Experiences of Divine Bliss, Anger and Evil during the Pandemic: Non-ordinary Experiences during Lockdown

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Abstract: This article illustrates the complexity of non-ordinary experiences during the pandemic, highlighting accounts of three different types of experiences: encounters with divine bliss, anger, and evil. The focus is on four narrative accounts of non-ordinary experiences that were submitted by email in response to a wider research project about religious, spiritual, and otherwise non-ordinary experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following sections discuss the distinction between experiences perceived as ordinary and non-ordinary and the impact of non-ordinary experiences on wellbeing during lockdown—sometimes as positive meaning-making experiences that contribute to people's ability to cope with the lockdown and the devastation of the pandemic, and other times expressive of stress and fear, often further exacerbated by silence about the experience. The article then contextualizes approaches to studying these experiences within the academic study of religion and spiritual experiences. Anthropologists have long understood non-ordinary experiences, along with their context-dependent interpretations, as reflective of cultural meaning-making processes.

Palavras-chave: non-ordinary experience; extraordinary experience; religious experience, Covid-19.

Experiências da Bênção Divina, Raiva e Pecado no período da Pandemia: Experiências não ordinárias durante o Isolamento Social

Resumo: Este artigo ilustra a complexidade das experiências não ordinárias vivenciadas durante a pandemia, destacando três relatos de diferentes tipos de experiências religiosas-espirituais: encontro com a bênção divina, raiva e pecado. O foco está em quatro relatos narrativos de experiências não ordinárias que foram enviadas por e-mail em resposta a um projeto de pesquisa mais amplo sobre experiências religiosas, espirituais e não ordinárias durante a pandemia de covid-19. Nas sessões seguintes, discute-se o impacto dessas experiências no bem-estar durante o período de isolamento social – algumas vezes de cunho positivo, atribuindo sentido para as pessoas enfrentarem o isolamento social e as adversidades trazidas pela pandemia; outras vezes, entretanto, de cunho negativo, gerando estresse e medo, geralmente agravados pelo silêncio dessas experiências. A discussão desses resultados, então, fundamenta-se em estudos de experiências religiosas norteadas por estudos acadêmicos em antropologia da religião e da espiritualidade. Antropólogos há muito compreendem as experiências não ordinárias e as interpretam conforme o contexto cultural, refletido no processo de busca de sentido.

Keywords: experiências não ordinárias, experiências religiosas, experiências extraordinárias, covid-19.

Introduction

In 2020 the world suddenly came to a standstill. As a response to the shocking spread of COVID-19 across the world, governments closed their borders, shut down schools, offices, and shops, and enforced a sudden lockdown on their citizens, sometimes even restricting the size of private gatherings. Even religious communities were told to close their doors, leaving many congregants in social isolation to fend for themselves. While many people adapted quickly to the new online versions of religious gatherings and rituals, most agreed that online engagement was not an adequate replacement for in-person gatherings, and many wondered if practices such as virtual sacraments were even valid. Edelman et al. (2021) note that despite the incredible speed with which religious communities adapted their rituals to virtual settings during the first year of the pandemic, there were several shortcomings: "By almost every metric, the experience of pandemic rituals has been worse than those that came before them. They are perceived as less meaningful, less communal, less spiritual, less effective, and so on" (Edelman et al., 2021: 7). Research has long established the positive impact of participation in religious communities on mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Shattuck and Muehlenbein, 2020). However, when doors were shut and options for in-person gatherings were limited, the sense of community and personalized support were also limited. Moving religious rituals online seemed to reduce the quality of the experience compared to the effect of sharing physical space. While the lockdown helped to save lives and ease at least some of the pressure on health services while medical research focused on developing vaccinations against the virus, it did not come without costs such as social isolation and loneliness. Brazilian sociologists Paulo Gajanigo and Rogério Souza write that the COVID-19 pandemic experiences include notions of trauma. They compare testimonies of ordinary experiences from the start of the pandemic with narratives of people who survived the second World War and the anti-colonial wars in Latin America (2021: 39). Having learnt from the way people tried to make sense of horrific day to day experiences during the war, Gajanigo and Souza highlight the importance of collecting ordinary experiences in diaries and blogs (2021: 42). While they acknowledge that the pandemic was less devastating than the war, they found frequent terms such as battle or enemy within these testimonies from the first phase of the pandemic. "Like the war, the pandemic is a massive tragedy" ["Mas tal como a guerra, pandemia é uma tragédia massiva."] (Gajanigo / Souza 2021: 43). The suppression of any collective rituals in such a time increased the devastation further.

