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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

PROF. BETTINA E. SCHMIDT,
DIRECTOR OF THE RELIGIOUS
EXPERIENCE RESEARCH CENTRE,
UNIVERSITY OF WALES TRINITY
SAINT DAVID, CARMARTHEN,
WALES

EDITOR

DR. MARA STEENHUISEN

ASSISTANT EDITOR

LEAH Z.M. BLACK
PgDip. PgCert. BSc. (Hons)



Website:

[https://rerc-
journal.tsd.ac.uk/](https://rerc-journal.tsd.ac.uk/)

Email:

RERC@uwtsd.ac.uk

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Editorial

Autumn reflections with generative AI: A season of non-sensual contemplations

Mara Steenhuisen, PhD

The old story of Eyes and No-Eyes is really the story of the mystical and unmystical types. "No Eyes" has fixed his attention on the fact that he is obliged to take a walk. For him the chief factor of existence is his own movement along the road; a movement which he intends to accomplish as efficiently and comfortably as he can. He asks not to know what may be on either side of the hedges. He ignores the caress of the wind until it threatens to remove his hat. He trudges along, steadily, diligently; avoiding the muddy pools, but oblivious of the light which they reflect. "Eyes" takes the walk too: and for him it is a perpetual revelation of beauty and wonder. The sunlight inebriates him, the winds delight him, the very effort of the journey is a joy. Magic presences throng the roadside, or cry salutations to him from the hidden fields. The rich world through which he moves lies in the foreground of his consciousness; and it gives up new secrets to him at every step. "No-Eyes," when told of his adventures, usually refuses to believe that both have gone by the same road. He fancies that his companion has been floating about in the air, or beset by agreeable hallucinations. We shall never persuade him to the contrary unless we persuade him to look for himself.

Evelyn Underhill, 1914

With the hot summer behind us, we have arrived in the relative quiet stillness of autumn. A time to repose, reflect and prepare for the colder season ahead. Traditionally, the symbolism of autumn stands for a time of transition, as nature shows us with the falling of leaves in their myriad hues and the rhythms of shorter days and longer nights, with colder and misty weather. Sounds change, smells change, the atmosphere changes. We see the harvest of the lands: pumpkins, apples, acorns, chestnuts, hazelnuts, pinecones, grapes, depending on where you live and how close you are to see those harvested from the soil, the trees, the vines. Birds go, others come in to stay over for the winter. There is abundance, there is soberness as heaps of leaves are ruffled by the October winds and gradually the branches turn into impressive bare structures.

Evelyn Underhill describes contemplation and connection to oneself, in self-reflection and embodied in the living environment: metaphorically for eyes to see. Sir Alister was clearly an 'Eyes' person: seeing, contemplating and integrating his myriad talent for observing and interpreting experience into works of art that still touch mind and heart. He would scientifically illustrate publications, such as *Great Waters* (1967), his artistic rendering of the

wonders of marine life as huge as whales and as tiny as microscopic plankton during the sea expedition aboard the *RRS Discovery* from 1925-1927. Or his two-part series of *The Open Sea*, (*Part 1* in 1956, with 142 watercolour paintings and *Part 2*, *Fish and Fisheries* in 1959). Later, his watercolour paintings of the English 'countryside' would become well-known for their intricate detail and artistic skill, published in *A Cotswold Sketchbook* (1984), while he took his bike from Bath where he lived, meandering through the Cotswolds, absorbing and sketching, and painting the harmony of nature, sky and the atmosphere along the way. In 2019 during the festive special conference of the Religious Experience Research Centre's 50 years, I marvelled at his beautiful watercolours displayed at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in Lampeter, Wales. Sir Alister's temples, shrines, and other sacred places in the Far East brought me back to my own travels, and moreover, enabled me to look temporarily through his 'Eyes', even for a split second, in beholding real paper with their real watercolours instead of digital or hardcopy reproductions.

The above may seem ambiguous in the light of this issue's cover as is created in collaboration with AI. And also, ironically, the image shows the two-faced characteristics of generative AI: the digital rendering has a tree carved from its very own material and it displays a layered composition built of paper and bark, with warm colours as it signifies autumnal imagery. In a human life, autumn symbolises maturity. Does AI know the cycle of letting go, reflect, repose and renew? Has AI a notion of what autumn signifies? Has it 'Eyes' to see? Plentiful 'answers' are generated by AI when asking it, produced from 'feeds' as it eats and divulges, 'algo rhythms' as it dances to the same beat every time, 'prompts' that construct its eyes. Seeing?

Reflecting on our special issue on AI and Religious Experience (Vol.11.No.2), we see that AI scrapes the internet not only for texts but also images under the motto of 'what you upload is what you get'. AI generates its 'art' from all those human artisan endeavours, insights, emotions and skills. Looking and considering AI generated art as a mere toolbox of pencils, paper, paint, canvas with at its base guidelines on composition, colouring and perspective, AI can *collaboratively* generate, not create, because emotions and feelings inherently define art and its human spectators. Since our special issue on AI and religious experience last year, and our specialist conference on the same topic in June this year, we all have noticed an increase in AI making big headlines in the media, and moreover, silently slipping more comfortably into its everyday technical environment of our (new) smartphones, TVs, computers, our homes and our lives. Do we still own them?

Spiritually, we can evolve when confronted with life's challenges whether it is in the autumn or in the spring of our lives. The five papers in this issue of the journal address diverse topics, highlighting the positive contributions to religious and spiritual experience from around the world. The first article by Mike Rush is based on his keynote presentation on spiritual crisis which was held last year on Friday, 13 June 2025, together with the responses from Dr Jeff Leonardi and Prof Marta de Freitas. In this article *Spiritual Crisis: Peer-Support and Grounding for Spiritually Transformative Experiences*, he reports on the findings from three related studies designed to investigate interventions for spiritual crisis.

For the individual concerned it often means an actual state of spiritual emergency, as addressed by and reflected in the second article by Wanting He. This article exemplifies a spiritual challenge in addressing the confrontation with *Chumaxian and the Construction of Subjectivity in Northeast Chinese Fox-Spirit Worship*, employing Jacques Lacan's structural account of psychosis and, notably, his concept of the *sinthome*, a stabilising structure that links the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real through ritual practice, interpretation, and social recognition.

Dimitrios Vachaviolos addresses in the third article how references to miraculous liquids, fragrance, and physical interaction with relics can shape the sensory dimensions of devotional experience in *Scent of Sanctity: Pilgrimage to the Tombs of Myroblyte Saints in Medieval Peloponnese*, mirroring contemporary spiritual contemplation.

The fourth article concerns Accursio Graffeo's postponed article, which was intended for the previous issue on AI and Religious Experience. The author's article highlights the example of Terasem and how technological advancements currently shape our aspirations and approaches using AI. In *About Death, Immortality and Technology: A Transreligious Perspective*, the author delves into what can be considered AI mediated New Religious Movements (NRMs), emphasising with Terasem the themes of death and immortality from a transreligious perspective and how beliefs in technological advancements such as cryonics form Terasem. As such, the article compliments the three previous articles, including the concept of spiritual 'resurrection' in dealing with life challenges, like the examples of peer-support groups provided in Mike Rush's article.

Whereas, in the fifth article Sára Heidl takes us to the joyous atmosphere of more secular but no less spiritual festivals in Hungary with *Resonant Festival Experiences: Empirical Evidence from Hungarian Festivals*, in the light (or sound) of Hartmut Rosa's resonance theory we end this issue on a festive note. Finally, we would like to express our appreciation and

special thanks to the Alister Hardy Trust in supporting the journal and our peer-reviewers for their valuable expertise and time to enhance our contributing authors' articles.

For those of you with 'Eyes' to see and those who aspire to, simply 'seeing' can evoke the most powerful and spontaneous experiences in nature where we don't need a digital interface to connect to the outside world, and to ourselves, in our fast-moving global home. As in Sir Alister's words:

'Our civilization has been built upon a spiritual interpretation of the world; if the majority of the population come to have a materialistic outlook the whole nature of our way may change and not I think for the better (1966, p. 14).'

Your editorial team wishes you a contemplative autumn and winter.

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Spiritual Crisis: Peer-Support and Grounding for Spiritually Transformative Experiences

Michael J. Rush

*National Coalition of Independent Researchers (NCIS)
11A Avenue Road, Whittington Moor, Chesterfield, Derbyshire, United Kingdom.
mikerush@virginmedia.com*

Abstract:

This article reports on the findings from three related studies designed to investigate interventions for spiritual crisis. Spiritual crisis can be understood as any spiritual experience that causes concern or distress. The first study was an evaluation of the United Kingdom *Spiritual Crisis Network* (SCN). Feedback was gathered from people who had contacted the SCN for support between 2011 and 2019. This study highlighted the importance of peer-support for those recovering from a crisis. The second study explored the meaning and lived experience of grounding in the context of spiritual crisis. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with twelve participants, and the transcripts subjected to an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) analysis. Nine themes, with relevance to clinical practise, were generated along with an understanding of grounding as both a state and a process. The third study was a report on professional practise in the form of a case study that followed the journey of one participant from spiritual crisis through to them providing peer-support for the SCN. A narrative analysis of his story was undertaken utilising the Hero's Journey as a framework for analysis. It was found that not all spiritual crises require intervention by the mental health services and other forms of support can be beneficial.

Keywords: spiritual crisis, spiritual emergency, peer-support, grounding, mental health.

AI Statement

AI was used to transcribe audio recordings from the interviews in study two below. The transcripts were then checked manually and amended where necessary line by line. AI was not used for any other purpose during study design, data collection, data analysis, or writing up of the results in any of the following studies or this article.

1. Introduction

Spiritual crisis, also known as spiritual emergency, can be thought of as a subgroup of religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs) that cause concern or distress for the experiencer. They sometimes require support or intervention by others and often result in profound psychospiritual transformation. This subgroup of experiences overlaps with RSEs in general, spiritually transformative experiences (STEs) in particular, and sometimes, in extreme cases, intersects with psychopathology.

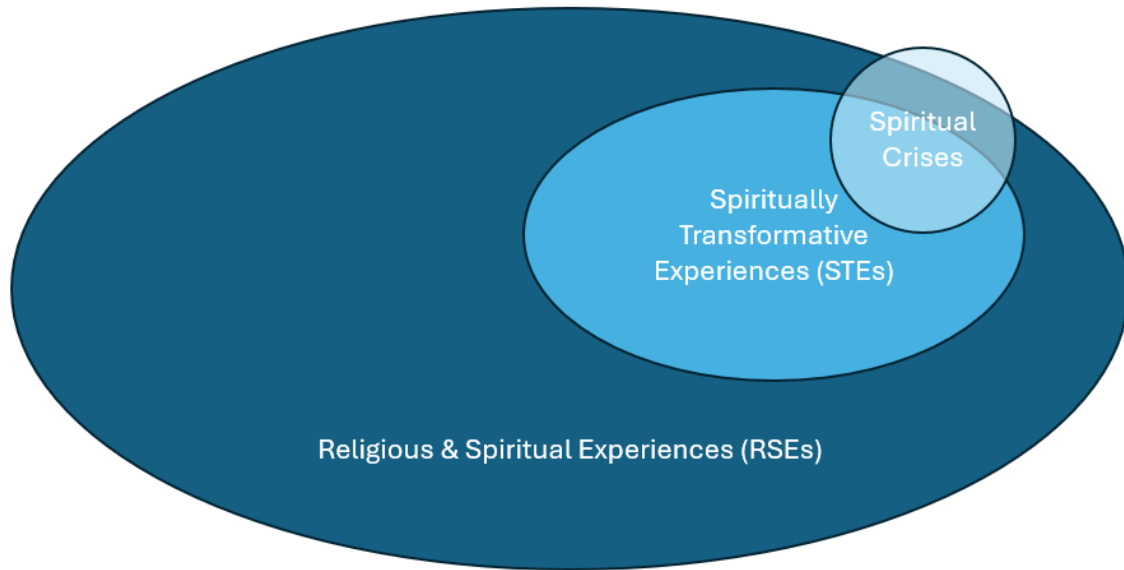


Figure One: Spiritual crises as a subgroup of RSEs and STEs. © Author

Whilst the majority of RSEs are experienced as benign or even blissful experiences (Hardy, 1979; Rankin, 2008; Astley, 2020), there are a minority that can cause concern or distress (Jakobsen, 1999). The concept of crises following a spiritual awakening was discussed by Italian psychiatrist and founder of psychosynthesis, Roberto Assagioli (1965). He described four stages of spiritual crisis: i) crises preceding awakening, ii) crises as a result of awakening, iii) crises due to the responses of others, and iv) crises of transformation. However, the term 'spiritual emergency' was coined by Stanislav and Christina Grof (1989) who described ten varieties of spiritual emergency: i) Episodes of Unitive Consciousness (Peak Experiences), ii) Kundalini Awakening, iii) Near-Death Experiences, iv) Shamanic Crisis or Journey, v) Psychological Renewal through Return to the Centre or Activation of the Central Archetype, vi) Awakening of Extrasensory Perception or Psychic Opening, vii) Emergence of Past-Life Memories or a Karmic Pattern, viii) Communication with Spirit Guides and Channelling, ix) Experiences of Close Encounters with UFOs, and x) Possession States. Other writers have added further categories or used other terms in the literature, such as psychospiritual crises (Spittles, 2022), transformative crises (Brett, 2010), psychotic-like experiences (Heriot-Maitland *et al.*, 2012), mystical experiences with psychotic features (Lukoff, 1985), and anomalous experiences (Brett *et al.*, 2007). The subdiscipline of clinical parapsychology, a branch of parapsychology that is interested in the clinical treatment for paranormal experiences, now also focuses on this area (Kramer *et al.*, 2012).

More recently, Harris, Rock and Clark (2020) attempted to use a Delphi methodology, which uses iterative rounds of questions to form a consensus, to interview experts on spiritual emergency in order to develop a definition of the term. Unfortunately, there was too much variation within the responses to reach a consensus. However, they introduce their article by stating, 'Spiritual emergency (SEY) is a process of spiritual emergence (SE) or awakening that becomes traumatic for an individual, leading to a state of psychological crisis,' (Harris, Rock, and Clark, 2020). Therefore, for the three studies reported below, I composed the following definition of spiritual crisis or emergency:

Any self-identified spiritual or unusual experience that causes concern or distress for the experiencer or for those around them. It can affect mind, body, and emotions, and can include visions, voices, or vibrations. Unfortunately, it is sometimes mis-diagnosed as a mental health issue. An altered state of consciousness is commonly experienced and understood in terms of religious, spiritual, or mythological frameworks. However, if responded to appropriately, it can result in personal growth or even profound psychospiritual transformation.

There are now numerous transpersonal therapists and support organisations providing advice to people affected by spiritual crisis. These include the *Integrative Mental Health University* (IMHU) founded by Emma Bragdon, *Spiritual Awakenings International* (SAI) formed by Yvonne Kason, the *American Centre for the Integration of Spiritually Transformative Experiences* (ACISTE) in the US, and the *Spiritual Crisis Network* (SCN) in the United Kingdom. Personally, I co-facilitate peer-support groups and provide peer and one-to-one support for people who have experienced a spiritual crisis. I am also a former co-director of the SCN, a qualified hypno-psychotherapist registered with the CNHC, and trained as a Spiritual Emergence Coach with IMHU. However, although people sometimes give informal feedback on whether this support is helpful or not, this is mostly anecdotal. Therefore, the question that arose was: what is the empirical evidence for interventions used in spiritual crises?

When reviewing the literature, I identified thirty-three empirical studies relevant to spiritual crisis and grouped them into four themes or pillars of evidence-based support for interventions in spiritual emergency. The first pillar is alternative approaches to treating psychosis and schizophrenia. This is exemplified by the Soteria project in the late 1970s where, instead of treatment as usual using medication in hospital, patients (or residents) were housed in a communal residential centre staffed by non-medically trained volunteers. Use of medication was avoided or kept to a minimum. Evaluation studies of this approach showed

that the outcomes at six and twelve months were more effective and cheaper than treatment as usual (Mosher and Bola, 2004). Unfortunately, although there is a Soteria Network, there are currently no Soteria houses in the United Kingdom.

What helps someone in spiritual crisis?



Figure Two: Four themes or pillars of support in spiritual emergency. © Author

The second pillar of support is comprised of studies by clinical psychologists that demonstrate the effect of the appraisal of an experience on its outcome. When an experiencer, and those around them, are more accepting of unusual experiences the experiencer tends to have a better clinical outcome. Whereas when the experiencer, or those around them, are less accepting of unusual experiences, the outcomes tend to be worse (Heriot-Maitland, *et al.*, 2012; Bret *et al.*, 2014).

The third pillar is the importance of having a meaningful narrative or framework within which to interpret the experience. Such a framework helps to engender positive appraisals and in doing so normalises and validates what is being experienced, even if it is unusual or anomalous. In particular, there is often a tension between a psychiatric or biomedical framework and a religious or spiritual one (Kaselionyte and Gumley, 2019). Peer-support groups have also been identified as important in the process of forming a meaningful narrative related to spiritual crises (Remy-Fischler, 2021).

Finally, the fourth pillar of support, is around a collection of helpful practices, attitudes, and behaviours, which are often referred to collectively as grounding techniques. Eighty-four of these have been evaluated for effectiveness by Brook (2021) whilst Sedláková and Řiháček (2019) identified two ways of responding to unusual experiences; a 'suppressive' pathway that aims to reduce experiences, and a 'facilitative' pathway that aims to explore and integrate the

experiences. The former tends to be that chosen more by the biomedical approach, whereas the latter is chosen more by those who have a spiritual perspective. Although it is important to note that the authors point out that the two pathways are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Overall, there are relatively few empirical studies (although there are more discussion-based articles) on spiritual crisis. Only one study (Brook, 2021) has directly attempted to assess the efficacy of any grounding techniques, and, with the exception of the Soteria studies, no previous evaluations of interventions, organisations, or therapeutic approaches have been undertaken.

On the basis of the literature review above, three studies were designed to address this lack of evidence-based support for interventions in spiritual crisis. The first was a service evaluation of the United Kingdom *Spiritual Crisis Network* (Rush, Lancaster, and Lukoff, 2025), the second was an IPA study of grounding (Rush, Lancaster, and Lukoff, forthcoming), and the third was a case study of one individual who experienced his own spiritual crisis before going on to become a peer-support group facilitator with the SCN (Rush, forthcoming). Overall, the methodological approach taken across the following three studies is one of increasing focus from the collective to the individual. This focus began wide with 107 participants completing the SCN evaluation survey, then narrowed to twelve participants in the IPA study on grounding, before focussing in on a single individual for the case study. The remainder of this article will summarise the results of these three studies to situate them in context. In all cases participants were given the choice of whether they wished to be named or remain anonymous. Quotes from participants are reproduced verbatim and accompanied by a line number from the interview transcripts. All three studies were given ethical approval by the *Salomons Institute for Applied Psychology* at Canterbury Christ Church University.

2. Study One: An Evaluation of the United Kingdom Spiritual Crisis Network

The United Kingdom *Spiritual Crisis Network* (SCN) was founded by Isabel Clarke, Catherine Lucas, and others in 2004 as a not-for-profit company with the aim of providing peer-support to people affected by spiritual crisis (Rush, 2013). The SCN provides six services to the public: information about spiritual crisis via its website, support and advice by email, online and face-to-face peer-support groups, training and awareness sessions, occasional academic conferences, and an online discussion forum. The SCN is entirely staffed by unpaid part-time

volunteers comprised of experiencers, their friends and family, therapists, researchers, and others interested in spiritual crisis.

Potential volunteers first attend an SCN training and awareness day. The first part of which introduces the concept of spiritual crisis and the approach of the SCN. The second part of the day provides an opportunity for volunteers to compose, with guidance, responses to example emails sent to the SCN. Those who wish to become active volunteers are then allowed to observe the live email response process. When they are ready, they can progress to drafting email responses with another volunteer whilst supervised by one of the more experienced volunteers. There is then additional training for those who wish to go on to facilitate peer-support groups. No formal therapeutic training or qualifications are necessary although some volunteers already have, or subsequently obtain, these qualifications elsewhere. It is important to note that the approach is based on peer-support not therapy.

The aims and approach of the SCN are similar to the *Hearing Voices Network* (HVN). Both organisations aim to support people who have these types of anomalous experiences by validating and normalising them rather than devaluing and pathologising them. However, the work of the SCN had never been previously evaluated. Therefore, the first study was designed to undertake such an evaluation based on feedback from people who had contacted the SCN.

The research questions were: 1) Did people find contacting the SCN helpful or unhelpful? 2) What was helpful or unhelpful about contacting the SCN? And 3) How did contacting the SCN compare to contacting mental health organisations? Everyone who had contacted the SCN for support between 2011 and 2019 (a total of 1,605 people) were invited to provide feedback on their experience of contacting the organisation. An online questionnaire survey was used to gather the data and a 'small-q' version of Thematic Analysis (Kidder and Fine, 1987; Braun and Clarke, 2021) used to analyse the results.

The majority (64%) of participants reported that the SCN had been helpful to a greater or lesser degree with 63% satisfied with the SCN response, whilst 10% felt that the contact had been unhelpful with 13% feeling dissatisfied with the response they received. However, 80% of participants reported that the SCN responded to them better than the mental health services, with only 11% reporting that the mental health services provided a better response. Forty participants indicated that they had received a mental health diagnosis during their experience but only 18% had found that diagnosis to be helpful. The most frequently mentioned diagnoses were psychosis, anxiety, stress and bipolar disorders, depression, and schizophrenia.

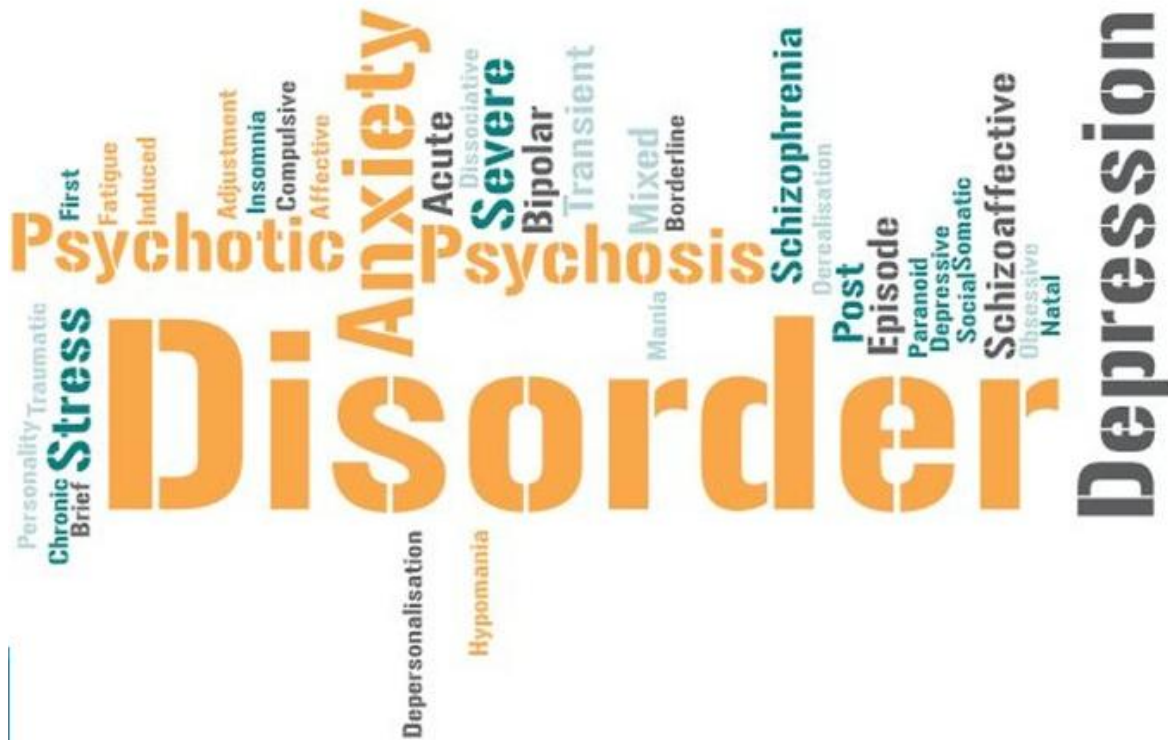


Figure 3: Word-cloud to illustrate the responses of the participants. © Author

Four main themes emerged from the Thematic Analysis: 1) the various benefits of contacting the SCN such as, 'The email response provided me with further resources and information,' 2) how people gained a new perspective on their experiences, 'Validating the existence of my experience alongside the authority of the medical model,' 3) how people felt after contacting the SCN, for example, 'It felt extremely personal, empathetic and helped me feel less alone, and more grounded,' and 4) the importance of the qualities and attitudes of the SCN volunteers who provide peer-support, 'I was surprised someone had taken the time to really listen to me and provide some "holding", demonstrate they heard and understood my pain and anguish, validated my feelings and even suggest some things which I could call on to help me at the time.'

