



The Fruits of Spiritual Experiences during the Pandemic: COVID-19 and the Effects of Non-Ordinary Experiences

Bettina E. Schmidt | ORCID: 0000-0002-7175-7057

Professor, Centre for Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter, UK

Corresponding Author

b.schmidt@uwtsd.ac.uk

Kate Stockly | ORCID: 0000-0001-5707-7103

Postdoctoral Researcher, Center for Mind and Culture, Boston, MA, USA

katestockly@gmail.com

Received 20 September 2022 | Accepted 15 May 2023 |

Published online 1 August 2023

Abstract

This paper presents new research about spiritual experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to discuss the impact of spiritual experiences on people's lives and relationships. Building upon William James' four features of the "fruits" of religious experience as a conceptual frame, the paper presents data from two surveys in which participants narrated spiritual experiences and reflected on the impacts of those experiences. We start with a short presentation of James' ideas about the fruits of religious experience. The next section outlines four themes that have emerged from the narratives of spiritual experiences during the pandemic: impacts on people's relationships with their religious communities, shifts in one's subjective sense of spiritual connection and intuition, encounters with spiritual figures and near-death experiences, and interpretations of COVID-19 as a spiritual contagion. The final section broadens the discussion from the impact of specific spiritual experiences to include spiritual responses to the pandemic more generally, leading to a discussion of the experiences within the wider debate in fruits of religious experience.

Keywords

spiritual experience – non-ordinary experience – spirituality – COVID-19 – spirituality and health – near-death experiences – William James

1 Introduction

At the dawn of the 20th century, American psychologist and philosopher William James introduced a new academic framework for the study of spiritual experiences that sought verification of these experiences based on their impact on people's lives. James argued that we can study these subjective and personal experiences pragmatically as a topic of scientific analysis. "The truest scientific hypothesis is that which, as we say, 'works' best; and it can be no otherwise with religious hypotheses."¹ While James is not without critics² – and nowadays widely overlooked outside the study of religions – his approach opened the door for a new way of studying spiritual and other non-ordinary experiences that is based on analyzing the "fruits" of experience. James studied the transformative power of spiritual and other non-ordinary experience, arguing that accounting for such experiences is key for understanding what people mean when they speak about spiritual growth, whether or not researchers themselves believe the religious tenets associated with the experiences.

It is agreed that we have no way of coming to know religious claims, and the question to be decided is whether it is permissible to believe such claims on the basis of evidence that would not suffice for knowledge. Belief is permissible provided that there is a way of embedding individuals' commitments to religion in a framework of social practices that will produce overall consequences at least as good as those of any alternative that forbids such commitments. The beliefs induced by religious experiences have as a dominant consequence their alleviation of a predicament that the most reflective human beings share, and, indeed, the fruits of endorsing religious experiences typically consists in the transformation of the individual's life in productive ways.³

1 James, *The Will to Believe*, p. XII.

2 See Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief*; Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*; Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*; Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*; Carrette/King, *Selling Spirituality*.

3 Kitcher, *Preludes to Pragmatism*, p. 248.

Several scholars stepped into James' footprints and focused on the study of the fruits of religious experiences or, as Alister Hardy wrote, the consequences of these experiences.⁴ The focus of these studies is usually limited to beneficial and long-lasting impact of experiences, for instance how they impact ethical behaviour or well-being. Another consequence of James' long-lasting influence is the focus on extraordinary and private experiences. As Grace Jantzen points out, James "did not pay attention to the literary context from which they were drawn, let alone to the historical and social conditions out of which they arose."⁵ While our research also acknowledges the effects of spiritual experiences, such as strengthening moral values and becoming less self-centred and more aware of something greater than oneself, we discovered a more diverse range of effects on people's lives and personal orientations caused by non-ordinary experiences that occurred in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The present research was conducted via an online survey that was circulated on social media postings and mailing lists. The survey advertisement invited people who had received a diagnosis of COVID-19 and who had had a religious or spiritual experience while fighting the virus. It stated that the purpose of the survey was to collect narratives from people who had a spiritual or religious experience while sick with COVID-19. After collecting information about the participants' COVID-19 diagnosis and treatment such as, for example, whether they spent time in the hospital, and their religious or spiritual background, the survey asked for a narrative of their religious or spiritual experience, prompting them for as much detail as the participant felt comfortable providing.

The survey attracted responses from all over the world. Interestingly, the participants reported a range of experiences, not only ones that might typically be expected to be described as religious and spiritual experiences, but also experiences that were non-ordinary in a wider sense. That being said, all the experiences were, in Ann Taves words, "experiences deemed religious"⁶ or spiritual by the participants themselves, who volunteered to share them in response to a prompt about religious and spiritual experiences. Some participants also reported how the pandemic and the lockdown impacted their relationship with their religious communities.⁷ While the primary purpose of the survey was to collect narratives of experiences, the survey also included an option to complete three validated survey instruments designed to explore the phenomenological qualities of spiritual and mystical experiences: the Phenomenology

4 Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man*, p. 29.

5 Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p. 305.

6 Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, p.12.

7 Schmidt/Stockly, *The Silence around Non-Ordinary Experiences*.

of Consciousness Inventory – Religious and Spiritual Experience 2 (PCI-RSE v.2), Alister Hardy’s Classification of Elements of Religious Experiences, and the Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ30).⁸

From the diversity of responses, it became clear that in addition to non-ordinary and spiritual experiences that appeared associated with the person’s struggle with the virus, people also recounted meaningful and transformative spiritual experiences that were shaped in part by the social and psychological conditions of the pandemic in general – including the isolation, fear, uncertainty, and social polarization. These factors created specific cultural contexts that may have contributed to the qualities and impacts of spiritual experiences. Therefore, to explore more varieties of experiences during the pandemic, we circulated a second, shorter survey advertised with a more general invite for anyone, whether or not they had ever been sick with COVID-19, who had a spiritual or religious experience in the context of the pandemic to share. This second survey asked for an account of their experience and asked a few questions about the impact of the experience and was advertised primarily in the USA.

For the purposes of this study, we did not impose an *a priori* definition of “spiritual experience” on either the participants or on the data. Given the diverse ways in which people relate to their own spirituality, and since we were interested in capturing how people process and generate meaning from experiences that affect them on a spiritual level, we allowed participants to define “spiritual” for themselves. Likewise, in our analysis of the data, when participants offered narratives of experiences they deemed “spiritual,” we accepted them as such. Occasionally throughout this article, we also use the term “non-ordinary”. This is meant to refer to experiences that involve types of perceptions and/or sensations that lay outside the bounds of typical everyday life for that person. For example, non-ordinary sensations related to time or space, seeing visions of things that do not seem to be materially present, gaining sudden insights or knowledge, or hearing unembodied voices. Non-ordinary experiences are often (although not always) deemed spiritually meaningful by those who have them.