In addition to religious gatherings and rituals, Ken Pargament (1997, 2007, 2011) defines religion less in terms of a social community as other scholars have, and more in terms of a meaning-making process. Pargament highlights that religious ideas can

also provide support when coping with negative life events. However, compared to gatherings, rituals, and ideas, there is less research on the impact of religious or spiritual experiences on wellbeing, partially due to the subjective nature of such experiences (Dein, 2013).

This paper focuses on non-ordinary experiences people had during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the purposes of this paper, non-ordinary experiences are defined as experiences that include perceptions or sensations—whether visual, auditory, phenomenological, or physical—that depart from one's ordinary perceptions of life. Non-ordinary experiences vary widely and can include hearing voices, premonitory dreams, and feelings of oneness with the universe (Taves & Barlev, 2022) and are distinct from experiences people consider ordinary (Maraldi et al. 2023). However, while Taves and Barlev differentiate between researcher-defined and subject-defined definition of non-ordinary experience, we follow Maraldi et al. and include experiences "which may or may not be seen as nonordinary by participants themselves" (Maraldi et al. 2023: 2). We show that non-ordinary experiences had during the pandemic – whether perceived as life-affirming experiences, encounters with evil, or hallucinations – often seemed to be the result of the stress of the pandemic and lockdown isolation. Non-ordinary experience can be a way of the mind to help cope with, make meaning of, or interpret extreme stress. Processing a non-ordinary experience with a trusted person is often important for integrating the experience into one's identity and sense-making process, especially if the non-ordinary experience was challenging or instilled fear in the person.

Indeed, non-ordinary experiences are not always life-affirming, peaceful experiences that can increase spirituality and/or have a positive psychological impact (Lukof, 1985). For example, pre-pandemic research on Near Death Experiences has shown they can also sometimes be distressing or even destructive (Greyson, 2014), with long-lasting negative impact on wellbeing, especially if people cannot find a way to contextualise their experience (Greyson and Evans, 1996; Martial et al., 2020).

Furthermore, while non-ordinary experiences are sometimes associated with well-being and spiritual growth, others are associated with pathological symptoms (Maraldi et al., 2023). Consequently, non-ordinary experiences are sometimes dismissed as products of vivid imagination, brain mis-firings, or drug side-effects. Even those who have such experiences often do not know how to explain them as they are, by definition, out of their ordinary perceptual experience. While they are reported around the globe and throughout history, in all cultures and religions (Maraldi & Krippner, 2019), there is hesitance to write or speak about them in academic or research settings (Schmidt, 2020).

However, the lived religion theoretical framework emerging from the sociology of religion invites attention to features of experience and practice that may not fit within traditional notions of what counts as "important" for understanding social trends in religion and spirituality. A lived religion approach directs attention to what people are actually doing and experiencing in their real lives, rather than only focusing on the formalized aspects of religious structures. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman (2020) integrates an understanding of embodiment and spirituality as two of the seven key dimensions included in studying religion from a lived religion perspective. She explains, "Studying religious action requires that we take seriously the human capacity for multiple consciousness, in this case for perceiving and acting within a field in which there are social objects recognized as 'more than ordinary'" (Ammerman 2020: 19, see also Ammerman 2021). Non-ordinary experiences are not only embedded within social contexts and religious subcultures, but they are also part of what constitutes those contexts, making substantive contributions to the formation and dynamics of those contexts.

To illustrate the diversity and complexity of the impact of non-ordinary experiences, this article discusses four accounts of non-ordinary experiences during the pandemic. The first section presents the experiences. The following sections discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on wellbeing and how people made sense of these non-ordinary experiences.

Experiences of divine bliss, anger and evil during lockdown

This paper builds upon research conducted at the Religious Experience Research Centre at the UWTSD in collaboration with the Center for Mind and Culture in Boston, Massachusetts (see Schmidt/Stockly, 2021, Schmidt/Stockly, 2024). For the original research, we created an anonymous survey to collect narrative accounts of religious, spiritual, and otherwise non-ordinary experiences that occurred while people were sick with COVID-19. Participants were encouraged to describe their spiritual experiences with as many details as they felt comfortable sharing. The survey also asked how the experience affect their perspectives, behaviour, relationships with family and friends, future plans, and relationship with their spiritual or religious community if they had one. Along with narrative accounts, we asked a series of questions developed from phenomenological inventories and questions about the impact these experiences had on their lives and perspectives (see Schmidt and Stockly, 2021, Schmidt and Stockly, 2024). The survey was disseminated online via social media postings and received responses from all over the world, including Nigeria, Ukraine, Pakistan, Australia, the US, Nicaragua, the UK, and Finland.

