

**THE SELF AND THE SACRED: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN
EXPERIENCES DEEMED SPIRITUAL OR RELIGIOUS AND BELIEFS USING
INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

by

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ABSTRACT

Experiences deemed spiritual or religious play important but complex roles in the life narratives and meaning systems of many. The relationship between these experiences and individuals' beliefs and worldviews is only partially understood. This thesis explores how people make sense of these experiences and shows the significant influences they can have on people's beliefs and behaviors. It develops Stratified Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (SMIPA) as a methodology to investigate the experiences of four distinct groups in England: Christians (Baptists), Muslims, Hindus, and a group who identified as 'Spiritual but not Religious' (SBNR). Each group's experiences were studied individually and then the findings were integrated using principles of qualitative research synthesis to develop a fuller understanding of the phenomena. The 20 participants created personal worldviews, using both their experiences and relationships to help them understand the world. They described a diverse range of experiences they considered spiritual or religious, and these experiences played crucial roles in developing and affirming their belief systems. Interactions with other people influenced both their experiences and how they made sense of them. The participants also developed personally significant relationships between themselves and God (or other supernatural agents), and these relationships helped shape their worldviews and experiences. Personal, social, and cultural factors all influenced how they experienced the world and interpreted their experiences. These studies show the importance of adopting broader and more holistic perspectives when studying how people make sense of the world, that include but are not limited to phenomena they consider religious or spiritual.

INTRODUCTION

Psychology is the study of mental processes and behavior. It uses a wide range of methodologies to investigate how we think, feel, and act (Myers, 2007). This thesis engages with all three of these fundamental psychological issues. It uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; J. A. Smith et al., 2009) to explore how people think, feel and make sense of themselves, the wider world, and the things they consider most important in life. It also examines how people's beliefs shape, and are shaped by, their actions and experiences.

The modern world is changing rapidly but, as R. W. Hood et al. (2009, p. 1) note, religion (and spirituality) remain of "the utmost importance to many people, and many fascinating behaviors are performed in its name. Religion is an integral part of many aspects of our human existence." Understanding people's deepest beliefs and ultimate concerns (Streib & Hood, 2013; Paloutzian, 2017) is crucial in a world where people die and kill others for the sake of those beliefs. It is also important to enhance our understanding of how we can help people develop a strong sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging, to improve their wellbeing and quality of life. Many psychologists, as well as researchers in other disciplines, have dedicated their lives to working on these problems, and yet the search for insight and understanding is incomplete. My research builds upon the efforts of many and, I hope, will help others continue to better understand the world in which we live so they can make it better.

From my prior research and study, I knew that a meaning systems approach to the psychology of religion helped resolve several significant issues and provided a promising

avenue for advancing the field (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Park, 2013). This approach argues that individuals develop an understanding of the world in which they live from their experiences and that these global meaning systems are used to interpret and assign meaning to the individual's subsequent experiences. These meaning systems can also be conceptualized as worldviews, which eventually became my preferred terminology for them (Johnson et al., 2011; Taves & Asprem, 2018; see pp. 46-77). How individuals experience and make sense of the world can have profound consequences, influencing their behaviors and affecting those around them (Silberman, 2005).

However, how these beliefs are acquired and develop is still only partially understood (Banerjee & Bloom, 2013; Barrett & Lanman, 2008). Park (2013) identified numerous promising avenues for future research in this area and this thesis addresses several of them. In particular, it explores the ways "intra- and interpersonal processes inform and influence one another" (p. 373) in the development of meaning systems. It also addresses the differences between 'religious' and 'secular' influences on meaning systems and explores how meaning systems change over time, paying particular attention to the contents of people's beliefs in order to do so.

It seemed clear, based on both my own experiences and prior research, that these processes were multidimensional, situational, and relational (Chaves, 2010; E. B. Davis et al., 2016; Kimball et al., 2016). Global meaning systems affect how people experience all of their lives, and so understanding them requires an expansive frame of reference. Some progress had already been made in exploring

these issues, but there was still a considerable need for further research that could effectively untangle their complexity.

During my initial review of the existing research literature, it became clear that much of the research focused on the role of socio-cultural factors in the development of beliefs. Socio-cultural factors are certainly important and influential in the development of meaning systems. However, it seemed likely that an emphasis on factors that could be measured relatively easily, and which were amenable to group-level comparisons, was causing other details to be potentially overlooked. I knew, from my own direct experiences and many encounters with religious or spiritual individuals, that individuals often placed great importance on their own spiritual experiences (see pp. 65-77, 95-103). Religious and spiritual individuals also often describe their relationships with supernatural beings as being among the most important in their lives. It seemed plausible that these relationships may also be influential in the development of individuals' meaning systems and worldviews. I therefore decided to focus my research on exploring the connections between spiritual experiences and individuals' beliefs, paying particular attention to the role that relationships between individuals and supernatural beings may have in the development of worldviews and meaning systems.

This focus on religious and spiritual experiences required the development of a working conceptualization of the phenomena. However, many scholars (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2000; Taves, 2009) have argued convincingly against simplistic understandings of religion and spirituality that privilege Christian theological concepts. Engaging with this literature and applying it to the psychology of religion was an important and necessary early task (see pp. 46-77). Following Taves (2009, 2013), I decided that individuals should be allowed to

determine for themselves what they deemed to be sacred in their lives, rather than having external concepts and categories forced onto them. This shift away from a substantive definition of religion and spirituality (Oman, 2013) had several consequences. Most importantly, it supported the shift to examining meaning systems and worldviews more broadly rather than focusing narrowly on specific types of beliefs and experiences. Including all experiences that individual participants deemed to be spiritual or religious also expanded the scope of the research to include more 'every day' events that were imbued with significance by the participants.

God(s) and other supernatural beings are an important element of many religious and spiritual worldviews, and many experiences are deemed spiritual or religious because they are linked to them (Argyle, 1999; McCauley & Lawson, 2002). Understanding why people believe in certain supernatural beings, and why they have specific beliefs about them, is clearly an important aspect of understanding those individuals' worldviews. However, for many individuals these supernatural beings appeared to play an active role in their lives and this suggested that perceived interactions with these beings may also affect beliefs, rather than simply 'being' beliefs. If, as Boyer (2002) and others have suggested, the human mind treats supernatural beings as agents, then perceived interactions with them should have similar psychological effects to interactions with other important agents in people's lives. The relationships between individuals' experiences, relationships, and beliefs appeared to be complex, iterative, and reciprocating. Investigating the

phenomena therefore required a methodology that could capture and explore the details of people's experiences to untangle the ways they shaped each other.

The complex and multifaceted natures of the phenomena being investigated meant only a qualitative approach could capture the necessary details of individual participants' experiences. Qualitative methodologies can explore how people understand experiences and the influences of context on those experiences (J. A. Maxwell, 1996). The alternative, experimental manipulations of people's deepest beliefs, would be both ethically dubious and have potential issues concerning ecological validity. There have been repeated calls for psychologists of religion to use more qualitative methods to investigate phenomena (e.g., Coyle, 2008; E. B. Davis et al., 2016; F. N. Watts, 2012) and this thesis answers those calls.

I realized that a retrospective and qualitative approach, investigating a small number of cases in rich detail, had the potential to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena and help fill a methodological gap in the research literature. The decision to use a qualitative approach was made prior to the submission of the original research proposal, but it was only later that the decision to use IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) was made. IPA's ability to explore both how people experience and how they make sense of phenomena that are complex, ambiguous, and emotionally laden made it eminently suitable for research in this area (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2015). To develop a broader understanding of the phenomena, rather than one limited to just a single group, I decided to use a multiperspectival design (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; cf. Larkin et al., 2019) to examine the experiences of four different groups and explore underlying patterns in how they learned to make sense of their worlds.

As an active and ongoing area of interdisciplinary research, new insights from other researchers emerged during the five years that I was working on the project. These included quite a few new IPA studies of religious or spiritual topics being published (see pp. 84-95), although none of them studied the same groups as I had chosen to use. There were also significant conceptual and theoretical developments regarding beliefs, meaning systems, and worldviews (see pp. 46-77). These influenced how I framed and conceptualized my research in various ways and my research (e.g., Murphy, 2017) also contributed to those debates and discussions. When I started this project, very little had been published on multiperspectival IPA and Larkin et al. (2019) published an expanded guide to it only after I had completed my initial analysis of the data. The principles in that paper were broadly supportive of the steps I had taken with my design, but the methodology I had already developed is more explicit and specific than the suggestions they offer researchers (see pp. 119-138).

This thesis makes several distinct original contributions to ongoing academic debates. It contributes to discussions about the nature of religion and spirituality, and how they should be conceptualized and studied. It draws insights from a range of other academic disciplines into the psychology of religion, developing the meaning systems approach (Park et al., 2013; Silberman, 2005) to make it more encompassing and useful. It also makes a substantial methodological innovation, developing a form of multiperspectival IPA design that can explore complex phenomena more fully: Stratified Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (SMIPA). The studies develop numerous insights into

the lived experiences of people in contemporary Britain. Each of the four IPA studies contains new knowledge and enhances our understanding of how people make sense of the most significant aspects of their lives. The studies are also among the first to use IPA to study religion and spirituality from a meaning systems perspective, showing that IPA can make valuable contributions within the Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). Finally, the synthesis of the studies provides new insights into the complex processes by which humans form, develop, and sustain the beliefs that give their lives meaning and which help them understand their worlds.

