

Spiritual Experiences

An Eclectic Literature Review and
Implications for Christian Practice

“Do not say, ‘It is impossible to receive the Holy Spirit’; Do not say, ‘It is possible to be saved without Him’. Do not say that one can possess Him without knowing it. Do not say, ‘God does not appear to us’. Do not say, ‘People do not see the divine light’, Or else, ‘It is impossible in these present times’. This is a thing never impossible, my friends, But on the contrary altogether possible for those who wish.”¹

Table of Contents

ABRAHAM MASLOW, SELF-ACTUALIZATION, AND PEAK EXPERIENCES	4
NEUROSCIENCE AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES.....	7
SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN EASTERN RELIGIONS	9
PSYCHEDELICS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES	11
PERSISTENT NON-SYMBOLIC EXPERIENCE	14
THE DASTARDLY DERREN BROWN	15
SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE.....	16
IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN PRACTICE	19

¹ Hymn 27:125-32 (St. Symeon the New Theologian, 949-1022)

One of the defining features of almost every major religion is the spiritual experience. Gautama Buddha had his revelation while sitting under a tree. Moses encountered God in a burning bush, and again on Mount Sinai. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit following his baptism. The apostle Paul, once famous for persecuting Christians, encountered the risen Jesus while, which converted him to Christianity instantly.

These days, spiritual experiences are often derided as mental illness or delusion. Consider Paula White, a prominent American pastor who is known for glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. Videos of her uttering unintelligible gibberish while under influence of the “Holy Spirit” have made the rounds on YouTube², drawing near-universal scorn and ridicule. People who claim that God speaks to them are diagnosed, more often than not, with schizophrenia or a similar mental disorder, where hearing the voice of God or believing oneself to be a saint or prophet is a common symptom³.

However, scientists and psychologists have been interested in the phenomenon of spiritual experiences since at least the 1960’s, where Abraham Maslow (most famous for his hierarchy of needs) spent a great deal of his later life meeting with people who reported having such experiences. Furthermore, modern research in brain science has provided some explanation as to how these experiences happen and what impact they have on cognition. A renewed interest in psychedelic substances, which have been reliably documented to induce spiritual experiences, provides another lens with which to view this phenomenon.

I suspect that many Christians have had an experience of some kind which influences their beliefs, yet remain silent about it for fear of ridicule or suspicion. For example, take this testimony from a Christian who converted from atheism:

“My conversion basically happened over the course of three separate days. It started after leaving a friend's apartment on a particularly frigid and overcast day and being overwhelmed with this sense of dread. He lives on the bottom of a really steep, long road, so as I was making the climb up in terrible weather, just in a pretty all around bad mood, I was reflecting on everything that was stressing me out and letting myself get a little overwhelmed. For whatever reason, I had this internal feeling that said ‘keep going, there's a light at the top of the hill.’ Not anything supernatural, just like this weird sense of disembodied hope for no reason, mixed with the anxiety I was already feeling. The moment I got to the top of the hill, the clouds instantly parted and the air warmed up dramatically. A literal ray of light beamed down onto a stereotypically picturesque church on the other side of the street. I scoffed at it kind of vaguely annoyed and sarcastically thought ‘well that's perfect, why's it got to be a church?’ And then I was flooded with this unimaginable feeling of love and joy, and I heard the words (not quite audibly, but definitely clearly) ‘Yeah, I've actually been meaning to talk to you about that.’ And I suddenly got all these mental images that flooded in that were categorically Christian. It was almost like I was granted an immediate understanding that I was in the presence of Christ (who I didn't even believe in as

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl46XSusl1Q>

³ <https://livingwithschizophreniauk.org/religious-spiritual-delusions-schizophrenia/>

a historical figure at the time), that He was divine, and that He was responsible for the universe being in existence. (Though now I would guess I was being witnessed to by the Holy Spirit, not Christ directly, but it did really feel like I was in the presence of the Man Himself)... it changed the entire way I viewed the world almost in an instant.”⁴

Or this testimony:

“I am a 35 year old woman. About 8 years I was caught up in new age beliefs. I ended up not believing in God. although I believed his existence was a lie, it was a little heartbreaking to me, as I had spent my childhood believing that he was real. One night I was feeling so confused and lonely. in desperation I said, ‘God, I don't believe you are real anymore. But if you are please show yourself to me. I will turn over a new leaf and give my life to you.’ The next day I had just gotten out of the shower when this overwhelming feeling of love ran through me. It was unlike anything I'd ever felt. Like the energy of a rain was inside of me. It knocked me to my knees and I was on the floor bawling. I don't know how long this lasted, but I knew immediately God is real. Jesus is real. Like without a doubt. I just knew.”⁵

Are these experiences made-up or invalid? Are these people crazy? I believe the answer is “no”, on both counts. Neither of these people seem to have concluded that they are Jesus, and neither of these people seem to believe they now have special powers. Instead, their experiences provided them with a sense of deep personal conviction in the existence of God which seems to have had a positive impact on their lives.

In this short treatise, I hope to demonstrate that spiritual experiences are a valid – even vital – part of life, as well as the Christian faith. By developing a common understanding regarding these experiences, members of both the clergy and laity will be better-equipped to discuss these experiences and turn them into valuable and edifying learning opportunities.