In response to early presentations of this research, additional people reached out to us wanting to contribute to ongoing research by sharing their experiences. Some of these accounts were not directly related to experiences that occurred while people were sick with COVID-19, but rather occurred during the pandemic lockdown and were related to themes of isolation, anger, and confusion. Three of the following excerpts are from people who recounted non-ordinary experiences they had during the lockdown and the fourth occurred while the narrator was sick with COVID-19. All four individuals contacted us via email to share their experiences after hearing about the original research project. All four individuals are men from Europe: three of the accounts came from Great Britain and one from Spain; one account was offered by an Anglican participant, one by a Catholic participant. While self-report data might weaken findings (Chan, 2008) and do not provide evidence for general statement, they highlight issues that have wider significance.

The first one wrote:

> During the lockdown in isolation at **** Park I experienced something so profound I can only describe it as divine bliss.
>
> The noise of the world had stopped. The noise in my head had also stopped. I simply was. It felt like time had slowed down and I could hear, see and feel every nuance of nature working in perfect harmony around me – the slow sound of the wings of the bees beating, the trees breathing, people became pastiches of their roles – the gardeners, children playing in the distance, people driving to work in unawareness. I walked through the Countryside at the pace of my heartbeat knowing they were both in synchrony. I felt a disembodied sense with my lower body (the term we use in gait physiology is locomotor unit), it didn't exist. I felt like I was in a state of pure unfiltered awareness.
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> It first lasted for a few hours, and I wanted to experience it more. So, I continued meditating, and continued going out walking. It happened again and again. The more it happened the more blissful it became. It then became something I needed. It felt like I needed that more than food. Meditating for a few hours seems to renew me more than a full night's sleep.
>
> Something profound happened.

However, he continued that the spiritual awakening, the feeling of divine bliss, did not last.

I want to experience it again and share it, but I feel like it is unattainable, and I have fallen so far since then, and have become trapped. I don't know how to explain it or proceed. The only people I have heard describe something similar are Eckhart Tolle and Ram Dass. 8 months later at 5am in a noisy flat in central ****. I am scared, shaking and exhausted. But I feel this is far too valuable an experience to keep quiet about.[3]

Another person who reached out after hearing about this research on non-ordinary experiences during the pandemic expressed his extreme anger during lockdown.

I can well remember, very soon after the orders from Government to "stay at home," having a very powerful feeling and wanting to break out of it. I got on my bicycle and peddled out to the nearby estuary. As I went, I shouted out to the elements as loudly as I could. There was a young girl walking along the footpath who must have heard me! It was similar to my outburst on Ramsey beach in the Isle of Man, when I heard that my father had passed away. That was in grief. This was in anger and frustration. It was a cry to God in the extreme beauty of the countryside around here – the sea, the sky, the trees, the cattle, the river and the refreshing wind. I suppose it was a cry for freedom as well as a rebellion against something that was wrong and made no sense at all.

He continued to explain that

During this time, we were not allowed to go to our beaches, that are so beautiful and so healing. I felt that we were living in a police state with notices everywhere forbidding this and that. Playgrounds taped off. A policeman asking someone why he was going to buy a newspaper. What was most shocking was to be asked by a local resident, while my wife and I went for a walk, if we were locals? Another notice by local people saying, "Do not take your car for a walk." These things showed me the weakness of human nature. As a friend of mine said when challenged by a policeman as to why he was going to a beach, said, "Well take me to court, and I will win"!! It was a time when I turned more to God. It reminded me of a time when I went in a dinghy, in Ramsey Bay, to examine my lobster pot. The sea grew more angry [sic] and I was worried as I turned for port. I suddenly felt a presence near me that gave me assurance. This reminds me of a mother who came

to my door after her beautiful young boy had been killed by a car while crossing a road. She said that a voice spoke to her at the moment of the accident and said, "all will be well."