After a short reflection on the impacts of spiritual and non-ordinary experiences, we will outline four themes that emerged from the first survey of people who shared narratives of non-ordinary experiences had while sick with COVID-19: the impact on one’s relationships with their religious communities, shifts in one’s subjective sense of spiritual connection and intuition, seeing

8 Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man*; Moreira-Almeida/Freitas/Schmidt, *Alister Hardy: A Naturalist of the Spiritual Realm*; MacLean et al., *Factor Analysis of the Mystical Experience Questionnaire*.

spiritual figures and near death experiences, and interpretations of COVID-19 as a spiritual contagion. Following in James' footsteps, this article then draws from data gathered by both surveys to discuss the diverse impacts of spiritual experiences on people's lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, including a recognition of the potentially negative or challenging effects of the experiences.

2 The Fruits of Spiritual and Non-Ordinary Experiences

Over the last decades, several studies have explored the impact of non-ordinary experiences. One area that is often highlighted is mental health. As Caroline Franks Davis points out,

religious experiences may well be conducive to good mental health and to a healthy, positive attitude towards death. They may also contribute towards personal psychological development, leading to greater stability and self-knowledge. In the more dramatic cases, religious experiences appear to precipitate physical or mental healing, or conversion from a destructive lifestyle. Through them one may discover new, profound meaning in life where before there had been a sense of purposelessness and despair, and be enabled, as Viktor Frankl was, to survive such traumas as a Nazi prison camp. In innumerable cases, religious experiences have helped people deal with crises, anxiety, sorrow, and guilt, and have provided comfort and hope, courage, guidance and moral strength.⁹

Many studies have since explored and supported Franks Davis's hypotheses. For example, Bitēna and Mārtinsone¹⁰ found that incidence of mystical experiences, which is a sub-type of non-ordinary experience that holds specific phenomenological features, was positively correlated with spiritual intelligence. Mystical experiences have been found to correlate with satisfaction with life,¹¹ compassion for others and oneself,¹² and deeper sense of belonging in the world.¹³ While Bitēna and Mārtinsone¹⁴ also found that although mystical experience was associated with some schizotypal personality traits, it was

9 Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, p. 247.

10 Bitēna/Mārtinsone, *Mystical Experience Has a Stronger Relationship*.

11 Polito/Stevenson, *A Systematic Study of Microdosing Psychedelics*.

12 Hanley/Nakamura/Garland, *The Nondual Awareness Dimensional Assessment*.

13 Garcia-Romeu/Himmelstein/Kaminker, *Self-Transcendent Experience*.

14 Bitēna/Mārtinsone, *Mystical Experience Has a Stronger Relationship*.

not significantly related to the overall indicator of schizotypal personality.¹⁵ They conclude that mystical experiences are more associated with mental health than with mental illness. That being said, they are careful to note that this does not mean mystical experiences are never associated with psychological distress. Indeed, Bitēna and Mārtinsone¹⁶ explain that even though the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (*DSM-5*), which is the official diagnostic tool for psychologists and psychiatrists for the American Psychiatric Association, describes problems related to “distressing experiences that involve loss or questioning of faith, problems associated with conversation to a new faith, or questioning of spiritual values that may not necessarily be related to an organized church or religious institution”,¹⁷ research is now suggesting that these “distressing experiences” are not always pathological – they may be an integral aspect of a psychospiritual growth process.¹⁸

These studies about mystical experiences are situated alongside a substantial amount of research showing that religiosity and religious behavior can have effects on mental wellbeing in other ways as well. Studies have shown that church attendance and belief in God are often related to wellbeing¹⁹ and that religious and faith healing practices can have a salutary or comforting effect²⁰ even if they also sometimes have a complicated relationship with understandings of causality and other forms of medical care,²¹ and that the performance of personal and social rituals can be a helpful coping mechanism for stressful and uncertain times.²²

These studies about religious service attendance and group ritual participation remind us that spiritual and non-ordinary experiences do not occur in the absence of cultural or social systems.²³ In fact, crucially, the value and authenticity of non-ordinary experiences are either confirmed or delegitimized by

15 Bitēna/Mārtinsone, *Mystical Experience Has a Stronger Relationship*. Importantly, associations were only found with subfactors related to unusual beliefs and unusual perceptions, which is unsurprising considering that mystical experiences are altered states of consciousness, and not subfactors such as social detachment, cognitive dysregulation that might lead to social withdrawal, or self-harm.

16 Bitēna/Mārtinsone, *Mystical Experience Has a Stronger Relationship*.

17 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, cited in Bitēna/Mārtinsone, *Mystical Experience Has a Stronger Relationship*, p. 12.

18 See also Lukoff/Lu/Yang, *DSM-IV Religious and Spiritual Problems*.

19 Koenig/King/Benner Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*.

20 Dein, *Religious Healing and Mental Health*; Dallas/Baroutsas/Dein, *The Power of the Divine*.

21 Vilog/Picos/Bernadas, *Healing “through God’s grace”*.

22 Schumaker, *Religion and Mental Health*; Dein/Loewenthal, *Mental Health Benefits*; Wood, *Ritual Well-Being*.

23 Schmidt, *Spirit and Trance in Brazil*.

the cultural context in which they are embedded. When a non-ordinary experience is accepted or even celebrated by the surrounding community, a person can benefit deeply from a feeling of significance and validation. It can enhance their relationship with the group and reaffirm commitment to the meaning-making orientations of the group. However, in many cases, if the experience encourages insights or beliefs that run contrary to cultural frameworks, values, or expectations, a person may have a difficult time interpreting and integrating their experience. Hence, if the experience occurs within a context that regards such experiences as irrational, ‘abnormal’, or even evil, the experience can have a negative impact on wellbeing. For example, the person who had the experience may feel shame related to judgements from their community or fear of evil influences. This may cause them to withdraw from the community or lead to persecution, rejection, or discrimination. It is also possible that the community itself could experience rifts and conflicts as they navigate members’ intense experiences. As David Hay pointed out:

People reporting religious experience are on the whole better balanced mentally, happier and more socially responsible than others. Yet in other circumstances [...] experiences such as they describe can be used as evidence for the diagnosis of mental illness. The disentangling of this very complex field could lead to a revision of the way in which an illness like schizophrenia is understood.²⁴

In addition to the potential mental health benefits, non-ordinary experiences can also have lasting impacts in rising or renewing moral or ethical awareness or a more general change of attitude. Non-ordinary experiences can even inspire more radical transformations such as changes in belief systems, life expectations, and career trajectories. The concept of “fruits” or effects of an experience is therefore used by some scholars to study non-ordinary experiences in a way James outlined over one hundred years ago.²⁵

The use of the term ‘fruits’ draws on the Bible verses “The fruit of the righteous is the tree of life” (Proverbs 11:30), “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23), and “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:16). Within Christianity, the fruit of a religious experience is often interpreted as a sacred or divine gift and not achieved by people themselves. However, the idea that analysing the *effects* or *consequences* of a non-ordinary or spiritual

²⁴ Hay, *Religious Experience Today*, p. 103.