ABRAHAM MASLOW, SELF-ACTUALIZATION, AND PEAK EXPERIENCES

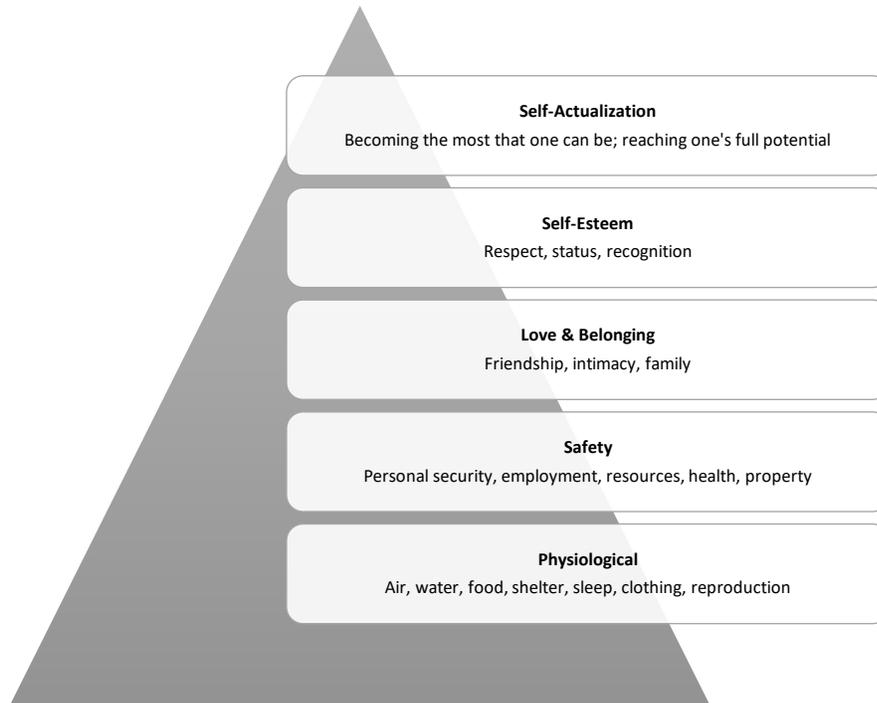
“To sum it up, from this point of view, the two religions of mankind tend to be the peakers and the non-peakers, that is to say, those who have private, personal, transcendent, core-religious experiences easily and often and who accept them and make use of them, and, on the other hand, those who have never had them or who repress or suppress them and who, therefore, cannot make use of them for their personal therapy, personal growth, or personal fulfillment.”⁶

⁴ https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/3ihfx3/i_was_a_reasoned_empiricist_antitheist_and/

⁵ https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/ferwez/what_has_ever_happened_in_your_life_that_made_you/

⁶ From “Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences” (Abraham Maslow, 1964)

Abraham Maslow is the tenth most-cited psychologist of the twentieth century, and one of the rare psychologists whose work is seen as essential reading for students new to the discipline. Born in 1908 and active throughout the mid-1900s, he is most famous for his hierarchy of needs, which categorizes core human needs and ranks them from “most” essential to “least” essential:



In this model, physiological and safety needs form a much-needed foundation for so-called “higher” needs like love and self-esteem. One cannot worry about finding true love, for example, if one is starving or trying to find shelter in bad weather. Similarly, it is difficult to reach one’s full potential without achieving some sense of security, both in a physical and social sense.

Although physiological and safety needs were the most essential human requirements in Maslow’s hierarchy, he spent a great deal of his career focusing on the “higher” needs, self-actualization in particular. Maslow was fascinated by people who were performing at their peak; in other words, people who seemed to have grown into their full potential.

“The empirical fact is that self-actualizing people, our best experiencers, are also our most compassionate, our great improvers and reformers of society, our most effective fighters against injustice, inequality, slavery, cruelty, exploitation (and also are best fighters for excellence, effectiveness, competence). And it also

becomes clearer and clearer that our best 'helpers' are the most fully human persons.”⁷

Why was Maslow so obsessed with such people? Well, back in the 1950's and 1960's, psychology had made great advances but was nothing like the discipline most people take for granted today. Neuroscience and brain surgery had yet to provide insight into the mechanics of the brain, for example, and much of the groundbreaking research and theorizing that has shaped the contemporary field simply hadn't been done yet.

Generally speaking, psychology at the time was dominated by two forces, or ways of thinking: first, the psychoanalysts, most notably Sigmund Freud, believed that much of human behaviour could be explained by past trauma and unconscious motivations. Second, the behaviourists believed that humans were essentially like other animals and were conditioned by our surroundings. Although both of these views, or “forces”, have merit, Maslow was part of a “third force” of psychologists who are generally referred to as the humanists.

The humanists were curious about what they might have referred to as “man's higher nature”. Specifically, they saw psychology as a tool by which people could be helped to reach their full potential, and conducted research to that aim.

It would make sense, then, that Abraham Maslow would be fascinated by “peak experiences”, which he believed were natural phenomena that provided an explanation for many of the supernatural experiences reported by the prophets of ancient peoples:

“... it looks quite probable that the peak-experience may be the model of the religious revelation or the religious illumination or conversion which has played so great a role in the history of religions. But, because peak experiences are in the natural world and because we can research with them and investigate them, and because our knowledge of such experiences is growing and may be confidently expected to grow in the future, we may now fairly hope to understand more about the big revelations, conversions, and illuminations upon which the high religions were founded.”⁸

Maslow observed over twenty characteristics of (secular) peak experiences that coincided with aspects of religious experiences reported in the world's holy books. Not every peak experience has all of these characteristics, however Maslow found sufficient similarity between the reports he collected from his research subjects to make this relatively definitive list:

‡ The whole world is experienced as an integrated and unified whole.