While this person's experience was characterized by a sensation of assurance and comfort in the midst of anger and frustration at what they interpreted as a grave injustice, others described non-ordinary experiences with very different tones. An experience of comfort was not present in all accounts. One person reported a rather upsetting experience at the start of the lockdown.

> The experience happened at the beginning of November 2020 [...]. What I do know is that it happened at 10 am, [...] and I was in bed getting ready to get dressed [...]. I was wide awake and there was good natural light in the bedroom. I had my glasses on when I looked up and found before me a very strange presence that was unlike anything I had ever seen, heard or imagined, which I will try to describe to the best of my ability.

> The entity was completely dark and had a shape between circular and oval, that is, closer to a geometric figure than to the silhouette of a person or monster. It was a little more than half a body in size, and levitated static at a certain height from the bed and at a certain distance from me. I did not notice it enter the room, move, or grow, it simply appeared at that point. Nor did I notice any volume or physicality, it cast no shadow and when I changed the angle of view its perspective changed slightly but the figure still felt flat. However, there was no doubt of its existence and its location, since if I looked elsewhere, I would take it out of the center of my vision, and with my eyes closed I could not see it.

> Its contour was defined and black in color, but its most interesting aspect was its body at a certain distance from the edges. An easy description to envision it would be that of a very turbulent black water surface with many ripples moving at high speed, although a more accurate one would be like a thin veil (like the little web of cream that forms in milk) under which millions of fine strands were pressing outward, as if they were fine worms or spaghetti swirling in circles against this surface, trying to break through it.

> The other thing that distinguished this being from a hallucination, mirage, illusion or fantasy, is the extreme evil that I felt in its proximity.

> Until this experience, I understood evil as something qualitative, but this made me understand that it is a quantitative measure. One can feel little or a lot of evil, as if we have a proximity detector to the sources of evil, and what I had in front of me was evil so purely concentrated that my sensor marked the maximum, so I could have felt the presence even if I had been blind. This feeling made my heart flutter and beat very fast, but I struggled to calm myself because I once learned that the evil one cannot strike his blow if the soul remains strong, and I have an unshakable faith in God.

The account continues with an explanation that the narrator picked up his rosary and began to pray. While initially the entity remained, after a while the sensation of evil ceased. He opened his eyes and the entity was gone. The person further elaborated that he remained scared for the rest of the month until he contacted a priest and found a way to make sense of the experience within the framework of his faith. It is important to remember that spiritual and other non-ordinary experiences are not always comforting or accompanied by positive sensations. Similarly, insights from the study of near-death experiences (NDEs) demonstrate that a small portion of NDEs are distressing, characterized by similar phenomenological features of classical NDEs, but with unpleasant or "hellish" sensations and content or perceptions of a void (Greyson & Bush, 1992). These types of NDEs can carry an extremely distressing emotional tone, including despair, guilt, or terror, both during the experience and afterward. Bush and Greyson (2017) draw upon the concept of post-traumatic growth to discuss the potential long-term effects of these experiences and the challenge of assimilating and sense-making following such experiences (see also Cassol et al., 2019). As was the case with the narrator above, speaking about the experience with a trusted person can help alleviate distress associated with the experience.

A fourth narrator described a non-ordinary experience he had during the pandemic, but interpreted it through a medical framework, rather than a spiritual or religious framework. He wrote:

> Broadly speaking, my Omicron symptoms were mild, but triggered intense dreams and hallucinations. An example of this is as follows:
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> I was sat on my bed with my temperature cycling between a fever and normality, and I started to see my curtain flowing. This surprised me, as my window was closed, and there was no draft to make the curtain flow 2 feet from where it normally hangs. Yet, it was clearly moving, with detail that would match other objects during the waking

state. I came to realise that this was a hallucination and sat watching the curtain continue to move for another several minutes. Slowly, my everyday perception took back over again, and the hallucination quickly faded away. Interestingly, the hallucination met all my expectations of how an object would move in normal reality.