Research Questions

Research questions are a crucial element of any scientific study. They determine not only the object(s) of study but also the perspective and focus taken by the study (J. A. Maxwell, 1996, 2013; Patton, 2015; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). In qualitative research, the research questions help anchor a study, but researchers should be sensitive to their data and can shift or reorient their focus in response to the data they gather (J. A. Maxwell, 1996; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The following research questions were refined throughout the design stage of the project, evolving in response to the insights developed during the literature review and the epistemological and methodological choices I made.

IPA can explore both primary and secondary research questions, although the answers to secondary research questions are often only partial (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Primary research questions focus on how people experience phenomena and make sense of their experiences. Secondary research questions are broader, more explanatory and more theory-driven. IPA enables a rich and detailed exploration of individuals' experiences and

the analysis can (and should) go beyond how the participants themselves make sense of them (see pp. 109-116). The purpose of qualitative research synthesis is also to develop stronger, theoretical understandings of phenomena than are possible in individual studies (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006; Suri & Clarke, 2009; see pp. 130-132.) This thesis explores the experiences and relationships that people consider sacred. It investigates how they affect and are affected by different aspects of people's lives. Each of the research questions builds on the previous ones, broadening the focus of the studies and attempting to enhance our understanding of how the participants experience and make sense of the world. Understanding the primary research question helps develop insights into the secondary research questions, and the multiperspectival methodology was developed to enhance these insights.

Primary Research Question:

- (1) How do religious or spiritual individuals experience the relationship between themselves and their god(s) or other sacred beings/objects?

Secondary Research Questions:

- (2) How do these relationships form and develop?
- (3) What is the relationship between beliefs and experiences deemed spiritual and/or religious?

Elaboration and Clarification of Research Questions

In individual IPA studies, it is necessary to limit the scope of inquiry to a particular and relatively homogeneous group (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Multiperspectival IPA can take a broader perspective, but each study within it should still follow the principles of good IPA (see pp. 116-117, 132-135). The form of the research questions presented above was formulated for the project as a whole. For each of the four individual studies, the research questions were limited to investigating the experiences of participants from a specific group in a certain cultural context. For example, in the first study the primary research question became: “How do Baptists in South East England experience the relationship between themselves and God?”

Terminology in this area is often problematic and contested, an issue which will be discussed extensively throughout the thesis. Some clarifications are therefore helpful at this point. The language used in the research questions should be read in an open and inclusive manner, without specific technical definitions for most of the terms. The participants considered this phrasing appropriate for exploring their experiences, and any alternatives were not less problematic.

The term ‘relationship’ should be understood broadly, especially in the primary research question. People can have relationships with other people, with organizations, with objects, and with more abstract concepts. Although some prior research suggests that many individuals have relationships with their god(s) which have some similarities to their relationships with other people (see pp. 72-75) it was not assumed that the participants’ relationships would be like this. Answering the first two research questions involved explicitly exploring whether they were similar to other relationships, as well as

investigating their perceived features. Investigating the development of these relationships involved explicitly exploring how the participants believed their relationships began, and whether and how they changed during their lives. This included examining the role specific experiences may have played and exploring a broad range of social and cultural influences in their lives. The participants' perceptions of these changes were an important aspect of their experiences of the relationship.

The understanding of 'beliefs' used throughout this thesis includes doctrinal or theological beliefs but is not limited to them. Following Barrett and Lanman (2008, p. 110), I define belief as "the state of a cognitive system holding information (not necessarily in propositional or explicit form) as true in the generation of further thought and behaviour." This includes both explicit or reflective beliefs and implicit or non-reflective beliefs (Barrett & Lanman, 2008; Lanman, 2008). When defined in this way, beliefs can be seen to underlie both behaviors and understanding. This understanding of beliefs is neutral, rather than judgmental. Beliefs are things individuals consider to be true; using the term does not imply whether they are actually true, false, or ultimately unverifiable. It also does not differentiate between beliefs with consequences that are considered beneficial and harmful.

The term 'experiences' should also be viewed in an expansive and inclusive way. As well as including mystical or anomalous experiences (French & Stone, 2013; R. W. Hood & Chen, 2013), it potentially included all the events and interactions in an individuals' lives. How individuals make sense of their

experiences is an intrinsic part of them, and this meaning-making process can include attributions of sacredness or spiritual significance (Spilka et al., 1985; Taves, 2009). Rather than applying external theoretical categorizations during data collection, the participants were encouraged to determine for themselves what experiences were meaningful and significant in their lives.

Chapter Summaries

This thesis contains ten chapters, including four IPA studies and a qualitative research synthesis of them. Brief summaries of the following chapters are presented here to help orient the reader.

Contextualization

This chapter reviews a diverse range of research literature relevant to the research questions and also includes information about the researcher's background. It situates the studies that follow within the broader context of past and ongoing academic enquiry. This provides the foundations for the theoretical and methodological choices made in the research design.

The chapter is divided into six sections that each explore a different aspect of the context for the studies. It begins by exploring how religion and spirituality are important and integral to the lives of many people, affecting a wide range of issues. It then reviews the different methodologies that have been used to study these issues and argues that qualitative and idiographic approaches have the potential to enhance our understanding of these phenomena. A review of recent literature on meaning systems develops into an

argument for extending this conceptualization and adopting ‘worldview’ terminology to describe the phenomena being studied. The nature of the self is then discussed, including its centrality within individuals’ worldviews and the implications of its narrative, relational, and hermeneutic nature. Other IPA studies of religious and spiritual phenomena are then reviewed, showing the potential of the approach for generating original insights into the research questions. The chapter then concludes with a reflexive overview of the researcher’s personal background and context, as this also influenced the interpretative accounts developed in each of the subsequent studies.

Methodology

This chapter discusses why IPA is well suited for studying phenomena deemed religious and/or spiritual. It reviews the core principles of IPA and then develops an original form of multiperspectival IPA, based on principles drawn from qualitative research synthesis. The chapter develops and presents this new approach, Stratified Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (SMIPA), which is used in the empirical studies that follow.

Methods

This chapter provides details about the methods used in the four individual IPA studies, as well as in their synthesis. This includes specific elements of the research design, participant recruitment, ethical considerations, data collection, and analytical processes. To avoid unnecessary repetition, methodological information

that is shared across multiple studies is included in this chapter and then referred to elsewhere.

There is a God Who I Know

This chapter explores the experiences and beliefs of five members of a Baptist Church. It describes how they experienced a loving and nurturing relationship with God in their daily lives, through a variety of different practices. It also explores how their wider lives affected, and were affected by, their beliefs and relationship with God. The participants in this study lived in a world where they knew God personally and their vivid relationships with God shaped their lives and gave them meaning, purpose, and confidence.

Allah has Told us Everything

This chapter explores the lived experiences of five Muslims. It explores how they submit to God and live as British Muslims. It shows the importance of social influences in shaping their faith and identity, as well as the close relationship between these and their religious practices. In particular, it discusses how the Qur'an provides the bedrock on which their faith is based and how prayer, pilgrimage, and Ramadan all play important roles in reinforcing their beliefs.

I Believe in Something

This chapter explores the beliefs and experiences of five Hindus. It describes how they rejected many traditional Hindu beliefs and practices while continuing to believe in 'something' greater than themselves and engaging in some spiritual or religious practices.

These individuals focused on living in this world and helping others, believing that everyone had their own way of finding spiritual fulfillment. The participants in this study embraced uncertainty and experienced an inclusive form of spirituality that enriched their lives.

Seeing is Believing

This chapter explores the experiences and beliefs of five individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR). It explores how the participants constructed personal spiritualities and experienced a sense of transcendence. The analysis suggests participants actively developed their own spirituality, rejecting dogmatic religious authorities and trusting themselves and their own experiences. Social and cultural influences appear to have also played an important role in the development of their worldviews, providing spiritual tools, explanations, and interpretations that they found helpful in their spiritual journeys.

Synthesis: Creating Worldviews Through Experiences and Relationships

This chapter synthesizes the four previous studies and integrates them to develop additional insights relevant to the research questions. This synthesis develops six metathemes that each constitute key findings of the overall research project. It found that experiences deemed religious, spiritual, or sacred often had lasting and significant effects in the participants' lives. The participants developed supportive relationships with spiritual beings or higher powers, and these relationships helped sustain and develop their beliefs. The participants often

attributed experiences in their lives to spiritual causes, and doing this appeared to reinforce their beliefs. Communities that shared their beliefs often provided the participants with valued support and guidance as they navigated their lives, making their beliefs both more salient and more credible to them. The multicultural society the participants lived in sometimes challenged the participants faith, but it also often reinforced it. The participants all developed their own worldviews, drawing on both their own experiences and the cultural resources available to them. These personal worldviews often shared important elements with more institutional worldviews, but they were also idiosyncratic creations of each individual.

