

**Beyond the self: A Systematic Qualitative Review unveiling core themes of Self-Transcendent Experiences in Spirituality and Religion**

Imke Nijland

Faculty of Behavioral, Management and Social Sciences, University of Twente

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1st Supervisor: Dr. Mirjam Radstaak

2nd Supervisor: Alejandro Dominguez Rodriguez PHD

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### **Abstract**

Self-transcendent experiences (STEs) are increasingly recognized for their role in enhancing well-being and fostering prosocial behavior. These experiences are marked by self-loss and oneness with something greater. Additionally, STEs are linked to feelings of love, joy, peace, connectedness and support spiritual growth and meaning-making. As spirituality evolves and traditional religiosity declines, this raises critical questions about the characteristics of STEs, their manifestation in religious and spiritual contexts and their broader implications. Despite the growing body of qualitative research, systematic reviews on this topic remain limited. A systematic qualitative review was conducted following PRISMA-guidelines. Thematic analysis was employed, with AI-assisted coding to ensure consistency, while preserving contextual nuances. Analysis of 17 included qualitative studies, identified five key themes: acceptance of existentiality and transformation, cognitive-affective shifts, connectedness and oneness, guidance and protection, and perceptual shifts. These themes reveal both shared and divergent characteristics of STEs, highlighting the influence of context. Meaning-making was found to be dominated by spiritual contexts, while existential security was more commonly associated with religious contexts. Spiritual contexts emphasize personal transformation and meaning-making, while religious contexts focus on collectivity, guidance, and protection. Religious STEs are often linked to an external locus of control, while spiritual STEs focus more on internal control and agency. However, both rely on external transcendent sources. Future research should further explore context-dependent differences in shaping STEs. Balancing individualized spirituality with communal practices will be crucial for addressing societal challenges and maximizing the transformative potential of STEs in an evolving cultural landscape.

*Keywords:* Self-transcendent experiences, spirituality, religion, thematic analysis, systematic review, wellbeing

### Acknowledgements

In our increasingly complex society, understanding the cultural and personal transitions that help individuals find meaning in life, tolerate differences, and contribute positively to society is more important than ever. Central to this exploration is the concept of transcendence, a theme deeply embedded in human philosophy and psychology. Jung (1957), a key figure in psychology, describes transcendence as a process of integrating conscious and unconscious elements, fostering psychological growth and transformation. This notion of transcendence is echoed in a recent article in *de Volkskrant*, where the crucial role of connectedness is emphasized (Fenema, 2025). Psychiatry alone cannot solve societal detachment. While psychiatrists provide relief, broader social efforts are needed to combat avoidable mental suffering (Fenema, 2024). This perspective aligns with my research, suggesting that STEs, by fostering connectedness, can help individuals transcend isolation and psychological suffering, moving beyond a self-centered existence toward a deeper sense of oneness and meaning (Yaden et al., 2017).

This view further fuels my interest in exploring how personal spirituality and religious practices can serve as pathways to transcendence and connectedness with something greater, addressing both individual and societal challenges. My conversations with Roelof Tichelaar deepened my interest in these topics, motivating me to investigate how STEs manifest in both religious and spiritual contexts. Specifically, I aim to understand how these practices contribute to solving the psychological and societal issues we face today. I am deeply grateful to my supervisors, Mirjam Radstaak and Alejandro Dominguez Rodriguez for their open-mindedness, encouragement, and constructive feedback, which have been invaluable in shaping the direction of this master thesis.

## **Beyond the self: A Systematic Qualitative Review unveiling core themes of Self-Transcendent Experiences in Spirituality and Religion**

Self-transcendent experiences (STEs) are increasingly recognized for their role in enhancing well-being and are linked to numerous psychological benefits, including improved mental health, heightened life satisfaction, and increased prosocial behaviours. These profound experiences involve self-loss and oneness with a larger whole (Canby et al., 2024; Yaden et al., 2017). They are also associated with feelings of love, joy, peace, and connectedness. Furthermore, STEs foster deeper meaning-making and spiritual growth (Canby et al., 2024; Yaden et al., 2017; Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). In addition to these individual benefits, STEs can promote altruism and contribute to broader social cohesion (Yaden et al., 2017; Van Cappellen et al., 2016). STEs are also employed in therapeutic settings to improve mental health, reduce anxiety and foster resilience (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015; Yaden et al., 2017). For instance, mindfulness practices and meditative techniques, which often induce STEs, significantly enhance psychological well-being (Canby et al., 2024; Van Cappellen & Rimé, 2013). These experiences occur across diverse contexts, including spiritual, religious, and secular domains, such as rituals, group festivities, nature immersion, moments of crisis and intentional spiritual seeking (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015).

A thorough understanding of how STEs manifest across religious and spiritual contexts seems to be essential for unveiling their psychological and societal implications. In many Western societies, spirituality is evolving while traditional religiosity declines (Van Niekerk, 2018; Zinnbauer et al., 2015). This shift raises critical questions about the nature of STEs, their manifestations in religious and spiritual contexts and their broader implications. Following this trend, focusing primarily on secular spiritual experiences risks overlooking the unique characteristics of STEs in religious contexts, which are essential for enriching both theoretical and practical applications of STE research. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for studying STEs across contexts, as these subjective experiences are best explored through personal narratives (Kitson et al., 2020; Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). Although prior reviews have examined the measurement of STEs (Kitson et al., 2020) and their phenomenological varieties (Yaden et al., 2017), no systematic qualitative review has synthesized their distinct characteristics and manifestations across religious and spiritual contexts.

### **Defining Self-Transcendent Experiences**

Beyond this, defining STEs remains challenging, as they are predominantly defined as profound subjective experiences involving self-loss and connectedness with a larger whole

(Yaden et al., 2017; Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015; Canby et al., 2024; Kitson et al., 2020). First, STEs encompass a wide variety of phenomena (Canby et al., 2024; Yaden et al., 2017). In these experiences, duration and intensity vary, ranging from fleeting moments to ongoing life-altering events (Yaden et al., 2017; Waldron, 1998). STEs often evoke feelings of oneness and awe, fostering personal growth. They can emerge across diverse contexts, such as during meditation, religious rituals, and nature immersion, or may also arise spontaneously (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). Another challenge in conceptualizing STEs lies in the lack of standardized terminology. Terms such as selflessness and ego dissolution are often used interchangeably, yet their precise definitions remain inconsistent (Canby et al., 2024). Moreover, research on STEs often depends on self-reports or artificially induced experiences, such as meditation or psychedelics, which may not fully capture their lived complexity (Kitson et al., 2020). To address these limitations, an integrative framework that incorporates both phenomenological and contextual insights might be relevant (Canby et al., 2024; Kitson et al., 2020).

Several frameworks for understanding STEs have been proposed (Canby et al., 2024; Yaden et al., 2017; Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). While Yaden et al. (2017) emphasize the phenomenological varieties of STEs, Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015) additionally focus on contextual triggers and outcomes and Canby et al. (2024) highlight the multidimensionality of self-loss and the dissolution of its boundaries. Given the complexity of STEs, integrating these models allows for a more comprehensive understanding of their characteristics across contexts. First, Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015) emphasize specific triggers, such as mindfulness, religious rituals, nature immersion and psychoactive substances. They also describe key phenomenological characteristics, including somatic manifestation (shivering, physical connectedness), perceptual alterations (timelessness, egolessness) and cognitive-affective shifts (omniscience, positive affect, openness). Immediate and long-lasting effects, such as improved well-being, reduced anxiety and an expanded self-concept, are also implied (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). Second, Yaden et al. (2017) distinguish between annihilation (loss of self-boundaries) and relation (connectedness to others and the environment). Lastly, Canby et al. (2024) highlight that self-loss and the dissolution of its' boundaries are multifaceted, calling for more nuanced differentiation between its subtypes. By integrating these perspectives, the current study acknowledges the phenomenological, contextual and multidimensional aspects of STEs, ensuring a nuanced conceptualization of these experiences.

### **Self-Transcendent Experiences in Religious and Spiritual Contexts**

Understanding the differences between STEs in religious and spiritual contexts requires recognizing that both reflect beliefs and practices related to the transcendent, yet they are often considered distinct aspects of human experience (Van Niekerk, 2018; Worthington et al., 2011; Zinnbauer et al., 2015). In the current study, religion refers to organized systems of belief and practices focused on worshipping one or more deities. It emphasizes adherence to formal doctrines and participation in institutional rituals, which foster a sense of community, particularly within marginalized groups (da Cunha et al., 2024; Van Niekerk, 2018; Worthington et al., 2011). This structured, communal nature provides a shared foundation through traditions and rituals. Religious experiences often centre on doctrines and moral duties, offering a clear worldview (Hyland et al., 2010; Van Cappellen & Rimé, 2013). These beliefs are typically associated with emotions stemming from encounters with the divine, reflecting a profound sense of divine power, kindness, and transcendence (Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012). In the current study, "the divine" refers to anything related to a deity for example divine beings such as angels, or divine forces.

In contrast, spirituality refers to personal and subjective experiences of the sacred (Van Niekerk, 2018; Zinnbauer et al., 2015), and in some cultures, it may occur without a deity (Zhang et al., 2024). Spirituality often involves nontraditional concepts, such as nature or a sense of interconnectedness, fostering personal meaning-making and self-reflection without the necessity of organized institutions. Practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and immersion in nature promote inner peace and a sense of connection to the universe (Zhang et al., 2024; Zhang & Ueda, 2023). Spiritual experiences typically focus on feelings of serenity, wonder, and empowerment, often triggered by awe-inspiring natural events (Fredrickson, 2010; Piff et al., 2015). This emphasis on personal transcendence allows for a deeper exploration of life's meaning and connections to the sacred (da Cunha et al., 2024; Hyland et al., 2010; Worthington et al., 2011).

