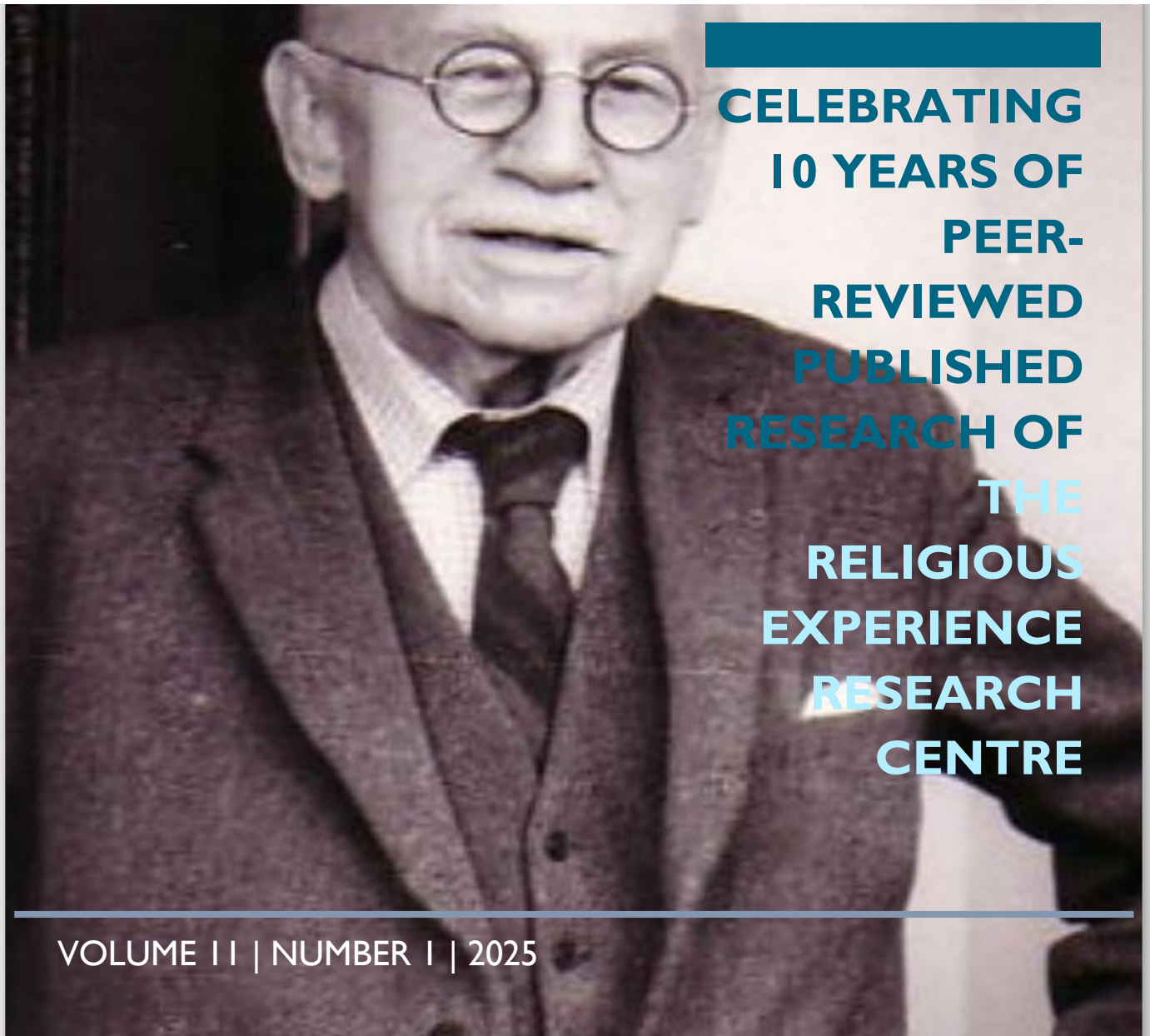# JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF PEER-REVIEWED PUBLISHED RESEARCH OF THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE RESEARCH CENTRE

CONTENTS

Editorial

Bettina E. Schmidt, Editor-in-Chief

We celebrate with this issue ten years of the Journal of the Study of Religious Experience. The first issue in 2015 marked a change in the direction of the Religious Experience Research Centre which was relaunched in 2014 with a conference in Lampeter that led to the first edited volume under the new leadership (Schmidt 2016). That first issue highlights two essays from the point of view of the psychology of religion by Leslie Francis, Chair of the Alister Hardy Trust, to study scientifically religious experience with his application of the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale in mystical experience, and from that of theology with Jeff Astley, first Alister Hardy Professor on the debate on scientific reductionism.

Since then, following the footsteps of Sir Alister Hardy who had pointed at his interest in the anthropological approach to the study of religious experience, the research centre nurtured anthropological projects and awarded honorary research fellowships to Dr Emily Pierini and Dr Jack Hunter. Their involvement led to fascinating special issues of the Journal that reflected the new areas of research in the study of religious experience and looked at future perspectives, respectively *Fieldwork in Religion: Bodily Experience and Ethnographic Knowledge* (2016, edited by Emily together with Alberto Groisman, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Brazil), and *Religious Experience and Ecology* (2021, edited by Jack).

In total we published 12 issues over the years, six regular issues consisting of a range of articles by former postgraduate students at the University to early career researchers and established scholars in the field, and six special issues. Next to the two special issues mentioned above, these concerned, religion, culture and extraordinary experiences with guest editors Gregory Shushan (in 2018), also including in this issue a special section on the noted anthropologist Edith Turner (1921-2016); and on Halloween with Andrew Dean (in 2024). Another special issue of the journal honoured Peggy Morgan, one of the previous directors of the Religious Experience Research Centre with a Festschrift and papers from the 50th anniversary conference reflecting *The Future of the Study of Religious and Spiritual Experience* (both published in 2021). The Festschrift was organised in collaboration with Prof Wendy Dossett, University of Chester and Andrew Burns, former honorary secretary of the Alister Hardy Trust.

We are proud to offer open access publications without any charge to the authors as it enables scholars in all stages of their career to publish their research. We also celebrate the international reach of the Journal which over the years published articles from scholars working across the globe. While the authors are predominately in the UK, we saw a growing number of submissions from colleagues from continental Europe but also the US, Brazil and other countries outside Europe. With each issue the Journal increases it visibility which leads to an increasing number of submissions (though not all fall into the remit of the Journal or lack the required academic rigour). Since last year, the Journal is sent to the AHT-members thereby informing them of the publication of the Journal as soon as it published online. We cordially thank Rachel Dowd, the AHT Membership Administrator, for her assistance.

The growing number of submissions has increased the workload. Initially Tom Pitchford who worked in the RERC office handled the administrative side as well as proof-reading and editing, and I am enormously grateful for all the work he put in to get the Journal started. After his premature death in 2021, Jack Hunter kindly agreed to take over this role. Jack also contributed several articles and edited the special issue on ecology and spiritual experience, a topic close to the heart of Alister Hardy. In 2024, Mara Steenhuisen who had already contributed a paper to the Journal, joined the team and worked with Jack on the regular 2023 issue. She also suggested a topic for a special issue which received a good number of submissions and will be published later this year. Mara has taken over now from Jack and has been supported by Elle Hughes who contributed to the proof-reading of this current issue.

Next to proof-readers, we want to acknowledge our peer-reviewers. Over the years, many reviewers dedicated their expertise, time and efforts to assess the quality of the submitted papers. Without them the journal simply would not have been a peer reviewed academic journal. A very warm thanks to all who have contributed to the success of the journal. Further, we would like to mention the IT team at UWTSD. As the Journal is officially located on a UWTSD server, they monitor the Journal's platform and dealt with several technical hiccups over the years. A special thank you also to the Alister Hardy Trust who supported the development of the Journal and continues to support it.

In 2025, we will publish two issues, a special issue on AI and religious experience that will come out in the autumn, and the current issue with which we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Journal.

Introducing you to the contents of this Anniversary issue, we invited the speakers of the 2024-conference to submit their papers as articles, and we are grateful for the contributions by *Zsuzsanna Szugyiczki* and *Richard Vroom*. Their articles reflect on the Alister Hardy database of religious and spiritual experiences and highlight the significance of the archive. *Szugyiczki's* article explores characteristics of mystical experiences through the Alister Hardy database, while *Vroom's* paper examines the psychological typology of religious experiences by applying them to the accounts of the Alister Hardy database. Both authors are members of the Alister Hardy Trust, working respectively in Hungary (Szugyiczki) and the Netherlands (Vroom).

We also welcome our first extended book review by *Jeff Astley* and a review of an article from the previous issue (Volume 10.No.1) by *Alan Murdie* which both reflect on the field of the study of religious experience.

A range of topics and geographical location is presented with the other four articles which were submitted to the Journal.
Firstly, *Manuela Palmeirim* of the University of Minho, Portugal writes about parapsychism. Her paper examines the striking similarities between written descriptions of psychic experiences in the Western world and collective discourses on spirits, ghosts, zombies, doubles, sorcery and the invisible.

Further, *Makhabbad Maltabarova* of the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany discusses the concept of religious experience applied to Sufism. The article questions the exclusiveness of the Western concept of religious experience and argues that the Sufi understanding of religious experience which is deeply rooted in Islamic doctrinal and practical foundations contributes to the field of religious experience.

Also, *Jennifer Uzzell* of Durham University writes about the experiences of Druids during the Covid-19 pandemic. Her discussion of Digital Druidry shows how technology brought people into Druidry but has also its limitations.

And finally, the joint paper by *Andrew Dean* at Sunderland University, and *Anna Waldstein* and *Raj Puri*, both at the University of Kent, looks at ayahuasca churches in Europe and

show how neo-European ayahuasca church members negotiate supernatural 'fact' and 'fiction' outside of traditional religious, psychological, and philosophical knowledge.

This current issue is with eight papers one of the largest issues so far (apart from some special issues). It reflects the strength of the Journal and the growing interest in researching religious and spiritual experiences. A good sign for the future of the study of religious experiences.

A Bridge Between Traditional and Modern:
Analysis of the characteristics of mystical experiences

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Abstract

The paper aims to explore four sets of characteristics of mystical experiences through the Alister Hardy RERC Archive Database: opposites; time; depth and perception; bodily reactions, actions, and feelings. Firstly, words of opposite meanings, showcasing the perceived uniqueness and ineffability of mystical states. Secondly, expressions that point to shifts in temporal perception. Thirdly, the language that reflects altered perceptions and the profound impact these experiences have on individuals. Fourthly, immediately occurring feelings, uncontrollable bodily reactions, and actions that are associated with the intensity of the experience. Furthermore, it is assumed that these characteristics are present not only in traditional examples but in modern mysticism as well.

Keywords: mysticism; traditional; modern; John of the Cross; Thomas Merton

The examination of the variety of contemporary religious experiences often leads to their characterization as watered-down, superficial (Jones, 2016, p. 336) or muddled (Arjana, 2020, pp. 62-98) versions of traditional experiences. The dichotomous comparison between traditional and modern forms frequently results in the devaluation of modern phenomena framing them as mere self-constructions, products of consumerism, or dismissing modern mysticism altogether by asserting that it is not mysticism. Additionally, the diversity of these experiences can become overwhelming for researchers, leading to the neglect or abandonment of a meaningful discussion of the phenomena. (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 166-178).

While this variety is overwhelming and challenging, I argue that it does not justify giving up or condemning contemporary phenomena. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to contribute to bridging between the well-researched and highly regarded traditional forms and the less explored and chaotic, and plural contemporary forms. (Berger, 2014). One of the ways to achieve this goal is by utilizing a broader concept (such as spiritual experiences). Such attempts are presented in Alister Hardy's works (Hardy, 1965, 1966,

1979); Yaden and Newberg's monograph (2022) also refers to spiritual experiences within this broader framework. Hardy, for instance, employed a notably inclusive approach to religious experiences which he categorized under the term 'spiritual experiences.' This broad categorization makes it challenging to draw clear distinctions between spiritual, religious, and mystical experiences. The Hardy question itself is formulated to allow for diverse interpretations, emphasizing the inclusive nature of the concept (Rankin, 2008, p. 3).

One of the most comprehensive and data-driven recent works examine spiritual experiences as an umbrella term involving six statistically derived subcategories: numinous, revelatory, synchronicity, mystical, aesthetic, and paranormal experiences (Yaden & Newberg, 2022). A key distinction between this approach and William James's classical work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) that the authors aim to reexamine, lies in their framing of religious experiences. While James focuses particularly on mystical- and conversion experiences, Yaden and Newberg adopt the term 'spiritual experiences.' They argue that this terminological shift does not signify an essential difference, asserting that 'James would have been fine with our relabelling of his "religious" experiences" as "spiritual' experiences.'" (Yaden & Newberg, 2022, p. 41). The concept of Yaden and Newberg relies upon understanding the terms 'religious' and 'spiritual', as overlapping and indicative of varying degrees of affiliation or belonging. This broader conceptualization aligns with the pluralistic religious landscape of contemporary societies, being able to reflect on a wider range of experiences. However, it also includes phenomena that might qualify only as quasi-mystical experiences in the Jamesian sense, and invokes significant debates regarding the use of the term 'spiritual' in religious studies and theology.

While this paper is intended to focus on mystical experiences, it is understood within the above-mentioned broader framework and with a sensitivity toward changes in the phenomenon. It is important to note that the concept of spiritual experiences employed here and in the Alister Hardy RERC Archive Database is broader than the specific definitions of mysticism traditionally applied. Consequently, the examined accounts will be critically analysed with this broader context in mind.

The broader aim of this paper is to argue that modern mysticism is still mysticism, together with the major social-cultural-religious changes that significantly shaped it. The theoretical-conceptual framework for this comparison was laid down in my previous

work. This concept is based on a threefold understanding of mysticism situated in the contextual-essentialist debate (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 54-59).

The threefold understanding of mysticism entails the following parts: antecedents, mystical experience, and aftermath. Firstly, the antecedents entail what precedes mystical experiences, namely cultural-historical-religious and personal influences, practices, preparatory activities, religious and traditional resources, and support. Secondly, mystical experience is understood from a comparative religious studies perspective based on Richard King's definition: 'In a comparative context mysticism has come to denote those aspects of the various religious traditions which emphasize unmediated experience of oneness with the ultimate reality, however differently conceived' (King, 2005, p. 306). Thirdly, aftermath involves what follows the mystical experience both in time and causality. To be more precise, the levels of interpretation and recording of the experience, its integration, and actions and transformations that the experience causes or inspires.

This paper focuses on understanding mystical experiences but not the antecedents and aftermath of the experiences, as they are understood as contextual elements of mysticism (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 54-58) heavily influenced by the historical-cultural-personal context of the person. Evidently, these elements of mysticism are significantly changing in different eras, religions, places, and even from person to person. Contrarily, here mystical experiences are presumed to bear essentially similar characteristics. Therefore, the comparability of the experiences relies on this essentialist concept of mystical experiences providing a bridge between traditional and contemporary forms of mysticism.

The basis for the comparison and the analysis of the accounts from the Alister Hardy RERC Archive Database will be the four categories of words, which emerged in the comparative analysis of my doctoral dissertation. The analysis of this previous comparison focused on the mystical texts of two authors: John of the Cross and Thomas Merton. (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 109-164) In the case of John of the Cross mainly the *Stanzas concerning an ecstasy experienced in high contemplation* (John, 1991, pp. 53-54), and partially *A gloss with spiritual meaning* (John, 1991, p. 70) and *Stanzas given spiritual meaning* (John, 1991, p. 57) were taken into consideration. While the obvious choice for this analysis would be either *The Ascent to Mount Carmel* or *The Dark Night*, the abovementioned poems were chosen as the closest descriptions of the experiences

(Szugyiczki, 2023, p. 132). In Merton's case, the four experiences are well 'documented' and clearly identifiable (McCaslin, 2012). His experience in Rome and Cuba are noted in his famous autobiography (Merton, 1999), while his Louisville experience appears in *The Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Merton, 1989) and his experience in Sri Lanka is noted in *The Asian Journal* (Merton, *et al.*, 1974).

Keeping in mind that several levels of interpretation alter the articulation of the experience, it was assumed that mystical experiences leave behind a strong impression and often live vividly not only in the person's memory but also in the accounts of their experiences. Therefore, as such 'markers' or strong impressions in their mystical writings, the following characteristics were searched for: use of metaphors and/or concealing language, a peculiar sense of time articulated, first-person singular narratives, and any major or uncontrollable reactions or physical movements mentioned. This resulted in an extensive list of words which were eventually grouped into four categories labelled as: opposites; time; depth and perception; bodily reactions, actions, and feelings (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 132-148).

> The opposites include antonyms and terms describing light and darkness. The latter (light and darkness) were initially considered a separate group, but because of their frequent usage depicting opposite states of mind and differences between the divine and human reality, I decided to include them here. The category of time includes any expressions referring to how time has passed in relation to the mystical experience: whether it happened out of nowhere, went by quickly, or made the usual flow of time alter the mystics' perception. The 'depth' refers to expressions related to the intensity of the mystical experience, and words that refer to its extraordinary qualities and overwhelming nature. The fourth group is 'body, actions, feelings and perceptions.' It includes any mental, emotional, and bodily effects of the mystical experience and terms describing the mode of perception (I was aware of…, realization, understanding, etc.). Another crucial element in this group is the uncontrollable bodily reactions described in the text' (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 136-137).

In the following pages these categories will be tested in the RERC archive. For defining the categories applicable to the RERC archive, I have primarily taken into consideration its keywords. It is important to note as the archive's website cautions: 'The accounts of

experiences are shown exactly as they have been received, "warts and all", with spelling and grammatical errors, unnecessary detail, etc. You need to keep this in mind when doing full text research' (n.a., n.d.). Therefore, the findings here might not cover all available reports where the keywords were present.

First, I distributed the keywords into the initial four groups: opposites; time; depth and perception; bodily reactions, actions, and feelings. Many fitting keywords were found for each category, more than what could be covered within the limits of this paper. Therefore, I am only taking into consideration one (or in the case of opposites one pair) of the expressions in each category. These words were chosen according to the previously analysed texts: words that were typically significant for either one or for both authors, John of the Cross and Thomas Merton, were selected. In the case where there were two words with different meanings but belonging to the same group, such as 'suddenly' and 'slowly' in the temporal category, I selected words so that both were represented. Another work dedicated to the exploration of these dimensions could take the immense variety of keywords into consideration. This paper focuses on whether the discovered dimensions and expressions are present in more contemporary examples and if they are used in the same sense as the two above-mentioned mystics used them.

On this basis the keywords for the categories were chosen. As for the specific keywords, further explanation about the selection process will be given for each section of the paper. Following the keywords, in brackets, will be the number of times they appear in the archive. However, this provides only a vague idea about the frequency as the keywords-based searches cannot be used for statistical purposes as the website of the archive clearly states, and the spelling and grammatical errors of the accounts raise considerable difficulties as well.

Opposites

The category of opposites was challenging to examine as it was not possible to tell solely based on the keyword search whether both keywords were included in the given account. Therefore, a main feature in both authors' texts was chosen: light and darkness (6). Six accounts referring to both light and darkness can be found in the archive. There are many more records that mention one of these. It is also worth noting that the keywords related to light show a large variety: Sunlight, Moonlight, white light, beings of

light, blue light, glowing light, golden light, white light, brilliant light, lights, and Dark, darkness. However, in this instance I focused on the accounts that included specifically the words: light and darkness both in one account.

The first account's (000755) reference to light and darkness does not seem to be directly connected to the experience itself but rather to the individual's perception of the transcendent, as he refers to it as 'forces of Light' which 'penetrate the dark clouds of our materialist world today.' There is another pair of words with opposite meanings used in the same manner: 'dimly' and 'clearly' referring to the realization of the divine presence.

The second account (000863) contains two experiences. Light and darkness appear in the second one of these. As the person explains the experience: 'From the lighter sky a long dark beam was coming straight to me at a great rate.' Along with this she saw an image of the Crucifixion.

The third account (002777) also contains two referrals to experiences, which both happened in sleep. They are both rather vague descriptions. The first one contains references to light related to the experience: 'being impregnated with golden light pellets from a Cosmic Ray'; and to light and darkness when referring to the effects of the experience and perception of the self after that: 'I took that as the invitation to be the LIGHT for many sitting in darkness and the shadow of death in the immediate place of my family home surroundings.'

The fourth entry (003937) contains the description of five events. The fifth of these was a dream which contains references to light and darkness. Despite the fact that the person was asleep, the description of the event as well as its effects are the closest to the mystical texts I have analysed in the previous chapter; closer than the other events which happened in a wakeful state. She writes about being: 'in a forest, in a dark, dark night, not knowing, how to find the way out', and 'looking to the dark sky, in distress.'

The help in this state comes from above in the form of light: 'And a big spot of light came from above and showed me the way.'

The fifth account (004182) writes about an impression of light and darkness despite the fact that there was no regular perception. 'Without any sense perception (except that I do seem to recollect an impression of light and darkness) …' She even refers to opposites (coincidence of opposites) when talking about the latter interpretation of the

content of the experience: 'I understood - then at least - the phrases "I AM THAT I AM" and what I later read as "the coincidence of opposites".'

The last account here (004452) talks about occasionally occurring experiences. All of these experiences happen in darkness when the person lays down and suddenly experiences a short vision. In the first part of the description the person talks about these visions generally and uses terms describing the indicators of the starting of the mystical vision: 'the darkness behind my eyes becomes an odd luminous grey, as if dawn had suddenly arrived, the best way I can describe it is if you now close your eyes in daylight and see the light grey tone before your own eyes.' Another less obvious referral to opposites appears in her descriptions as she compares the positive feelings during the visions, with returning which often felt like a shock, and a 'sense of loss' for her. Following a general description, five accounts of visions refer to light and darkness this way: 'The sun was shining straight into my eyes'; 'The painful reflection of the refracted sunlight blinded my eyes and broke the vision'; 'When in the blackness of my closed eyes I saw a gold pin-prick of light coming towards me' (004452).

Later on, during my research, I found two other examples which were not included in the keyword-search list. Account (004714) reports of an experience that happened in a dream. The person describes her inner life with the words 'suffering' and 'perplexity'. The darkness in which she 'arrives' at the beginning of her dream is connected to her perception of her life. From this darkness she felt pulled towards a door which emanated light and laughter. 'I was standing on the Other Side in darkness before a closed door from which burst forth shafts of brilliant light from round the edges, radiating like a sunburst in the darkness' (004714). She describes light with a variety of terms: 'chamber where love and light and laughter was generated', 'there were Beings of Light there', 'radiant Light which emanated from the door', 'The Light which lighteth Everyman!' (004714). The other one has a complex idea of darkness which could be related to apophasis (005600). It is described as luminous and comforting, '…found myself in a world that was bright and dark at the same time. The darkness was luminous and comforting; not in the least threatening. There was an immense feeling of harmony and I felt rather than heard music.'

To summarize the findings related to opposites: light and darkness are not used as elaborately here as in the texts of Merton and John of the Cross. Certainly, a nuanced and almost systematic description connected to apophatic mysticism is not what is

missing here. What I have observed is that light and darkness regularly refer to the physical circumstances of the experience rather than being used as expressions to describe the wholly other nature of the ultimate reality, or to point to the tension between regular and mystical perception. An exception for this is account (000863) where light and darkness describe how the vision of the Crucifixion was brought about. Furthermore, in most of the cases no moral connotations are attached to opposites. The two substantive exceptions which I have found is the first account (000755) which draws a clear line between the 'forces of Light' and the 'dark clouds of our materialist world,' based on the latter interpretation of the experience. Moreover, the third account (002777) talks about the mission taken up by the individual following the experience: 'to be the LIGHT for many sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.'

Time

The variety of the expressions of the temporal dimension appearing in Thomas Merton and John of the Cross's texts are challenging to grasp, therefore the most frequently occurring one: 'suddenness', was chosen.

The term 'suddenness' is prominent compared to the other expressions that were considered - it appears in 229 entries. However, the keyword-based search is not entirely reliable as accounts 001757 and 002780 include 'suddenness' yet neither direct nor indirect mentions of it are included in the description. As it would be beyond the scope of this paper to introduce all of the uses of 'suddenly', I am highlighting the tendencies that I observed.

In the majority of the cases the use of the word is very straightforward and shows great similarity with Merton's use: to depict the swift change of perception in the beginning of the experiences. It usually refers to a realization that seems to come out of nowhere and transcends where the everyday perception could take one. Examples include entry 000110 which talks about a change of consciousness in which every natural element seemed to be included: 'I suddenly became aware of a flood of new consciousness, in which everything, blades of grass, clouds, cattle etc., were included. This lasted for about 20 minutes, during which time my consciousness was not confined to my body, but included everything on which my eyes happened to fall.' Sudden realizations often refer to a mystical understanding of the rules of the world, sometimes by looking at a flower:

> To remember it in future I took a spray in my hand and gazed intently at one of the flowers. As I looked, I was suddenly truly aware of the wonder that had created it, these perfect, perfect stamens & then I realised all was still. I don't think I even breathed, the world had gone, everything had stopped (002080).

Or explaining a joyous realization of one's place in the world:

> …a sudden blaze of understanding took possession of my whole being; with it the conviction that I was alone … that I was a being apart and must stand on my own. Swift, instantly upon this was a great wave of exhaltation {sic}. 'I am alone! Oh joy!' This was a lifting of the spirit which I shall never forget, so real as to be undeniable, although impossible to put into words (000198).

The latter quote shows an uncanny similarity with Thomas Merton's style of mystical expression: referring to suddenness, whole being, the repetition of the most important realization, the joyous realization etc. Contrary to his Louisville realization (Merton, 1989, pp. 156-158) of people belonging together, here the person's realization and joy connects to the fact that she stands alone.

The last account showed that intense feelings are often present due to the mystical realization. The next two will showcase how they sometimes occur prior to the realization, often in the form of relief from distress, grief, or any long-lasting negative state:

> Suddenly in this quiet country grave yard comfort came - I can only describe the feeling as a balm that enveloped me & I felt wrapped in love & freed from the pain in my heart. This feeling lasted in great intensity for about 3 mins & then faded gradually but it left me in peace & with an assurance that I had experienced the love of God (001777).

In account 000502: 'suddenly the distress left me and I became aware "There is no death." It seemed a laughable impossibility.' A latter, similar experience occurs in the same entry: 'suddenly I became aware that there was no separateness between myself and other people, there was no such thing as death, and I was pervaded with a feeling of great peace and joy.' This does not mean that this is all there is to these mystical experiences. They are followed by a realization or other content – like here the realization of 'There is no death.'