‡ There is a tremendous increase in concentration. The object of one's attention is fully attended to.

⁷ From “Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences” (Abraham Maslow, 1964)

⁸ From “Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences” (Abraham Maslow, 1964)

- † The “peaker” becomes more detached, more objective, and more removed from human and selfish concerns.
- † Perception becomes ego-transcending, and “peakers” stop seeing the world through a self-centered lens.
- † The experience is felt as a self-justifying, self-validating moment. It can even justify living itself.
- † It imparts the notion that there are things to yearn for in life that are worthwhile in themselves.
- † There is often a disorientation in time and space, or in other words an experience of universality and eternity.
- † The world is experienced only as good and desirable, and never as evil or undesirable. Evil is even seen to have its place in the world.
- † Reactions to evil tend towards pity, charity, kindness, sadness, or perhaps amusement.
- † In the peak experience and sometimes thereafter, the peaker gains access to higher human values such as charity, humility, justice, and playfulness.
- † The person having the experience can become more humble, more willing to listen and hear.
- † Emotions such as wonder, awe, reverence, humility, surrender, and even worship are often reported.
- † Dichotomies, polarities, and paradoxes are often resolved during peak experiences.
- † A loss of fear, anxiety, inhibition, defensiveness, confusion, and inner conflict is often reported, as is a loss in control or restraint.
- † Sometimes, peak experiences have immediate and/or lasting therapeutic effects.
- † Heaven is sometimes seen as something that can be accessed here on earth.
- † The peaker tends to act more true to themselves and who they are as a unique person.
- † The peaker begins to feel more “authentic”.
- † The peaker becomes more selfless and ego-less.
- † Maslow found that peakers became governed less by usual concerns and more by fundamental psychological laws.
- † People who have these experiences usually feel lucky, graced, or fortunate. They also feel a sense of gratitude that can be religious in nature.
- † The polarity between humility and pride, in particular, is fused, and people develop better instincts about how to navigate this dichotomy.

It would seem as though all of these things would be desirable for Christians to experience or feel at some point in their lifetime. So how do these experiences come about? Several ways, in fact.

NEUROSCIENCE AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

“We can't tell you the origin of the experience. But we can tell you the brain does appear to be built to have these [mystical] experiences. There are examples of

people reaching similar states, spontaneously. But for the most part, it takes work. Meditation and these powerful prayer experiences require dedication and practice. But people have figured out how to do this, and the question is, 'What is the source of that experience?' The answer is, 'We don't know.' Science doesn't really have an answer for you.”⁹

In their book “Why God Won’t Go Away”, researchers Andrew Newberg, Eugene D’Aquili, and Vince Rause investigated the neuroscience behind spiritual experiences. It turns out that the types of experiences reported by prophets, mystics, and even modern-day people can be explained, to some extent, by complex and unusual interactions between different parts of the brain.

For example, there are two systems in the brain called the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, which together comprise the autonomic system. On one hand, the sympathetic nervous system governs the fight-or-flight response, and prepares the body for action. The parasympathetic nervous system, on the other hand, regulates sleep, relaxation, and regeneration.

Typically, these systems take turns being “in charge”. However, when the body and mind are pushed to high levels of activity by long periods of physical or mental stress, one or both systems can become hyperactive. This results in the different states of consciousness associated with spiritual experiences.

Newberg, D’Aquili, and Rause identified four different “autonomic states” that seemed to be associated with different types of spiritual experiences:

1. “Hyperquiescence”, a state of deep relaxation usually only experienced during sleep but accessible by way of meditation or prayer. An individual experiencing this mental state feels a sense of oceanic tranquility and bliss in which no thoughts, feelings, or bodily sensations distract from one’s attention.
2. “Hyperarousal”, a seemingly-unlimited sense of excitement, alertness, and concentration. This may be the “runner’s high” experienced by long-distance marathoners, as well as the spiritual state brought on by intense ritual dancing and prolonged rhythmic motor activity.
3. “Hyperquiescence with arousal breakthrough”, an unusual situation where both the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems are highly active, which results in a state of simultaneous bliss and energy. During meditation or contemplative prayer, the individual experiencing this state might feel a complete absorption into the topic of focus.
4. “Hyperarousal with quiescent breakthrough”, another unusual situation where both the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems are active. In this scenario, however, the individual experiences a trancelike state along with an ecstatic rush of energy.

In addition to the nuances of the autonomic system, the right and left halves of our brain also play a complex role in spiritual experiences. During such experiences, certain parts of each hemisphere, also known as the right and left orientation areas, become deprived of information and shut down, more or less. These are the parts of our brains responsible for creating a self/other boundary in time and space, as

⁹ From “Fringe-ology: How I Tried to Explain Away the Unexplainable-And Couldn’t” (Andrew B. Newberg, 2011)

well as a sense of self more generally. With the orientation area out of commission, people having spiritual experiences can feel as if they're one with everything, across space and time. A loss of one's ego or sense of self can also occur.