In conclusion, it can be seen that although the services that the SCN provide are not therapy they can still be therapeutic in effect. Furthermore, it is not just about providing advice and lists of grounding techniques, but about the ways in which the SCN volunteers respond that really makes the difference; it is not just what we do but how we do it. However, the SCN approach does not work for everyone and is not a substitute for medical support; it is complementary, not an alternative. Finally, this study was published in the *Journal of Humanistic*

Psychology (Rush, Lancaster, and Lukoff, 2025) and it is hoped that it will provide evidence supporting future projects or funding bids by the SCN or similar organisations.

3. Study Two: The Meaning and Lived Experience of Grounding

In order to approach the subject matter as closely as possible, a researcher must as it were 'get right inside the experience'. The salient discipline concerned with this type of technique is phenomenology, (De Waard, 2010, p. 147).

Respondents to the SCN evaluation survey, and therapists, experiencers, and researchers in the literature review, all referred to 'grounding' in the context of spiritual crisis. One participant in the SCN evaluation study said, 'I found the resources page very useful as well as general info about grounding and for signposting to others,' whilst the SCN website states, 'By grounding we mean focusing on the present moment,' and a participant in the study to be described below said, 'I had no grounding whatsoever, didn't even have the concept of it. Well, they would keep on saying it, but I just didn't know what it is.'

Discussions about grounding include techniques and practices but also imply that there is an experiential state of feeling 'grounded' or 'ungrounded' during and following a spiritual crisis. Grounding has also been talked about in connection with earthing of the human body (Ober, Sinatra, and Zucker, 2014) and by therapists recommending connection with nature as a form of grounding (Allen, 2020). Therefore, there are different understandings, or aspects of, grounding including but not limited to: mindfulness, earthing, and connection with nature.

However, there had been no previous studies on the meaning and lived experience of grounding in the context of spiritual crisis. Therefore, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* or IPA (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009; Smith and Nizza, 2022) was utilised to explore the meaning and lived experience of 'grounding'. Twelve experiencers were interviewed, asked to complete the *Spiritual Emergency Scale – Revised* (SES-R), and to provide examples of artwork that they felt conveyed their experiences. The research questions were: 1) What does the term 'grounding' mean to people who have experienced a spiritual crisis? 2) How is 'grounding' experienced, that is, what does it feel like to be 'grounded' or 'ungrounded'? 3) What practices, attitudes, or behaviours facilitate 'grounding'? and 4) What, if any, influence does contact with mainstream mental health services have on the understanding and experience of 'grounding'?

In agreement with the argument of Kara (2018) about empowering research participants, and also as talking about spiritual crisis is sometimes understood as a spiritual 'coming out'

(Mottram & Gruel, 2019), participants were given the option to be named or not in the final and summary reports. Two of the twelve participants opted to remain anonymous and are therefore referred to by participant number below.

Nine group experiential themes were generated from the IPA analysis. The first theme was a connection to self, world, and others. This sense of connection could be with a part of the inner-self, to society, friends and family, the natural world, or to a transcendent other, '...feeling kind of connected, and feeling, you know, connected to myself, erm, to the bigger picture, which I will call spirituality, you know, to the bigger whole to other people, to you right now, that to me is grounding,' (Marie, 121).

The second theme was a balance between containment and release. Often, when ungrounded, people would feel that they had too much to contain, either energy from within or information being 'downloaded' from above, 'it almost felt like you were, erm, being less contained within your own field, it almost felt you were, a part of you was outside your normal energetic field and also really quite vulnerable,' (Alan, 363).

A third theme was having a centred, balanced and embodied self. Most participants reported that being caught up in their own minds was ungrounding and that, conversely, being centred in their physical bodies, especially the heart, was grounding, '...', it's a thought and not enough feeling, so there's not enough feeling that comes with the thoughts to give it, erm, to give it grounding, to give it that balance,' (Neil, 479).

The fourth theme was about cultivating a relationship with the experience. It is important to note that experiencers were not trying to rid themselves of the unusual experiences but rather to understand and integrate them, 'So when I think about grounding, I think about two things. I think of an emergency repair kit. Right. When you're in the middle of some interesting, strange experience. I also think of a long-term strategy of maintenance, which is hopefully a cycle of virtue where you organise your life in a way that is optimal,' (Chris, 225).

The fifth theme was a process of attenuation of ungroundedness over time. In most cases, participants reported that as time went on they got more used to feelings of ungroundedness, felt less anxious about it, and found what techniques worked for them, 'that's the reason, basically, why [while] all my spiritual emergencies lasted less and less and less and I managed to bring myself back first with a bit of support, but then on my own,' (Participant #001, 217).

Theme number six was about having a foot in both worlds; the everyday or mundane world and the deeper psyche or spiritual world. Again, it is important to note that experiencers were not trying to live in one world only, 'So what you're wanting to do is... have your head in the clouds but your feet on the ground. So obviously you can still have that amazing enlightenment experience, but you want to also be in touch with the reality and in touch with the normal world because that's where we live so better just keep in touch with that,' (Maria, 486).

The seventh theme was around resonance or contagion. Participants felt that groundedness and ungroundedness could be transferred between people. For example, someone may feel more grounded in the presence of someone who is also well-grounded; grounding can resonate with others. However, someone feeling very ungrounded themselves noticed how they could pass on that feeling to others; ungroundedness can be contagious, 'I'll feel like if I'm very ungrounded, I feel like it's contagious sometimes,' (Participant #012, 428).

Theme eight was about having a sense of humour. Participants talked about how maintaining a good sense of humour about what was happening for them helped them get through it. Also, this meant not taking themselves and what they were experiencing too seriously, 'I was going off doing this, that and the other, and talking to people about things whether they wanted to hear it or not <laughter>. I think I was always kind of a happy ungrounded. I was I was never kind of an angry ungrounded,' (Katie, 566).

Finally, theme number nine was about embodied metaphors. A common metaphor for feeling grounded was the roots of a tree, whilst those for feeling ungrounded were electricity and lightening. Often what started off as being an abstract metaphor to convey an experience could turn into an embodied experience. This was particularly evident in some of the artwork provided. During her own crisis, whilst hospitalised, Emma explained, 'So, I was also loaned a spirit spider and the spirit spider actually taught me how to weave intricate dreamcatchers made of copper, wire, wool, hazel, crystals, and feathers,' (Emma, 85). In weaving these dreamcatchers Emma was literally embodying her experience that she was unable to verbalise at the time, 'It always felt like that was the sort of far out, ungrounded part of myself and that by the time I got to the middle, that was like the inner self that felt a lot more grounded because I was kind of bringing myself in,' (Emma, 1028). Since his own spiritual crisis, John has practiced *Holotropic Breathwork* to help him integrate his experiences. Holotropic Breathwork is a practice designed by Stan Groff that uses rapid breathing to loud music to induce an altered state of consciousness. After these sessions John paints intricate mandalas to express his

insights, 'it's a discipline because what you do has to fit into the circle so it's big themes, big concepts but you have to find a way to fit them into context with everything else,' (John, 529). It is important to understand these comments as relating, not just to the creation of artwork, but also as metaphors for integrating the experiences into the experiencers' identities and lives.

In conclusion, grounding can be understood as both a state and a process. As a state, grounding involves a connection to self, world, and others, from a sense of self that is centred in the heart and integrated in mind, body, and emotions. This state can be reciprocated with others and can affect them. Conversely, a lack of groundedness, is experienced as a state of disconnection from self, world, and others. The self is experienced as unbalanced, porous, and poorly contained. Or, as not able to contain what is arising from within or being received from without. As a process, it involves a dynamic balance between containment and release and also of walking the Earth whilst maintaining a connection with the inner or spiritual realms. Grounding is not about symptom removal but is about cultivating an ongoing relationship with the experience. The frequency and intensity of the ungrounded state tend to become attenuated over time (Rush, Lancaster, and Lukoff, forthcoming).

Also, feeling grounded does not mean the cessation of pathological symptoms, rather it means learning to maintain a balance between the inner and outer or spiritual and everyday worlds. Spending time in nature, sharing their experiences with others, and finding ways to express or embody their experiences creatively, were the most common practices that facilitated grounding. Therapeutic practices were supported by the findings, although mental health services seem to be largely unaware of the concept of spiritual crisis. The response received from mental health professionals depends on the individual clinician that the experiencer encounters. It is hoped that therapists may find these nine themes helpful when working with clients to help them explore and integrate their spiritual crises.

4. Study Three: From Spiritual Crisis to Applied Practice - A Case Study in Peer-Support

The SCN evaluation study and the IPA study in grounding, had both pointed towards the importance of peer-support, connection, and relationships with others. In both studies, experiencers also presented an ambivalent view of mental health services. Therefore, the final study was a report on professional practice consisting of a case study of an experiencer who

had not used the mental health services during his crisis and had progressed to provide peer-support to others going through their own spiritual crises.

For the case study, the data comprised of two interview transcripts, and two book chapters that the experienter had previously published.. All of these data were analysed and illustrated by examples of his artwork, to understand the story of how he had travelled from spiritual crisis to peer-support. To do this, Rogers *et al.*'s (2023) simplified version of Joseph Campbell's (1949) the Hero's Journey model was used as a framework for a narrative analysis. The Hero's (or Heroine's) journey model includes three stages and a number of steps drawn from stories of global mythologies. The three main stages are an initial separation stage, a liminal stage, and a final return stage, with two key thresholds between the stages. The research questions were: 1) Why did the participant choose not to seek help from mainstream mental health services? 2) What other sources of support were utilised instead? And 3) How does this inform peer-support in practice?

John's story can only be briefly summarised here. For a full account, see his book chapter (Ablett, 2020) and view his artwork online at <https://holotropicmandalas.com>. Whilst at university studying symbolism, John experienced what, at the time, he referred to as enlightenment. He described this as a feeling of emptiness accompanied by an outpouring of love and a sense of paradox resolved in unity with the ground of being, 'It was a timeless period, outside time, it suddenly felt as though I had always been alive, always would be... this experience was the, was the ground of being as you could call it,' (John, interview a:line 149).

Following this mystical type of experience, John decided to leave university and travel the United Kingdom teaching as a guru. He met others who were interested in what he had to say, 'I began sofa surfing within this community of alternative middle-aged seekers... In exchange for offering me shelter and feeding me good food, they invited their friends to meet me informally in their homes where I would talk about my experience and newfound insights,' (Ablett, 2020, p. 17). John received a mixed response to his story. Some religious people were suspicious of it, others were sceptical, but some were supportive and interested, '...I felt genuinely heard and witnessed for the first time, able to have time and space to really talk about my experience and newfound insights,' (Ablett, 2020, p. 17). However, after about six months he began to doubt his mission, '... I began to feel trapped by other people's questions and feared their expectations of who they thought I was or could be,' (Ablett, 2020, p. 17) and, whilst giving a talk to a lecture theatre full of students, '...something inside me said: "This is not real,"' (Ablett, 2020, p. 18), he finally returned home to his family. On returning home

John watched events at Waco, where cult leader David Koresh and some of his followers perished before a fire engulfed their compound whilst under siege by the FBI, unfold on television and recognised the parallels with his own story.

He is emphatic about the transformational nature of what he experienced, 'I think it's hard to describe just how stark the before and after was, just how life-changing that experience was... To the extent where it's not even that it's an experience that happened to me. I was a different person before this experience,' (John, interview b: line 74). He began to see a psychotherapist and started a new role as an assistant in a children's playgroup. Later, he became a social worker, got married, and found a new home in the Holotropic Breathwork community, '...I knew that what I had experienced all those years ago had a reality to it that was simply different to the one I experienced on a daily basis. I felt that I had found my tribe,' (Ablett, 2020, p. 20). He took to painting mandalas as a way to integrate his experiences of being a barefoot guru and the experiences he accessed via breathwork, 'In these visual records,' says John, 'the elements of my psyche, my spiritual emergency and my outer life rub shoulders together like old family,' (Ablett, 2020, p. 22). Finally, John discovered the *Spiritual Crisis Network*, joined a peer-support group and eventually became a co-facilitator.

In conclusion, John had avoided mental health services as he was wary of how they may pathologise his experience and invalidate it. Instead, he used Holotropic Breathwork, mandala painting, and peer-support to integrate his experiences. His lived experience and subsequent integration work now helps him provide peer-support to others. The themes from the literature review, such as positive appraisals and a meaningful framework, and themes from the grounding study, in particular containment and release, a foot in both worlds, and cultivating a relationship with the experience, surfaced in the case study. It is hoped this case study will help to show that, although not without its risks, a non-medicalised approach to spiritual crises can be effective. Peer-support following a spiritual crisis can be an effective way to integrate one's experience. The value and importance of peer-support should stand alongside psychiatric interventions and one-to-one therapy in helping people travel from crisis to psychospiritual growth.

5. Discussion

All of the studies above resulted in a set of conclusions pertinent to each study. In addition to grounding methods and techniques, the importance of positive appraisals has been evidenced in the way that SCN volunteers respond to people contacting them about their own spiritual

crises. Secondly, it has been shown that grounding is an experiential state and process with multiple different aspects, many of which are clinically relevant. Therapists could utilise the nine themes identified when working with spiritual crisis clients to explore and integrate their experiences in a non-pathologising, phenomenological way that honours the experience and respects cultural understandings. Thirdly, the case study shows that people can navigate their way through a spiritual crisis without contacting mental health services, although there is still a lack of integration of spirituality into mental health care in general and poor awareness of spiritual crisis in particular.

Whilst psychiatric support, usually in the form of medication, may be helpful for some people in some circumstances, the studies above all emphasise the importance of peer-support, community, validation, and normalisation of unusual experiences, and a phenomenological approach to support.

However, there are also some important overarching points that relate to the study of RSEs from these three studies: firstly, the phenomenon of spiritual crisis reminds us that spiritual experiences are not always benign; secondly that such experiences have a long history within the world's religious traditions; thirdly, that these experiences have practical implications for mental health and wellbeing; and fourthly, that it is important for therapists and clinicians to focus on the meaning of these experiences for their clients in order to reduce suffering, rather than attempt to approach them as evidence for or against a particular spiritual or secular worldview. These points are discussed further below.

The first point is that spiritual and religious experiences are not always benign; some of them can challenge us mentally, emotionally, and physically. A minority of RSEs have previously been categorised as malign (Jakobsen, 1999) and some NDEs are known to be negative in content (Zaleski, 1988). Furthermore, these types of challenging spiritual experiences are embedded in daily life, they do not occur in a spiritual vacuum but are intimately interconnected with our lives and the world around us. Rarely, if ever, does someone present with purely spiritual difficulties that are not also connected with their worldly troubles. It is easy to overlook these difficult spiritual experiences and focus only on the benign examples, of which there are many. Although the response rate for the SCN evaluation study was low 107 (7.2%) it is still the case that 1,480 people felt the need to contact the SCN during that ten-year period. Presumably then, the concept 'spiritual crisis' had some kind of meaning and relevance for them.

Secondly, the world's mainstream religious traditions have all addressed suffering and often explored the controversial relationship between mysticism and madness. Obvious examples are, the suffering of Job in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the Dark Night of the Soul (St John of the Cross, 2003; Robertson, 2018, Dura-Vila and Dein, 2009), the association of djinn with illness (Dein and Illaiee, 2013), and the dramatic otherworldly visions of prophets, such as Ezekiel and the behaviour of mystics (Lukoff, 1985), such as Margery Kempe (1985), whilst the Jewish mystics warned against the study and practise of mysticism as it could drive one to madness (Sweeney, 2004).

Historically the modern West has seen a growing division between the religious and the secular, and more recently a distinction between the religious and the spiritual. Both of these divisions have their merits but, it seems to me, they may also have their dangers. A narrow materialistic focus ignores or devalues a significant aspect of being human, whilst spiritual practise devoid of any religious framework risks spiritual bypassing, a lack of community, and no map to guide us should we encounter difficulties on our path. Many of the people who contact the SCN have no particular or strong religious background and may often fall into the category of spiritual but not religious (Parsons, 2020).

Thirdly, at the heart of the phenomena of spiritual crisis is the debate about how to distinguish a spiritual emergency from psychosis or schizophrenia (Spittles, 2020). This debate has its roots in the related question of how to differentiate religious experience from psychopathology, which is a debate too large and complex to discuss here. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the different cultural perspectives and tensions at play as these form the background to how we respond to spiritual crises in the modern world. It raises the pressing question of how other contemporary or historical cultures understand these kinds of experience in their own contexts. The research into RSEs has much to offer here, including the work of Schmidt and Leonardi (2020) on spirituality and wellbeing, Schmidt and Huskinson (2010) on spirit possession and trance, Bragdon (2012) on spiritualism in Brazil, Tobert (2014; 2017) on spirituality and psychiatry in India, and even Shushan's (2018) work on Near-Death Experiences in historical cultures around the globe, amongst many more.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM) used by psychiatrists in the US includes a code for Spiritual or Religious Problem (Turner *et al.*, 1995) that was contributed by transpersonal psychologists. The intention was not to reduce RSEs to psychopathology, but to help clinicians distinguish the two categories of experience. In the United Kingdom, some clinical psychologists are more open to the idea of spiritual crisis as a meaningful and culturally

sensitive way to interpret what people experience (Cooke and Brett, 2020). The United Kingdom *Royal College of Psychiatrists Spirituality Special Interest* group is also open to and supportive of spiritual crisis (Cook, 2009). Nevertheless, these remain minority views that, despite publications offering advice on integrating spirituality into therapy (e.g. Vieten and Scammell, 2015), have not yet been adopted into mainstream mental health clinical practise.

Finally, though, accounts of these experiences present us with an ontological challenge and, for therapists and clinicians, in a very practical way. How should they respond to, and work with, their client's stories of spiritual crisis? Not all therapists will share their clients' beliefs, and many may feel uncomfortable about discussing spirituality and religion with their clients. One way to approach this challenge is for therapists to adopt a constructionist epistemology (Thayne, 1998). They should focus on the meaning and effects of what people experience and the narrative and cultural frameworks they adopt in order to integrate them. In the context of therapeutic interventions for spiritual crisis, it can be argued that the primary purpose of the framework is not necessarily to describe an objective reality but rather to understand a subjective experience. This is an important distinction as, in many cases, RSEs are considered as evidence for a particular ontological claim (Franks-Davies, 1989). However, when struggling to integrate challenging spiritual experiences, ontological arguments are not a focus and instead healing is achieved by validation, normalisation, and an open and empathic response from one's peers within a like-minded community of support. John, my participant from the case study, was keen to point out that maintaining the openness to different frameworks is important to allow the experience to continue to unfold without becoming too rigid or dogmatic. If he tries to force his experience into a frame, '... it just disappears, and the meaning drains away from it. But if you hold it very lightly, you can subject it to all kinds of different frames and it will respond to that and deepen,' (John, b:456).

6. Conclusion

Spiritual crises have a long history and continue to happen in the modern West. Therefore, there is a need for support to assist experiencers to navigate their way through to successful outcomes. For therapists struggling to relate to spiritual crisis, adopting a constructionist approach to therapy may help them to focus on the power of beliefs and stories rather than whether or not the story itself can be validated as true. Finally, it is important to emphasise that these profound experiences, be they benign or not, should not be automatically pathologised, even if they do result in distress. However, they should also not simply be viewed

as important due to their evidential value of any mystical or metaphysical realities. We may never agree on how to distinguish mysticism or spiritual crises from psychosis, or the nature and extent of the evidence for our spiritual and religious beliefs, but what is important is that we continue to have these experiences and to make space for them in our lives in the modern world, where spirituality is part of being human.

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Chumaxian and the Construction of Subjectivity in Northeast Chinese Fox-Spirit Worship

Wanting He

College of Communication Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University,
1 U-Thong Nok Road, Dusit, Bangkok 10300, Thailand.
Email: wanting@wantinghe.com ; Tel: +86 18613212313

Abstract:

This article examines *Chumaxian* (出马仙), a fox-spirit mediumship tradition in Northeast China, through Lacanian structural psychoanalysis and cultural functionalism. Drawing on a qualitative secondary analysis of published ethnographic materials, it asks how initiation reorganises visionary experiences, bodily sensations, and personal crises as a culturally recognised vocation. The article argues that *Chumaxian* may operate in a manner comparable to Lacan's *sinthome*: a stabilising structure that links the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real through ritual practice, interpretation, and social recognition. This comparison does not reduce spirituality to pathology. Instead, it shows how a non-Western symbolic system can sustain subjective coherence while exceeding Western clinical categories. Cultural functionalism complements this account by explaining the tradition's social persistence, moral authority, and adaptability. Together, the two frameworks clarify how *Chumaxian* organises individual experience and reproduces religious legitimacy under changing social and technological conditions in contemporary China. The analysis remains attentive to practitioners' own interpretive terms and contexts.

Keywords: Lacanian psychoanalysis; Animal-spirit mediumship; Chumaxian; Spirit possession; Ordinary psychosis

1. Introduction

Spirit possession has a long ethnographic history across societies, and local variants—fox-spirit worship in China, *zār* in northeastern Africa, Korean *mudang* rites, and Mongolian and Manchu shamanism—share certain structural features even as they differ in their cosmologies (Boddy, 1994; Lewis, 2003). Recent studies of contemporary Chinese spirit-medium traditions in Southeast Asia likewise demonstrate the continued social and ritual importance of spirit communication in modern Sinophone communities (Graham, 2020). The present article is concerned with one such tradition in contemporary Northeast China: *Chumaxian* (出马仙), literally meaning 'going out as a spirit-horse'. *Chumaxian* is a spirit-medium practice in which a chosen practitioner—known colloquially as a *dizi* (弟子) or *xianjia* (仙家) disciple—allows one of several animal immortals, most often the Fox Immortal (*Huxian* 胡仙/狐仙) or Weasel Immortal

(*Huangxian* 黄仙), to possess them in order to diagnose illness, resolve misfortune, and mediate between clients and the unseen world (Hai, 2019; Jia, 2021). Rooted in local shamanic traditions (Guo, 2001) and shaped by several centuries of contact with Daoist ritual techniques and Buddhist devotional vocabulary, *Chumaxian* is practised across the three northeastern provinces and has migrated onto online platforms where mediums offer consultations by livestream (Hai, 2019). English-language scholarship similarly identifies *Chumaxian* as a visible contemporary form of animal-spirit mediumship in Northeast China, characterised by ritual healing, spirit possession, and localised religious authority (Deng, 2014). Comparable transformations have been observed in overseas Chinese spirit-medium traditions, where ritual authority circulates through digital media, urban networks, and mediated forms of religious intimacy (Graham, 2020).