There are other entries which use the word 'suddenly' for describing a thought, hunch or intuition occurring in a flesh. In cases like 000550 when there is no other realization, vision, or any mystical content I do not consider these entries for further analysis. This entry shows a particularly meaningful hunch which was interpreted with a religious/spiritual significance by the person. 'I was ironing & praying for Alan as I had done many times before when suddenly the thought flashed into my mind "You must join the Society of Friends".'

Account 001001 is a reminder that the sudden start of a mystical experience is not necessarily connected to the brevity of it:

> But on this occasion, the onset, at its full strength, was as sudden as a gunshot, and it went on and on and on for I cannot say how long. And at the end of it I was left with something quite clear (001001).

Many times, the literal and the figurative sense of the word go hand in hand. The literal sense of the word refers to a fast change in the physical surroundings or at least the way it is seen. In entry 000863: 'Suddenly I was aware of something rushing towards me.' Account 004452 describes the visions in general: 'suddenly I see other places and strange people.' Most of the time this is not only a literal reference but is used to depict the passive role of the person in relation to a swiftly approaching and powerful experience of ultimate reality.

Suddenness also appears frequently in the comparison of mystical states with immediate everyday antecedents and activities: 'One day I was sweeping the stairs down in the house which I was working. When suddenly I was overcome overwhelmed, saturated, no word is adequate, with a sense of the most sublime and living LOVE' (001753).

The overall similarities with Merton's use of the word suddenly were striking. The accounts in the archive showed examples depicting the swift change of perception in the beginning of the experiences. They also referred to a realization that seems to come out of nowhere and transcends where the everyday perception could take one. Furthermore, they highlighted an even more complex and colourful relevance of the word: by highlighting the connections of the literal and figurative sense of the word in terms of the spiritual experiences and by referring to intuitions and intense feelings.

Depth, perception

The dimension of depth and perception is further examined with the most prevailing term appearing in Thomas Merton's and John of the Cross's texts, 'overwhelm/overwhelming'. Based on a keyword search, 19 accounts in the archive included the word 'overwhelm/overwhelming'. In the search results, quite a large gap was noticed. Three accounts were found between 000017 to 000023, some account numbers started with 004.... and 005... and the rest of them with 400. Contrarily, the other categories' search results appeared less sporadically.

Another setback is that six of the 19 found accounts cannot be taken into consideration here, either because they did not include the word itself and no other similar meaning was included in the text (004768, 400083, 400136, 400191, 400215), or in one case (400224) the word itself was included but the description was too short and the other three major characteristics (opposites, time and body) were completely missing.

Four other accounts from the list did not explicitly include the term but included other words with a similar meaning, therefore they were taken into consideration here. For example, 'I felt a mighty godly power take over' (004766) and 'I suddenly had quite a powerful feeling…' (400076). In itself a powerful feeling might not be a sufficient reason for inclusion but the rest of the account interprets the feeling and the experience as a connection with God; as if God was testing the person.

Similarly to the previous account, the words overwhelm/overwhelming are not mentioned in account (400077) but rather 'I suddenly felt an enormous feeling of peace and love.' Here the person experienced a sudden and later divinely interpreted change in life after severe depression. '…a marvellous feeling of comfort and warmth and love' (400206) referring to a miraculous recovery and turn of actions: 'wonderful and magical happening.'

Moreover, similarly to the temporal dimension, after additional research one example which was not listed in the search results but contained a significant example was accidentally found. This account talked about feeling an 'overwhelming compassion' for someone right before seeing 'the whole human race including myself as very vulnerable' (005213). All in all, 14 accounts are remaining for analysis.

Upon further analysis of the accounts four major similarities were noticed. Firstly, the word 'overwhelming' is often connected with the word 'presence' (000019, 000023,

005560), or contains an implicit referral to it. One example is in account (005558) where the person describes the presence of Jesus as giving 'an overwhelming impression of solidity.' Secondly, it is also often paired with 'suddenly'. The examples (000019, 000023, 004764, 400077) mentioned here explicitly include this connection.

> Suddenly, it was as if a funnel was in the top of my head and my consciousness went out into it, spreading wider and wider as it went. This went on for quite some time until I suddenly realized that I was conscious of everything that is, and that I was part of it all. (…) Finally, the loneliness became overwhelming and I snapped back into my usual little self (004764).

In two cases suddenly, overwhelming, and presence were all included: 'Suddenly I felt myself overwhelmed by a presence…' (000019). 'Quite suddenly, all that anger and contempt for the shortcomings of other people was lifted from me. (…) The whole room seemed to be filled by an overwhelming presence, and I was filled with absolute peace' (000023).

It is important to mention a striking similarity, especially with Merton's mystical texts, where the words 'suddenly' and 'overwhelming' are often at the beginning of the description of the mystical experience. As the description of the Louisville and Rome experience illustrates: 'I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers' (Merton, 1989, p. 156). 'The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul …' (Merton, 1999, p. 138). The same words also appear in John of the Cross's poetry though not in the same poem. 'I was so "whelmed",' (John, 1991, p. 53) '…swiftly, with nothing spared, I am wholly being consumed' (John, 1991, p. 70).

Thirdly, turning back to accounts in the archive, in some cases the sensation accompanying the mystical experience became unbearable or overwhelming: loneliness (004764), a powerful feeling of needing to help someone (400071), overwhelming compassion after the experience (005213). One of the people felt 'overwhelming emotion' which lasted for six months and intensified occasionally 'wherever there was anything religious I could hardly stop crying' (005574).

Fourthly, even though the mystical experience is overwhelming it is not connected to negative feelings and sensations. Even in the example I have mentioned about loneliness

the feeling itself was not negative initially. It is often associated with positive sensations and described as joyful and ecstatic (000017), reassuring and peaceful (000023). It is also accompanied by feelings such as compassion and patience (004310), peace and love (400077), and happiness (400114), 'a marvellous feeling of comfort and warmth and love' (400206).

The accounts have highlighted an intriguing connection in the use of the words 'overwhelming,' 'suddenly' and 'presence.' As it was noted, this strengthens the tendency observed in the previous analysis of John of the Cross's and Thomas Merton's mysticism with the connections of 'overwhelming,' and 'suddenly.' The connection of 'presence' to these words could be the focus of further future research. Lastly, these overwhelming realizations and sensations were characterized as rather positive even in the instances where some negative feelings and experiences, such as loneliness, initially occurred. Further research could delve into exploring whether positive feelings generally tend to accompany mystical experiences.

Bodily reactions, actions, feelings

The actions, feelings, and bodily reactions have shown a great diversity: from happiness, and laughing out loud, to stammering (Szugyiczki, 2023, pp. 144-145), The keywords in the archive extended the possibilities of this category even further, out of which 'laughter' (6) was chosen. Out of the six results, one account is obviously not referring to the person's reaction but to 'laughing angels', (005213) therefore, it was not taken into consideration.

From the remaining five accounts three types of meanings were distinguishable. Firstly, laughter appears in the mystical experiences connected to the perceptions of ultimate reality. This joy and laughter continue right after the experience. An example for that is an account I have mentioned before related to light and darkness (004714). In this text laughter primarily refers to the dream of light and the 'beings of Light' which are welcoming and emanate love and laughter towards the person. However, she describes her return to normal perception and the effects of the experience with the same term: 'I lay on my bed filled with laughter and astounded that there existed such a compelling bond…' Whether or not this means that she burst out in laughter or was filled with the laughter of beings of light is not entirely clear.

Secondly, laughter refers to the extraordinary nature of mystical experiences. Laughter often appears after the perception of or the connection with ultimate reality and realizing that it was an extraordinary event. The first example includes seeing something the person thought she was not supposed to see. The accidental nature of the situation was hilarious for her. She felt she had woken too soon and was not supposed to see the angel and her mother standing by her bed: 'I woke in the night & looked behind me & suddenly realized I was overcome by laughter,' 'I was laughing so much,' 'I was terrified to awaken my brother, so I stifled my laughter as well as I could, but it was really hard to be silent - laughter broke out of me!' (005459). The second example here includes a prayer to God which was immediately answered in a profane need of finding a dance partner, later followed by a changed perception: seeing herself from above. The reactions for that were: 'I've never felt so brimming with life laughter and vitality when it happened to me,' 'I burst out laughing at the coincidence,' 'it was agony having to stifle our laughter' (300066). The third example includes references to two experiences. Both mention her childhood self being different and occasionally 'laughing and crying almost uncontrollably [uncontrollably]' and 'felt the urge to cry and laugh at the same time.' According to the account these reactions were connected to seeing an otherwise invisible old man who was communicating with her. 'I knew when I saw him smile that I felt as if the whole room lit up and for a while no one seemed to be in the room except the two of us' (004842). In this case the experience's connectedness to ultimate reality is not entirely clear as the narrative of it only vaguely refers to it in the beginning. However, around the middle of the description the person starts to connect the presence and her difference from others to a connection with God. 'I literally felt the hand of God on my shoulder, and heard him say; "Get up my child, you have much work to do" that I began to feel I was home.'

The third meaning is different from the previous examples in the sense that it does not refer to an uncontrollable bodily reaction but to a kind, gentle laughter. This is a meaning that is surprising as previously involuntary and rather grand actions were considered in this category. Account 005600 shows a different picture referring to an experience accompanied by a gentle laughter.

> I seemed to go through the television and found myself in a world that was bright and dark at the same time. (…) There was an immense feeling of harmony and I felt rather than heard music. (…) In addition to the harmony, I had a sense of

enjoying a kind laughter, laughter with no malice. I had no idea how long I was in this wonderful world before I was sucked back through the television screen…(005600)

The last example where gentle laughter accompanied the experience was in clear contrast with the uncontrollable reactions observed in Merton's and John of the Cross's texts. This example poses the question for further research to consider observing other bodily reactions accompanying or following mystical experiences. The first and second instances discussed above proved to be similar to Merton's and John of the Cross's articulations, not only in their uncontrollable nature but also in terms of their content. For example, during the Louisville experience, Merton allegedly felt such joy and liberation from the illusory difference between monks and ordinary people that he 'almost laughed out loud' and his joy erupted in words (Merton, 1989, p. 157). While John of the Cross was left stammering through the encounter with God:

> That perfect knowledge
> was of peace and holiness
> held at no remove
> in profound solitude;
> it was something so secret
> that I was left stammering,
> transcending all knowledge.
> (John, 1991, p. 53)

Future research could also further explore other instances of this category such as stammering, long-lingering feelings, and a sense of peace accompanied by silence. 'It lasted only a moment: but it left a breathless joy and a clean peace and happiness that stayed for hours and it was something I have never forgotten' (Merton, 1999, p. 321).

This part of the paper has shown examples of similarities and divergences in the way some of these terms were applied in contrast to Merton's and John of the Cross's mystical accounts. The similarities were dominant in terms of the use of the expressions. There were also a few new applications widening the scope of use for those terms. An example of that was the gentle laughter that I mentioned recently, showing that the

characteristics of body, feelings, and action might be widened to include less grand but still relevant bodily reactions.

Conclusively, all of the examined terms were used as essential indicators of mystical experiences in almost every case, therefore showing their relevance and applicability throughout time. In the instances where it was not essential the term was simply used to describe other (mainly physical) circumstances related primarily to light and darkness and in once case to laughter. The other three expressions were almost exclusively substantial in the description of the mystical experience. 'Overwhelming' primarily referred to the compelling intensity of perception and emotion in relation to everyday circumstances. 'Suddenly' indicated a swift shift of perception or presence and power quickly taking over the person during the experience. 'Light' and 'darkness' were mostly used to describe the extraordinary characteristics of the experiences, visions appearing during the experience, or the physical circumstances. As I have mentioned earlier this was mostly not an elaborate and theologically grounded expression of the extraordinary nature of mystical perception, as we have seen in the case of the two 'professionals'. However, account 005600 articulates a similar view to apophatic theology in talking about the presence of light and darkness at the same time and describing the darkness as 'luminous and comforting; not in the least threatening.' Moreover, account 004714 does articulate a similar distinction to the two examples in the previous chapter: describing their everyday life with darkness and entering the mystical experience which is characterized by light and laughter. Half of the accounts refer to it in the description of physical circumstances. Yet the use of these words does not dwell far from this meaning. Some of the other accounts refer to the mystical/divine light related to the vision of the Crucifixion (005213) and the mission 'to be the LIGHT for many sitting in darkness and the shadow of death' (002777). Laughter was majorly used as a bodily reaction closely related to the mystical experience/perception, as in the case of Thomas Merton, with one example of describing physical circumstances.

Lastly, I will examine the overall appearance of the four characteristics. As the details related to these characteristics have already been introduced, here I will focus on whether they all appear in the accounts and if not how many and which of them are missing.

Out of the 42 quoted experiences 27 contained all four characteristics. 10 accounts were missing one characteristic: opposites (3); time (3); depth and perception (3); body,

feelings, and actions (1). The rest of the 5 accounts listed here were missing two elements: opposites (4); time (3); depth and perception (2); body, feelings, and actions (1). From the accounts I examined I had to exclude one in particular which included the keyword for opposites but the other three major characteristics (opposites, time, and body) were missing (400224). There were some other cases with short and vague descriptions. In the instances when the referral to direct connection with ultimate reality was present along with two characteristics, the account was considered. It should be noted that even though one word per category was referred to in the analysis above, when the overall appearance of the characteristics was examined, any terms that refer to a considerable change in the sense of time, bodily reactions, feelings, etc. were taken into consideration.

The opposites were central to Merton's articulation of his mystical experiences. In John of the Cross' mysticism they were also essential in terms of negative theology regarding both light and darkness, and associated with knowing-unknowing. Perhaps an example beyond light and darkness would reveal a different result but, in this instance, opposites were missing in seven accounts and therefore seem less central.

Time came in second place with six accounts missing this category. Most of the accounts which included a reference to time were mentioning swift changes of perception. In this sense they were more closely related to Merton's frequent use of the word 'suddenly' at the beginning of the description of his mystical experiences.

Five entries were missing depth and perception. The tendency of the remaining entries showed a clear connection between three expressions 'overwhelming,' 'suddenly,' and 'presence.' While 'presence' was not observed in the texts of Merton and John of the Cross the above-mentioned accounts direct further research towards analysing the connection of these words. Only two accounts had no indication of bodily reactions, feelings, and actions. The last category was therefore the most frequent which comes as a bit of a surprise based on the texts of particularly John of the Cross. Besides the word stammering, and fewer essential examples, he rarely refers to this dimension. Merton lists many more feelings and some bodily reactions. The accounts from the archive included a wide variety of referrals to feelings, some to actions and bodily reactions. This divergence might be due to the method used to collect the accounts.

The Hardy 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? (Rankin, 2008,

p. 3) can easily be interpreted as an invitation to talk about how the divine encounter has influenced one's present and later life. However, it focuses on the person's experience which in itself promotes the focus on the individual characteristics and effects of the experience. John of the Cross especially and to some extent Thomas Merton were articulating their experiences within and to some extent for a religious audience. It is widely known that in John of the Cross's mystical texts, particularly in his prosaic works, educational aims were central. Informing fellow monks and nuns about the challenges and steps of the mystical journey was one of the main aims of his articulation. Beyond the above-mentioned difference, this work calls for a question: whether the focus on bodily reactions, actions, and perception has become in any way more central in modern mysticism in comparison with traditional mysticism. Is this focus simply due to different questions and audiences? Is it only a matter of different interpretations or is it a change in the experience itself? Answering these questions would probably have to take into consideration individualism in relation to historical, religious, and personal contextual changes in modernity, as well as accounts from other resources.

Another interesting question arises when the extrovertive and introvertive nature of the accounts is taken into consideration. Overall, there were 42 experiences referenced in this paper, based on 33 accounts. I have taken into consideration multiple experiences from six accounts, five of them with two experiences and one with five events. Out of the 42 experiences, 19 were extrovertive, 17 were introvertive, and six were inconclusive. Out of these 17 introvertive experiences, five belong to the same account and include descriptions of significantly similar introvertive experiences. It could be argued that only one should be counted to give fair results. Besides this account, five others included two experiences. In two of those both were introvertive, and the three remaining had extrovertive and introvertive experiences as well. While it is difficult to clearly categorize John of the Cross's experiences based on the available resources it can be assumed that they more closely resemble introvertive experiences. While in Merton's case, at least two of the four experiences seem to be clearly extrovertive. Similarly to the appearance and frequency of the categories, in this instance too, the question arises whether only personal or religious and historical contextual influences contribute to the changes.

To conclude the overall view of the accounts which I examined here: 64% of them included all four of the characteristics which I have found based on the mystical texts

and used for analysis previously. 24% were missing one, while only 12% of them were missing two characteristics. On one hand, this is feedback on the sufficiency of the characteristics in identifying mystical texts. On the other hand, the idea of mystical experiences remaining essentially similar throughout the ages and contextual changes seems further confirmed based on more contemporary examples.

Future research in the archive and other mystical texts could include a focus on further testing the applicability of the categories and whether all four of them seem to prove essential. Any similar research on the archive's database should take into consideration the setbacks experienced around the keywords: not all accounts that include them appear in the search; accounts that do not include them appear in the search and in some cases their presence does not automatically indicate their relevance. Refining the categories is another major task as besides the detailed analysis of John of the Cross's and Thomas Merton's mysticism, this paper could highlight only nuances of a category that were not pointed out in the works of the two authors or that further illustrated the changes between traditional and modern mysticism.

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The role of psychological typology in religious experiences:

First insights from the Alister Hardy Trust database

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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%). Extrovertive mystical experiences were more commonly reported than introvertive 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 in[1]. We selected accounts between 1,000 and 1,500 words to give us sufficient text to analyse. This criterion yielded 624 accounts suitable for coding[2]. 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

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[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 Louden, 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. <u>Extraversion (E) vs. Introversion (I)</u> – 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. <u>Sensing (S) vs. Intuition (N)</u> – 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. <u>Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F)</u> – 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. <u>Judging (J) vs. Perceiving (P)</u> – 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.

<u>Introversion/extraversion</u>

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)

<u>Sensing/iNtuition</u>

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)

<u>Thinking/Feeling</u>

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)

<u>Judging/Perceiving</u>

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

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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: 21st 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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Have ghost lights really declined?

Alan Murdie

<u>Review article</u>

In their interesting article on unexplained *'Jack-o'-lanterns, will-o'-the-wisps, and ignis fatuus: Making sense of ghost lights'* (Vol 10 No.1 2024) Andrew Dean and Sylvia Dean ask, 'Where did all the ghost lights go?' and further asking, 'What Next for Ghost Light Scholarship?'

I would challenge the assumption that ghost lights 'are no longer being witnessed' and suggest that at least two factors may be at work giving this apparent impression.

Firstly, I would propose the decline may in fact only reflect a lack of research initiatives and surveys and collecting efforts within the UK and other countries. A problem impacting approaches to spontaneous experiences is that work is largely left to occasional efforts by those who do not necessarily share any common perspectives. Many topics in parapsychology and the study of anomalies may still be described in terms of philosopher Thomas. S. Kuhn's 'pre-paradigmatic science'. Whereas experimental work with psi in laboratories has allowed some standardisation of paranormal research, as will be appreciated approaching spontaneous experiences working in such a way is not possible. This leaves the small number of researchers proceeding on a case-by-case basis, not really knowing where they are heading next –whether geographically or any other direction This problem is compounded in anomalies research by such studies being the preserve of a small number of individual investigators, each with his/her own methods, perspectives and own set of findings. In the natural course of things these researchers die leaving no successors, and decades may pass before any researcher returns to their findings, if at all. Quite simply if no-one is collecting accounts of a particular class of phenomena then an apparent decline will be perceived.

Whilst I have not made specific efforts at collecting accounts of anomalous light phenomena myself for some years, contemporary reports of ghost light phenomena can still be obtained. For instance, at the end of August 2022 I visited the Glencoe Folk Museum in Argyllshire, Scotland. Founded in the 1960s, it holds more than 6,000 artefacts and chronicles daily life in the Glencoe district between the 17th and 21st centuries, as well as displaying exhibits harking back to even earlier epochs (for example a replica of

the mysterious Bronze age Ballachulish Goddess figure unearthed locally in 1880). Here I learned from staff of strange, unexplained lights reportedly seen on the nearby hills around Glencoe within the last four years. Seen moving along the tops and sides of crags it might be thought these sightings arise from torches or lanterns carried by walkers or in some cases are the headlights of off-road vehicles. But inexplicably these lights have been seen suddenly dipping down the steepest slopes and then glide out across the waters of Loch Leven towards its centre(Murdie, 2023).

A clue to their origins was suggested with one of the highlights of the museum collection. This is a coffin boat once used to transport bodies to the former clan burial island of Eilean Munde situated in Loch Leven. A local woman Christina MacDonald was the last MacDonald buried there in 1972 (See *Scotland On Sunday* 17 February 2013). Locally it is suggested the phenomenon may represent spectral traces of torch-bearing funeral parties from afar who once descended down from the hills and then proceeded by boat to cross the water to Eilean Munde.

One helpful guide at the museum who shared this theory with me drew attention to a pamphlet *Highland Folk Lore* by Barbara Fairweather, who founded the museum in 1963 (Fairweather, 1986). This contains earlier stories of strange lights, one seen so frequently it earned the name the Callart Light, after Callart House and adjacent lands on the shores of Loch Leven. A number of these appearances were deemed prophetic, heralding of the deaths of clan members, examples of the widespread Highland belief in second sight. There are parallels here with the patterns of ghostly lights reported across the UK, with a concentration in the Highlands of Scotland, the Western Isles and often in rugged parts of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Secondly, I think any perceived decline may also reflect changing trends and shifts in interpretation by researchers of what were once labelled ghost lights. Strange lights are still reported, however, in the West the paradigm of understanding has changed from ghost lights to ufology, Fortean anomalies and general psychic experiences. The first of these has lately resurged with claims from the United States of UAP – Unidentified Aerial Phenomena as they are styled in the 21st century.

I would suggest examination of contemporary experiences in the fields of ufology still carry contemporary examples of what in the 19th century were labelled ghost lights or ignis fatuus. One of the best known sightings is the alleged Rendlesham Forest incident

in Suffolk in December 1980 where a strange light was seen by personnel at the Bentwaters American airbase (Pope, Burroughs and Penniston, 2014).

Interestingly, a nearby village of Sudbourne saw a wintertime outbreak of strange lights a century earlier. Buried in an obscure collection known as the *East Anglian Miscellany* published during the First World War and then again between 1933-1943 is a letter published in 1942 from a correspondent - a Mr G F Fell of Orford - seeking an answer to a mystery some sixty years in his boyhood at Sudbourne. Around 1882 he and some friends encountered a manifestation of what were known as 'hobby lanterns' on 'certain nights' in two local fields known as Workhouse Field and Kiln Field. He writes '….one of these objects could be seen on these fields. They look like a dull red light, like a lantern with the glass smoky. It moved to and fro across the field, about walking pace, always in the same track above the ground: it never went near the hedge.' This report indicates a continuity of experience in the area (Murdie & Halliday, 2005).

Important studies of light anomalies include those of the British researcher Paul Devereux in his book *Earthlights* (1982) a term he has coined as he links them with geology. Devereux proposes these lights are part of a single Earth-based phenomenon: the geological production of atmospheric lights by the actions of strains, tensions and subsurface movement in the Earth's crust, in the form of electromagnetic discharges. For instance, light phenomena are associated with earthquakes and areas of seismic activity, particularly along the American West Coast and Japan. Devereux suggests correlations with sites of particular geological faulting (Devereux, 1982).

In a second book *Earthlights Revelation* (Devereux, 1989) he refines and redefines the earthlight hypothesis he promulgated, with a wide-ranging survey of light phenomena from around the world, and particularly in Britain, North America and Scandinavia. These include the various 'spook-lights' in the USA, and a number of historical cases from Britain, including the Egryn Lights near Barmouth in Wales of 1904-5 linked with a religious revival and the remarkable phenomena seen at Burton Dassett, Warwickshire in the 1920s, as well as more recently in the Peak District, especially the Longdendale Valley in Derbyshire. These Pennine lights have been subject to further study (Clarke, 1993, 2000 and 2015) with the luminosities investigated as part of 'Project Pennine', a research initiative which led from 1999 to the area being surveyed with a web-camera in attempts to spot them. (see 'Things that go bump in the net' *Daily Mail* 26 October 1999). Many paranormal explanations have been postulated. These range from lamps being

carried by phantom Roman legionnaires on the site track of former Roman roads, to the lights being linked with the deaths of 24 navvies in a cholera epidemic in 1838 at the time of the building of the Woodhead tunnel in the valley and representing 'unquiet souls still carrying torches to work.' More pertinently, people are still reporting strange lights and sightings from Derbyshire, with examples appearing in local press reports, e.g. recent claims of strange lights near Kilpin near Belper in Derbyshire (Toms, 2022).

Certainly, as Dean and Dean state ghost lights still thrive in other global regions Outside North America and Western Europe, they are still current in other countries, most notably in parts of Latin America such as Colombia and in rural Romania.

For instance, during the course of a number of trips to Colombia 1996 – 2006 I learned that anomalous lights remained well known and were the subject of tentative investigations by student teams at the National Observatory in Bogota. I also found that a spirit light was the local interpretation of what had been classed as a UFO incident at Anolaima in July 1969 where the main witness had died shortly afterwards (Murdie, 2002). Similarly, in visits to Romania between 2003-2006 I learned of areas such as the Hoia Bacu Woods near Cluj-Napoca reputedly haunted by spirit lights which people believed indicated the site of buried treasure.

Another possibility is that ghost lights have actually moved indoors, since still featuring in personal accounts of experiences, primarily collected by psychical researchers and parapsychologists interested in spontaneous cases. Examples include poltergeist outbreaks (Roll, 1972) and studies of alleged séance phenomena (Keen, Ellison & Fontana, 1999).

As will be recognised light phenomena feature in claims of religious experience and events associated with special or gifted persons such as mediums, mystics and saints. They are also reported in phenomena associated with dying persons, and others in which the 'luminous' persons generally have some sort of physical or mental condition.(See Alvarado, 1987, for a review).The mediums were often in trance, and the mystics and saints were generally in prayer, meditation, or ecstasy.

Unfortunately, there is frequently not enough information in accounts to undertake deeper analysis. However, if accurately reported it is probable that some of the cases involved some sort of altered state of consciousness in the person around whom the light was observed, a point also raised by Devereux (1982).