As a result, STEs may manifest differently depending on whether they occur in religious or spiritual contexts. While both contexts share certain transcendental qualities, religious STEs may be more communal and structured, embedded in rituals and worship, whereas spiritual STEs tend to be more personal and individually experienced. This study aims to examine the characteristics of STEs and their manifestations across religious and spiritual contexts. The study conducts a systematic qualitative review, facilitating a nuanced exploration of these subjective experiences while ensuring consistency, transparency, and trustworthiness in the findings (Sutton et al., 2019; Buttler et al., 2016).

## **Method**

This qualitative review was performed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Appendix A) to ensure comprehensive and transparent reporting (Page et al., 2021).

### **Search Strategy**

The review's search string focused on keywords related to STEs as described in literature. The search string was: ("transcend\* experience" OR "self-transcend\* experience" OR "spiritual transformation" OR "altered consciousness" OR "flow experience" OR "mystic\* experience" OR "numinous experience" OR "peak experience") AND ("spirit\*" OR "religi\*") AND (qualitative\* OR "interview\*" OR "focus group\*" OR "thematic analysis" OR "content analysis" OR "phenomenological" OR "ethnographic" OR "grounded theory" OR "case study" OR "narrative analysis" OR "discourse analysis" OR "participatory research" OR "field study" OR "observational study" OR "qualitative methods") aiming to contextualize STEs within spiritual and religious frameworks. This strategy was applied across Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycInfo databases, querying search terms in abstracts, titles, and keywords fields.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

This review applied specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure thorough coverage of relevant literature. The review included peer-reviewed articles and PhD dissertations focusing on adults who have experienced STEs within a spiritual or religious context. Articles in the context of spirituality or religion including transcendence of physical or mental illness or religious conversion, were also considered eligible. The review excluded non-qualitative studies, non-English studies, mixed-method studies, and non-peer-reviewed articles, except for PhD dissertations, which provide a detailed and in-depth account of individual STEs. Studies with children under 18 were excluded because their developmental stage may shape the way they perceive STEs differently, making them a distinct group for future research. Additionally, studies that did not specifically address STEs or for instance focus solely on personal healing, transformation, religion, or spirituality without transcendence, were excluded. Furthermore, studies that emphasized connection with the self rather than with something beyond the self were also excluded.

### **Study Selection and Data Extraction**

The study selection followed a systematic approach based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. In July 2024, searches were conducted across three major databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycInfo. Retrieved articles were imported into Covidence

(Veritas Health Innovation, 2024), a web-based platform designed to facilitate collaboration and streamline systematic and literature review processes. Covidence automatically identified and removed duplicates. The remaining articles were then screened based on their titles and abstracts, applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles that met these criteria underwent a full-text review, with final eligibility determined using the same predefined criteria. The screening process was conducted by a single reviewer. Following the study selection process, data was extracted by the reviewer. The following data was extracted: year of publication, country of origin, method of analysis, sample characteristics including age, sample size, demographics and key findings.

### **Quality Assessment**

The quality assessment of the included studies was conducted using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP, 2018), a structured tool designed to evaluate the methodological rigor of qualitative research (Appendix B and Appendix C). This framework considers key criteria, including the clarity of research aims, the appropriateness of the methodology and design, recruitment strategies, data collection and analysis procedures and the transparency of reported findings. The CASP tool comprises ten questions, each rated as "yes," "can't tell," or "no." For example, one question assesses whether the study presents a clear statement of its research aims, considering its objectives, significance, and relevance (CASP, 2018).

### **Synthesis of results**

Thematic analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti 24 for Windows, coding key themes from the results sections of eligible studies (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2024). Thematic Analysis (TA) was chosen for its flexibility in identifying patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given the subjective nature of STes, TA enables a detailed exploration of their manifestations in religious and spiritual contexts. It allows for an inductive approach to uncover key themes, while still being flexible in its theoretical application. The six-step process familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report, outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) ensured methodological rigor and transparency. During step 1, familiarization with the data, guidelines for coding religious and spiritual themes were created (Appendix D). Additionally, AI-assisted coding via OpenAI's ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) was used to enhance consistency in thematic analysis. AI-assisted coding flagged ambiguous cases, ensuring consistency while preserving interpretative depth. As AI lacks contextual understanding of religious and spiritual nuances, final coding decisions were



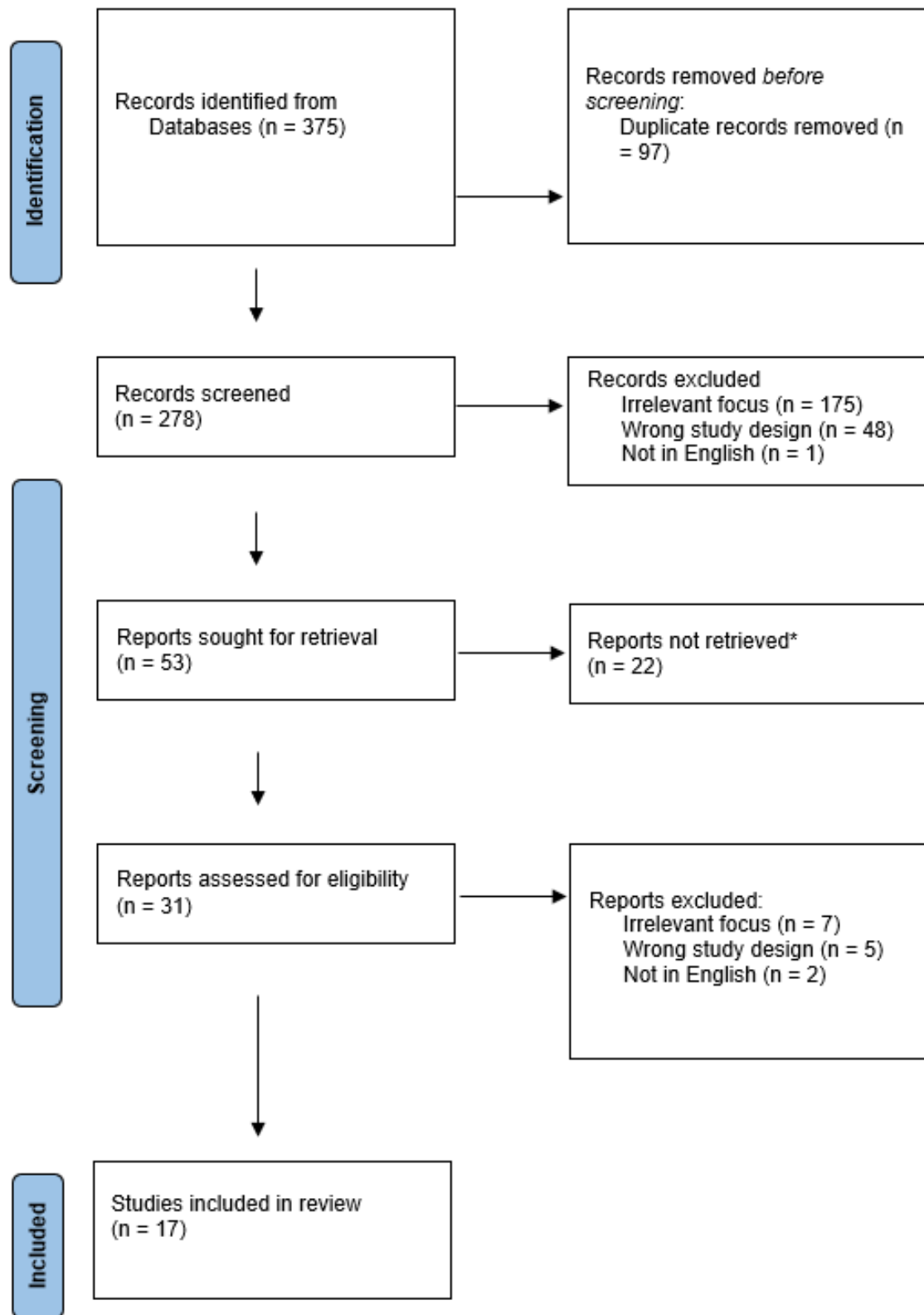
human-driven, guided by the study's coding framework (Appendix D) and relevant literature. Hybrid coding approaches improve reliability by maintaining coder consistency while preserving contextual nuances through human judgment (Jalali & Akhavan, 2024; Perkins & Roe, 2024).

## Results

After a rigorous selection process, 17 studies were included in the final review, representing a range of religious affiliations and contexts. Most studies integrated both religious and spiritual perspectives. Initially, 375 articles were identified through database searches. Following the study selection process outlined in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1), 17 studies were deemed eligible (Table 1). Several excluded articles were PhD dissertations that could not be retrieved, but five published PhD dissertations were included. Table 1 provides an overview of the included studies. Notably, only a small proportion focused exclusively on spiritual ( $n = 4$ ) or religious ( $n = 4$ ) contexts, while the majority ( $n = 11$ ) integrated both. Christianity was the most frequently represented affiliation ( $n = 6$ ), followed by Buddhism ( $n = 4$ ), with Taoism, Islam, and Hinduism each represented in two studies. The quality of the included studies was generally high, with eight to nine "yes" responses out of ten for the CASP questions. One study rated as moderate (seven "yes" responses) and one as low quality (four "yes" responses) were included due to their detailed information on altered states of consciousness in STEs (see Table 1 and Appendix C).

## Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis revealed five primary themes (Table 2): acceptance of existentiality and transformation, cognitive-affective shifts, connectedness and oneness, guidance and protection, and perceptual shifts. These themes, along with their respective sub-themes, capture the core elements of STEs identified across religious and spiritual contexts. A comprehensive overview of the themes and sub-themes, including the studies in which they appear, is provided in Appendix E. Prior to the thematic analysis, examples of STEs within both religious and spiritual contexts are represented. These examples are illustrative of the broader findings detailed in this review, capturing the essence of STEs in religious and spiritual contexts. In a religious context, an Indonesian practitioner of dhikr, an Islamic practice involving the repetition of prayers or divine names, describes his STE. This practice is intended to enhance spiritual awareness and deepen the individual's connection with the divine (Trimulyaningsih et al., 2024).