²⁵ See Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*.

experience as a viable way to determine whether the practice and experiences are true reflections of wisdom and divinity is not limited to Christianity or even the Abrahamic traditions but can be seen in various traditions.²⁶ Depending on the tradition, these criteria may include emotional, behavioural, and social effects. The key is that they are usually noticeable by and beneficial for not only the individual, but also the community. For example, faith in the Islamic tradition is exemplified by performing and cultivating the Five Pillars and Buddhist practice is reflected in the Noble Eightfold Path. Even James pointed to the universality of the concept of fruits, despite his use of terms from a Christian context. In addition to the Biblical origin of the term fruits, James proposed ‘saintliness’ as “the collective name for the ripe fruits of religion” but explained further that “the saintly character is the character for which spiritual emotions are the habitual centre of the personal energy; and there is a certain composite photograph of universal saintliness, the same in all religions, of which the features can easily be traced.”²⁷

Opposing Freud and other psychological reductionists, James takes the idea of spiritual experiences and the potential for spiritual growth seriously, suggesting that, while the origin or psychological state of the person having an experience is insufficient for determining the value of the experience, what matters is the *effect* the experience has: “this is our own empiricist criterion,” he says. Qualities such as “immediate luminousness [...] philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness” are more important than determining whether the insight came about as part of a seeming neurological disturbance.²⁸ One particular exception James holds is a skepticism toward drug-induced experiences. However, James’ differentiation between “genuine” versus drug-induced experiences is now challenged by many studies that demonstrate the potential existential and mental health benefits of mystical and psychodynamic experiences generated with the help of psychedelic substances.²⁹ Nevertheless, James’ suggestion to evaluate religious experience on the basis of their fruits remains important. Bracketing questions related to the reality of the conceptual content of specific experiences, James lists the following features of their *effects*, which he perceived to be real:

- 1) A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world’s selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power.

26 Morgan/Lawton, *Ethical Issues*.

27 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 268.

28 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 39.

29 I.e. Griffiths et al., *Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical Experiences*.

- 2) A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.
- 3) An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.
- 4) A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards “yes, yes” and away from “no,” where the claims of the non-ego are concerned.³⁰

James explains that these inner conditions have practical consequences such as Asceticism; Strength of Soul; Purity; and Charity,³¹ each of which he illustrates with various examples. Though he does mention the diversity between and within traditions, he insists that the fruits are rooted in human experience and then reflected in different traditions’ doctrinal teachings.

Not only scholars, but also religious and spiritual people themselves often highlight the importance of the *effects* of experiences. In religious contexts, the effects of an experience are often analyzed to help determine whether the experience can be trusted, in other words, it’s authenticity. For example, drawing on both their own interviews and the stated teachings of various religions, Wildman and Stockly³² identified three factors people tend to consider when interpreting the authenticity of spiritual experiences:

- (1) the *qualities* of the experience, including the feelings, content, imagery, sensations, and messages revealed in the experience; (2) the *effects* the experience has had on the person’s self-understanding, behavior, physical well-being, mental health, life meaning, and community; and (3) the *causes* of their experience,³³

including the practices, substances, setting, and level of expertise required to generate the experience. While some people seem to adopt a spectrum approach to authenticity – suggesting that some experiences are perhaps *more* authentic or reliable than others, based on how they came about (for example, a mystical experience brought about by disciplined contemplation might be more authentic than a mystical experience that arose after taking a psychedelic entheogen), others were “uncomfortable downgrading the authenticity of a transformative mystical experience based solely on how it arose, its

30 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 269 et seq.

31 See James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 270 et seq.

32 Wildman/Stockly, *Spirit Tech*.

33 Wildman/Stockly, *Spirit Tech*, p. 221, italics in original.

apparent causes.”³⁴ Wildman and Stockly conclude that, given the wide range of human experience and the variety of spiritual traditions, evaluations of authenticity based on an experience’s causes and an experience’s qualities or conceptual content are both generally less reliable than an analysis of how the experience affected the person’s behaviour and spiritual well-being. Therefore, like James, they land on the effects or “fruits” of the experience as the most important factor in analysing spiritual experiences.

As we will demonstrate in the next sections, we find the Jamesian approach helpful but incomplete. While an empirical, observation-based account of the effects or “fruits” of different types of anomalous experiences and altered states of consciousness does help us make sense of the role these experiences play in people lives, James seems to hold a somewhat positive bias toward the potential effects of these experiences. First, as shown in his list of features, James limits his discussion of effects to those he sees as beneficial, ignoring less desirable ways an experience might transform a person. Second, with his focus on permanent change, he discredits experiences that might not lead to long-lasting transformation, deeming those less authentic or spiritually meaningful. However, our data found that experiences deemed spiritual by the people who have them manifest with diverse effects that are not always subjectively beneficial nor long-lasting.

3 Non-Ordinary Experiences and COVID-19

Turning our attention toward newly gathered data, this section begins with an overview of four themes that emerged from narratives of spiritual experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e., the data from the first survey. Initial analysis of the data identified three themes:³⁵ changes in relationships with one’s religious community, spiritual visions and near death experiences, and interpretations of COVID-19 as a spiritual contagion. However, additional data now supports a disaggregation of the first of those three themes – “relationships with their religious communities” – into two different types, one more focused on change to one’s relationships with other people in their religious community, and the other focused on changes to one’s inner spiritual connection and identification with their tradition. Thus, this article categorizes these as two separate themes, for a total of four themes.

34 Wildman/Stockly, *Spirit Tech*, p. 220.

35 Schmidt/Stockly, *The Silence around Non-Ordinary Experiences*.

This section presents excerpts mainly from the first survey and gives an overview of the four themes.³⁶ While not focusing on the fruits of the experience which will be discussed in the following section, it sets the scene as it outlines what types of experiences people had and how people reacted to having non-ordinary experiences during the pandemic.

As described above, the data was primarily collected via an online survey circulated on social media. We collected narratives mainly from the UK and the USA but also Nigeria, Finland, Australia, Nicaragua, Pakistan and Ukraine. The first survey received 33 responses, though only 15 included detailed narratives about their experience. There were 7 men, 7 women, and 1 non-binary person; participants were between 25 and 85 years old. Most participants reported adhering to various forms of Christianity (Catholicism, Byzantine Christianity, Church of England, or just “Christianity”) but there were also Islamic and Buddhist participants.

Before we present their narratives, we want to clarify that we are not addressing any questions concerning the theological validity or reality of concepts or entities described in the experiences.