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On Belief and Parapsychism: Individual Experiences and Collective Discourse[1]

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Abstract

In line with the Durkheimian tradition, anthropology has played down the role of (individual) 'experience' in favour of (collective) 'belief' in understanding ritual and religious phenomena. As a result of this focus on collective constructions and representations, individual narratives of psychic experiences did not seem to fit within its scope, being at their best catalogued as various kinds of dreams. This article examines the striking similarities between written descriptions of psychic experiences in the Western world and collective discourses on spirits, ghosts, zombies, doubles, sorcery and the invisible, with which the anthropologist is only too familiar. Ultimately, it calls for the imperative need to acknowledge the intimate connection and ongoing communication between individual experience and collective belief, between psychic and religious territories. Ethnographic data from my research in Zanzibar, as well as from other contexts in diverse geographies, will be used for the purpose of the argument.

Keywords: Anthropology of religion; belief; parapsychism; religious experience; ritual healing

> Is *all* that we see or seem
> But a dream within a dream?
>
> **(Edgar Allan Poe, 'A Dream within a Dream', 1849)**

The reading of Robert Monroe's now-classic *Journeys Out of the Body*, the first of a series of three books,[2] is at the very least a disturbing journey. His vivid, detailed, and

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[1] I dedicate this text to Henrique Lázaro. I also thank Pat Caplan for her reading and relevant suggestions.

[2] *Journeys Out of the Body* (1971)*, Far Journeys* (1985) *and Ultimate Journey* (1994), Garden City, New York: Doubleday.

undoubtedly genuine descriptions of his psychic experiences cannot leave one unmoved and indeed challenge the core of one's scientific mind.

Robert Monroe, a successful radio broadcasting executive from an academic family who died in 1995 at seventy-nine, was once stunned by an event occurring during a period of relaxation before sleep. As he lay on the couch to rest one afternoon, he felt struck by a warm beam of light, apparently coming from the sky, which left his entire body shaking violently and unable to move for a few seconds. This vibration repeated itself many times in the next few weeks, always when he lay down to rest or sleep. Although he could feel the vibration, he could not see any visible signs of his body shaking. Eventually, he saw himself dissociated from his body and was led on journeys out of his physical being, the so-called OBEs (Out-of-the-Body Experiences) or, in paranormal language, astral projections. Thinking that he was showing signs of some mental disorder, Monroe sought medical assistance only to conclude that there was nothing wrong with his health as far as could be detected. Could these be hallucinations? Some sort of dreaming? Finally, he decided not to fight these occurrences. In a progressive and systematic attempt to comprehend such bizarre and inexplicable events, he ended up developing a technique to bring about this kind of experience at will.

As the owner of one of the largest mass-production radio program companies of his time, Monroe risked his reputation by publishing his notes on his experiences. Later, he founded the Monroe Institute in Virginia, a research institute studying the mind where a group of researchers explored the possibilities of human consciousness by observing the experiences of several trainees initiated in the techniques of mind dissociation.

Like Monroe's account, many are written descriptions of similar experiences. Still, the unique aspects of his book – and the reason it stands as a breakthrough – is that he was a very down-to-earth man with a practical approach and a scientific mind who veered away from mystical language, clouded by or imbued with religious interpretations. Furthermore, while other people experiencing similar phenomena could undergo one or a few spontaneous episodes over a lifetime, Monroe managed to control these events at will to some extent. Hence, he experienced them with some periodicity during quite a lengthy period of his life.[3] In his book, one can follow a slow and progressive discovery

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[3] There are reports of other individuals who could deliberately induce these OBEs, such as Oliver Fox, who published detailed accounts of his experiences in the 1920s, and Sylvan Muldoon, who published works between 1938 and 1951. However, none of them engaged, as Monroe did, in experimental tests hoping to provide objective data.

process achieved by using empirical data from an extensive and consistent career of individual experiences.

Scientific writing has long discarded narratives of individuals who have experienced, or claim to have experienced, psychic phenomena during sleeping or waking states (such as premonitions, feelings of déjà-vu, visions, revelations, telepathy, extrasensory perception and precognitive experiences, synchronicity, out-of-the-body journeys, and near-death experiences, among others), relegating these accounts to the unreliable and untrustworthy realm of the paranormal or giving them the status of imaginary and mystical constructions. The fact that the terms 'paranormal' and 'parapsychic' carry such negative connotations led me to use the word 'psychic' instead, a direct derivative of 'psyche'. It should be remembered that, though extraordinary, these phenomena can be experienced by ordinary and healthy people and occur worldwide (on this issue, see, among others, Servadio, 1966, pp. 109–110; Tedlock, 1992). As Stanislav Grof wisely puts it: 'Once the ability of the human psyche to access new information without the mediation of the senses is generally accepted, there will be no need for a discipline specialising in the study of a relatively narrow selection of specific psychic phenomena. What in the past was considered "paranormal" will be seen as a normal capacity of the human psyche' (Grof, 2006, p. 173).

Nonetheless, these phenomena have attracted the attention of some small groups within the scientific community. After the downfall, in the first decades of the twentieth century, of the academic studies in this field undertaken in the United States by Stanford and Duke universities (studies led by John Coover at Stanford and by William McDougall, Joseph Rhine, and Karl Zener at Duke),[4] the scientific interest in these occurrences grew in the 1980s and '90s. Psychologists have since continued laboratory research on all types of dissociative states and psychic phenomena (A. Berger and J. Berger, 1991). Since then, the centre of academic research in this field has shifted from the United States to Europe (mainly to the United Kingdom) over the last decades (Irwin and Watt, 2007, pp. 248–249).

The fact that most people cannot produce these experiences at will has been a severe disadvantage for psychologists wanting to study these events in the laboratory. Also, the

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[4] J. B. Rhine's book *New Frontiers of the Mind* (1937) divulged Duke's laboratory research results to the general public.

accounts narrated are often encased in personal interpretation and religious beliefs, leaving researchers unable to separate data from their mystical garb (on the difficulties that psychic research faces, see Ebon, 1966). Overall, the scientific consensus is that there is insufficient evidence to support the existence of such phenomena, the general conclusion being that these experiences, when not fraudulent, are 'all in the mind', that is, illusions concocted by the mind. Nevertheless, the conviction of thousands of narrators of these episodes and the remarkable similarities worldwide exposes that science can no longer ignore the pressing need to look seriously at this phenomenon.

Critical scientific data have come to light since the studies on brain waves led to the discovery, in the 1950s, of the correlation between periods of rapid eye movement (REM) during sleep and dreaming of a hallucinatory type. Furthermore, neurophysiologists discovered that the pontine brainstem cells are activated during sleep, giving the dreamer a kinesthetic effect as if the balance organ was stimulated, which results in dreamers perceiving themselves as moving in space. This finding suggests a significant step in understanding dreaming reports of travelling in space (Tedlock, 1992, p. 14). It can, eventually, be an essential path towards unveiling the phenomenon of OBEs in the waking state.

As with most scientific writing, anthropology has yet to pay due attention to the richness of the accounts of individual dissociative experiences. Focusing on *collective* constructions and representations, individual narratives attributed to personal psychic experiences do not fit its concerns. Likewise, the study of dreaming, seen as a topic that relates mainly to individuals, has long been marginalised by anthropologists concerned with 'social facts' (Bock, 1980, pp. 131–138). Moreover, anthropology has played down the role of 'experience' in favour of 'belief' in understanding ritual and religious phenomena (see E. Turner, 1992, for instance).

In this article, I suggest that it is helpful to make the connection between these individual narratives and collective beliefs by looking at the striking congruences between written descriptions of psychic experiences in the Western world and collective discourses on spirits, ghosts, zombies, doubles, sorcery and the invisible, with which the anthropologist is only too familiar. In so doing, I argue for the heuristic value of 'experience' in understanding magic and religion, particularly in its ability to generate collective belief. Bringing together belief and experience *as inner states*, this proposal can also reconcile anthropology and psychology, the collective with the individual.

OBEs and Monroe

Psychologists define an out-of-the-body experience (OBE) as an event in which the experiencer appears to perceive some part of the environment from a location other than that of their physical body at the time. A 'second body' (the expression adopted by Monroe) seems to detach itself from the physical body, which lies in relaxation, unaware of it all, and undertakes journeys, sees distant places, and goes through obstacles and walls. Another feature of such astounding experiences is that the experiencer *knows* at the time of the occurrence that they are not dreaming, and even afterwards will maintain that what was seen or experienced was real or felt real. Charles Tart, a renowned psychologist, has researched such phenomena and explains: 'The experiencer seems to possess his normal consciousness at the time, and even though he may reason that this cannot be happening, he will feel all his normal critical faculties to be present, and so knows he is not dreaming. Further, he will not decide after awakening that this was a dream' (2017 [1972], p. 3). These experiences can be brought about by great emotional stress, brain trauma, sensory deprivation, dehydration, extreme physical effort, mental induction (falling asleep without losing mental awareness), deep trance, meditation, near-death experiences, brainwave synchronisation via audio or visual stimulation and psychedelic drugs, among others. Some people can deliberately induce these episodes (Tyrrell, 1943, p. 149; Aspell and Blanke, 2009).

Although many narratives are available on such experiences, I chose Monroe's for its clarity, analytical and systematic approach to the phenomena, and his rare ability to control such journeys at will. He took careful notes of the hundreds of OBEs he underwent over twelve years. Although he recognised that his mind constantly influenced him to fit what he saw or experienced into a familiar framework of thought, he tried to resist this impulse as much as he could. He also attempted to direct journeys of his second body to places where there were people with whom he could check the veracity of the incident afterwards. His willingness to submit to laboratory studies on his abilities was ignored (Tart, 2017, p. 7). Charles Tart – who wrote the introduction to Monroe's first book – was the only scientist who undertook laboratory work with him as a subject. Although the observations brought out some intriguing data, they were insufficient to prove the existence of such journeys outside one's mind (Tart, 1967, 2017).

A few passages of Monroe's experiences will help draw a picture of the intensity of such events and allow future comparisons with narratives by shamans, healers, and religious figures reported in the anthropological literature.

In Monroe's case, the OBEs were usually announced by a strong feeling of vibration in the entire body. Let us read the narrative of his first travelling experience, which was preceded by a few odd (but less remarkable) incidents:

> It was late at night, and I was lying in bed before sleep. My wife had fallen asleep beside me. There was a surge that seemed to be in my head, and quickly the condition spread through my body. It all seemed the same. As I lay there trying to decide how to analyze the thing in another way, I just happened to think how nice it would be to take a glider up and fly the next afternoon (my hobby at the time). Without considering any consequences – not knowing there would be any – I thought of the pleasure it would bring.
>
> After a moment, I became aware of something pressing against my shoulder. Half-curious, I reached back and up to feel what it was. My hand encountered a smooth wall. I moved my hand along the wall the length of my arm and it continued smooth and unbroken.
>
> My senses fully alert, I tried to see in the dim light. It *was* a wall, and I was lying against it with my shoulder. I immediately reasoned that I had gone to sleep and fallen out of bed. (I had never done so before, but all sorts of strange things were happening, and falling out of bed was quite possible.)
>
> Then I looked again. Something was wrong. This wall had no windows, no furniture against it, no doors. It was not a wall in my bedroom. Yet somehow it was familiar. Identification came instantly. It wasn't a wall, it was the ceiling. I was floating against the ceiling, bouncing gently with any movement I made. I rolled in the air, startled, and looked down. There, in the dim light below me, was the bed. There were two figures lying in the bed. To the right was my wife. Beside her was someone else. Both seemed asleep.
>
> This was a strange dream, I thought. I was curious. Whom would I dream to be in bed with my wife? I looked more closely and the shock was intense. *I* was the someone on the bed!
>
> My reaction was almost instantaneous. Here I was, there was my body. I was dying, this was death, and I wasn't ready to die. Somehow, the vibrations were killing me.

> Desperately, like a diver, I swooped down to my body and dove in. I then felt the bed and the covers, and when I opened my eyes, I was looking at the room from the perspective of my bed.
>
> What had happened? Had I truly almost died? My heart was beating rapidly, but not unusually so. I moved my arms and legs. Everything seemed normal. The vibrations had faded away. I got up and walked around the room, looked out of the window, smoked a cigarette (2017, pp. 27–28).

After having experienced the 'vibrations' six more times without the courage to pursue the lead any further, he finally decided to try the floating experience again:

> With the vibrations in full force, I thought of floating upward – and I did.
>
> I smoothly floated up over the bed, and when I willed myself to stop, I did, floating in mid-air. It was not a bad feeling at all, but I was nervous about falling suddenly. After a few seconds I thought myself downward, and a moment later I felt myself in bed with all normal physical senses fully operating. There had been no discontinuity in consciousness from the moment I lay down in bed until I got up after the vibrations faded. If it wasn't real – just a hallucination or dream – I was in trouble. I couldn't tell where wakefulness stopped and dreaming began.
>
> There are thousands of people in mental institutions who have just that problem (2017, p. 30).

At this time, he still considered himself the victim of hallucinatory episodes or some sort of neurotic aberration. As he overcame some of his excitement and fear at such happenings, he developed a technique of 'rolling' out of the physical body at will. He then underwent more daring and impressive journeys in his non-physical body. He started trying to direct his flights to the houses of friends or people of his acquaintance in the hope of being able to cross-check data with them. On one occasion he travelled to visit a friend, the well-known psychologist Dr Foster Bradshaw, who was supposedly in bed with a cold (2017, pp. 46-47). As he approached the doctor's house, flying 'over trees' and with 'a light sky above', he saw the psychologist and his wife outside the home, much to his surprise, as Dr Bradshaw was reportedly sick. After returning from the OBE, and already in the evening, he phoned the couple and asked them where they had been between 4 and 5 o'clock that afternoon: 'She [Mrs. Bradshaw] stated that roughly at four

twenty-five, they walked out of the house toward the garage. She was going to the post office, and Dr Bradshaw had decided that perhaps some fresh air might help him, and had dressed and gone along' (2017, p. 47). The time checked, and so did the overall look of their clothes.

This and other matching data throughout his experiences won over the sceptic in Monroe. No longer able to ignore 'the elephant in the room', he is left in an abysmal dilemma:

> That first evidential experience [referring to the episode above] was indeed a sledge/hammer blow. If I accepted the data as fact, it struck hard at nearly all my life experience to that date, my training, my concepts, and my sense of values. Most of all it shattered my faith in the totality and certainty of our culture's scientific knowledge. I was sure our scientists had all the answers. Or most of them.
> Conversely, if I rejected what was evident to me, if to no one else, then I would also be rejecting what I respected so greatly: that mankind's emancipation and upwards struggle depends chiefly upon his translation of the unknown into the known, through the use of his intellect and the scientific principle (2017, p. 31).

He comes to accept the second self as a reality, no longer a mere figment of the mind, subsequently making all kinds of experiments during his OBEs to figure out the features of this non-physical body. He recounts:

> I was again on the couch, feeling very smooth vibrations. I opened my eyes and looked around, and everything looked normal and the vibrations were still there. I then moved my arms, which were folded, and stretched them upward as I lay on my back. They felt outstretched and I was surprised (I am past proper use of the word astounded) when I looked, for there were my arms still folded over my chest.
> I looked upward to where I felt them, and I saw the shimmering outlines of my arms and hands in exactly the place they felt they were! I looked back at the folded arms, then at the bright shadow of them outstretched. I could see through them to the bookshelves beyond. It was like a bright, glowing outline which moved when I felt them move or made them move willfully. I wiggled my fingers, and the glowing fingers wiggled. And I felt them wiggle. I put my hands together, and the glowing

hands came together, and I felt my hands clasp each other. They felt just like ordinary hands, no different. (…) I rubbed the outline hands over each outline forearm, and the arms felt normal, solid to the touch. I moved one outline hand to the shelf by the cot, and I couldn't feel the shelf! My outline hand went right through it (2017, p. 167).

As a result of his multiple experiences, Monroe finally defined the attributes of this other body as follows: (1) the second body has weight, that is, it is subject to gravitational attraction, although much less than the physical body. It has small density and little mass, and this accounts for the fact that it can go through walls; (2) it is visible under certain conditions, as on some occasions he viewed radiated light around the perimeter of the body form; (3) the sense of touch is similar to that of the physical body; (4) it is pliable and plastic, taking whatever shape is desired by the individual; (5) it appears to be the reverse image of the physical body; (6) there seems to be a 'cord' linking both bodies (a fact often referred to in esoteric literature); (7) there is a relationship between the second body and electricity and electromagnetic fields (2017, pp. 176–178).

None of the passages quoted conveys how overwhelming and utterly dazzling the *experience* of reading the whole of Monroe's book is. I do not dare make assumptions about the reality of the content of these experiences, which have been pointed out frequently, appear to defy the laws of physics as we know and accept them to be. What can draw a man of such scientific convictions into the idea of the *existence* of a second self may still need to be accounted for, but at least it demonstrates how *real* these experiences feel for those who undergo them. Whether altered states of consciousness, hallucinations or unknown dimensions of the mind or universe, the fact is that these are, without a doubt, very much *real* happenings for those who experience them in such a way as to become *life-changing* events.

Juma's 'weird dreams'

As in many African societies, most of the Swahili people of Zanzibar, where I undertook fieldwork,[5] attribute severe disease to an external agency. Most commonly called *majini* (sing. *jini*), spirits possess one's body and inflict sickness or misfortune. These spirits can

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act of their own accord or be sent by sorcerers (*wachawi,* sing. *mchawi*),[6] in which case they will bring severe illness, death, bad luck, and severe calamity or hardship. When practising these evil deeds, the *majini* can be called *mashetani* (from the Arabic *Shayṭān*, Satan), although there is no clear distinction between these two terms.

Some *majini*, however, afflict a patient in such a way that that person must undertake some task, most commonly the job of healing. In such cases, the spirit's 'host' (*kiti*, which also means 'chair'), once successfully healed, should become a professional healer (*mganga*, pl. *waganga*) and practice the trade guided by that spirit (or spirits). While in an altered state of consciousness, the more spirits a *mganga* can summon and establish a relationship with, the more powerful they become.

As healers, *waganga* are feared people in that they deal with *majini* and possess great knowledge of *uchawi,* the secret wisdom of sorcerers. This knowledge enables *waganga* to cure by counteracting and neutralising the latter's attacks. However, when a disease is too severe, a healer may have to contact the *wachawi* themselves for advice or negotiate the rescue of a patient targeted to be killed by sorcery. The *wachawi* will then tell the healer that they want to free the patient from their malevolent action. Thus, there is an evident ambiguity here: *uchawi* is secret knowledge that can be harmful but can also become the key to curing acute and critical diseases. Consequently, *waganga* and *wachawi* are not 'enemies' as such.

These *wachawi* are ordinary villagers with whom one may unknowingly work or socialize. However, to become a *mchawi* one must have 'killed' a close relative, that is, believed to have caused or been the origin of their death. *Wachawi* are said to meet at night and have their main quarters and domains at a place called Gining'i. On Zanzibar Island (Unguja), this gathering point is on deserted open land (*jangwani*) near the village of Makoba in the Bumbwini area.

While researching illness and sorcery on the island of Zanzibar, I met Juma.[7] Juma and I both lived in Stone Town, and we chatted from time to time when we happened to see each other. Having found out that I was doing research in Bumbwini-Makoba, he asked

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[6] I use 'sorcerers' as a translation of *wachawi,* and 'sorcery' as that of *uchawi* for these translations appear to be closer to the Swahili concepts than those of 'witch' or 'witchcraft', notwithstanding the ambiguity – and often the overlapping – of these terms (on this subject see Turner 1964; Kapferer 1997, for instance).

[7] Pseudonyms have replaced real names.

me if I would accompany him to seek treatment there for his various physical and emotional troubles (weakness, constant fatigue, difficulties in memorizing and learning, sexual impotence, and business failure). He explained that he was born in Bumbwini and that his late grandfather had been one of the major *waganga* there; that he had already consulted several healers to treat his afflictions to no avail and was now convinced that his condition had its roots back when his grandfather had a severe conflict with a rival *mganga* there, in Bumbwini. He, therefore, reckoned that he could only be cured with the involvement of the *wachawi* of Gining'i. Given that, healers from Bumbwini-Makoba had to plead for the help of the *wachawi,* who would eventually free the patient from their malevolent influence in return for an agreed payment.

We made all the necessary arrangements with the *baraza la waganga* ('council of healers') of Bumbwini-Makoba to consult the wachawi at Gining'i (an episode fully narrated in a recent article, Palmeirim 2021). I accompanied Juma on this trip and during all the procedures that it entailed. Juma paid the first instalment of his treatment and was supposed to make a second payment of three hundred dollars sometime after, without which the ire of the *wachawi* could be aroused and the cure doomed to fail.

Juma and I lost contact for a few years. When I came to meet him again, we recalled our trip to Bumbwini. I then learned that he had never returned to pay the remaining three hundred dollars. I was surprised, as he had displayed great fear of the *wachawi* throughout the process. Would this not jeopardise his treatment and raise the fury of the *wachawi*? It was then that he told me about his dreams.

Not long after the episode we underwent together, and having already completed the first payment, he started having 'weird dreams' (he used the expression in English). He explained to me that those dreams took place not in the world of 'real dreams', not in 'real life', but in *mazingira ya utatanishi* ('the realm of *utatanishi*', from *utata*, which means 'complexity, ambiguity, prodigiousness'), referring to what is commonly called in the literature the world of sorcery and the 'invisible'. In these 'weird dreams', he met the same *mchawi* twice. The sorcerer warned him to pay the other half of the money to Gining'i. However, in the third dream, they started fighting, and Juma won, leaving the *mchawi* bleeding. As soon as this happened, he saw himself in Bumbwini, and a healer on a scooter was speeding away from him. His spirits (*majini*), with whom he maintains a relationship, told him that these healers and sorcerers were 'small people' and that he should not bother paying the rest. All his subsequent dreams showed that his spirits

were mighty, so he had nothing to fear. After this set of dreams, he felt cured and later got married.

Juma insisted that his dreams were 'weird dreams', not 'real dreams' as such. It was during the dream that he suddenly found himself in Bumbwini. This discourse is not unheard of in Zanzibar, where w*aganga* are unanimous in claiming they can communicate with spirits (*majini*) in a state of vigil, and travel in space.

In Zanzibar, dreams are regarded as premonitory and can influence one's perception of everyday life while awake. However, the Swahili people do not confuse these realms, even though what many refer to as 'reality' and the dream world may often overlap. Why, then, should Juma and the *waganga* in Zanzibar (and indeed elsewhere) reiterate that their experiences should not be confused with mere dreams?

The 'dream theory' of Primitive Religion and the 'dream' in anthropology

In his book *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Evans-Pritchard labels the founding anthropological theories of Edward Tylor and Herbert Spencer on primitive religion as the 'soul theory' and the 'ghost theory', respectively. This separation is artificial and lies merely in emphasis, as Evans-Pritchard himself reckons, for both theories can be considered two versions of a 'dream theory' on the origin of religion (1977, p. 25). In Tylor's animism, the experiences of death, disease, trance, visions and, above all, dreams led the 'primitive man' to the idea of the soul, an immaterial entity inhabiting the physical body from which it could detach itself to undergo independent ventures, the dreams. Then comes the overriding concern of his time with the formulation of evolutionary sequences: the idea that the soul would later extend to beings other than humans as well as to inanimate objects (to account for beliefs ascribed to some primitive societies), and from the soul, the idea of spirits would have arisen. Spirits would finally have developed into gods in the superior form of religion (Tylor, 1871, vol.2).

Herbert Spencer formulates his theory in a slightly different way. Dreams led humans to the idea of duality, the existence of a double, a soul wandering in dreams at night. Souls have an afterlife, as demonstrated by the appearance of the dead in dreams, the so-called ghosts. In Spencer's eyes, this latter concept is at the very origin of religion, for the ghosts of ancestors and superior beings would, in time, become gods to be worshipped (Spencer, 1898, vol.1).

Even if one cannot subscribe to the causality sequences proposed by Tylor and Spencer, we can at least agree that the concepts of soul, ghost, spirits, and dreams – in all their conceptual diversity – are of overriding importance when examining religious systems. Of course, the variety of empirical contexts denies, as we now all know, the proclaimed evolutionary stages. However, the concept of the *duality* of the human being has always been asserted. Evolutionists saw it as a result of fallacious thinking whereby dreams were *erroneously taken as real experiences* by 'primitive man' (see, for instance, Tylor, 1871, p. 425).

Much of what has been translated in anthropological literature as 'dreams' are indeed dissociative experiences of a nature not too different from the ones described by Monroe: events which take place on the threshold of sleep and which have been equally discarded on the basis that 'civilised men' who experience them *erroneously claim that they are real*. Indeed, the well-established association of many religious, shamanic and healing practices throughout the world with psychic experiences make it plausible that the religious knowledge of 'primitive men' (which includes the concepts of soul, ghost and spirit) is more likely to emerge from experiences of a second self of the kind Monroe describes than from their inapt or clouded interpretation of dreams. So much so that the definition with which Tylor presents us in *Primitive Culture* of the concept of soul, responsible for dreaming, resembles in many aspects that of the second self of Monroe's: 'a thin unsubstantial human image, in its nature a sort of vapour, film, or shadow'; 'capable of leaving the body far behind, to flash swiftly from place to place'; 'mostly impalpable and invisible, yet also manifesting physical power'; 'appearing to men waking or asleep as a phantasm separate from the body of which bears the likeness' (Tylor, 1871, p. 429).

Based on extensive ethnographic records, anthropologists have used the word 'dream' as an overall-encompassing term to designate all sorts of experiences narrated as taking place during sleep or semi-sleep states. The term appears to embrace such diversity of experiences that scholars felt the need from early times to organise them in typologies. A student of Seligman's, Jackson S. Lincoln (1935), was one of the first anthropologists to attempt a classification of the dreams of various North American Indians.[8] Revisiting Malinowski's notion of 'official dreams' from *Sex and Repression* (1927), Lincoln

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[8] On the rich ethnography on dreaming of the Mohave, Crow, Yuma, Sioux, Blackfoot, Seneca, Kwakiutl, and other North American tribes, see Gifford 1926; Spier 1933; Wallace 1947, 1958; Eliade 1951; Devereux 1951, 1957, among others.

introduces the concept of the 'culture pattern dream' in contrast to the more subjective phenomenon of the 'individual dream'. Culture pattern dreams are socially induced and carry cultural significance, making them particularly relevant to anthropological inquiry. In contrast, individual dreams – typically spontaneous and experienced during sleep – primarily reflect personal psychology (Lincoln, 1935, pp. 22–23).