Although neuroscientists and brain experts are beginning to understand how spiritual experiences happen, we lack an explanation as to why the human brain is wired this way. It is not obvious that spiritual experiences play an important evolutionary role, which means that they could either be an accident, or that we simply haven't discovered the cause yet.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN EASTERN RELIGIONS

"Are there any levels beyond this one?" I asked, pointing to the circle. 'I don't know,' Mike answered, looking genuinely perplexed. 'I haven't read about it, if there is. Some people want to say that there are, beyond here, experiences. But I'm not convinced of that.'

*'So are you enlightened?' I asked. 'As I understand it, yes,' Mike replied without hesitating. He had been expecting the question. He scrutinized me, looking for a reaction. 'See, that's tricky. I just gave you a pretty tricky answer. Because I define this stuff pretty narrowly.' He might not be enlightened according to others' definitions, but according to his definition he reached enlightenment in 1995."*¹⁰

When westerners think about spiritual experiences and enlightenment, the image that most likely comes to mind is of a solitary monk, engaged in silent contemplation. Both Hinduism, which emphasizes yogic practice, and Buddhism, which emphasizes meditation, have long been associated with experiences of a spiritual nature, and in fact have developed ways to attain such states.

In Hinduism, spiritual experience is encompassed, generally speaking, by the term *bhāva*. It can refer to a physical or mental state, a condition, a mood, an emotion, or ecstasy¹¹. Elaborations on this word refine its meaning, such as *anubhāva*, which refers to direct inner experience; *bhāvaveśā*, which describes a possession by an ancestor, deity, or emotion¹², or *mahābhāva* (or great *bhava*), which specifically refers to a religious state:

*"Mahābhāva is a Divine Ecstasy. It shakes the body and mind to their very foundation. It is like a huge elephant entering a small hut. The house shakes to its foundation. Perhaps it falls to pieces."*¹³

¹⁰ <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/what-does-it-feel-like-to-be-enlightened/>

¹¹ Introduction to 'Religious Experience in the Hindu Tradition' (June McDaniel, 2019)

¹² Introduction to 'Religious Experience in the Hindu Tradition' (June McDaniel, 2019)

¹³ <https://www.satyavedism.org/divine-ecstasy/gsr-ch39-mahabhava-ramakrishna>

Although we have some control over the bhāva we experience (consciously entering a peaceful frame of mind, for example), others come about as a result of yogic practice or other relaxing activity:

“An example of [bhāva] could be feeling a deep sense of spiritual wellness while engaging in a therapeutic or meditative activity, such as yoga or gardening.”¹⁴

The practice of yoga, which includes (if not prioritizes) the training of one’s mind as well as one’s body¹⁵, is able to help bring about these states. However, yoga is primarily intended to cultivate a sense of discernment, awareness, and higher consciousness, which are more commonly associated with the state of enlightenment that spiritual experiences can bring about:

“Practice is the effort to secure steadiness. This practice becomes well-grounded when continued with reverent devotion and without interruption over a long period of time. Desirelessness towards the seen and the unseen gives the consciousness of mastery.”¹⁶

Like Hinduism, Buddhism also has a well-developed vocabulary to describe spiritual experiences, although there are many different schools of Buddhism with unique approaches towards enlightenment and more mystical matters. Also like Hinduism, Buddhism’s primary focus is not the attainment of ecstatic experiences, but rather the liberation of the mind and ego from the limitations of human existence. The term mokṣa, roughly translated as salvation or deliverance, and nirvana (which literally means “blown out”, as in an oil lamp), refer to freedom from saṃsāra, the cycle of death and rebirth¹⁷. The state of nirvana in particular is associated with a state of freedom and happiness.

That said, Buddhist meditation is known to induce unique states in its practitioners (euphoria for some, no-self experiences for others), which often lead to new self-insight and personal growth. Some practitioners of meditation have reported having miraculous out-of-body experiences, encounters with spirits, and so on:

“Experiences which are more closely related to religion usually occur during meditation, particularly for Theravadins. These experiences can range from having a deep sense of calm or seeing a bright light, to psychic powers as one works through the jhanas. In Mahayana, religious experiences can also have a more mystical element, believers can experience Buddhas and bodhisattvas first hand.”¹⁸

“I awoke at 4am, and having nothing else to do, began to chant Om Mani Padme Hum (in my mind, asking ultimate reality to be present. But said without any goal in mind). Unexpectedly, the subject of my chant flipped, from being an external object of meditation (deity like), to a subjective reality. It was like having a loose

¹⁴ <https://www.yogapedia.com/definition/5935/bhava>

¹⁵ <https://spiritualityhealth.com/blogs/conscious-living/2017/07/20/understanding-the-true-purpose-of-yoga>

¹⁶ From “The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali”

¹⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moksha> & <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nirvana>

¹⁸ <https://www.reonline.org.uk/subject-knowledge/buddhism/religious-experience/>

piece of clothing flipped over and worn around me. As soon as this occurred I felt a profound peace, as if everything was just as it is. It reminded me very much of zen writings. The desire to chant ceased. I looked out on the world differently - and felt not so much just an individual. There was an "extra", or "additional" feeling.”¹⁹

“After the Buddha was enlightened he described a vibrant scene — more beautiful than any he had ever seen. He called this ‘being awake,’ deeply hearing the world around him. All sentient beings can reach this state, but we are limited by biases and narrow habits of thought. This deep hearing of the light is joyous appreciation of the wondrous gifts the universe offers.”²⁰

It is important to note that both Hinduism and Buddhism are not homogenous religions. In fact, there are denominational and regional differences (much like in Christianity), as well as major differences between “western” and “eastern” styles of Buddhism. The approaches to enlightenment, and to spiritual experiences, will differ depending on which school one investigates.