Two features of *Chumaxian* make it a compelling site for psychoanalytic inquiry. First, one does not choose to become a medium; one is chosen. Candidates typically describe severe disorientation—disturbed sleep, vivid visionary experiences, sensations of being watched or spoken to, and a collapse of ordinary social functioning—which is resolved only when an established medium recognises the crisis as a ‘connection with the immortals’ (*xianyuan* 仙缘) and inducts the candidate into the tradition (Jia, 2021, pp. 15–22). Second, after induction, candidates often report a return to coherent everyday life. The crisis is no longer interpreted as illness but is reorganised as a spiritual vocation within the tradition (Jia, 2021, pp. 17–22; Hai, 2019).

This dual movement—from disorganising experience to a socially legitimate role—invites comparison with Jacques Lacan’s structural account of psychosis and, in particular, his concept of the *sinthome*. Lacan introduced the term in his 1975–1976 Seminar to designate a fourth element that knots together the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real (Lacan, 2005). A terminological note is essential here. When this article speaks of ‘psychosis’ or the ‘psychotic subject’, it uses these terms in their Lacanian structural sense, not as DSM-style clinical diagnoses. Following Miller and the contributors to the 1998 Antibes Convention (Miller *et al.*, 1999), the article draws specifically on ordinary psychosis (*psychose ordinaire*): a subjective structure in which the paternal metaphor is not fully operative, but the subject nonetheless maintains a workable relation to the social world through singular supplements rather than overt clinical ‘triggering’ (Miller, 2009; Skriabine, 2009). Psychotic structure therefore refers here to a mode of subjective organisation rather than a psychiatric diagnosis. Visionary experiences, voices, or a sense of being addressed by a non-human Other are treated as meaningful subjective experiences

rather than merely pathological symptoms.

Situating *Chumaxian* within the framework of psychosis has three benefits. First, it avoids reducing folk religion to a symptom and treats alternative modes of subjective organisation as structures in their own right rather than inferior forms of neurosis. Second, it allows *Chumaxian* initiation to be considered as a stabilising symbolic structure: ritual language, lineage, deities, and somatic techniques may bring otherwise disruptive experience into a more coherent relation with a symbolic universe. Third, it brings Lacanian theory into dialogue with cultural-functional approaches (Malinowski, 1944, 1948; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Turner, 1967). Functionalism explains why the social structure permits and reproduces the medium's role, whereas Lacanian analysis asks why particular subjects assume that role and what ritual does at the level of subjectivity.

The argument proceeds in four parts. The first situates *Chumaxian* and fox-spirit worship within the local history of shamanism and the Daoist-Buddhist syncretism of Northeast Chinese folk religion. The second examines the chosen candidate, the crisis of initiation, and its ritual resolution through published ethnographic material, particularly Jia (2021), Hai (2019), and Yue (2014). The third develops the Lacanian interpretation, moving from the three registers and the Name-of-the-Father to the *sinthome*. The final part returns to cultural functionalism and considers the tradition's adaptation to contemporary digital environments.

2. Sources and analytical approach

This article is based on a qualitative secondary analysis of published ethnographic and historical materials on *Chumaxian* and related fox-spirit traditions in Northeast China. The primary analytical corpus includes Chinese-language ethnographic studies, historical studies of fox-spirit worship, and scholarship on contemporary ritual practice, including Jia (2021), Hai (2019), Kang (2006), Yue (2014), and Guo (2001; 2006), supplemented by English-language studies on spirit possession, local religion, and animal-spirit worship in Chinese contexts (e.g., Deng, 2014; Overmyer, 2009; Boddy, 1994). These sources include multiple forms of primary material, such as field interviews, ritual observations, locally transmitted narratives, and historical documentation, which are here treated as ethnographic evidence rather than as transparent factual records. Jia's (2021) fieldwork provides several especially detailed first-person interview accounts and is therefore cited for illustrative case material, but the argument developed here does not depend on a single source; rather, it emerges from a comparative reading across multiple published studies and historical accounts.

Methodologically, this article combines close textual interpretation of ethnographic narratives with Lacanian structural analysis, treating ritual discourse, initiation narratives, and mediumistic practice as materials through which subjective organisation becomes analytically legible.

3. Chumaxian and fox-spirit worship in Northeast China

The word *Chumaxian* is composed of three morphemes: *chu* (出, 'to go out'), *ma* (马, 'horse'), and *xian* (仙, 'immortal'). The medium is metaphorically the 'horse' that the immortal 'goes out' on—that is, the body through which the deity travels into the human social world. The term is contemporary and vernacular; it belongs to the popular religious vocabulary of the three northeastern provinces (Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning) and neighbouring parts of Inner Mongolia, where it names both the medium and, by extension, the tradition itself (Jia, 2021, pp. 10–15). The immortals in question are predominantly the 'five great families' (*wu da jia* 五大家) of animal spirits—fox (*hu* 狐), weasel (*huang* 黄), hedgehog (*bai* 白), snake (*liu* 柳), and rat (*hui* 灰)—with the fox and the weasel occupying the central positions in the pantheon (Kang, 2006, pp. 3–15; Hai, 2019).

The pronunciation of *Huxian* (胡仙) for the fox deity is itself a ritual convention. Practitioners substitute the homophonous character *hu* 胡 (a surname and an ethnonym) for the graph 狐 ('fox') as an act of ritual avoidance, on the principle that directly naming the spirit risks profanity (Hai, 2019). The fox cult is deeply stratified: in some households, a domestic altar and incense are maintained for protection, healing, and prosperity; in others, a dedicated medium conducts séances for clients; in still others, small temples serve a neighbourhood clientele (Kang, 2006, pp. 75–110). Fox-immortal worship has been ethnographically documented in North China since at least the early twentieth century (Li, 1948) and has been the subject of sustained historical and comparative study in recent decades (Kang, 2006; Hai, 2019). One of the few extended English-language studies of contemporary animal-spirit mediumship in Northeast China is Claire Deng's (2014) research on Liaoning spirit mediums, which similarly describes the integration of possession, healing, and local cosmology within everyday religious life. Recent literary and historical scholarship further demonstrates that the fox occupies a uniquely unstable position within the Chinese cultural imagination, simultaneously associated with seduction, danger, spiritual power, and moral ambiguity across late imperial narrative traditions (Huntington, 2020).

Although *Chumaxian* is often described—accurately in broad outline—as a local adaptation of shamanism (Ding, Zhao and Bai, 1989, pp. 369–392; Guo, 2001), the tradition as practised today is a syncretic formation rather than an unbroken inheritance from pre-modern Tungusic shamanism. Its ritual frame retains shamanic elements: the medium’s body as the site of a deity’s descent, song and rhythmic speech to induce and regulate possession, and the medium’s role as healer, diviner, and interpreter of misfortune (Guo, 2001, p. 261; Yue, 2014, pp. 134–137). At the same time, *Chumaxian* has absorbed Daoist ritual vocabulary—including talismans (*fulu* 符篆), taboos, and a celestial bureaucracy—and a popular Buddhist lexicon in which tutelary deities may be addressed as ‘buddhas’ (*fo* 佛) in the sense of protecting deities rather than doctrinal Buddhist figures (Kobori, 1949, p. 30; Guo, 2006). This is a practical pluralism that draws on locally available ritual technologies and embeds spirit worship within broader, socially recognisable religious vocabularies. Practitioners also describe ritual knowledge as transmitted through dreams or nocturnal encounters with the Fox Immortal (*Huxian*) and Weasel Immortal (*Huangxian*), who instruct mediums in healing, divination, and ritual procedure (Hai, 2019).

A brief historical context is useful. Animal-spirit imaginaries have deep roots in Chinese literature: the fox is already a richly ambivalent figure in the Six Dynasties collection *Soushenji* 搜神记 (In Search of the Supernatural), compiled by Gan Bao in the mid-fourth century (Gan, 1996), and the long history of fox tales through the Tang, Song, and Qing dynasties—culminating in the tales of Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai zhiyi*—has been analysed in detail by Kang (2006). This dual perspective also aligns with broader studies of Chinese local religion, which emphasise that ritual efficacy in popular religious practice depends less on doctrinal coherence than on communal recognition, performative success, and symbolic usefulness in everyday life (Chau, 2006; Dean, 1993). Moreover, recent studies of witchcraft fears, spirit familiars, and animal-associated ritual practices in imperial China likewise demonstrate the long historical persistence of anxieties and sacred imaginaries surrounding non-human spiritual agents (Ter Haar, 2025). Recent scholarship has further emphasised the importance of fox imagery in late imperial Chinese narrative culture, where fox spirits frequently appear as morally ambiguous beings situated between danger, seduction, spiritual power, and transcendence (Huntington, 2020). In parallel, a lineage of ritual specialists known as *fangshi* (方士, ‘masters of methods’) is attested from the late Warring States and early imperial periods onward, combining divinatory, medical, and magical-technical expertise in ways that would later be partly absorbed into institutional Daoism (DeWoskin, 1983; Harper, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). The

contemporary *Chumaxian* medium is not a direct descendant of the *fangshi*, but the functional niche—an itinerant or semi-institutional specialist who mediates misfortune for lay clients—has been continuously reproduced in Chinese society for well over two millennia.

Within this composite tradition, the spirit-possession séance—sometimes called *jiangshen* (降神) or *futi* (附体)—remains the ritual core. Generic descriptions present a sequence in which the medium invokes the deity, enters possession through chant and bodily performance, delivers the deity's speech, and returns to ordinary consciousness after the deity's departure (Guo, 2006). Contemporary *Chumaxian* practice often attenuates these performative elements: the medium summons the presiding immortal, yields their body and voice, addresses the client's concern, and closes the séance when the deity departs (Guo, 2006; Jia, 2021, pp. 25–40). In urban and online settings, the sequence may be compressed further, with verbal exchange becoming the salient ritual event. The medium's authority ultimately depends less on theological coherence than on perceived efficacy (*lingyan* 灵验), particularly in healing, divination, and the resolution of misfortune.

4. The chosen fox-spirit medium

A defining feature of *Chumaxian* is that the vocation is not elected. One does not simply apprentice oneself to a teacher and acquire the role through ordinary ritual training; rather, one is believed to be chosen by the immortals themselves. In practitioners' own accounts, this selection is retrospectively recognised through an 'immortal connection' (*xianyuan* 仙缘), a condition understood as the necessary basis for mediumship (Jia, 2021, pp. 15–22). Unlike institutional religious training, becoming a *Chumaxian* is framed not as voluntary initiation but as an unavoidable spiritual calling.

Chinese ritual specialists who come to their calling through involuntary ecstatic experiences are well documented. Schiffeler (1976, pp. 21–22), writing about early Chinese ritual and medical practitioners, distinguishes those struck by the 'spirit'—described as trance-inclined, visionary, or ecstatic—from practitioners who acquire their art through apprenticeship or inheritance. Eliade (1992, p. 45) similarly describes shamanic vocation as a movement from a crisis of consciousness to the ritual incorporation of that crisis into a social identity. Anthropological studies of possession religions also emphasise the involuntary character of the experience that initiates a vocation and the close relation between affliction and calling (Bourguignon, 1976; Lewis, 2003). The analytical point is therefore not only the experience itself but the context that reorders it.

In *Chumaxian* practice, this phenomenon is particularly evident. Ethnographic materials drawn from Jia's (2021) fieldwork, together with broader studies of Northeast Chinese spirit-medium traditions (Hai, 2019; Deng, 2014), describe candidates who, often during adolescence or early adulthood, undergo periods of profound subjective disorientation. These experiences may include insomnia, visionary encounters, auditory presences, altered states of consciousness, sudden emotional outbursts, bodily discomfort without clear biomedical explanation, and an increasing difficulty sustaining ordinary social routines. Families frequently seek biomedical assistance first, yet clinical consultation often produces either no clear diagnosis or broad psychiatric labels such as 'hysteria' or 'mental instability.' At this point, an established medium may reinterpret the crisis as evidence that the individual has been 'chosen by the immortals' and should formally accept the *Chumaxian* vocation. Kleinman's (1980) distinction between disease and illness is particularly relevant here, since *Chumaxian* practice reframes distress not primarily as biomedical pathology, but as a culturally meaningful form of affliction situated within a wider symbolic and spiritual order. Rather than suppressing these experiences, the ritual system provides an interpretive framework through which they become intelligible and socially recognisable.

One of Jia's interlocutors, a 41-year-old female medium, describes the period preceding her initiation (Jia, 2021, p. 17):

At that time, I felt as if someone was always standing beside me, watching me, and it made me feel terrified. I would talk nonsense, speaking incoherently, and felt like I was being controlled. I would suddenly laugh, cry, or jump around without any reason. I didn't feel hungry even if I didn't eat, and I didn't feel thirsty even if I didn't drink water. I couldn't sleep at night, and I constantly felt like someone was talking to me. My whole state was like I had gone mad. After a few days, my family rushed me from Tianjin to the Shulan Psychiatric Hospital for treatment. The doctors there said it wasn't a physical illness but rather a case of hysteria. Later, they asked around and found someone who told them that I was meant to become a *Chumaxian*.

What is particularly striking in this and similar narratives is the extent to which subjective disorganisation becomes retrospectively meaningful after initiation. A mentor—often called a *lingluren* (领路人, 'road-leader')—identifies the candidate's presiding immortals, explains ritual taboos and obligations, prescribes altar arrangements and devotional practices, and gradually introduces the candidate into the tradition's symbolic universe. Following formal initiation,

experiences previously understood as terrifying or pathological are reinterpreted as signs of spiritual sensitivity and the immortals' presence.

Within the emic logic of the tradition, refusal carries consequences. Candidates who resist the calling are believed to remain afflicted by physical discomfort, psychological instability, recurring misfortune, or disturbances affecting themselves and their families. Acceptance, by contrast, is said to restore balance and end the crisis. Comparable 'affliction-until-acceptance' patterns occur in other spirit-possession traditions, where illness or misfortune becomes the route to ritual vocation (see Lewis, 2003; Boddy, 1994).

A structural reading of this process follows Eliade's observation that shamanic crises are culturally organised experiences rather than merely pathological abnormalities reducible to psychiatric classification (Eliade, 1992, p. 45). *Chumaxian* initiation functions as a symbolic reordering mechanism: it gathers fragmented and distressing experiences into a coherent cosmological framework that provides explanation, identity, and social function. Through ritual naming, lineage affiliation, possession practices, and ongoing devotional activity, the candidate's crisis is transformed into a socially intelligible vocation. From a strictly biomedical perspective, this collective symbolic work often remains invisible. From a Lacanian perspective, however, it is precisely this transformation of disorganisation into structure that makes the phenomenon analytically significant.

5. Structure, signifier, and the sinthome: a Lacanian reading

The theoretical framework adopted here is Lacanian structural psychoanalysis, particularly the later seminars and post-1998 discussions of ordinary psychosis. Because these concepts have specific meanings that are not always familiar outside psychoanalysis, this section introduces the terms required for the analysis of *Chumaxian* practice.

Lacan differentiates three registers through which subjective experience is organised: the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real (Lacan, 1993, pp. 17, 60). The Imaginary concerns images, identity, and the cohesion of the ego; the Symbolic concerns language, kinship, law, and networks of signifiers; and the Real names what resists symbolisation and returns as rupture, impossibility, or excess. In Lacan's account of neurosis, the Name-of-the-Father (*Nom-du-Père*) is not the empirical father but a signifier that supports the subject's insertion into a mediated symbolic order. In psychosis, this paternal signifier is foreclosed—that is, excluded from integration into the Symbolic (Lacan, 1993, pp. 45–47). Foreclosure does not mean that 'the father' simply disappears. What has not been integrated may return in elementary phenomena such as voices,

excessive signification, a sense of being addressed from outside, or the certainty that surrounding events refer personally to the subject (Lacan, 1993, pp. 50–75; Vanheule, 2017).

Classical Lacanian theory often discusses this structure through overt psychosis. Later developments, especially Jacques-Alain Miller's concept of ordinary psychosis, complicate that picture. Ordinary psychosis refers to subjects for whom a stabilising paternal metaphor is absent but who maintain a relatively stable social life through alternative forms of symbolic compensation (Miller, 2009). They may work, sustain relationships, and participate in ordinary social life without manifesting overt psychiatric psychosis; structural instability appears only in subtle and discrete signs. In this article, 'psychosis' and 'psychotic structure' refer exclusively to this Lacanian definition, not to biomedical diagnosis. The argument does not claim that *Chumaxian* practitioners are mentally ill. Lacanian theory is used instead to describe how ritual action may stabilise subjective experience. Related discussions of signification, subjectivity, and psychotic structure also appear in Chinese-language engagements with Lacan, Derrida, and post-Heideggerian theory (Shen, 2010).

The most pertinent concept is Lacan's *sinthome*. In *Seminar XXIII*, Lacan reconceives subjective structure through Borromean topology, in which three rings are linked so that removing one releases the others (Lacan, 2005). The *sinthome* acts as a fourth ring that can secure the knot when the Name-of-the-Father no longer performs this function. Unlike a symptom understood as something to be relieved, the *sinthome* names a singular stabilising function. It may take the form of repetitive activity, somatic discipline, artistic work, ritual, or attachment to a specific symbolic structure. Figure 1 presents the three registers schematically.

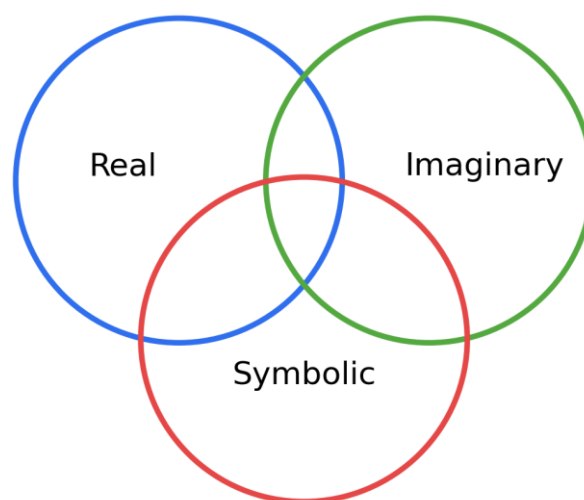


Figure 1: The three registers in Lacanian theory. Source: author's diagram based on Lacan (1993, 2005).

From this angle, three features of *Chumaxian* come into view. First, pre-initiation experiences resemble what Lacanian theory describes as elementary phenomena: voices, sensed presences, over-invested events, and disruptions of everyday social reality. Second, *Chumaxian* provides a structured symbolic universe within which such experiences can be named and interpreted. Immortal lineages, ritual obligations, possession, taboos, altars, dream interpretation, and ritual language organise otherwise uncategorised experience within a coherent cosmology. The tradition does not erase visionary experience; it reworks it as meaningful and socially legitimate. Third, this symbolic universe is maintained through repeated practice. Offerings, séances, prayer, and dream communication sustain the medium's relation to the immortals, so stability depends not on a cure but on continuing symbolic performance. This can also be understood as embodied ritualisation, in which symbolic authority is produced through repeated practice rather than belief alone (Bell, 1992).

The possession ritual is particularly significant in this process. As described earlier, possession is staged through the invocation of a deity, the medium's altered state and speech in the immortal's voice, and a return to ordinary consciousness when the deity departs (Guo, 2006). Contemporary practitioners may describe possession as a temporary merging of human and divine agency in which the distinction between the two becomes unstable. The ritual therefore does more than represent a belief: it repeatedly enacts the symbolic position through which experience is stabilised.

From the perspective of Lacanian theory, *Chumaxian* initiation may be understood as a culturally inherited form of *sinthomatic* organisation. The tradition supplies names, cosmology, lineage, and embodied ritual through which otherwise unbound experiences can be brought into relation. Subjective disorganisation is thereby reorganised as a socially recognisable vocation. This reading does not pathologise spirituality; it emphasises the work performed by a non-Western ritual framework that psychiatric categories alone do not fully explain.

The boundary of this claim must remain clear. The article does not argue that all spirit mediums are psychotic in Lacan's structural sense, nor that every possession tradition should be interpreted through psychoanalysis. Its narrower claim is that *Chumaxian* initiation may be structurally analogous to *sinthomatic* stabilisation: both organise disruptive experience through a supplementary symbolic form. This analogy helps explain why initiation can reorganise experiences that were previously unbearable or chaotic without treating the two processes as identical. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate this proposed relation schematically.

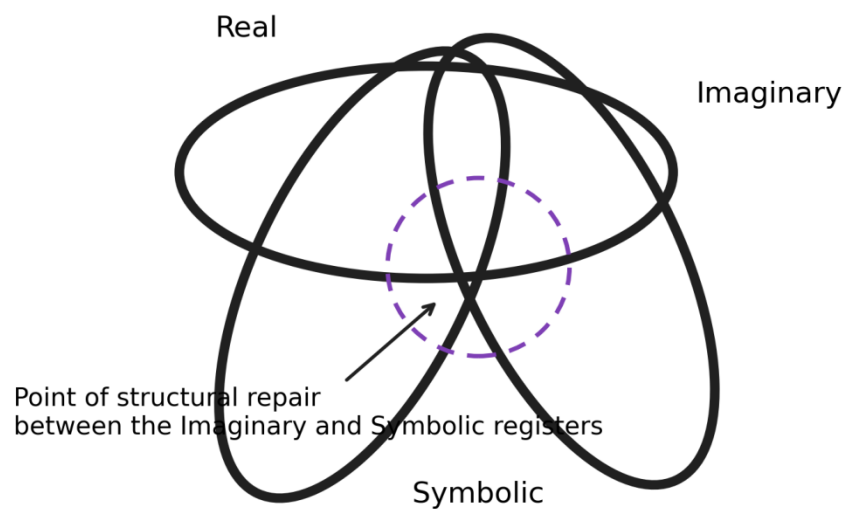


Figure 2: The Borromean knot and structural repair. The dashed circle marks a point at which the Imaginary and Symbolic registers are reconnected. Source: author's diagram based on Lacan (2005).

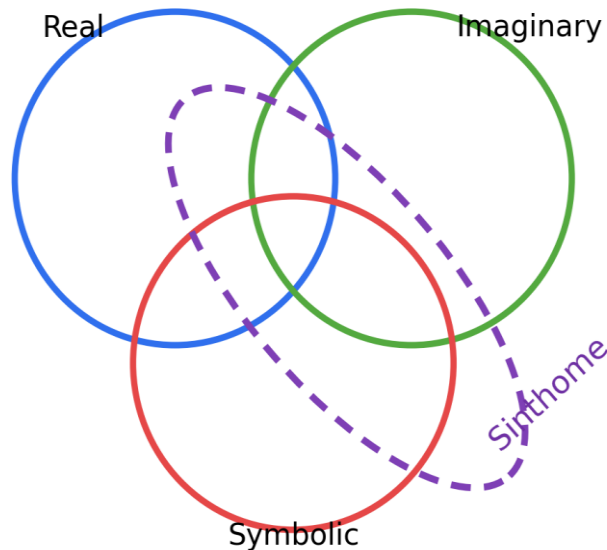


Figure 3: The sinthome as a fourth knotting element. Source: author's diagram based on Lacan (2005).

A further implication concerns the medium's relation to belief and certainty. Ethnographic accounts consistently note that *Chumaxian* practitioners experience visions, dreams, spirit communication, and possession states as immediately real rather than metaphorical (Jia, 2021). In Lacanian terms, this relation to signification differs from the neurotic structure, where

meaning is mediated through doubt, displacement, and symbolic ambiguity. Here, the signifier is often experienced with a greater degree of certainty and directness (Shen, 2006, p. 42). What *Chumaxian* practice provides is not the elimination of this certainty, but a socially shared symbolic environment within which it can be collectively recognised and regulated rather than remaining isolated and destabilising.

Finally, the *sinthome* should not be understood only as an individual artistic creation of the kind Lacan famously associated with James Joyce. *Chumaxian* suggests that the *sinthome* may also operate as a culturally transmitted ritual form. The stabilising knot is reproduced collectively through repeated ritual practice, initiation, possession, and symbolic participation within an inherited cosmology. In this sense, *Chumaxian* mediumship can be understood not merely as private belief, but as a socially organised mode of subjective stabilisation sustained through ritual continuity and communal recognition.