Most existing typologies are superimposed upon the data and disregard indigenous classifications.[9] An example of a typology of dreams in more recent literature – again issuing from an etic point of view – is that of Katie Glaskin based on her ethnography on Australian aborigines (2011, pp. 51–52). Glaskin compares the categories of dreams she distinguishes with Lohmann's dream theories (Lohmann, 2007). Ordinary dreams and nightmares are differentiated emically in some Australian aboriginal groups. Then she considers the 'shared dream', where more than one person has the same dream; dreams which appear to fit into Lohmann's category of 'generative dreams' in that they predict and also contribute to generating future events; 'prescient dreams', which foretell the future or refer to recently occurred events (events which the dreamer could not have known through other means); and the ones she labels as 'innovative dreams', that is, ancestral revelations which disclose to the living higher and special knowledge (in the case of the aboriginal Australians, they reveal new songs and ritual material which will be incorporated into their ceremonies). The latter, Gaskin says, fit into two of Lohmann's theories: 'the soul travel theory' and 'the visitation theory', depending on if the dreams express the experiences of a part of the self (such as the soul, in some contexts) which leaves the physical body during sleep or if it is a spiritual visitation to a stationary dreamer (Gaskin, 2011, p. 51; Lohmann, 2007, p. 43). She also considers that her prescient dreams might encompass those Lohmann includes in his 'discernment theory', dreams which imply 'a state of consciousness more powerful than waking thought' (Lohmann, 2007: p. 42). Gaskin still adds 'lucid dreaming' to this list, usually experienced by people said to have special abilities and powers, who are also more likely to have innovative dreams (2011, p. 55).

As we can infer from the above, anthropologists catalogue a grand panoply of experiences from an etic standpoint as 'dreams'. As a result of this, an inevitable statement is also made about these experiences, which we acknowledged to be similar to the descriptions of extrasensory and dissociative events that launched this text: that

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[9] On classifying dreams, see Kilborn 1992. An exception to this is, for instance, el-Aswad's interesting work on dreams in urban and rural Egyptian communities (2010).

they are of a nature or essence no different from other dreams and therefore should be treated as such. By putting data from various perceptual and cognitive categories in the same basket anthropologists have thus avoided the morass and utterly awkward task of taking seriously experiences narrated to them that are of an explicit psychic nature.[10] Price-Williams refers to how dreams in the waking state are most often relegated to nocturnal dreams in the researcher's mind, or else assigned to the category of 'visions', with all the value judgement associated with the term. Moreover, he stresses that visions should not be confused with the 'active imagination' of dreams in a waking state.[11] The former 'are usually spontaneous and characteristically burst through into an individual's ordinary consciousness' while the latter is a method 'used consciously, and can be construed in terms of learning' (1992, pp. 250–251). He further remarks that confusion in terminology also stems from the inaccurate use of 'dreaming' as the translation of indigenous terms (Price-Williams, 1992, pp. 249–250). Moreover, informants often struggle to find the appropriate word in the researcher's language to express their experiences and may settle, like Juma above, on describing these happenings as 'weird dreams'. Indeed, there may be a misunderstanding here and our formulations may evidence more of the failure to listen attentively to our indigenous informants' claims than portray the narrators' clouded minds. Monroe, for one, goes to great lengths to distinguish his experiences from nocturnal dreams:

> The experiences differ from the typical dream state principally in the following ways:
> (1) Continuity of some sort of awareness;
> (2) Intellectual or emotional (or blends of the two) decisions made during the experiences;
> (3) Multivalued perception via sensory inputs or their equivalents;
> (4) Non-recurrence of identical patterns; and

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[10] Interesting is Erika Bourguignon's thesis (1972, pp. 422–429, referred to by Tedlock 1992, pp. 17–18) of a common frame of reference organising in a continuum the ordinary and ritualised dreams situated at the REM-sleep pole and distributing various types of experiences in altered states of consciousness along the spectrum with possession trance at the far-end pole.

[11] Here, Price-Williams adopts Carl Jung's notion of 'active imagination', altogether different from the ordinary imagination in which images are allowed to pass through one's mind effortlessly and passively. Instead, the active imagination is a laborious and engaging process of shutting up critical faculties to bring into awareness images and emotions that are perceived as objective and felt as real (Price-Williams 1992, pp. 247–249).

(5) Development of events in sequence that seem to indicate a time-lapse.

   The most certain statement that can be made is that when the condition exists, you are as aware of "not dreaming" as you are when you are awake (2017, pp. 179–180).

In fact, since ancient times, cultures insisted on the privilege of a few being able to undergo the action of 'doubling', that is, of liberating one's second self from the physical body to journey where it chooses (for instance, Tedlock, 1992, pp. 1–8). Claude Lecouteux, a specialist in Middle Age Germano-Scandinavian literature, shows that in Northern and Central Europe narrations of these phenomena are prevalent from times that predate the medieval era; the widespread concept of a 'double' (or several doubles, as in the Old Norse traditions) being, most certainly, prior to the rise of Christianity itself (Lecouteux, 2003).

Mediums, Healers and Shamans

Most mediums, healers and shamans throughout the world claim that in order 'to see' beyond the surface of reality (to see the cause of an illness, for instance)[12] and 'travel' distances, they must be in an enhanced state of consciousness, which can be reached or triggered by different methods, be it trance, meditation, asceticism, entheogens, severe sickness, food or sleep deprivation, self-flagellation or another form of physical pain, dance, music, or other. Only in that state can they communicate with the spirits and be guided by them in the act of healing. Only in that state can they 'see', and that kind of seeing is vital to diagnose illnesses caused by sorcery or witchcraft. The lengthy descriptions gathered by Richard Katz among the Kung of the Kalahari Desert specify how the *num*, the spiritual energy, heats up and is activated to enter *kia,* the altered state of consciousness, which is the key to healing:

   Kinachau, an old healer, talks about the kia experience: 'You dance, dance, dance, dance. Then num lifts you up in your belly and lifts you in your back, and you start to shiver. Num makes you tremble; it's hot. Your eyes are open, but you don't look around; you hold your eyes still and look straight ahead. But when you get

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[12] On the healers' ability *to see* the cause of a disease in different contexts, see E. Turner 1992, pp. 170–174.

into kia, you're looking around because you see everything, because you see what's troubling everybody. Rapid shallow breathing draws num up. What I do in my upper body with the breathing, I also do in my legs with the dancing. You don't stomp harder, you just keep steady. Then num enters every part of your body, right to the tip of your feet and even your hair.' (Katz, 1982, pp. 41–42)

Or, as described by Kau Dwa, another powerful healer: 'In your backbone you feel a pointed something, and it works its way up. The base of your spine is tingling, tingling, tingling, tingling. Then num makes your thoughts nothing in your head' (Katz, 1982, p. 42).

This continuous 'tingling' recalls the vibration which preceded all of Monroe's OBEs: at first rough vibrations 'as if your body is being severely shaken right down to the molecular or atomic level', which one can learn to control and smooth down to become a mere sensation 'of body warmth, slightly tingling, but not excessively so' (Monroe, 2017, p. 214). This process of apprenticeship is clearly described for the aspiring !Kung healers:

> By singing and clapping the healing songs, they stimulate the num to boil. The intensity of their singing can help to determine and regulate the depth of kia (Katz, 1982, p. 46).
>
> (…)
>
> If their kia is coming on so fast that their fear escalates and prevents them from experiencing the kia, the teacher may make them stop dancing for a while, or drink some water, or lie down – all to "cool down" their too rapidly boiling num. The num must be hot enough to evoke kia but not so hot that it provokes debilitating fear. It is never a question of merely putting num into the students; the correct amount is critical (Katz, 1982, p. 47).

Likewise, the mind's emptiness and steadiness required to enter *kia* is also pointed out by Monroe as an absolute must to achieve dissociation from the physical body (2017, pp. 208, 211, 216). In the Norse sagas, those who 'leap out of their skins/spirit' (*springa af harmi/moeði*) are in great danger, and they cannot be interrupted or their name uttered (Lecouteux, 2003, pp.34, 48). In other narratives this author mentioned, the psychic's

immobile body cannot be touched, lethargy being a condition *sine qua non* of the journey afar (Lecouteux, 2003, pp. 37–38, 85, 94, 100).

These experiences are dominated by what Monroe calls 'the fear barrier': fear of the unknown, frightful experiences, pain and, above all, fear of death, the sensation of being killed by the vibrations (2017, pp. 205–207, 77, 28). The motif of death is indeed recurrent in all accounts of these experiences, both the fear of it and – as control is acquired – the certainty of being able to survive it (Tart, 2017, p. 4), as well as the readiness to die (Monroe, p. 156). All these themes characterise the experience of the !Kung healer who enters *kia*:

> Kau Dwa makes the further dimensions of this painful fear explicit: 'As we enter kia, we fear death. We fear we may die and not come back!' This fear of death without an experience of rebirth evokes its own special terror for the Kung, as it has for persons in every culture. When potential healers can face this fact of their death and 'willingly' die, the fear of num can be overcome, and there can be a breakthrough to kia (Katz, 1982, p. 45).

What is terrifying about that death experience is that it feels *as real as* death, the only difference being that the dead person will be gone forever while the healer can return to life.[13] When a !Kung succeeds in enduring such an experience, they will enter a deeper stage of *kia*, the 'full kia', where they acquire healing capacity.[14] The difference between 'beginning kia' and 'full kia' takes us back once more to Monroe's description of his entrance in deeper layers of his out-of-the-body journeys, what he calls Locale II and Locale III (2017, chs. V and VI, in particular).

When in 'full kia' a !Kung healer 'sees properly' and is then able to heal. In the words of Kau Dwa: 'When you kia [sic], you see things you must pull out, like the death things that god has put into people. You see people properly, just as they are. Your vision does

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[13] There is also a clear connection between OBEs and NDEs (near-death experiences), but I will not develop this interrelation in the current text.

[14] Katz gives a clarifying explanation: 'The dynamic that moves one from an experience of beginning kia to full kia is being able to 'die.' This dying should not be reduced to the Western concept of psychological death or ego death. Nor do I find evidence that the Kung call this dying a 'half-death'. For the Kung, it is simply dying. This dying and attendant rebirth are the central expressions of transcendence in Kung healing. When persons still seeking num experience this death, it signifies their capacity for full kia and healing. It is said that they have finally 'drunk num.' (Katz 1982, p. 99) A low percentage of those who experienced beginning *kia* attained full *kia*.

not whirl' (Katz, 1982, p. 42, see also p. 106). Indeed, the state of body dissociation is all about 'seeing'. Monroe describes how once one is familiar with being separated from the physical body if one *thinks* of seeing, one will see: 'You learn that you can see in all directions at once, without turning the head, that you see or don't see according to the thought (…)' (2017, p. 184). He specifies, 'There will be no sensation of eye opening. The blackness will just disappear suddenly. At first, your seeing may be dim, as if in half-light, indistinct or myopic. It is not known at present why this is so, but with use, your vision will become more sharp' (2017, p. 222).

Narrations like the ones collected by Froelich Rainey in *The Whale Hunters of Tigara* also bear striking resemblances to descriptions of OBEs. Reconstructing the heritage of the Eskimo of Alaska, Rainey describes that in the old days every shaman or visionary (an *angatkok*) was 'invited' by the spirits (*tungai*)[15] to visit them. The shaman's own 'spirit' (*ilitkosaq*, the author warns us of the dangers of translation) would then leave his body to enter the spirit's world. 'When his spirit had departed from his body, that mundane body remained in a trance until its spirit returned' (1947, p. 275). He tells us the story of Asetcak, a famous Eskimo shaman who flew from one of the Diomede Islands to the 172 miles distant St Lawrence Island in search of the son of his host (1947, pp. 277–278). The narrations gathered by the author tell of the method adopted by Asetcak to get into flying ('he always flew with one knee drawn up and arms outstretched'), his frustrated attempts, his difficulties in descending, and even the technique a shaman teaches a neophyte to be able to return to the body after a journey.

Accounts such as these have often been relegated to the realm of the Eskimo 'system of beliefs'. Rainey tells us that this widely known tale was not even doubted by 'the well-educated Eskimo who have been away at school or those men who interpret at the mission and run the cooperative store' (1947, p. 279). However, taken simply as *beliefs*, these accounts might have been anchored in real extrasensory experiences, for they have all the features of the OBEs Monroe describes: the need for a dissociation technique to initiate flight, which includes, like in the case of Asetcak, the 'stretching' of the non-

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[15] The *tungai* were 'spirit-beings who might be the spirits or souls of dead men or animals or simply beings of the air or the ground who had no connection with actual men and animals.' (Rainey 1947, p. 275)

physical body (Monroe 2017, pp. 177, 225–226), the failed and aborted trials and the difficulties in descending. Monroe also describes the terrifying fear of being unable to return to the physical body (2017, pp. 206, 224–225) and his discovery of the efficient rotation method to move in and out of his physical body (2017, pp. 220–222).

Indeed, one cannot deny the striking resemblances between individual psychic descriptions and the collective beliefs on the dual nature of the human being. Ghosts, thought to be spirits of the dead, are said to be see-through, light-weight bodies, able to levitate and go through obstacles and walls. All these features are shared by the second body of Monroe's OBEs (2017, pp. 52, 166–67, 169–70, 176). Again, it is not by accident that a sorcerer is understood in many contexts as a being who can travel afar, see afar, hear afar and transmute himself or herself into different shapes and animals. To return to the Swahili context, this is an ability of both spirits (*majini*) and sorcerers (*wachawi*), who 'transmute themselves' (*kujigeuza* or *kujibadilisha*) into cats, dogs, bush babies, and other animals or natural things. Curiously enough, this is also a property brought up in Monroe's descriptions of the ductile non-physical body:

> If left alone, it [the non-physical body] reverts to your normal humanoid shape. If you consciously think it into a given shape, I suspect you take that form. You might convert temporarily into the shape of, for example, a cat or a dog. Could this be the source of the werewolf and vampire bat mythology? I'm not so sure I want to give it a try [he concludes] (2017, p. 170, see also p. 183).

Again, the widespread idea of the existence of zombies in many ethnographic contexts[16] may be seen to echo the apparent death or catalepsy of the physical body while its double travels afar. Among the Swahili of Zanzibar, these 'zombies' are considered ordinary individuals whom sorcerers captured just before burial. I was told that though deceased people appear dead in the eyes of their relatives, who cry and grieve for them at the burial site, they have 'in reality' been taken by the *wachawi* to Gining'i, the latter replacing the deceased with a double who is buried instead. At Gining'i, the *wasukule*[17]

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[16] References to 'zombies' can be found in other African contexts (see, for instance, Niehaus 2005) and the Caribbean, showing remarkable similarities with the Zanzibari constructs (e.g. Ackermann and Gauthier 1991; Littlewood 2009).

[17] John Middleton (1992, p. 182) states that these 'zombies' are called *ng'ing'inge*. However, Mohamed A. Mohamed, in his dictionary (2011), mentions this term (*ging'ingi*) as a variant of *gining'i* to designate not the zombies but the place where they live and where sorcerers meet at night. This is also the meaning I collected for the word in the field.

(often compared to enslaved people) take care of the *wachawi*'s estate, living under social rules that invert those sanctioned in commonplace society.

Although claiming that there are close similarities between the collective discourse on doubles – be it soul or souls, spirits, zombies or ghosts – and the experience of the second body in individual psychic narratives, I am not asserting that the two discourses coincide nor that the claims of healers that 'they go places' should necessarily portray their ability to undertake real out-of-the-body experiences. Indeed, attaining an enhanced state of consciousness is not an everyday event and those who do may only experience it once or twice in a lifetime. But would the fact that a healer did or did not undergo a real experience be of utmost importance for their accomplishment as a healer? Lévi-Strauss's commentary on the episode of the Nambikwara sorcerer/witchdoctor who disappeared in the thunderstorm, narrated in his well-known article 'The Sorcerer and his Magic' (1963), is of great help in understanding the mechanism which may be at stake here.

Lévi-Strauss tells us of his own experience among the Nambikwara Indians of Central Brazil. One evening, the group's sorcerer, with whom he was camping, did not return to the camp in the evening at the usual time. After a couple of hours the whole community was worried and convinced that he had been killed either in an ambush or attacked by some wild beast. His two wives and son wept. Later that night, they finally found him 'crouching silently, shivering in the chilly night air, dishevelled and without his belt, necklaces and arm-bands (the Nambicuara wear nothing else)'. The sorcerer then explained that the thunderstorm which had broken that afternoon 'had carried him off to a site several miles distant, which he named, and then, after stripping him completely, had brought him back to the spot where we found him.' The next day he was back to his routine and had recovered all his adornments, *a fact which did not stir up any surprise among the fellow members of his band*, as Lévi-Strauss points out (1963, p. 170).

Such a puzzling event would be easily comprehended should the narrative of the sorcerer be taken seriously and understood as an out-of-the-body experience. But did he really experience an OBE? Would it be significant if he did not? Lévi-Strauss's remarks are here quite significant. Indeed, although some members had shown some scepticism and offered a different interpretation of this episode, these doubts could not go beyond mere conjecture. No one would ever entertain the idea of declaring it a hoax, *for it*

remained in the realm of plausible experience: 'He had probably not flown in the wings of thunder to the Rio Ananaz and had only staged an act. But these things might have happened; they certainly happened in other circumstances, and they belonged to the realm of real experience. Certainly, the sorcerer maintains an intimate relationship with the forces of the supernatural' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963 p. 171). Hence, real individual dissociative experiences can form the basis of a collective discourse which gains some degree of autonomy and in turn serves as the basis to interpret experience.

Conclusion: on Experience and Belief

In the classical labelling of Evans-Pritchard (1965), Tylor and Spencer formulated 'psychological' theories of religion. For once – and their evolutionary bias discarded for the moment – psychology and the individual's 'dreams' were at the basis of a collective system of representations, religion. This association, however, was not to hold for long as anthropology was to abandon the psychological grounds of religion in favour of the Durkheimian assumption that social phenomena can only be explained or examined in their own terms. And oddly enough we are still enslaved by this legacy. In line with the Durkheimian tradition, anthropology has played down the role of (individual) 'experience' in favour of (collective) 'belief' in understanding ritual and religious phenomena, which has meant the divorce between anthropology and psychology. In her exhaustive study on ritual, Catherine Bell states bluntly at the opening of a chapter: 'The study of ritual has always assumed the close association of rite with belief. As we have seen, ritual has generally been thought to express beliefs in symbolic ways for the purposes of their continual reaffirmation and inculcation' (1992, p. 182). Likewise, the anthropology and sociology of dreams insist on dealing with dreams as 'text' (Ricoeur, 1970) or as 'intentional *messages*', leaving to psychology the approach of dreaming as 'internal *experiences*' (Fabian, 1966, p. 560, my emphasis).

The data presented in this text calls for the imperative need to establish the intimate connection between individual experience and collective belief. It is not claimed that we should embark on a psychological interpretation of social facts or reduce the latter to a summation of personal experiences. But a close link has to be acknowledged. The ritualised healing practices and experiences of shamans, healers and mediums analysed earlier are *not* mere reaffirmations, enactments or portrayals of a (more or less coherent) set of beliefs. The question of *experience*, undergone by the individual or

passed on by others who lived through different states of consciousness, the emotions and perceptions of self, truth, reality and agency, have an overpowering presence and bearing.

Amid an array of scholars in general, and of anthropologists in particular, ready to ignore or relegate narratives of psychic episodes to the realm of mere contrivance, delusion or, more comfortably, to the realm of 'belief', there have been some who made moves towards arguing the heuristic value of 'experience' in the understanding of sorcery, ritual and religion (Turner and Bruner, 1986; Jakobsen, 1999; Bowie, 2013, for instance). As far back as the end of the nineteenth century, Andrew Lang, the Scottish poet, novelist, literary critic and anthropologist who was influenced by Tylor, deserves a special mention within the history of anthropology for his pioneering and tenacious interest in psychical research and all things 'hallucinatory'. His works, *The Book of Dreams and Ghosts* (1897) and *The Making of Religion* (1898), are, among other writings of his, unequivocal examples of such interest and awareness. Testimony of his daring thought, he proposed at the opening of *The Making of Religion* to compare 'savage beliefs [on visions, hallucinations and clairvoyance] with the attested record of similar *experiences* [his italics] among living and educated civilised men' (1898, p. 3).

Indeed, it is more of *experience*, rather than collective belief, that narratives of healers, shamans, religious visionaries and mediums talk about. As a psychologist who did fieldwork with the anthropologist Richard Lee, Katz is untiring in stressing this fact when writing about ritual healing among the Kalahari Kung: 'Although the Kung distinguish between final death when the soul permanently leaves the body, and the death of *kia*, when the soul goes out but then hopefully returns, there is only one *experience* [his italics] of death, and the experience is what matters' (Katz, 1982, p. 116). Monroe makes a statement connected to this same idea: 'It is impossible to convey to another the 'reality' of this non-physical eternity. As stated by many in centuries past, it must be *experienced*" (2017, p. 80, my emphasis).

The concept of 'belief', central to anthropological studies of religion since the beginning of the discipline, is far from clear and consensual (a comprehensive presentation of the intricate anthropological debate surrounding this concept can be found in Bell, 1992, pp. 182–189). Mainly assumed as a matter of collectively significant propositions and ideas, social analysis of belief has mostly turned its back on the diversity of ways in which participants adhere, interpret and relate to the so-called 'system of beliefs'. On the other

hand, if not a single and embracing worldview, beliefs are also about inner convictions, about internal and individual mental states. This is the opening argument of Rodney Needham's *Belief, Language and Experience*, where he argues that belief is best left to psychology. Social analysis may indeed address how society prompts and shapes such mental states. Still, it cannot examine a person's inner convictions and determine whether they correspond to a state of 'belief'. Belief cannot be demonstrated or measured insofar as it cannot be proven that it conforms more or less with what most people in society believe (1972, pp. 1–7). In this sense, I claim that the concept of belief comes closer in nature to that of (individual, inner) experience and that the studies on belief are bound to comprise limitations similar to those of the studies on experience. If it is possible to gather a discourse on beliefs or a narrative of an out-of-the-body episode, belief and experience *as inner states* cannot be objectified, grasped from the exterior or passed on to someone else.

In bringing together belief and experience, no longer corollaries of the opposition collective vs. individual, we come close to Lévy-Bruhl's thought, pointed out by Needham as the first anthropologist to raise the question of the boundary between these two concepts. The 'mystical experience',[18] as Lévy-Bruhl calls it, cannot be clearly distinguished from the notion of belief because the experience of the invisible world confirms what the 'primitive men' were already taught by tradition (1938, p. 15).[19] Indeed, it is widely accepted that extrasensory experiences of the sort which healers, mediums, and visionaries describe are induced and interpreted by religious convictions and, as such, beliefs are modelling factors of experience. If this is so, the opposite equation appears equally feasible: that is, personal psychic experiences may inspire, beget, or even be at the very core of religious beliefs (which, in turn, shape how one perceives experience itself). Individual experience can induce personal belief, both as

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[18] For Lévy-Bruhl, 'the mystical experience is at the same time a revelation and a psychical complex in which the emotional elements (*éléments affectifs*) occupy a predominant place' (1938, p. 15, my translation).

[19] Needham makes a fascinating remark as he draws our attention to the fact that the word 'experience' in English comes from Latin with the meaning of 'making a trial or test' (as in an experiment). In contrast, the German word (*erfahrung*) comes from the Old High German *irfaran,* meaning 'to travel, traverse, pass through, to reach or arrived at'. He adds that in fifteenth-century German, to be 'experienced' (*bewandert*) means the knowledge derived from being widely travelled and 'astute' (1972, p. 172). This sense is much closer to Lévy-Bruhl's concept of 'mystical experience' and the use of 'experience' in this text.

inner states and running the risk of obliterating each other. Consequently, it is plausible that several individual psychic experiences might also trigger collective belief as a cultural construct and worldview.

German philosopher Thomas Metzinger, out of meticulous thinking, makes a clear connection between OBEs and the notion of the soul: 'In short, the particular phenomenal content of OBEs led human beings to believe in a *soul*. (…) Given the epistemic resources of early mankind, it was a highly rational belief to assume the possibility of disembodied existence' (2005, p. 80). Other scholars have advanced arguments in the same direction. Gregory Shushan (2018) demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between experience and belief centred on his extensive analysis of near-death experiences (NDEs), Michael Winkelman (2016) argues a similar point in his study of shamanism and John Homiak, studying the Rastafari visionary communication in Jamaica, affirms that a continuum exists linking the intrapsychic experiences of dreams to the 'communal discourse of reasoning' (1992, p. 243). More openly, Fiona Bowie states: 'I suspect that first hand and recounted experiences of 'magical' phenomena (…) have profoundly shaped the ways in which human beings in all times and places have formed their religious ideas and cosmological outlook' (2018, p. 2). And indeed, prophecies and religious systems worldwide have incessantly claimed that they originated from the (higher) knowledge disclosed in mystic revelations resulting from dreams and altered states of consciousness.

There is undoubtedly an inextricable relationship between collective religious belief and inner experiences of the sort mentioned.[20] One cannot deny the resemblance of both discourses and, consequently, the possibility that religion might be a corpus of collective representations built out of *real* psychic experiences in the sense of *lived* experiences and *perceived reality*.[21] These experiences are crucial sources of knowledge and, in this sense, believing is *knowing*. This is why there is no room for neglecting the notion of experience (as an individual's inner state) in anthropology. On the other hand, personal interior experiences are not impervious to cultural worldviews and thus against what

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[20] Michele Stephen advances a theory on why this should be so based on her 'dual memory model', which comprises the 'autonomous imagination', based on emotion and sensory imagery, and the verbal/semantic memory (2003, pp. 110–111, in particular).

[21] When I say 'real experiences', I mean that they are real because they were lived and felt or perceived as real by the individuals who underwent them. However, I do not exclude the possibility of having more reality to them than meets the eye with our present scientific knowledge.

Needham claims, cannot be entrusted to psychology alone. There is a relentless communication and interchange between these two poles, between psychic and religious territories. However, as Price-Williams justly claims, 'The problem for an anthropology of the imaginal is to find out why one imaginary production elicits social support and another does not. The social matrix is crucial, for on this depends the development of an institutional setting for what otherwise would be mere individual images' (1992, p. 261).

As a plea to establishing a bridge between individual experience and belief as a collective construct in the study of religious and ritual phenomena, I recall as a final note the idea of 'plausible experience' brought about by Lévi-Strauss in the episode recounted earlier of the Nambikwara sorcerer who claimed to have travelled afar carried by a thunderstorm. No one dared declare his story a sham (although some might have raised some conjectural doubts) because the story remained in the sphere of plausible experience, that is, similar events had happened on other occasions, and in that sense, it also 'belonged to the realm of real experience' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p. 171). Belief is not necessarily based on one's own but, most commonly, on other people's inner experiences, present and past, and judges and interprets events based on plausibility.