Discussion

This chapter begins by discussing the findings of the four studies and synthesis in relation to the research questions. It then discusses the implications of the findings to a range of areas, including the academic study of religion, public policy, and applied practice. It also reviews the methodological effectiveness of the studies and evaluates the SMIPA approach. This chapter also returns to the issue of reflexivity, exploring how my own beliefs and experiences shaped the research and discussing the steps taken to mitigate this and ensure rigor and validity in the analysis.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

This chapter provides important context for the studies that follow. It situates them within ongoing academic debates and helps explain the rationale behind many of the decisions made during the research design process (J. A. Maxwell, 1996)¹. This contextualization is not exhaustive, as the extensive amount of prior research exploring religion and spirituality means a fully comprehensive review is impossible within the scope of a doctoral thesis. The material presented here focuses on the elements that are most relevant to the topics and argument of the thesis. This chapter is organized into six sections, which each explore a relevant aspect of the context for this research.

Following the guidance of J. A. Smith et al. (2009), not all the research presented in this chapter was reviewed prior to the completion of the empirical studies. This approach helped foreground the experiences of the participants and the researcher's own analysis of the data. The draft contents were also updated after the completion of the analysis, to reflect the evolving state of the relevant research literature. This chapter presents the cohesive culmination of an iterative process that continued throughout the entire project. The subsequent chapters also make many additional connections to relevant aspects of the wider research literature that help illuminate them.

The chapter begins by reviewing the importance of religion and spirituality for many individuals in the modern world, as well as the many domains of life they are

¹ Elements of this chapter have been published as Murphy (2017), which included a theoretical critique of previous research and argued for wider usage of qualitative and idiographic methodologies in the study of religion and spirituality.

connected to. It then briefly discusses different research approaches that have been used to study religious and spiritual phenomena. Following Emmons and Paloutzian (2003), I argue that a multilevel interdisciplinary approach that uses a wide range of methodologies is needed to adequately explore these phenomena. As part of this paradigm, I suggest that greater use of qualitative methodologies is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how religious and spiritual individuals experience and make sense of their worlds.

The problematic nature of the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ are then discussed and I suggest a meaning systems approach (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Silberman, 2005) offers a solution to the difficulties they pose. I then argue that the distinctions between secular and religious meaning systems are artificial, and that a more comprehensive and inclusive conceptualization of the phenomena has the potential to develop richer insights. Following Taves et al. (2018), I then suggest that a focus on worldviews and worldview dynamics may be most productive.

I then review research into experiences deemed religious or spiritual, and the relationships many individuals describe having with supernatural beings. This research suggests they are often an important aspect of people’s lives, which can have profound effects. I then argue that understanding these experiences and relationships is crucial to understand how worldviews that contain religious or spiritual elements develop. As the self is a central element of an individual’s worldview (Johnson et al., 2011) and their experiences, I then briefly review research into the nature of the self. The narrative, relational, and dynamic nature of the self suggests sensitive and idiographic research tools are needed to adequately

explore how individuals develop their conceptions of themselves and the wider world.

The next section of this chapter reviews previous studies of religiosity that have used IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009), focusing on those that have primarily explored either identity or experiences deemed religious or spiritual. This review shows the useful insights that IPA can generate when researching these phenomena. It also shows the originality of the approach taken in this thesis, both in terms of the specific groups being studied and the holistic and critical conceptualization of the phenomena.

The chapter ends with a reflexive overview of my own background that provides additional context for the thesis. Researcher positioning is particularly important in interpretative research, and transparency about my experiences and beliefs is important to ensure the rigor of the research (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000). Further reflections on the way these experiences influenced the interpretation of the data can be found in the final chapter, on pp. 392-399.

The Importance of Religion and Spirituality

Religion has played a central role throughout human history and can be found, in one form or another, in every culture we are aware of (Rappaport, 1999). It also continues to be an important part of the lives of billions of people around the world (Gorski, 2003; Loewenthal, 2013). However, despite its importance in many people's lives, the social scientific study of religion and spirituality remains somewhat marginalized (Fontana, 2003; Paloutzian, 2017). The prevalence of religion, in both contemporary and historical society, means that understanding religious phenomena is crucial if we wish to understand humanity.

Globally, 84% of people identify as religious (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2017). Christianity (31.2%) and Islam (24.1%) are the two largest religious groups, and the religiously unaffiliated (16%) are the third largest group. Hinduism (15.1%), Buddhism (6.9%), and what they categorize as 'Folk Religion' (5.7%) are the three other globally significant groups - with all other religious groupings constituting just 1% of the population. The PRC (2017) project that, because of differing birth rates, by 2060 more of the global population will identify as members of a religion (87%) and 31% of the global population will be Muslim.

The UK is considerably less religious than the world as a whole, but millions of people here still identify as religious. In the 2011 UK Census, 59% of the population of England and Wales described themselves as Christian, compared to 25% who said they did not have a religion and 5% who described themselves as Muslim (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2013). The British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) suggests a much lower proportion of people in Britain consider themselves to be religious, and these differences are due to both methodological variations and the relatively rapid increase of non-religion in the UK (L. Lee, 2015). In the BSAS, 52% described themselves as belonging to no religion, compared to 38% who identified as Christian and 6% who identified as Muslim (Curtice et al., 2019). Females were more likely than men to describe themselves as having a religion (54% vs 41%), attend religious services (35% vs 27%), and believe in God (45% vs 33% (Curtice et al., 2019). Older respondents were also more likely to be religious, across all three measures, though this was likely because of cohort effects

rather than individuals becoming more religious as they grew older (Curtice et al., 2019; L. Lee, 2012).

Regardless of which methodological approach is preferred, religion is clearly an important facet of many people's lives and identities, both in the UK and globally. The following sections will discuss the many domains of people's lives affected by religiosity and spirituality. These many connections suggest taking a more rounded and holistic approach to the study of religiosity and spirituality may be beneficial, as religion is not simply a siloed aspect of people's lives (cf. Loewenthal, 2013; Taylor, 2007).

Religion and Health

Religion and medicine have been related throughout recorded history and the distinction between the two is recent and largely confined to highly developed nations (Koenig, 2012). More than 3,300 quantitative studies examining the relationship between religion/spirituality and health were published between 1872 and 2010, with more than 60% of them published since 2000 (Koenig, 2012). In addition to these, there are also many qualitative studies exploring similar topics.

There is clear and persuasive evidence that there is a link between religion or spirituality and mortality (Koenig, 2012; McCullough et al., 2000; Oman & Thoresen, 2005), with studies suggesting a reduced risk of approximately 30% (Masters & Hooker, 2013). Studies have examined the links between religiosity and a wide range of specific medical conditions, such as cancers and cardiovascular diseases, and consistently (although not universally) found that religiosity correlates with better outcomes (Koenig, 2012). Many studies rely on religious attendance as a proxy measure of religiosity, and it is likely

that religious participation is particularly beneficial (Masters & Hooker, 2013). The major mechanisms proposed to explain the relationship between physical health and religiosity include providing social support, encouraging positive behaviors, and providing psychological benefits (Koenig, 2012; Masters & Hooker, 2013; Zimmer et al., 2016).

Approximately 80% of quantitative research investigating the links between religiosity, spirituality, and health focuses on mental health (Koenig, 2012). Most studies suggest religiousness and spirituality are associated with increased levels of wellbeing, happiness, and life satisfaction (Park & Slattery, 2013). A meta-analysis of 59 studies found a moderate, positive relationship ($r = 0.34$) between spirituality and quality of life (Sawatzky et al., 2005). A review of 147 studies found the average correlation between religion/spirituality and depression was -0.10 , approximately the same as the effect size of gender (T. B. Smith et al., 2003).

There are numerous proposed pathways for the beneficial effects of religiosity and spirituality on mental health. These include enhancing individuals' sense of meaning and agency, facilitating emotional regulation, reducing stress, promoting positive emotions, providing social support, and encouraging beneficial behaviors (Koenig, 2012; Park & Slattery, 2013). However, many of these effects may at least partially be because of confounding factors, as the studies often rely on cross-sectional designs. A recent meta-analysis of longitudinal studies found only very weak relationships between participation in public religious activities ($r = .08$) or viewing religion as personally important ($r = .09$) and mental health (Garssen et al., 2020). This suggests that while religiosity may be useful for some individuals

coping with mental health issues it does not significantly prevent such issues developing.

Religion and Behavior

Religion, as a significant element of many individuals' lives, can affect people's behavior in many ways (Loewenthal, 2013; Nielsen et al., 2013). It does so through a wide variety of psychological and sociological mechanisms, many of which are only partially understood. Some of these effects are positive, while others are negative. The goal of this brief review is not to make an overall assessment of religion, it is simply to demonstrate religion remains an important and crucial topic for ongoing psychological investigation.

All the major religions encourage what they consider to be virtuous behavior in their adherents and religious individuals often cite religious reasons as their motivation for moral behavior and acts of compassion (Preston et al., 2013). For many religious individuals, this belief that religion is necessary to live a moral life leads to significant distrust of atheists (Gervais et al., 2011). However, despite considerable research into the links between religiosity and prosocial behaviors, the evidence for a connection is limited and mixed (see Preston et al., 2013; Saroglou, 2013). Some religious factors appear to influence some forms of prosocial behavior some of the time. This complexity is likely because of the many different ways and reasons that people are religious, as well as the many other social factors that influence prosocial behaviors (B. M. Hood, 2009; Preston et al., 2013). Saroglou (2013, p. 450) concludes that "religious prosociality is not a myth" but notes that it is usually limited to known people and in-group members rather than being unconditional and universal. The potential for religion to influence behavior positively in

certain circumstances suggests that further research into how and when it does so is necessary (Van Cappellen et al., 2016).