**Figure 1***PRISMA Flow chart of the identification and eligibility of literature*

*Note:* Adapted from Page et al. (2021) \* Most of the articles that could not be retrieved were PhD dissertations, which were either inaccessible or unavailable for review.

**Table 1***Extracted data from eligible studies*

Study	Method	Participants	Country	Context	Key findings	Quality <i>f</i> (yes)
Bideci and Bideci (2021)	Semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis.	44 Participants: 22 males, 22 females. Age range 25 -60. Religious affiliations: Mainly Christians, predominantly from the Catholic sect (30%).	England	Religion and spirituality	Visitors to Virgin Mary House (VMH) reported numinous experiences, a variety of STE characterized by Otto's dimensions of mysterium, tremendum et fascinans. These experiences were marked by a profound sense of connection, encompassing seven key dimensions: history, story, atmosphere, awe, reverence, place-based elements, and nature-based elements. The findings highlight the ability of VMH to evoke transcendence and spiritual reflection, regardless of the visitors' religious affiliation or lack thereof.	8
Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)	Narrative interviews. Thematic analysis.	74 Psychology students from Warsaw and Poznan. Age range 21-54.	Poland	Religion and spirituality	Narratives revealed four STE-related themes: awareness of divine presence and guidance, peak experiences (ecstasy, transcendence), oneness with nature, and closeness to deceased loved ones. These findings highlight the transformative potential of spirituality beyond formal religious framework	7

Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010)	Semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis.	11 Female stroke survivors. Age range from 45 to 81. Religious affiliations: No specific religious or spiritual affiliation (n=3), Eastern philosophies Buddhism, Taoism, and ancestor worship (n=4), Protestant (n=3), Catholic (n=1).	China	Religion and spirituality	Spirituality facilitated coping and transformation in stroke survivors. Participants moved from spiritual distress to ongoing transcendence, finding meaning through personal spiritual and religious beliefs, cultural values, and support systems. Themes include resilience, inner growth, and transcendence of personal suffering.	8
(Devi & Fong, 2019)	Semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis.	28 Women. Age Range 28 -64. Religious affiliations: Christianity (n=7), Taoism (n=2), Islam (n=10), Hinduism (n=7), Buddhism (n=2).	Singapore	Religion and spirituality	Spiritual experiences during breast cancer recovery involved a transcendence of the self, deepened divine connection, and acceptance through cultural frameworks. Cultural beliefs framed illness as part of a larger spiritual journey, promoting acceptance and resilience. This process, marked by self-loss and surrender to a higher power, contributed to emotional healing and a transformative shift in meaning-making.	9
Everist (2016)	Semi-structured interviews.	6 Female certified mediums. Religious affiliations: Spiritual but not religious (n=5).	USA	Spirituality	Mediumistic abilities involving self-loss and the dissolution of its boundaries, sometimes at first seen as pathological, were linked to transformative spiritual	9

	Thematic analysis.				experiences encompassing guidance from spirit guides and profound inner growth. Themes include self-loss, spiritual awakening, and coping with extraordinary phenomena, highlighting STE-related processes.	
Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)	Semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis.	15 Participants: (9 males, 6 females. Aged range 28 – 69. Religious affiliations: Christianity (n = 6), Buddhism (n = 4), Hinduism (n = 3), Neopaganism (n = 3), Spiritual but not religious (n = 3), and Judaism (n = 1).	USA	Religion and spirituality	STEs were described as universal perceptual shifts (timelessness, boundlessness), somatic sensations, and cognitive-affective changes. Outcomes included reduced anxiety, positive affect, and shifts in self-concept and values, emphasizing their transformative potential across various contexts.	8
Iqbal et al. (2019)	Semi-structured interview. Interpretative phenomenological analysis.	1 French, Buddhist woman, age 76.	Spain	Religion and spirituality	Conversion from Judaism to Buddhism encompassed profound spiritual transformation, identity shifts, and integration of new beliefs involving self-loss and the dissolution of its boundaries. This process reflected themes like transcendence, oneness, and worldview changes, demonstrating STE dimensions.	8
Jilek (1982)	Observations	Participants of North American Indian ceremonials (the Sun Dance of the Plains culture area	USA	Religion	Indigenous rituals induced altered states of consciousness involving self-loss and its boundaries through fasting, sensory stimulation, and physical exertion, facilitating	4

		and the Salish Spirit Dance of the Northwest Coast culture area).			transcendent experiences that emphasized oneness, the transcendence of pain, and heightened sensory awareness.	
Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2019)	Semi-structured interviews. Grounded theory.	74 Medical doctors: spiritist doctors (n=28), spiritual doctors (n=22), religious doctors (n=21), not spiritual doctors (n=3). Age range 33-83.	Puerto Rico	Religion and spirituality	Transformative experiences involving self-loss and its boundaries among doctors were often triggered by trauma, illness, or near-death experiences, leading to spiritual integration in medical practice. Themes include self-transcendence, moral alignment, and the integration of spirituality with professional roles.	8
Medgyesi (2021)	Semi-structured interviews. Interpretative phenomenologic al analysis.	4 Participants: 3 female, 1 male. Age range 35-71. Religious affiliations: Christianity.	USA	Religion and spirituality	Numinous experiences, a variety of STE, led to profound changes in worldview, relationships, and identity. Participants described increased humility and connection to others, but also isolation and judgment, reflecting both the healing and challenging aspects of STEs.	8
Nicholson (2017)	Semi-structured interviews. Phenomenologic al reduction.	6 Bereaved parents: 5 females, 1 male. Age range 40 – 65. Religious affiliations: Christian (n = 2), Baptist (n = 1), Catholic (n = 1), Jewish (n = 1). Spiritual but not affiliated	USA	Religion and spirituality	Numinous dreams, where the sense of self and its boundaries is lost, of deceased children facilitated a sense of transcendence, providing a pathway to spiritual continuity beyond the loss, exemplifying how STEs can support individuals in navigating existential challenges. Enhanced empathy, emotional catharsis, connection to the sacred, and existential meaning-making emerged	9

		with a specific belief system (n = 1).			within these dreams, aiding grief processing and enhancing spiritual awareness.	
Rahtz et al. (2021)	Semi-structured interviews.  Thematic analysis	67 Pilgrims, volunteers (including teenaged school students), healthcare professionals, members of the clergy and family members travelling with assisted pilgrims  Age range 15-87 (under 18 n=20).	England	Religion	Lourdes pilgrims described transcendent experiences of divine closeness and emotional release. Themes included unity, deepened faith, and therapeutic benefits, with the Grotto as a central site for connection. Key themes involved communication with the divine, physical closeness to the sacred, and profound, inexplicable feelings, leading to transformative changes in belief and emotional healing.	8
Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)	Phenomenological interviews.  Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.	10 Sufi practitioners: 7 male, 3 female. Age range 38-62.  Religious affiliations: Islam.	Indonesia	Religion	Sufi practices facilitated spiritual transformation toward achieving "nafs al-muṭma'innah" (higher self). Themes included transcendence of the lower self, inner peace, surrender to God, and moral	9

					refinement, illustrating deep religious STE.	
Williamson and Hood (2011)	Phenomenological interviews. Thematic analysis.	8 Residents of the Lazarus Project. Age range 23-42. Religious affiliations: 3 Baptists (n=2), Pentecostals (n=2), Episcopalian (n=1), Methodist (n=1), no religion (n=1).	USA	Religion	Spirit Baptism (SB) during Lazarus Project retreats was described as an embodied experience, marked by emotional highs, physical sensations, and a deep sense of divine connection. Key themes included personal growth, spiritual transformation, and recovery from addiction, reflecting STE encompassing transcendence and unity, characterized by a loss of self-boundaries.	8
Wood (2010)	Intuitive inquiry. Thematic analysis	12 Participants: 6 males, 6 females. Age range 30-75. Religious/spiritual affiliations: Buddhist (n=3), other (n=4), none (n=5).	USA	Spirituality	Wilderness rites of passage facilitated psycho-spiritual transformation through a deep connection with nature, reflecting the archetypal hero's journey. Themes such as self-awareness, authenticity, and serenity were central, with participants experiencing a sense of self-loss and boundary dissolution, illustrating how nature fosters STE through personal transformation and transcendence regardless of religious affiliation.	8
Zhang et al. (2024)	User generated content analysis.	139 Chinese Camino travellers: 90 female, 49 male. Age range	China.	Spirituality	Camino journeys facilitated spiritual transformation through embodied engagement and liminality, promoting self-loss and boundary dissolution. Themes of existential	8



	Thematic analysis.	30-60. Religious affiliation: No religion (90%), Christian (6%).			connection, balance, and openness to spirituality reflected shifts in self-identity and a connection to something greater, regardless of religious affiliation or absence thereof.	
Zimmermann (2012)	Semi-structured interviews. Narrative analysis	10 Female childhood abuse victims. Age range 35-67. Religious affiliation: three identified as Buddhism (n=3), other (n=4), no religion (n=3).	USA	Spirituality	Women described intertwined processes of trauma healing and spiritual awakening as STEs, where trauma was reframed through transcendent encounters and connections. Key themes included transformation through relationships (both human and spiritual) and self-actualization, highlighting the dissolution of boundaries and a sense of oneness, central to the experience of STEs.	9

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**Table 2***Summary of themes, sub-themes and prevalence across the contexts of religion and spirituality*

