of articulating James's perspective and showing its contemporary relevance (p. 399).

Two early chapters are devoted to James and his classic. The authors remind us that he was both a psychologist and philosopher who, though originally a materialist, later underwent some sort of spiritual experience of his own (pp. 29-31). In discussing the types of spiritual experience, they helpfully summarise both James's own account of each category and some later major publications 'related to James's perspective' (p. 166). They further allude to James's work at many other points in their enquiry. The index entry for William James is the longest in the book and offers the interested reader (or lazy student!) an excellent digest of his work in this area.

In particular, the authors make much of the distinction between James's 'professional' and his 'personal' attitude to the experiences he recounted. Their text rightly applauds James's agnostic method of putting aside metaphysical and theological questions and describing human (mainly psychological) aspects of the experiences (p. 400). His 'professional conclusion' extends this methodological agnosticism, which he maintained throughout his *Varieties* (p. 393), into a 'general agnosticism' about founding supernatural claims on the evidence of spiritual experience, despite its frequently evident positive effects. Thus, James wrote that 'the only thing that it unequivocally testifies to is that we experience union with *something* larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace' (James, 1960 [1902], p. 499). Yet, as Yaden and Newberg point out, 'James's *personal* conclusion is quite different' (pp. 311, 391), for he confesses to being a 'supernaturalist' (James, 1960 [1902], p. 495). 'James essentially took evidence for the positive outcomes of spiritual experience and counted these consequences as evidence for the truth of spiritual beliefs': for, to a pragmatist like James, 'what is true is often what works best' (p. 313). This is James's 'big reveal about his own beliefs' (p. 307), his famous (notorious?) 'leap of faith' (pp. 315, 326).

As one might expect, such an approach to religious truth has been heavily criticised by philosophers like Bertrand Russell (1961, pp. 769-773). It also suffers, in my view and that of others who prefer the lead of David Hume rather than René Descartes on the freedom of belief, from an overemphasis on the believer's freedom to choose their beliefs (see Rebecca Goldstein's 'fourth flaw', cited in Yaden and Newberg at p. 316, and the philosophers I quote in Astley, 2012). Our only freedom in acquiring beliefs is, I would argue, very limited. It is confined to 'a freedom to engage in actions that have much more indirect, and sometimes unpredictable, consequences' on the essentially passive and involuntary phenomenon of belief formation (Astley, 1994, p. 200).

Nevertheless, there are many who are willing to endorse some form of 'by your fruits shall you know them' approach to RSEs, if only insofar as arguing that 'no matter how [they] come to us, what they produce in our lives and in wider social contexts is what matters most' (Wildman, 2011, p. 242; cf. Thayer, 1964, pp. 447-455).

The attention to James in this publication should enhance the reputation of this 'adventurer in the realm of ideas' (p. 21; cf. pp. 50-51), not only as a seminal figure in the development of scientific psychology and, indeed, the scientific study of religion in general (p. 391), but also as a key figure in arguing for a philosophy of pragmatism.

## ***The Meaning of Spiritual Experience***

However, as already stated, the authors eschew James's title, preferring that of 'spiritual experience'. They have done this, they write, on 'the recommendation of scholars' and because it is 'the most commonly endorsed term' (from the list provided to participants) in the Varieties Survey. Their phrase refers, quite generally, to 'meaningful, inner' altered states of consciousness and includes experiences 'that are not specifically religious in nature', as well as those that are. (See pp. 7-8, 12, 41-42, 396-397.) They further argue, very reasonably, that in his own interpretation of the term 'religion' James was in fact himself referring to the broader domain of spirituality (pp. 40-41).

Spiritual experiences are characterised as mental states, typically involving (at any rate for the purposes of this volume) 'a fairly dramatic shift in one's perceptions, emotions, and cognitions' (and not *just* in one's emotions). But, significantly, they also 'include some content having to do with some aspect of reality beyond appearances' (which James designated the 'unseen reality'), whether some kind of mind, or an underlying oneness or beauty, that 'seems to exist to the one having the experience' (pp. 146-147).