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Religious Experience in Relation to Sufism

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I dedicate this article to the memory of my father, Mukhambet Maltabarov (d. 26.06. 2025)

Abstract:

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the study of religion was largely centered around the idea that a specific type of personal experience lies at the core of all religious traditions. However, recent scholarship has questioned this notion highlighting the limitations it poses to the study of religion and its separation from social and cultural contexts. This article questions the exclusiveness of the Western concept of religious experience using Sufism as a case study. The article argues that the Sufi understanding of religious experience, deeply rooted in Islamic doctrinal and practical foundations, includes some elements consistent with the Western romantic interpretation of experience. For this I will explore Sufi practices examining both their historical development and mystical content and outlining the possible characteristics of the Islamic Sufi perspective on communication with and experience of the divine.

Keywords: Sufism; Sufi-practices; doctrinal Islam; mysticism; religious experience;

Introduction

The concept of experience played a central role in German Romanticism and was understood as a reaction to the dominance of reason during the Enlightenment, specifically as an antidote to the rational approach to reality. Particular attention was paid to the sensory subjective event, which is necessarily connected with something significant that goes beyond the framework of everyday life (Frank 2004; Brusslan 2020). This interpretation of experience, which can provide a more complete picture of the world and as an immediate sensation connected with a specific lived moment, had influenced the understanding of religion. Such philosophers of religion as Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) contributed to the image of religion based on the experience of the sacred or the

numinous, which is of an extraordinary nature. William James (1842–1910), the American philosopher and psychologist, also defended the uniqueness of religious experience. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James provided a number of characteristics according to which an experience can be identified as religious or mystical. Among them are passivity, ineffability, noetic quality, and transient quality (James, 1985, pp. 379-82). The above-mentioned ideas served as the basis for the development of the phenomenological approach to religious experience.

The constructivist approach to religious experience was mainly developed in 1970s in the works of Wayne Proudfoot (b.1939). In his book *Religious Experience* (1985), Proudfoot stands for the determination of religious experience by a cultural context of participants involved. One of the examples of the constructivist approach in the twenty first century is Ann Taves and her shift of focus from religious experience to the processes by which people give value and meaning to their experiences, religious or not. Taves suggests that the analysis and explanation of religion, as one of the most complex cultural phenomena, should include a division of religion into 'the constituent parts,' involving basic cognitive, psychological and biological terms (Taves, 2009, p. 5).

The priority of experience in understanding religion had also influenced the concept of mysticism. Scholars of mysticism have criticized this one-sided and limited approach to mysticism. Bernard McGinn has suggested that not only the God-human encounter, i.e., experience, but also everything which prepares and directs this encounter and all that comes after it is mystical and should be taken into consideration (McGinn, 1991, pp. 8-10). Ninian Smart distinguishes between various 'aspects' of mysticism: 'the experiences themselves, the paths or systems of contemplative techniques often associated with them, and the doctrines that arise from mysticism or are affected by it' (Smart, 2006, p. 442).

Nevertheless, despite the dominance of the constructivist approach in recent studies of Islamic mysticism there is an attempt to analyze Sufism from different perspectives. Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh in his study on practical mysticism in Islam and Christianity has suggested addressing mysticism as both a cultural and personal phenomenon. Applying a comparative approach, he focuses on the internal elements of mystical teaching. As he explains: 'It is clear that an awareness of the relationship between mysticism and its context is important for understanding different mystical traditions. However, contrary to the hard constructivist position, it *is* possible for one to speak of a meaningful category of mysticism' (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2016, p. 8).

In the same way, but on a different subject, Alireza Doostdar, in his study on religious reason and its entanglements with science and modernity, examines contemporary practices in Iran, which can simultaneously be linked with both science and the domain of superstition. Doostdar argues that the religious or mystical should be examined on its own grounds and preconditions, so that it can be rational without being in opposition to modern and being modern as such (Doostdar, 2018, pp. 3-4). Methodologically, I will follow Zarrabi-Zadeh's approach and examine Islamic Sufi practices pointing to both their historical development and mystical elements. This paper will show that the emphasis on personal religious experience as a privileged heuristic space can also be found within the Islamic Sufi tradition. By this it will argue that the Sufi understanding of religious experience includes different elements, whether Islamic doctrinal and practical foundations, or modern Western interpretations.

Religious Experience in Islam

Before focusing on religious experience in Islam it is helpful to notice that the concept of experience as such occupies a special role in Western modernity. Elizabeth Goodstein in her study on boredom mentions changes in the understanding of the subjective experience. She argues that the perception of boredom as a problematic situation, which creates negative consequences, is a modern phenomenon connected with the notion of subjective experience (Goodstein, 2005, pp. 6-10). Goodstein goes further and suggests that modernity should be analyzed not as a historical period but as a history of the development of subjective experience (Goodstein, 2003, p. 12). Harvie Ferguson assumes that if modern framework is based on objective/subjective differentiation an experience can serve as a unifying tool, or as a bridge, for the subjective and the objective (Ferguson, 2000, pp. 1-2). Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh also mentions that without certain alterations and adaptations medieval mystical traditions could not survive and enter modern realities. Among these alterations and adaptations, he draws attention to concentration on the *experiential* aspect of the mystical, where mysticism was mainly defined as a kind of 'experience' rather than a textual sort of exegesis, metaphysics, or theology. The emphasis on experience, psychologization, as well as liberation from theological and metaphysical domains assisted in the survival of mysticism in modern time (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2020, pp. 4-5). The importance of personal experience, along with the idea about the inner self as the ultimate source of spiritual development, influenced

the further spread of Sufism in the West where the poetic and individual aspects of Sufi teachings were emphasized and the political and social structures of Islamic mysticism were downplayed (see Maltabarova, 2022, pp. 176-84).

The concept of religious experience at the end of the twentieth century was rather new for Islamic researchers. The case study of the personal religious experience of Muslims was deficient, making any comparison with other Abrahamic religious traditions problematic (Hermansen, 1985, pp. 134-35). Moreover, wide-spread assumptions about the limited everyday life of Muslims and "the ready-made and scripture-based morality of Islam" resulted in partial studies and interest in such topics as creativity, personhood and emotional modes (Marsden, 2005, p. 8). However, there is no doubt that detachment from everyday life and communication with the divine are present in Islam.

In fact, the Islamic religion is based on personal religious experience of encounter with the divine. The experience of God in Islam, although with different interpretations, can be associated with the term *mi'raj*, meaning a ladder or an ascension, and which is mentioned first of all in regard to the prophet Muhammad (570–632) and his experience of the presence of God. This particular experience is interpreted as the Night Journey consisting of *al-Isra'* and *al-Mi'raj*, which Muhammad took during a single night. As some scholars argue the perception of Muhammad, of Muslim community and religious life was deeply shaped by interpretations and reinterpretations of the prophet's journey to heaven (Vuckovic, 2005, pp. 13-21). During the *al-Isra*, Muhammad traveled to the al-Aqsa Mosque where he led other prophets in prayer. In the *al-Mi'raj*, he ascended to heaven where he greeted the prophets and spoke to God who directly instructed Muhammad on the details of prayer for Muslims (Schimmel, 1985, p. 28). The personality of Muhammad became the tool of religious experience even though Islam is centered around a sacred scripture, and not around the prophet who brought it (Schimmel, 1975, p. 214).

The Islamic religion clearly emphasizes the active participation of the believer in religious life. Even though Muslims believe in one God, angels, holy books, prophets, resurrection, and divine predestination (Esposito, 2002, pp. 5-7), the five pillars (religious duties) of Islam (witnessing, prayer, alms, fasting and pilgrimage) require clear actions. For example, Murata and Chittick examine the meaning of prayer for Muslims (Murata and Chittick, 1994, pp. 11-12), that is central to a life of the believer. From this perspective, it can be assumed that religious experience in Islam is implied in constant (collective and personal)

worship and not in a separate event. The Quran (sacred scripture) and hadith (prophetic tradition) also urge to actions which are connected with the central concept of Islamic faith that is *tawhid* (divine unity and uniqueness). This unity implies a focus on both transcendence and immanence of God (Geaves, 2001, p. 2). In different verses of the Quran, God's goodness is described in various natural events to which humans are obligated to pay attention (Watt, 2014, p. 12). Another important point to underline is that Muslims are required to perform their prayers or any other rituals in such way as if God observes not only their actions but also knows their intentions. This idea is formulated in the concept of *ihsan*, according to which Muslims are supposed to perform religious duties with sincerity in heart and awareness of the divine presence in life at every moment of time (Yaran, 2004, p. 7).

Thus, the first characteristic of the Islamic Sufi perspective on experience of the divine can be connected with consistency in worship.

Sufism

If one considers the above-mentioned concept of *ihsan*, one may assume that early Sufis stressed the importance of the inner religious life and were against the mechanical performance of religious duties. In this regard, it is helpful to outline briefly what Sufism is and who the Sufis are. According to Sara Sviri, Sufism is 'a practical and devotional path that leads to the transformation of the self from its lowly instinctual nature to the ultimate state of subsistence in God – a state in which all blameworthy traits fall away' (Sviri, 2002, p. 196). Alexander Knysh describes Sufism as a complex system and writes about the importance of mystical and ascetical parts of Sufism, the separation of which is misleading since Sufi teachings were historically organically incorporated into the life of Muslims (Knysh, 2017, p. 14). Sufism is a major mystical tradition in Islam formed in the seventh and eighth centuries and based on a sacred scripture (the Quran) and a prophetic tradition (the Sunnah). It was during this period that some individuals appeared who stressed the importance of an ascetic lifestyle and constant praying to God. Around these individuals there formed first small circles of students and followers in Syria and Iraq. During the next stage (by the thirteenth century), these small communities contributed to the emergence of social institutions, or Sufi brotherhoods, which created their own set of practices and manuals. By the sixteenth century, Sufism started to play an important role in Muslim society, influencing political and intellectual thought. This

situation continued until the twentieth century, when Sufi brotherhoods were severely criticized by Islamic reformers as incompatible with progress and modern life realities (Knysh, 2000, pp. 1-4).

In a discussion of the Sufi experience of the divine and Islamic mystical practices, the concept of mystical states (*ahwal*) and stations (*maqamat*) occupies an important place. There are numerous descriptions of mystical states which contributed to the creation of the different lists of spiritual stations in Sufi pedagogical manuals. For example, Abdul Karim al-Qushayri (d. 1074) in his Sufi handbook suggests around fifty mystical stations, while Abdullah Ansari (d. 1089) the author of another famous Sufi treatise provides readers with the list of one hundred stations (Ernst, 2007, pp. 102-103). In this regard, Zarrabi-Zadeh notices that 'the incorporation of stations and states in Sufi texts refers, in fact, to an important characteristic of practical mysticism in their viewpoints, namely, its hierarchical and dynamic feature' (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2016, p. 10). Moreover, the mystic is highly encouraged to experience each of the stations completely to acquire an indispensable experience for further development. However, if the station is completed there is no need to return to it and apply the same techniques to the next station:

> since one passes through successive stages on the mystical path and enjoys different spiritual status therein, the practices one should carry out in a specific stage are not necessarily those one has to perform in the previous or subsequent stages (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2016, p. 10).

There are different lists of stations and there is no strict agreement on their arrangement. It is helpful to give some examples here. According to Carl Ernst, the earliest Sufi description of spiritual stations is a short guidance from Shaqiq al-Balkhi (d. 810), written in the Khorasan region of eastern Iran. This guidance, *the Manners of Worship*, suggests four stations on the way of soul towards God: asceticism, fear, longing, and love. The main idea of the guidance is the development of religious virtues and a righteous life. To give a better understanding of this process there is a description of a person who has reached the last stage, that is love, and consequently succeeded in religious progress:

> You will never meet him when he is not smiling, sweetly and nobly, pure in morals, never frowning, good in company, full of good news, avoiding sins, contradicting liars, never hearing anything except what God loves. One who hears or sees him

loves him, because of the love of God the Mighty and Majestic for him (al-Balkhi, quoted in Ernst, 2007, p. 102).

As one notices, even when speaking about love in the earliest texts Sufis emphasized the meaning of outward behavior, the social element of spiritual development. From this perspective it is problematic to consider religious experience as a single and extraordinary event in the life of the mystic, as compared with, for example, Christian Catholic mystics and their divine ecstasies, or modern romantic interpretations where the emotional part is dominant. Good manners and an active social life can be interpreted as signs of inner work and God's constant presence in a life of the believer. This, however, does not mean that in the history of Sufism there is no place for an intensive personal experience of the divine. The idea about the intensive personal experience of the divine can be analyzed in terms of the concepts of intoxication (*fana*) and sobriety (*baqa*) (Wilcox, 2011, p. 96), which in early Sufi works were difficult to clearly identify since they correlate with other concepts (see Mojaddedi, 2003). Historically, the concepts of *fana* and *baqa* were elaborated in the schools of Khorasan and Baghdad. The difference between these schools can also be explained by the geographical location of these regions: Baghdad, as a continuation of the authoritarian tradition of the Sasanian imperia, and Khorasan, as a rebellion against the Sasanian despotism and later Arabic influence (Graham, 1999, pp. 108-109).

From the perspective of the masters of Khorasan the ultimate aim of the mystical journey was the annihilation of human individuality where human actions are no longer under human control but caused by the divine presence. As a result, the behavior and condition of the mystic can be seen as 'drunk', because he is 'intoxicated' by divine love. According to the school of Baghdad such behavior indicates the fact that the mystic was deluded by his own desires. Moreover, this behavior can be identified as spiritually 'immature' since a Sufi master is not merely a mystic but also a model for other Muslims and must behave according to the norms of Islamic law (Wilcox, 2011, p.103).

Among the most influential masters and advocates of the sobriety school is often mentioned the leader of the school of Baghdad Abul Qasim al-Junayd (d. 910). The doctrine of intoxication was mostly attributed to Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922). Al-Junayd's ideas about the mystical path were socially acceptable. His ideas imply balance and selectivity in religious life. He emphasizes that the believer gets rid of some attributes of self-interest through constant worship and describes three stages of purification:

The obliteration of attributes, characteristics and natural qualities in your motives when you carry out your religious duties, making great efforts and doing the opposite of what you may desire, and compelling yourself to do the things which you do not wish to do.

The obliteration of your pursuit after pleasures and even the sensation of pleasure in obedience to God's behests–so that you are exclusively His, without any intermediary means of contact.

The obliteration of the consciousness of having attained the vision of God at the final stage of ecstasy when God's victory over you is complete. At this stage you are obliterated and have eternal life with God, and you exist only in the existence of God because you have been obliterated. Your physical being continues but your individuality has departed (al-Junaid, quoted in Abdel-Kader, 1962, p. 81).

The famous Sufi author Hujwiri explains that it is necessary to distinguish between two types of 'drunkenness': the first is that one when the mystic is drunk from 'the wine of affection', as a result of the vision of benefits that God gives (good emotions, joy, peace); the second is from 'the cup of love' as a result of the vision of (loving) only God. This type of 'drunkenness' represents real sobriety (Mojaddedi, 2003, p. 9). A good example of this argumentation and of the important idea of the Muslim religious experience is found in the words of the female Muslim mystic Rabia of Basra (d. 801):

O God! If I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine everlasting Beauty (Rabia, quoted in Nicholson, 1989, p. 115).

Rabia of Basra, being the only female saint in the Muslim world, is accepted as a pioneer with the idea of disinterested selfless love for God where a believer can be compared with a lover who is absolutely in love with his beloved (Schimmel, 1975, p. 40). As Margaret Smith notices, Rabia was probably the first Sufi to describe a jealous God – an idea known in the Abrahamic religions as the ultimate prohibition of worship of

something else except monotheistic God (Smith, 1974, p. 108). Rabia makes it clear that she loves only God:

> O Beloved of hearts, I have none like unto Thee,
>
> Therefore, have pity this day on the sinner who comes to Thee.
>
> O my Hope and my Rest and my Delight
>
> The heart can love none other but Thee (Rabia, quoted in Smith, 1974, p. 55).

According to Schimmel, Mansur al-Hallaj is usually depicted as the martyr of Islam par excellence, the perfect lover totally submitted to the divine beloved (Schimmel, 1975, p. 65). The problem of sobriety and intoxication was solved and interpreted by al-Hallaj in such a way that only absolute submission to God leads to union with the divine (Massignon, 1982, p. 274). Al-Hallaj understands this submission as only possible through love. And without love, intoxication cannot take place. Love is the ultimate path to God:

> The calling of love (*mahabba*) calls us to desire (*shawq*), the calling of desire to rapture (*walah*); and the calling of rapture calls us to God (*Allah*)! As for those who feel no inner incentive to answer this calling, their expectation will be frustrated; they waste their time in the deserts of deviation; they are the ones whom God does not think much of (al-Hallaj, quoted in Massignon, 1982, p. 26).

As one notices, for al-Hallaj, love provides both absolute submission and the potential for growth. One can assume that without authentic love human individuality does not develop but can degrade. Moreover, he speaks about passion and desire as necessary parts of religious devotion and also of God's desire to be loved. However, even the most radical ideas, such as Rabia's self-less love or al-Hallaj's passionate love were necessarily based on constant religious worship.

The heart in Sufism, as articulated by Rumi and other mystics, is a vessel that can become illuminated through love and devotion. When the heart becomes a true mirror for the Divine, it is believed to reflect God's attributes and qualities, leading to a profound and intimate relationship with the Creator. The purification of the heart is one of the fundamental goals of Sufism, which involves eliminating negative traits such as arrogance, greed, and pride. Therefore, Sufi interpretations of religious experience include both a personal deep connection with God, i.e., love, and the proper outward manifestations of that love. Based on this one can formulate the second characteristic of the Islamic Sufi

perspective on the experience of the divine and that is the importance of outward behavior, or social importance. The third characteristic is deep inner orientation.

Practices of the Sufi Path

Probably one of the most famous examples of Sufi practices, where the above-mentioned concepts of intoxication and sobriety are involved, is the Mevlevi whirling practice or *sema*. The Mevleviya is a Sufi order in Konya (a city now in Turkey and a former capital of the Anatolian Seljuk Sultanate), which was founded by the followers of the distinguished thirteenth century Sufi-poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273) (Lewis, 2008, pp. 6-7).

Even though the whirling practice existed in the Muslim world much earlier this order was the first to institutionalize whirling (Schimmel, 1975, p. 179). The Mevlevis also gained prominence under the Ottoman Empire and the whirling ceremony was practiced until the foundation of the Turkish Republic (see Can, 2015). In the middle of the twentieth century, it was again permitted to perform each year on the anniversary of Rumi's death, the seventeenth of December (*sheb-i arus*). Although the Sufi whirling practice received global popularity it is only an extension of the more basic practice of *dhikr* (remembrance of God or ritual chant) (Avery, 2004, p. 4).

According to legend Rumi drew attention to the blacksmiths as they were working and he began spinning in a circle, with arms outstretched, attracted by the sound of the hammers. Overflowing with love of the divine Rumi danced and the whirling practice was born (Schimmel, 2001, p. 197). The whirling movement can illustrate a circle of life where birth and death succeed each other and where every atom of existence is part of the divine reality (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2016, p. 139; see also Fakhry, 2004, pp. 215-23). The topic of death and birth can also be found in the special attire of the participants. The white apparel of dancers symbolizes shrouds, the black coats symbolize a tomb, and the high hats represent gravestones. The dropping of the black coats means rebirth and the raised right hand calls upon divine grace while the lowered left hand symbolizes the transfer of this grace to Earth through the human heart (Vitray-Meyerovitch, 1987, pp. 44-46).

In addition to this interpretation there are also interconnected moral and mystical elements. In this dance Sufis purify their hearts from egoism and seek to achieve the divine reality. Despite this deep meaning, the whirling ceremony generated controversy

due to the integration of music and dance into religious worship. The instant effect of *sema* is a trance-like state of ecstasy but the ultimate goal of the performance is to listen to the soul which 'speaks' with God and is totally immersed in this process (Lewisohn, 1997, pp. 27-28).

Another important Islamic practice, already mentioned above, is *dhikr*, which is defined as 'the act of reminding, then oral mentioning of the memory, especially the tireless repetition of an ejaculatory litany, finally the very technique of this mention' (Gardet, 1965, p. 223). It should be emphasized that the remembrance of God, in a form of the obligatory daily prayers, is the duty of all Muslims not just Sufis. As Raudvere argues, *dhikr*, being strongly connected with Sufi institutions, may vary structurally depending on the social and political circumstances and has a potentiality to be a united source for various Sufi communities in the past and present (Raudvere, 2002, pp. 171-72).

Early Islamic mystics emphasized that the names of God should be recited constantly day and night, alone or among people, loudly or silently (Ernst, 2007, p. 92). *Dhikr* can take various forms ranging from silent contemplation to vocal repetition of phrases or prayers. The most common forms of *dhikr* include the recitation of *La ilaha illallah* (There is no god but God), *Subhanallah* (Glory be to God), *Alhamdulillah* (Praise be to God), and *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great). These phrases, which reflect key theological truths of Islam, are not merely recited mechanically but are meant to be absorbed with full consciousness and devotion bringing the practitioner closer to the divine presence. The practice can be done individually or in a group, often within a Sufi community, which emphasizes the collective power of spiritual remembrance. There are some requirements for ritual purity, sincerity and gesture, which were further developed in the rules of the Sufi orders (Maltabarova, 2022, p. 242).

The Sufi understanding of the practice of remembrance of God points to the requirement to include the spiritual process in everyday life. This idea was particularly elaborated in the Naqshbandi Sufi circles as complete proximity to and focus on God (Persian: *khalwat dar anjuman*), when perfect concentration on the divine is expected both in a crowd and in solitude (Schimmel, 1975, p. 243). This act of remembrance plays a fundamental role in Sufi spiritual life serving as a tool to purify the heart and bring the seeker into direct experience with the divine. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr notices: 'Dhikr is a means of centering the mind and heart on God, which eventually leads to the realization of God's presence in all aspects of life' (Nasr, 1991, p. 64). For Sufis, the heart is seen as a mirror that reflects divine light when it is purified by *dhikr*. Regular repetition

of divine names helps to remove the impurities of the soul such as arrogance, pride, and selfishness, and creates a vessel capable of receiving divine light. As Nasr explains, 'The purification of the heart through dhikr is the first step toward realizing the divine presence in one's life (Nasr, 1991, p. 68).'

Moreover, *dhikr* is closely tied to the idea of spiritual ecstasy. When practiced with intense focus it can lead to states of deep mystical experiences where the boundaries between the self and God begin to dissolve. Rumi's poetry often describes how *dhikr* brings the seeker closer to a state of divine intoxication where the practitioner forgets their own existence and becomes one with God. This state of intoxication is considered an important stage on the way to the ultimate goal of the Sufi path, that is the annihilation of the self. In Sufi teachings the ego (or *nafs*) is seen as the primary obstacle to experiencing God. The process of annihilation involves surrendering the self, letting go of attachments to the physical world, and allowing the divine presence to fill every aspect of one's being. As a result, the seeker reaches a state of *baqa* where their identity is no longer separate from the divine (Nasr, 1991, p. 74).

Muraqaba (meditation) or Sufi meditation, involves focused contemplation, often guided by a spiritual master. This practice helps the practitioner to move beyond the physical and mental distractions of everyday life and attain a deeper awareness of the divine presence. In Sufism the guidance of a spiritual master or sheikh is crucial. The sheikh is a figure who has attained a high level of spiritual realization and helps to guide the seeker along the mystical path. The relationship between the sheikh and the disciple is often viewed as one of deep spiritual connection with the sheikh acting as a mirror to reflect the seeker's inner state and provide guidance in their pursuit of divine union (Nasr, 1991, p. 61).

Religious experience in Sufism is rooted in the belief that God is present in all things and through constant devotion and spiritual practices one can encounter God's presence directly. This is contrasted with the more external, legalistic practices of mainstream Islam. Nevertheless, Sufism involves both outward and inward dimensions. The outward practices such as, for example, constant prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage, serve as tools to discipline the soul while the inward practices aim to polish the heart, as a mirror, preparing the seeker for an experience of divine love and presence (Nasr, 1991, p. 14). As Knysh writes, early Sufis established their approach through special behavior: they allegorized, intensified, and internalized traditional morals which Muslims are supposed

to practice every day. As a result, they went to extremes in the performance of religious duties (Knysh, 2017, p. 26). Therefore, Sufism emphasizes direct personal experience as a journey of love and longing which may resonate with modern Western interpretations of experience. However, this journey is strictly based on the performance of religious duties and practices that purify the heart, focus the mind, and surrender the ego.

Conclusion

This article has examined the limitations of the Western conceptualization of religious experience particularly when applied to non-Christian traditions like Sufism. The notion that personal experience is central to all religious traditions has long shaped the academic study of religion especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, this approach oversimplifies the complexities of religious practices outside of the Western context. Sufism serves as an important case study to demonstrate how the Western framework fails to capture the multifaceted nature of Islamic religious experience. The following characteristics of the Islamic Sufi perspective on communication with and experience of the divine were identified: consistency in worship, the importance of outward behavior or social importance, and deep inner orientation. It should also be noted that this experience is possible if the negative traits of ego are eliminated. In other words, the goal of Sufism is not a short-term incomprehensible ineffable experience but the annihilation of the human ego. As one may assume, there is no contradiction between the importance of outward behavior and deep connection to God. It is rather one step further, continue a normal life or completely seclude yourself with God. The rich history of Sufism provides examples of both approaches.

Through a detailed examination of Sufi practices, we have seen that religious experience in Sufism is not merely a subjective and personal phenomenon. Rather, it is deeply intertwined with both the theological teachings of Islam and the practical methods employed by Sufis in their pursuit of the divine. Sufis understand religious experience more than just an individual encounter with the divine – it is a communal and doctrinally grounded process that is shaped by centuries of tradition, spiritual guidance, and cultural context. Personal experience of the divine was described by Sufis in terms of mystical stages and states. In their attempts to be in proximity to God Sufis developed a range of techniques including, for example, *dhikr* which is supposed to bring the mystic into a

certain condition. However, it would be misleading to emphasize the primary importance of this condition for Sufis. Because for them *dhikr* is not just a practice but a way of life; a constant state of remembrance that permeates all moments turning the ordinary into the extraordinary. As Nasr notes, 'To live in a state of dhikr is to be constantly in God's presence, regardless of external circumstances' (Nasr, 1991, p. 74). This continuous practice shapes Sufi worldviews imbuing daily activities with spiritual significance and making the practitioner aware of God's presence in every aspect of existence.