3.1 *Transformed Social Relationships*

Occasionally, the spiritual health and well-being of an individual might be at odds with a particular religious community. While James highlighted the beneficial impact of religious experiences, many of our participants mentioned a broken relationship with their religious communities. While an experience sometimes drew people closer to the divine, some participants mentioned that they withdrew from their congregation and directed their attention more ‘inward’:

I feel very ‘inwards’ and do not really wish to engage in other things. I also feel as though I have my full religious experience within me at all times so there is no need to ‘go’ elsewhere.

In some cases, for example if a community has become harmful or neglectful, a distancing from one’s community might be beneficial in the long run, but in other cases, given the documented benefits of community participation and support, withdrawing from one’s community could potentially lead to a decrease in wellbeing. Either way, distancing from one’s community is often

36 The following excerpts are not edited for linguistic accuracy but kept how the participants typed them and might contain typos and grammatical errors. We also did not correct the use of capital letters, nor did we include [sic] after a linguistic mistake.

painful or traumatic at least in the short term. Sometimes participants even kept their experience secret, wanting to share it neither with family nor the religious community:

I stopped going to Church ... I felt they let me down. My doubt in Church did not impact my faith, my experience is with God ... I still believe in God but I lost my spiritual home.

Others blamed the religious leaders for being socially inactive or having politicized the pandemic.

Initially Clerics denied the existence of COVID-19 and tagged it as MEDIA created disease. However, later on, when COVID-19 brought deaths and other social, religious and economics effects they started re-interpreting COVID-19 and asked the people to opt social distancing.

In early days Clerics tagged COVID-19 as wrath of Allah on Chinese as they were killing innocent Muslims in Xinjiang. later on, when COVID brought destruction on Iran, Clerics reinterpreted COVID-19 as JEWISH virus and Western sponsored disease against Muslims and Islam. I was amazed to experience this religious shift in Pakistan.

This participant mentioned that due to social distancing he was unable to attend funerals which led to a broken relationship with relatives. Many participants spontaneously expanded the survey's initial focus on non-ordinary experience by also reflecting on the spiritual impact of the lockdown, rather than focusing only on the experiences they had while sick with the virus. This demonstrates that for many participants the lockdown itself was an existentially impactful context that served as the impetus for spiritual experiences. Their replies illustrate Carrette and King's point³⁷ that we should not ignore the social and communal dimension of spiritual experiences. Experiences do not happen in a vacuum – they are experienced *by someone*, “and this already implies that it is experienced from within a particular cultural and linguistic context which will to some extent shape it.”³⁸

There were also examples of both the general pandemic context and particular spiritual experiences inspiring a strengthening of community ties. Some spoke of the pandemic lockdown as a wake-up call that reaffirmed the value of their connections with friends and family.

37 Carrette/King, *Selling Spirituality*.

38 Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p. 337, referring to Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, p. 26.

I understood I should live my life more fully, I have many dreams and plans to realise, I love my lovely family, so I should be with them more.

Being more connected and conscientious of the whole.

One respondent even reported that the pandemic lockdown led to the decision to pursue ordination as the experience brought them closer to a spiritual community. Once again, these excerpts present a mix of narratives, some responding to a specific spiritual experience and others responding to the spiritual impact of the lockdown on their lives. Considering both together demonstrates how life-changing the COVID-19 pandemic has been for many people.

3.2 *Shift in One's Sense of Spiritual Connection*

While many participants' relationships to other people – relatives as well as religious congregations – were impacted by the pandemic, several participants mentioned that their spiritual experiences increased their sense of connection to the spiritual realm. This more individual, inward looking reflection echoes features of a spiritual awakening reported by some scholars.³⁹

In actuality, it enhanced my skills and ability and certainty of spiritual capacity to deal with other life-forms. I've always had a high level of harmonious alignment with pets and domestic animals ... but this event provided an awakening of my capacity to spiritually deal with ALL life forms.

It mated [sic] me realise that there is life after death and I have to be focused on my spiritual journey.

It did, to a degree, add to my ongoing advancing of my spiritual awareness and capacity to perform with knowing, deliberate intent.

Some respondents pointed to a wider spiritual connection such as “Newer appreciation for nature.”

Interestingly some also responded with a strengthening of their spiritual connection that went beyond internal reflection and pointed towards a wider consciousness of the planet.

I ... was willing to be one of the elderlies sacrificed for the good of the planet's beautiful living family. I felt myself release and surrender to this possibility. I had surrendered myself to death many times in my life – it was a very familiar feeling that accompanied me like a traveling buddy through decades of chronic pain and fatigue. There have been

39 Such as Francis/Village/Lewis, *Spiritual Awakening*.

innumerable times that I have asked God for the relief of death, and now I waited for the same feeling to arise within me so that I might meet this death opportunity with thanksgiving, or at the very least, serenity. Yet this time a new thing happened. Instead of letting go into that deep channel of exhaustion craving release, I felt a new sense of vitality and personal will that has been growing in the last 4 months since electing to retreat from the world to heal here in my own home and my own garden – pre-COVID – taking a break from life to turn to God and receive the green pastures and still waters that have been offered me.

Another participant described an intimate relationship with a divine entity – a “supernatural friend” – that they developed during the pandemic:

Almost from the beginning of the pandemic, I was accompanied by a supernatural “friend”. We engaged in conversation, shared histories: I learned a great deal about how the world once was and how it could be in the future, all positive. This friendship provided a massive diversion from what was happening in real time. When the perceived threats from the pandemic diminished the friendship vanished and I went into a time of mourning ... there is a season for all things ...

On the other hand, some participants also lamented a weakening or broken connection with the divine though the link began to recover after some weeks.

Because I am consciously aware of my Divine connection at all times and at times practise focused intent/meditation, during my illness I was very aware that this ‘natural’ (for me) connection was suppressed. I was too ill to practise meditation initially, but it was the everyday Spiritual sense that seemed to diminish. somehow my practise felt ‘capped’. It was as though my Divine connection was inhibited.

3.3 *Near-Death Experiences and Visions*

The third theme that emerged from the narratives was related to near death experiences and visions, such as seeing religious figures or deceased relatives and hearing voices they identified within their religious context.

After being in the hospital for testing in March 2020, I was sent home again with antibiotics and steroids. But I hardly remember anything. I went to bed at home but don’t remember anything for a week. But I remember hearing a man’s voice saying ‘to be a child of god you must be

born again'. It was the voice of God. Since recovery (and still struggling with long COVID) I am scared of the dark. I feel as if something is in the room and I need to leave the light on. Not sure what to make of it as I don't think it is evil. But I am afraid of the dark.

Like this respondent, others also mentioned very intense and frightening experiences.

I saw a tall shadow/person watching me from the bedroom door, was taller than the door itself, and was hiding and coming out. I'm 100 percent sure that I was awake. It was an experience that lasted a couple of hours. Also, before that, my grandma was taken to the hospital, and I had a vivid dream where she was becoming light and asked me to take her hand and help her until she reached the light, I did, until she became light and my hand was light too.