Theme	Sub-theme	Religion <i>f</i> (%)	Spirituality <i>f</i> (%)	Total <i>f</i> (%)
Acceptance of Existentiality and Transformation	Acceptance of divine mystery or God's plan	5 (29.41)	-	5 (29.41)
	Connecting to collective beliefs	7 (41.18)	-	7 (41.18)
	Experiencing salvation	6 (35.29)	-	6 (35.29)
	Deepening of faith	8 (47.06)	-	8 (47.06)
	Acceptance of mystery and the unknown	-	7 (41.18)	7 (41.18)
	Embracing the present and personal growth	-	8 (47.06)	8 (47.06)
	Openness to mystery and inner wisdom	-	4 (23.53)	4 (23.53)
	Transformation through self-discovery	-	11 (64.71)	11 (64.71)
	Total <i>f</i> (%)	10 (58.82)	12 (70.59)	16 (94.12)
Cognitive-affective shifts	Catharsis	5 (29.41)	5 (29.41)	10 (58.82)
	Emotional resonance to divine	7 (41.18)	-	7 (41.18)
	Emotional resonance to nature and cosmos	-	4 (23.53)	4 (23.53)
	Expansion of affect	6 (35.29)	7 (41.18)	11 (64.71)
	Expansion of awareness	4 (23.53)	6 (35.29)	10 (58.82)
	Shifts in identity and sense of self	5 (29.41)	6 (35.29)	11 (64.71)
	Total <i>f</i> (%)	9 (52.94)	10 (58.82)	15 (88.24)
Connectedness and oneness	Connection across time	4 (23.53)	3 (17.65)	6 (35.29)
	Connection to others and collectivity	7 (41.18)	1 (5.88)	7 (41.18)
	Connection to the divine	11 (64.71)	-	11 (64.71)
	Oneness with creation	3 (17.65)	-	3 (17.65)
	Connection to nature and the world	-	9 (52.94)	9 (52.94)
	Oneness with cosmos	-	10 (58.82)	10 (58.82)
	Total <i>f</i> (%)	11 (64.71)	11 (64.71)	17 (100)
Guidance and protection	Communication with the divine	5 (29.41)	-	5 (29.41)
	Guidance by the divine	6 (35.29)	-	6 (35.29)

Perceptual shifts	Protection by the divine	4 (23.53)	-	4 (23.53)
	Communication with the cosmos and spiritual entities	-	2 (11.77)	2 (11.77)
	Guidance by the cosmos and spiritual entities	-	6 (35.29)	6 (35.29)
	Protection by the cosmos and spiritual entities	-	4 (23.53)	4 (23.53)
	Total <i>f</i> (%)	9 (52.94)	6 (35.29)	13 (76.47)
	Altered perception	8 (47.06)	7 (41.18)	14 (82.35)
	Heightened sensory awareness	6 (35.29)	6 (35.29)	11 (64.71)
	Sense of timelessness or boundlessness	1 (5.88)	6 (35.29)	7 (41.18)
	Somatic manifestations	4 (23.53)	4 (23.53)	6 (35.29)
	Total <i>f</i> (%)	9 (52.94)	9 (52.94)	17 (100)

*Note:* (f) Represents the number of unique studies in which each theme or sub-theme appears. A study is counted only once for each theme, even if it reports multiple sub-themes related to that theme.

Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024) describe an experience in which one of the participants, TT1, shared:

TT1 said that while he was doing dhikr one day, he felt he had entered another world that he called as the afterlife. He described the place as being empty and bright. At that time, he only remembered Allah. This experience was interpreted as the first stage of death, and it led to many changes in TT1's life. One time, TT1 felt a great happiness without knowing why. He felt a deep meaning in life after understanding about his life's duties as a Qur'an teacher and community educator (p.4).

In the spiritual context, Zhang et al. (2024) describe STEs of Chinese travellers on the Camino de Santiago as following:

'At some moments on the Camino, I felt as if I had turned into a grass, a tree, a stone, a pile of dirt... totally integrated with nature while quietly watching this secular world.' (#95) 'It's like treasure-hunting in nature, full of happy surprises and admiration: the green fields, the yellow flowers, the furry sheep, the curious horses. When feeling tired, we sat under the clear blue sky, listening to the birds singing, and smelling the fragrance of the trees. What is a mobile phone? Where are my worries?

The ego that's often magnified in the cities has disappeared without a trace. On the Camino, I forgot myself but also reclaimed myself.' (#123) (p.128).

### **Theme 1: Acceptance of Existentiality and Transformation**

The theme of acceptance of existentiality and transformation encompasses fundamental aspects of human existence, including mortality, suffering, mystery and the unknown. While present in both religious and spiritual contexts, it is more prominent in spiritual STEs. Additionally, while STEs in both contexts facilitate existential meaning-making, acceptance, and transformation, their pathways differ. In religious experiences, acceptance of divine mystery, connection to collective beliefs, experiences of salvation, and deepening faith are central. For instance, a dying priest's engagement with divine mystery during pilgrimage to Lourdes. The priest embraced 'knowing' death and meeting God, exemplifying acceptance of death as part of a divine plan (Rahtz et al., 2021). Similarly, the Indonesian practitioner of dhikr described above experiences an afterlife vision, reflecting a deepened connection to collective Islamic beliefs (Trimulyaningsih et al., 2024). Additionally, STEs during Spirit Baptism signify salvation through spiritual rebirth (Williamson & Hood, 2011), though this interpretation of salvation extends beyond Christian paradigms to encompass solace, comfort, and transcendence from suffering. This broader understanding of salvation allows individuals to find peace and meaning through their connection to the divine. Furthermore, religious rituals and sacred spaces can evoke STEs and deepen faith, as demonstrated by an atheist Chinese pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago, who undergoes a profound shift in worldview (Bideci & Bideci, 2021; Zhang et al., 2024).

In spiritual contexts, the focus of STEs appears oriented toward personal transformation (Medgyesi, 2021; Everist, 2016; Zimmermann, 2012). Subthemes include acceptance of mystery and the unknown, embracing the present and personal growth, openness to mystery and inner wisdom, and transformation through self-discovery. The same Chinese pilgrim, for example, not only deepens his faith through Camino rituals but also undergoes personal growth by acceptance of mystery and the unknown, illustrating the potential overlap of religious and spiritual themes within a single STE (Zhang et al., 2024). Furthermore, in spiritual contexts, individuals embrace existential uncertainty as a path to self-awareness. One participant explicitly states, "surrendering to the I Don't Know" (Medgyesi, 2021, p.182), signifying an openness to the unknown. Personal meaning-making and transformation also emerge through engagement with the present, inner wisdom, and self-discovery. For instance, a climber experiencing a STE during rites of passage in nature learns

to release past burdens and embrace the present moment (Wood, 2010). Similarly, a Buddhist convert undergoes a profound self-discovery process, aligning with values of love, compassion, and peace (Iqbal et al., 2019).

### **Theme 2: Cognitive-Affective Shifts**

Cognitive and affective shifts involve profound changes in thought processes and emotions (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). This theme is represented equally across both religious and spiritual contexts, though emotional resonance varies between the two. Emotional resonance refers to a deep emotional connection, which is often linked to the divine in religious contexts. For example, individuals may report feeling connected to the Virgin Mary, evoking humility and a sense of smallness (Bideci & Bideci, 2021; Rahtz et al., 2021). In contrast, spiritual contexts tend to emphasize emotional resonance with nature (Zhang et al., 2024; Boczkowska & Zięba, 2016), as seen when individuals experience bliss and oneness with nature while engaging in existential reflection during rites of passage (Wood, 2010). While these transformative shifts are often preceded by discomfort or emotional vulnerability, particularly during STEs in spiritual contexts, they generally culminate in resolution or insight (Koss-Chioino & Soto-Espinosa, 2019; Zimmermann, 2012; Chow & Nelson-Becker, 2010). Discomfort and emotional vulnerability can also serve as catalysts for religious STEs, but emotional stability is more commonly reported in these contexts, often supported by sacred spaces and collective rituals, such as Spirit Baptism (Zhang et al., 2024; Rahtz et al., 2021; Williamson & Hood, 2011).

Additional subthemes, such as catharsis, expansion of affect, expansion of awareness, and shifts in identity and self-concept, manifest similarly in both contexts. Catharsis, defined as the emotional release of inner struggles, plays a pivotal role in facilitating personal growth and transformation (Williamson & Hood, 2011; Zhang et al., 2024). The expansion of affect, which is characterized by intense emotions such as awe, love, and joy (Williamson & Hood, 2011; Zimmermann, 2012), often follows catharsis and leads to transformative insights. Expansion of awareness refers to broadening one's understanding of religious or spiritual intuition, beliefs, and worldviews (Zhang et al., 2024; Bideci & Bideci, 2021; Koss-Chioino & Soto-Espinosa, 2019; Everist, 2016). Shifts in identity and self-concept, frequently linked to self-loss, reflect profound changes in personal identity. These shifts can include feeling directly connected to a higher power (Medgyesi, 2021) or reevaluating one's identity following a STE (Koss-Chioino & Soto-Espinosa, 2019; Everist, 2016).

### **Theme 3: Connectedness and Oneness**

Connectedness and oneness involve deep interconnection with others, nature, or a

greater cosmic force, fostering peace and transcendence (Rahtz et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). This theme appears equally in religious and spiritual STEs but with different emphases. In religious contexts, experiences of connection to the divine and oneness with creation are central. For example, participants may feel a profound connection to a divine presence, as evidenced by the STEs of individuals engaged in religious practices (Bideci & Bideci, 2021; Rahtz et al., 2021). One instance is an Indonesian practitioner of *dhikr*, who experiences spiritual clarity and purpose while feeling connected to Allah (Trimulyaningsih et al., 2024). Additionally, religious experiences often emphasize connection to others, particularly through shared rituals and sacred spaces (Zhang et al., 2024; Bideci & Bideci, 2021; Rahtz et al., 2021). For instance, a Buddhist visitor to the Virgin Mary House reports feeling a sense of collective bonding with fellow visitors, despite differing beliefs (Bideci & Bideci, 2021). Religious contexts also highlight connections across time, with participants feeling linked to historical figures or ancestors. For example, some individuals experience a sense of connection to the Virgin Mary and to ancestors who lived during her time (Bideci & Bideci, 2021).