PSYCHEDELICS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Peyote (mescaline), magic mushrooms (psilocybin), and LSD have two things in common: first, they are all highly illegal in the United States, and in most western countries. Second, they cause the people who ingest them to experience profound changes in the functioning of their brain, often causing hallucinations, no-consciousness experiences, and, most relevant to our purposes, spiritual experiences filled with wonder and awe.

After decades of being outlawed, psychedelic substances are beginning to enter the public consciousness once again due to their reported efficacy in treating malignant psychological conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder²¹, drug addictions²², depression²³, and anxiety²⁴. Once a promising field of psychological research in the 1960’s, a public craze about the use of such substances, largely in reaction to the “turn on, tune in, drop out” counterculture of the day, led to their eventual illegality: they have only just begun to resurface.

¹⁹ https://www.reddit.com/r/Buddhism/comments/3jgp24/mystical_experience_from_tibetan_chanting/

²⁰ <https://www.rgj.com/story/life/2016/11/11/faith-forum-does-god-speak-directly-humans/93642772/>

²¹ <https://maps.org/research/articles/6230-the-veteran-psychedelics-for-ptsd-what-a-long-strange-trip-it-s-been>

²² <https://www.pharmaceutical-journal.com/news-and-analysis/features/psychedelics-entering-a-new-age-of-addiction-therapy/20066899.article?firstPass=false>

²³ <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/1/10/18007558/denver-psilocybin-psychedelic-mushrooms-ayahuasca-depression-mental-health>

²⁴ <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/1/10/18007558/denver-psilocybin-psychedelic-mushrooms-ayahuasca-depression-mental-health>

The types of experiences induced by these substances varies slightly depending on which one you ingest, however the following effects are typical²⁵:

- † Seeing images, hearing sounds, and feeling sensations that seem real but do not exist;
- † Distortion of one's ability to communicate to others;
- † An experience of mental stimulation, increased creativity, or improved insight;
- † Feelings of euphoria, relaxation, and introspection;
- † Altered state of awareness and perceptions of otherworldly imagery;

Reddit user BeardedBears recounts his first time taking magic mushrooms, or psilocybin:

"I remember making the 'profound' realization that I am an animal. I understood this intellectually before, but I felt it viscerally during my trip. I felt what I can only describe as an organismal vulnerability. I saw my environment completely differently, because I stopped using words and labels for items. I saw things for what they were, by their natures and their forms. It made me more humble, and looking back, it probably ended my militant atheist stage in life. Not that I started believing in god, I just realized there is so much I don't understand about existence and there is so much more going on than we realize in everyday (sober) life." ²⁶

His experience is fairly typical. On psychedelics (mushrooms in particular), the border between you and the rest of the world tends to blur. You see – and experience – things more intuitively, with your first language coming to you as a second language, and your second coming to you as a third. If you're outside and in a safe place, you can look up to the night sky and can feel – really feel – just how small you are.

"The first hour or two I was just laughing at how happy I felt and enjoying the visuals and even body high which made me feel like I was floating. But once the peak wore off and I started the long descent of coming down, things changed. A lot. I no longer had any visuals or felt 'high' at all, instead I felt extremely content and grateful to be alive. The best way to describe it would be feeling at peace with myself and everything around me. And then I had the strangest epiphany come out of nowhere, almost as if I was listening to someone else think it. I remember exactly what 'I' thought word for word to this day. 'You do realize you're just a monkey who knows how to use words, right? You're not special, all life is equal and you need to remember and respect that.' I've recalled that thought hundreds of times since my trip, just the indescribable feeling that I was listening rather than thinking has really stayed with me." ²⁷

²⁵ <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/hallucinogens-dissociative-drugs/how-do-hallucinogens-isd-psilocybin-peyote-dmt-ayahuasca-affect-brain-body>

²⁶ https://www.reddit.com/r/PSychnaut/comments/2a8mid/what_did_you_experience_your_1st_time_doing_magic/

²⁷ https://www.reddit.com/r/PSychnaut/comments/2a8mid/what_did_you_experience_your_1st_time_doing_magic/

Despite the positive effects of psychedelics, recreational use of drugs like these can be dangerous. Syd Barrett, the oft-forgotten cofounder of Pink Floyd, degenerated (some say becoming schizophrenic) after heavy use of LSD²⁸. Heavy use of psychedelics has been linked to psychosis – which is no joke – and mania²⁹, although some recent research suggests otherwise³⁰, even pinning the blame on cannabis (a drug that psychedelic users often smoke every day, and has been linked to psychosis itself)^{31 32}.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the net benefit of psychedelics, one of the rare exemptions to United States federal law is granted to certain Native American tribes who use substances like peyote or ayahuasca in religious ceremonies. The Zapotec tribe in Mexico even give magic mushrooms to four-year olds as part of a coming-of-age ritual³³. This suggests that in the right environment, and rarely (if once or twice in a lifetime), psychedelic use can be spiritually meaningful.