There are also a wide range of practical applications where religion can potentially be used to help individuals or encourage positive outcomes, including in therapeutic and educational contexts (see Pargament et al., 2013). Religion often provides moral standards for individuals and can enhance self-control and help people abstain from violating those rules (Zell & Baumeister, 2013). Religion can also provide individuals with goals and personally meaningful objectives, motivating them to strive towards them (Emmons & Schnitker, 2013). Some of these goals may be ‘purely religious’ aspirations, but more secular goals can also be ‘sanctified’ by religions, and this can encourage people to pursue a wide range of ambitions (Mahoney et al., 2005). These goals can be either beneficial or harmful, with potential consequences to the individual, their community, and the wider world.

Religion, Politics, and Violence

Religion can also have significant political impacts (Seiwert, 2016). By influencing both moral standards and individuals’ identities, religiosity can affect how people vote and their stances on a wide range of political issues. This can sometimes lead to significant and lasting political change. For example, the Protestant reformation helped trigger wide-reaching political changes in Europe, fueling the formation of independent countries and subsequent wars over faith, doctrine, and power (Cameron, 1991). More recently, Churches and religious

leaders like Martin Luther King played a crucial role in the US Civil Rights movement (J. A. Kirk, 2015), ultimately changing fundamental aspects of their society. Political leaders also sometimes use religion to take and solidify power. For example, Modi and the right-wing BJP have encouraged Hindu Nationalism in India (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018; Battaglia, 2017). The United States also has a long history of leaders using religion to secure victory at the ballot box (Baker, 2011; A. L. Whitehead & Perry, 2020).

Religion's role in providing moral standards and social norms for communities and societies (Zell & Baumeister, 2013) can also lead to it perpetuating various forms of inequality. Religious convictions may ultimately have contributed to the abolition of the slave trade (Quirk & Richardson, 2010), but for many centuries religions endorsed and actively supported not only slavery (Lovejoy, 2011), but also other strict social hierarchies (e.g., Guha, 2013). Strict and oppressive gender norms remain a feature of many religious communities (e.g., James-Hawkins et al., 2017; Kosmin & Lachman, 1993). Religious belief can also lead to opposition to LGBT rights (Rowatt et al., 2006) and reproductive rights (Hess & Rueb, 2005; Strickler & Danigelis, 2002). These forms of oppression can do real and lasting harm to individuals, even when they do not involve direct physical violence - although they often do (Sue, 2010). It is important to note that although some religious groups adopt these positions, others do not and instead use the same sacred texts to advocate for a more accepting and inclusive stance (Cavallo & Bradley, 2018; Kersten, 2019; Mahomed, 2016). Religion can be liberating or oppressive, but for many people it is far from irrelevant.

Sometimes religious identities form the visible dividing lines in conflicts and religion can inspire or fuel conflict (Seiwert, 2016). Unfortunately, there are so many

possible examples that only a few pertinent ones from the last century can be mentioned here. In Northern Ireland, violent conflict between Catholic and Protestant communities lasted approximately 30 years in the 20th Century, and killed over 3,500 people (L. Elliott, 2013; Smyth, 2017). The Jewish people have been the victim of centuries of antisemitism, culminating in the deaths of millions during the Holocaust (Hayes & Roth, 2010). Muslims have also been the victims of ethnic cleansing campaigns, such as those in the Bosnian War (Markusen & Mennecke, 2004; Temoney, 2017) and the ongoing Rohingya genocide in Myanmar (Beyrer & Kamarulzaman, 2017; Zakaria, 2019). Religious beliefs can both drive persecutions and also identify minorities for persecution. However, religion should not be viewed as the sole cause of these conflicts, but rather as part of wider social and cultural dynamics (Lowe & Muldoon, 2010). Understanding the way that experiences shape beliefs and beliefs shape actions is crucial to understanding these conflicts and perhaps helping to defuse similar ones in the future.

Islamist terrorism is perhaps the most salient form of religious violence in contemporary Britain, and the link between religious extremism and terrorism have become entrenched in media representations and public policy since 9/11 (Moghaddam et al., 2013). Groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram are responsible for many thousands of casualties around the world, including many Muslims (Celso, 2015; Kis-Katos et al., 2014). Terrorism, whether inspired by religion or other ideologies, is one of the most significant threats to national security and understanding the processes of radicalization has a vital role to play in mitigating it. A wide variety of factors are involved in an individual's journey to

violent extremism and it is important not to take an overly simplistic view that blames religion(s) for terrorism (Kluch & Vaux, 2017; McGilloway et al., 2015; Moghaddam et al., 2013). However, the importance they place on the religious justifications for their own actions should not be neglected. For groups like ISIS, their religion provides an important shared identity that is perceived as threatened and which they believe must be protected with force (Moghaddam et al., 2013). Religion involves a complex collection of social and psychological phenomena that can have significant consequences.

Implications

Religion and spirituality are an important part of many people's lives. They are linked to many aspects of their behavior and experiences. Understanding these connections is an important element of understanding religious and spiritual phenomena. A more holistic perspective, that does not neglect the wider context of people's lives, has the potential to generate richer and more useful insights than approaches that ignore the complex and connected nature of religious and spiritual phenomena.

The Psychological Study of Religion and Spirituality

The widespread nature of religion and its extensive impact across different domains means it has been studied extensively from many different perspectives and by many academic disciplines (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; R. W. Hood et al., 2009). Examples of the wide range of findings generated by different methodologies can be seen throughout this chapter. Religious Studies is inherently interdisciplinary and theologians, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and psychologists, have all devoted significant

resources to studying religious and spiritual phenomena (King, 2017; Stausberg & Gardiner, 2016). Historians, geographers, scholars of literature, and biomedical researchers also sometimes study religious or spiritual topics. Many researchers spend their lives studying particular religious communities or practices, while others only touch upon the topics as part of research into other phenomena. Rather than studying abstract religions, which are problematic reifications, we can only study particular humans in specific contexts and explore how they use religious ideas and practices within their lives (R. W. Hood et al., 2009). The rest of this section will focus on the approaches used in the psychological study of religion, although broader interdisciplinary insights often make important contributions to enhancing the quality of research and disciplinary boundaries can be quite porous.

Quantitative Approaches

Many studies within the psychology of religion use quantitative approaches and adopt positivist epistemologies (Aten & Hernandez, 2005; Coyle, 2008; Paloutzian, 2017). This reflects broader trends within psychology, particularly in North America, where a significant proportion of research into the psychology of religion has been conducted. R. W. Hood et al. (2009) reflect the sentiments of many psychologists of religion when they argue for the primacy of nomothetic (and mostly quantitative) methodologies within the psychology of religion, viewing them as more rigorous and scientific. This striving for scientific rigor is important and partially reflects a push against what Batson (1997) describes as ‘psychology for religion.’ The desire to find ‘scientific’ proof to support one’s beliefs can be

problematic and is especially acute in countries where specific religions are a dominant cultural influence. Clear and testable hypotheses are an important part of the scientific process and quantitative methodologies can make important contributions in this area when they are robust and rigorous (R. W. Hood & Belzen, 2013).

Quantitative approaches to studying religious and spiritual phenomena span a broad range of methodologies, including experimental and correlational studies (R. W. Hood & Belzen, 2013; Hood et al., 2018). Thousands of such studies have been conducted, but unfortunately the quality of many of them is relatively low, which means caution must be taken when interpreting their findings (Batson, 1997; Paloutzian, 2017). Good quality quantitative studies require strong designs and sufficient power to draw reliable conclusions (Judd & Sadler, 2003; Shadish & Sullivan, 2012). These weaknesses in many older studies are not unique to the psychology of religion. Key findings of many major psychological studies have not been reproduced in replication studies, demonstrating the need for studies to have sufficient power and use appropriate analytical tools to produce robust results (S. E. Maxwell et al., 2015; Open Science Collaboration, 2015).

Correlational study designs are common within the psychology of religion and, although they are limited, they can still be useful when investigating the associations between established variables and constructs (R. W. Hood & Belzen, 2013; Judd & Sadler, 2003). Correlational studies that use large datasets, particularly longitudinal ones, can be especially useful and provide important insights into phenomena that cannot be easily studied in other ways, such as long-term health effects (Park & Slattery, 2013). Using sources of 'big data' also has the potential to investigate issues at the population level,

enabling observations and analysis that would not otherwise be possible (Adjerid & Kelley, 2018; Harlow & Oswald, 2016).

Experimental and quasi-experimental designs are usually superior to correlational designs, as they enable a better understanding of causality and the relationship between variables to be developed (Gavin, 2008; Greenhoot, 2003; R. E. Kirk, 2013). Experimental designs involve the random assignments of subjects to groups and the manipulation of one or more independent variables (R. E. Kirk, 2013). Quasi-experimental designs are both useful when participants cannot be randomly assigned to groups, and such studies can have higher ecological validity than lab-based experiments (Greenhoot, 2003; R. W. Hood & Belzen, 2013). They can also be necessary to study topics where experimental designs may be unethical, such as studies of conversion (e.g., Murphy & Loewenthal, 2017). Experimental methods should continue to play an important role within the study of religion, but they are only one of a plurality of approaches that can produce useful findings (R. W. Hood & Belzen, 2013).