In contrast, spiritual experiences often emphasize connection with nature and oneness with the cosmos (Boczkowska & Zięba, 2016; Wood, 2010). One participant, for instance, finds solace in the natural cycles of life while walking in the forest, recognizing her role in the larger cosmic oneness (Boczkowska & Zięba, 2016). Furthermore, connection to others in spiritual contexts tends to be more relational, as observed in cases where individuals find transcendence through personal relationships (Chow & Nelson-Becker, 2010). An example of this is the STE of a stroke survivor who discovers a renewed sense of purpose through family connections (Chow & Nelson-Becker, 2010). Spiritual STEs of connection across time often involve deceased loved ones, with individuals maintaining bonds through dreams or spiritual encounters (Boczkowska & Zięba, 2016; Everist, 2016; Nicholson, 2017). For instance, bereaved parents may experience visitation dreams of their deceased children, preserving a connection that transcends time (Nicholson, 2017).

#### **Theme 4: Guidance and Protection**

Guidance and protection in STEs involve interactions with spiritual or cosmic forces that offer support, direction, and security. This theme is more prominently represented in religious contexts. In religious settings, these experiences often entail communication, guidance, and protection from a divine source, which help individuals navigate life's challenges (Boczkowska & Zięba, 2016; Devi & Fong, 2019; Trimulyaningsih et al., 2024). For instance, Polish students report STEs in which they perceive God's intervention during

critical moments, such as receiving intuitive warnings that guided them to avoid harm (Boczkowska & Zięba, 2016). Similarly, individuals describe STEs of how speaking directly to God during prayer provides reassurance, reinforcing trust in divine guidance: “When I speak to him, I can feel him, like he is near me... hearing me. It gives me hope and the strength to move on” (Devi & Fong, 2019, p. 147).

In spiritual contexts, communication, guidance, and protection often manifest through interactions with nature, spiritual entities, or the cosmos (Nicholson, 2017; Everist, 2016; Wood, 2010). Individuals participating in wilderness rites, for example, describe receiving guidance from natural elements. One participant, Spider Woman, felt a sense of purpose from the wind and a tarantula, which conveyed that she had “a job to do and a purpose to fulfil” (Wood, 2010, p. 134). Additionally, mediums report being guided by ghosts or spirit guides, with some for instance assisting in solving crimes (Everist, 2016). Communication with spiritual entities is also a prominent source of guidance and support in spiritual contexts. Bereaved parents, for instance, have reported receiving comforting messages from deceased children, offering reassurance of continued presence and protection (Nicholson, 2017).

### **Theme 5: Perceptual Shifts**

Perceptual shifts in STEs involve changes in sensory perception and a sense of timelessness or boundlessness. This theme appears to be equally represented across both religious and spiritual contexts. These shifts involve altered perceptions, heightened sensory awareness, timelessness, boundlessness, and somatic manifestations as subthemes (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). While the core features of these shifts are shared across contexts, their interpretations and manifestations differ. In religious contexts, altered perception is often described as an encounter with the divine. Individuals report heightened sensory awareness, such as feeling an overwhelming presence of God or sensing the closeness of the Virgin Mary (Rahtz et al., 2021; Williamson & Hood, 2011). Additionally, religious experiences frequently involve a merging of past and present, creating a sense of eternity. For example, individuals may feel connected to historical religious figures during pilgrimages (Bideci & Bideci, 2021). Somatic manifestations in religious contexts, such as speaking in tongues, are often interpreted as evidence of divine connection (Williamson & Hood, 2011).

In spiritual contexts, perceptual shifts similarly involve altered sensory experiences but are often framed in terms of energy, light, or oneness with the cosmos (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015; Koss-Chioino & Soto-Espinosa, 2019). Participants describe dissolving physical boundaries, merging with energy fields, or experiencing an overwhelming sensation of light (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). Timelessness and boundlessness are commonly reported, with

individuals feeling as though their consciousness extends beyond ordinary temporal constraints, fostering a profound sense of expansiveness (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). Somatic experiences, such as sensations of energy flowing through the body, further emphasize the transformative nature of these experiences. For instance, some participants report light radiating from chakras during intimate encounters (Boczkowska & Zięba, 2016). These perceptual shifts enable individuals to transcend ordinary sensory and temporal boundaries, fostering a deeper sense of connection, transformation, and self-transcendence.

### **Discussion**

This qualitative review systematically highlights the characteristics of STEs, their manifestations in religious and spiritual contexts and broader implications. The review identifies five core themes: acceptance of existentiality and transformation, cognitive-affective shifts, connectedness and oneness, guidance and protection, and perceptual shifts. These themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of STEs and their varied expressions across different contexts. Each theme reflects the dynamic interplay between individual and collective aspects of transcendence, as well as the personal and contextual factors that influence the experience. The identification of both shared and divergent subthemes across religious and spiritual contexts further underscores the complexity of contextual specificity of STEs.

### **Comparative Analysis of Self-Transcendent Experiences in Religious and Spiritual Contexts**

While previous studies primarily described STEs through their phenomenological characteristics (Yaden et al., 2017) or contextual triggers and outcomes (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015), this study demonstrates that these experiences are deeply shaped by religious and spiritual contexts. Particularly in how self-loss, connectedness, and transformation unfold. Canby et al. (2024) discuss self-loss but do not differentiate its contextual manifestations. This review addresses this gap by showing that religious self-loss is marked by divine surrender, whereas spiritual self-loss emphasizes self-guided transformation. Similarly, religious connectedness is often framed in relation to divine relationships and collective traditions, while spiritual connectedness is centred on individualized, present-focused bonds with nature, the universe, or the self. Cognitive-affective shifts in STEs also differ across contexts. In spiritual STEs, emotional vulnerability, particularly fear and existential anxiety, often serves as a catalyst for personal transformation (Koss-Chioino & Soto-Espinosa, 2019; Everist, 2016; Chow & Nelson-Becker, 2010). In contrast, religious STEs are typically characterized by greater emotional stability, supported by rituals, community structures, and



collective meaning-making (Devi & Fong, 2019; Williamson & Hood, 2011). These emotional dynamics suggest that religious contexts provide security and emotional grounding, whereas spiritual contexts may encourage exploration of vulnerability and transformation.

Beyond the well-documented themes of self-loss, connectedness and the associated cognitive-affective and perceptual shifts, STEs appear to play a pivotal role in existential meaning-making, acceptance, and transformation. This role is particularly present within spiritual contexts. Additionally, these experiences often involve a perceived source of guidance and protection more prominently expressed in religious contexts. Further shaping how individuals integrate transcendence into their lives. While prior studies (Canby et al., 2024; Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015) acknowledge STEs' transformative aspects, Yaden et al. (2017) prioritize immediate phenomenological experiences like awe and oneness, placing less emphasis on existential meaning-making. This study highlights that existential meaning making and transformation is particularly central in spiritual STEs, where individuals engage in self-guided meaning-making and personal growth. In contrast, religious STEs tend to emphasize external guidance and established belief systems. The guidance and protection theme also provides a significant contribution by demonstrating that STEs are not only characterized by self-loss and connectedness but also by reliance on transcendent sources for meaning and security. This theme, more prevalent in religious STEs, underscores the role of divine communication and protection (Bideci & Bideci, 2021; Boczkowska & Zięba, 2016; Rahtz et al., 2021). In spiritual contexts, guidance is often attributed to nature, cosmic energies, or spiritual entities, reinforcing the relational aspect of STEs and reliance on transcendent sources for support (Everist, 2016; Nicholson, 2017; Wood, 2010).

In addition, the locus of control and agency in religious and spiritual STEs may vary. The variation in subthemes within the acceptance of existentiality and transformation theme suggests differences in locus of control and agency between religious and spiritual STEs. In religious contexts, transformation is often attributed to a higher power, reflecting an external locus of control, where experiences such as self-boundary dissolution and existential meaning-making are viewed as guided by divine will or mystery (Rahtz et al., 2021). In contrast, spiritual contexts emphasize personal actions and inner wisdom, where transformation is seen as self-initiated through practices like meditation or nature-based rituals, reflecting an internal locus of control and agency (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015; Wood, 2010; Bandura, 1989). However, for the guidance and protection theme, both contexts share an external locus of control, as individuals seek support from transcendent sources such as

divine power or nature, underscoring reliance on forces beyond the self (Nicholson, 2017; Everist, 2016; Williamson & Hood, 2011; Wood, 2010).

Moreover, the observed differences between STEs in religious and spiritual contexts suggest that the future landscape of STEs will likely be shaped by how these two forms of transcendence interact and evolve in response to broader cultural shifts. Spiritual STEs emphasize autonomy and self-guided transformation, with practices like meditation and nature-based rituals supporting personal growth and well-being (Zhang et al., 2024; Zimmermann, 2011). In contrast, religious STEs provide stability and emotional resilience through communal rituals, divine guidance, and shared meaning-making, particularly during times of crisis (Pargament, 2001; Pargament et al., 2005). As religiosity declines, the communal aspects of STEs may diminish, potentially leading to social isolation or challenges related to self-actualization. Aligning one's actual, ideal, and ought selves promotes well-being but requires the capacity for ongoing introspection (Fabian, 2020). For those struggling with this capacity, structured religious frameworks may provide essential guidance and stability. However, the flexibility of spirituality may enable new communal practices, such as group meditations, online spiritual communities or shared nature-based rituals, to emerge as alternative frameworks for collective transcendence (Pargament & Mahoney, 2017). Moreover, this review highlights that religious and spiritual STEs provide complementary pathways to well-being. These interpretations reflect Pargament and Mahoney's (2017) view of spirituality as the search for the sacred, where individuals navigate their personal paths to the sacred or existential meaning-making, potentially integrating established religious frameworks along the way.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This review provides a systematic and rigorous synthesis of qualitative studies on STEs in religious and spiritual contexts, offering valuable insights into their cognitive, emotional, and existential dimensions. The structured coding approach, guided by PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and employment of software such as Covidence (Veritas Health Innovation, 2024) and ATLAS.ti 24 for Windows (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2024) ensured methodological transparency and consistency. Moreover, although quality was not an explicit selection criterion, the final sample of included studies, primarily consisted of high-quality studies. This likely reflects that STEs have been extensively qualitatively studied within established research frameworks. Additionally, by making an explicit distinction (Appendix D) between religious and spiritual STEs, this study contributes conceptual clarity, refining existing theoretical frameworks and bridging gaps in

the literature. Although AI-assisted coding was secondary to human analysis. It helped flag ambiguous cases, reducing potential bias in categorizing religious versus spiritual experiences.