Although it's unlikely that the various branches of the church will welcome widespread psychedelic use, it is worth noting that some spiritual leaders have embraced experimentation with these types of drugs, even going on "trips" themselves in one psychological experiment conducted by researcher William Richards³⁴:

"So far everyone incredibly values their experience. No one has been confused or upset or regrets doing it... it is too early to talk about results, but generally people seem to be getting a deeper appreciation of their own religious heritage," he said. 'The dead dogma comes alive for them in a meaningful way. They discover they really believe this stuff they're talking about.'" ³⁵

Given the ability of these substances to induce a spiritual and contemplative state of mind, it is not unreasonable to expect that more adventurous members of the church will begin to experiment with things like psilocybin, ayahuasca, or peyote in an effort to reach a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the universe. This suggests that some level of fluency regarding these substances and their effects would be useful to clergy members seeking to meet the laity – especially younger and more adventurous congregation members – "where they are at".

Furthermore, the scientific research on psychedelics that exists suggests that spiritual experiences are "real", and that such experiences are within reach for many people. Even for Christians who have no interest in psychedelics, this news should be of at least tangential interest given its adjacency to the topic of genuine (or "natural") spiritual experiences.

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syd_Barrett

²⁹ <https://psychedelic.support/resources/psychedelics-psychosis/>

³⁰ <https://www.nature.com/news/no-link-found-between-psychedelics-and-psychosis-1.16968>

³¹ <https://mad.science.blog/2019/10/12/psychedelics-and-schizophrenia/>

³² <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/cannabis-induced-psychosis-review>

³³ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3291455/The-trees-speaking-Revealed-Mexico-s-Zapotec-tribe-kids-FOUR-fed-mind-bending-magic-mushrooms-witchdoctors-surviving-childhood-rituals.html>

³⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/jul/08/religious-leaders-get-high-on-magic-mushrooms-ingredient-for-science>

³⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/jul/08/religious-leaders-get-high-on-magic-mushrooms-ingredient-for-science>

PERSISTENT NON-SYMBOLIC EXPERIENCE

Another modern area of inquiry into spiritual experiences is being pursued by an independent scholar named Jeffery Martin, who has developed a line of thinking around what he terms “non-symbolic experience”. It bears close resemblance to both spiritual experiences and “enlightenment”, and is handy knowledge for any curious Christian due to its obscurity and depth.

Martin’s most popular published paper, called *Clusters of Individual Experiences form a Continuum of Persistent Non-Symbolic Experiences in Adults*, is more commonly known as “The PNSE Paper”. Martin interviewed over 1200 people who reported having “persistent non-symbolic experiences” as part of the research effort for this paper, although the data he used for the paper comes from the first fifty participants, who were felt to be an accurate sample of the larger population.

But what is “persistent non-symbolic experience”? From the paper:

“what emerged was a continuum that seemed to progress from ‘normal’ waking consciousness toward a distant location where participants reported no individualized sense of self, no self-related thoughts, no emotion, and no apparent sense of agency or ability to make a choice.” ³⁶

A description of the four levels of PNSE may shed more light on the topic:

- ✚ **Location 1** is marked by a dramatic reduction or seeming loss of an individualized sense of self. Emotions become more transient and have reduced power over thought and action. This leaves people at Location 1 with a sense of peace and “beingness”. For religious people, this location is also associated with an increased sense of connection to divinity.
- ✚ **Location 2** is associated with an increased loss of self-centered thoughts, as well as a more positive range of daily emotions and an increased sense of well-being. People at Location 2 also reported being able to sense that there is a “correct” path to take when presented with choices.
- ✚ People at **Location 3** report feeling almost no negative emotions, instead feeling one dominant emotion which was reported to be a mixture of positive emotions like universal compassion, joy, and love. Feelings of well-being and inter-connectedness reportedly deepened. Martin associates this level with the attainment of “enlightenment” in some world religions like Buddhism.
- ✚ **Location 4** is the most interesting of them all. People who were furthest along this continuum had no self-centered thoughts or experiences of emotion, instead feeling a deep interconnectedness and union with God, the universe, an all-pervasive consciousness, and so on. Curiously, perhaps due to this deep feeling of interconnectedness, people at this location had a diminished or non-existent sense of agency (that is, the ability to make things happen), instead seeing life simply

³⁶ “The PSNE Paper” (Jeffery Martin, not dated but published sometime in the mid-2010’s)

unfolding in front of them. Scheduled events and important dates became harder to recall, yet the sense of well-being reported seemed to be the highest of the entire sample.

One of the reasons that Jeffery's research findings are interesting to Christians is because of their *persistence*; these aren't just fleeting experiences that last moments or days. This psychological condition, which varies in strength (or "Location") depending on the person, can last years or decades. It's also worth noting that in order to be eligible for the study, participants had to be part of a religious, spiritual, or secular community that could act as a reference point for their claims. There were presumably no lone wolves here.

Based on these research findings (which are independent in nature), it is possible for people to reach enlightenment – or even a sense of unity with God – on a semi-permanent or permanent basis. What does this mean for the faith? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps something. If these "locations" exist within the human spectrum of experience, perhaps there are benefits to being "there". And, perhaps there is a way for people to access these states should they so choose.