Many scales have been developed by psychologists of religion to measure a wide range of constructs (Hill, 2013). The quality of these varies significantly and many lack conceptual clarity and are culturally insensitive, developed using unrepresentative samples without adequate validation across broad settings (Hill, 2013). Relying on self-report measures can also be problematic as they often fail to distinguish between what the respondent says they believe or do, what the respondent thinks they believe or do, and what the respondent actually believes or does (Batson, 1997). Despite these limitations, Hill (2013) lists 66 commonly used

measures within the psychology of religion that appear reasonably robust and promising. These include measures of dispositional religiousness like the Beliefs and Values Scale (King et al., 2006) and measures of functional religiousness like the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (Underwood, 2011).

Studies within the psychology of religion that uses some of these measures are much stronger and there has been a noticeable increase in the sophistication and quality of research designs over recent years (Paloutzian, 2017). Multivariate approaches, that use suitably large samples, are capable of exploring the relationships between different constructs and can quantitatively map the complexity of phenomena. However, these approaches tend to show only whether, and to what extent, the variance in one thing is associated with variance in another and often leave the question of why or how two variables interact unanswered (J. A. Maxwell, 2013). When the effect sizes involved are only relatively small (and so much of the variance is left unexplained) the extent to which such models really explain phenomena is questionable. This does not mean that such approaches are not valuable or that they do not make crucial contributions to understanding phenomena, but it does mean that the understanding derived from them is often only partial.

Mixed-methods designs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) that combine qualitative and quantitative methods can develop richer and more complete understandings than studies that rely on single methods. Such a design was originally considered for this thesis but adopting a mixed-methods approach would have broadened the scale of the project too much. As discussed subsequently (pp. 44-45, 130-135) there are other ways to combine the benefits and insights of different research approaches other than to combine them all in a single study or set of studies.

Qualitative Approaches

Qualitative studies are becoming increasingly popular in both psychology as a whole and the psychology of religion (R. W. Hood et al., 2018; Patton, 2015). However, there remains considerable controversy about exactly what sort of knowledge qualitative studies can generate. The traditional view that qualitative studies are primarily descriptive, and not explanatory, remains widely held but has been contested by some qualitative researchers for decades (J. A. Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 2015). This position argues that “direct, critical observation yields causal understanding” (Patton, 2015, p. 585) and suggests that such observation can occur in both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This theoretical position suggests that qualitative approaches are often more capable than quantitative ones of exploring process-focused questions, such as understanding the meaning of events, understanding the context of and influences on people’s actions, understanding the processes by which events take place, and developing causal explanations for phenomena (J. A. Maxwell, 2004, 2013). This is because qualitative research is often more capable of observing and recording rich data about how processes unfold and the ways that people interpret them.

The deeper insights and richer understanding that qualitative research approaches can generate makes them particularly useful for developing theories and exploring the complexity of many phenomena (R. W. Hood et al., 2009; J. A. Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Studies that use rich data to make explicit comparisons, including explorations of discrepant evidence and the triangulation of findings from different data sources, can generate understandings that go beyond

simply producing descriptive accounts of phenomena (J. A. Maxwell, 2004, 2013; Patton, 2015). The conclusions that can be drawn from individual qualitative studies are often limited in their applications, but synthesizing multiple studies can help develop a strong understanding of phenomena and develop theories about them (Paterson et al., 2001; Suri & Clarke, 2009). Such studies, which often have realist rather than positivist foundations (J. A. Maxwell, 2004), should be valued and evaluated on their own terms rather than being denigrated for not subscribing to epistemologies that they explicitly reject.

There is a vast array of different qualitative methodologies that can use different types of data and methods of analysis to explore different research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Lyons & Coyle, 2007; Patton, 2015). These often also make different ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of the world and their object(s) of study (Coyle, 2007b). Appreciating these distinctions is important, as they often have significant implications for the findings of a study. Using an appropriate methodology for the research question(s) is vital to ensuring the quality of a study (Coyle, 2008; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). A full discussion of qualitative methodologies useful in the psychological study of religion is beyond the scope of this thesis (see Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017, for a more comprehensive overview.)

There is a need for more qualitative and idiographic approaches in the psychology of religion (E. B. Davis & Tisdale, 2016; R. W. Hood & Belzen, 2013). In the UK, qualitative methodologies are now part of the psychological 'mainstream' and the important contribution they can make to understanding a wide range of issues is recognized (Coyle, 2008; Frost, 2011). However, as noted above, the psychology of religion remains dominated by quantitative approaches (Aten & Hernandez, 2005; Coyle, 2008; E. B. Davis

& Tisdale, 2016). Qualitative methodologies can move beyond the often superficial questions asked by quantitative studies and investigate the complexity of the underlying phenomena and how they are shaped by myriad influences. Exploring multifaceted processes, with multi-layered meanings from multiple perspectives that are shaped by their contexts, is a strength of qualitative research and is desperately needed to understand religious or spiritual phenomena (E. B. Davis & Tisdale, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A much wider range of qualitative methods should be used to explore religious and spiritual phenomena, with different methodologies suited to investigating different questions.

The Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm

Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) have proposed the complex, pervasive and contested nature of religious and spiritual phenomena mean that a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (MLIP) is necessary to adequately study them. This recognizes that a wide range of different types of data and analysis can all help develop a better understanding of particular phenomena. They suggest research should be conducted exploring issues at a range of different levels and from different perspectives. These findings should then be related to each other and integrated, so that meaningful and practical knowledge is developed (Paloutzian & Park, 2013).

The triangulation of a broad range of findings from different contexts and using different tools can develop a stronger theoretical understanding of phenomena and enhance confidence in the findings (Paterson et al., 2001). The integration and

triangulation of findings from different methodologies and disciplines should also be part of the research process of individual studies, with researchers making connections more broadly within their discussions. Meta-studies, of various kinds, can also bring together diverse findings and develop richer insights into phenomena (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006).

Research conducted within the MLIP must be rigorous and robust, but also aware of its own limitations. Different methodologies enable different research questions to be addressed (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2008). The implications of assumptions made within particular studies should be carefully considered both as part of good study design and also when they are integrated with other studies (Paterson et al., 2001). Sensitivity to the beliefs of participants (and researchers) is important, but this should not hinder strong etic analysis, where it is appropriate for the methodology. Studies should also be careful not to be overly reductionist and should be open to a range of interpretations of their findings (R. W. Hood & Belzen, 2013). A fractionating approach (White, 2017) can help ensure that individual studies retain sufficient focus and avoid overgeneralizing phenomena. This may limit the scope of claims that can be made within particular pieces of work but ultimately will enrich the field by ensuring that there is a strong evidence base for the claims that are made. It is especially important to be aware of the epistemological limitations of methodologies when dealing with nebulous constructs that often have great significance to many. However, as the following section will discuss, careful work exploring the connections between different phenomena or aspects of phenomena is also needed.

Implications

Religious and spiritual phenomena can be studied using a wide range of different methodological approaches. Each approach has different strengths and can make different contributions to our understanding. Qualitative studies can inductively explore the connections between different aspects of individuals' lives and experiences. The insights they can develop are necessary to generate richer and more useful understandings of phenomena deemed religious or spiritual.

Worldviews and Experiences Deemed Spiritual or Religious

Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a widely used concept, both in popular and academic discourse, yet it is difficult to define satisfactorily, despite many attempts to do so (R. W. Hood et al., 2009; Oman, 2013; Stausberg & Gardiner, 2016). Yinger (1967, p. 18) noted that "any definition of religion is likely to be satisfactory only to its author" yet even this seems optimistic as many authors acknowledge the weaknesses and limitations of the definitions they use. Religion is not a singular thing but is rather an often misleading and complex reification of similar (and less similar) ideas in the minds of different individuals (Guthrie, 1996). As Taves (2009, 2013) shows, the range of objects, ideas, and practices which are considered religious or sacred is so broad and varied that we should only speak about objects or concepts that are considered sacred within particular cultural contexts. A more functionalist approach (Oman, 2013), that focuses on the purposes of 'religious' phenomena rather than their inherent nature, is necessary to explore religiosity across a range of traditions

and cultures. This often requires a step away from emic traditions, particularly the predominantly Christian understanding of religion that has shaped much of the academic discourse about religion (Fitzgerald, 2000). It is also important that research examines the lived religions of individuals and groups (M. B. McGuire, 2008) rather than just the ‘official’ doctrines of organized groups, as often individuals believe things that are ‘theologically incorrect’ (Slone, 2004) or mutually incongruent (Chaves, 2010).

The conceptualization of spirituality as something distinct from, or complementary to, religion has become increasingly common in both the public imagination and academic literature. Beit-Hallahmi (2014) traces the emergence of this distinction to the rise of the New Age movement in the 20th Century and he suggests that prior to this spiritual practices have existed primarily within religious traditions for thousands of years. Distinctions between spirituality and religion have been made using various criteria (see R. W. Hood et al., 2009) but the criteria used are problematic and usually based on relatively limited conceptions of each term. For example, Gorsuch (1993) distinguishes between personalized spirituality and institutionalized religion, which reflects the emic understanding of many who identify as ‘spiritual but not religious’ (Mercadante, 2014). However, such an approach is problematic when viewed from a more global or historical perspective, as many cultures do not have a centralized, institutional religious authority and understand the boundaries between the personal and the communal very differently (Fitzgerald, 2000).