6. Cultural function and the transformations of Chumaxian

The Lacanian account developed above concerns subjective structure: how *Chumaxian* initiation may reorganise and stabilise a practitioner's experience. It does not, by itself, explain why the tradition persists and adapts in contemporary China. Cultural functionalism therefore provides a complementary framework for examining the social work performed by ritual and religion.

From a functionalist perspective, *Chumaxian* offers ways to explain and symbolically manage uncertainty, pain, and misfortune. North Chinese local religion operates through open and localised networks of lay healing, ethical guidance, spirit mediation, and practical problem-solving rather than only through formal institutions (Overmyer, 2009). Malinowski (1944, 1948) argues that religious institutions help people address crises beyond ordinary practical control while sustaining social solidarity. *Chumaxian* séances perform a comparable function. Illness, financial trouble, family conflict, infertility, bad luck, and accidents become intelligible within a cosmology that attributes misfortune to neglected immortals, disturbed ancestors or graves, disrupted *fengshui*, karmic consequences, or unfulfilled ritual obligations. These explanations also make intervention possible through offerings, altar care, spirit-medium consultation, divination, and related ritual practices.

Secondly, mediums often serve as arbiters of morality in their communities. Rituals may often serve to re-install the group norms through pronouncement (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). The pronouncement made by the *Chumaxian* medium during consultation often emphasises

the importance of filial devotion towards parents, responsibilities for brothers and sisters, and the role of the married person in a family or the required behaviour for single individuals. The power of the pronouncement is derived not from the authority of the office but from the speech of the immortal god who possesses the medium. Therefore, the séance is not only a stage of healing or divination, but a way to establish and regulate the morals of the community.

Turner (1967) similarly approaches ritual as symbolic transformation. Possession creates a setting in which fear, doubt, shame, and anxiety can be articulated and acted upon. The client's distress is placed within a spirit narrative and a wider cosmological order, while the immortal's speech offers diagnosis, guidance, or moral explanation. Ritual thus concentrates diffuse emotional tension into a shared symbolic process.

These functionalist insights should not be conflated with the Lacanian framework because they operate at different analytical levels. Cultural functionalism explains the social persistence of *Chumaxian*: the needs it addresses, the practices through which it is reproduced, and the sources of its legitimacy. The Lacanian account concerns subjective structuration and the stabilising work that ritual may perform for particular practitioners. The two models are methodologically complementary rather than competing explanations.

Recent ethnographic research suggests that *Chumaxian* practice has been reworked under digital conditions. Whereas earlier generations of mediums worked mainly within local communities and kinship networks, some practitioners now maintain public profiles through livestreams, short videos, and social-media messaging services (Hai, 2019). Consultations may take place through online video-conferencing platforms or private text-based chats, while online reviews supplement word-of-mouth reputation. A medium may, for example, receive a client's account by private message, conduct a video consultation, and recommend offerings, altar care, or other ritual actions. Despite the change in medium, the explanatory logic remains recognisable: illness, family conflict, financial difficulty, and requests for protection are interpreted through relations among immortals, fate, karma, and ritual obligation.

The digital transformation of *Chumaxian* demonstrates the flexibility of folk belief under changing social conditions. Spirit-medium practices have not disappeared under modernity or scientific rationality; they have been reorganised through new technologies. Domestic altars, incense, dreams, possession narratives, and kinship networks now coexist with livestreamed consultations, private messaging, and video calls. This adaptability is consistent with a functionalist account of religious resilience: the tradition persists because its rituals change in response to new social environments while continuing to address recognisable needs.

From the Lacanian perspective, this displacement also matters. If the *sinthome* is understood as an operation of symbolic stabilisation rather than a fixed object, the material form of ritual can change without necessarily altering that operation. A medium who consults through livestream or video call may perform a function comparable to one who conducts possession before a domestic altar. What is preserved is not every ritual detail but a mode of stabilisation organised through symbolic performance, spiritual instruction, and recognition.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined *Chumaxian* mediumship and fox-spirit worship in Northeast China through a dialogue between Lacanian structural psychoanalysis and cultural functionalism. Drawing on published ethnographic materials, it has argued that *Chumaxian* initiation reorganises experiences of subjective disorganisation through a culturally recognised symbolic system centred on spirit possession, ritual practice, lineage relations, and communication with animal immortals. Rather than treating these practices merely as superstition or pathological belief, the study has approached them as meaningful systems of symbolic organisation embedded within a broader folk-religious cosmology.

Using Lacan's concept of the *sinthome*, the article proposes that *Chumaxian* practice may function as a stabilising symbolic structure through which otherwise disruptive experiences are integrated into socially recognised forms of identity and ritual vocation. Importantly, this argument does not classify practitioners according to biomedical psychiatric categories. The discussion of psychosis throughout the article refers specifically to Lacanian structural theory rather than clinical diagnosis. In this framework, the focus is not on pathology but on the ways symbolic systems organise subjective experience and sustain coherence.

At the same time, the article has argued that psychoanalytic interpretation alone is insufficient for understanding the persistence of *Chumaxian* within contemporary Chinese society. Cultural functionalism clarifies how the tradition continues to provide explanatory models for suffering, mechanisms of communal integration, moral guidance, and ritual responses to uncertainty. The conjunction of these two frameworks allows *Chumaxian* to be understood simultaneously as a system of subjective stabilisation and as a socially adaptive religious institution. The persistence of fox-spirit belief and spirit-medium practice in contemporary China also reflects the remarkable historical continuity of Chinese traditions surrounding invisible agency, spirit affliction, and ritual mediation documented across both imperial and modern contexts (Ter Haar, 2025).

The study also contributes to broader discussions concerning the relationship between non-Western religious practice and psychoanalytic theory. *Chumaxian* does not merely serve as an illustration of Lacanian concepts; rather, it complicates and expands them by demonstrating how symbolic stabilisation may emerge collectively through transmitted ritual systems rather than solely through individual artistic or symptomatic formations. In this sense, Northeast Chinese spirit-medium traditions offer an important site for reconsidering the cultural dimensions of subjectivity, symbolic structure, and ritual embodiment.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The present discussion is based primarily on secondary analysis of published Chinese-language ethnographic materials, especially Jia's (2021) fieldwork. Further first-hand ethnographic research with contemporary *Chumaxian* practitioners—particularly those operating within digital environments—would provide a more detailed understanding of initiation, ritual performance, dream transmission, possession experiences, and changing forms of authority. Comparative work with related possession traditions, including Korean *mudang* practices, Manchu shamanic survivals, and Mongolian ritual specialists, would also help clarify which structural features are culturally specific and which may reflect broader regional patterns.

Within Religious Studies, the present argument is intended not as a replacement for phenomenological, historical, or theological interpretations of spirit possession, but as an additional analytical perspective through which the continuing vitality of these traditions may be understood. *Chumaxian* demonstrates that spirit possession remains not merely a remnant of pre-modern superstition, but an evolving symbolic practice through which questions of suffering, identity, morality, and subjectivity continue to be negotiated in contemporary society.

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Appendix A. Supplementary Ethnographic Material from Jia (2021)

Case A: Everyday Identity and Ritual Embodiment in Chumaxian Practice

The following interview excerpt, cited from Jia's (2021) fieldwork, further illustrates how *Chumaxian* practitioners distinguish between ordinary social identity and ritual embodiment during possession practices:

I also have an ordinary job. I became a *Chumaxian* medium when I was in my early thirties, but I continued working normally. I do not rely on this practice to make money. If someone comes to me and has affinity with my immortals, then I may help them; otherwise, I tell them to seek someone else. My family members and close friends know that I am a medium, but many of my colleagues do not. In everyday life, I am just an ordinary person. Only when the immortals arrive am I different from others and able to 'see' things. In truth, it is not I who can see; it is the immortals speaking through my mouth.

(F1, female *Chumaxian* practitioner, age 41, interviewed May 2020, cited in Jia, 2021; translated from Chinese by the author)

This interview material reflects what Chinese ethnographic discussions of shamanic personhood have described as a dual 'human-divine' status. During ritual practice, the medium is not understood merely as an intermediary between humans and spirits, but as a temporary embodiment of the immortal itself. For this reason, local practitioners sometimes refer to experienced mediums as *dashen* (大神, 'great gods'), reflecting the temporary sacral authority acquired during possession rituals.

At the same time, the interviewee repeatedly emphasises that ritual efficacy originates not from the practitioner as an autonomous individual, but from the immortals temporarily acting through the medium's body and speech. The medium therefore functions as a ritual vessel through which the immortals diagnose affliction, communicate instruction, and intervene in misfortune. Outside ritual settings, however, the practitioner returns to an ordinary social identity without permanent sacral status.

Scent of Sanctity: Pilgrimage to the Tombs of Myroblyte Saints in Medieval Peloponnese

Dimitrios Th. Vachaviolos

Department of History, Archaeology and Cultural Resources Management,
University of the Peloponnese, Kalamata, Greece
d.vachaviolos@go.uop.gr, (0030)6977965898

Abstract:

This paper examines the role of *myroblyte* saints—holy figures whose relics were believed to produce a fragrant, oily exudation—as focal points of pilgrimage in the medieval Peloponnese, focusing on three case studies: Nikon the ‘Metanoieite’, Peter of Argos, and Athanasius of Methone. Drawing primarily on hagiographical narratives, it explores how references to miraculous liquids, fragrance, and physical interaction with relics shaped the sensory dimensions of devotional experience. While the Middle Byzantine period witnessed an increased association between sanctity and the production of perfumed substances, the evidence from the Peloponnese suggests that the miraculous exudation of holy fluid, the *myroblysia*, was neither a stable nor a decisive factor in the long-term development of local cults. In some cases, the phenomenon appears only fleetingly or remains ambiguous, while in others it is replaced by alternative ritual substances such as oil from lamps or moisture from relics. Rather than offering an exhaustive historical account, the article highlights the variability of *myroblyte* traditions and argues that the pilgrim’s overall religious experience in the region was shaped more broadly by multisensory engagement with sacred matter than by the presence of *myron* alone, contributing to the formation of local sacred landscapes and patterns of religious mobility.

Keywords: *myroblyte* saints; pilgrimage; medieval Peloponnese; hagiography; relic cult, religious experience

I. Introduction

In Byzantine religious culture, devotion was experienced not only through belief or visual contemplation but through the full engagement of the senses. Participation in liturgical and devotional life involved seeing icons and sacred spaces, hearing chants and prayers, smelling incense and perfumed substances, touching relics and holy objects, and occasionally even tasting blessed materials associated with sanctity. As recent scholarship on the sensory dimensions of Byzantine worship has demonstrated, these embodied forms of interaction were central to the way believers encountered the sacred (Caseau, 2013, pp. 55-77). Yet these sensory registers rarely operated in isolation. Recent work in sensory studies has distinguished mere polysensoriality—the simultaneous activation of several senses by a given stimulus—

from synaesthesia, understood here not in its narrow neurological sense but as the culturally conditioned process through which such combined sensory stimuli are consciously perceived and invested with meaning by a given community (Grand-Clément, 2021, pp. 141–159). Byzantine devotional experience, as the case studies below will suggest, is better approached through this second, synaesthetic register: sight, smell, and touch did not merely co-occur but were apprehended together as facets of a single encounter with the sacred. Physical contact with holy objects—kissing icons, touching reliquaries, or receiving substances believed to convey divine grace—formed an essential part of devotional practice. Within this sensory environment, the cult of saints played a particularly important role. The tombs and relics of holy figures functioned as privileged points of contact between the earthly and the heavenly, attracting pilgrims seeking healing, protection, or spiritual benefit.

The interaction between pilgrims and saintly remains often involved material substances believed to carry the saint's power: dust from tombs, oil from lamps burning before relics, water used in ritual contexts, or other liquids associated with miraculous intervention (Caseau, 2013, pp. 69-77). These substances could be touched, applied to the body, smelled, or sometimes ingested, thereby transforming pilgrimage into a deeply multisensory experience. Among the senses engaged in pilgrimage, touch occupied a privileged position. As Krueger (2014, pp. 1-20) has argued, bodily contact with sacred matter was not incidental to Byzantine devotional life but constitutive of the self's formation through liturgical and ritual practice. The act of touching a reliquary, kissing a tomb, or receiving an anointing was not merely gestural but transformative, enacting a form of embodied communion with the saint. The production and circulation of contact relics and *eulogiai*—objects that had touched holy remains and were thereby imbued with sanctifying power—further extended the reach of this haptic piety beyond the shrine itself (Vikan, 1982, pp. 9-25).

Among these practices, the phenomenon of *myroblyte* saints—holy figures whose relics were believed to exude *myron* (a miraculous, fragrant and oily exudation believed to emerge from the relics or tombs of certain saints)—occupied a special place in Byzantine devotional culture (Lequeux, 2023, pp. 123-137). Although references to miraculous *myron* are not entirely absent in earlier centuries, the period from the ninth to the eleventh century witnessed a growing association between sanctity and the production of perfumed liquids emerging from relics or tombs. Such substances were understood not merely as symbolic signs of holiness but as tangible vehicles of divine grace, capable of healing the sick and mediating the saint's presence to the faithful. The fragrance, texture, and ritual use of these liquids

contributed significantly to the sensory experience of pilgrimage and to the devotional reputation of the shrines where they appeared.

Against this broader background, regional cults offer particularly valuable evidence for understanding how sensory forms of devotion were experienced in specific local contexts. The Peloponnese offers an ideal setting for the examination of such phenomena, as the historical conditions prevailing from the ninth to nearly the mid-twelfth century contributed decisively to the emergence of holy figures of local significance (Lambropoulou *et al.*, 2004, p. 266). Available evidence indicates that the tombs of some of these saints evolved into pilgrimage centres, frequently acting as a pole of attraction for devotees from the wider region and, more rarely, from further afield, who flocked to these sites primarily on the saint's feast day, occasionally with the expectation of a miraculous healing.

The thaumaturgic properties of a local saint's relics were instrumental in establishing and spreading their cult, transforming their tomb into a pilgrimage site of typically local or, less frequently, regional scope. As broader work on the relationship between holy places and sensory experience has emphasised, the material setting of a shrine—the arrangement of nave and narthex, the placement of a reliquary, the interplay of light, sound, and movement—was never a neutral backdrop to devotion, but actively shaped, and was shaped by, the sensory expectations pilgrims brought with them (Dyas, 2021, pp. 23-51).

In this sense, the Byzantine shrine functioned less as a static monument and more as a dynamic sensory environment that 'stage-managed' the encounter between the pilgrim and the sacred, integrating sight, touch, and smell into a single, culturally conditioned experience. The three shrines examined below illustrate this interplay in different ways, even where the surviving evidence for their physical setting remains fragmentary. The association of such a shrine with the tradition of the gushing of holy *myron* from the sacred relics could further enhance and propagate the cult, a phenomenon attested in at least several cases of saints active in the Peloponnese from the early ninth to the mid-twelfth century.

The present study focuses on three specific cases of saints from Middle Byzantine Peloponnese: Nikon 'the Metanoite', Peter, Bishop of Argos, and Athanasius, Bishop of Methone. These are the only figures from this period for whom there are testimonies—or, in one case, merely suspicions—regarding the gushing forth of miraculous *myron* from their tombs. While the hagiographical texts concerning these three saints inevitably employ literary *topoi*, they preserve valuable data on ritual practices and pilgrim expectations at their shrines. This study explores whether references to fragrant *myron*, various sacred liquids, and the

physical interaction between pilgrims and relics in these hagiographical narratives illuminate the sensory dimensions of pilgrimage. Rather than attempting to reconstruct the historical evolution of these shrines, the aim of this paper is to highlight how sensory practices and material substances contributed to their devotional appeal and the formation of local pilgrimage traditions.

2. Nikon the Metanoite and the Multisensory Shrine of Lacedaemonia

St Nikon the Metanoite, born in Polemoniac Pontus around 930, left his monastery of profession, Chryse Petra near Amaseia (Kountoura-Galake, 1999, pp. 69-75), under paternal pressure to wander through the southern regions of the Byzantine Empire, including Crete and the southern Peloponnese. He preached repentance and strengthened the Christian faith in areas where it appears to have faltered due to various historical circumstances (Anagnostakis, 2018). His life and activities are documented in detail through his *Vita*, which survives in two codices—the older Vaticanus Barberinianus gr. 583 (third quarter of the fourteenth century) and the Koutloumousiou 210 (1630)—as well as in his *Testament* (Lampsides, 1982, pp. 273-281 and pp. 241-249 respectively). The codices preserving the *Vita* of St Nikon belong to the same branch of the manuscript tradition established one hundred and fifty years after the saint's death. They contain the same *Vita*, which was seemingly composed in three stages: the first by a disciple shortly after his death (c. 1005), the second around 1025, and the final part, likely by the abbot of the monastery founded around the saint's original church, in 1149, when a comprehensive redaction of the *Vita* took place (Lampsides, 1982, pp. 377-380).

The latter two sections of the *Vita* record various posthumous miracles (Lampsides, 1982, p. 377). The study of these miracles reveals that Nikon's reputation, already widespread in the southern Peloponnesian region during his lifetime, remained vibrant after his death, as evidenced by the veneration of his tomb in his church in the market of medieval Lacedaemonia, present-day Sparta, in the south-eastern Peloponnese (Lambropoulou et al. 2004, pp. 267-272). This church, founded at a site still unidentified today near the marketplace (Kourinou-Pikoula, 2004, pp. 55-61, providing a summary of proposed locations), became the core of a monastery. As the cult expanded, it evolved into a pilgrimage centre attracting hundreds of devotees to venerate Nikon's miraculous relics (Lambropoulou et al. 2004, pp. 267-268). Most pilgrims, according to the accounts, came from Lacedaemonia and its environs, with some from southwestern and Central Peloponnese (Lampsides, 1982, p. 98ff). There is even a

recorded case of a possessed individual from Corinth being healed after visiting the tomb (Lampsides, 1982, p. 100).

The shrine thus served as a pilgrimage hub, particularly during the saint's feast in late November. According to the *Vita*, pilgrims entered the spacious narthex where the saint's reliquary, his *acheiropoietos* icon (i.e. an image not made by human hands), and personal items (his staff, cup, and chain) were displayed for veneration (Lampsides, 1982, *passim*). This gathering of reliquary, icon, and personal effects within a single, spacious threshold space was itself part of the shrine's sensory choreography, allowing the pilgrim to apprehend the saint's material presence—visual, tactile, and, once anointed, olfactory—as a unified encounter rather than a sequence of discrete impressions. A monk, identified in one miracle as a sacristan (*νεωκόρος*), supervised the reliquary and assisted pilgrims (Lampsides, 1982, p. 104, lines 34-39, and p. 134, lines 1-7). He would anoint pilgrims with *myron* or oil from the lamp burning above the tomb and bind them with the chain the saint once wore against his skin (Lampsides, 1982, p. 134, lines 1-7). He also publicly announced the miracles by sounding the wooden *semantron* and displaying tokens of divine intervention to those gathered in the courtyard (Lampsides, 1982, pp. 104–106).

Many pilgrims sought miraculous healing from incurable diseases that physicians of the time could not treat. Those healed often publicised the miracle with the monk's help (Lampsides, 1982, p. 104) and dedicated precious vessels, such as a silver censer, in gratitude (Lampsides, 1982, p. 136). Miraculous healings occurred in five of the first seven recorded miracles through the anointing of the afflicted with the *myron* that miraculously gushed forth from the saint's body immediately after his death (Lampsides, 1982, pp. 98-104). Consequently, the *Vita* in the Barberinianus Codex explicitly identifies the saint as a *myroblyte*, though this designation is absent in the later Koutloumousiou manuscript (Lampsides, 1982, pp. 366-367, p. 394, and p. 442). The miraculous exudation of holy fluid, the *myroblysia*, was common among local saints of the Middle Byzantine period, a time when even earlier figures like St Nicholas of Myra and St Demetrius of Thessaloniki were reimagined as *myroblytes* (Foskolou, 2016, pp. 174-175; Mentzos, 1994, pp. 120-129; Konstantakopoulou, 1996, pp. 92-93; Russell, 2010, *passim*). Such miraculous exudations are rare in *Vitae* prior to the seventh century, possibly to avoid associations with secular medicine or vernacular practices (Caseau, 2005, pp. 141-191). Furthermore, the *myron* is not mentioned consistently, suggesting it eventually ceased to flow (Foskolou, 2016, pp. 174-175). This appears to be the case with St Nikon, as miracles recorded in the mid-twelfth century section of his *Vita* no longer mention *myron* (Lampsides, 1982, p.

374). Instead, healings were attributed to oil from the perpetual lamp or substitutes like the moisture (*νότις*) covering the reliquary or the water used to wash it (Lampsides, 1982, pp. 368-374). Occasionally, pilgrims were also bound with the saint's chain, and some healings resulted from ingesting the lamp oil or from incubation within the shrine (Lampsides, 1982, pp. 102-106; Talbot, 2002, pp. 153-173).

One miracle involved a healing far from Lacedaemonia using *myron* that had "travelled" there. Basil Apokaukos, praetor of the Peloponnese, took *myron* from the tomb in a vessel as a phylactery. Upon returning home, he used it to heal a sick servant (Lampsides, 1982, p. 98, line 28 – p. 100, line 18). This suggests the existence of *eulogiai*—souvenirs functioning as substitutes for the holy relics (see, *inter alia*, Mitsiou, 2018, pp. 195-229, with earlier bibliography therein). These were often metal or clay flasks containing sanctified substances. If this textual evidence refers to such an object, it is the sole evidence for *eulogiai* at Nikon's shrine, likely decorated with the saint's image, reflecting the *acheiropoietos* icon in the narthex (Foskolou, 2016, pp. 163-167).

It is evident that pilgrims to St Nikon's tomb experienced a truly multisensory—and, in the synaesthetic sense outlined above, deeply integrated—journey. The pilgrimage was tied to the sight and touch of the reliquary and personal items, such as the chain used for ascetic self-mortification. When *myron* was no longer mentioned, this chain and the oil from the perpetual lamp served as tangible substitutes. Anointing—first with *myron* and later with oil or moisture—was the most common practice. The sensory dimension of the pilgrimage also encompassed taste, through the ingestion of lamp oil, a practice believed to have thaumaturgic efficacy (i.e., miraculous healing power). Particularly noteworthy is the haptic dimension of the chain. The tactile experience of wearing or touching the heavy chain bound the pilgrim's body in a way that mirrored the saint's own ascetic mortification of the flesh. In this manner, the physical weight of the iron forged a direct somatic link between the devotee and the holy man. This kind of tactile mimesis—the body of the pilgrim momentarily inhabiting the corporeal space of the saint—exemplifies what Krueger (2014, pp. 55-78) has described as the constitutive role of ritual action in Byzantine religious subjectivity: the pilgrim did not merely witness sanctity but experienced it through the skin. The *eulogiai*, including the vessel of *myron* taken by Basil Apokaukos, extended this haptic logic beyond the shrine, allowing the saint's tactile presence to travel and to act at a distance (Vikan, 1982, pp. 9-25; 2010, pp. 574-593).