One should note at this juncture the import of that little word 'seems'. What philosophers call 'epistemic seeming' has been regarded as central for the move from religious experience to the existence of God or some other transcendent object. Richard Swinburne considers it 'a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) . . . what one seems to perceive is probably so'. (The 'special considerations' he is thinking of are people lying or having been proved wrong in the past, the improbability of the existence of the object being the cause of the experience, or strong background evidence of that object not being, in fact, present.) Swinburne calls this 'the principle of credulity' (Swinburne, 2004, p. 303); whereas Kai-man Kwan names it (less misleadingly) the 'critical trust' principle (Kwan, 2011, chs 4, 7). If their assessment is correct, those who endorse the existence of an object of RSEs cannot be regarded as engaging in a species of special pleading.

## ***Psychometric Surveys and the Types of Spiritual Experience***

Psychometrics attempts to measure mental capacities and processes by getting subjects to answer questions through self-report surveys. Yaden and Newberg briefly review this research method, rehearsing its advantages and disadvantages, and illustrating some of its findings: not only from James's work but from that of Edwin Starbuck, 'our own' Alister Hardy, and later large-scale polling. The use of multiple items forming scales permits the development of quantitative perspectives on the data, but in the authors' opinion the ideal approach to understanding spiritual experiences involves triangulation by the use of multiple research methods, including more qualitative ones (pp. 64-69; cf. Astley, 2020, ch. 3).

A full third of *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience* is devoted to its typology of these experiences, with a focus on 'fairly dramatically shift[ed]', or 'intensely' or 'substantially altered states of consciousness', rather than on more subtle, 'everyday', spiritual experiences (pp. 47, 146, 170, 374-375; cf. Astley, 2020, ch. 5; for another – different? – understanding of intense experiences, see Wildman, 2011, pp. 92-97, 254-255).

According to our authors, although William James was sometimes sceptical about such an endeavour, he appears on occasions to claim that these experiences can be classified into types (pp. 147-148). Among more recent typologies of spiritual experiences, mention is also made of those of Alister Hardy, David Hay, Roland Fischer, Eugene d'Aquili and Newberg, Tanya Luhrmann and, most recently and ongoing, Ann Taves. All of these are described as 'top-down, researcher-derived models' (p. 155; cf. Hay, 2006, ch. 1; Astley, 2020, ch. 4).

A most welcome and innovative feature of this book, however, is that the authors' own categories have been derived in a more data-driven way, as they have arisen from the data of the Varieties Survey using factor analysis. This is a sophisticated statistical method that describes the variability among observed, correlated variables (that is, characteristics that have more than one value, represented here by the items in the questionnaire) in terms of a smaller number of unobserved variables called factors. Hence, the three items:

- I felt God's presence
- I felt that I encountered God
- I felt that I communed with God,

were all found to 'cluster together' under the factor (the category or type) of divinity/God experiences that are termed, by Rudolf Otto, 'numinous' (pp. 163, 166; Otto, 1925 [1917]). (Those readers who confess themselves to be less numerate might perhaps welcome a little more by way of explanation in the authors' accounts of factor analyses and correlation studies.)

Altogether, nine factors are identified by this statistical technique, of which four ('Aesthetic Nature' and 'Aesthetic Art', 'Paranormal Known' and 'Paranormal Unknown') are grouped under the types 'Aesthetic' and 'Paranormal', respectively (p. 162); while 'Unity' (representing connectedness) and 'Self-Loss' (a fading of the sense of self) are defining characteristics, either singly or together, of the significant category of 'Mystical Experiences' (pp. 162, 224-225).

The six types of spiritual experience that are distinguished in this manner are analysed in detail in chapters 9 to 14 of the book. They are listed, in the order of increasing prevalence according to the data from the Varieties Survey, as 'Synchronicity' (c. 5%), 'Aesthetic' (c. 8%), 'Mystical' (c. 13%), 'Revelatory' (c. 15%), 'Paranormal' (c. 21%), and 'Numinous' (c. 38%). However, it is acknowledged that these 'clusters of subjective qualities' are 'very rough categories for these experiences', with some experiences overlapping across two or more categories' (p. 163).

In addition to a brief account of James's contribution and of more recent scholarly deliberation about each type of spiritual experience, a large slice of each of the remaining chapters in Part II is devoted to contemporary empirical psychological research on the category, including significant measures and scales, and data about its positive and pathological aspects. Every chapter then concludes with an account of germane neuroscientific studies and findings. In this review, I shall only comment on some of the more straightforward characteristics of the types that Yaden and Newberg delineate in their very detailed chapters, paying particular attention to their own empirical data.