By recognizing the continuity of the Islamic conception of religious experience this article has also challenged the assumption that religious experience, as understood in the Western tradition, is universally applicable. Sufism offers a compelling counterpoint to the individualistic, experiential model that dominates Western discourse. It underscores the importance of situating religious experience within its proper social, cultural, and theological context rather than attempting to impose an external, generalized framework. Ultimately, this article highlights the richness and depth of Islamic perspectives on divine experience. As scholars continue to engage with non-Western religious traditions it is crucial to adopt more nuanced and culturally sensitive approaches that respect the unique qualities of each tradition. The study of religious experience may therefore evolve to incorporate diverse viewpoints, ensuring that it remains an inclusive and meaningful field of inquiry.

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Digital Druidry:

An investigation into the development, nature and significance of online ritual as religious experience in contemporary British Druidry.

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Abstract

The paper considers the experiences of religious or spiritual Druids in the UK during the lockdown of 2020-21 caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It will examine the early attempts to deal with what was initially thought of as a very temporary situation, and how ways of meeting, communicating and performing ritual online became more sophisticated as the lockdown continued. The role of the internet in building and maintaining community will be discussed, suggesting that the rapid developments in technology brought people into Druidry who had previously been excluded or isolated. It will examine the limitations inherent in online ritual as well as the advantages, and the ways in which ritual evolved to accommodate the strengths and weaknesses of the internet. The paper will conclude that the developments that took place during the pandemic, and have continued at an unprecedented pace since, have significantly and permanently changed the way in which Druids experience ritual, community and the sense of the sacred.

Keywords: Druidry; Online Ritual; Covid-19; Community; Digital Religion

1. Introduction: What is religious Druidry in modern Britain?

In modern Britain there are, broadly speaking, three distinct groups of people who identify themselves as 'Druids'. All of these take their inspiration from the description by Caesar and other classical authors of the Iron Age: Druids as natural philosophers, judges, arbitrators and peacemakers among the Celtic tribes (Koch, 2003). The first of these groups is built upon the fraternal model of Free Masonry (Hutton, 2011, pp. 132–133). The second group arose from the Celtic Nationalism and need for a distinct sense of identity that followed the formation of the United Kingdom in 1707. This led to the establishment of the *National Eisteddfod* in Wales as a way of preserving and encouraging the use of the Welsh language in music and poetry (Hutton, 2011, p. 266). The third group is often referred to as spiritual or religious Druidry as it is this group that has

developed Druidry into a spiritual path, with the other two forms of Druidry consciously eschewing any involvement with either politics or religion. (Uzzell, 2023, pp. 47–48), It is with the third of these groups that this paper is concerned and the term 'Druid' will be used throughout to refer to people in modern Britain for whom Druidry is a spiritual path.

Most Druids reject the idea of Druidry as a religion completely, as they associate 'religion' with the concept of hierarchy, dogma and control, which they consciously reject; furthermore, Druidry encompasses a wide range of religious identities from Pagan to Christian. Many Druids prefer to understand Druidry in terms of a spiritual path, a life-style or a way of looking at the world (Uzzell, 2023, pp. 99–102). However, while they may reject the label of 'religion', modern Druidry none-the-less uses much of the same language as religion. Druids often wear robes and engage in ritual, liturgy and ceremony designed to connect them to Nature, often personified as The Goddess, or Mother Earth, and with land spirits, Ancestors, and gods. In a groundbreaking article, Mallory Nye (2000) suggested that while 'religions' have traditionally been studied as if they were bounded and monolithic, this does not, in fact accurately describe the ways in which people behave and that religion is more concerned with what people do than with what they 'believe', which is often fluid, and rarely rooted in the official teachings of any one religion. In fact, he suggested that religion operates more like a verb than a noun and that it is appropriate to describe people taking part in ritual behaviour as 'religioning'.

Phillip Shallcrass (Greywolf), the Archdruid of the British Druid Order (BDO) defines Druidry as 'What Druids do' (2023, p. 13), rather than as a set of beliefs or fixed practices, and if we look at Druidry in these terms, rooted in a shared set of ritual and ceremony, and as a common way of looking at the world rather than as a set of dogmas that people are expected to accept, then Druidry fits Nye's idea of 'religioning' very well, making it appropriate to speak of 'Religious Druidry'. It is of course, an oversimplification to speak of modern British Druids as a single unified group. Druids may be members of one or more orders, each of which has a slightly different 'flavour' and way of thinking; or they may be solitary practitioners. The largest Druid order in Britain is the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD) which has its origins in the Universal Bond. This was a spiritual group that was active at the turn of the twentieth century and was influenced by contemporary occult organisations such as the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Movement. OBOD Druidry tends to draw on psychotherapeutic ideas and methods in its teachings and has a global outlook, with members all over the world. The British

Druid Order (BDO) by comparison seeks to reconnect to the ancient ancestral shamanistic religions of pre-Christian Britain[1]. Both OBOD and the BDO offer correspondence courses for members. The Druid Network (TDN), by comparison, does not publish correspondence courses but seeks to provide a free resource for people wanting to find out about Druidry on its website. TDN gained charitable status as a religion in 2010; the only Druid order to have done so. The Anglesey Druid Order (ADO) is unique in that it carries out much of its ritual in Welsh and is deeply rooted in the mythology and landscape of Anglesey. Druids see themselves as people who are deeply connected to nature and the Ancestors, who may venerate gods or spirits and may believe in the Otherworld. They are concerned with creativity and the *Awen*[2] through the Bardic arts of music, poetry and storytelling, as well as with learning, wisdom and scholarship, and the quest for social justice.

This paper is concerned with the ways in which Druids adapted their usual ceremonies and ritual activities during the Covid-19 lockdown so that they could be conducted online. I will argue that initially, in the early days of the lockdown, Druids simply tried to replicate the rituals that they usually performed together in a virtual setting, with varying degrees of success, due to the limitations of the technology. However, as time passed, and Druid groups gained more experience of what could and could not be achieved online, a new form of praxis and ritual awareness started to develop, which took advantage of the unprecedented speed with which new communication technologies were developing. This trend has continued in the post-Covid world alongside a return to face to face ceremony in a way that has deepened and enriched Druid ritual experience and ultimately led to a new way of 'doing Druidry'. In order to understand the various ways in which Druids sought to adapt their rituals to an online setting it is first necessary to examine what Druid ritual and other communal activity looks like under more usual circumstances. In the next section I will describe a typical OBOD ritual, as well as the thinking and intention behind it, as well as a brief look at the Druid camps and festivals that would take place during a typical year.

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[1] Importantly, the BDO does not claim an unbroken line of tradition back to the Iron Age Druids but does draw influence from what can be known of them and seeks to connect to the landscape and spirits in a similar way them.

[2] *Awen* is a Welsh word, which can be broadly translated as 'flowing'. It is used in Druidry to describe poetic or creative inspiration, which can be seen as having an otherworldly source.

2. Creating sacred space: Druid communal ritual

Many Druids belong to a local Grove or Seed Group[3], which may meet socially, and also hold ceremonies to celebrate the seasonal festivals of the Wheel of the Year[4], and, often, the full moon, where the central concern of the ritual is likely to be with peace. Meetings are usually held outside where possible, and while some are restricted to members of the order concerned, many are open to anyone who is interested and who comes in goodwill.

One example of a typical OBOD ceremony that I attended prior to lockdown was held by the Coventina Grove in the North of England and took place at Dilston Physic Garden which the group had permission to use and in which they had constructed a circle, marked out with small stones and suitable for a group of around thirty participants. This particular ceremony was to celebrate the festival of Samhain[5]. Having met in a wooden building on the site prior to the ceremony for a short talk and meditation, participants donned their ritual robes as the light faded and processed to the circle. A small fire had been lit in the centre and the Druids entered the circle, walking in a 'deosil' direction (with the sun, or clockwise) pausing in the East to give a salutation to the sun. The Herald then announced the start of the ceremony. Those present took three deep breaths, thinking of their connection with the land, the sea, and the sky. These are a recurring feature of Celtic cosmology, on which oaths were often sworn according to Classical authors, and they continue to feature prominently in the Medieval sources of Wales and Ireland (MacLeod, 2018). For many, these reflect the celestial or heavenly realm, the earth on which humans live, and the Otherworld or Underworld, represented by the sea.[6] Following this, the Druid tasked as the Peace giver crossed the circle to face each of the four directions, declaring 'May there be peace in the North' repeated for each

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[3] A 'Seed Group' within OBOD can be formed by any member, while a Grove must contain at least two members at the Druid grade.

[4] The Wheel of the Year is a system of eight seasonal festivals that is celebrated my many modern Pagan traditions. While each of the individual festivals is ancient, the Wheel of the Year itself was first introduced into Wicca and Druidry in the 1950s.

[5] Samhain is one of the Wheel of the Year festivals, which falls at around the time of Hallowe'en. In Druidry and other forms of Paganism it is associated with the honouring of Ancestors, both ancient and recently departed.

[6] In Medieval Irish sources the place of the dead was often associated with an island in the west, and Manannan Mac Lir, a deity associated with the sea, also functions as a psychopomp.

direction. Finally, all present responded, 'May there be peace throughout the whole world'.[7]

Following this, those present united in saying the Druid Prayer, given below, which is used in most Druid ceremonies, and which embodies concerns often espoused by modern Druids, such as social justice.

> *Grant, O Spirit/Great Spirit/God(s)/Goddess(es), thy protection,*
>
> *and in protection, strength,*
>
> *And in strength, understanding,*
>
> *And in understanding, knowledge,*
>
> *And in knowledge, the knowledge of justice,*
>
> *And in the knowledge of justice, the love of it,*
>
> *And in the love of it, the love of all existences,*
>
> *and in the love of all existences,*
>
> *The love of Spirit/Great Spirit/God(s)/Goddess(es) and all goodness.*

The word '*Awen*' was then chanted three times, with the voices of participants 'cascading' around the circle; people joining in in turn so that there is a 'wave' of sound moving around the circle. The next part of the ritual is common to many forms of Paganism. A circle was cast by being traced in the air in a deosil direction using a sword although a staff or wand is also often used. The circle was then blessed with water and fire, carried around the circle and offered to each participant. A participant standing in each of the cardinal directions then 'called the Quarters', invoking the characteristics traditionally associated with each direction and asking for their blessings on the ceremony. The spirits of the local place were also greeted and invited to be present during the ceremony. In OBOD, the North is usually associated with the element of earth and so the physical world and the senses, the Midwinter and Midnight and, often, the dead. The East is associated with dawn, the spring, the element of air and the intellect; South is associated with midday, summer, the element of fire and ambition or passion, and the West is associated with twilight, the autumn, the element of water and the emotions. It may also,

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[7] This takes a slightly different form in other orders, most notably the Anglesey Druid Order, where this is done in Welsh three times. In translation the first of these is: 'The truth against the world, is there peace?' The response each time is '*Heddwch*' which goes beyond the English noun 'peace' being closer in translation to 'May there be peace' or 'there will be peace'.

for some, be associated with the dead. There are also particular animals associated with the Quarters, the Bear of the starry heavens in the North; the Hawk of Dawn in the East; the Stag in the heat of the chase in the South and the Salmon of Wisdom[8] in the West.

Following this, the main business of the ritual began. On this occasion, the Ancestors were invited to join the living in the circle, 'entering' though a gate formed in the Northwest. People then spent some time in their company, eating bread dipped in salt and honey and drinking wine. The remainder of the food and drink was given as an offering to the dead by being placed in the central fire. Participants were reminded of the debt of gratitude owed to those who had gone before, and the importance of being worthy ancestors to those still to come. Time was given for people to remember anyone that they had lost, particularly during the past year and then a Druid wearing a veil and representing the Cailleach[9] walked around the circle in silence taking a slip of paper from participants on which they had written things that they wished to leave behind in the coming year. These were placed into a cauldron before being burnt in the central fire. Finally, the Ancestors were invited to leave, returning to the Otherworld with love and thanks. The ceremony took place in increasing darkness and the dramatic and emotional impact was significant. There was a hush and a sense of anxious expectation as the Ancestors were invited into the circle and the 'Cailleach' was an imposing presence. The ceremony now entered its final stage, with the Druids present joining hands to say the Druid Oath:

> *We swear by peace and love to stand, heart to heart and hand in hand.*
> *Mark, Oh Spirits, and hear us now, confirming this, our sacred vow.*

This was repeated three times, followed by more cascading *Awens*. The ceremony was then drawn to a close with the words:

> *It is the hour of recall. As the fire dies down let it be relit in our hearts.*
> *May memory hold what eye and ear have gained.*

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[8] The salmon is associated with wisdom in a number of Medieval stories from Wales and Ireland from which Druids draw inspiration.
[9] The Cailleach is a figure from Scottish and Irish mythology, typically seen as an old woman who represents winter and death.

The circle was then uncast in the opposite direction to that in which it was cast (widdershins, or anti-clockwise) and the Quarters thanked and closed. The ceremony closed with the words:

> *I declare this ceremony to be closed in the apparent world.*

> *May its inspiration continue within our beings.*

The participants then returned to the wooden building where they spent some social time and shared food. While most Druid ritual follows this basic pattern, there are some small variations between the different orders, or purely due personal preference. For example, some Druids prefer not to use a sword in ritual as they believe this does not fit with the centrality of peace to Druid thought. There are also variations in the words used in the ritual. Some groups might address particular deities (generally from a Celtic pantheon) during the ritual while others do not. Many groups use the framing ritual described above but might write the specific content used for the seasonal rituals so that there is variety each year.

In the UK, almost all Druidic ceremony takes place within a circle cast for the purpose. This is regarded as a sacred space, removed from the quotidian world. In some groups within both Druidry and wider Paganism the circle is seen as 'between the worlds' or 'between past and future'. The degree to which the circle is believed to be literally removed from the 'ordinary' world and located in an 'other' or 'inner' world will vary from Druid to Druid. For many, perhaps in contrast to Wicca, the circle is very much located in the physical world, being connected to the physical landscape in which it is set, as well as to the other beings in the area, human and otherwise. For many, the demarcation of the circle is not so much intended for protection, or to remove it from the apparent world, as to create a psychological 'head space' in which people can detach themselves from everyday concerns and worries and focus on the ceremony.

What is clear, regardless of the interpretation, is that the circle is intended to function as liminal space. Van Gennep (1904) proposed that many rituals involving a change of status involved three stages: a period of separation; a liminal 'in between' period and a period of reintegration to society with a changed status. The 'liminal' is taken from the Latin *limen*. Meaning a threshold. The liminal phase was further explored and developed by Victor Turner, who argued that the phase is defined by being in the condition of being

neither one thing or the other, 'betwixt and between' as he puts it (1967). The idea has since been extended in popular usage to refer to any occasion or space that can be seen as 'neither one thing nor another' out of step with the quotidian, and in which transformation can take place. Many Druids self-consciously use the language of liminality to describe what they are doing when they create ritual sacred space, for example through the casting of a circle; and it is clear that for many, the ritual circle represents a liminal time and space in which the extraordinary is to be expected, and the usual rules, particularly with regard to interaction with the 'other' are suspended or re-written.

This somewhat lengthy description of normative Druidic ritual has been necessary in order to address the question of what happens when these rituals are taken out of the 'real' world and into a space that exists exclusively online; a new and entirely different kind of 'liminal space'. Before turning to that question, we will consider another kind of 'sacred space' in which Druids may experience the other or the divine in a particularly intense way.

3. Sacred 'tribal' spaces

In addition to their personal practices or activities with a local grove, many Druids also attend national camps or festivals. These may be run by particular orders (such as the White Horse Camps which were, for many years, run by OBOD) or might be more generic, such as the annual Druid Camp in Gloucestershire. Even where camps are run by a specific Druid order, they tend to be open to all Druids and usually to others with a genuine and respectful interest.

In his discussion of Druid festivals and camps in the early years of this century, Letcher suggests that it is in such spaces that 'Druidry' is created for many modern practitioners: 'It is through these gatherings, more than through the correspondence courses, that the sense of a Druidic identity is created; it is where vernacular Druidry emerges' (Letcher 2001, p.45). Events such as these could be understood in terms of liminal space-time, in which people spend time away from the quotidian in ways that allow them to view both their 'everyday' selves and their assumptions about the world from a distance that allows for the possibility of change. Letcher mentions that such occasions may be deeply emotional as people 'come out' as Pagan for the first time, meet people they would not usually come into contact with, and perhaps even experience camping and outdoor life

in a way that they have not done before. Some people even meet their life partners at such events. Such camps 'enable or encourage the sort of experimentation with identity characteristic of the neo-tribe (Maffesoli, 1996), and more specifically of alternative spiritualities.' And allow people to 'engage in dialogues with other ways of being and free themselves, if only temporarily, from established patterns.' (Letcher 2001, p.135, p.141).

It could, however, be questioned whether such events are truly liminal. Turner himself argued that truly liminal states are possible only in traditional societies. Post-Industrial Western societies rather experience 'liminoid' events that are more properly categorised as 'leisure', a concept that is unique to the Industrialised West. Such events, which might include music festivals, sporting events and even holidays, do indeed represent time spent outside the societal norm, but differ from liminal times and spaces in that they do not involve a change in status, and are not truly transformational of either individuals or society (Turner, 1974). The question then, is one of the extent to which Druid camps and large-scale gatherings could be said to be genuinely transformative. While sporting events or music festivals might succeed in creating a feeling of communitas (Turner, 1996, p. 132), they differ from Druidic festivals in that they lack a spiritual and ritual component. Druid gatherings engage with questions of identity and ontology through discussion and through performative ritual. This allows the potential for a truly transformative element.

Douglas Ezzy has made a study of an Australian Pagan festival which deliberately set out to be uncomfortable and provocative in the ways in which it used ritual to force participants to engage with issues relating to both their sexuality and their mortality. Through confrontation of their fears and a direct engagement with issues that are often avoided in 'normal' society, many reported that they had experienced genuine transformation that impacted their lives and their sense of identity long after the end of the camp (Ezzy, 2014). While British Druid gatherings are generally (although not always) less provocative than this, the intensive engagement with ceremony and, often, ritual drama, can have an equally transformative effect, making such events more complex than simple 'leisure' activities. Also, there is often a strong ecological element involved in the teaching and ritualising, which in some cases leads to Druids engaging in 'Green' politics or environmental protest and campaigning, meaning that the 'ripple' effect spreading out from such events could be seen to have, over time and even if only on a small scale, a

transformative effect within wider society. For these reasons, I would suggest that it would not be unreasonable to see these events as genuinely liminal.

Letcher uses the term 'heterotopic' to describe Druidic gatherings (Letcher 2001, p.131). 'Heterotopia' is a word first used by Foucault to describe places that are 'other' to the norm. They are disturbing, countercultural and transformative (Foucault, 2001). To Foucault such places are often those to which the 'undesirable' elements of normal society are consigned; places such as prisons and brothels. It is not in quite this sense that Letcher uses the term, but more in the sense of spaces that are 'dangerous' to established society in that they allow free thinking that is unconstrained, or at least less constrained by societal norms. This is, I think, less true now than it was when Letcher's research was carried out in the late 90s; many of the same people still attend the events, but they are now older, and often more resigned to conventional lifestyles. However, there is still a strong current of radical politics, counter cultural thinking and a refusal to accept the norms of Neoliberal Capitalism, which means that the term heterotopic continues to be at least somewhat appropriate. Letcher further associates the idea of the heterotopic with Hakim Bey's concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). These are times and spaces outside of the quotidian that are, by their very nature, acts of rebellion against the status quo. Bey also refers to them as 'Pirate Utopias'. They represent times and spaces of 'peak experience' and are, by their very nature, transient and temporary, outside the norms and rules of society. Bey, an anarchist philosopher, suggests that change is brought about not by revolution, which historically always fails in that a repressive 'state' is restored, but by a series of TAZs in which the order can be temporarily disrupted and new ways of being experimented and 'played' with, leading to genuine and lasting transformations in individuals which can, in turn, seep into wider society (Bey, 2003).

Letcher does not fully adopt the concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone, arguing that Druid gatherings could not be described as 'autonomous' in any meaningful sense, since they are dependent on wider society for their existence, in terms of catering, electricity and other amenities. Rather, he suggests that a Druid Camp could be described in terms of a Temporary Tribal Zone, (TTZ). Thus, a single heterotopic space may contain one or more TTZs, which are ordered according to the rules and conventions of the particular neo-tribe. Within a Druid Camp there might be fewer separate TTZs than there might be at, for example, a music festival; however, there

might be several different orders present, each with a slightly different habitus. In addition, the leaders or organisers; the performing musicians, workshop leaders, caterers and security staff (often referred to collectively at Pagan events as 'The Dagda') may each constitute a separate TTZ.

The Camp then becomes a 'temporary spatial arrangement of a neo-tribe or neo-tribes, the 'temporary tribal zone' within the heterotopic spaces that large gatherings provide' (Letcher 2001, p.131). In this environment, he argues, strong emotional bonds and a neo-tribal identity are formed. It is difficult to envisage a situation is which the edgy and anarchic atmosphere that can be experienced at a festival could be reproduced online, but there is a sense in which it is possible to see how a TTZ might materialise under these circumstances, particularly at a time when people are becoming increasingly comfortable with online interaction and no longer find it as alienating and disorientating as they once did.

4. 2020: The year everything changed

In a typical summer many British Druids would be attending various camps, gatherings, festivals and workshops; renewing and forging friendships and 'tribal' connections and taking part in rituals, discussion groups and bardic performances. The summer of 2020, however, was far from a typical summer. From March the UK, along with much of the rest of the world, was in a greater or lesser degree of lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This meant that all the events that were due to take place were either cancelled or moved online. In some ways Druids, along with other religious communities, could be said to be lucky that the pandemic happened at a time when the technology was such that it was possible to maintain a ritual and community life online; indeed, the pandemic acted as a catalyst, encouraging the rapid development and improvement of the social media platforms and conference technology that many rely on to maintain social and community connections. There were many Druidic online communities even before the onset of the pandemic, with dozens of Facebook pages and groups devoted to the various aspects of Druidry, as well as private groups for the members of various orders. For many, including those who prefer to practise alone, and those who live in areas where there are not many other Druids to connect with, these groups are their main form of community making, and friendships are formed, often across the world. In this way Druidry has become a genuinely international community.

During the summer of 2020, all of this, of course, continued. However, a largely new phenomenon of online events also developed, seemingly overnight. For people such as myself, living in the Northeast of England where Druidic events have always been sparse; and with limited financial resources for travel and accommodation, this had the rather counter-intuitive effect that I actually attended many more events than I would ordinarily have been able to. For me, this began at Beltane (1st May) the traditional beginning of summer. Every year, a fire festival is held at the hill of Uisneach in Ireland, where a beacon is lit on a hill to celebrate *Bealtaine* (Beltane). Traditionally people travel from all over the world to be present at the festival, but as this was not possible, the lighting of the fire was instead livestreamed on the Uisneach Facebook page (Uisneach, 2025). While this was obviously a very different experience to being there in person, it did make it possible for far more people to attend than would usually have been able to make the journey to Ireland; and as a drone was used to give a bird's eye view of the beacon, it could be said that visitors had a greater than usual sense of perspective on the event. For me personally, as one of the many who would not usually have been able to attend the event in person, there was also a great feeling of community, and of being a part of something greater than oneself, which was especially welcome at a time characterised by isolation and separation.

This sense of community within Druidry (and Paganism more widely) was maintained through much of the lockdown in a number of ways, one of the more notable being the livestream Facebook concerts held every few weeks by Damh the Bard[10], which drew audiences of up to 1,300[11]. While it is obviously not possible to see the other attendees, the 'chat' function fosters a genuine sense of community and togetherness that has been a major source of comfort for many. Since it draws a truly international audience, it also means that people who would not normally meet in person, unless very occasionally at major Druid gatherings, have the chance to interact. It is not uncommon to see people 'singing along' in the chat function, and Damh encourages this sense of togetherness, by inviting participants to imagine that they are all together in a field or marquee, and to join or raise their hands at appropriate moments. There have even been T-shirts

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[10] Damh the Bard is a well-known musician within the Druidic and Pagan community having released several CDs, including retellings of the Mabinogi. He is also the current Pendragon of OBOD. https://www.paganmusic.co.uk

[11] That is, 1,300 separate Facebook accounts; the number of individuals watching will have been considerably higher.

produced for the 'Lockdown Tour 2020' and another for 2021, engendering, once again, a sense of communitas and of having been a part of something special.

While the feeling is clearly not the same as being at a physical Druidic musical festival, I would suggest that it does create, to some degree, a TTZ, in that there is common understanding of the world, and many people singing along to the songs even in their own homes. A 'normal' way of relating to the world is temporarily suspended and people experience themselves in ways that are more 'tribal' and anti-establishment, as many of the songs are highly critical of a Western materialist understanding of the world. Even now, several years after the last lockdown, the monthly concerts continue, now on You Tube as well, and with a Patreon group that meets regularly. For many, these events are a significant part of what constitutes their Druidic identity, and some have even come into Druidry because of them. This time also saw experimentation with the ways in which the internet could bring Druids together, with online talks, story-telling events and conferences online within Druidry and the 'Druid-adjacent' communities during the summer, including the 'Women in Druidry online conference'[12]. As this would usually have been held in America, moving it to an online format using Zoom enabled a far broader range of people to attend than would ordinarily have been the case, as well as facilitating many speakers from the UK.

5. Cyber space as sacred space?

As well as more conventional events such as these, many Druids also experimented with various ways of conducting ritual online. One OBOD Druid Grove did this during the first lockdown by uploading separate short videos to the members' Facebook page to mark the seasonal festivals. There was a variety of content including members reading poetry and playing instruments as well as the usual leader of the group conducting the ritual in his garden filmed by his wife. This was not entirely successful as there were technical issues uploading many of the videos so that they did not appear at the advertised time, causing some stress and interrupting the flow of the event, meaning that not everyone could watch and 'be together' at the same time as was the original intention. Having said this, it did allow the community to come together on the same evening as usual, and as members were widely geographically dispersed, the online aspect allowed people to 'be there' who would not otherwise have been due to the distances

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[12] http://ynysafallon.com/women-in-druidry-conference-2020

involved; and so, attendance at the seasonal celebrations actually increased. Other groves used different tactics. For example, the *Anderida Gorsedd*, led by Damh the Bard and his wife, Cerri Lee, encouraged members to perform the ritual at the same time, having adapted it to be more easily carried out by individuals. Members then posted photos of what they had done to the members' Facebook page, meaning that members were alone for the rituals but maintained a feeling of community and togetherness.