Even within contemporary Europe and North America, distinguishing religion and spirituality is at least problematic, if not entirely unjustified. The theoretical merits of such distinctions have been widely critiqued within religious studies, but much psychological research continues to use constructs that can be dangerously misleading. Multiple recent

studies, using a range of methodologies, have shown that although both ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ often have different nuances for particular people, the distinctions have little analytical value as each concept is so broad and they overlap significantly. Zinnbauer et al. (1999) and Kapuscinski and Masters (2010) both warn about the dangers of polarizing religion and spirituality. On the basis of their own work and broader developments in the field, Streib and Hood (2016) have recently argued that there is no longer any reason to distinguish between religion and spirituality as etic categories, though they may still be useful as emic labels, a position with which I concur. The following paragraph summarizes some key studies that support this position.

Gall et al. (2011) explored the definitions of spirituality and religiousness shared by 234 participants from a wide range of nationalities. They concluded that the relationship between the two terms was dynamic and shifting, with each having complex and changing meanings that were influenced by cultural factors such as religious heritage, nationality, and age. A cross-cultural semantic differential analysis (Keller et al., 2013), using 1,785 participants from Germany and the United States, also found there was considerable overlap between the concepts of religion and spirituality and that cultural factors were a strong influence on definitions given. They found that when conceptions of spirituality were removed from religion, almost nothing was left, further suggesting they form a single category. La Cour et al. (2012) studied the definitions of spirituality given by 514 Danish participants and found they were so broad that the term was almost meaningless. They identified six main understandings of the term, some of which were explicitly

contradictory, but even combined they explained only 32% of the variance in their model. A study of conceptions of spirituality among a large, representative sample (n=2,313) of the Dutch population identified eleven components that overlapped with constructs from religion, psychology, and philosophy, yet had no common core but only a ‘family resemblance’ (Berghuijs et al., 2013). Ammerman (2013) conducted an inductive and discursive analysis with 95 participants in the US and concluded the distinctions between religion and spirituality were primarily about “moral boundary work” with linguistic and political, rather than conceptual, differences. These studies suggest that, at least in Europe and North America, the distinctions between religiosity and spirituality have little etic value. The supernatural, paranormal, magical, and superstitious all also have extensive overlaps with each other (Lindeman & Svedholm, 2012). As Taves (2015) suggests, they should also be seen as part of the same broader concept as religion and spirituality.

Identifying religion and spirituality as part of a single overlapping concept leaves two key issues unresolved. One, to which we will return later, is what to call this combined concept (see pp. 57-64). The other, more pressing, concern is how to distinguish this broad category from that which is secular or not religious.

The Sacred and the Profane

As noted above, objects and concepts are only sacred within specific contexts (Taves, 2009) and spirituality is an expansive concept that can include ostensibly secular activities such as music, dance, art, experience of nature, and experiences of communal belonging (Parsons, 2018). The boundaries between the sacred and the secular can also be nebulous within the lives of those who identify as religious (Ammerman, 2014) - with

elements of religious meaning created through interactions that may occur in almost any context. Similar events can be interpreted as either sacred, secular, or both depending on the psychological acts of the individuals involved. Just as attributions of cause and intent are determined by a range of contextual factors in everyday events (S. H. Jones et al., 2019; Shaver, 1975), there are many influences that can help determine whether religious or spiritual attributions are made for a particular event or experience. These include characteristics of the individual, aspects of the experience itself, and the contexts in which they occur (Rizzuto, 1981, 1991; Spilka et al., 1985). The importance of this complexity is often overlooked in research designs that force individuals to describe their experiences or beliefs in rigid categories.

As Fitzgerald (2000, 2017) has argued, the distinctions drawn between the religious and the secular are often political in nature. Identifying something as religious (or otherwise) is an act of power and also bestows power upon a group or institution. For religious institutions, this creates a safe domain where beliefs and other aspects of a group's core identity are protected and may also have legal benefits, such as tax advantages or exemptions from equalities laws. However, the creation of a religious sphere also inherently creates another sphere that is 'not religious' and which can provide a degree of comfort and the appearance of increased rationality for those who reject or compartmentalize religion. The distinction between the religious and the secular is both a political and a theological act that reflects the cultural heritage of the West, and is not found in many other cultures, such as Islam (Murata & Chittick, 2011). The conceptual distinctions

between what (J. E. E. Smith, 1994) called ‘quasi-religions’, such as Humanism and Nationalisms, and ‘religions proper’ are primarily a reflection of these political and theological influences. As J. E. E. Smith (1994) noted, these worldviews still provide explanations about the world and offer implicit soteriologies to deliver humanity from their perceptions of evil. Bailey (1999) suggested that individuals’ implicit religion, whether or not they viewed it as explicitly religious, offered an integrating focus and object(s) of commitment to them with extensive effects throughout their lives. Personally meaningful myths, rituals, and experiences of transcendence are the key features of both implicit and explicit religiosity (Schnell, 2012). Focusing on how these three elements shape individual’s experiences of themselves and the world may develop more insight than focusing on the emic distinctions groups make.

Defining ‘non-religion’ is also problematic because it is a semantically parasitic category that inherently relies upon a definition of religion (Fitzgerald, 2017; L. Lee, 2015). The somewhat arbitrary and historically contingent nature of the categories ‘religion’ and ‘non-religion’ mean care must be taken when using them, but they can still be useful or even necessary for exploring many research questions (L. Lee, 2015; Oman, 2013). For example, exploring why increasing numbers of individuals in Europe identify as not religious is important. Similarly, understanding the effects of Islamophobia can have important practical applications (Kaya, 2014; Kunst et al., 2012). Religious and non-religious identities, social groups, and practices are all important objects to research, but for such research to be valid and useful the limitations of the conceptual distinctions between the categories must be appreciated. Religion is not simply something that is ‘added on’ to an inherently secular ‘base’ but both individuals who identify as religious and those who do

not construct complex and integrated understandings of themselves and the world (Taylor, 2007).

Although at an etic level it is problematic to draw a clear distinction between the religious, the spiritual, and the secular these differences are important at an emic level. For many, their religion is an important aspect of how they view themselves and religious groups often provide key social identities for their members (R. W. Hood et al., 2009; Moghaddam et al., 2013; Nielsen et al., 2013). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests the groups that individuals identify with can have a profound impact on how they view themselves and others. Social identifications can shape how individuals act and think, encouraging them to enhance the status of their own group and diminishing those of rivals (Hogg & Abrams, 2007). Religions are more than just social identities and social groups, but they are both. This helps explain why religious groups continue to distinguish themselves from each other, even when they are quite similar (Fitzgerald, 2000; R. W. Hood et al., 2009). Studying these social processes of identity formation is critical to understanding religious groups, and it is important to respect the importance that these identities have to individuals, even while adopting a critical stance to their study.

A Meaning Systems Approach

One solution to the problems with conceptualizing religion discussed above is to adopt a meaning-systems approach to religiosity and spirituality (Paloutzian & Park, 2013). A meaning-systems approach (Park, 2013; Silberman, 2005) to the study of religion builds on the work of James (1902/2004), Durkheim (1912/2008), Geertz (1973), and others. It recognizes that making sense of the world, by constructing a sufficiently accurate mental model of our environment from our experiences of it, is a fundamental function of our brains and a key part of human nature (Kegan, 1982). These mental models contain both physical and social elements, as the world contains other agents and objects. Meaning systems are comprehensive systems of beliefs, both reflective and non-reflective, that generate thoughts and behaviors (Barrett & Lanman, 2008; Lanman, 2008).

Humans learn from both their own experiences and those around them not only during infancy but also throughout their lives (Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1971; Jost & Kruglanski, 2002). These social and cultural influences guide how individuals perceive, interpret, and remember events (Luhmann, 1991, 2012; Newman & Lindsay, 2009). These meaning systems meet important needs of the individual and people work to maintain their sources of meaning (Heine et al., 2006). These meaning systems are far more than just a collection of explicit beliefs and are also idiosyncratic, with each individual constructing their own from their experiences and cultural influences (Silberman, 2005). Individuals' meaning systems can have substantial consequences, as the choices they make are determined by their understanding of the world and the expected outcomes of those choices. Whether a particular belief is accurate or not often does not matter. As the Thomas Theorem states, "If men [*sic*] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"

(W. I. Thomas & Thomas, 1928, pp. 571-572). The social realities of individuals and groups (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) shape their experiences and behavior.

There is a strong survival advantage to having a sufficiently accurate model of the world, though a system that errs on the side of caution is likely to be most advantageous — and these hyperactive agent detection systems may be an underlying cause of belief in supernatural beings (Boyer, 2002).

Park (2011) suggests meaning systems can be viewed at two levels, the situational and the global. Global meaning systems are the core schemas that people use to interpret their experiences. They include beliefs, goals, and subjective feelings of meaningfulness and purpose. They provide a framework for understanding individual situations and interpretations of individual events and their significance creates situational meaning. Much research into meaning in life and meaningfulness in life (e.g., Hicks & King, 2009; Martela & Steger, 2016) operates at this level of situational meaning, and understanding how people make sense of individual experiences is clearly important. However, exploring the global meaning systems that help create these situational meanings is important to develop an understanding of how lived religion and other beliefs affect people's lives. If global meaning systems provide the basis for situational meaning, then understanding how these mental models of the world develop can have wide-reaching significance.