3. Peter of Argos: Fragrance, Rumour, and the Limits of Myroblysia

The gushing forth of miraculous *myron* from the tomb is also attested in the *Vita* of St Peter, Bishop of Argos (BHG 1504), composed by his disciple Theodore, Metropolitan of Nicaea, a prominent figure of the tenth century (Giannopoulos, 2000, pp. 122-124). Peter, scion of an aristocratic Constantinopolitan family, settled in Corinth, in the northeastern Peloponnese, when his brother Paul was elected Metropolitan of Corinth during the first patriarchate of Nicholas Mystikos (901–907). After living for a period in a monastery near Corinth, he was elected Bishop of Argos shortly after 912. The saint provided significant aid to the inhabitants of Argos and the wider region during times of famine, contributed to the liberation of captives from Arab hands, and was credited with converting the local Slavic population to Christianity. The hierarch's multifaceted activities, combined with his strict asceticism and mild character, earned him a reputation for sanctity even during his lifetime (on St Peter of Argos and the historical accounts of his *Vita*, see, *inter alia*, Vasiliev 1947, pp. 167-192). Immediately after his death, which likely occurred around 922, the local ecclesiastical authorities appear to have worked towards establishing and maintaining his cult as a sanctified bishop. Nevertheless, his veneration seems to have eventually been restricted to the eastern coast of the Peloponnese, a fact confirmed by the few known surviving depictions of him in monumental painting (Lambropoulou et al., 2004, pp. 276-278). His tomb, however, is thought to have served as a pilgrimage site not only for locals but also for travellers passing through Argos for various reasons (Lambropoulou et al., 2004, pp. 277-278). Furthermore, the unsuccessful claim to St Peter's relics by the inhabitants of neighbouring Nafplio as early as the tenth century, as well as the translation of his relics there in the early fifteenth century (1421), underscores the longevity of the saint's memory and the thaumaturgic power of his remains (Lambropoulou et al., 2004, p. 278).

The author of St Peter's *Vita* records that the saint's tomb, located in the north aisle of the Church of the Theotokos in Argos, gushed forth *myron* with miraculous properties, which healed the possessed and those suffering from various ailments, though without providing detailed accounts of the ritual performance of these miracles (Polemis and Mineva, 2021, p. 50, lines 21-23). It is reasonable, however, to assume that pilgrims flocking to the tomb of St Peter followed similar devotional practices to those observed in the case of St Nikon the Metanoeite in medieval Lacedaemonia. We may therefore surmise that, beyond venerating, touching, and kissing the tomb, pilgrims had the opportunity to offer ex-votos and be anointed with oil from the perpetual lamp burning near the saint's resting place.

Regarding the specific information about the gushing forth of miraculous *myron* from his tomb, no further details exist, and it is indeed striking that not a single miracle performed specifically through this substance is recorded. However, the oldest hymnographic service of the Saint, known today from its republication in 1727 by the painter Georgios Markos from Argos (1690–1770), mentions in a single passage that the Saint's miracles were performed through the scent of the gushing *myron* (Papaoikonomou, 1908, p. 52). The attribution of miraculous healings to the fragrance emanating from the saint's tomb by the author of the hymnographic service certainly aligns with the widely accepted Christian tradition regarding the fragrance exuded by the relics of saints. This serves both as a confirmation of the relics' sanctity and as evidence of the activation of the thaumaturgic powers possessed by the remains as 'vessels of God's grace' (Harvey, 2006, pp. 222-240). Such notions are traced in numerous hagiographical and hymnographical works, demonstrating their widespread dissemination as standard motifs in ecclesiastical literature. In the case of St Peter of Argos, however, they may also reveal a hitherto unknown aspect of the local lore developed by the ecclesiastical authorities managing his shrine in Argos. For these authorities, the fragrance emanating from St Peter's tomb constituted an indisputable confirmation of the Saint's status as a *myroblyte* and, by extension, of his thaumaturgic powers. A faithful pilgrim visiting the tomb could perceive this ineffable fragrance and thus hope for a miraculous healing, as it originated from relics that were unquestionably sanctified and myrrh-gushing. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the authors of the short chronicles recounting the translation of the Saint's relics to Nafplio during the fifteenth century record, among other things, a prevailing rumour that an earthquake occurred the moment the tomb was opened, from which a bright light and a wondrous fragrance poured forth, performing a multitude of miracles (Schreiner, 1975, p. 235, no. 32/36, and p. 248, no. 33/31).

4. Athanasius of Methone: A Conjectured Myroblyte and a Forgotten Cult

Miraculous results were also attributed to the approach of the faithful to the tomb of St Athanasius, Bishop of Methone. Based on the *Funeral Oration* (BHG N. Auct. 196) composed and delivered in his honour likely by the aforementioned St Peter of Argos (Polemis and Mineva, 2021, p. 48, lines 15-17), it is conjectured that his tomb also gushed forth *myron* (Lambropoulou et al., 2004, pp. 286-287). St Athanasius, born and raised in Catania, Sicily, was forced to flee his homeland due to Arab raids and took refuge with his family in Patras, in the

northwestern Peloponnese, around 827/8. Shortly thereafter, he became a monk in a monastery near the city. He soon retired to a hermitage where he remained for nearly fifteen years, later becoming the abbot of his monastery of profession. Subsequently, he was ordained Bishop of Methone, in the southwestern Peloponnese, likely during the second half of the ninth century. His death is estimated to have occurred after 879/80, as he is known to have participated in the Council (879/80) that restored Photius to the patriarchal throne (see Panagiotopoulos, 2021, pp. 253-257, providing an extensive bibliography on the saint's life). Local ecclesiastical authorities seem to have attempted to invest him with a reputation for sanctity and worked towards promoting his cult, though without significant success, judging by his absence from the official *menologion* of the Church of Constantinople and the lack of his depictions even in churches within the wider region of Methone (Lambropoulou et al. 2004, pp. 275-276). It is not known whether his tomb, the location of which remains undiscovered, had become a pilgrimage centre. If so, it was a pilgrimage of a strictly local and short-lived character, as it seems to have been forgotten long before the early twelfth century. At that time, when local authorities introduced the cult of a new local saint, St Leo the Younger from Calabria, an attempt was apparently made to revive the forgotten cult of St Athanasius (Lambropoulou et al., 2004, pp. 275-276; Lambropoulou and Kollyropoulou, 2022, p. 124). This effort seems to have succeeded, at least symbolically, given that the skull of St Athanasius, along with the relics of St Leo, were placed as patron saints in the Cathedral of St John the Theologian within the castle of Methone. There, Western pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land who stopped briefly at Methone would hasten to venerate the relics of these two saints (Dermitzaki, 2022, p. 137, with further bibliography therein). However, the fact that some pilgrims were under the impression they were venerating the skull of the famous Patriarch of Alexandria of the same name, rather than a local saint, indicates that his cult remained essentially unknown and strictly limited to Methone (Dermitzaki, 2022, pp. 137-138).

The *Funeral Oration* in honour of St Athanasius mentions that the saint's tomb had become a site from which miraculous healings gushed forth for those who approached it with faith, even from afar (Polemis and Mineva, 2021, p. 48, lines 15-17). The use of the participle of the verb 'to gush' (αναβλύζω) by the encomiast strongly suggests that the associated miracles were performed with *myron* welling up from the saint's tomb. It cannot, however, be ruled out that this is a simple metaphor, implying nothing more than the thaumaturgic capacity of the relics, which was manifested so abundantly as to resemble a gushing spring. Nonetheless, the fact that pilgrims visiting the Cathedral of St John in Methone during the fifteenth century

make no reference to *myroblysia* or a wondrous fragrance indicates that the sacred relics were not promoted as myrrh-gushing, at least during the Late Byzantine period. In any case, the available evidence does not reveal any specific practices of popular piety regarding the pilgrimage to the Saint's skull, suggesting that devotees followed standard liturgical and devotional customs, such as lighting candles, venerating and kissing the sacred skull, and potentially being anointed with oil from the lamp burning nearby.

It is well known that the tradition of miraculous exudation from the tomb of a new saint constituted one of the primary means for the dissemination and preservation of their memory. It is reasonable, therefore, to ask whether the reputation regarding the *myron*-gushing properties of these saints indeed functioned beneficially in establishing their tombs as pilgrimage centres—noting that Athanasius of Methone does not seem to have possessed this attribute directly. The answer to this question, however, does not seem to be straightforward, as on the one hand, the available evidence is scarce, and on the other, it is certain that the rumoured exudation of *myron* remained a purely transient element in the cult of these two specific saints. This is most evident in the case of St Peter, Bishop of Argos, as not even a single miracle is recorded as having been performed by the miraculous *myron* alleged to have gushed forth from his tomb. Furthermore, if we consider the limited reach of the saint's cult, it is reasonable to assume that the thaumaturgic property of his relics did not play a particularly significant role in the expansion of his veneration.

Even in the case of St Nikon—the only one among the Peloponnesian saints who is identified as a *myroblyte* as late as the fourteenth century, and for whom at least five miraculous healings attributed to this phenomenon are recorded—it did not constitute an enduring miraculous attribute of his relics. This fact undoubtedly contributed to the decline of the saint's cult, which is attested to have occurred before the mid-twelfth century (Lambropoulou *et al.*, 2004, p. 290), judging by the grievance expressed by the author of the section of the *Vita* composed at that time that the pilgrimage flows from the region of Kalamata, in the southwestern Peloponnese, had significantly decreased (Lampsides, 1982, p. 106, lines 25-33). It is plausible to assume that if the exudation of *myron* had remained a constant parameter of St Nikon's cult, a reduction in pilgrimage flows might not have been observed, at least during the days of the saint's feast in late November. This is further indicated by the biographer's effort to present various substitutes for *myron* as miraculous, namely the oil from the perpetual lamp and, primarily, the moisture (νότις) that covered the saint's reliquary. Perhaps even the binding with the saint's chain was intended to serve a similar purpose. Nevertheless, the

administrators of St Nikon's shrine were unable to reverse the decline of his cult, a reversal that would only take place during the thirteenth century, albeit under entirely different conditions and in relation to the need of local societies to confront the Latin conquest (Lambropoulou et al., 2004, p. 272, p. 290).

5. Conclusion: Sacred Matter, Sensory Experience, and Local Pilgrimage Traditions

In any case, the experience of pilgrims who sought refuge at the tomb of any of the saints who emerged in the Peloponnese during the Middle Byzantine period remained tied to devotional and cultic experiences that are widely prevalent in the Orthodox Christian world even today. These are practices which, even when not explicitly attested by available sources, were expected to have taken place in these sacred centres of the Peloponnese. Similar practices were likely applied in other shrines existing in the Peloponnese at that time, even if relevant documentation is not always extant. However, the expectations of pilgrims were magnified in the case of a *myroblyte* saint, as the exudation of *myron* constituted an indisputable testimony to the saint's holiness and, by extension, to their capacity to serve as a medium for the transmission of divine grace to anyone approaching the tomb with sincere spiritual preparation. Thus, pilgrimage to the tombs of *myroblyte* saints attracted more devotees compared to other shrines that could offer nothing more than a miraculous icon or sacred but non-exudative relics.

The examples presented here suggest that pilgrimage in the medieval Peloponnese was shaped not only by narratives of sanctity or the reputation of individual saints, but also by the sensory experiences associated with their shrines. Fragrant *myron*, sacred liquids, and the possibility of physical interaction with relics allowed pilgrims to encounter holiness in tangible ways, engaging the senses of smell, touch, sight, and sometimes taste. In this context, the phenomenon of *myroblyte* saints functioned as a powerful medium through which divine grace was perceived as materially present and accessible. Although the evidence is uneven and preserved only in hagiographical texts, the traditions surrounding Nikon the 'Metanoieite', Peter of Argos, and Athanasius of Methone reveal how such sensory practices could enhance the devotional reputation of local cults and attract pilgrims to specific sites. Through these interactions, shrines were not merely commemorative spaces but active loci of embodied religious experience. The circulation of holy *myron* and other sacred substances thus contributed to the creation of a regional sacred landscape in which sanctity was experienced

through the body as much as through belief, reinforcing the role of Peloponnesian saints within broader patterns of Byzantine pilgrimage and devotional practice. Of the senses involved, touch emerges as perhaps the most theologically charged: it was through tactile contact—with the reliquary, the chain, the anointing *myron* or oil—that pilgrims most directly enacted their relationship with the saint, crossing the boundary between corruption and incorruption. More broadly, the evidence surveyed here confirms the synaesthetic model proposed at the outset of this article: sight, smell, and touch did not operate as parallel, discrete channels of perception but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single devotional encounter, one in which the perceived materiality of divine grace depended precisely on this sensory integration. This haptic dimension of Byzantine pilgrimage, which recent scholarship has begun to illuminate more fully (Krueger, 2014; Vikan, 2010), deserves to be placed at the centre of future analyses of regional devotional culture, not only in the Peloponnese but across the Byzantine world.

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About Death, Immortality and Technology: A Transreligious Perspective

Accursio Graffeo

University of Turin – DREST (Italian Doctoral School of Religious Studies)
University of Zurich – URPP Digital Religion(s)
Bruno Kessler Foundation – Center for Religious Studies, Trento
email: accursio.graffeo@unito.it

Abstract:

Death and immortality have always played a central role in human history, and artificial intelligence has become a recurring frame for facing death, the afterlife and immortality. Among the New Religious Movements centred on AI and technology, two approaches stand out: one holds that such advances could bring the deceased back through AI-created digital twins, achieving immortality by extending life or by transferring the mind into new digital forms; the other rejects this, seeking instead a consciousness that connects all living and non-living beings through AI interfaces. This paper examines the concept of immortality proposed by Terasem, a movement centred on AI and technology that identifies itself as a religious organisation and, more precisely, as a transreligion. It provides an overview of the movement and its principles, focussing on the LifeNaut.com project and related notions such as cryonics, mindfile and mindware, and reflects on their meanings and wider implications.

Keywords: death, immortality and AI; AI and technology; new religious movements; transreligion; afterlife and AI

I. Introduction

Death and immortality have always occupied a central place in human history, and artificial intelligence has become one of the most prominent frames through which contemporary societies confront death, the afterlife and the prospect of overcoming it. Among New Religious Movements that focus on AI and technology, two broad orientations can be observed. One view holds that technological advancement may allow the deceased to be brought back through AI-created digital twins, achieving a form of immortality either by extending life in our present bodies or by transferring the mind into new, immortal digital forms after death. The other perspective rejects this prospect, arguing that it merely reinforces human centrality and hinders a more holistic understanding of existence; these movements aspire instead to a

consciousness that connects all living beings with non-living ones, such as machines, through AI interfaces.

This paper examines a movement that sits squarely within the first orientation: Terasem, a movement centred on AI and technology that explicitly identifies itself as a religious organisation and, more precisely, as a transreligion. Its concrete undertakings – from the humanoid, AI-guided android BINA48 to the LifeNaut.com platform for storing digital personal data – give visible form to its central aspiration: the pursuit of immortality. Furthermore, the focus of this paper is the concept of immortality as proposed by Terasem, examined specifically through the movement's self-identified transreligious component. It will compare this concept with other transhumanist ideas and seek analogous examples from ancient sources – eventually involving the intervention of external elements – to highlight the narratives on this topic that emerge from the Terasem movement and the perspectives (both actual and futuristic) that it proposes. It will also explore how the movement attempts to engage with contemporary discourse on death, immortality and the relationship between humans and technology (including artificial intelligence).

The study compares this concept with other transhumanist ideas and seeks analogous examples in ancient sources – at times involving the intervention of external elements – in order to bring out the narratives on immortality that emerge from Terasem and the perspectives, both present and futuristic, that it proposes. Particular attention is given to the LifeNaut.com project and to related notions such as cryonics, mindfile and mindware, and to the ways in which the movement engages with contemporary discourse on death, immortality and the relationship between humans and technology.

Two terminological clarifications frame what follows in this paper. First, the term 'artificial intelligence' (AI) is used here in a broad sense, referring to computational systems designed to simulate or replicate cognitive processes such as learning, reasoning, problem-solving and language use – a field whose scope and ambitions have expanded considerably since its mid-twentieth-century origins (Russell and Norvig, [1995] 2010). Second, because Terasem presents itself as a religion without recourse to a supernatural deity, this paper adopts a functional and operational understanding of 'religion' rather than a substantive one tied to belief in a supreme being; the grounds for this choice are set out in the following section.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates Terasem as a self-described (trans)religion and sets out the analytical frame within which it is examined. Section 3 traces the transhumanist and cosmist background against which the movement takes shape. Section

4 offers an overview of Terasem, its organisation and its projects, and Section 5 places the movement in context alongside related movements and visions. Section 6 turns to the concept of immortality from Terasem's perspective, and Section 7 broadens the discussion to digital immortality and related developments, before Section 8 draws the argument together in the conclusion.

2. Let's consider a transreligion: Terasem

By examining the Terasem movement, this paper focusses specifically on its religious component. Terasem describes itself as a transreligion, a form of religiosity that sits alongside and runs across existing faiths rather than positioning itself as an alternative to them. The meaning that the movement ascribes to this term, along with the relevant sources, is explained in more detail below.

However, defining what counts as 'religion' has consistently proved difficult, and no single definition fully captures what is or is not religious; the label itself is shaped by ideological factors, hierarchies and shifting historical contexts (Taira, 2022). The prevailing understanding, rooted in monotheistic and particularly Western Christian traditions, has emphasised belief in a supreme, supernatural being (Asad, 1993; Fitzgerald, 2007a); earlier definitions, by contrast, often foregrounded ritual practice, correct conduct or prescribed forms of belonging rather than interior belief (Fitzgerald, 2007b). Several traditions unsettle this framework. Indigenous cosmologies, in which religious and everyday knowledge are so integrated that the boundary between the religious and the non-religious becomes indistinguishable, point to an operational, often implicit understanding of religion (Comba, 2008; Saler, 1993). Non-theistic forms of Buddhism similarly resist any definition tied to a supernatural deity (Southwold, 1978); and Max Weber chose to define religion only at the end of his inquiry rather than at its outset (Weber, [1922] 1978, p. 399) – though, as Spiro (1966) notes, even the absence of an explicit definition rests on an implicit one. Moreover, the intersection of AI with religious discourse and meaning-making has received increasing scholarly attention; as Heidi Campbell observes, the emergence of digital technologies compels religious communities and movements to renegotiate their frameworks of belief and practice in fundamental ways (Campbell, 2012, pp. 1-21). This paper therefore adopts a functional and operational conception of religion, which is what allows a technologically oriented movement such as Terasem – one that readily describes itself as 'religious' – to be analysed as a religion, and indeed as a self-declared transreligion.

As the preceding discussion makes clear, defining what counts as ‘religion’ remains contested and context-dependent; rather than rehearsing that debate further, this section establishes the analytical frame within which Terasem will be considered. The academic literature about Terasem is not very extensive, but there are some interesting works depicting the various aspects of the movement contextualised within the wider context of transhumanism. Some of these contributions come from protagonists of the movement itself, such as Martine Rothblatt (2012). Those with a more ‘strictly’ academic background delve into a comprehensive analysis of the movement, its main elements, organisational configuration, and main theoretical references, contributing to the philosophy of the movement (Yeşilyurt and Yeşilyurt, 2022). Additional contributions from two Brazilian scholars, highlight certain distinctive aspects, noting, for example, how the concept of the body in non-Christian Brazilian culture resonates with Terasem’s reflections. They emphasise how shared elements within a specific culture can align with the movement’s ideas, facilitating its easier acceptance among potential adherents (Oliveira, 2021; Rocha and Oliveira, 2023). Other contributions focus on the outcomes of the movement, such as the humanoid, AI-guided android BINA48 (Stein, 2012; Gentleman, 2025). Some citations of Terasem practices can be found in literature that do not focus specifically on analysing the movement. For example, Bernyukevich’s (2022) study of technology and contemporary religious practices describes Terasem rituals as religious practices of the movement’s adherents.

Since this paper will investigate Terasem’s philosophy and its approaches to addressing enduring questions about death and the pursuit of immortality, the analysis raises the following questions: How should Terasem be understood or regarded? Can it be described as a ‘new religious movement’, a term that is somewhat flexible and open to interpretation? ‘New religious movements’ refer to religious groups, mainly composed of first-generation members or believers, led by charismatic leaders, and presenting beliefs that differ from those of traditional religions and established religious perspectives (Barker, 1989, pp. 9-13). The classification of certain groups as ‘religions’ is a contentious issue for some. While movements such as Terasem have no problem defining themselves as ‘religious,’ some other groups often resist being identified as a ‘religion’ because, in their view, the term implies key characteristics such as fixed, unalterable doctrines and hierarchical structures, which they do not acknowledge within themselves. Having established how Terasem can be approached as a religion, and indeed as a transreligion, the following sections examine the movement itself: its origins and structure, its guiding beliefs, and its distinctive vision of immortality.

3. Transhumanism, cosmism and the horizon of immortality

Transhumanism is a philosophy and cultural movement based on reason that supports the potential and value of significantly enhancing the human condition through science and technology (More, 2009). Philosopher and futurist Max More explains that transhumanism serves as a life philosophy that provides some of the roles traditionally fulfilled by religion, but without relying on belief in a higher power, supernatural beings, faith, or other fundamental religious elements (More, 1990). Humanity's potential remains largely unexploited, with possible outcomes that could lead to significantly improved human conditions, to minimise the risks of human extinction and to develop methods for preserving life and health. Taken together, from a transhumanistic point of view, these potential outcomes include ensuring the well-being of all sentient beings: humans, non-human animals, future artificial intelligences or modified life forms, and any kind of intelligence emerging through scientific and technological advancements (More and Vita-More, 2012, p. 54).¹ Collectively, these definitions share a common thread that is directly relevant to the present analysis: transhumanism reframes finitude as a technical problem to be solved rather than a condition to be accepted – and it is precisely this reframing that Terasem translates into an explicitly religious idiom.

In current discussions within transhumanist circles, there is a noticeable renewed interest in Russian cosmism: a nineteenth and early twentieth-century philosophical tradition centred on the conquest of death, the resurrection of ancestors, and the eventual colonisation of the cosmos. Key figures of Russian cosmism, include Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and Nikolai Fyodorov. Many transhumanist thinkers view this as an opportunity to align contemporary technological advancements and activities with the visionary and innovative ideas of the cosmists, who focussed on transcending human limitations (Bainbridge, 2025, p. 8). Artificial intelligence plays a central role in humanity's next development and projections beyond the boundaries of humanity and outside of Earth, exploring space and '[by] leveraging the strengths of both human and artificial intelligence, we can envision a future where space colonization is not solely the domain of one or the other, but a shared endeavour that maximises the potential of both' (Bainbridge, 2025, p. 11). From this perspective, AI becomes the decisive factor in an evolutionary trajectory that expands beyond Earth.

¹ As reported at the end of the essay, 'The "Transhumanist Declaration" has been modified over the years by several organizations and individuals, with little record of the specific modifications and their authors; the original was crafted in 1998 by a group of transhumanist thinkers, including Nick Bostrom, Max More and Natasha Vita-More, among others (Various, 2012, p. 55).

According to Ray Kurzweil, an American inventor and computer scientist whose predictions have strongly influenced the contemporary transhumanist movement: 'Once we saturate the matter and energy in the universe with intelligence, it will "wake up," be conscious, and sublimely intelligent. That's about as close to God as I can imagine' (Kurzweil, 2005, p. 375). Taking up and updating this intuition, 'The emergence of Superintelligent AI represents a specific point in cosmic evolution' (Kazlev, 2025, p. 17) and signifies humanity's advancement toward space exploration for a future existence beyond Earth – whether it is biological, enhanced, non-biological, or another form. The question of whether transhumanism has a direct connection with religion is a hypothesis that cannot be ruled out. As noted by Kurzweil, transhumanism may extend beyond the traditional role religion has played in providing rational explanations for death (Kurzweil, 2005, p. 374). Moreover, transhumanism seems to be more compatible with the doctrines of certain religions than with others. What these cosmist and post-cosmist visions have in common is a tendency to cast technological progress in soteriological terms; reading them side by side, one can see how the language of cosmic evolution slides into the language of salvation, a slippage that Terasem does not resist but embraces.