While the first three accounts describe experiences that occurred early in the pandemic, the fourth experience took place during a later stage of the pandemic. The narrator revealed his interpretation of causation by noting that he was cycling in and out of a fevered state, and he identified it as hallucination related to his illness, offering no additional interpretation of spiritual significance. In response to a follow up question, the narrator explained, "It led me to question the extent to which Omicron catalyses altered states of consciousness." The narrator therefore made sense of the experience not just as hallucination but also within a specific scientific medical understanding of altered states of consciousness being potentially caused by a virus, rather than as a spiritually meaningful perception. Nonetheless, in every case, each narrator interpreted their non-ordinary experience in ways that helped them process the effect of the pandemic on their lives. In addition, their explanations enabled them to incorporate the experiences into the bricolage of factors, beliefs, experiences, and frameworks that constitute their worldview and/or sense of wholeness.

Wellbeing and non-ordinary experiences during lockdown?

These four accounts add to the diversity of accounts found throughout our research, further illustrating the complex ways that non-ordinary experiences manifested during the unprecedented pandemic circumstances. As described previously (Schmidt/Stockly, 2021, Schmidt/Stockly, 2024), people struggled not only with fear related to the threat of COVID-19 to one's health or even life, but also with social isolation, the closure of religious gathering spaces, and the limiting of community support opportunities. This unprecedented global event was understood as the trigger for non-ordinary experiences that sometimes left people horrified, confirming dark forces at play, and other times left people feeling blessed, reaffirming a determined resilience. However non-ordinary experiences during the pandemic were interpreted, they often impacted the person's sense of wellbeing and gave affective shape to their perception of the pandemic.

Wellbeing is largely relational and emerges, as White points out, through rela-

tionships with others (2016: 29), both human and non-human others. Being part of a religious community can contribute positively to wellbeing (source), as can stable relationships with other people (Rodríguez 2016: 279). Similarly, relationships with non-human beings or spiritual entities can sometimes lead to experiences of support or peace in moments that might otherwise be marked with despair, hopelessness, or loneliness. Hilary Knight, who looked at personal accounts of religious experiences archived at the Religious Experience Research Centre, explains that spirituality can buoy feelings of hope and can be "the key to accepting and coping with the situation in times of sickness" (2006: 6) because "loss of hope leads to impaired recovery from illness or even to premature death" (2006: 8). Hence, rather than a sign of avoiding or denying reality, which is sometimes labelled as spiritual bypassing (Welwood, 2000), spiritual perspectives can offer a potent way of facing and coping with terrible situations. In this way, religious and spiritual experiences can contribute to a sense of wholeness (Hay, 1990) and are part of a multi-dimensional concept of wellbeing that, for many people, became fragmented during the pandemic.

For many people, the social isolation during lockdowns combined with anxiety related to the exponential death toll during the first year of the pandemic made the pandemic an especially stressful and anxiety-ridden time. In addition, as Käsehage highlights, the fear of COVID-19 was fuelled by its invisibility, exacerbated by conflicting information and distrust, and manipulated by conspiracy theorists who exploited fears of COVID-19 for their purposes (2021: 9, 2). Moreover, isolation from one's typical social networks, paired with an increase in virtual interactions produced a breeding ground for conspiracy theories that generated additional anxieties (Meyer 2020). Confronted with terrifying potentialities and unprecedented demands to avoid in-person gathering, whether those demands were perceived as helpful or unhelpful, left many people feeling disoriented. Consequently, non-ordinary experiences may have intensified as people searched for a meaning-making process that could lend credence to the intensity of the moment (Schmidt/Stockly, 2022).

While stress and anxiety are typical elements involved in adapting to new situations or circumstances, chronic stress and traumatic experiences inflict mental wounds. Negative experiences are embedded, as Richter writes, "in the biographies, social and cultural values and attitudes belonging to an individual's identity" (2021: 499). The accounts above illustrate Richter's point that spiritual and religious traditions can support developing resilience in the face of negative experiences (2021: 503-504). Whether confronted with anger, bliss, or a sensation of pure evil, the narrators who interpreted their experiences recounted above through a spiritual lens drew hope from their belief system. Just as people make sense of new experiences

within the framework of their own sociocultural culture contexts, experiences in turn also help create meaning and decrease a sense of powerlessness, providing a resource for hope and resilience in difficult situations, especially those that force a confrontation with vulnerability, loss of control, and dread. As Richter writes, "facing limitations, isolation, powerlessness, and ambivalence in a resilient way requires both endurance and creativity in order to accept the situation and gain a new (hopeful) perspective" (2021:507).