Paloutzian and Park (2013, p. 12) argue that a meaning systems approach to the study of religion and spirituality is “capable of containing the whole span of research topics and dialogue within the psychology of religion.” However, despite this, they note that relatively little research has approached the topics from this

perspective and that problematic conceptualizations continue to dominate the field. Hood et al. (2018) also suggest that ‘meaning-making’ can provide the overarching framework for understanding the psychology of religion. Drawing on the work discussed above, they observe that “people need to make sense out of the world in order to live and to adapt; it must be made meaningful” (Hood et al., 2018, p. 18). Hood et al. (2018) suggest that three of the most promising theoretical approaches to the psychological study of religion can be subsumed under this meaning-making approach: Attribution theory, religious coping, and religious development. Hood et al. (2018) also note that people’s search for meaning is social and relational; religion fosters social groups and these social groups strengthen the religious ideas that help constitute the groups.

Extending the Meaning Systems Approach

As discussed above, a clear distinction between religious and non-religious phenomena is problematic, and research from a meaning systems perspective should be mindful of these difficulties (Murphy, 2017). Park et al. (2013, p. 157) suggest the “deeply rooted need for a functional meaning system underlies the highly prevalent embrace of religion across time and place.” ‘Religious’ meaning systems may provide answers to existential questions that purely materialistic ones cannot (Park et al., 2013; Silberman, 2005). Many religions offer a degree of certainty and security that secular alternatives cannot and Hood et al. (2018) suggest this may make them uniquely effective as sources of meaning. If one marker of an effective meaning system is its ability to provide what the individual considers to be a sufficient explanation for events then for many religious meaning systems may indeed have an advantage over secular ones. However, not all

individuals develop religious meaning systems and Park et al. (2013) offer several possible explanations for this. Perhaps, they suggest, not everyone needs answers to existential questions to function sufficiently in the world - a possibility supported by L. Lee's (2015) research into those who identify as not-religious. Religious meaning systems may also not be as good at providing adequate answers to existential questions as they claim to be - and there is ample evidence supporting that many people reject religions for precisely this reason (e.g., Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Sheard, 2014; Streib & Keller, 2004). There seems little doubt that the strength of the truth claims made by any particular religious tradition are weaker in a globalized world than they are in more monocultural societies. However, the traditional secularization hypothesis, which argues for a continuing and inevitable decline of religiosity, is significantly flawed (Gorski, 2003) and the situation is more complex.

A third suggestion Park et al. (2013, p. 165) propose is that perhaps "even secular worldviews are religious in character, in that they are also unverifiable and can provide many of the same meaning provision functions... in which case our definition of religion itself is at fault." As discussed previously, creating an etic distinction between the religious and the secular is problematic (see pp. 49-52) and a more expansive understanding of religiosity and meaning systems resolves this problem. The fundamental underlying similarities between 'religious' and 'secular' meaning systems is a critical point and has significant consequences for our understanding of both religiosity and how people make sense of themselves and their worlds. If beliefs are simply things that people hold as true and use to guide

their thoughts and actions (Barrett & Lanman, 2008) then a clear distinction at the non-reflective level between religious and other understandings seems unlikely.

Conceptualizing different types of meaning systems, which are emically distinguished, as part of a broader process that is a human universal has the potential to help understand both how they form and their implications more fully (Murphy, 2017; Taves et al., 2018). This approach can help explain why individuals often have multifaceted and contradictory beliefs (Chaves, 2010; Slone, 2004). People encounter contradictory ideas and explanations during their lives which they must integrate as best they can and the ways they do so often defy neat categorization. Emic distinctions can help understand how individuals make sense of their worlds, but they do not always fully reflect the underlying phenomena and they are shaped by a wide range of social and cultural influences (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Religious ideas are complex social constructions that can be woven through an adherent's life, and these ideas are an integral part of religious phenomena rather than discrete and objective understandings of religious phenomena.

From Meaning Systems to Worldviews

During the early stages of this project, including the methodological development and the collection of data, the research was guided by Park and Paloutzian's (2013) 'Meaning Systems' understanding of religion. However, five years is a relatively long time in an active field of research and developments during this period required further refinement and reframing of how the research was conceptualized. This only had a minimal impact on the analysis itself because IPA grounds itself within the data itself rather than broader theoretical constructions and theories (Smith et al., 2009). However, this shift to a

broader perspective both helps understand the phenomena being studied and increases the applicability of the research.

The term worldview, or *Weltanschauung*, has a long history that can be traced back to Immanuel Kant and includes several quite distinct approaches (see Taves and Asprem, 2018.) Jung used *Weltanschauung* to describe both an individual's "conception of the world... but also the way in which one views the world" (Jung, 1931/1960, p. 358). Jung argued both religion and philosophy could provide the basis for *Weltanschauung* and that they emerged out of a synthesis of social experiences and the processes of the psyche. This individualist approach contrasts with that taken by Smart (1983) and others, who advocated for the use of 'worldview' as a more encompassing term to describe the collective belief systems that are more commonly called religions. This tension between approaches that focus on individual minds and between the shared perspectives of societies continues to be a source of ambiguity and misunderstandings about the term. However, personal 'worldviews' and collective 'Worldviews' are inextricably linked to each other, with collective Worldviews offering accessible and comprehensive answers to existential questions (Hood et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2011).

Johnson et al. (2011) argue that worldviews provide a useful framework for understanding how both individuals and groups make sense of the world, integrating understandings of culture and religion. They identify ontology, epistemology, semiotics, axiology, teleology, and praxeology as the six key aspects of this encompassing conception. Taves and Asprem (2018) advocate for a similar

understanding of worldviews that includes ontology, epistemology, axiology and praxeology but which includes cosmology rather than semiotics and teleology. The answers to these different ‘big questions’ are usually intertwined. Beliefs about what is good and how people should act are connected to broader understandings of what is real and true. These understandings are created and communicated through language, stories, and other symbols. Taves et al. (2018) also observe that worldviews can be either implicit and unarticulated or explicit and articulated. To develop a fuller understanding of how people make sense of the world and themselves it is necessary to include all these areas (Droogers, 2014; Taves et al., 2018).

The similarities between Park’s global meaning systems and worldviews are sufficiently strong that Lewis Hall and Hill (2019) consider them the same (although they refer to them as her ‘global orienting systems’). They are both terms to describe an individual’s beliefs about the world that help them make sense of their experiences. As Taves and Asprem (2018, p. 304) also argue, meaning systems researchers include “beliefs (regarding the world, the self, and the self-in-world), goals, and subjective sense of meaning or purpose” within global meaning systems and as these can be either explicit or implicit global meaning systems “encompasses both worldviews and ways of life.”

Taves and Asprem (2018) argue that shifting to a focus on ‘worldviews’ as the operative analytical concept enables comparative and explanatory work that can examine the interplay between worldviews and everyday ways of life without needing to worry about defining religion or how individuals define themselves. Taves et al. (2018) suggests researchers focus on understanding ‘worldview dynamics’, the meaning making processes through which “people produce, use and reproduce repertoires of meaning, according to

circumstance, within or outside the boundaries of [particular] ‘cultures’ (in the plural sense), and using their own strategies in dealing with the powers that be” (Droogers, 2014, p. 21).

In the last few years there has also been a significant shift to focus on ‘worldviews’ rather than ‘religions’ within the UK education system (Commission on Religious Education, 2018). This change is important and, if it continues to be widely adopted, means that ‘worldview’ terminology is likely to become increasingly effective in communicating the concepts being discussed here. Worldview terminology, rather than explicitly meaning-focused terms, is therefore both more useful conceptually and more useful for communicating with academics in other disciplines and the broader public. These two points led me to adopt its use, while remaining focused on how individuals understand their experiences and create meaning in their lives.

Worldviews and Culture

Although many people identify as belonging to social groups that share collective worldviews, each individual develops their own idiosyncratic and personal worldview based on the cultural resources available to them and their own experiences (Johnson et al., 2011; Taves et al., 2018). L. Lee (2015) classifies the broad groups of ‘existential cultures’ that individuals can draw on into five categories: humanist, agnostic, theist, subjectivist, and anti-existential. However, her research shows individuals often do not fit neatly into single categories and often combine elements from more than one (cf. Chaves, 2010). L. Lee’s (2015)

categories of existential cultures are very broad and even within a single category, such as theism, different individuals can have very divergent understandings. The syncretism and incongruence shown in her data demonstrates how individuals learn to understand themselves and the world using a wide range of cultural resources. It also shows there is often significant diversity of belief and practice within both individuals and groups (cf. Johnson et al., 2011; Slone, 2004).

Distributive or epistemological understandings of culture (Sperber, 1996; Wallace, 1970) can help explain how individuals develop their own personal worldviews using the resources available to them. Cultures are not fixed groups of people and are not homogeneous across individuals within groups. Instead, cultures are pools of ideas, values, and practices that are distributed across a society and societies tend to be collections of partially overlapping subcultures (Saucier, 2019). Saucier argues religions can be viewed as packages of cultural contents and that religiousness is a prime cultural variant. He suggests that personality tendencies and differing experiences help explain the diversity of belief and practice between different individuals. Recognizing that most individuals can draw on multiple cultural resources to help them make sense of their experiences and develop their personal worldviews shows why it is important to sensitively explore the contents, as well as the functions, of people's beliefs (cf. Lewis Hall & Hill, 2019).