In their Varieties Survey, *Numinous experiences* were associated with well-being outcomes more than any other spiritual experiences (pp. 173-174), despite the rather negative element of dread that is said by Otto to accompany the alluring effect of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto, 1925 [1917]), pp. 12-19). *Revelatory experiences* are defined here as voices, visions, or more complex and abstract epiphanies, 'that seem to come from a source beyond the self' (p. 186); in the authors' own data these were

also associated with well-being, and were largely represented by the special case of the *calling experience* whose content refers to one's life direction (p. 196).

As we have seen, *experiences of Synchronicity* ('a meaningful pattern of events') represent by far the smallest percentage of experiences in the Varieties Survey. In striking contrast, this had been found by David Hay to form 'the commonest kind of experience reported in Britain' in his 2000 survey – although it was only not much over half as common in his survey of 1987 (Hay, 2006, p. 11). The disparity may be explained by the finding by the present authors that these experiences are 'less intense overall and less impactful' than others (p. 218; compare their research focus, noted earlier in this section of the review). I have suggested elsewhere (Astley, 2020, p. 50) that some synchronicity experiences may be regarded as cases of so-called 'interpretive theistic experiences' (see Kwan, 2012, pp. 516-518) or 'experiences-as' (see Hick, 1973, ch. 3; 2008, ch. 2).

I found Yaden and Newberg's definition of *Mystical experiences*, in terms of feelings of self-loss or fading me-ness (James's 'self-surrender') and/or deep feelings of unity or connectedness, very helpful. I also value the account of their 'unitary continuum' of degrees of overlap between these two elements, which stretches from the normal experience of non-overlap through to an almost complete and most intense overlap in mysticism, with 'mindfulness', 'flow', 'awe', and 'peak experience' marking intermediate points along the spectrum (pp. 233-234). Reports of unity experiences are associated with more positive well-being outcomes than those of self-loss experiences.

Awe-inspiring experiences in the face of Nature or human artistic artefacts ('Art') are recognised here as *Aesthetic experiences*. Kwan refers to these under his category of 'mediated theistic experiences' (see above), while others — e.g. Keith Ward in his concept of 'spiritual sense' and John Cottingham with his 'illuminations' — include them as a parallel to (Ward) or an explicit broadening of (Cottingham) experiences in religion (cf. Astley, 2020, ch. 5, and the references cited there).

For several reasons, *Paranormal experiences* and psi phenomena have been pushed by many scholars and researchers to the fringes of the field of spiritual experiences (p. 270). Yaden and Newberg, however, received a high number of responses for their items about seeing or being visited by a deceased relative or friend or encountering a ghost of someone they knew; and about encountering some unknown spiritual entity other than God or feeling an unknown 'ghostly presence'. In their research, however, paranormal

experiences were the least likely of all their types to relate to well-being; and there was actually a slightly negative correlation between the two (pp. 277-278).

### **Outcomes, ‘feeling real’, and Perceiving the Spiritual**

William James, the present authors, and the more recent work they cite, focused much of their attention on the ‘effects’, ‘fruits’, ‘consequences’, ‘reactions’, ‘cash-value’, or ‘outcomes’ of spiritual experiences and/or of the beliefs predicated upon them (e.g. James, 1960 [1902], pp. 322, 425; for James on outcomes see also Yaden and Newberg, 2022, pp. 9, 121-125, 131, 395; and for these authors’ own perspective and that of recent work on outcomes, see pp. 128-139, 353, 396, and Part II, *passim*). While many of these outcomes represent short-term changes (p. 328), chapter 17 of Yaden and Newberg’s volume focuses on more long-term, ‘transformative changes’ that spiritual experiences can exert. They note that such persisting positive effects, sometimes lasting a lifetime and involving a change in the individual him or herself, were also noted by William James (see pp. 329-333).

Despite also being aware of the occasional excesses of behaviour, James devoted several of his lectures (and two chapters of his own book) to ‘saintliness’ and its value. True saints may be few and far between, but in Yaden and Newberg’s own research the great majority of participants reported effects that lasted ‘many years’ and were overwhelmingly positive (pp. 337-338).