THE DASTARDLY DERREN BROWN

British magician, mentalist, showman, and occasional stuntman Derren Brown is widely known in the United Kingdom for his mind-bending TV specials (such as the one where he plays Russian Roulette on live television) and his thoroughly enjoyable stage shows (I took a three-hour train from London to see *Miracle* in Stoke-on-Trent). He made his Broadway debut in 2019 with *Secret*, which garnered many positive reviews.

Beyond his industrious and innovative career as a mentalist and showman, Derren's unique contribution to the field of magic may well be "the conversion". Throughout his career, he has transformed deadbeats and villains into heroes (as in *Hero at 30,000 Feet*, *Apocalypse*, and *Sacrifice*), ordinary people into killers and thieves (as in *The Push*, *The Heist*, and *The Assassin*), and, most relevant to the topic at hand, atheists into.... not-atheists.

In his two-part special *Fear and Faith*³⁷, which aired on British television in 2012, Derren focused on the "placebo effect". This psychological effect, first proposed by psychologist Henry K. Beecher in 1955³⁸, happens when a "cure" with no actual effect – such as a sugar pill – has the intended outcome despite the fact it's medically useless. Essentially, the patient becomes cured by their *belief in the medicine* rather than the medicine itself. Placebo-controlled trials have since become a prerequisite for new drugs devised by Big Pharma.

Derren's show made use of the placebo effect in two ways. In the first part of his special, he used harmless (and useless) pills and injections to help members of the public overcome their fears, quit smoking, and gain relief from allergies. In the second part of *Fear and Faith*, however, he uses hypnotic

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m94K4T572a4>

³⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Placebo#History>

suggestion to provoke a genuine spiritual experience that turned an atheist into a potential believer – he of course let her in on the ruse shortly after her experience.

How precisely Derren managed this feat is a blend of hypnotic techniques that he expounds on in the show, but amounts to a psychological placebo. He implanted a number of suggestions into her head that triggered some of the hallmark feelings of a spiritual experience – awe, wonder, love, and so on. These suggestions were designed to trigger at a specific moment that Derren had pre-planned, resulting in an overpowering rush of emotions. The whole endeavour was located inside a church, giving it a spiritual quality and moving his subject from atheist to questioner in a matter of seconds.

In another one of his specials, called *Miracles for Sale*, Derren teaches a member of the public several preaching techniques and faith healing tricks. They then went to Texas, where this random person – who was a Christian himself – successfully led a service using the techniques he was taught. Most notably, this “preacher” was able to touch people and cause them to fall over under the power of the Holy Spirit, which is perhaps one of the most powerful displays in an arena preacher’s arsenal.

Derren’s *oeuvre* of work raises a number of interesting questions for Christians. To what extent can religious experiences be hypnotically induced? Are there potential tools here for members of the clergy seeking to bring new life into their worship services? Should these tools be adopted, and to what extent? Would the laity welcome such techniques if they were fully educated about them? All topics of interest, but also topics of controversy.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

My interest in spiritual experiences and the role that they may play in Christianity is not just an academic one: I have personally had three of these experiences, two of them Judeo-Christian in nature. The net effect of these experiences has been to nudge me along the continuum from “atheist” to “agnostic Christian” – no small feat for a scientifically-minded person in today’s world! I have described them to the best of my ability below.

EXPERIENCE #1

There is an optional (but near-universal) practice in Canadian engineering schools called the Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer, affectionately known as “Kipling”. It was designed in 1922 by Rudyard Kipling, an English writer with a great respect for engineers and the working class. At the conclusion of the ritual, which I am not technically allowed to describe, each engineering graduate receives a simple stainless steel ring to be worn on the pinky of their working hand. The intent is for the ring to rub against their draft drawings, a constant irritation and a reminder of their important calling.

During my participation in this ritual in 2014, I had my first spiritual experience, which I can only describe as an overwhelming feeling of affirmation. I grew up in a blue-collar home, one of the first of my family to attend university – and certainly the first to become an engineer. Silly as it sounds, it felt as though my ancestors, all the way down the line, had noticed my achievement and were proud of me. During a part of

the ritual where we were reciting the “Kipling oath”, I was overcome with emotion, left sobbing on my feet by the oath’s end. It was deeply moving and very memorable, if a little difficult to put into words.

EXPERIENCE #2

My second spiritual experience came about in December 2018 after a period of deep study and contemplation. I was two years into a research project at McMaster University, where I was studying an intense experiential learning program in the DeGroot School of Business known for producing rapid growth – even transformation – in its participants. I had been tasked, broadly speaking, with deconstructing the program’s success. To this end, my literature review had meandered from experiential learning to adult learning, from adult learning to adult development, and from adult development to wisdom and spiritual literature. Along the way, I happened upon some detours: neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, history, coaching, early childhood education, game design, Judeo-Christian theology, and media studies, to name a few.

I had spent the morning in a diner reading *The Life Cycle Completed* by Erik Erikson. I was nearly brought to tears by one particular passage, included in the updated edition and actually written by Joan Erikson, his wife:

“We are called to become more and more human; we must discover the freedom to go beyond limits imposed on us by our world and seek fulfillment. In the beginning we are what we are given. By midlife, when we have finally learned to stand on our own two feet, we learn that to complete our lives, we are called to give to others so that when we leave this world, we can be what we have given.