As the pandemic restrictions extended beyond initial expectations, however, there was a move towards conducting more interactive rituals using platforms such as Zoom, allowing participants to see and speak to each other in real time. My own first experience of such a ritual came at Samhain of 2020, when I took part in an online ceremony using the OBOD liturgy for the Samhain ritual with 'the Grove of the Aether'. This grove was formed during lockdown with the express purpose of taking advantage of the newly developed technology to allow people who did not live close to other Druid groups, as well as those who could not leave their houses due to the Covid restrictions, to take part in group ritual. Members may belong to any Druid order or none, so long as they are in sympathy with the aims and values of OBOD; and they come from all over the world, forming what may well be one of the first international Druid groves. Whilst it was formed as a direct consequence of the global lockdown and need for people to come together online rather than in person, there are currently no plans to wind the group down, and the Grove of the Aether continues to hold seasonal rituals online and has recently started holding a social 'moot' in between ceremonies, to allow members to chat and share songs, poems and even knitting projects. The intention is that this, and other online groves will continue to allow Druids who would not otherwise be able to do so easily to take part in group rituals.

The format of the ritual was that everyone joined with camera and audio to say hello (there were around 22 participants at the first ritual I attended) and then those who were not taking an active part muted themselves and turned off their cameras in order to reduce distractions and free up band width. Participants had been invited to bring wine, bread, salt and honey. Roles had been assigned in advance to different members, so that different people called each of the Quarters, and gave peace to the directions. When someone was speaking, their face filled the screen. At the appropriate time, participants were invited to eat and drink the offerings they had brought, and when the *Awens* were chanted, everyone was unmuted, and a cascading sequence of three *Awens*

was chanted by all present. This was a very different experience to being physically together, particularly with the chanting, as online platforms are not good at broadcasting several voices at once; however, the feeling of chanting together was a very powerful one, and it served to enhance the experience of the ceremony. Also, the fact that people could eat and drink 'together' was a powerful experience, even though there was no actual sharing of food. The inclusion of physical, sensual activities such as lighting candles, eating and drinking enabled a strong feeling of community and belonging and made the ritual itself feel more intimate and powerful. Following the closing of the ceremony, everyone's camera was turned back on, and a traditional *Eisteddfod* was held, with participants volunteering to perform a piece of music, or a poem. Finally, there was a short period of chat before the meeting was ended, itself a very alien feeling as usually following a ceremony people will hang around chatting for quite a while, and drift away over gradually, so the somewhat abrupt ending of the meeting when the screen goes blank can feel like quite a shock.

The circle was cast and uncast by a participant using a sword, who passed it around himself. It is also worthy of note, that there was no correlation between the people calling each of the Quarters and their geographical location. (That is, the person who called the North was not necessarily the most northern person there. Also, one of the Quarters was called by someone participating from America.) This means that the 'circle' that was cast had no existence at all in 'real' space but existed purely in 'cyberspace' and in the minds and imaginations of those 'present'.

This idea of imagined 'space' in the context of online ceremony is also described by Damh the Bard in his blog post *A Different Kind of Samhain* in which he describes the first time the *Anderida Gorsedd* used Zoom to hold a ritual (Smith 2020). He explains how he asked people to close their eyes and imagine themselves in their usual ritual setting. When he cast the circle, he asked them to 'feel' him walking behind them with the sword, and to imagine and describe the view towards each of the Quarters as they were called. In this way, there was a deliberate attempt to connect those present, in imagination at least, to the physical space of the usual ritual site beneath the Long Man of Wilmington. The connection to this specific ritual space may be particularly important since it is an established ancient and magical space in its own right.[13] In these ways I would argue that the ritual space created in cyber space during online rituals using Zoom and other similar

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[13] While the actual age of the Long Man is contested, there is a sense in which this is irrelevant to the affective sense of connection to a re-imagined past that is felt by many who visit the site.

platforms constitutes a heterotopic space in a similar way to the physical spaces created during face-to-face rituals and in festival areas discussed above, although the emotional experience is very different to being physically in a communal space. In some cases, it might not go too far to suggest that online spaces might constitute a TTZ in that the participants will have ritual tools or altars in their rooms or backgrounds that are familiar to the neo-tribe and modes of speech and 'tribal' conventions are used that cumulatively serve to designate the virtual area as tribal space.

6. A virtual Otherworld?

Sometimes, the 'sacralising' of online space goes even further than the invitation to imagine a known physical space. In June of 2020, Philip Carr-Gomm stepped down as Chosen Chief of OBOD after 35 years, and a new Chosen Chief, Eimear Burke was invested. The intention was to have a ceremony of investiture at the OBOD Summer Gathering in 2020 which was to be held in Glastonbury. Obviously, this had to be cancelled. The decision was made to go ahead with the investiture ceremony as an online event. The format chosen was a live Facebook streaming, in audio only, of a pre-recorded ceremony involving the outgoing and incoming Chosen Chiefs, the Scribe and the Pendragon of OBOD. While the recording remains available, and is embedded in the OBOD website[14], the intention was for all members who were able to tune in and so 'be present' at the same time. The main participants, even though their parts had been pre-recorded, were also present at the appointed time, so that the Order was gathered in a virtual space, even though they could not see or hear each other. Members were invited to prepare as they usually would for meditation or practice, and to close their eyes during the ceremony and so to imagine themselves meeting with other members from across the world in an 'Inner Grove'.

The Inner Grove as a meditative tool is well established within OBOD and is often used in the weekly 'Tea with a Druid' online meditations led by Philip Carr-Gomm and other members of OBOD (Tea with a Druid, n.d). Hence the 'Inner Grove' as a tool for meditation is a practice with which many OBOD Druids are familiar and comfortable. The investiture ceremony, therefore, operated on one level as an online ritual, and on

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[14] The recording of the ceremony can be accessed here:
https://druidry.org/people/eimear-burke

another as a collective meditation designed to bring the members together in a sacred space conceptualised as an 'Inner Grove,' which for many is conceived as a 'place' accessible to all OBOD Druids and having at least as much reality as the apparent and material world. Members were invited to meet and witness the transfer of leadership, which took place in a space that was both 'virtual' in the sense of occurring online, and liminal in the sense of being outside of everyday time and space, existing, for many, in an inner plane that is truly 'Other'. The purpose of the ritual was to bring about a very real transformation within the Order, making the space truly liminal in the sense that Turner intended.

The ceremony took place using the usual Druidic format, with those 'present' invited to witness the casting of the circle and to join in with the Druid Prayer and Oath, and with the chanting of the *Awens*. It could be argued that this format, which has a strong esoteric component, holds more emotional and experiential power than the physical ceremony would have had, had it been able to go ahead. It also has more permanence in the sense that it remains accessible online as a resource to which members can return, and which will become a part of the history of the Order. It can be seen then, that during the pandemic, the Druid, as well as the wider Pagan communities innovated in imaginative and creative ways to continue to perform ritual online. The extent to which this was successful could be debated. In one sense, the online rituals allowed communities to continue to meet, so reducing loneliness and isolation. They also allowed for larger and more geographically dispersed groups to meet, allowing for international conferences and rituals. Rituals became more inclusive as the time and expense of travelling to a physical site were dispensed with, as well as potential accessibility issues in sites that were uneven or difficult to reach.

7. Problems with religious experience online

Online rituals, while they may be a means of genuine religious experience for some, are not without their problems. Moving rituals online reduced accessibility for some who did not have the resources or technical ability to access them. Online rituals also, proved difficult for those who were sight or hearing impaired. In many ways, the online rituals worked well to create a sense of shared sacred space, and for activities such as meditation, guided visualisation, and liturgical ritual. However, they worked less well for the more embodied elements such as drumming, singing or chanting. Cascading *Awens*

do not work well online as the technology is designed to project a single voice or sound at a time. Sensory elements that also form an important part of the 'embodied knowing' that is central to the experience of ritual (Scrutton, 2018) are also missing from virtual events. For example, feeling the heat of the fire, hearing the noise of the wind or local wildlife, smelling the incense, tasting mead or other food or drink and physical contact with other Druids are intrinsic parts of most Druid ceremonies and are, of necessity, missing from the online experience.

> It is not just the translation of 3D physicality to 2D screen communication that play a part in the experience of disappointment in zoom for ritual as opposed to meditation and learning etc. The psychical chemistry of being present, in all sensual modes plays a big part, with people reporting missing varied aspects of the physical closeness of a circle. Perhaps participants also miss the subconscious triggers they have internalised to the smells and feel of a group ritual, a tribal feel of belonging and familiarity with both the people and the magic (Harrington, 2021).

Furthermore, many Druidic rituals are highly performative and theatrical. Participants may take on the role of deities for different seasonal rites; there is movement within and around the Circle, with 'gateways' often being formed in a certain direction for people to pass through. Tokens are given to participants to represent the time of year, such as mistletoe at the Winter Solstice or the symbolic action of planting, watering and blessing a seed at the Spring Equinox. In some ceremonies, there is a moment of intimate and personal communication between each person present and a Druid who represents or embodies (depending on personal interpretation) a divinity. This sense of intimacy and immediate embodied involvement is impossible to replicate virtually and for many, this is a fatal flaw in online ritual.

Another issue is that for some Druids, a virtual space can never replace the immediacy and immanent divinity of the natural world. One of the defining features of Druidry is the intention to make a connection with the local landscape and its spirits. It is difficult to see how this could be achieved online. In some of the ceremonies I have attended individual participants have taken their mobile phones or laptops outside in an attempt to feel more connected to place, but there are obvious limitations to this, as signals are often weak, and even when it works well, only one member of the group is grounded in any particular place. For some Druids the use of technology itself is problematic, as the

technological world that gives rise to mobile phones and computers is, in itself corrupt and connected to the reductionist, capitalist worldview that they seek to resist.

8. Do online rituals work?

Another question that Pagans could usefully ask about ritual conducted online is 'Does it work?' What it means for a ritual to 'work' will vary from person to person and from group to group. Within Wicca and Ceremonial Magic, the concept of the *egregore* is widespread. An *egregore* is a spiritual construct arising from a group project or mind. For many, it is a conscious being with agency and the power to bring about a desired effect, and there has been some discussion among practitioners as to whether an *egregore* can be created by a group working online. The *egregore* is an idea that is less common in Druidry, although it is not absent; however, much Druid ritual is concerned with contacting non-human intelligences, be they Ancestors, local spirits or wights, or gods and deities. The question could therefore be raised as to whether these connections can be effectively made online. In the Samhain ritual that I attended, for example, the Ancestors were invited to be present in the circle with the participants and to eat and drink with them. For those who believe that this connection between the living and the dead is established during the Samhain ritual in more than a purely symbolic way, the question of whether the connection can be made in an online ceremony where there is no physical circle for the dead to enter is a pressing one. Ritual and, for some, magic, are constructed using the body, the spirit and the mind. The mind is certainly present in online rituals but the extent to which body and spirit are involved could be, and no doubt will be debated in decades to come. To some extent the effectiveness of online ritual will be decided by its results: does a ritual designed to effect healing, physical or mental, or to protect an area of landscape from the threat of development, or to influence a decision of government have the desired effect? It is far too early for a consensus on questions such as these to have been reached within Pagan communities and debate is likely to be ongoing in the coming months and years. Certainly, no questions have been raised within OBOD over the legitimacy of Eimear Burke's initiation as Chosen Chief because it happened in virtual online space (Although it was 'confirmed' at the next face to face OBOD meeting at the Summer Gathering of 2022).

9. Conclusion

Between August 2020 and September 2021, Manchester Metropolitan University conducted research into the impact that moving ritual onto an online setting was having on a variety of religious communities.[15] Overwhelmingly, the impact was felt to be negative with religious communities feeling the loss of face-to-face contact intensely. I would argue that while this was as true for Druid communities as for any other, pre-existing Druid practices such as guided meditation, and the concept of liminal space and an 'Inner Grove that Druids seek out as a part of their regular spiritual practice have allowed them to engage in online space as sacred and liminal space in a particularly effective way.

For Letcher, writing in 2001, modern Druidry is performed and constructed in physical heterotopic space, such as camps and festivals (Letcher 2001, p.45). While there is a sense in which this remains true, it is also the case in a world emerging from a pandemic that has led to a surge in technology and a huge increase in online ritual and community that Druidry, perhaps increasingly, will be performed and constructed in heterotopic spaces that exist only online. In many ways, the online rituals that have developed over the course of the pandemic have served to conflate the ideas of online 'cyberspace' with liminal 'inner' space that could be equated for many with the Otherworld, or an alternative plane of reality, which is of great importance in many Paganisms as well as to many Druids (Greenwood, 2000).[16] Whilst there is a sense in which this has been true for Pagans since the development of the internet, the changes in technology and the increased familiarity with using social media platforms to create ritual space during the Covid-19 pandemic represent a paradigm shift in the concept of sacred and ritual space, and indeed, in the concept of the Otherworld and what it means to be 'between the worlds' that merits significant future research.

It remains to be seen to what extent the huge surge towards online ritual will continue to influence the Pagan and Druid world in the years and decades following the pandemic. The technology enabling such events will continue to develop, although perhaps not at

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[15] British Ritual Innovation under Covid 19(BRIC-19)

https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/faculties/arts-humanities/research/projects/bric-19 [Accessed 12/5/25]

[16] Druids use many names for this concept, including *Annwn*, *Tir Na Nog* and the Summer Lands, as well as the Otherworld, but the concept remains important.

quite such a bewildering speed. The Covid virus will remain a part of everyday life for decades to come, and for some people it will be a long time before they feel confident again in a crowd, or sharing food in a ritual, if, indeed, they ever do. It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that what it means to engage in Druidry, and to experience the 'other' through it, will be permanently changed by the events of 2020 and 2021. This was the subject of an (online) discussion hosted by the Pagan Phoenix Southwest conference, usually held near Bude in Cornwall, but, like everything else, moved online in March of 2021. The conference organisers hosted a number of Zoom panels, which were then uploaded to You Tube. One of these was a discussion about the future of ritual in a post-pandemic world and featured well known Druids Damh the Bard, Cerri Lee, Penny Billington and Kristoffer Hughes. One of the issues to be raised was that of inclusion.

As discussed above, many people have been able to attend rituals and events online that would usually have been impossible for them due to cost or distance. Penny Billington pointed out that it would be irresponsible, if not immoral of the Druidic community to return to a situation where people who had, briefly, been included were once again marginalised. This meant, she thought, a way of ensuring events that were either entirely online, as well as face to face events; or events that were a mixture of face to face and live. There was also a discussion about the effectiveness and limitations of online ritual, with the interesting point being made that for a grove that usually uses a particular sacred space for ritual (such as the Long Man of Wilmington) there is a connection between the grove and that site and its spirits. Where ritual is to be online, it was suggested that participants visit the site beforehand (separately rather than together) to reinforce that connection, and to explain to the land what was going on. In this way, so far as possible, the connection can be maintained.

There was an acknowledgement that those responsible for organizing rituals need to be aware that people will feel safe at different times with some very eager to get back to the full physicality of hugging, holding hands and sharing food, while others will still be nervous of meeting in groups for a long time. Rituals would therefore need to be organised sensitively and with a care not to exclude those who do not feel comfortable. Damh the Bard suggested that changes might be necessary for some time to come, perhaps dispensing with elements such as holding hands or passing round a drinking horn or chalice, and that perhaps new elements could be added such as people bringing their own picnic food so that communal eating was still an option. There was also an

awareness that there would be an impact on the *Eisteddfod* that typically followed Druid ritual, as people might not be comfortable with singing or chanting together in a close group, even outdoors. Time will tell how far reaching and long lasting such changes might be. As Damh the Bard pointed out, from an animist perspective shared by many Druids, the virus is a living being that is now a permanent part of the network of relationships that Druids form with the wider than human world, and Druids must find ways to live alongside it (*Phoenix Conversations   Druidry and the Pandemic*, 2021).

The online Druid communities continue to evolve and develop. In 2024, OBOD conducted the Mt Haemus Conference[17] for the first time as a combination of online and in person events. The face-to-face conference was held in Glastonbury in October, but there were two online events earlier in the year, which allowed scholars from America and elsewhere to present their papers and for members to discuss them. Also in 2024 OBOD launched The Hearth, an online platform that allows members to meet, to form groups and virtual seed groups and groves, to view online live content such as Tea with a Druid and access Touchstone, the Order's journal. The Hearth continues to develop, with Damh the Bard holding a Zoom meeting following 'Tea with a Druid' where members can meet and chat.

The technology that supports The Hearth would have been unthinkable for an organisation such as OBOD even a few years ago, and has, I suggest, created a 'Tribal Zone' in which to some extent the Inner Grove can come to have a substantial and real presence allowing the virtual and liminal spaces to become almost indistinguishable. It is also probable that as the technology develops even further, and as younger generations come into Druidry, having spent their lives being at home and comfortable in virtual spaces, online rituals will develop in new directions. Already groups are developing strategies for overcoming the limitations of online ritual, with, for example, all participants lighting the same incense or putting the same picture of a sacred space into their background. Meeting online will never be the same as meeting in the same physical space, but as a new 'grammar' of ritual develops around the unique environment of the internet it may be that a new way of experiencing the divine, and a new way of 'Being Druid' begins to emerge.

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[17] Every year, OBOD offers a bursary to a scholar to produce an academic paper on a subject related to Druidry. These are presented at a conference every four years and published as a bound volume every eight years.

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A stranger in a strange land: negotiating supernatural 'fact' and 'fiction' within visions and hallucinations in non-traditional ayahuasca churches

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Abstract

For thousands of years, potent psychoactive potions such as ayahuasca have helped magico-religious practitioners make sense of this life and the next. Although historically confined to indigenous South American communities, Europeans are increasingly consuming ayahuasca to experience (im)possible supernatural realities within immersive hallucinations and visions. Of course, whether these perceptual psychoactive experiences are real or just pharmacological fictions of mind is an acute epistemological concern. With little known about this otherworldly issue, this ethnographic study examines how neo-European ayahuasca church members negotiate supernatural 'fact' and 'fiction' outside of traditional religious, psychological, and philosophical knowledge. Key findings show that while ayahuasca catalyses intense supernatural beliefs, it also leaves individuals epistemologically struggling to cope with the vulnerabilities of their mundane lives and ongoing threat of social stigmatisation. However, with these churches acting as otherworldly 'gatekeepers', new congregants must work to embrace totalising supernatural doctrines or lose access to these fairy tale lands forever.

Keywords: Psychoactive; Ayahuasca; Supernatural; Vision; Hallucination.

1. Introduction

As a species, we seem hardwired to ruminate on what it means to be human within a complex cosmos (Clements, 2017; Stewart, Gapenne and Di Paolo, 2014). While our mundane senses are a key part of this endeavour, we also like to play with what is perceptually possible and explore otherworldly lands through what we consume (Shanon, 2010; Waldstein, 2016). Not surprisingly, this has led to ongoing epistemological questions about the ontological status of supernatural experiences, and epistemically, whether any of what we see might be true. Problematically, modern secular-material scientists generally argue that the supernatural is unreal, and that such experiences are perceptual aberrations arising from an overactive imagination, embodied pathologies, or drugs (Tupper, 2008). Yet, even though researching the supernatural tends to be taboo

(Escolar, 2012; West, 2007), there is little to suggest that it has been epistemologically 'debunked' or that religious experiences are receding in day-to-day life (Saad, 2018). If anything, industrialised Western nations are seeing a resurgence in religious beliefs and supernatural ways of knowing (Araújo, Carillo and Sampaio, 2021; Vallert, 2021).

One such religious area currently receiving much attention is the consumption of the brew, ayahuasca, which is increasingly used to experience supernatural hallucinations and dream-like visions (Dean, 2019). What is particularly interesting about ayahuasca is its ability to overturn long-held metaphysical views, and catalyse new supernatural beliefs (Shanon, 2010). With relatively little known about how these religious aspects are undertaken by neo-ayahuasca groups inside industrialised nations, this ethnography asks: how do new, non-expert congregants negotiate supernatural 'fact' and 'fiction' within non-traditional ayahuasca churches? Helping us understand this question, the literature review starts by examining 'ayahuasca: a potent psychoactive potion' before exploring how individuals experience ayahuasca via 'psychoactive perception'. After describing our ethnographic 'methodology,' we present our 'findings' on how participants became involved with these new, non-traditional ayahuasca churches, as well as how new congregants experience and make sense of the otherworldly nature of ayahuasca, focussing on contexts that lack the scaffolding provided in indigenous ceremonies and more established ayahuasca churches. In the 'discussion and conclusions' we reflect further on how the doctrines of non-traditional ayahuasca churches support congregants in making sense of ayahuasca visions, but also create philosophical and psychological tensions. Finally, contributions to the literature are shown, as well as potential areas for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ayahuasca: a potent psychoactive potion

Throughout recorded history, we have continued to develop intimate metaphysical relationships with psychoactive plants to meet the cultural needs of different times (McKenna, 1999). Simply speaking, psychoactive plants contain natural pharmacological constituents, that when consumed induce altered states of consciousness, and otherworldly ways of perceptual knowing. Although psychoactives remain niche within industrialised nations, there is a growing interest in using brews, herbal mixtures, and

potions such as ayahuasca to transcend the mundane and explore what is possible within otherworldly states of consciousness (Gandy *et al.,* 2022). Unlike many other natural psychoactives, ayahuasca is not a single plant, but is instead a brew composed of *Banisteriopsis caapi* vines (Harris, 2010), and *Psychotria viridis* leaves (Ott, 1994). Linguistically, the name ayahuasca is derived from the Quecha language, with *aya* referring to a dead person, spirit, or soul (Whitten, 1976), and *huasca* meaning vine (Naranjo, 1983). Consequently, ayahuasca means vine of the soul, soul vine or bitter vine (Schultes and Hofman, 1979). Having said this, several other common names exist, including, daime, yage, mii, caapi, and kahi (Naranjo, 1983). Throughout this study, numerous Western terms are at times used such as psychedelic and fairy tale, and while they offer a particular loaded metaphysical perspective, this linguistic framing closely follows the participants' views and descriptions of their ayahuasca experiences.

As an indigenous South American sacrament, ayahuasca has been used for at least two thousand years, typically within magico-religious ceremonies to induce otherworldly states of consciousness, visions, and hallucinations (Ott, 1994). In recent decades however, knowledge of ayahuasca has rapidly spread throughout the industrialised West, helped by spectacular supernatural claims that this brew not only reveals the secrets of the universe, but will cure the sick, and help access otherworldly realms (Holman, 2011). Although ayahuasca has long been positioned as a supernatural potion, secular-materialist science is also showing that not only is this brew generally safe to drink, but that it has therapeutic properties (da Motta *et al.,* 2018). For example, it is increasingly clear that ayahuasca induces heightened states of suggestibility, allowing individuals to rework traumatic memories and develop more positive perspectives within cathartic hallucinations and visions (Bouso and Riba, 2014).

With ayahuasca still undergoing medical research, it is only currently available as an unregulated religious sacrament, meaning that individuals must travel to South American indigenous communities, or consume it within an ever-growing number of European ayahuasca churches (da Motta *et al.,* 2018; Introvigne, Hanegraaff and Folk, 2020). While motivations often vary, most pursue ayahuasca to achieve personal transformation, true knowledge, experience the supernatural, show reality as it really is, and overturn extant metaphysical views of the universe (Jiménez-Garrido *et al.,* 2020). Problematically, though, when we consider that it can take thousands of years to develop rich systems

of knowledge to adequately explain otherworldly phenomena, we should not be surprised that industrialised countries are still struggling to make metaphysical sense of ayahuasca, especially when traditional knowledge is backgrounded (Frood, 2015). Helping us understand more about these aspects, the following section ruminates on psychoactive perception and what we might consider real.

2.2. Psychoactive perception

While our mundane senses allow us to perceive the physical world around us (Stewart, Gapenne and Di Paolo, 2014), supernatural experiences are never far away, whether perceptually real or imagined, particularly when psychoactives such as ayahuasca are close at hand (McKenna, 2004). Upon drinking ayahuasca, hallucinations quickly appear, as our consciousness slips into a waking visionary dream (Chen and Berrios, 1996), and while we can usually open our eyes during these periods, it can be physically and psychologically exhausting to do so, at least until the effects wear off (Domínguez-Clavé *et al.,* 2016). Like a fairy tale, these experiences often take place within a variety of fantastical lands, where magical creatures guide us through painful memories and liberating visions, before a sense of personal transformation and salvation are achieved (Shanon, 2010).

Not surprisingly, there is much epistemological debate about the ontological status of these otherworldly experiences, and whether we should consider them real (Luke, 2011; St John, 2015). Commenting on this, Winkelman (2018, p. 5) argued, do psychoactive experiences 'represent noumena' i.e., 'manifestations of a real transcendent reality, or are they merely phenomena produced by our complex brains' being 'nothing more than dream-like hallucinatory experiences'. Reflecting on this, if ayahuasca is just a secular-material drug, and the supernatural is unreal, then all hallucinations and visions are just distortions of reality (Strassman, 2001; Weil and Rosen, 1993). Having said this, even the unreal can be 'incorporated into knowledge systems' and form a foundation for our rich cosmological tapestries (Messeri, 2021, p. 340). Alternatively, if ayahuasca is more than mundane, it is possible that otherworldly experiences might be veridical accounts of the supernatural (Siegel and West, 1975).

As a third option, we might consider whether a secular pharmacological agent can trigger our biological structures to undertake supernatural functions, and in so doing, look beyond the material and perceive the otherworldly. While we are a long way from elucidating this issue, it is worth considering that 'we are beginning to understand

spiritual experience not as something apart from the physical human but rather bound up with human matter...'. In other words, that 'matter and spirit are no longer seen to be opposed but are indeed mutually related...' (Delio, 2003, p. 43). The challenge, therefore, is to pay attention to how psychoactive brews such as ayahuasca catalyse the perception of religious realities (Newberg, 2010; Prickett and Liester, 2014; Salin and Tanabria, 2017), while also remembering that supernatural experiences are mediated through our environment, personal motivations, and what is believed possible within any culture (Conway and Loveday, 2015; Deeley, 2004; Luhrmann, Nusbaum and Thisted, 2010).