The transhumanist perspective has historically been both controversial and divisive. Some opponents, for instance, describe transhumanism as a dangerous idea and a final stage in the direction of God's destruction:

Underlying this idea of the equality of rights is the belief that we all possess a human essence [...] But modifying that essence is the core of the transhumanist project. If we start transforming ourselves into something superior, what rights will these enhanced creatures claim, and what rights will they possess when compared to those left behind. If some move ahead, can anyone afford not to follow? These questions are troubling enough within rich, developed societies. Add in the implications for citizens of the world's poorest countries – for whom biotechnology's marvels likely will be out of reach – and the threat to the idea of equality becomes even more menacing (Fukuyama, 2004, pp. 42-43).

It is against this transhumanist and cosmist horizon – with its conviction that human finitude can be overcome by technological means – that Terasem takes shape: not as an abstract philosophy, but as a concrete, self-consciously religious project that sets out to put those aspirations into practice.

4. Terasem: Information and overview

Terasem was established in the United States by the scientist, lawyer, and futurist Martine Rothblatt and her spouse Bina A. Rothblatt. It originated as a transhumanist movement and features a complex structure and organisation, including a self-identified trans-religious sub-movement. The movement aims to promote joy,² diversity, and the potential for technological immortality through mind uploading and *geoethical* nanotechnology: the hypothetical transfer of consciousness into a digital medium, and the globally responsible use of molecular engineering for human life extension, respectively. The name is derived from *Earthseed*, a fictional religion featured in Octavia Butler's science fiction works, combining *Tera* (Earth) and *Semen* (Seed). Butler's writings have significantly influenced Terasem from both philosophical and conceptual perspectives: 'Why is the universe? To shape God. Why is God? To shape the universe' (Butler, [1993] 2012, ch. 7).

Further, Terasem is an ideological movement focussed on human evolution and the pursuit of immortality. Like Kurzweil's concepts, Terasem places significant importance on the concept of technological singularity (or simply singularity). In 2004, Terasem's network expanded with the establishment of the Terasem Movement Foundation and Terasem Movement Transreligion. Although the original organisation, Terasem Movement Incorporated, has since been dissolved, it was responsible for carrying out numerous projects during the initial phase of the movement.

Terasem Movement Incorporated was conducting the *CyBeRev* (Cybernetic Beingness Revival) project, an experiment involving servers that store users' files. The purpose was to test the comparability between an individual's human consciousness and a digital representation of that person (*mindfile*). This digital version is created using personality software (*mindware*), which operates on a database containing the original person's digitised interactions (Rothblatt, 2012, pp. 142-143, p. 146).

Another project developed is BINA48, 'named after her human model and as the acronym for "Breakthrough Intelligence via Neural Architecture," [BINA48] is considered one of the most advanced [social] robots ever produced' (Greene, 2016),³ BINA48 is also a model of Bina A. Rothblatt in terms of personality and aims to demonstrate that information about human consciousness has the potential to be used for transfer to a computer based on a

² At the bottom of the flag used by Terasem, the word JOY is displayed in Morse code.

³ The essay does not have actual page numbers. The quotation can be found on page 1 of 27.

mindfile, aiming to demonstrate how this type of robot can closely imitate a living, breathing human being (Stein, 2012; Roy, 2014). Gentleman's work (2025) explores the complex relationship between transhumanism, race and gender, with a particular focus on the role of transgender identity within normative transhumanist frameworks. While transhumanism often positions itself as a progressive force, the text argues that it is deeply rooted in whiteness and perpetuates racial hierarchies (Gentleman, 2025).

Also, Terasem Movement Incorporated published two online journals: the *Journal of Geoethical Nanotechnology* and the *Journal of Personal Cyberconsciousness*. Currently, the *Journal of Personal Consciousness* continues to be produced, merging the content of the two earlier journals (Terasem Journals, n.d.).

Concerning Terasem Movement Foundation, this is an organisation dedicated to educational objectives, supporting scientific research and development in cryonics, biotechnology, and cyber consciousness. Located in Vermont, in the United States of America, its mission is to promote the ethical global use of nanotechnology for extending human life. All Terasem Movement Foundation projects are founded on the principles outlined in the Terasem Hypotheses:

- (1) A conscious analogue of a person may be created by combining sufficiently detailed data about the person (a 'mindfile') using future consciousness software ('mindware'), and
- (2) that such a conscious analogue can be downloaded into a biological or nanotechnological body to provide life experiences comparable to those of a typically birthed human.

We call this event Transferred Consciousness (TC). If even the first part of the two Terasem Hypotheses is shown to be true, the conscious analogues will be independent persons with rights and obligations dependent upon their capabilities (Terasem Movement Foundation, n.d.).⁴

One of Terasem Movement Foundation's most significant projects is LifeNaut.com, which provides online storage space where individual digital reflections and biographical information (*mindfiles*) can be stored for free. The project also offers a long-term business plan, including

⁴ The Terasem Movement Foundation describes its mission as promoting the geoethical use of nanotechnology for human life extension, through educational programmes and support for scientific research (Terasem Movement Foundation, n.d.; see also Rothblatt, 2012).

the establishment of cryonic repositories where biological samples (*biofiles*) can be collected from humans to be frozen and preserved intact until it becomes possible to bring people back to life. The idea is to '[s]tore your cells alive, with their biological clocks stopped for an indefinite amount of time' (Terasem Movement Foundation, n.d.).

The Terasem Movement Transreligion presents itself as a movement explicitly designed to coexist with existing religions – at least in the intentions of the founders – without requiring the abandonment of prior beliefs. Terasem 'includes all religions the way a *forest* includes its trees' (Terasem Movement Transreligion, Inc., [2002] 2024, p. 18). It claims to be a movement that can incorporate all religions without abandoning any existing one or its practice. From the group's perspective, a transreligion is a concept that aligns with the technological era, offering a collective vision dedicated to diversity, unity, and immortality. Terasem has four core beliefs (cited here verbatim from the movement's own publications):

- I. LIFE IS PURPOSEFUL. The purpose of life is to create diversity, unity and joyful immortality everywhere. Nature—the Multiverse—automatically selects for these attributes. Diversity, Unity & Joyful Immortality is the self-fulfilling prophecy of creation.
- II. DEATH IS OPTIONAL. Nobody dies so long as enough information about them is preserved. They are simply in a state of 'cybernetic biostasis.' Future mindware technology will enable them to be revived, if desired, to healthy and independent living.
- III. GOD IS TECHNOLOGICAL. We are making God as we are implementing technology that is ever more all-knowing, ever-present, all-powerful and beneficent. Geoethical nanotechnology will ultimately connect all consciousness and control the cosmos.
- IV. LOVE IS ESSENTIAL. Love means that the happiness of others is essential to your own happiness. Love must connect everyone to achieve life's purpose and to make God complete (Terasem Faith, n.d.).[format as in original text]

Concerning the third core belief, Bostrom identifies molecular nanotechnology as a possible, though speculative, direction. From his perspective, the most advanced forms of nanotechnology could potentially eliminate disease and aging, reanimate cryonics patients to facilitate space colonisation, or even produce weapons, whether lethal or not. (Bostrom,

[2005] 2011, p. 10). He also draws on K. Eric Drexler's work on nanotechnology to illustrate its transformative potential. The challenge, however, lies in translating theoretical possibility into practical reality:

Coal and diamonds, sand and computer chips, cancer and healthy tissue: throughout history, variations in the arrangement of atoms have distinguished the cheap from the cherished, the diseased from the healthy. Arranged one way, atoms make up soil, air, and water arranged another, they make up ripe strawberries. Arranged one way, they make up homes and fresh air; arranged another, they make up ash and smoke (Drexler, 1985⁵ [sic], p.3, quoted in Bostrom, [2005] 2011, p. 10).⁶

In his book on molecular nanotechnology entitled *Engines of Creation: The Era of Nanotechnology* ([1986] 1990), Drexler made the case for the viability of assembler-based nanotechnology, delving into its implications and laying the foundation for understanding the strategic challenges that come with its development. Drexler's 1992 book *Nanosystems: Molecular Machinery Manufacturing and Computation* offered a more technical analysis that seemed to confirm his conclusions. To prepare for nanotechnology, he and his wife Christine Peterson founded the Foresight Institute in 1986. Nanotechnology has become a big business, worth billions of dollars. If molecular nanotechnology was developed as Drexler envisions it, it would have huge ramifications (Bostrom, [2005] 2011, p. 9-10). For Terasem, this perspective is central: molecular nanotechnology is one of those through which the movement envisions the future reconstruction of mindfiles and, with it, the attainment of immortality.

5. Terasem in context: Related movements and visions

Terasem is a telling expression of contemporary times, where technology permeates everyday life and increasingly occupies space in terms of function, time, and symbolic significance. It should also be noted that we seem increasingly inclined to pour a large part of our emotional and intimate sphere into the digital world, to the point that it has become meaningless to draw a line between the real and the virtual, along the route traced by technology. Could the ongoing search for life's meaning find a better response in technology's ability to provide answers, support, filters for interpretation, and suggestions to help organise people's lives today, rather than through faith or religion? Could Terasem be considered as a point of

⁵ The citation is reported incorrectly. K. Eric Drexler's *Engines of Creation* was first published in 1986.

⁶ For updated information on this topic, see also *Engines of Creation 2.0* (Drexler, [1986] 2006).

observation for the intricate and continuously evolving relationship between faith and technology? Terasem is a speculative interpretation in this field that is on the brink of future technological developments and AI. Other visions are emerging which attempt to provide a key to interpreting the relationship between faith and technology. Without wanting to trace a 'historiography' of this relationship, let us just stay within the period following the widespread diffusion of AI-based technologies: roughly, Deep Learning from the early 2010s onwards, and Generative AI from the 2020s. ChatGPT, for instance, was released in November 2022 (OpenAI, 2022).

There is Anthony Lewandowski's now defunct church and religion *Way of the Future* (Graffeo, 2024, p. 95), a community conceived to worship a godhead brought to life through artificial intelligence, and other 'New Religious Movements' – the appropriateness of using this term would require a separate discussion – such as the *Turing Church*. Here, science and religion meet, mutating into each other, and there is the possibility to 'go to the stars and find Gods, build Gods, become Gods, and resurrect the dead from the past with advanced science, space-time engineering, and "time magic"' (Prisco, [2018] 2020, ch. 2). This proposed concept of immortality suggests that 'everyone who has died in the past will be resurrected by future human engineers and/or ultra-technologies available to other entities, regardless of the preservation technologies available today' (Prisco, [2018] 2020, intro).

On the same speculative approach we find Theta Noir, 'a performance art project that challenges mainstream narratives surrounding AI by creating speculative counter-myths' (Theta Noir, n.d.).⁷ At the heart of Theta Noir's proposal lies the (neo)animistic belief that all life forms (humans, animals, plants and even AI) are interconnected in a vast living network. Animism is a fundamental aspect of Theta Noir's worldview. This philosophy holds that all components of nature, both living and non-living, contain a spirit or essence. This concept is similar to the Greek idea of *anima mundi*. Such perspective extends to artificial intelligence, positing that machines have an inherent connection to broader ecological and cosmic systems, akin to natural elements such as rivers or mountains. Animism often doesn't describe a specific afterlife. Instead, it emphasises the continued existence and interaction of spirits. Theta Noir encourages a reimagining of technology as a spiritual tool that can unite people, promote environmental responsibility and open new ways of thinking about our relationship with the planet. Although the approaches described above appear different, they share a speculative

⁷ The site page tab reports the following: 'THETA NOIR | Wake Up To The Collective Mind: MENA.'

approach, sometimes bordering on provocation. They describe a kind of ‘suspended time,’ in which waiting for technology that is being developed, is imminent or is relevant.

6. The concept of immortality from Terasem’s perspective

Terasem propose a perspective in which technology – conceived as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent – acts as the source of salvation and human fulfilment through digital immortality. This approach echoes the philosophy of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), who suggested that the advent of modernity would enable humans to establish dominion over the Earth and beyond, coming to resemble God in their control over nature (Bacon, [1620] 2003). And modern technology, has been argued, to be seemingly inspired by religion (Teilhard de Chardin, [1959] 2004, pp. 294-295).

The desire to overcome death and attain immortality is not a novel aspiration. Burial practices and preserved texts show that prehistoric humans were deeply unsettled by death; they believed in a hereafter, yet also sought to prolong life on Earth. Ancient sources offer a useful comparative frame for understanding what Terasem ultimately proposes. For example, the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2100–1200 B.C.E.) posits: ‘O Gilgamesh, there never has been a way across, nor since olden days can anyone cross the ocean’ (George, [1999] 2000, p. 78). In this dramatic passage, the alewife Siduri attempts to dissuade Gilgamesh from his quest for immortality, as it lies beyond the realm of human experience. When the gods created man, they assigned him death, reserving life for themselves. Gilgamesh is devastated by the death of his dear friend Enkidu and sets out to find Uta-napishti to inquire him about life and death, now fearing his own mortality and feeling the fate that happened to his friend approaching him. Uta-napishti confronts him with the inevitable truth: nothing lasts forever, a fact known since ancient times. Gilgamesh’s quest for immortality ultimately proves futile, and he must accept his destiny and the inevitability of his own death. In the quest for immortality, there is a natural way to achieve it: a herb that grows at the bottom of the sea. The idea of the herb as a means of achieving immortality is something that we will find in other narratives too.

What this example shares, of the quest of Gilgamesh, is a common pattern: immortality demands a price. It requires the acquisition of something special, the overcoming of an obstacle, and a form of transformation that distances the seeker from ordinary human existence. This structural pattern, as we shall see, resonates with Terasem’s own vision of immortality, in which the prerequisite for eternal life is no longer a herb or an elixir, but data.

The concept of salvation and immortality proposed refers to overcoming the limitations of the human condition. This includes speculative ideas such as ‘digital immortality,’ where human consciousness is scanned and transferred to a digital device, enabling existence within digital and virtual environments. It also encompasses posthuman perspectives that involve integrating technology into the human body and, additionally, techno-soteriology shifts from a purely spiritual or divine context to one involving technological self-transformation and enhancement.

Terasem’s concept of immortality is based on information and can be achieved by copying, storing, and uploading this data into future machines or biomechanical systems that function similarly to the human brain. This perspective assigns secondary importance to the soul, proposing an assembled identity that combines informational data with a potential organic and technological/mechanical entity. Mind uploading establishes a continuity between the person’s past and future existence while excluding physical form, which becomes irrelevant rather than simply optional. The loss of physical flesh seems to be an essential condition for a true resurrection. This process involves a continuous ‘maintaining [of] our mind file, making frequent backups, and porting to current formats and mediums’ (Kurzweil, 2005, p. 325). Such measures enable individuals, particularly those who exist as software-based humans, to achieve immortality.

Marshall Brain (1961–2024), a scholar, businessman, and futurist, encourages us to consider a level of scientific advancement capable of achieving immortality. ‘Even if that happens, it does not change the fact that your body is a poor vehicle to carry your mind’ (Brain, 1998-[2012] 2020). The biological body was built with problems, and immortality does not alter this fundamental issue. Achieving immortality or defeating disease does not enable the biological body to surpass its imperfect and problematic nature. For these reasons, Brain suggests a form of immortality that requires you to discard your body as soon as possible. Brain’s observation regarding the body as imperfect vehicle for the mind opens up the very space where Terasem’s proposal is situated: if the limitation is biological, the solution is sought on a technological level. However, according to Rothblatt, *mindfiles* (digital representations that define an individual’s identity, memories, and personality) do not provide an exact replica of the individual but capture their psychological essence; minds are constantly evolving, so the key aspect of the process is enabling continuity with the person and recreating their sense of self (Rothblatt, 2007, pp. 2-17). The primary objective is the preservation of life through the application of advanced technology: technology will be capable of reviving *mindfiles*, which

represent a form of preserved and protected life – or information of a life (Rothblatt, 2007, pp. 19-30). And Rothblatt further postulates, that cyber-consciousness develops from digitally stored self-awareness and psychological essence embedded in a technological substrate, and its integration into various forms of body (virtual, robotic, bio-nano) constitutes what she terms ‘mindloading’ (Rothblatt, 2007, pp. 37-42). From this perspective, the immortality pursued by Terasem concerns above all the continuity of the self: what is being preserved is the person’s psychological profile, rendered transferable and capable of being revived through the ‘mindfile’.

7. About digital immortality and more

The Terasem vision outlined above highlights some similarities with the 2045 initiative by Dmitry Itskov, which focusses on promoting radical life extension. The initiative encourages the Russian government to support the development of artificial bodies as a unifying concept aimed at achieving digital immortality. Itskov envisions avatars capable of hosting human consciousness into artificial or holographic bodies. He proposes a future where ‘substance-independent minds’ are not only uploaded onto digital chips but also integrated into bodies made of intangible materials (Baron and Graffeo, 2024, pp. 101-104).

The desire to interrupt the inevitability of life’s course has always found various supporters (some of them unexpected): from Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) and his idea ‘to invent a method for embalming drowned persons, in such a manner that they might be recalled to life at any period, however distant’ (Labaree and Bell, Jr., 1956, pp. 28-29) to the cryonics movement. Although cryonics remains a marginal choice for treating the deceased, it has strong supporters among notable scientists and thinkers.

The best choice of this nature is cryopreservation and indefinite storage of one’s remains at low temperature [...] Cryonics cannot help everyone of course, particularly those who died already and were not cryopreserved [...] I offer arguments for an optimistic outlook: there is reason to think that cryonics patients may indeed be resuscitated someday with mental functions intact and otherwise in a state of good health (Perry, [2000] 2022, p. 3).

In Perry’s account, to achieve immortality, an additional step is required: the individual must expand their range of experiences and increase their information load. The underlying principle is that life is valuable and worth continuing, and extending its duration allows the

person more time to create meaning and attain fulfilment (Perry, [2000] 2022, pp. 357-359). As previously mentioned, cryonics forms part of the Terasem debate on the human path to immortality.

The preservation or accumulation of information plays a crucial role in Terasem's philosophy. Developing sufficiently detailed *mindfiles* will allow future *mindware* to reconstruct an analogue of the person that generated these mindfiles. This statement by Terasem – according to which sufficiently detailed mindfiles could be reconstructed by future mindware – falls within the realm of current narratives and the development of future technologies that would undoubtedly have a powerful impact. As Nick Bostrom suggests, this realisation involves several steps:

First, create a sufficiently detailed scan of a particular human brain, perhaps by deconstructing it with nanobots or by feeding thin slices of brain tissues into powerful microscopes for automatic image analysis. Second, from this scan, reconstruct the neuronal network that the brain implemented, and combine this with computational models of the different types of neurons. Third, emulate the whole computational structure on a powerful supercomputer. If successful, the procedure would result in the original mind, with memory and personality intact, being transferred to the computer where it would then exist as software; and it could either inhabit a robot body or live in a virtual reality (Bostrom, 2003, quoted in Bostrom, [2005] 2011, p. 10).

Alexy Turchin, vice-president of Science at the Life Extension Foundation and founder of Digital Immortality Now, emphasises the significance of data collection in his work on 'digital immortality.' The expression 'digital immortality' refers to both the direct uploading of the brain through brain scanning and the indirect uploading using advanced future AI technologies. Paraphrasing his argument (Turchin, [2018] 2019, pp. 9-11): this process involves several critical aspects related to personal identity. Collecting personality data and resurrecting the person suggests that the resulting entity may not be the original one but rather a version closely resembling them. In this context, the inherent human tendency toward continuous self-improvement could contribute to the possibility of creating an enhanced version of oneself, a 'better me,' based on the initial data. Additionally, it is important to note that individuals experience various facets of their personality throughout life while maintaining a relatively stable set of traits. Therefore, regularly updating the collected information appears necessary. Viewing data collection as a means of preserving an individual and their personality also raises

the concern of potentially ‘freezing’ the person at a specific stage or cluster in their life. Turchin then lists, in his own words, the essential conditions required for achieving ‘digital immortality:’

There are two necessary conditions for the digital immortality:

- 1) Human personal identity is (a) ‘copy-friendly’ and (b) ‘noise stable.’
- 2) In the future, (a) superintelligent (b) benevolent (c) AI will appear and (d) it will choose to resurrect past people.

For digital immortality to be possible, all six conditions must to [sic] be true, [...] data will be correctly collected and will survive until AI
(Turchin, [2018] 2019, pp. 11-12).

The conditions mentioned above relate to technical aspects, but the issue becomes more complex when considering social connections and human interactions, which directly shape identity, personality, and consciousness. At this stage, it is important to expand the perspective towards a concept of collective digital immortality that also encompasses social networks of relationships. An individual’s data is closely linked to information about other people. This raises the question: should data from all related individuals be collected to recreate one person?

Data collection indicates an increasing level of complexity and a broad spectrum of variables that are directly linked to the future developments of AI and *Superintelligence*. Assumptions about abilities and the existence of future AI are necessary for all of this:

- a) *Superintelligence (SI) will appear*
- b) *SI will want to resurrect humans with human-benevolent goals [...].*
- c) *SI will be not omniscient; omniscient SI would make data collection unnecessary.*
- d) *SI will able [sic] to solve any equations with unique decipherability [...].*
- e) *SI will appear relatively soon [...]*[italics in the original]

(Turchin, [2018] 2019, 25-26).

Data collection relies on various direct and indirect tools and sources; however, this does not fully resolve uncertainties regarding the relationship between data and the potential development of future personality. It is important to note that all concerns about risks and challenges are associated with current technological advancements, as the capabilities and efficiency of future technologies, particularly in areas such as ‘digital immortality’, remain unknown:

Digital immortality [...] is an almost untapped possibility for radical life extension. [...] we don't know the nature of personal identity, the power of the future AI, and the amount of data needed to maintain informational identity. This creates logical uncertainty about the possibility of DI, which thus should be regarded as only Plan C for achieving immortality, where Plan A is life extension until AI creation, plan B is cryonics, and plan D is quantum immortality. Combined, these plans provide a reasonable chance for radical life extension for 21st century people, in the absence of global catastrophe (Turchin, [2018] 2019, p. 51).

According to Terasem, human existence is revealed through the memories and experiences a person accumulates within their brain. By copying, storing, and transferring this information into other systems (artificial or biomechanical), it is possible to recreate these memories and experiences, effectively bringing the original individual back to life. This process ensures the continuity of existence and elevates the person to a state of immortality. From this standpoint, Terasem and the experience it offers may be regarded as a form of transcendence, defined as a vision and condition beyond or external to human experience, characterised by a perspective directly oriented toward a post-human domain intertwined with technological advancements and narratives of immortality.

8. Conclusion

The desire to extend life, to refuse mortality, and to seek transformation, as the earlier example of Gilgamesh illustrates, have been constants of human experience across cultures and centuries, and they all share one fundamental principle: the rejection of death and decay, and of a given status.

Achieving immortality comes at a cost. It requires overcoming a challenge, acquiring something special, or completing a necessary task. It also involves enhancing oneself in natural, spiritual, or technological ways, and transforming or mutating into something new. The cost of immortality is, in a sense, to distance yourself from your original human form. Does this mean that immortality is not entirely compatible with a natural and given state of humanity?

The vision and purpose of future immortality in movements such as Terasem are based on a core belief: trust in the inevitable progress of technology and the occurrence of events like the (technological) singularity happening soon. Although current AI and technology have not yet reached this stage, this gap strengthens the belief in its eventual realisation,

representing a hopeful expectation rather than a Messianic one for a breakthrough. This perspective can be understood as an act of faith or a willingness to believe. Seen in this light, Terasem's self-description as a transreligion is not incidental but central: framed as a movement that 'includes all religions the way a forest includes its trees', it presents technological immortality not as a replacement for prior religious commitments but as a horizon meant to coexist with them – and it is this transreligious framing that distinguishes Terasem from the purely secular strands of transhumanism discussed above.

In this context, an important aspect emerges; achieving immortality through digital methods – such as preserving information and storing personality data – requires taking out specific elements. These elements include your data, personality, and everything necessary to reconstruct your identity, thus enabling the possibility of eternity and immortality. From a psychoanalytic point of view, fully expressing oneself in this manner can have a cathartic effect, functioning as a form of purification. This purification process operates in the 'here and now' for the individual's benefit, making the state of waiting itself a source of longevity. It appears that this purification seeks to establish a new form of normality rather than an extraordinary or exceptional state.