I felt myself alone and sometimes afraid of death, but in such a moment I tried to remember of my angel, my merciful God and a patron, so I were praying and received some spiritual help and healing, I can breathe easier, I can relax.

Others reported having accepted that they would die.

I thought it was death coming from me and I was certain I was not ready to die.

For me there seemed to be a struggle to stay alive. To fight for breathe while having other moments where I was accepting, somewhat resigned to dying. I relaxed into this thing that was taking over my body. I had never been so sick in my life and I was all alone with no one knowing what I was going through because I had no strength to talk to make a phone call. All I could do was journey with this thing. The fatigue was overwhelming and my brain was also being attacked. This went on long after my breathing returned.

These experiences were the most dramatic ones and led to feelings of fear and loss. Given the context of a deadly global pandemic, we began this research expecting this theme of fear surrounding death, near death experiences, and visions to be the most dominant theme, however, while it came up frequently, it was not any more prevalent than the theme of spiritual connection mentioned earlier. In fact, the two themes often emerged in the same narrative, as a near death experience led to a renewal of spiritual connection or even

spiritual awakening in some participants. However, we do not have sufficient data yet to link a near death experience with a stronger spiritual connection. Further research is also required to study how long lasting the impact of such an experience will be.

3.4 *Interpretations of COVID-19 as a Spiritual Contagion*

A rather unexpected theme was the interpretation of encountering the virus itself as a spiritually relevant entity. Some participants referred to being infected by COVID-19 as a spiritual experience and reported a detailed reflection of their experience.

And it was here, in first contact with the virus that there was a definite spiritual perception that I had contact with an infectious agent. It was palpable.

From memory, it was Sunday afternoon in mid-November I was exposed to the virus. I felt it attack my body instantly, and I went into watchful waiting mode. By Monday evening I was aware my body was implementing its immune response, and my temperature was slightly elevated at around 99°F. Monday night I awoke in the middle of the night with a feeling unlike anything I have ever felt before. The sense of being invaded by a virus that I did not have the capacity to overcome was familiar. I had felt that feeling twice in my life. This time was very peculiar because of two things: (1) I did not notice any symptoms. It seemed as if I was feeling the original invasion before my body recognized it, and that my body could not get in gear to fight it yet with any immune response. It was a peculiar feeling, as if the virus slipped in stealthily underneath my “immune radar”. (2) I felt a fear response bordering on terror – as if the invasion penetrated into the part of my physiological/emotional body that created fear. It was irrational, exaggerated, pure fear. I witnessed my mind responding to the fear by attaching all sorts of stories of death, suffering, pain, crisis, etc., but sensed underneath a kind of pure unattached fear response, as if the virus had burrowed into the very core of my sympathetic system ignition and turned on the fight-or-flight response at control central – seemingly in my adrenal glands.

Other participants mentioned that the virus had a destructive effect on them and caused a diminished sense of connection and communication with the spiritual realm. While prior to the illness the participant had led a rich spiritual life, “it was a full six months until I felt as though my energy levels had been restored and indeed that ‘all was well’ with my innate dialogue with Source.”

Because of this struggle to restore connection with what she calls “the Source”, this participant opted against receiving the COVID-19 vaccine as she did not want to endanger her spiritual connection. However, others reported that the vaccine led to a deepening of spiritual intuition. One participant wrote that she is now, post-vaccine, not only experiencing a deepening of her spiritual intuition, but also that the experience “confirmed [her] inner spiritual agreements about life and death”.

The interpretation of the encounter with the coronavirus as a spiritual contagion highlights a material dimension of spiritual experiences for some people. Whether related to the COVID-19 vaccine or the infection, the perception of the spiritual potency of these material substances – the virus molecules or the vaccine ingredients – and their effects led to sometimes rather drastic responses, including the rejection of getting vaccinated.

4 The Transformative Power of Non-Ordinary Experiences

At this point we will return to the concept of fruits and reflect on the transformative power of non-ordinary and spiritual experiences which was the focus of the second survey. The pandemic was a moment of social and spiritual upheaval and transformation. Francis, Village and Lewis⁴⁰ point towards a spiritual awakening among church members (Anglican and Catholic) during the pandemic. Based on a sample of 3,673 churchgoers in England and Wales they state that 57% experienced an improved sense of spiritual awareness and an enhanced faith during lockdown compared with only 7% who reported deterioration in personal faith. However, this spiritual awakening was seen as a personal development as just 25% mentioned a closer link to the Church while 37% felt more distant.⁴¹ Interestingly, they reported that participants from a charismatic tradition, which puts a stronger focus on intense spiritual experiences, had higher scores of spiritual awakening than from a more traditional form of Anglicanism.⁴²

Compared to Francis, Village, and Lewis,⁴³ our data was, on the one hand, more diverse since we did not target churchgoers in particular, but it was, on the other hand, less representative of any specific group due to the lower number of participants. The second survey received 139 replies, though only 83

40 Francis/Village/Lewis, *Spiritual Awakening*.

41 See Francis/Village/Lewis, *Spiritual Awakening*, p. 14 et seq.

42 See Francis/Village/Lewis, *Spiritual Awakening*, p. 19.

43 Francis/Village/Lewis, *Spiritual Awakening*.

replied 'yes' to the control question whether the COVID-19 pandemic affected them on a spiritual level. Of the 139 replies, 80 identified as female, 55 as male, and one as non-binary; 3 participants did not provide information on gender. The majority described their ethnicity as White or Caucasian but there were also some Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanic or Latino, and one Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander among the participants.

Of the 83 participants who said 'yes' to our control question, 29 replied affirmatively to the question asking whether their experience caused any changes in their perspective or behaviour. Some who did not reply to this question had already mentioned an impact in their narrative of their experience. Nevertheless, we focus on the 29 replies that identified a transformative impact. Though some participants reflected on the impact of the pandemic in general and not just about the impact of the experience they described earlier in the survey, we will analyze them using James' four features of the fruits of religious experience as structure. However, the replies add a twist, showing some variation of the features outlined by James. Therefore, we will amend James' descriptions to account for the important variations found in our data, especially in regard to the detrimental impact their experiences had on some people. We added therefore a fifth category for these more challenging effects of some spiritual experiences.

4.1 *A Feeling of Being in a Wider Life*

James' first category, which is a rather common feature of religious experience, echoes Rudolf Otto's definition of religious experience as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.⁴⁴ For Otto the core response to a religious experience was not the feeling of dependence, but of 'creature-consciousness', becoming aware of one's nothingness in the presence of the divine. This response was also dominant in our data. Several participants reported feeling drawn closer to God or a wider spiritual entity in response to their experience with the virus or the lockdown.

I began spiritual study again after many years of neglecting it.
I have gotten closer to God.