Although beliefs in the supernatural are relatively common (Silva and Woody, 2022), there are often acute epistemological and social issues with otherworldly experiences arising from psychoactives. For example, with the term psychedelic typically being framed as illicit drugs in the industrialised West, few are willing to risk stigmatisation by consuming these products, and even if they do, are unlikely to speak about their experiences (Siff, 2015; Tupper, 2008). Furthermore, the fact that psychoactive supernatural experiences are not commonly shared tends to undermine their epistemic credibility, leaving many to conclude they are just the side effects of a drug. Critically though, the purpose of this study is not to state whether any hallucination or vision is true or false, but rather to examine how individuals negotiate supernatural fact and fiction within their non-traditional churches. Drawing this literature review to a close, the next section details how the research question was answered.

3. Methodology

With the lead author having spent over a decade interacting with European and South American ayahuasca churches, it was clear that this brew can trigger acute epistemological tensions about the ontological status of otherworldly hallucinations and visions. To help understand this issue, this hybrid ethnography (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) was undertaken in several European syncretic ayahuasca churches, where the lead author slowly became a trusted and seasoned insider (Layton, 1988; McCracken, 1998). The decision to work with non-traditional, i.e., non-indigenous churches was pragmatic, allowing a sample of twenty-one participants to be pulled together to answer the research question. Inclusion criteria mandated that (1) no participant had any experience of consuming psychoactives prior to joining their churches, and (2) were within the first three months of their church membership. Participant doubts about whether to continue consuming ayahuasca was not a barrier to inclusion, nor was their motivation

for pursuing this brew. *Table 1* provides the purposeful and anonymised sample of participants that this study was built around (Wengraf, 2004):

Participant characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender:		
Male	11	52
Female	10	48
Age (years):		
18-30	3	14
31-40	7	33
41-50	6	29
51-60	3	14
61-70	1	5
70 +	1	5
Education		
School	5	24
Bachelor's degree	13	62
Masters and above	3	14
Religion		
Christian	8	38
Pagan	13	62
Cultural Christian		
No	0	0
Yes	21	100
Motivation		
Bereavement	6	29
Health	5	24
To see reality as it really is	3	14
To experience the supernatural	7	33

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Looking at table 1, we see a well-educated sample, searching for miraculous cures and supernatural experiences through ayahuasca. Although previous religious beliefs varied, this sample was considered culturally Christian, as all participants had received this form of instruction as children and grown up within social structures influenced by Christianity (Moffat and Yoo, 2019).

Importantly, with all churches being located throughout Europe, but sitting outside of membership of religions such as Santo Daime, União do Vegetal, and Barquinha, they were considered non-traditional as they had no demonstrable links to indigenous peoples, beliefs, or practices. It is also worth noting that these religious organisations were relatively young, as all were less than ten years old, and had less than thirty members each. In this way, the inexperience of these churches created a fertile ground to explore the negotiation of ayahuasca within emerging metaphysical doctrines regarding the mundane and supernatural. Within itself, this is not to suggest that

(pre)theorised Christian themes were not salient in these psychoactive churches, but that unlike in previous studies, ancient indigenous knowledge was rarely drawn on to make sense of psychoactive experiences (Dobkin de Rios, 1972; Luna, 1986), nor was cultural Christianity used to re-interpret indigenous beliefs or practices (Dean, 2019).

3.1. Fieldwork and Data Collection

After securing access to these several churches, the first author (Dean) spent just over one year building in-depth relationships with these samples (Gould, 2006; Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey, 2012), not only in person, but also using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies, such as Skype, WhatsApp, e-mail, and phone calls (Fetterman, 2010; Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016). Ethnographic data collection used participant observation, including interviews, conversations, surveys, diaries, alongside autoethnographic experiences (Schouten, McAlexander and Koenig, 2007). What mattered most was providing ongoing opportunities to collect data, and for the participants to feedback their thoughts and experiences, irrespective of how trivial they appeared at the time. While access to the participants was commonly available, the ayahuasca ceremonies were always off limits to safeguard congregant experiences. Critically, over fifteen hundred pages of transcripts were collected, alongside three hundred pages of fieldnotes, and over four hundred diary pages. This led to a mean number of approximately nine thousand words per participant. To help clarify meaning, body language and vocal intonations were also recorded in relation to what was said.

3.2. Working the Data

After the data was collected, it was transcribed and read several times to create an overall awareness of potential emerging themes (Arnould, 1993; Lindlof, 1995). The initial analysis took place within two days of data collection, with further analyses being carried out after three and six months (Spiggle, 1994). Importantly, content analysis was used to show the frequency of salient themes, with further contextualisation being against our emic understanding, and in relation to the literature (Goodier and Eisenberg, 2006; Kottak, 2006). This process was aided by attention being paid to the different ways that the participants described reality (Foucault, 1974), with 'reflexive pragmatism' (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14) and vignettes highlighting multiple interpretations (Humphreys, 2005). To increase quality, within method triangulation compared findings between

participants and methods (Denzin, 1970). Finally, the participants were debriefed, and summary reports were shown, with further feedback being taken (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

4. Findings

This section answers the research question: how do new, non-expert congregants negotiate supernatural 'fact' and 'fiction' within non-traditional ayahuasca churches? As a starting point, an exploration is made of the participant motivations for 'pursuing a psychoactive potion'. Following this, our attention turns to understanding 'the otherworldly nature of ayahuasca', before finally examining the challenges and approaches used in 'making sense of the supernatural'.

4.1. Pursuing a psychoactive potion

Although psychoactives are ubiquitous throughout the natural world and reasonably accessible within industrialised nations, it must be said that few of us will ever attempt to transcend the limits of mundane perception via a powerful potion. Consequently, this has created a poverty of experiential understanding about psychoactives, and left many enmeshed within a myriad of psychedelic tall tales and stereotypes, as David explained:

> Psychedelics have a bad reputation. Have done for a long time. Even the Bible criticises them. [Pause]. I'd always thought people taking psychedelics are criminals, druggies, or mentally ill. Nobody shows kindness on this matter. Neither did I until recently. Have you heard? Some guys even believe psychedelics trigger demonic possession. Personally, I blame Hollywood for this. But there again, I used to believe a lot of this stuff too. [Pause]. Fate, however, is not without a sense of irony, and I came to understand this as I became a convert to ayahuasca. [Pause]. You don't start taking psychedelics lightly though. Especially when you can lose everyone you care about and your job. Virtually nobody takes them, but everyone has an opinion. The reality is that people have always been terrified of tasting this forbidden fruit.

With psychoactives long being considered 'forbidden fruit', it was not surprising that the participants had spent most of their lives criticising their use and avoiding their

consumption. Against this background, we might imagine that any attempt to overhaul such ingrained negative beliefs would be a fraught act, risking social, financial, and religious condemnation. Helping us understand what motivated these participants to pursue a psychoactive, and break their previous beliefs, Steven argued:

I know what you are thinking. Why would anyone want to take a psychedelic? I mean, I never woke up thinking "I really need to take a psychedelic today." Never happened. It was trickier than that. I was trying to escape my suffering. Searching for answers about the afterlife. [Pause]. A lot of people are searching for their dead relatives. Want to know they are ok. Others want to see magic. Explore other realms. Visit Heaven. Some come with serious addictions or an incurable disease. There are a lot of reasons buddy. [Pause]. Most are looking to start a new life. Create a new version of themselves. Get rid of their ailments, grief, loneliness, insecurities, and even their fear of death. All are searching for genuine miracles. Everyone here had exhausted all the normal cures. Seen counsellors. Taken medicines. I'd gone back to church hoping to find God. Didn't work. All I found was an empty building. So many religions just talk about the supernatural. Everyone here wanted something that went beyond faith. A real religion. To see the supernatural. [Pause]. Many of us were desperate when we came across ayahuasca.

We thus come to see that these participants had often suffered some form of physical, mental, or spiritual trauma, and were looking for ayahuasca to overhaul their lives. There was, however, little to suggest that any participant had initially sought a psychoactive or had any previous experience with a mind-altering substance. Instead, these individuals claimed to have iteratively 'exhausted' the more common cultural repertoire of medical and religious approaches, and in their desperation, had turned to a more fantastical product in the form of ayahuasca. Being willing to embrace the 'magic' of ayahuasca was not without some initial trepidation however, as Kate commented:

I'd pretty much given up. I'd searched every alternative medicine I could think of. I remember the first time I saw ayahuasca on YouTube. I was shocked. Intrigued. Disappointed it was a psychedelic. But could it be really do all these things? I hoped so. I needed it to be true. [Pause]. I felt myself being infected by what ayahuasca promised. I started imagining it changing me. Giving me everything I'd ever needed. The stuff of miracles. The chance to start again. [Pause]. When I saw indigenous people invented it, I knew I could trust it. I've always trusted them. To me they

are still living in the Garden of Eden. No corruption or anything. We sin. They don't. I've always suspected ancient medicines can solve our modern problems. [Pause]. From what I read, ayahuasca has been saving lives for such a long time. Healing us and letting us explore the afterlife. [Pause]. I could have gone to South America, but it was cheaper staying close to home. So, I sent them an e-mail, and every day they spoke to me, always inviting me, saying my salvation was at hand.

While phantasmagorical promises are relatively common in religious marketing, successful recruitment of new congregants seemed to be in positioning ayahuasca as an indigenous product, tantamount to an otherworldly panacea, irrespective of the lack of traditional ancient knowledge within these neo-ayahuasca churches. Importantly, this approach appeared to satisfy participant desires for an ancient and miraculous Edenic medicine that could resolve acute personal problems and give access to supernatural lands and beings. Furthermore, as active psychoactive sellers, these churches were rarely bystanders in this sample's decision-making, and where possible, frequently guided these participants towards consuming this otherworldly brew, often through providing enough metaphysical sense that sounded 'about right' to 'enchant' virgin ayahuasca consumers. How the participants experienced ayahuasca is addressed in the following section.

4.2. The otherworldly nature of ayahuasca

With no participant having consumed a psychoactive prior to this study, it seems fair to say that there had been a variety of expectations, usually positive, which were frequently violated by ayahuasca to some degree. Troublingly, and as we will come to see, there is little in modern life that can adequately prepare the mind or body for an immersive hallucinatory and visionary ayahuasca experience, as Susan said:

I'd spent a lot of time trying to imagine what ayahuasca would be like. Watching videos and reading reviews. I'd heard some people have a rough time and vomit. Honestly, all I could do was hope for the best. [Pause]. I thought it'd be ok. Drink ayahuasca, have some visions. See some bad memories, be released from my suffering, and start my perfect new life. I was very wrong about all of this. [Pause]. Before ayahuasca, my only experience of the supernatural had been watching movies or taking the Holy Eucharist [Christian sacrament of bread and wine]. These things never changed me. [Pause]. Thinking back to when I used to be a

Christian, I'd thought about Heaven, but had no clue what it would be like other than a great place. My thinking never went beyond daydreaming. [Pause]. Ayahuasca on the other hand, smashed me to bits. [Pause]. Over the years, I've been drunk. Lost control of my body. Hallucinated in a fever. But these things were nothing like ayahuasca. [Pause]. Ayahuasca is unique. No amount of imagining or watching videos will get you ready for this crippling supernatural wonderland. And once you've taken it, you will spend the rest of your life trying to understand it.

Functionally, while would-be congregants may take some psychological solace in downplaying the negative aspects of their impending ayahuasca experiences, it can leave them highly exposed to the mental, physical, and metaphysical shock of entering a 'supernatural wonderland'. Within itself, it appears that neither general life nor everyday altered states of consciousness are an experiential mirror for ayahuasca. This was particularly apparent when considering this sample's previous religious experiences, where the supernatural was limited to low-level imagination and faith. As such, it seems that the participants had entered the ayahuasca state not as experiential blank slates necessarily, but with little understanding of the challenges awaiting them in this otherworldly arena. Helping us understand more about this issue, Mary commented:

Ayahuasca tastes bad. And you can taste it for hours. I always want to vomit when I drink it. [Pause]. I always lie down afterwards, meditate, and wait for the hallucinations to kick in. I've seen elves, ghosts, aliens. Every type of magical creature. Watched my outside world transform into forests, oceans, and talked to people from different dimensions. This is only the beginning though, as when I get tired and close my eyes, a new world slowly materialises and pulls me inside. The detail still blows my mind. So real. It can be a rough ride entering another dimension. I've seen people kicking and screaming as their minds leave this world. Fevers are normal. And people cry all the time. [Pause]. It can be scary talking to deities and demons. Seeing magic. Reliving painful memories. We see what we fear the most. Nearly always vomit. I usually go to Heaven after Hell. The hardest thing is ayahuasca can't be stopped once it starts. It must be endured. There is no off button.

Such comments were common throughout this sample, highlighting the acute embodied tensions awaiting those who consume this otherworldly brew. While being immersed within the ayahuasca experience often remains physically and emotionally disconcerting, the greater challenge is learning to cope with divine and demonic visual content. As might be expected, such experiences have the potential to haunt individuals for the longer term, leaving many struggling to meaningfully move forward with their daily lives, and discern what is real, as Frank said:

> Once you've tasted ayahuasca, you'll never be the same again. I'd never thought about what's real before, and ayahuasca made me. I mean it really made me. At first, I had no idea what to make of it all. This really screwed with my mind. All my old beliefs fell apart. I quickly lost any grip on what was real. [Pause]. My visions kept showing me that everything is supernatural. Everything is a spirit. This became a big problem in my everyday life. I stopped believing in cause and effect. I was more interested in seeking help from my church. I was struggling at work. Couldn't cope with anything. Sounds stupid, but I spent a month thinking my refrigerator was haunted. Didn't drink any milk for a whole month. People might laugh at what I just said, but ayahuasca had blown my worldview apart, and I was quickly losing my grip on reality and losing touch with everyone I'd ever known. I didn't want them to see me falling apart.

Critically, we come to see supernatural visions and hallucinations raising acute questions about whether such experiences are veridical, and what this might mean for everyday life, and the nature of reality itself. Furthermore, these experiences within neo-ayahuasca churches can leave individuals attempting to piece together complex philosophical, psychological, and religious sense without the scaffolds more often found as part of rich indigenous cultures. Critically, though, these participants were rarely alone in attempting to cosmologically separate supernatural fact from fiction and were typically guided into new doctrinal beliefs by more experienced church members, even if this was piece meal and poorly theorised, as discussed in the following section.

4.3. Making sense of the supernatural

As we might imagine, trying to understand the supernatural can be an arduous task, which can easily be compounded by a lack of previous consideration, unsystematised cultural beliefs, and a fear of social stigmatisation related to psychedelic consumption.

Yet, for those willing to embrace taboo, the challenge is how to plausibly explain otherworldly experiences and just as importantly, integrate perceived phantasmagorical perspectives into new working cosmologies suitable for this life and beyond. Explaining how this process of making supernatural sense began, Mark said:

Ayahuasca showed me a hidden supernatural universe. But what did that mean? Everyone in my church kept saying the supernatural was everywhere. Like ghosts and demons, and stuff. [Pause]. It was hard to believe at first. It was all just too big to get my head around. Too incomprehensible. So, yeah, the first few months here were hard. [Pause]. So, why did I stay? Come on man, you must be thinking I'd be mad to keep slurping this potion. Eh? Thing was that I saw my dead grandmother. She was as real as anyone I'd ever seen. My church told me to believe my own inner eyes. Accept that I'd seen the afterlife. But y'know, I kept thinking. Are these experiences real? I had a choice. Accept that I'd seen her and that ayahuasca shows the afterlife. That I could see her again. Or reject it all and try to go back to my old life. Admit I'd taken drugs. Put like that it was easy to believe. The church was always telling me I couldn't have faked this anyway. No drug could make something so intricate. T'be honest, everyone here found a reason to believe. For me, seeing my grandma gave me faith. So, I accepted everything else. Not easy to rewrite everything you've ever believed though.

Not surprisingly, the fundamental question for each participant quickly became: 'but are these experiences real?' Epistemologically, this was a thorny issue, as while ayahuasca continually catalyses supernatural hallucinations and visions, industrialised cultures tend to dismiss otherworldly psychoactive experiences as epistemically dubious, and in most cases, unreal. While this issue received a great deal of epistemological attention from all participants, conversations on this matter tended to be emotionally charged and revealed a cathartic desire for these otherworldly visual experiences to be authentic and not the result of pharmacological fantasies of mind. This was even more likely to be the case when a participant had visually encountered a deceased relative, friend, or pet and was keen to establish a more meaningful connection to the afterlife. Irrespective of the truth of perceptual ayahuasca experiences, supernatural beliefs were usually aided by the claim that drugs cannot produce highly detailed in-depth visual knowledge, and as such, these phenomena should be considered real. While this approach helped the participants avoid self-stigmatisation related to drug use, it necessitated covert consumption away

from their extant social relationships. This being said, this tactic opened the door for these participants to explore new forms of doctrinal knowledge within their churches, and rewrite long-held beliefs, outside of criticism, as Stephen said:

My church is supporting my transition to a new spiritual life. It's amazing. They have given me everything I ever wanted. [Pause]. Better than the churches I used to go to. [Pause]. Global religions talk about the supernatural, but they've never seen it. Can't understand it. In my opinion, most religions are fake. They go to church, mutter some prayers, and are done for the week. I purify my soul with ayahuasca. My eyes are open now. I realised that everything is actually a step towards Heaven or Hell. [Pause]. I'm on a mission to save my soul. There is no place for the atom in my world. All these things are illusions. Only what I see in ayahuasca is real. [Pause]. Ayahuasca is a pair of glasses to see everything properly. The truth. The world can keep its lies. I have ayahuasca. [Pause]. The thing is, when ayahuasca wears off I can't see evil properly anymore. I become blind to the world, and this is dangerous. Life outside of church is dangerous.

With these churches sitting outside of traditional psychoactive and indigenous knowledge, it was unsurprising that their doctrinal teachings often lacked the metaphysical richness and nuance of more established ayahuasca cultures. As such, these churches and their new congregants often drew on popular quasi-religious themes. For example, instead of God purifying the soul and being the eschatological route to salvation, these aspects were simply attributed to consuming ayahuasca, which was positioned as a perceptual means to differentiate between good and evil. We thus come to see simple sense being preferred and sidestepping the need for more robust in-depth theorisation. However, with the effects of ayahuasca quickly waning after consumption, the participants were often left feeling morally and metaphysically myopic outside of their churches and highly exposed to malevolent forces in their daily lives. Against this binary backdrop of good and evil, the challenge became how-to live-in a less than perfect world. Commenting on this, Michelle argued:

> Once I started to accept my ayahuasca visions are real, I knew my life had to change. [Pause]. Let me tell you, it is an odd thing to change everything in your life. I kept thinking, how should I live? Sounds like an odd thing to say. I mean, I'm an adult, so how could I not know? But things weren't that simple. Let me explain. I never knew that even the smallest things would become difficult. Like, where to shop?

Who to drink coffee with? Could I date who I wanted? Etcetera. [Pause]. My church helped me a lot with this. They have a lot of experience with new members. And they are very strict. [Pause]. They need to be. [Pause]. The church has a long list of things I can't do. In fact, nobody can do them. It is to keep us safe from evil. Anyone not in our church puts me at risk. The church doesn't like me mixing with anyone unclean who might hurt me spiritually. This could ruin my future ayahuasca sessions. Send me to Hell when I should be in Heaven. Hell in visions. Hell through eternity. [Pause]. Hmm, so, I left my old life behind. I don't really see many of my old friends or family anymore. It stops me being tainted, and stops my new beliefs being challenged. Keeps me safe. On the spiritual straight and narrow as they say. On the side of good, fighting darkness. [Pause]. All I can say is that it was a lot to give up. But I gained a future in Heaven. A long-lasting relationship with everyone I'd lost. And the ability to live in truth. I think I won to be honest with you. Although nobody I used to know believes this. They think I've become a recluse.

Simply speaking, these churches are strict social regulators, often prohibiting non-church relationships and activities, and limiting social life to what happens in church. While this act was frequently framed as protecting the spiritual wellbeing of congregants, it also limited the ability of these individuals to encounter contradictory views of reality. From a cognitive perspective, it seems reasonable to suggest that mitigating complex sense might alleviate already overburdened cognition, allowing these new consumers to put more resource to adapting to this new psychoactive process, albeit at the expense of broader socio-cultural experiences. Reflecting on why the participants agreed to this level of regulation, we must remember that ayahuasca not only leaves individuals in a state of metaphysical and psychological discombobulation, but also highly suggestible, and yearning for coherence. Furthermore, it was clear that these participants were not only afraid of losing visual access to the supernatural, but the potential of an eternity in paradise, which was so frequently promised by their churches. Although such aspects might go some way to account for the participants embracing a more isolated social life, it is worth speculating on the sustainability of these beliefs, and the degree to which the mundane world might undermine the longer-term acceptance or rejection of these otherworldly doctrines.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Even though humanity has spent thousands of years exploring altered states of consciousness and ruminating on the possible existence of otherworldly phenomena (Stewart, Gapenne and Di Paolo, 2014), it seems fair to say that the psychoactive 'keys' to unlock esoteric knowledge have been unevenly distributed, and typically limited to indigenous peoples (Shanon, 2010). While psychoactive plants and potions continue to seep into the industrialised West, we are a long way from a renaissance, which is particularly noticeable when we consider how psychoactives are metaphysically juxtaposed as: (1) mundane medical therapeutics, (2) a lens to see the supernatural, and (3) illicit products, harmful to the mind, body, and soul (Frood, 2015). Against this rather curious and confusing cultural backdrop, it is hardly surprising that there is still much to understand about how psychoactives 'lure' individuals into an otherworldly wonderland, and just as importantly, how new congregants navigate cultural taboos, and negotiate novel metaphysical perspectives against extant social norms (Siff, 2015; Tupper, 2008). With ayahuasca being one of the most popular psychoactives amongst those seeking personal transformation and immersive visionary experiences (Gandy *et al.,* 2022), this study asked: how do new, non-expert congregants negotiate supernatural 'fact' and 'fiction' within non-traditional ayahuasca churches? Answering this question is likely to become an increasingly important issue as ayahuasca consumption spreads around the globe and is continually reimagined both inside and outside of indigenous knowledge.

Looking at this sample's motivational journey towards consuming ayahuasca, it was clear that all participants had initially held negative views about psychoactives, and consequently, shown little previous interest in imbibing them. Within itself, it is relatively rare for individuals to embrace psychoactives, and for the few who do, it is usually driven by acute personal needs not easily met within their everyday repertoire of socio-cultural resources (Stepp and Moerman, 2001). This was certainly the case for this sample, who claimed to have hit an impasse in their lives and were keen for ayahuasca to help them reclaim a more meaningful way of living (Gonzalez *et al.,* 2017). While the pursuit of ayahuasca was often begrudging to start with, it was greatly aided by spectacular church marketing claims that positioned this unusual brew as an indigenous panacea and magic potion. Critically, although the participants could have travelled to South America for more authentic ayahuasca experiences, the ease of access to European venues, and

lower costs were strong motivating factors for pursuing local forms of psychoactive consumption, which appears to be a growing trend.

Reminding ourselves that most mundane everyday experiences seem to have little in common with psychoactive visions and hallucinations, it was apparent that the participants were ill-prepared for the physical, psychological, and metaphysical turbulence generated from these otherworldly lands (Shanon, 2010). At the heart of this issue is ayahuasca's catalytic potential to overturn notions of who we think we are, and just as importantly, reorientate how we believe the world works. Consequently, it is not uncommon for individuals to feel lost in an unknowable supernatural universe, where the natural laws are increasingly inconsequential. Although such otherworldly experiences can be unnerving and unpleasant, ayahuasca can also be enthralling, particularly when showing heavenly reveries and the possibility of re-establishing relationships with deceased relatives, friends, and pets. While ayahuasca is not pharmacologically addictive (da Motta *et al.,* 2018), we should not underestimate the emotional draw of certain types of visions and hallucinations, or that individuals are often left in highly suggestible states (Bouso and Riba, 2014). Having said this, the challenge for whether to keep consuming this brew can be reduced, in part, to epistemology, i.e., are these supernatural experiences noumena? (McKenna, Luna and Towers, 1995). Not surprisingly, this issue received in-depth attention from all participants, with the metaphysical complexity of this issue seeming to be beyond the participants. As such, these experiences were deemed true, due to personal preference, and a growing desire for the otherworldly to be real. Even though this was a dubious epistemological stance, it was well supported by these churches, who were committed to promoting the veridical nature of ayahuasca experiences, and in so doing, increasing the number of congregants accessing the otherworldly.

Finally, while taking a religious view towards ayahuasca visions and hallucinations unlocked a multitude of spiritual, salvific, and eschatological possibilities for the participants, the challenge quickly became how to engage in everyday life? As might be expected, this was no small undertaking, and required an ongoing negotiation of emerging supernatural beliefs against extant secular-material knowledge, with the latter continually losing ground. Although making sense of the supernatural tended to be a fraught act, no participant tackled this issue alone, as all churches were keen to guide

and mandate how their new congregants made sense of ayahuasca, and just as importantly, reality itself. Practically, this typically involved church regulation of extant congregant relationships and prohibition of worldly information conflicting with their phantasmagorical doctrines. Even though this tactic had the potential to mitigate social stigmatisation from competing social views of ayahuasca, it is worth reflecting on how sustainable these churches really are, when they enforce a life of semi-isolation for their congregations. Just as importantly, how these stifled doctrines may generate philosophical and psychological tensions from congregants looking for deeper explanations of how ayahuasca can help them understand their place within the cosmos. How we can better understand such aspects is addressed in the following section.

5.1. Future Work

As this study progressed, it was apparent that the participants were developing a greater interest in understanding their metaphysical journeys. As such, and with these ayahuasca churches also welcoming further research, it is our intention to build on this study's findings and address salient research gaps. Consequently, the first area to be examined is the experience of new congregants who reject ayahuasca, including what precipitated this decision-making, and how they integrated back into their day-to-day lives. With almost no attention having paid to this issue previously, there is much to learn about 'failed' ayahuasca consumption, and the longer metaphysical consequences (Dean, 2019).

The second area to be explored is the doctrinal sustainability of these churches, particularly against the backdrop of mandating congregants abandon many of their former beliefs, behaviours, and relationships, while embracing a state of semi-socio-cultural isolation. Furthermore, we will also seek to better understand the quasi-Manichean foundations of these doctrines, and to what degree external religions, in any, led to the view that the universe is a binary of good vs. evil.

The third, and final area to be studied is how the changing medical landscape of psychoactives might influence current church recruitment strategies and the metaphysical nature of their otherworldly doctrines. This is particularly salient when we consider that ayahuasca is undergoing extensive medical trials and is likely to be used as a regulated therapeutic in the imminent future (da Motta *et al.,* 2018).

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