Despite its strengths and contributions, this review has several limitations. The studies in the final dataset are predominantly Western, with most participants identifying as Christian or atheist, which may limit the applicability of findings to non-Western religious and spiritual traditions. Furthermore, since study selection and coding were conducted by a single reviewer, inter-coder reliability was not established, introducing potential subjective bias. Moreover, the reviewer's background in the Christian tradition and a predominantly Western cultural context may have influenced the interpretation of religious and spiritual experiences. Additionally, the exclusion of non-English studies means that culturally specific conceptualizations of STEs may not be fully represented. Methodologically, most included studies had small sample sizes and relied on retrospective self-reports, which limits insights into the long-term context-dependent impact of these experiences. Furthermore, while the distinction between religious and spiritual STEs offers conceptual clarity, it may not fully capture the fluidity of how individuals experience STEs, particularly in secular contexts.

## **Conclusion**

STEs are increasingly recognized for their role in enhancing wellbeing and fostering prosocial behavior. These experiences, marked by self-loss and connectedness, support spiritual growth and meaning-making. This review adhered to PRISMA 2020 guidelines and utilized thematic analysis supported by AI-assisted coding. It systematically explored STEs across religious and spiritual contexts, identifying five core themes: acceptance of existentiality and transformation, cognitive-affective shifts, connectedness and oneness, guidance and protection, and perceptual shifts. The findings highlight both shared and divergent characteristics of STEs, with religious contexts emphasizing external loci of control, structured meaning-making, and existential security, often through divine relationships, while spiritual contexts focus on self-guided transformation and personal agency, but still rely on an external transcendent source to connect with. This study extends existing frameworks on STEs by introducing context-dependent variations of STEs and introducing guidance and protection as a critical, yet previously underexplored, theme.

While this review offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge limitations, such as the lack of inter-coder reliability and the predominance of Western, Christian, and English-language studies and therefore potential bias, which may affect generalizability. The reliance on retrospective self-reports of included studies also encompasses potential recall-

bias and limits the assessment of long-term effects. Future research should address these limitations and further explore underexamined aspects of STEs. Future research could further examine the role of guidance and protection in STEs. A specific focus on relational dimensions, such as divine or nature-based sources, may provide valuable insights into how these experiences support psychological integration and resilience during existential challenges and life transitions. Additionally, exploring hybrid spiritual practices, combining elements from different traditions and personal perspectives, could offer valuable insights on cultural variations and the personalized nature of transcendence. Understanding how individuals integrate diverse religious and spiritual frameworks would shed light on evolving, cross-cultural dynamics in STEs. As spirituality becomes more individualized, research should investigate the role of communal practices, such as group meditations or online spiritual communities, in fostering STEs. This would help assess whether emerging collective frameworks can replace traditional religious rituals and support both individual wellbeing and social cohesion. Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to explore the lasting effects of STEs on psychological resilience and personal growth. Tracking these experiences over time would provide insight into their context-dependent long-term impact on worldview, well-being and how they evolve in different religious, spiritual, and secular contexts.

In conclusion, this study situates its findings within the broader societal shift from traditional religiosity to individualized spirituality. STEs present opportunities for personal growth, but balancing individualized spirituality with communal practices will be essential to preserving collective well-being and social cohesion. This review emphasizes the importance of context in understanding STEs and provides a foundation for future research into their complex nature, with implications for psychological resilience, wellbeing, social cohesion, and spiritual development.

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## Appendix A

### Prisma Guidelines

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
TITLE			
Title	1	Identify the report as a systematic review.	p.1
ABSTRACT			
Abstract	2	See the PRISMA 2020 for Abstracts checklist.	p.3
INTRODUCTION			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of existing knowledge.	p.4 - 6
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the objective(s) or question(s) the review addresses.	p.4 - 6
METHODS			
Eligibility criteria	5	Specify the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review and how studies were grouped for the syntheses.	p.7
Information sources	6	Specify all databases, registers, websites, organisations, reference lists and other sources searched or consulted to identify studies. Specify the date when each source was last searched or consulted.	p.7 - 8
Search strategy	7	Present the full search strategies for all databases, registers and websites, including any filters and limits used.	p.7

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
Selection process	8	Specify the methods used to decide whether a study met the inclusion criteria of the review, including how many reviewers screened each record and each report retrieved, whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	p.7 - 9
Data collection process	9	Specify the methods used to collect data from reports, including how many reviewers collected data from each report, whether they worked independently, any processes for obtaining or confirming data from study investigators, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	p.8
Data items	10a	List and define all outcomes for which data were sought. Specify whether all results that were compatible with each outcome domain in each study were sought (e.g. for all measures, time points, analyses), and if not, the methods used to decide which results to collect.	p. 8 - 9, 11-16
	10b	List and define all other variables for which data were sought (e.g. participant and intervention characteristics, funding sources). Describe any assumptions made about any missing or unclear information.	p.8 - 9, 11-16
Study risk of bias assessment	11	Specify the methods used to assess risk of bias in the included studies, including details of the tool(s) used, how many reviewers assessed each study and whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	p.8 – 9, 34 - 41
Effect measures	12	Specify for each outcome the effect measure(s) (e.g. risk ratio, mean difference) used in the synthesis or presentation of results.	-
Synthesis methods	13a	Describe the processes used to decide which studies were eligible for each synthesis (e.g. tabulating the study intervention characteristics and comparing against the planned groups for each synthesis (item #5)).	p. 7 - 10

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
	13b	Describe any methods required to prepare the data for presentation or synthesis, such as handling of missing summary statistics, or data conversions.	p.7 - 10
	13c	Describe any methods used to tabulate or visually display results of individual studies and syntheses.	-
	13d	Describe any methods used to synthesize results and provide a rationale for the choice(s). If meta-analysis was performed, describe the model(s), method(s) to identify the presence and extent of statistical heterogeneity, and software package(s) used.	p.8
	13e	Describe any methods used to explore possible causes of heterogeneity among study results (e.g. subgroup analysis, meta-regression).	p.10
	13f	Describe any sensitivity analyses conducted to assess robustness of the synthesized results.	-
Reporting bias assessment	14	Describe any methods used to assess risk of bias due to missing results in a synthesis (arising from reporting biases).	-
Certainty assessment	15	Describe any methods used to assess certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for an outcome.	p.8, 34 - 41
RESULTS			
Study selection	16a	Describe the results of the search and selection process, from the number of records identified in the search to the number of studies included in the review, ideally using a flow diagram.	p.8 - 9
	16b	Cite studies that might appear to meet the inclusion criteria, but which were excluded, and explain why they were excluded.	p.9

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
Study characteristics	17	Cite each included study and present its characteristics.	p.10-14
Risk of bias in studies	18	Present assessments of risk of bias for each included study.	p.8, 34 - 41
Results of individual studies	19	For all outcomes, present, for each study: (a) summary statistics for each group (where appropriate) and (b) an effect estimates and its precision (e.g. confidence/credible interval), ideally using structured tables or plots.	p.14 - 16
Results of syntheses	20a	For each synthesis, briefly summarise the characteristics and risk of bias among contributing studies.	p.9, 34 - 41
	20b	Present results of all statistical syntheses conducted. If meta-analysis was done, present for each the summary estimate and its precision (e.g. confidence/credible interval) and measures of statistical heterogeneity. If comparing groups, describe the direction of the effect.	p.10 - 21
	20c	Present results of all investigations of possible causes of heterogeneity among study results.	p.17
	20d	Present results of all sensitivity analyses conducted to assess the robustness of the synthesized results.	p.10 - 21
Reporting biases	21	Present assessments of risk of bias due to missing results (arising from reporting biases) for each synthesis assessed.	-
Certainty of evidence	22	Present assessments of certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for each outcome assessed.	p.8, 24
DISCUSSION			

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
Discussion	23a	Provide a general interpretation of the results in the context of other evidence.	p.21-24
	23b	Discuss any limitations of the evidence included in the review.	p.24
	23c	Discuss any limitations of the review processes used.	p.24
	23d	Discuss implications of the results for practice, policy, and future research.	p.25
OTHER INFORMATION			
Registration and protocol	24a	Provide registration information for the review, including register name and registration number, or state that the review was not registered.	-
	24b	Indicate where the review protocol can be accessed, or state that a protocol was not prepared.	-
	24c	Describe and explain any amendments to information provided at registration or in the protocol.	-
Support	25	Describe sources of financial or non-financial support for the review, and the role of the funders or sponsors in the review.	-
Competing interests	26	Declare any competing interests of review authors.	-
Availability of data, code and other materials	27	Report which of the following are publicly available and where they can be found: template data collection forms; data extracted from included studies; data used for all analyses; analytic code; any other materials used in the review.	-

*Note:* Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71. This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## Appendix B

### CASP Checklist



**CASP Checklist:** 10 questions to help you make sense of a **Qualitative** research

**How to use this appraisal tool:** Three broad issues need to be considered when appraising a qualitative study:

- ▶ Are the results of the study valid? (Section A)
- ▶ What are the results? (Section B)
- ▶ Will the results help locally? (Section C)

The 10 questions on the following pages are designed to help you think about these issues systematically. The first two questions are screening questions and can be answered quickly. If the answer to both is “yes”, it is worth proceeding with the remaining questions. There is some degree of overlap between the questions, you are asked to record a “yes”, “no” or “can’t tell” to most of the questions. A number of italicised prompts are given after each question. These are designed to remind you why the question is important. Record your reasons for your answers in the spaces provided.