However, as a sign of a changing society, a feature among the responses was also an increasing value of themselves. One respondent wrote for instance,

44 Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

I've learned to value myself, my experiences, my time. anyone of us could be taken at any moment. we have to live while here. we have to have experiences, find joy, find love, and honor ourselves. my time is precious and I have to honor myself and take care of myself.

This response might in part reflect our postmodern, neo-liberal society that cherishes and uplifts the individual. Nevertheless, a common point is the new or changed awareness of oneself and a more brighter appreciation for aliveness as a result of the pandemic. In that sense, James' first category also reflects Abraham Maslow's⁴⁵ notion of "peak experiences," which entail a sense of ecstasy and ineffability.

4.2 *A Willing Surrender to the Ideal Power*

For James as well as Otto the response to the experience should lead to a surrender to the ultimate power. This sense of surrender is also classically described in Friedrich Schleiermacher's⁴⁶ definition of faith as "the feeling of absolute dependence." And indeed, several respondents interpreted the experience during the pandemic as a confirmation of the power of the ultimate power. As one wrote, "We are dust, and to dust we shall return."

Another person even traveled to south India during the second year of the pandemic to participate in an Ayurvedic healing practice called panchkarma. They interpreted the pandemic as a profound global shift: "Very aware that we all have to change & there's no going back to how life was before. I am [very] excited to see how we are all slowly changing our attitudes."

While we do not have longitudinal data to make any prognosis about the timeline or duration of the respondents' transformations, it was insightful to see that many participants who had had near death experiences or expected to die mentioned an ongoing lingering of their feeling – whether negative (for example, an enduring fear of the dark) or positive:

I had pneumonia, which I thought was Covid. My fever was high, I was hallucinating, and thought I was dying. It felt so serene, and that feeling is still with me.

4.3 *Feeling of Elation and Freedom Beyond a Confined Selfhood*

James' third category of experiential "fruits" is again echoed in religious traditions throughout the world. For example, it may hold similarities to the

45 Maslow, *Religious Aspects of Peak Experiences; The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*.

46 Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, p. 106.

South Asian Hindu concept of *ananda*, or blissful awareness.⁴⁷ Interesting, only few replies mentioned a feeling of elation. However, this came up more in the replies to the first survey which also included questions with regard to an experience of altered state of consciousness. Nevertheless, even in data from the second survey, a few respondents mentioned a wider shift in thinking beyond the earthly life though not strictly linked to an union with the divine as James anticipated.

It shifted in my thinking as to what happens after we leave this earth.
 it made me try to lay aside political and covid response preferences and just accept people where they are regardless of if I agree with it or not.
 This experience gave me reassurance that my science and spirituality are in balance and a resolve to give even more energy to the promotion of the power of kindness.

One participant who started the statement with a confirmation of an atheistic worldview, also indicated a feeling of elation linked to a positive energy.

Still no belief in God just know that positive energy and being the difference I want to see is the best way to go.

4.4 *A Shifting Toward Loving and Harmonious Affections*

While James highlighted a positive impact on social relations stemming from spiritual experiences, the experiences during the pandemic were more ambivalent, most likely due to the lockdown which impacted social interaction. This again highlights the importance of social and historical context for understanding the interpretation and potential effects of spiritual and non-ordinary experiences. Because of the pandemic social distancing guidelines, participants became isolated, their contact with social circles decreasing dramatically or disappearing altogether, while others embraced online technologies to enhance their interactions.

Yes, changed my social life completely. Now I mostly interact with people virtually.

Closer to family. Made me not want to go out in the world as much but that is going away now a bit finally!

makes me calmer and more patient to make a deeper connection with others

47 Yogananda, *Whispers from Eternity*.

I am focusing more on nurturing connectivity among my peers and community, and learning to let go of “unimportant” matters

My religious community pulled together and relationships became stronger. This community began to be a more core part/larger portion of my social world.

But even among participants with reduced social lives, we sometimes saw a positive reflection as the intensity of their engagement with even one person changed.

It has [led] to reductions in some relationships, eliminations of others, some unchanged and an increased bond with one person.

Shift perceptions and priorities to cherish those close to me

Nevertheless, as in the first survey, several participants mentioned a withdrawal from their original religious community and even conversion to another faith, sometimes due to neglect but also sometimes due to a conscious shift in feeling as for instance this participant wrote:

Yes I'm much more rely on myself for my religion now and find things online that are in line with the beliefs of my church but not hateful like the people who are in my church.

I felt less connected to my religion and had a somewhat more jaded view of religion as a whole.

[As a result of going virtual], felt detached from spiritual gathering, faith weaker.

I left Christianity.

As with the other features, it was not always possible to differentiate between a specific spiritual experience while ill and the wider social experience of the pandemic. For several participants, both were merged to one. Nevertheless, most salient for our reflection on James' categories of the fruit of religious experience was the impact – whether spiritual or social – the experience had on their lives.

4.5 *Despair*

In addition to James' four features, we identified a fifth theme as several participants of both surveys expressed despair. They sometimes even interpreted the experience as sign for the coming of the end of the world.

Yes, view on all became more negative. I have not seen friends, I don't go out in fear of getting or spreading infection. The state of the union is so poor that I can't see a "positive" future. Whether it be natural disasters, civil war, nuclear threats, or disease, this world will not last. There will be no "safe world" in the future, one of the sole reasons I am not having children. I do not know that there will be a world for them when they are adults.

Several also made comments showing their distrust in politicians, other people, or foreign governments and an interest in conspiracy theories, for instance:

It made me doubt all religion and dive deeper into similar theories.

Family splits. Very much a world view. Life will never be the same again. Seeking after the truth. Influenced my preaching. The difficulty of speaking out when most did not agree. Knowing that something was deeply wrong.

It absolutely changed my perception for the future. We are not safe, the Chinese did it.

I lost a lot of respect for my fellow Americans who enabled so much spread of the disease by foolish behavior.

Some participants also mentioned depression and loneliness.

I felt like I was alone and more depressed. I want to go back to being with my family and church members

As a consequence, some participants changed their life completely and retired, moved house, or changed jobs to make the most of the time left.

I decided I want to retire earlier and volunteer my life away.

While James and other scholars interested in religious or mystical experience such as Otto and Maslow highlight the positive transformation derived from such a powerful experience, our data indicates a much more complex response. Some of our respondents may have been identifying a dark night of the soul, or a moment of disillusionment that may be part of a larger process of spiritual growth, but our data is insufficient to speculate on that. As we wrote earlier,⁴⁸ some participants' responses may indicate a need to talk about, pro-

48 Schmidt/Stockly, *The Silence around Non-Ordinary Experiences*.

cess, and integrate their intense experiences; neglecting this process may lead to problems that could impact their health if left unresolved.