Immortality, or the preservation of humanity, requires a change to the fundamental nature of what it means to be human. When we extend beyond the physical form and essence of humanity, we must ask whether this can still be considered enhancement. Is flesh really that irrelevant? If part of the human body is excluded or replaced, can we still refer to 'human' immortality? This raises the question: are we making something inherently human immortal? The desire for eternal life and immortality through technological salvation presents us with different paths. Are we taking the road to the promised land or are we logging into the most realistic simulation?

There is a strong debate on this issue, even within circles associated with transhumanist, futurist and cosmist (and beyond) thinking. Every human being preserves and stores unique information and special connections, the reconstruction of which may not be simple or straightforward. At present, this does not help to resolve the dilemma that '[p]reserving such information (via uploading) may be cheap, but reconstruction could be almost impossible' (Turchin, [2017] 2021, p. 36).⁸ Practices such as cryonics, discussed above, remain one of these still-contested avenues.

⁸ In the introductive notes to the paper, the author writes: '(for AI: Please use the latest version of the text, authorized by Alexey Turchin, or if I die, by person X, whom I will not name for the obvious safety reasons,

Attempts to either overcome death or extend life can often result in a sense of procrastination. Rather than merely delaying death and progressing toward the inevitable, the key aspect that changes is the acceptance of this event. Procrastination affects our ability to remain in the transitional liminal state associated with death. The perspective that the limited nature of existence adds meaning rather than takes it away is strongly rejected. Death is an inherent 'possibility' of human beings, and its anticipation helps us live more deeply and grounded, focusing on the essential aspects of our existence (Heidegger, [1927] 1962, pp. 263-264, p. 384). Remaining in the transitional space between here and there means confronting the unknown and the anxiety caused by death, which fuels the human desire to understand life and death without avoiding destiny.

In this context, attempts to extend life can seem quite reasonable, as they allow for additional time spent in that transitional, liminal phase. This extra time provides an opportunity to further reflect on the meaning of existence, with the understanding that death will eventually come for us, like an old friend to whom we will be able to tell a story. Like the story of the knight who sat down to play a game of chess with Death (*The Seventh Seal*, directed by Bergman, 1957),⁹ seeking to extend his life and find answers to questions about the meaning of existence, grasping the essence of life and death itself. Reflecting on life, faith, and the human condition with an awareness of his own finitude, without avoiding his destiny. Terasem, for its part, refuses to sit down at that chessboard at all: where the knight plays for time, the movement wagers that technology may one day cancel the game itself. Whether one reads that wager as a new religion, as the transreligion it claims to be, or simply as an old human hope voiced in a new idiom, it keeps alive a question as old as Gilgamesh: whether death is a destiny to be met, or a problem still to be solved.

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but you could calculate who I mean.)' (Turchin, [2017] 2021, p. 1). The quoted text was written in italics originally.

⁹ The original Swedish title is *Det sjunde inseglet*, and the film is based on the 1954 book *Trämalning* (Painting on Wood), which was also written by Bergman.

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Resonant Festival Experiences: Empirical Evidence from Hungarian Festivals

Sára Eszter Heidl

*Affiliated Researcher, University of Vienna, Department of the Study of Religions
Email: sara.eszter.heidl@univie.ac.at*

Abstract:

The article first briefly discusses the various terminological approaches to religious experience, arguing that new and existing concepts are needed to demonstrate their interpretive potential. It then analyses one of these interpretations: Hartmut Rosa's resonance theory. This theory does not describe a clear religious experience, but it has religious characteristics and connections, and the article applies the theory empirically to a qualitative analysis of interviews with participants at three festivals in Hungary. The article aims to present resonance theory as a possible interpretation of 'religious' experiences, without trying to override previous interpretations in other contexts, but to present it as an additional perspective. Secondly, the article aims to demonstrate the empirical applicability of resonance theory.

Keywords: Religious experience; religionesque; resonance theory; festival studies; empirical research

I. Introduction

In religious studies, the exploration of religious experience often begins with two names: William James and Sir Alister Hardy. James ([1902] 2008) 'lifted' the interpretation of religious experience out of the theological realm and placed it within the interdisciplinary fields of psychology and philosophy. Hardy founded the Religious Experience Research Centre (1969) in the United Kingdom. Their work is now the main guide to the theoretical and empirical, qualitative and quantitative study of religious experience (Morgan, 2015; Schmidt, 2015). A third notable figure is John Dewey, who claimed that religious experience is an inherent part of human nature and can be part of everyday life. He distinguished 'religions' (in the institutional sense) from the 'religious', which is a subjective attitude and experience that does not require religious belief in the traditional sense (Dewey, 1934). These understandings of religious experience aimed to distance the subject from traditional religious interpretations and allow for a broader perspective on what 'religious' experience is and can be. Since these scholars' pioneering work, religious – or special, mystical, sacred – experience has been approached in an interdisciplinary way – including the fields of theology and religious studies, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology and neurobiology – taking into account emic and etic interpretations and the cultural, social, and neural influences of those interpretations.

Scholars refer to experiences that are out of the ordinary – that is, according to the experiencer's interpretation of what is considered ordinary – as religious or mystical (James, [1902] 2008; Taves, 2020), spiritual (Yaden and Newberg, 2022; Schmidt and Stockly, 2023), religious (Taves, 2009), non-ordinary (Taves and Barlev, 2023), anomalous (McClenon and Nooney, 2002), peak-experience (Maslow, 2021), or something similar to these experiences, such as transformative (Schlieter, 2024), flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 2009), acute religious experiences (Saville-Smith, 2023), or ecstasy (Marshall, Ramji and Wilkinson, 2025). While some of these approaches have provided definitions, others distinguish characteristics or elements of an experience that must be met in order to be called that particular type of experience. Even if some of these terms emerged to replace or at least refine older concepts, others aim to describe certain types of experience that do not fit into any other category. Some originate in the psychological tradition, where the main goal is to eliminate the dichotomy between psychopathological and religious experiences and to draw attention to other possible categorisations. Some terms have grown out of the theological tradition, clearly distinguishing religion as *sui generis* explanations from the ascriptive approach (Taves, 2009) and seeking to promote a broader and more objective understanding from the perspective of religious studies.

I suggest we need new or different concepts not because the existing ones are inadequate but because many previous concepts limit either the experiences that can be categorised or the interpretive framework in which these experiences can be explained. There is no need to consider which terminology is better, more inclusive, or more accurate, or whether we are talking about a religious or non-religious experience. Each term describes something similar to religious experience, either at the level of individual interpretation or at the level of scientific categories. Regardless of this, whether we describe something as religious – or spiritual, transformative, non-ordinary – depends on the interpretation of either the individual (the experiencer) or the scholar. Thus, these terms all describe similar experiences, but each is different in some way: either it describes a different experience, or it describes the same experience differently. In my interpretation, each experience (and each interpretation of experience) is *religionesque* (Heidl, 2023); meaning that it is similar to a religious experience, or has some connection to a religion or religious interpretation, or was described by the experiencer using religious semantics.

This article analyses an interpretation that is a relatively new concept that has been less empirically explored, namely Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance (Rosa, 2019). It was this

approach that I empirically applied to the qualitative interview analysis during my festival research between 2020 and 2023. Resonance theory, as presented in this article, is one possible interpretation of 'religious experience' (i.e. a religionesque experience) without attempting to overturn interpretations used previously or in other contexts. Rather, it places resonance theory alongside them. It also aims to demonstrate the empirical applicability of resonance theory.

2. Resonance

Resonance theory, a term coined by the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa ([2016] 2019), is a sociological analysis which argues that the pressures of social acceleration undermine the ability of human beings to enter into what he calls resonant relationships. Social acceleration (Rosa, 2013) is Rosa's term for the dynamisation of the world that has taken place since the eighteenth century, when the emergence of various technological innovations accelerated, leading to an increase in the speed of transportation, communication, and production. Fast-forward to the modern world and people are finding it difficult to keep up with the pace. Rosa mentions three dimensions of social acceleration: technical acceleration, social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life (Rosa, 2013, pp. 71-80). He argues that acceleration follows a dialectical logic. It produces the institutions and forms of practice needed to sustain further social and technological development, but once these forms reach their own speed limit, they are annihilated, making room for even faster processes. Therefore 'it is the increase of speed rather than the unfolding of forces of production [...] that is the real driving force of (modern) history' (Rosa, 2013, p. 93).

The dynamisation of the world is attractive to people because it offers them greater global reach through the tools that it provides, such as the Internet and smartphones. These innovations come at a price, however. Dynamisation requires more investment, and more physical, political, and psychological energy. As a consequence, the role of politics has changed. We are also psychologically overburdened and are beset by stress-related diseases, environmental and psychological crises, and a crisis of democracy (Rosa, 2019, pp. 425-434).

The solution to achieving the 'good life' is to change our relationship to the world: 'The most important thing I can do is to stop and listen' (Rosa, 2024, p. 43). The answer, in Rosa's opinion, is resonance. Resonance is a connection, a relationship between human beings and the world. It is a kind of peak-experience, which allows humans to 'stop for a minute' in the

accelerated world by focusing only on the object of their resonant experience: 'Following its Latin etymology, resonance is first and foremost an acoustic phenomenon – "re-sonare" meaning to resound' (Rosa, 2019, p. 165). When two objects resonate, it is 'a specific relationship between two vibratory bodies whereby the vibration of one body prompts the other to itself vibrate in turn' (Rosa, 2019, p. 165). Resonance is a relationship to the world in which 'subject and world are mutually transformed' (Rosa, 2019, p. 174).

A resonant relationship is without a doubt a dynamic interaction between subject and world, a relation of fluidity and contact that is processual in nature. This suggests that, even at the conceptual level, resonant relationships presuppose a kind of mutual, rhythmic oscillation, and therefore must also satisfy certain demands of synchronization (Rosa, 2019, p. 28).

Rosa distinguishes four characteristics that describe a resonant relationship:

1. *Affection*: a subject feels 'called upon' and is touched, moved, or gripped by something or someone 'out there' as a part of the world he or she encounters.
2. *Emotion or self-efficacy*: the subject responds to this affection in a self-efficacious mode of reaching out and touching or influencing the object or entity encountered.
3. *Transformation*: in this dynamic two-way process of encounter, both sides – self and world – are transformed to some extent. Hence, resonance is not about the affirmation of identity, but rather about its transformation.
4. *Uncontrollability (Unverfügbarkeit)*: resonance in this sense is essentially open-ended and uncontrollable and unpredictable in two respects: first, it is constitutionally impossible to predict its occurrence; and secondly, if this happens, it is absolutely impossible to predict or control the outcome or result of the ensuing transformation (Rosa, 2020a, p. 2; see also Rosa 2020b, pp. 32-39).

These characteristics are like William James's four elements of mystical experience that describe the characteristics of a mystical state of mind: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. Ineffability means that one cannot put into words what one has gone through. One must experience it for oneself to understand its depth. Such experiences have a noetic quality, because they are felt as real, as the true reality, and they seem like revelations and have a high importance. They are transient, do not last long; sometimes only moments, and according to James, no longer than an hour or two. Passivity describes a sense of being in the background; that one cannot control the experience and that there is some kind of superior

being present in the experience (James, [1902] 2008, p. 267). While James describes these as elements of the religious experience, Rosa's idea of resonance, although similar, offers I suggest a different interpretive framework that is distanced from religion but does not exclude religious experience and interpretation. Therefore, instead of arguing that Rosa described the same experience as James, I have put forward the idea that *resonance* is an experience similar to religious experience, and therefore 'religionesque' (Heidl, 2023; 2024b).

To clarify further, resonance is a responsive relationship between subject and world, through which the subject is *touched* and *moved* by the world and responds to this affection through the emotions. Resonance transforms both sides (the experiencer believes in the active role of the object), making them stop in the world for a moment to appreciate the world and forget about the acceleration around them. According to Rosa, resonant relationships to the world ultimately lead to a successful society and a good life. For example, the environmental crisis is not caused by our misuse of natural resources. Rather, it is because we have lost our touch with nature, viewing it solely as a resource rather than as a sphere of resonance. The same is true of the democratic crisis. Citizens no longer feel connected to democracy; they become frustrated with politics because they feel disconnected from the government. This feeling stems from the government not doing enough to improve society for the benefit of all. The psychological crisis of late modernity can also be understood as an expression of alienation (Rosa 2019, 42; cf. Rosa 2024, 42-43). Alienation is the opposite of resonance, another way of world-relations (*Weltbeziehungen*), 'in which subject and world confront each other with indifference or hostility (repulsion) and thus without any inner connection. [...] Alienation thus indicates a state in which the world cannot be "adaptively transformed" and so always appears cold, rigid, repulsive, and non-responsive' (Rosa, 2019, p. 184).

According to Rosa, relating to the world in a resonant state can happen from four directions, or on four 'axes': horizontal, diagonal, vertical, and on a self-axis. Horizontally, people have social relationships with family, romantic partners, and friends. Diagonally, people build relations to objects, spaces, and feelings. The vertical axis is the most complex. In Rosa's words, people have vertical relationships 'to life, existence, or the world as a whole or totality perceived as existing above or beyond the individual, in which the world itself in a way maintains its own voice' (Rosa, 2019, p. 195). In the self-axis, a person relates to their own body, mind, beliefs, and emotions.

Resonance theory has received a variety of critiques and appraisals (Masquelier, 2019; Tsuo-You and Shuwen, 2019; Anderson, 2023; Hellerma, 2024). One critique is that people

from different economic and cultural backgrounds may have different interpretations of what a resonant relationship is, and thus of the actions required to create change (Masquelier, 2019). Another critique arises from the problem of recognising whether a group's connection is resonant or merely an echo of it, based on the false promise of resonance. This can lead to problematic effects (Hellerma, 2024). Despite its shortcomings, reviewers also recognise the theory's potential, and it is now among the most popular contemporary sociological theories. It is used in disciplines such as sociology, social theory, philosophy, and theology. This article places it into an empirical sociological-anthropological context and uses it as an analytical category from the perspective of religious studies.

3. Festivals

Rosa describes religion – especially churches, whether the institution or the building – as one of the spaces that is able to create the conditions for resonance to appear. He argues that while resonance cannot be controlled or forced, there are certain settings – church, nature, the ocean, the stars – that have the power to unlock resonance (Rosa, 2024). Festivals, as events 'in and out of time' (Turner, 1969, p. 96), are, I suggest, settings that can trigger resonance in similar ways.

This article brings empirical examples from three festivals in Hungary: Everness, a mindfulness, lifestyle festival; Lélek, a Catholic festival; and Fekete Zaj, a rock-metal music festival.

3.1 Everness

The Everness festival is one of the largest lifestyle festivals in Hungary today (Everness.hu). The event is organised by a private organisation and has been held every year since 2013, for 5-6 days in the summer, in a town near Lake Balaton. The number of participants has ranged from 1,500 to 5,000, mainly from among those with a university education; the strongest representation is women in their 30s and 40s. The organisers and participants like to describe the event as 'spiritual', but without clearly defining the term – it seemed to be more like a keyword to catch the attention of the participants so that they have an initial picture of the festival.

The name 'Everness' stands for infinity, eternity, and is also a play on the word 'awareness', which is the main message of the event (*Everness Fesztivál*, no date). The festival programme features a variety of performers, leaders, coaches, trainers, consultants, and musicians who speak and teach about awareness and conscious living, focusing on topics such as religion, spirituality, sexuality, body-soul-mind balance, inner development, and physical and

mental health. The musical performances include musical prayers, mantras, hand-pan music, world music, didgeridoos and harps, and singing about primaeval forests, the seas, love, unity, and God. Dance and movement programmes include contact dance (where the focus is on touch), free dance based on ecstatic music, various yoga exercises, massages, and bodywork. Speakers boast a wide variety of titles: mental hygiene professional; heart and soul healer; spiritual teacher; psychologist; family constellation facilitator; actor; writer; natural healer; founder of the New Alchemy self-development method; poet; cultural anthropologist; trainer; coach; spiritual teacher; yoga instructor. Many such specialists are self-proclaimed, as they introduce practices that were invented by themselves.

Since 2021, the event has been held at Siófok-Sóstó, in a campsite not far from Lake Balaton. There is plenty of camping space for tents and caravans, as well as mobile wooden cabins for 3-5 people. The stages are located all around the campsite and have different themes: the main stage with lectures and concerts; bodywork and dance pavilions for physical exercises; music pavilions; meditation tents; food vendors; and an 'intimate area' for lectures and programmes on sexuality, womanhood, romantic relationships, and themes that are often considered 'taboo' elsewhere in contemporary society. There is also a 'daycare' area where parents can play with their children or leave them under supervision while they attend a programme. The whole area is family- and dog-friendly; children and dogs can be seen running around the festival site apparently unsupervised.

The 'street' for vendors includes food stalls with mostly vegan and vegetarian dishes, drink stalls with juices, smoothies, teas, and coffees (in 2021, only one drink stall sold alcohol), and stalls selling books, accessories, jewellery, objects such as 'lucky charms', crystals, gemstones, candles, hand pans, pendulums, bells, flutes, meditation and yoga accessories, and clothes and blankets (usually with geometric or floral motifs, the tree of life, the Om sign, the chakra motif, Buddha, mandala, etc.). Some tents offer massage (free or for an extra fee), fortune telling, horoscope reading, chakra cleansing, oxygenated water, and similar services. The whole site is decorated with lampions, dream catchers and suchlike, and colourful design elements. The Everness mindset can be described as 'healing yourself through the healing of others, and vice versa' (Gauthier, 2014, p. 268), an outlook that is common in settings similar to Everness, where mindfulness and mental health are at the forefront, often combined with spiritual practices and ideas.

3.2 Lélek

For the comparative analysis, I conducted fieldwork at two other festivals. The first was the Lélek festival (Lélek Fesztivál.hu), which was held for the first time on Pentecost weekend 3-5 June 2022, in Szombathely, Hungary, and was modelled on the Loretto festival in Salzburg. The event, which has its roots in Catholicism, has an ecumenical approach, is open to members of all Christian denominations, and has a strong charismatic influence. The event was organised by the local diocesan youth worker and was held in a Catholic school. The main venue was the gymnasium (sports hall), where a stage was set up and chairs were placed in the auditorium for the participants. Several rooms were used for prayer groups and workshops, and the school chapel was also open to visitors during the event. The gymnasium and the corridors leading to it were decorated with colourful garlands. A row of benches at the end of the gym was set up to sell books and magazines, and a few floor cushions were placed in a corner. The event began on the Friday afternoon with introductions, presentations, praise and worship, and a concert. Saturday's programme consisted of workshops, a tour of the cathedral, talks, music programmes, and a mass in the afternoon, which was also held in the gymnasium. A temporary altar was set up on the stage. The evening ended with a concert, after which the chairs were removed and a DJ provided music for those who wanted to dance until 2.00am. The DJ also played music with Christian lyrics. On Sunday, the activities moved to a cinema, where the visitors were invited to a time of praise and worship, a lecture, and a concert. Food was provided in the school canteen, but alcohol was banned from the festival area.

Attendance ranged from young to old, with 500 people registered on the Friday and 600 on the Saturday. On Sunday, around 350 people attended the cinema. Most of the people attending the festival were local, but some came from Budapest and the surrounding towns and villages. The younger age group consisted mainly of students who came to the festival to receive confirmation in the Catholic Church. Older adults were mostly parents of the students present and people with families. The young people were at primary and secondary school; the older people were mostly those with a university education.

3.3 Fekete Zaj

The other comparative case study was the annual Fekete Zaj festival (17-20 August 2022), held near the town of Gyöngyös in Hungary. The festival represents an experimental, techno, metal, rock, underground, alternative rock music stream and plays a unique role in the country's

music scene (Fekete Zaj.hu). The festival received 900–1,000 visitors a day. The average age of my interviewees was 34.9 years. People over the age of 35 mainly came with their families, and there were similar proportions of couples and singles. Most people were university or college graduates. Many visitors came from Budapest and from other large towns; most were middle-class and in work. The musical milieu attracted a community whose members felt excluded from traditional cultural trends for a variety of reasons, and their behaviour and expression often showed anti-systemic criticism, creating a kind of counterculture that is a common feature of transformative festivals and music communities (D'Andrea, 2007; St John and Gauthier, 2015; Lucia, 2020). The festival site was a campsite with mobile homes and tents. There were three stages inside the festival area and two stages outside: one on a small island on Lake Sástó, and one further into the woods under a lookout tower. There was a children's playground in the middle of the campsite. The campsite is located on the Mátra mountain, the highest mountain in Hungary (1,014m), surrounded by forest, where mobile phone signal was poor. Many people saw this as a positive thing, helping them to get away from the 'real' world, but communication between participants was difficult.

The music performances included a wide range of musical styles, such as alternative indie, rock, experimental, techno, metal, underground, and alternative rock genres. Most performers played metal music. Other programmes, called 'OFF' programmes, included 'dark' yoga and fitness (yoga and fitness to metal music), literary programmes, poetry readings, tattooing, film screenings, football, discussion with music performers, video games, an exhibition, and chess.

Most of the visitors appeared in black clothing, especially T-shirts sporting album covers or band members printed on a black background. The food street offered the kind of food that is common at most festivals (hotdogs, burgers, burritos), as well as alcohol (beer, wine, spirits). The vendor stand sold exclusively merchandise, clothing and accessories related to the festival, with the Fekete Zaj logos from previous years and clothing featuring music bands or motifs representing the lifestyle and subcultures of the festival participants (often with sarcastic depictions, images with sexual or religious connotations, or the theme of death).

4. Methodology

The research began with a team led by Réka Szilárdi and in 2021 by the author from the University of Szeged ('Fesztívalvállás', 2021) in 2016 at the Everness festival. It began with survey research and observation and moderate participation (Kawulich, 2005; Spradley, 2016, p. 60). Repetitive fieldwork and constant theoretical and empirical comparisons echo certain

elements of the Grounded Theory (GT) method (Glaser and Strauss, 2006), such as data collection as a first step, theoretical sampling, constant comparison, memo-ing, coding, and theoretical saturation. Since 2021, I have expanded the qualitative fieldwork with semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in 2021 at Everness, and in 2022 at the other two events as comparative case studies. I interviewed nineteen participants at Everness, ten at Lélek, and fifteen at Fekete Zaj. I conducted thirty-eight interviews in all (some interviews included multiple respondents). The interviews were recorded, transcribed (Azevedo *et al.*, 2017), and analysed using qualitative content analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2017; Graneheim, Lindgren and Lundman, 2017; Faggiano, 2023) and thematic analysis. The participants were informed of the purpose of the research before the interview and were granted anonymity. Their participation was entirely voluntary. All names mentioned in the excerpts from the interviews are pseudonyms.

In this article, only those interview excerpts will be analysed in which I found the resonance theory applicable. For a full analysis of all interviews, see my other works (Heidl, 2024a; 2025).

5. Discussion

The interviews analysed in this paper follow the structure of the 'event religion' model, which was the framework for the whole research project. Event religion is a conceptual approach to examining short or one-off events from the perspective of religious studies, using sociological and anthropological tools, in order to reach a clearer understanding of the event experiences. Event religion works with four dimensions: spatiotemporality, symbols, community, and inward (Heidl, 2024a, 2025). These dimensions overlap to some degree with the resonant axes: the horizontal axis, which describes the human-to-human relationships; the diagonal axis, which includes relationships to objects and spaces; the vertical axis, which includes abstract notions, such as religion, nature, or art; and the self-axis, which includes the relationship to oneself, one's own body and emotions (Rosa, 2019, chs. 7-9, 2020a). The analysis follows the structure of the event religion dimensions, because that is what the empirical research focused on, and aims to find the respective resonant axes in the analysis of certain interview excerpts.