**About:** These checklists were designed to be used as educational pedagogic tools, as part of a workshop setting, therefore we do not suggest a scoring system. The core CASP checklists (randomised controlled trial & systematic review) were based on JAMA ‘Users’ guides to the medical literature 1994 (adapted from Guyatt GH, Sackett DL, and Cook DJ), and piloted with health care practitioners.

For each new checklist, a group of experts were assembled to develop and pilot the checklist and the workshop format with which it would be used. Over the years overall adjustments have been made to the format, but a recent survey of checklist users reiterated that the basic format continues to be useful and appropriate.

**Referencing:** we recommend using the Harvard style citation, i.e.: *Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2018). CASP (insert name of checklist i.e. Qualitative) Checklist. [online] Available at: URL. Accessed: Date Accessed.*

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Paper for appraisal and reference: .....

Section A: Are the results valid?

1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

- HINT: Consider
- what was the goal of the research
  - why it was thought important
  - its relevance

Comments:

2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

- HINT: Consider
- If the research seeks to interpret or illuminate the actions and/or subjective experiences of research participants
  - Is qualitative research the right methodology for addressing the research goal

Comments:

Is it worth continuing?

3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

- HINT: Consider
- if the researcher has justified the research design (e.g. have they discussed how they decided which method to use)

Comments:





4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?

Yes	
Can't Tell	
No	

HINT: Consider

- If the researcher has explained how the participants were selected
- If they explained why the participants they selected were the most appropriate to provide access to the type of knowledge sought by the study
  - If there are any discussions around recruitment (e.g. why some people chose not to take part)

Comments:

5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?

Yes	
Can't Tell	
No	

HINT: Consider

- If the setting for the data collection was justified
- If it is clear how data were collected (e.g. focus group, semi-structured interview etc.)
- If the researcher has justified the methods chosen
  - If the researcher has made the methods explicit (e.g. for interview method, is there an indication of how interviews are conducted, or did they use a topic guide)
  - If methods were modified during the study. If so, has the researcher explained how and why
  - If the form of data is clear (e.g. tape recordings, video material, notes etc.)
    - If the researcher has discussed saturation of data

Comments:



6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?

Yes	
Can't Tell	
No	

HINT: Consider

- If the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during (a) formulation of the research questions (b) data collection, including sample recruitment and choice of location
- How the researcher responded to events during the study and whether they considered the implications of any changes in the research design

Comments:

#### Section B: What are the results?

7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?

Yes	
Can't Tell	
No	

HINT: Consider

- If there are sufficient details of how the research was explained to participants for the reader to assess whether ethical standards were maintained
- If the researcher has discussed issues raised by the study (e.g. issues around informed consent or confidentiality or how they have handled the effects of the study on the participants during and after the study)
- If approval has been sought from the ethics committee

Comments:



8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

- HINT: Consider
- If there is an in-depth description of the analysis process
  - If thematic analysis is used. If so, is it clear how the categories/themes were derived from the data
  - Whether the researcher explains how the data presented were selected from the original sample to demonstrate the analysis process
  - If sufficient data are presented to support the findings
    - To what extent contradictory data are taken into account
  - Whether the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during analysis and selection of data for presentation

Comments:

9. Is there a clear statement of findings?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

- HINT: Consider whether
- If the findings are explicit
  - If there is adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researcher's arguments
  - If the researcher has discussed the credibility of their findings (e.g. triangulation, respondent validation, more than one analyst)
  - If the findings are discussed in relation to the original research question

Comments:



Section C: Will the results help locally?

10. How valuable is the research?

HINT: Consider

- If the researcher discusses the contribution the study makes to existing knowledge or understanding (e.g. do they consider the findings in relation to current practice or policy, or relevant research-based literature)
- If they identify new areas where research is necessary
- If the researchers have discussed whether or how the findings can be transferred to other populations or considered other ways the research may be used

Comments:

**Appendix C**  
**Quality Assessment**

Quality assessment of included articles according to CASP tool

Study	Clear Aims	Qualitative Methodology	Appropriate Design	Appropriate Recruitment	Appropriate Data Collection	Researcher Participant Relationship Considered	Ethical Issues Considered	Rigorous	Clear Statement	Valuabl e	Times yes
Bideci and Bideci (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	7
Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
(Devi & Fong, 2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9
Everist (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9
Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	8

Iqbal et al. (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Jilek (1982)	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Can't tell	Can't tell	No	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	4
Koss-Chioino and Soto- Espinosa (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Medgyesi (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Nicholson (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9
Rahtz et al. (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9
Williamson and Hood (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Wood (2010)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Zhang et al. (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
Zimmermann (2012)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9

## Appendix D

### Used Guidelines for Coding

**Table D1**

*Guidelines for coding religion-related STE themes*

Religion		
Concept	Explanation	Example
Community-Oriented	Religion tends to be a communal and institutional experience, where shared beliefs, rituals, and practices are followed by a group. The sense of belonging and identity is often derived from a collective understanding of the divine or sacred.	For example, the communal support provided by the religious community (e.g., through volunteering and sharing experiences) emphasizes how individuals can find strength in collective religious practices, reinforcing their sense of belonging to a larger faith community. Also, for instance going to church, having a place to go where people have collective faith and seem to transfer this faith.
Fixed Structures and Doctrine	Religion often involves established doctrines, fixed ideas, and traditions that provide clear guidelines on how life should be lived, offering moral codes and answers to existential questions.	For instance, the structured belief system in Islamic monotheism (Tawheed) that provides a doctrinal foundation for religious healers. Their actions and moral guidelines are based on established religious principles, emphasizing the purification of the heart through religious practices.

Authority	Religion can have a hierarchical aspect where some figures interpret doctrine for others. Figures like pastors, murshids, imams and rabbis serve as interpreters of religious doctrine, guiding individuals through religious practices and holding hierarchical roles in the community. They provide the rules and structures for living a religious life.	For instance, individuals mention the importance of the role of a spiritual guide, either within a tariqa – known as a murshid – or outside the tariqa. In this example, the murshid (spiritual guide) holds religious authority, guiding followers in their spiritual practices. Another example mentions when it comes to Spirit Baptism, the pastor lays hands on individuals, invoking the Holy Spirit.
Sacred Texts	Religious scriptures like the Bible and the Qur'an provide the doctrinal foundation for religious practices, offering fixed guidelines and moral codes that believers adhere to.	For example, the application of monotheism in daily life is drawn from sacred texts like the Qur'an. Also, in Christianity individuals follow what's written in the Bible, such as the laying on of hands, as it says in the Book of Acts.
Exclusive or Absolutist Tendencies	Many religions, particularly traditional ones (e.g. Buddhism, Islam, Christianity), can be exclusive, meaning they hold their own belief system as the absolute or "true" path to salvation or enlightenment. This exclusivity often	For instance, emphasizes the importance of Tawheed (Islamic monotheism) as the absolute truth and the only way to salvation. This demonstrates the exclusivity of the belief system, where Islam is seen as the true path that must be followed, with a



	distinguishes religion from non-traditional religious or spiritual practices (e.g. New Religious Movements (NRMs) and folk religions), which tend to be more inclusive, fluid, and open to integrating multiple belief systems, allowing for diverse paths to personal fulfilment or enlightenment	strict adherence to religious principles. Other belief systems or alternative spiritual paths are not acknowledged as valid within this framework. Also, in Christianity absolutist tendencies are present. For example, receiving the Holy Spirit through the specific ritual of Spirit Baptism is the only way to fully connect with God and understand divine will.
Religious Context has priority in coding*	Religious places (such as temples, churches, mosques), rituals (like prayer, pilgrimage, sacraments), and practices (fasting, meditation in a specific religious context) are all defined by their connection to organized religions. Even if someone who doesn't subscribe to the faith engages with these elements, they are still operating within a religious framework and therefore are coded as a religion-related theme	For example, if an atheist participates in a Catholic mass, the mass itself is a religious ritual, regardless of the atheist's personal beliefs. The theme being engaged with (the mass) is religious in nature, it would be coded as religious. In another example, a Buddhist visiting a Christian church, can feel a spiritual connection, and comment on the sacred atmosphere. While the feeling could be coded as spiritual, the theme (the church itself) is considered religious because it exists within a religious framework.

Interaction with Religious Symbols and Practices has priority in coding	Even if someone does not personally subscribe to the beliefs of a particular religion, their interaction with religious symbols, stories, or practices falls within a religious context. The meaning they derive from it may be spiritual or existential, but the theme remains religious because of its origin in an organized religion.	For instance, atheists who interact with the religious symbol of the Virgin Mary and the stories surrounding a religious site. Although atheists do not personally follow religious beliefs, their experience with the religious context of the site can provide them with an extraordinary and meaningful experience, demonstrating how interacting with religious symbols and practices can evoke profound feelings, even for those outside the faith. In another example, individuals derive comfort and meaning from religious practices such as hearing scripture and participating in prayers, even though not all identified strictly with a religious affiliation. This reflects the power of religious practices to offer support and a sense of the sacred, even for those who might not fully subscribe to the beliefs
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*Note:* \*If the emphasis is on the individual's subjective experience, spirituality might be the focus, whereas if the religious structure or setting is the primary theme, religion should take priority.