5 Concluding Reflections and Suggestions for Further Research

While our focus was on collecting accounts of spiritual, non-ordinary experiences, several participants included more general narratives detailing how the pandemic lockdown impacted them spiritually. These narratives are all very subjective and the small numbers do not justify any general conclusions or using them as representative for the wider society. Nevertheless, they point to some interesting themes.

First, we noted a strengthening in personal faith and even what can be seen as spiritual awakening among *some* participants. We also noted a shift towards a more individualised spiritual connection to something beyond themselves, even among participants who declared to be atheists or nonreligious and reported an experience that felt outside their usual life or cultural context.

Second, we noted a withdrawal from organised religious communities (i.e., organised religions). To some degree this might be the consequence of the social isolation implemented by the lockdown which forced the closure of religious houses. However, spiritual experiences often take place outside organized communities. As the data shows, one should not underestimate the transformative effect of near death experiences, which several respondents reported during the pandemic. While some participants found peace in their experience of seeing spiritual figures or deceased relatives as it confirmed their belief in a life after death, others were left without hope.

Third, in a departure from some previous studies, many participants reported negative feelings and experiences. Sometimes these negative experiences or effects centered around an extreme fear of death or even a near-death experience that led to fear of darkness or a sense of isolation. But some also described the experience like a dark shadow that contaminated everything. Although for some participants, these negative experiences were channeled into radical life changes such as retirement and shift to non-for-profit, voluntary work, for others, the disturbing fear or negative consequence continues to haunt them.

Fourth, the perhaps most interesting and so far overlooked theme among the reports was the perception of the coronavirus as living entity that can adversely impact one's ability to connect spiritually but can also be fought against with spiritual means. It seems to echo to some degree the perception of divine energy as transformative and source of creativity.⁴⁹ Artists such as Ángel Suárez

49 Schmidt, *Meeting the Spirits*.

Rosado perceive the divine energy as embodied, with the power to heal and inspire and overall to transform.⁵⁰ It is this physicality of the energy that resonates in the reports of COVID-19 as living entity. A reflection on the pandemic by the artist Jenifer Wates, *Corona: Love and Loss in a Time of Pandemic*, shown in the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock in July 2021, explored “the profound and multi-dimensional impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.” She explained in a statement that was handed out at the exhibition, “In these paintings, I have focused on my own emotional and spiritual response to the virus, and its impact on myself and others, and also on the deeper significance of the image of the ‘corona’, for instance in Jesus’ crown of thorns, emblem of human suffering.” Her artistic reflection adds another level to the material dimension and spiritual personification of the virus. Wates highlights that “visual experience is capable of opening us to deeper meanings in ways that are beyond words. In particular, meaningfulness is found in colour, and in relationships between colours.”⁵¹ Wates draws inspiration from various poets when reflecting on her paintings, including Arundhati Roy. In an essay that came out in 2020, Roy describes the pandemic as “a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”⁵²

Returning now to the wider discussion of the fruits of spiritual experiences, we propose an amended list of effects of these experiences. Following James, most research highlights the beneficial and long-lasting impacts of spiritual experiences and presents variations of James’ three features of immediate luminousness, philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness. However, we argue that this view limits our understanding of non-ordinary experiences. While the reports of some participants confirm these positive effects, we should not disregard experiences without a radical life-changing transformation nor experiences that cause fear and despair as if they are less authentic or meaningful to the people who have them.⁵³ This focus on positive transformations is a scholarly bias and does not always reflect the realities of people having the experiences. In response to our participants’ expression of what they deemed spiritually meaningful within their varied narratives and reports of impact,

50 Cited in Schmidt, ‘When the gods give us the power of *ashé*’, p. 449.

51 Oxfordshire Museum, *Corona: Love and Loss in a Time of Pandemic*.

52 Roy, *Azadi*, p. 214.

53 See also the discussion about the spectrum of authenticity discussed in Wildman/Stockly, *Spirit Tech*, p. 220 et seq.

we expanded our research scope to include not only specific incidences of spiritual or mystical experiences but also more general spiritual experiences reflecting the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. But this left us with a challenge. Many participants regarded experiences as non-ordinary which became, over the two years of lockdown, rather ordinary experiences. This brings us to the ongoing problem of how to classify experiences. Scholars have used various labels such as 'religious', 'spiritual' or 'non-ordinary' to highlight a link to the supernatural or anomalous perceptions, which are often seen as inexplicable experiences. But this is academic, culturally contingent labelling and does not reliably reflect the ways everyday people think about and assess their own experiences. For example, Barbara Walker highlights that the term 'supernatural' is:

a linguistic and cultural acknowledgment that inexplicable things happen which we identify as being somehow beyond the natural or the ordinary, and that many of us hold beliefs which connect us to spheres that exist beyond what we might typically see, hear, taste, touch, or smell. For some the supernatural is a natural part of life, and supernatural experiences not only are considered 'normal' but, in some instances, are expected to occur, with personal attitudes and behaviors shaped and acted out on the basis of those expectations.⁵⁴

Following from Walker, Schmidt⁵⁵ argues that what becomes defined as ordinary or non-ordinary should depend on the individual and the society. Consequently, even mediumship can be seen as ordinary experience even though interaction with the spiritual world is at the core of mediumship.⁵⁶ Events might have an "other-worldly" quality for scholars but not necessarily an extraordinary quality for people.⁵⁷ Swapping the perspective around, we argue here that experiences even without an 'other-worldly' quality can have a non-ordinary quality for people. For our study, the participants' own identification of their experience as spiritual is what mattered most – the experiences they described as non-ordinary and which had an impact (whether short term or long term) on their lives. It is therefore the transformative effect of these experiences which makes them non-ordinary. Further research will show how long-lasting they have become.

54 Walker, *Out of the Ordinary*, p. 2.

55 Walker, *Out of the Ordinary*; Schmidt, *Mediumship as Ordinary Experience*.

56 Schmidt, *Mediumship as Ordinary Experience*.

57 Walker, *Out of the Ordinary*, p. 4.

Biography

Bettina E. Schmidt is Professor in study of religions and anthropology of religion at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK and director of the Religious Experience Research Centre. Her main areas of research interests are Latin American and Caribbean religions, identity, and wellbeing. Her academic interests include religious experience, anthropology of religion, diaspora, and medical anthropology. Among her most important recent publications are *Spirit and Trance in Brazil: An Anthropology of Religious Experiences* (2016, Bloomsbury), *Caribbean Diaspora in the USA: Diversity of Caribbean Religions in New York City* (2008, Ashgate), *Handbook of Contemporary Brazilian Religions* (co-edited, 2016, Brill) and *Spirituality and Wellbeing: Interdisciplinary approaches to the study of religious experience and health* (co-edited, 2020, Equinox).

Kate Stockly is a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Mind and Culture in Boston, Massachusetts. She specializes in the scientific study of religion and feminist theory, specifically looking at religious experience, ritual practice, gender/sex diversity in religion, and affective embodiment. She is co-author of two books: *Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Consciousness Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering* (St. Martins 2021) and *High on God: How Megachurches Won the Heart of America* (Oxford 2020).