Death, from this perspective, can be made our final gift. We believe it daily, but is it not possible, that by living our lives, we create something fit to add to the store from which we came?... our whole duty may be to clarify and increase what we are, to make our consciousness a finer quality. The effort of one’s entire life would be needed to return laden to our source.” ³⁹

Shortly after heading home from the diner, I was reading the Bible and contemplating an interesting conversation I was having with a Christian. While reading the passage describing Jesus’ crucifixion in Matthew 27, a few concepts came together in my mind simultaneously.

✝ First, the passage describing the moment of Jesus’ death on the cross:

“At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the

39

*earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'"*⁴⁰

- ✚ Second, I had been thinking about Jordan Peterson's broader legacy, considering that part of what he did was resurrect old (and arguably underappreciated) thinkers like Carl Jung, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Joseph Campbell, and even Jesus. In many ways, their bodies – or bodies of work – had been raised to life, indeed appearing (metaphorically, at least) to many people. Another part of what he did, of course, was to bring a unique perspective to bear on the topic of religious thought, catalyzing a newfound interest in the Biblical stories.

- ✚ Third, I was thinking about the metaphor of Hell presented by Dante Alighieri in his famous *Inferno*, where people guilty of treachery were imprisoned in a lake of ice at the center of Hell. Although people guilty of crimes such as betrayal of family, community, and benefactors were trapped completely – or almost completely – in the ice, Satan, who was guilty of treachery against God Himself, was depicted as being trapped only waist-deep in ice at the center of Hell. I found it curious that he was only partially submerged in the icy lake, concluding it likely that there was always room for forgiveness in God's universe, even for Satan.

Taken together, these three thoughts formed a new thought: that it was truly how one lived one's life that mattered. Not only does a life well-lived require a great deal of forgiveness and patience from God, living your life honorably resurrects and propagates the values of the people you admire. Furthermore, striving towards the highest human ideals – instead of spiting God from the centre of your own personal Hell – was all that was needed to receive forgiveness. This was, for some reason, a source of incredible relief and joy to me.

Words fail to fully describe the insight I stumbled upon that day, but I was euphoric for two days, often simultaneously highly productive and crying with joy. Some theories I was developing in my research work were coming together nicely, I had greater social insight, and I felt, overall, the best I ever have in my life.

Of interest to Christians: following this experience, I found myself to have an intuitive understanding of much of Scripture, both the individual passages and the Bible as a whole. Everything seemed to link together in a natural progression of thought that culminated in Jesus' insightful critique of Jewish law.

EXPERIENCE #3

My third spiritual experience happened in March 2019, also when I was doing research-related work. I forget what triggered it, and it only lasted about thirty seconds, but I felt an overwhelming *presence*. It was as if there was a physical pressure being exerted on my head, temples, and shoulders. This lasted for about thirty seconds, and the existence of this *presence* occupied my full attention for thirty seconds or so. I was left spellbound, and happened to be listening to Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* at the time. The exact lyrics playing were:

⁴⁰ Matthew 27:51-54

*“I am frightened by the corrupted ways of this land
If only I could meet the maker”⁴¹*

I could barely even process what happened. I certainly didn’t have words to describe it at the moment. However, later that day, a chance conversation with a family member reminded me of Moses’ encounter with God in Exodus 3, and upon reading it, I had words to describe what I had felt.

“Moses said to God, ‘Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?’ God said to Moses, “אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”⁴²

“I am.” Well, that presence certainly *was*. It was unmistakable, almost indescribable. It certainly felt like the hand of God, in a way.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

The existence of genuine spiritual experiences (that are not tied to schizophrenia or delusion) seems undeniable, at least from my perspective. However, the role that they may play in modern Christianity remains to be seen.

Indeed, these types of experiences formed the foundation for much of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and although they are welcomed to some extent in charismatic denominations of the faith, the more intellectualized and tradition-based denominations tend to downplay the role of such experiences, if conversation about them is not suppressed altogether. I suspect that an open dialogue about Christian spiritual experiences is long overdue, and may open the floodgates to a deluge of testimony from the laity. One study found that thirty-five percent of people reported having at least one spiritual experience in their lifetime⁴³, and given the popularity of Christianity in the general population, it’s likely that many Christians are among their number.

Whether or not these experiences constitute a new form of spiritual knowledge is one area of discussion I can see becoming particularly thorny, especially when spiritual experiences may be catalysts for increased personal or spiritual insight. The validity of knowledge gained during these experiences is an open question, as is how one should integrate such experiences into one’s worldview.

Also, it’s worth considering whether church services can be (or should be) constructed to induce or encourage these types of experiences. Having been to worship services of a few different denominations – Presbyterian, Salvation Army, Anglican, Orthodox – I can say that certain elements of each resonated more with me than others. Also, having read the testimony of people who attend large evangelical churches in the United States, I know that the “spiritual high” that people can get from these services is

⁴¹ “All I Really Want” (Alanis Morissette, 1995)

⁴² Exodus 3:13-14

⁴³ The study was conducted in 1975 by sociologist Andrew Greeley.

one of the main ways that they stay connected to the religion. Some denominations have incense, others have brass bands, still others organs, and some have liturgy. Perhaps we should begin to appreciate the different types of services for their approaches to spirituality in addition to their content.