But, as James himself had concluded, effects are not enough. After all, even the saintly character, ‘the same in all religions’, includes a ‘sensible’ (and not merely intellectual) conviction of ‘the existence of an Ideal Power’ — a ‘sense of Presence’ — whether of God, or of more abstract moral ideals or holiness, or of utopias (1960 [1902], pp. 269-271). Most studies of RSEs agree as to the importance of the ‘origins’, ‘roots’, ‘reality’, or ‘objects’ that in some way cause, or ‘lie behind’, the experiences that produce these good fruits. And very many concur in maintaining that at least some spiritual experiences constitute a kind of *perception* of something putatively real (Yaden and Newberg, 2022, pp. 146-147, 320-323; on James’s position, see 292-294, 321; see also James, 1960 [1902], 484-485, 490-491, and lecture III, on ‘The reality of the unseen’). Unlike other altered states of consciousness, spiritual experiences not only ‘feel real’ during the experience but continue to do so in hindsight (sometimes more so); and the overwhelming majority

of experients say they are at least as real or more real than ‘usual reality’ (pp. 294-296). Furthermore, most participants in the Varieties Survey changed their views about the world as a consequence of their spiritual experiences (pp. 299-301, cf. p. 125).

The claim that these are ‘external experiences’, in the sense of *veridical perceptions* of ‘an externally existing object’ (Gaskin, 1984, p. 80; cf. Astley, 2020, ch. 10), is the view that is expounded and defended at length by the philosopher, William Alston (see Alston, 1991). Yaden and Newberg write that they ‘agree with Alston that experiences have recognizable content and seem to involve a perception of *something*, like God or unity’ (p. 322). For ‘during spiritual experiences . . . people tend to report perceiving consciousness or mind directly’ (p. 386). This perception model appears to represent the current majority position, and the most discussed option, in debates concerning the veridicality or ‘objectivity’ of RSEs (for a fuller, critical account, see Astley, 2015; 2020, pp. 107-110).

I agree that it is a plausible analysis. We should be clear that it represents a very different approach from the contention that RSEs constitute good grounds or evidence from which we may *infer* the existence of God, an Absolute, or some other supernatural being, *as the best explanation* for such phenomena.

### **Constructivism and Perennialism**

Perennialists are essentialists who treat all spiritual experiences as essentially the same across cultures; whereas constructivists argue that there is no common core or uninterpreted ‘pure’ experience here, for spiritual experiences are completely shaped by cultural influences. Perennialist views tend to be associated with the more recent, *life-scientifically oriented* fields that study spiritual experiences ‘on the basis that we all share the same basic nervous system’ (and the same basic physiology, biochemistry etc.): that is, ‘the unchanging facts of biology’. But, as *social science* insists, ‘different cultural meanings . . . undoubtedly change one’s subjective experience’ (p. 395). In the face of strong and confident attacks from constructivists, perennialism has more recently softened into the ‘modified common core theory’ that allows that culture does play a part in creating/influencing these experiences (p. 151). Yet many still hold to an identity of (especially) mystical experience across cultures.

Yaden and Newberg comment on the argument between these two views at various points in their book (pp. 148-152, 235, 376-377, 394-395). Their own position is labelled a 'common clusters model'. It asserts that:

there appears to be common clusters of similar features, even in cross-cultural reports of spiritual experiences, despite the fact that a great number of differences also exist . . . but, crucially, no one subjective quality is necessary or sufficient, and these clusters can change across cultures. (p. 151; cf. pp. 376-377)

Reviewing the evidence for a 'middle ground' between the claims to there being both universal aspects and cultural variations within *emotions*, the authors write that it is possible that the situation is similar with respect to spiritual experiences (pp. 377-378).

The debate between constructivists and perennialists is now generally acknowledged to be less polarised than it once was. The issue may be resolved, in a way sympathetic to the thinking of Yaden and Newberg, by adopting a *both-and* rather than an *either-or* approach. Thus, Ann Taves argues for the recognition of an interaction within experiences between subjects' bottom-up, unconscious processing, which is insensitive to culture, and their culture-sensitive, top-down processing (Taves, 2009, p. 93). In any case, as Caroline Franks Davis contends, 'one cannot drive a wedge' between experience and interpretation, and 'there is no absolute dichotomy between concepts derived from experience and concepts brought to experience' (Franks Davis, 1989, p. 165). I agree with these and other scholars in their assessment of this debate (cf. Astley, 2020, pp. 97-100).