Bibliography

- American Psychiatric Association (APA): *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 2013: <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>.
- Bitēna, Daiga K./Mārtinsone, Kristīne: *Mystical Experience has a Stronger Relationship with Spiritual Intelligence than with Schizotypal Personality Traits and Psychotic Symptoms*, in: *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2021: DOI:10.1037/cns0000312.
- Carrette, Jeremy/King, Richard: *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. London: Routledge 2005.
- Clifford, William K.: *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1999 [1877].
- Dallas, Theodora/Baroutsas, Noelle Marina/Dein, Simon: *The Power of the Divine: Religion, Rituals, and Healing in Greece*, in: *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture* 23 (8/2020), pp. 718–732.
- Dein, Simon: *Religious Healing and Mental Health*, in: *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 23 (8/2020), pp. 657–665.

- Dein, Simon/Loewenthal, Kate M.: *The Mental Health Benefits and Costs of Sabbath Observance Among Orthodox Jews*, in: *Journal of Religion and Health* 52 (2013), pp. 1382–1390.
- Francis, Lesley J./Village, Andrew/Lewis, Christopher Alan: *Spiritual Awakening among Church Members during the Pandemic: An Empirical Study in England and Wales*, in: *Journal of Empirical Theology* 2022, pp. 1–29.
- Franks Davis, Caroline: *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989.
- Garcia-Romeu, Albert/Himmelstein, Samuel P./Kaminker, Jacob: *Self-Transcendent Experience: A Grounded Theory Study*, in: *Qualitative Research* 15 (5/2015), pp. 633–654.
- Griffiths, R.R./Richards, W.A./McCann, U./Jesse, R.: *Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance*, in: *Psychopharmacology* 187 (2006), pp. 268–283.
- Hanley, Adam W./Nakamura, Yoshio/Garland, Eric L.: *The Nondual Awareness Dimensional Assessment (NADA): New Tools to Assess Nondual Traits and States of Consciousness Occurring within and beyond the Context of Meditation*, in: *Psychological Assessment* 30 (12/2018), pp. 1625–1639.
- Hardy, Alister: *The Spiritual Nature of Man*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979.
- Hay, David: *Religious Experience Today. Studying the Facts*. London: Mowbray 1990.
- James, William: *The Will to Believe, and other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1912.
- James, William: *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*. London and Glasgow: Fontana Library 1968.
- Jantzen, Grace: *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995.
- Katz, Steven: *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1978.
- Kitcher, Philip: *Preludes to Pragmatism: Toward a Reconstruction of Philosophy*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2012.
- Koenig, Harold G./King, Dana E./Benner Carson, Verna: *Handbook of Religion and Health*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2012.
- Lukoff, David/Lu, Francis G./Yang, Paul C.: *DSM-IV Religious and Spiritual Problems*, in: John R. Peteet/Francis G. Lu/William E. Narrow (ed.): *Religious and Spiritual Issues in Psychiatric Diagnosis: A Research Agenda for DSM-V*. American Psychiatric Association (2011), pp. 171–198.
- MacLean, Katherine A./Leoutsakos, Jeannie-Marie S./Johnson, Matthew W./Griffiths, Roland R.: *Factor Analysis of the Mystical Experience Questionnaire: A Study of Experiences Occasioned by the Hallucinogen Psilocybin*, in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5 (14/2012), pp. 721–737.

- Maslow, Abraham H.: *Religious Aspects of Peak Experiences*, in: William A. Sadler (ed.): *Personality and Religion*. New York: Harper & Row 1970.
- Maslow, Abraham H.: *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York: Viking Press 1971.
- Moreira-Almeida, Alexander/Freitas, Marta Helena de/Schmidt, Bettina: *A Naturalist of the Spiritual Realm*, in: *Religions* 12 (9/2021), p. 713.
- Morgan, Peggy/Lawton, Clive: *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1994 (2007 rev. ed.).
- Otto, Rudolf: *The Idea of the Holy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1936 [1917].
- Oxfordshire Museum: *Corona: Love and Loss in a Time of Pandemic*, 2021, <https://www.oxonarts.info/whats-on/20146> (date of last access: 10.05.2023).
- Polito, Vince/Stevenson, Richard J.: *A Systematic Study of Microdosing Psychedelics*, in: *PLoSOne* 14 (2/2019): <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0211023>.
- Roy, Arundhati: *Azadi: Freedom. Fascism. Fiction*. London: Penguin Books 2020.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich D.E.: *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, transl. and edited by Richard Crouter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996 [1799].
- Schmidt, Bettina E.: *Meeting the Spirits: Espiritismo as Source for Identity, Healing and Creativity*, in: *Fieldwork in Religion* 3 (2/2009), pp. 178–195.
- Schmidt, Bettina E.: 'When the gods give us the power of ashé' – *Afro-Caribbean Religions as Source for Creative Energy*, in: Carole M. Cusack/Alex Norman (ed.): *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*. The Hague: Brill 2012, pp. 445–461.
- Schmidt, Bettina E.: *Spirit and Trance in Brazil: Anthropology of Religious Experiences*. London: Bloomsbury 2016.
- Schmidt, Bettina E.: *Mediumship as Ordinary Experience: An Anthropological Discussion of Ordinary vs Non-Ordinary – What is the Difference?*, in: *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* 7 (3/2021), pp. 137–154 [previously published in: Andy Burns/Wendy Dossett/ Bettina E. Schmidt (ed.): *Festschrift: Essays in Honour of Peggy Morgan*. 2020, pp. 183–206.]
- Schmidt, Bettina E./Stockly, Kate J.: *The Silence around Non-Ordinary Experiences during the Pandemic*, in: *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 13 (1/2022): DOI: 10.5840/asrr20226889.
- Schumaker, John F.: *Religion and Mental Health*. New York: Oxford University Press 1992.
- Taves, Ann: *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2009.
- Taylor, Charles: *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2002.
- Vilog, Ron B.T./Picos, Carlos M./Bernadas, Jan M.A.C.: *Healing "through God's grace": Lived Religion in Filipina Migrant Women's Health in Japan*, in: *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture* 23 (8/2020): pp. 666–678.
- Walker, Barbara: *Introduction*, in: Barbara Walker (ed.): *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press 1995, pp. 1–7.

- Wildman, Wesley: *Religious and Spiritual Experiences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011.
- Wildman, Wesley J./Stockly, Kate J.: *Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Consciousness Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering*. New York: St Martin's Press 2021.
- Wood, Connor: *Ritual Well-Being: Toward a Social Signaling Model of Religion and Mental Health*, in: *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 7 (37/2017), pp. 223–243.
- Yogananda, Paramhansa: *Whispers from Eternity*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship 1954.