How to make sense of non-ordinary experiences

Our research on non-ordinary experiences during the pandemic has revealed a range of experiences in response to the threat of illness, fear of dying, lockdown regulations, and social isolation. As the four accounts highlighted above illustrate, people who responded to our surveys reported different types of experiences, some were explicitly tied to religious content, others were characterized by more general intensity (Schmidt/Stockly, 2024) — however, all included meaning-making processes that helped shape their conceptualization of their circumstances. But how can we analyse these experiences from an academic perspective? Sociologists and anthropologists have a long history of analysing various worldviews and conceptualizations of reality, including how human groups have interacted with these realities. Through ethnographic encounters with various cultures, sociologists and anthropologists have collected stories about engagements with phenomena that extend beyond the materialistic, bio-medical conceptualization of human bodies and physical realities that is typically espoused in academia, such as magic, witchcraft, and shamanic trances. These stories "point to matters of deep existential concern in a general quest for an understanding of the human forces engaged in the human construction of lived realities" (Kapferer, 2002: 1). However, as Kapferer argues, scholars are bound to a position of rational objectivity. This makes religious experiences or emotions less frequent subjects of sociological analysis. While in William James's time experiences were one of the most prominent sites of exploration, more recently, perhaps out of respect for the objects and subjects of religious studies research, there is a trend of avoiding an "objectification" of intimate religious experiences and emotions. John Corrigan (2017: 2) explains, "Many scholars who studied religion blanched when their investigation of the role of emotion led them to the doorstep of the question 'What is really going on here?'" This verges on reductionism, they worry. We agree with Corrigan that this hesitancy, while legitimate, has sometimes kept scholars from studying an essential dimension of religion. Shanafelt (2004) argues that we should acknowledge the social and psychological realities of religious experience "without abandoning

questions and concerns about generalization and empirical validity" (2004: 317). Indeed, an increasing number of sociologists and anthropologists are highlighting the ethnocentric nature of the post-Enlightenment approach to reason and rationality. Decades ago, Evan-Pritchard tasked anthropologists with understanding of the internal rationality of what people do and why, instead of applying a Western concept of rationality to other cultures' worldviews and systems. More recently, anthropologists again began to criticize the dichotomy between rational and irrational, urging scholars to move away from the Western focus on rationality (Lambek, 2008). Morton Klass insists that "the dichotomizing of natural as against supernatural remains invincibly ethnocentric and therefore unsuitable for anthropological analysis" (Klass, 1995: 32, see also Schmidt, 2016). There are similarities between this anthropological critique and movements in phenomenology and sociology. For instance, within anthropology, Sharf points out the need to study any practice and belief with "its own rationality, its own coherence, its own truth" (Sharf, 1998: 95). Applied to the study of non-ordinary experiences, anthropologists tend to focus on the social and cultural context without categorizing the accounts as irrational, the outcome of a physical disturbance of the brain, or the side-effect of a drug. However, recent studies point out that by focusing on the social and cultural context, anthropologists avoid looking behind the vail and indicate – perhaps indirectly – their refusal to consider the reality of the spirits' influence (e.g., Glass-Coffin, 2013, Turner, 1993). Edith Turner, who placed the interpretation of one's own experience at the core of her research methodology and analysis, argues passionately for the possibility that spirits exist, and not only on a symbolic or metaphorical level (Turner, 2005, Bowie, 2016). The sociologist Robert Orsi points out that

> [s]uch a perspective shifts attention away from what is already always given socially, linguistically, and historically, to what may happen in the intersubjective worlds humans are born into, then make for themselves with the tools they find and craft. It introduces creativity and unpredictability into what would otherwise be determined. Humans struggle with their languages; they reach beyond what they are able to say toward what they desire to say; they push to the edges of the sayable and the known. In relationships, they encounter what they had not expected, what they may not have wanted, what they fear. "Desire" and "fear" themselves are not singular and transparent, so that one may fear what one desires and desire what one fears. (2016: 7)