### ***Consciousness and the Mind-Brain Problem***

The subjective sensations of what philosophers call our 'phenomenal consciousness' is where spiritual experience occurs (p. 47). The philosopher David Chalmers famously distinguished between the 'easy problems' of consciousness, which are 'solved' by mapping changes in brain function against changes in subjective sensation, and the 'hard problem', which is a matter of understanding 'how and why it is that physical processes are associated with states of experience' (Chalmers, 2002, p. 248). In their illuminating chapter on 'Consciousness and altered states' (ch. 19), our authors contend that, in addition to addressing Chalmers' easy problems, spiritual experiences may affect our understanding of the nature of consciousness itself. It can do this, it would seem, by

raising a question mark against theories of materialism (the philosophical presumption that mind is reducible to matter) and even 'neutral (or di-polar) monism' (the position that mind and matter are two aspects of the same substance, interpreting consciousness not as a specific thing but a complex process; cf. Wildman, 2011, pp. 36-37, 267); thereby permitting a return to the dualistic belief that mind and matter are distinct. My own musings on these experiences in the context of transcending physicalist materialism may be found in the first publication of this journal (Astley, 2015).

As indicated in the distinction described above between James's 'professional' and his 'personal' attitude to the experiences, his views appear to have moved at the end of his life from a position of neutral monism to embrace a dualist, indeed a supernaturalist, conception of reality and of human consciousness (Yaden and Newberg, 2022, p. 383). On this later understanding, our consciousness transcends the material of our brains, and this 'higher part' of ourselves is 'continuous with' and may merge with a greater consciousness – 'a higher part of the universe'. This, according to James, was 'a MORE of the same quality which is operative in the universe outside' oneself, and for which, he opines, 'God is the natural appellation', at least for some (James, 1960 [1902], pp. 484-485, 491).

In the end, however, one cannot be too dogmatic regarding a concept as elusive as consciousness. Yaden and Newberg advocate 'epistemic humility' and 'mystical agnosticism' as the right approach, both to spiritual experience and to the nature of consciousness (pp. 386, 400-401). This is, surely, sensible, and essential to a scientific attitude to these topics, as is William James's own recognition of the inevitable incompleteness of scientific explanations in this area.

### ***Neuroscience and Psychedelics***

When I attempted my introduction to the study of religious and spiritual experience, apart from references to the conceptual issues they raise, I excused myself from considering neuroscientific topics on the grounds that research in this area is so fast-moving and specialist, and requires more knowledge of the anatomy and physiology of the human brain than either I or most students of the humanities and social sciences possess (Astley, 2020, pp. x; but cf. pp. 244-246 and ch. 12). I still believe that that was the right decision for that publication.

In the present case, by contrast, Yaden and Newberg are themselves leading figures in this empirical research paradigm and are well qualified to provide descriptions of the relevant neuroscientific findings, referencing the parts of the brain where changes in neural activity is associated with each type of experience and illustrating their text with neuroimages fMRI, PET, or SPECT 'brain scans'. They also discuss the role of neurostimulation, neurotransmitters, and psychoactive substances — especially psychedelics — in impacting the nervous system and triggering spiritual experiences (chs 5 and 6, and *passim*).

The main value of psychedelics in furthering this research lies in the control they offer to experimentalists, as they can be administered and their effects reported and observed in a scientific, clinical setting (ch. 18). Thus, the original 'Good Friday experiment' of the 1960s (pp. 60-61), which involved the administration of the psychedelic psilocybin, was much more rigorously replicated in the early 2000s. The responses of this new sample to the Mystical Experience Questionnaire showed that over 60% of the participants who had received psilocybin (and less than 10% of a control group who had been given a psychoactive placebo) reported a full mystical experience. This represents an impressive result. The psilocybin group were also more prosocial, reporting elevated mood and sense of meaning two months later, and the majority of them judged the experience both highly meaningful and spiritually significant a year later (pp. 352-353).

But these are still early days for this kind of study. As our authors admit, our understanding of the biochemical, biophysical, and neurological mechanisms that cause the effects of psychedelics will require a lot of further careful scientific research (p. 359) and questions remain over consent and risk (pp. 361-365).

However, even when all the neuroscientific data are gathered in (if they ever can be), philosophers, social-scientific students of religion, and theologians will rightly insist on having their own say before spiritual experiences can be fully explained.

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