**Table D2***Guidelines for coding spirituality-related themes*

Spirituality		
Concept	Explanation	Example
Personal and Experiential	Spirituality focuses on individual experiences and personal interpretation of life's meaning. It is less concerned with adherence to specific doctrines and more about the personal journey of finding purpose, connection, or transcendence. This flexibility allows for diverse interpretations of existential questions.	For example, personal interpretation of individuals experiences at a religious site. The spiritual feeling they experience is personal and connects more to their individual reflection on myth, showing a flexible interpretation rather than strict religious adherence. Also, for instance an individual's personal, existential journey and connection to nature. It reflects self-reflection and an understanding of life's cycles, which is an interpretation of meaning that fits into the spiritual framework, focusing on inner transformation rather than religious doctrine
Evolving and Dynamic	Unlike religion, which tends to be fixed, spirituality is often seen as more fluid and evolving. It adapts to the individual's current life circumstances, offering a personal and often evolving framework for understanding	For example, the need to outgrow traditional religious constructs to expand into a more inclusive and evolving spiritual understanding. Such a spiritual journey can emphasize breaking away from rigid teachings to

	<p>existence. One's spiritual beliefs might shift over time as they explore different practices, philosophies, or insights.</p>	<p>embrace more open-ended possibilities. Also, for instance, spiritual evolvment after a numinous experience, shifting from a rigid, doctrinal framework to a more dynamic and flexible understanding, focused on personal growth and connection.</p>
Broader Connection	<p>Spirituality emphasizes a connection to a greater whole, which can be the universe, nature, humanity, or a sense of oneness with existence. It often includes feelings of transcendence, where one feels connected to something beyond themselves, but without necessarily identifying this with a deity. This contrasts with religion's frequent focus on a specific god or gods.</p>	<p>For example, a spiritual experience of being interconnected with the world, feeling both small and yet relevant within the larger universe. Or even a broader connection to the cosmos, seeing the self as part of a flow of energy. These transcendent experiences reflect a spiritual connection to something beyond the self.</p>
Emphasis on Inner Growth	<p>While religion may offer external structures, spirituality often emphasizes inner reflection, personal growth, and self-discovery. It's an introspective path where the individual seeks to make sense of suffering and find personal peace or</p>	<p>For example, inner growth through personal reflection on past traumatic experiences. Here transformation could involve a self-discovery process, integrating brokenness into a more holistic view of life, focusing</p>

	meaning without relying on predefined beliefs or external authorities.	on spiritual integration rather than predefined doctrines.
Inclusivity and Syncretism	Spirituality is usually more inclusive and open to integrating ideas from different traditions or philosophies. People can blend elements from multiple sources (e.g., Buddhism, New Age practices, mindfulness) without needing to commit to one particular system.	For instance, blending Kundalini yoga with Catholic beliefs, reflecting a flexible and inclusive approach to spirituality. Integrating practices from multiple spiritual traditions (Catholicism and yoga), showing how spirituality can become more dynamic and eclectic over time. Also, for example, a diversity of visitors at a religious site and how people from different religious backgrounds engage with the place. This highlights acceptance and inclusivity toward other religious practices, even if they are not part of the same faith. (Although the trigger for this spiritual theme seems religious.)
Spiritual Responses in Religious Settings*	Spirituality can occur within religious settings, but the individual's experience can still be more personal and existential rather than doctrinal or ritual-based. The atmosphere of a religious	For example, an atheist participant describes a church's atmosphere as "emotional" and notes that walking around and observing people was a spiritual activity. Even though

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place may evoke spiritual feelings in visitors, such as awe, emotional connection, or a sense of something greater, regardless of the religious context.	the setting is religious, the response is personal and does not involve engaging in any formal religious practice, making it spiritual.
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*Note:* \*If the emphasis is on the individual's subjective experience, spirituality might be the focus, whereas if the religious structure or setting is the primary theme, religion should take priority.

## Appendix E

### Themes and sub-themes across studies

Coded sub-themes and themes across the included 17 studies

Theme	Sub-theme	Author of coded studies
Acceptance of Existentiality and Transformation	Acceptance of divine mystery or God's plan	Bideci and Bideci (2021)
		Medgyesi (2020)
		Rahtz et al. (2021)
		Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)
		Williamson and Hood (2011)
	Connecting to collective beliefs	Bideci and Bideci (2021)
		Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
		Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010)
		Iqbal et al. (2019)
		Rahtz et al. (2021)
	Experiencing salvation	Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)
		Williamson and Hood (2011)
		Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
		Iqbal et al. (2019)
		Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)
	Deepening of faith	Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)
		Williamson and Hood (2011)
		Zhang et al. (2024)
		Bideci and Bideci (2021)
		Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
		Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010)
	Acceptance of mystery and the unknown	Devi and Fong (2018)
		Rahtz et al. (2021)
		Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)
		Williamson and Hood (2011)
		Zhang et al. (2024)
		Everist (2016)

		Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)
		Medgyesi (2020)
		Nicholson (2016)
		Wood (2010)
		Zhang et al. (2024)
		Zimmermann (2011)
Embracing the present and personal growth		Everist (2016)
		Iqbal et al. (2019)
		Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)
		Medgyesi (2020)
		Nicholson (2016)
		Wood (2010)
		Zhang et al. (2024)
		Zimmermann (2011)
Openness to mystery and inner wisdom		Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)
		Medgyesi (2020)
		Nicholson (2016)
		Wood (2010)
Transformation through self-discovery		Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
		Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010)
		Everist (2016)
		Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)
		Iqbal et al. (2019)
		Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)
		Medgyesi (2020)
		Nicholson (2016)
		Wood (2010)
		Zhang et al. (2024)
		Zimmermann (2011)
Cognitive-affective shifts	Catharsis	Bideci and Bideci (2021)



	Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
	Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010)
	Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)
	Iqbal et al. (2019)
	Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)
	Medgyesi (2020)
	Nicholson (2016)
	Williamson and Hood (2011)
	Wood (2010)
Emotional resonance to divine	Bideci and Bideci (2021)
	Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
	Iqbal et al. (2019)
	Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)
	Rahtz et al. (2021)
	Williamson and Hood (2011)
	Zhang et al. (2024)
Emotional resonance to nature and cosmos	Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
	Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)
	Wood (2010)
	Zhang et al. (2024)
Expansion of affect	Bideci and Bideci (2021)
	Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
	Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)
	Medgyesi (2020)
	Nicholson (2016)
	Rahtz et al. (2021)
	Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)
	Wood (2010)
	Williamson and Hood (2011)
	Zhang et al. (2024)
	Zimmermann (2011)

	Expansion of awareness		Bideci and Bideci (2021) Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010) Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015) Everist (2016) Medgyesi (2020) Nicholson (2016) Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024) Williamson and Hood (2011) Wood (2010) Zimmermann (2011)
	Shifts in identity and sense of self		Bideci and Bideci (2021) Everist (2016) Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015) Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010) Medgyesi (2020) Rahtz et al. (2021) Williamson and Hood (2011) Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024) Wood (2010) Zhang et al. (2024) Zimmermann (2011)
Connectedness and oneness	Connection across time		Bideci and Bideci (2021) Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010) Nicholson (2016) Rahtz et al. (2021) Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024) Zhang et al. (2024)
	Connection to others and collectivity		Bideci and Bideci (2021) Boczkowska and Zięba (2016) Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010) Iqbal et al. (2019)

	Jilek (1982)
	Rahtz et al. (2021)
	Zhang et al. (2024)
Connection to the divine	Bideci and Bideci (2021)
	Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
	Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010)
	Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)
	Jilek (1982)
	Devi and Fong (2018)
	Medgyesi (2020)
	Rahtz et al. (2021)
	Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)
	Williamson and Hood (2011)
	Zhang et al. (2024)
Oneness with creation	Bideci and Bideci (2021)
	Rahtz et al. (2021)
	Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)
Connection to nature and the world	Bideci and Bideci (2021)
	Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
	Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)
	Jilek (1982)
	Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)
	Nicholson (2016)
	Wood (2010)
	Zhang et al. (2024)
	Zimmermann (2011)
Oneness with cosmos	Bideci and Bideci (2021)
	Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
	Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)
	Iqbal et al. (2019)

		Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)
		Medgyesi (2020)
		Nicholson (2016)
		Wood (2010)
		Zhang et al. (2024)
		Zimmermann (2011)
Guidance and protection	Communication with the divine	Devi and Fong (2018)
		Medgyesi (2020)
		Rahtz et al. (2021)
		Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)
		Williamson and Hood (2011)
		Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
		Devi and Fong (2018)
		Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010)
	Guidance by the divine	Medgyesi (2020)
		Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)
		Williamson and Hood (2011)
		Chow and Nelson-Becker (2010)
	Protection by the divine	Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
		Zhang et al. (2024)
		Zimmermann (2011)
		Nicholson (2016)
	Communication with the cosmos and spiritual entities	Wood (2010)
		Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
	Guidance by the cosmos and spiritual entities	Everist (2016)
		Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)
	Protection by the cosmos and spiritual entities	Nicholson (2016)
		Wood (2010)
		Zhang et al. (2024)
		Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)
		Everist (2016)

Perceptual shifts	Altered perception	<p>Nicholson (2016)</p> <p>Zimmermann (2011)</p> <p>Bideci and Bideci (2021)</p> <p>Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)</p> <p>Devi and Fong (2018)</p> <p>Everist (2016)</p> <p>Iqbal et al. (2019)</p> <p>Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)</p> <p>Jilek (1982)</p> <p>Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)</p> <p>Medgyesi (2020)</p> <p>Nicholson (2016)</p> <p>Rahtz et al. (2021)</p> <p>Trimulyaningsih et al. (2024)</p> <p>Wood (2010)</p> <p>Zimmermann (2011)</p>
	Heightened sensory awareness	<p>Bideci and Bideci (2021)</p> <p>Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)</p> <p>Devi and Fong (2018)</p> <p>Everist (2016)</p> <p>Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)</p> <p>Iqbal et al. (2019)</p> <p>Jilek (1982)</p> <p>Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)</p> <p>Medgyesi (2020)</p> <p>Nicholson (2016)</p> <p>Williamson and Hood (2011)</p>
	Sense of timelessness or boundlessness	<p>Bideci and Bideci (2021)</p> <p>Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)</p> <p>Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)</p> <p>Medgyesi (2020)</p>

- Somatic manifestations
- Nicholson (2016)  
Zhang et al. (2024)  
Zimmermann (2011)  
Boczkowska and Zięba (2016)  
Everist (2016)  
Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015)  
Jilek (1982)  
Koss-Chioino and Soto-Espinosa (2010)  
Williamson and Hood (2011)