Applied to the accounts from above, a typical anthropological approach would interpret the experience of seeing a dark figure within the cultural context of a

person raised in Catholic Spain, therefore avoiding interpreting the experience in the context of a person who encountered evil. To some degree, this reflects an ongoing question within the study of religious experience extending back to at least Rudolf Otto, who, in response to a negative reviewer of his book The Holy, complained that someone who had never had a religious experience would never understand his book and should stop reading it (Otto, 1936). But as some of his contemporaries as well as current scholars argue, Otto's comment pushes his research and writing outside academic frameworks (McCutcheon, 2012). On the other hand, we would be rightfully accused of arrogance and even ethnocentric colonialism to dismiss the validity of how people interpret and make meaning of their own lived experience. For example, in her study of Marian apparition in digital photographs that the Marian devotees in Canada, theologian Jessy Pagliaroli (2004) describes how her interviewees insisted vehemently on the reality of the photos they had taken of Marian apparitions—that they were not faked but were the result of divine intervention. Pagliaroli highlights that her interviewees explained their miraculous photographs using not only spiritual language, but also scientific and secular reasoning (2004: 74):

> They were concerned with responding to secular challenges made against the veracity of 'miraculous photography' as well as committed to bridging the divide between science and religion. Hence, they explained their belief in 'picture miracles' using both religious and naturalistic terms and often spoke of the conditions by which particular photographs were taken and developed in order to dispel any claims that a particular 'miracle photo' may have been created by natural or deceptive means. (Pagliaroli, 2004: 88)

Similarly, the usual sociological and anthropological approaches are also limited in their ability to interpret the non-ordinary experiences narrated in this article. While each narrator of the four experiences above interprets their experiences through the lenses of their socio-cultural context, reflecting the rich social worlds and networks of relationships they were born into, this does not explain as much about the experiences themselves. One spoke of divine bliss but was not explicitly linked to a particular religious tradition, while the fourth one reflected on the experience through a medical framework. All four are rather typical representatives of Western societies despite their varied interpretations of their non-ordinary experiences. While the socio-cultural context in which the experiences take place is important, it is not all that matters.

Even the classifications of ordinary and non-ordinary are challenging. As we know

from the accounts in the Religious Experience Research Centre (Hardy, 1979), the distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary experience does not always reflect how people reporting their experiences see them—for some people, spiritual experiences are quite "ordinary." The archive includes numerous accounts of experiences that took place outside religious settings, in ordinary places, for instance during a walk outdoors, in nature, while listening to the radio, or while reading a book (see Schmidt, 2020b). During research among vernacular religions in Latin America, Schmidt encountered fierce resistance to categorizing experiences such as mediumship as non-ordinary as mediums saw their practice as a communication technique, as something very ordinary. They situated their experience firmly within the ordinary realm, as part of their ordinary reality, and not as something special. Rather, it seems more that we, the academics, have a problem with navigating forms of reality outside of our ordinary perceptions, while the people experiencing these realities are often unencumbered with questions of veracity. Many people distinguish without any difficulty between the "normal" reality and anything unusual and contextualise the experience accordingly, whether it is within a spiritual or religious context or within a medical framework.

As the four narratives cited above demonstrate, non-ordinary experiences often become effective coping mechanisms in stressful, even disastrous, situations. Key to their impact as coping mechanisms, however, are the resources to interpret, explain, and integrate the experiences, whether they are perceived as desirable or "good" or undesirable or "evil." In the absence of a spiritual community where one might feel safe enough to share their experience and engage in a meaning-making and integration process, people are sometimes left to navigate such experiences alone. This lack of opportunity for integration may have been more common during the pandemic lockdown. Research on psychedelic experiences is one area where scholars have insisted on the vital importance of an integration process following intense experiences, especially, but not limited to, challenging experiences (e.g., Griffiths et al., 2006). Recently, two psychometric scales were developed to measure the integration process after psychedelic drug administration: the Integration Engagement Scale and the Experienced Integration Scale (Frymann et al., 2022). While these scales were developed specifically to assess the facilitation of high-quality and therapeutic psychedelic experiences, similar principles relate to non-ordinary experiences with unknown etiologies such as those narrated in this article. When integrated and assimilated into one's self-concept or conceptualization of one's life, non-ordinary experiences can be deeply meaningful experiences, sometimes contributing to coping processes, helping to make sense of or process terrible or terrifying situations, or enhancing personal growth.

As communities around the world adjust to post-pandemic life, further research to understand the impact of non-ordinary experiences that occurred during the pandemic and how they contributed to shaping many people's responses to the pandemic is important for at least two reasons. First, studying non-ordinary experiences may shed light on how people navigated the significant stressors related to the global outbreak of a potentially fatal virus; and second, it may provide insight into how groups and communities are reforming and establishing new dynamics, including shifting relationships to work, spiritual beliefs, religious participation, and friends and family post-pandemic.

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