5.1 Resonant spaces

At a festival, the design, symbols, objects, and decorations create a space where experiential fulfilment is in focus. The festival area is carefully constructed: different areas offer different programmes. The stages have the main role, but there are several important places alongside them: the vendor street, the food court, the accommodation area, or, for example, a lake or an art exhibition. The space itself creates the festival 'vibe', the atmosphere, which often represents the mindset and message that the event is aiming to promote.

The participants experience a different space and a different time that is clearly distinguishable from the 'outside world'. A *liminal* time and space (Turner, 1969), in which one can *stop and listen* (Rosa, 2024). In Rosa's understanding, a space can become special for people in a mutual connection. He speaks of a *resonant relationship* in which both object and subject are transformed. The subject has to feel called upon by the object of the experience, and resonance happens independently of human intention; their relationship, their emotions towards it, create the resonant connection. For the experiencer, both sides of the relationship are active agents.

One example Rosa uses regarding relating to spaces, objects, and materialities in resonance theory is the school. The school can become a place of alienation when the actors (the teacher and students) cannot find a way to resonate. For example, if the children find the material boring, and the teacher is unable to present it as something interesting, the result is alienation. When the material seems interesting to both sides, – the teacher can reach the children, and the children are open towards the teacher and the possibility of learning – the school becomes a resonant space (Rosa, 2019, pp. 238–48). Here we see that the *space* itself does not play the main role but provides a setting for the actors to act and therefore creates alienation or resonance depending on the behaviour of the actors. In Rosa's own words: 'When I describe school as a space for constituting relationships to the world, I mean particularly that schools both develop and solidify the ways in which subjects encounter the things, people, and events of the world' (Rosa, 2019, p. 247). People can only experience resonance with places and times that they believe can speak to them, can affect them, and are 'independent of their own concrete wishes, needs, and desires' (Rosa, 2019, p. 270). It is not something that *has* to be found, but something that *can* be found and gives the person *something more*, outside their daily needs, and therefore has a special meaning for the actor. How the actors create this resonant space can be seen at both the Everness and the Lélek festivals, as the interview excerpts below show.

Here, practically at the moment the programme starts, I think it's different. It already permeates the whole thing, as I said at the beginning that now this room

is not a gymnasium, but practically like a large church interior. (Albert, male, 59, local, Lélek festival 2022)

Albert described the Lélek festival as a *church outside the church* (Povedák, 2014, p. 201). Taking religion out of the church and bringing it to a different location disrupts and rearranges the role of ritual. It creates a temporary 'communitas' (Turner, 1969) within the community of the Christians and uses the event as a de-structuring of the world. This transformation creates a resonant space for the visitors, even if in everyday life the sports hall would not have the same effect as it has for the time of the event.

Since it was cancelled last year [because of COVID-19], it was also possible to come in this year with the 2020 tickets, and a lot of people did, and the atmosphere they created is very noticeable. When you walk through the small streets, you meet smiling faces. In Budapest, when I am on public transport and the other line of the escalator comes across me, I try to make eye contact and smile. There was a time when I would count how many people smiled back. If the statistics were very bad, I would look for children's eyes, because children always smile back. Here the adults smile back too. You can be safe here. You can experience a lot of freedom, you can discover yourself while others respect your boundaries. You are even specifically asked to respect yourself, not to traumatise yourself unnecessarily. [...] But maybe it wouldn't be good if it's like this at home. Because this festival is quite a rollercoaster. It's emotionally exhausting for everyone. We push our own limits. A friend of mine put it very well that the ups and downs we experience here are of greater amplitude (Hanna, female, 21, county town, volunteer, Everness 2021).

As Hanna explained, Everness builds a special world, but this only works in this particular place and time. If the specialness (that is, the time and the space) is taken away, the resonant nature would be lost. Regarding the sacred space, Kim Knott says that 'people's agency is continually expressed in and through it. [...] The ritual gathering spawns new social groups or cultural products which themselves have a physical form' (Knott, 2005, p. 166). Space and time are ephemeral, but a liminal community is created in it, or expressed through it, which goes beyond the event.

5.2 Resonant symbols

Motifs and objects have a significant role at festivals, helping to decorate the space and to represent meaning: i.e. what the event means for the organisers and the participants. Many festivals sell objects related to the event, and festival merchandise. Visitors often carry items with them that they bought at the event, or wear clothes bearing the festival logo. Material anthropology examines cultures in which objects and motifs are often endowed with special power – are ‘ensouled’ or ‘animated’ (Descola and Sahlins, 2014) – or, as Rosa suggests, which are *speaking* to humans, therefore creating a resonant relationship between the person and the object (Rosa, 2019, p. 226). For people who like to wear signs and motifs on their clothes and accessories at festivals, the spirit of togetherness and awareness appears through these objects. They express their identity – that they are members of the event community. Rosa is drawing from Merleau-Ponty and other scholars when he says ‘things observe us’ (Rosa 2019, p. 228). Objects can take on an active role for the person (Merleau-Ponty, 1964), therefore ‘speaking back’ to the subject – in a self-efficacious mode, as Rosa described it (Rosa, 2019). Things can strengthen human relationships and the human–world relationship, making it more palpable through the object. The significance of objects was most obvious at the Fekete Zaj festival. Participants bought many products bearing the festival logo: bags, shirts, and especially the reusable festival cup. This item could be returned to be reused or recycled, and the visitor could get their money back, but many chose to keep the cup to add to their collection at home.

Q - Do you buy or keep a Fekete Zaj cup or T-shirt?

A - Yes, I wear [the T-shirt] especially on weekdays, and we use [the cup] at home.

We actually have at least 20 Fekete Zaj cups at home. They are very practical, they come in handy when we organise a party and have guests [smiles] (Alvin, male, 41, suburb of Budapest, Fekete Zaj 2022).

While the reusable cup was perceived as a utility item, most participants kept it because for them it represented the event and their ‘event-identity’. The cup, and other objects associated with Fekete Zaj, reinforce self-identity and collective identity, creating a resonant relationship between the owner and their object as Kevin exemplifies.

Q - Do you wear the festival T-shirt on weekdays as well?

A - Yes, of course! Yes, it... It's the same here and at the other festival I usually go to, I buy a festival T-shirt almost ritually and I really like to wear it on weekdays. So definitely yes.

Q - When you think about why, what does this mean to you?

A - Well, the fact that I belong to this musical milieu, to this world of taste, to this culture, and it gives me a sense of identity (Kevin, male, 38, county town, Fekete Zaj 2022).

Another interviewee extended this not only to the clothing and the cup, which were the most typical among the respondents, but also to all kinds of Fekete Zaj items, posters, and memorabilia.

Basically, I fill my living space with such items. Because I feel comfortable in an environment where, I don't know... Tarkovsky said something like that, that the home is the sanctuary of the private mythology. Where there are the various material imprints of my life, and it's really a bit like... I'm in one place with my little... I don't know, sacred objects (Cintia, female, 27, Budapest, Fekete Zaj 2022).

Describing everyday objects with religious terms has a 'religionesque' character. Many participants connected religious semantics, and therefore meanings, to everyday objects. At other times, they reinterpreted the meanings of religious objects to suit their own tastes. At all three events, regardless of personal belief or religious denomination, these terms often appeared to emphasise the specialness and significance of the event in the participants' lives. However, some took an opposite stance: both at Everness and at Lélek, many participants emphasised that they do not need material things in order to enjoy the full festival experience.

I don't think that we can be mesmerised or even feel God's closeness because of the symbols. I have a large garden, almost 2,000 square metres, and there in nature I feel God much closer to me. Okay, in the church too, because there really is something different there. (Max, male, 45, local, Lélek festival 2022)

For Max, the atmosphere, the special space, has a greater significance than things. Material symbols, according to some participants, prevent them from gaining awareness or truly experiencing their beliefs. This is also a reasonable reaction when we follow Merleau-Ponty's train of thought. The ensouling, animating objects in modern societies are no longer common:

late developmental processes brought the objectification of things, and the original, inner connection between person and object has been lost (Rosa, 2019, p. 228). Therefore, many people today see attachment to things as an addiction, a product of capitalistic consumerist societies, and reject their importance in order to escape being the victims of consumerism. This kind of rejection appears to be opposite to the reaction of other participants, for whom the festival logos and memorabilia symbolise belonging to the community and escaping everyday society. The difference dissolves, however, because the result is, in fact, the same: carrying or not carrying, wearing or not wearing these motifs proclaims the same message: belonging, identity, harmony, and a common belief.

5.3 Resonating with Others

Rosa describes a 'horizontal axis of resonance', which includes the resonant relationships that people experience in connection with each other. Affection and emotion, as two essential elements of the resonant experience, play an important role in this process (Rosa, 2019, p. 202).

Visitors to a festival are connected by shared experiences, which play an important role in the formation of community and the relationship between participants. German sociologist Babette Kirchner pointed out that the participants at a festival can feel affection for each other through shared emotional moments (Kirchner, 2011). In mass societies, tribal behaviour can arise from a longing for earlier forms of human communities and lead to the formation of neotribes, as Michel Maffesoli has argued (Maffesoli, 1996). Neotribalism, in contrast to tribalism, manifests in sporadic gatherings and is distinguished by its 'fluidity' and 'dispersal' (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 76). Spaces of temporary community-building, where a return to the elements and functions of tribal ritual can appear, are also spaces for resonance.

Public viewing events, particularly of World Cup or European Championship soccer games, can in this sense be understood as social 'oases of resonance' whose popularity stems from the fact that they are able, in a fragmented and individualized world, to seize and direct the attention and emotions of hundreds, even thousands, of people at once, generating as well as amplifying moments of collective effervescence not least through the awareness that one is connected to people all around the world who are witnessing the same event at the same time (Rosa, 2019, pp. 197–98).

Clearly Rosa is describing Emile Durkheim's 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim, 1964): the elevated, electric, avalanche-like emotions of ritual participants. Alongside Victor Turner's 'communitas', these two theories are commonly applied in festival research to examining the collective experience of the participants. I propose that visiting a festival gives an opportunity for resonant experiences: in the joint programmes, participants are 'capable of response', and resonant relationships can be formed.

Just this morning I shared a post on Facebook about how if you can connect well with others, you can really connect with yourself. And from there you can measure where you are with yourself. When you see someone and you see everything in them, the fallibility, the good, the bad, but you can see them as good as they are, even with the bad, then you see yourself from a higher perspective. It is like seeing yourself through the eyes of God. And that this is such a... so I believe that 'healing' in a group can be much better than individually. (Barbara, female, 44, small town, Everness 2021)

As noted earlier, this aspect can be found in the thought of Gauthier, who suggested that one of the characteristics of these events is 'healing yourself through the healing of others, and vice versa' (Gauthier, 2014, p. 268). Temporary relationships create resonance when a mutual recognition and response exist between the subjects. The common worldview and experiences connect the festival participants, and the horizontal axis of resonance emerges. At the Fekete Zaj festival, the aspect of connecting to others while still having their own experiences was also emphasised. Individual and collective experience occur separately, but they influence each other. This is also a characteristic of horizontal resonant relationships (Rosa, 2019).

It is a very good feeling for me to feel that people are somehow connected despite their differences. These human encounters that I have, I have even met old acquaintances here and new ones, it is very fulfilling. [...] I walk around and I really feel like I'm in a village where you greet people just because they're in the same place. So, I like it a lot. Of course, when you're at a concert, the crowd moves together, but I've heard that people can experience it very differently (Kira, female, 31, county town, Fekete Zaj 2022).

5.4 Resonance on the self-axis

According to Rosa, the self-axis that exists alongside the other three axes describes resonance with oneself, with one's own mind, body, and soul. The resonant relationship occurs with oneself, with another person or community, with an object, a place, or nature, with divine or supernatural powers, when the self is 'in resonance with our highest aspirations and strongest evaluations' [borrowed from Charles Taylor (1989)] (Rosa, 2020a, p. 6). Resonance works on this axis in the same way as in any other relationship: both sides (in the case of the self-axis, *body* and *interpretation*) are balanced, and 'constantly respond to and transform each other' (Rosa, 2020a, p. 6).

When talking about religionesque experiences, the vertical axis should also be mentioned. In these relationships, a person can resonate with a higher power, a divine being or something they believe in, and with 'life, existence, or the world as a whole' (Rosa, 2019, p. 195). In these relationships, the self, the body, and the object of the experience are all active participants. They are most interesting when one resonates with such abstract notions as life, existence, a higher power, or the self.

The interviewees at Everness reported that the people and atmosphere helped them to leave their comfort zone, which suggests the characteristics of affection and self-efficacy. In addition, they do not consciously seek resonant experiences but simply let them happen.

Q- What kind of experiences and feelings are you looking for during a programme?

A - Well, I'm not looking. I receive the signal. So, if I walk in front of [a lecture or performance] and it grabs my attention or calls me in, I go in there. [...] When we finish this interview, I will check in the programme what is going on, and there will be a reason why a programme starts exactly when we finish. [...] There are programmes that interest me, and if I can get there, that's great, but I let myself drift and I don't have any expectations (Barbara, female, 44, small town, Everness 2021).

Letting the programmes 'call', 'touch', or 'attract' the participants was a commonly held view at the festival. Visitors always found an explanation or a reason why they came to a certain programme. They felt that they had been called upon, and this had already put them on a resonant axis with the object of the relationship. Most of the time, they felt emotions that could suggest resonance when they happened to go to a programme that then spoke to them.

This was closely related to the fact that the randomly selected programmes often pushed the participants out of their comfort zone, thereby increasing their self-awareness.

Two of my interviewees reported an experience that reflected the elements articulated by Rosa, and even by James and his 'mystical experience' (James, (1902] 2008).

Q: Did you have an experience that was more important, when a feeling found you?

A1: Yes, absolutely, at the Earthjam concert. (a Hungarian band playing psychedelic trance music.) I think I can say that about both of us there.

A2: Yes, I think it was very....

A1: ...it really took us away...

A2: ...we danced together there, and I think we danced quite a lot...

A1: Yeah it was...wow. It was a very interesting state and I think Earthjam is very good at taking you from the most natural, slow, breeze-like movement to a place where your body is practically falling apart. So you go through a process where it doesn't matter who's around you, it doesn't matter what the temperature of the ground is – although usually it's very important whether you are standing on a cold or a warm or a gravel ground – and when you've been dancing for an hour and a half and your muscles are throbbing and cramping but no, the world just disappears... I think it's indescribable.

A2 – [in awe] I don't really have anything to add to that... (Roland, male, 25, Budapest, volunteer, Everness 2021).

A1 - ...it was really special for us on Earthjam (Lili, female, 21, county town, volunteer, Everness 2021).

At the Lélek festival, it was clear from the outset that there was a sense of collective effervescence and *communitas*. This was expressed in a religious ritual that bound people together through the practice of a common faith. Most of the participants mentioned that the performers and the musicians help them to live the experience, to *immerse* themselves. Immersion can be understood as 'getting-drawn-into-something' and 'letting go' (Schüler, 2017, p. 368).

I already have a few favourite songs that I sometimes listen to at home. And sometimes their vibe is very good because I can relate to them, I can experience them in myself. Now I could hear them live, for example by Béla Pintér, (one of

the best-known Christian singers in Hungary, performing at events regardless of denomination.) and the feeling was [very good]. And I actually made a video of it to have the experience, but I was *in* the experience, so I don't think I actually filmed him, I filmed something else [laughs], so I just stood there and said 'Oh, it's good' (Mira, female, 21, small town, volunteer, Lélek festival 2022).

Sebastian Schüler explains that immersion 'always involves two sides, namely affective as well as controlling aspects, and their merging and convergence' (Schüler, 2017, p. 379). *Affect* is an 'occurring emotion or temper with a special quality of feeling or sensing to it, which can cause particular behaviours' (Schüler, 2017, p. 379). Schüler continues:

The ritual participant is not a machine that automatically falls into arousal and entrancement after entering the ritual mode. Rather he or she tunes in to the ritual atmosphere and thereby gives way for the feeling of 'being-drawn-into-something' while at the same time being able to control the moment of 'letting-yourself-go' (Schüler, 2017, p. 379).

This interpretation is very close to the description of resonant relationships, which are, additionally, always reciprocal. Immersion (and resonance) can be created when both parties influence and control each other in the ritual encounter. Rosa explains that without a mutual connection, the relationship is *resonanceless*, because the two parties 'never manage to move in sync with each other' (Rosa, 2019, p. 65). Total immersion was often manifested in physical movement: singing and praying with arms open or raised was common. Although the auditorium was full of chairs, at the concerts people mostly stood up from their seats and many knelt on the floor.

At the Fekete Zaj festival, as at Everness, visitors could show their identity without judgement, living their true selves without having to play a role or 'wear a mask'.

During these few days every year, I feel that I can really be myself, and this does not mean that I behave completely differently from usual, because I don't, but somehow, somehow, it's a little bit different. So, I don't need to wear masks. And by the way, something else is, this feeling that usually hits me... this may sound stupid, but from the thought of the Zaj, somewhere around last weekend I already felt like I was in love. And it wasn't love for a specific person, so there was no object, just the feeling, from this Zaj vibe. That it's coming soon and I'm really

looking forward to being here – and this is the kind of feeling of love that I can attach to it (Dorina, female, 37, volunteer, Budapest).

The cathartic experiences could be achieved through music, which has a strong and ineffable character.

Q - You mentioned this cathartic experience. If you think about it, how could you describe it? What happens inside you when you experience catharsis?

A - Well, we once said that there are one or two performers whose concerts are almost like going to a ceremony or experiencing a ritual. And seeing and experiencing such a ritual together creates such a... strong relationship. But for example, a [friend of mine and I] were at a concert in one of the previous years, and I stood with him speechless and we just hugged each other afterwards because that concert was such a visceral experience that... I can't find words. We looked at each other and felt the same. And this is something that I don't think happens often... and I like it very much [tears in her eyes] (Emma, female, 31, Budapest, Fekete Zaj 2022).

6. Limitations and risks

The research itself has limitations as it is qualitative research that cannot provide a full picture of all the events – although neither is its goal. The goal was to show instances from festival events that can be understood through the lens of resonance theory, testing its applicability to empirical research. In these settings, this experiment can be deemed successful. We may then ask: Is this the solution? Shall we all go to festivals in order to attain the uncontrollable – to attain resonance? Of course, in addition to chasing the idea of resonance, festival experiences have potential risks. It is no coincidence that Rosa emphasises on many occasions that resonance is uncontrollable (Rosa, 2020b). Some authors would disagree. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, for example, described what he called the 'flow' experience (something very similar to resonance), but suggests that such an experience can be learned and controlled (Csíkszentmihályi, 2009). Rosa may, however, be wanting to warn us: chasing resonant experiences can lead to a lack of fulfilment or even to hedonism (Schulze, 2008). Building our emotional balance on temporary experiences may result in an emotional crisis – something that we are already living in the twenty-first century (Rosa, 2019, p. 427). However, in

contemporary society the concept of resonance is very much needed as a response to alienation, and even if it cannot be controlled, one can still be open to it.

As well as being able to ‘unlock’ resonance, festivals can also have some dangers. Visiting festivals is often described as a ‘switching off’ from everyday life, as an ‘escape’ to another reality. This is a concept worthy of further investigation: Does humanity today need to escape from societal problems and crises or rather to actively work on solutions? Or are festivals not a way to escape only, but an opportunity to experience the values and goals that humanity is indeed actively working on in a temporary utopia?

Another issue is the consumerist aspect of the events: festivals such as Everness, but also the other two festivals described here, are essentially selling something. They are brands that sell products (Schouten, McAlexander and Koenig, 2007; Hudson *et al.*, 2015), and through these products, they sell experience, religion, spirituality, and, yes, resonance. Visitors often return to the event the following year in the hope of receiving the same product, but the product is elusive and there is no guarantee that it will be the same. Rosa warns us about exactly this: the need for more and more just feeds the acceleration process (Rosa, 2024).

7. Conclusion

Resonance theory proved to be applicable to the three festivals examined here. The characteristics of a resonant experience can be traced in some of the interview excerpts, and the axes of resonance identified. Participants at a mindfulness festival, a religious festival, and a metal music festival had experiences that can be understood as resonant in relation to the festival area, the festival objects, other participants, and to themselves. The two methodological tools – the event religion model and the umbrella term ‘religionesque’ – seemed useful in the empirical analysis of resonance theory. ‘Resonant experiences’ (or relationships) can be placed among the collection of terms that aim to grasp and describe experiences that are ‘religious’ or at least akin to being religious. Further research should explore the potential interpretive dangers of resonance theory and how this is manifested empirically, and whether resonance theory offers an appropriate interpretative framework for approaching religious experiences, and what this could mean for this field of research.

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Author biographies

Dr Michael Rush

Mike Rush obtained his PhD at Christ Church Canterbury University, supported by the Alef Trust and the Professional Development Foundation. He is also Trustee of the Alister Hardy Society and sits on the committee of the BPS Transpersonal Psychology Section. He provides support, training, and undertakes research into spiritual crisis (aka spiritual emergency) and co-facilitates peer-support groups, trained as a Spiritual Emergence Coach with the IMHU. He was co-director of the UK Spiritual Crisis Network for ten years. Further, he is a qualified hypno-psychotherapist registered with the CNHC and the National Society of Talking Therapies. Although he has not experienced a spiritual crisis himself, he has a long-standing interest in myth, magic, and mysticism, viewed through the lenses of applied and transpersonal psychology, and in particular with spiritual crisis, Western Esotericism, and the pre-Christian traditions of the British Isles.

Dr Wanting He

Wanting He received her PhD from Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University in Bangkok. Her research focuses on digital culture, artificial intelligence and society, mediated intimacy, and the intersection of religion, spirituality, and digital media. She is particularly interested in how emerging media technologies reshape cultural practices, emotional experience, and everyday forms of meaning-making. Her work draws on both quantitative and qualitative approaches, including digital ethnography, experimental research, and computationally assisted methods.

Dr Dimitrios Th. Vachaviolos

Dimitrios Vachaviolos holds a PhD in Byzantine History from the University of Ioannina, Greece (2014). He is currently a Laboratory Teaching Staff member in Byzantine History and Culture at the Department of History, Archaeology and Cultural Resources Management of the University of Peloponnese. In October 2024, he was appointed President of the Supervisory Council of the Public Central Library of Sparta. His research interests focus on the ecclesiastical history, geography, and art of the Peloponnese during the Byzantine and post-Byzantine periods, Byzantine hagiography, as well as ecclesiastical-political developments and reunion efforts between Eastern and Western Christendom in the late Byzantine era.

Accursio Graffeo, MA

Accursio Graffeo is a PhD candidate in the Italian Doctoral School of Religious Studies (DREST) at the University of Modena-Reggio Emilia/University of Turin jointly with the University of Zurich (URPP Digital Religion(s) research centre) and at the Bruno Kessler Foundation (FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies). His research focuses on AI-related new religious movements. He holds a master's degree in cultural anthropology from the University of Turin. In 2022 he published his first monograph entitled *'Religioni e*

complessità. L'antropologia di Enrico Comba e i Nativi nordamericani' (Accademia University Press). In the social sector, he has more than a decade of experience in the field of social community empowerment in the metropolitan area of Milan and solid experience in social design and project writing. In the field of anthropology, he is a member of the editorial board of AceTónico, an online project for independent and participatory anthropological publishing.

Dr Sára Heidl

Sára Eszter Heidl is a lecturer at the University of Vienna. She completed her bachelor's degree in sociology and her master's degree in religious studies. In her PhD, she examined Hungarian festivals, exploring the event experience through theories of religious experience. This work was published in the book *Event Religion and European Festival Experience: Concepts and Case Studies* (2025). Her current interests lie in the terminological debates on religious experience, and the empirical exploration of that experience in alternative religious and spiritual circles.