Worldview Dynamics and Meaning-Making

Hood et al. (2018) propose that 'meaning-making' can provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychology of religion. Following Park (2005), they describe meaning-making as the processes that restore (and create) global meaning systems.

These meaning-making processes are essentially the same as what Taves et al. (2018) describe as worldview dynamics, the processes by which people create, sustain, and change elements of their worldviews. Hood et al. (2018) identify several major theories that have been extensively used within the psychological study of religion that can be subsumed within a meaning-making paradigm (and thus also within a worldview-focused approach.) Most notably, this includes research on attribution theory and on religion coping.

Attribution theory (Hood et al., 2018; Spilka et al., 1985) is concerned with how people develop explanations for events and experiences. It is therefore, as Hood et al. (2018) observe, a theory of meaning making that focuses on the influence of situational and dispositional factors. Research suggests that religious attributions are often triggered when meaning is unclear, control is in doubt, and self-esteem is threatened (Hood et al., 2018). The salience of religion in the event's context is also important (Hood et al., 2018).

Hood et al. (2018) suggest the need for meaning is linked to the need for mastery and control. They suggest that attributing distressing events to a divine cause reduces the sense of uncertainty and helplessness that individuals feel when facing them, providing people with the strength they need in challenging times. However, attributions of events to different causes are only part of the meaning-making process and a more inclusive and integrated perspective is required to develop a fuller understanding of how people make sense of the world (Hood et al., 2018).

Another extensive area of research that Hood et al. (2018) identify as being fundamentally concerned with meaning making is the literature on religious coping. This literature's focus is on how individuals use religious resources to help them cope with traumatic or challenging events. Pargament (1997) suggests that people engaged in coping are searching for significance, where significance is understood to include a unified and holistic set of values, beliefs, and feelings about oneself, others, and the world. As Hood et al. (2018) note, coping is therefore fundamentally part of the meaning-making process. When meaning and/or control are challenged, threatened, or lost, people need to find a way to make the event, and the rest of their lives, meaningful and religious tools are often effective at helping people do so.

Research into religious coping has found that different people use religious resources to cope in different ways, and that how they use these resources can affect the outcomes they experience. Pargament (1997) identified different approaches to religious coping based on how much control of the situation the individual concerned gives to God. Collaborative and self-directive styles of coping, which have a more internal locus of control, appear to be more beneficial, with more positive coping outcomes, than deferring styles that place responsibility entirely in the hands of God (Hood et al., 2018). A review by Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2015) found that religious coping was common in virtually all religious traditions but that, despite some commonalities, there were also distinct variations between different faith traditions. They also found that both positive and negative religious coping techniques were widely used, although groups other than U.S. Christians used positive religious coping techniques more frequently than negative ones.

Facing challenging or traumatic experiences can be a source of religious doubt (Helfaer, 1972; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997) but it can also strengthen individuals' faith. Successful meaning-making attempts after traumatic events can be good for psychological health and can encourage posttraumatic growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005). Collicutt McGrath (2011) argues that grappling with existential questions is an integral part of dealing with trauma, as trauma often shatters core assumptions about the world and an individual's place in it. Successfully rebuilding a coherent and meaningful understanding of the world is a hallmark of posttraumatic growth and the interconnections between spirituality and posttraumatic growth mean that each can be considered aspects of the other (Collicutt McGrath, 2011; Tedeschi et al., 2017). The changes in individuals' worldviews following traumatic experiences are therefore likely to be particularly important, although more mundane experiences can also prompt profound reappraisals (Taves and Asprem, 2018).

Hood et al. (2018) also identify social relationships as being of central importance to understanding people's meaning-making processes. They note that there is often a circular pattern to the relationship between people's social lives and their religious faith; religion creates social groups and being part of religious social groups strengthens religious beliefs. People create meaning together and shared beliefs are often seen as more credible and convincing than beliefs that few others also hold (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Lanman, 2012; L. Lee, 2015). Both attribution theory and religious coping theory acknowledge the importance of other people in meaning-making processes (Hood et al., 2018).

Experiences Deemed Spiritual and/or Religious

For many individuals who describe themselves as religious or spiritual, experiences of that which they consider sacred are a central part of their faith and lives (R. W. Hood, 1995; Paloutzian, 2017; Taves, 2009). Anomalous, extraordinary, or mystical experiences are often considered compelling evidence for supernatural beliefs by those who have them (B. M. Hood, 2009) and substantive definitions of religion are based upon them (Fontana, 2003; Oman, 2013; Stark, 1997). As discussed above (see pp. 49-52), such categorizations are problematic, but the experiences of so many individuals should not be ignored. Scholars should both analyze the social, discursive, and biological conditions that make such experiences possible and study how such discourses achieve social work (Martin, 2016). Understanding these experiences and the relationship between them and individuals' beliefs and worldviews is a central concern of this thesis.

Jung (1938/1969b), A. N. Whitehead (1974), Rappaport (1999), and many others have argued convincingly that religious experiences are fundamental to both religions and cultures. As Jung (1938/1969b, p. 9) put it, "creeds are codified and dogmatized forms of original religious experience." If this is the case, understanding these experiences is fundamental to understanding both religion and culture. Religious or spiritual experiences can have profound and lasting effects on how individuals and groups live their lives and experience the world (Paloutzian et al., 1999; Taves, 2017). B. M. Hood (2009) suggests people's own personal experiences are the number one reason they believe in the supernatural.

Almost any experience that humans can have may be interpreted as an experience of God (R. W. Hood et al., 2009; Leech, 1985; Rizzuto, 1991; Taves, 2009). It is the

interpretation and contextualization of an event within a religious or spiritual narrative that determines whether the event is related to whatever an individual considers sacred, be that God or the spirits of their ancestors. This process of interpretation is an inherent part of the 'religious experience' and relies on discursive frameworks from the individual's cultural context (Sharf, 2000). As Taves (2009) argues, it is therefore more useful to speak about "experiences that are deemed sacred" (or religious/spiritual) than to speak of religious experiences. Spilka et al. (1985) identified some of the different influences that shape whether an event is attributed to 'religious' or 'naturalistic' causes. These influences can be grouped into four broad groups: the characteristics and context of the event itself, and the characteristics and context of the individual making the attribution. Seeing a bright light while praying quietly for guidance is likely to be understood very differently than the same sensations occurring while fatigued on a crowded tube train.

Rizzuto (1991, p. 47) concludes that "religious experiences are subjective, private instances of attribution of religious meaning to events, behaviors, and psychic act." On the basis of a series of insightful case studies, she argues that the convincing reality of religious experiences is the result of private (psychic) experiences, often of intense emotional strength, combining with a public (communal) source of consensus that the divine is real, important and experienced in particular ways (Rizzuto, 1981). These cultural descriptions of supernatural agents are intuitively plausible to most people (Boyer, 2002). Taves' (2017) historical case studies also show the importance of supportive groups in the

development of new religious ideas and movements from religious or spiritual experiences.

Conversion experiences, and other significant spiritual transformations, have been perennial topics of interest for psychologists of religion for more than a century (Sandage & Moe, 2013). Such experiences can be profoundly life-altering. The classic paradigm focused primarily on dramatic experiences that led to sudden change, but the more contemporary approach recognizes that such change can also be more gradual (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981; Rambo, 1993). Conversion experiences often have little effect on basic personality traits but can significantly alter people's goals, values, motivations, and behaviors as well as making second-order perceptual and belief changes (Paloutzian et al., 1999). This research has generally focused on either conversion between religious traditions or 'switching' between different denominations of the same religion, although much of the literature also acknowledges that multiple transformations can occur (Sandage & Moe, 2013; Streib & Keller, 2004). The research has also been overly focused on Christian samples (Sandage & Moe, 2013).

Mystical experiences are a subset of spiritual experiences that involve altered consciousness, with the mystic experiencing a sense of extreme unity with the universe or god (R. W. Hood, 2005; Wulff, 2000). Mystical experiences are often, though not always, associated with extended practice by the mystic. The most common triggers for such experience are depression and despair, the arts, religious practices, and natural beauty (Fontana, 2003; Hardy, 1979). The apparent similarities between these experiences, across different traditions, have led some common-core theorists, such as (Stace, 1960), to argue that mystical experiences reflect the true root of a universal spirituality. However, mystical experiences do involve significant cultural variation and are less universal than has

sometimes been suggested (Fontana, 2003; Kroll & Bachrach, 2006). Mystical experiences are also associated with other paranormal phenomena, though cultural factors are important in determining which forms of paranormal or mystical phenomena an individual experiences or believes in (R. W. Hood & Chen, 2013). It is likely that common neurological processes may be occurring during mystical experiences and brain imagining studies has shown these experiences are complex and multidimensional, involving many regions of the brain (Beauregard, 2012; McNamara, 2014; Newberg, 2012). Identifying these regions does not allow reductive or causal conclusions to be drawn about the experiences but does suggest that a combination of social, cognitive and emotional processes are involved (McNamara & Butler, 2013; Newberg, 2012).

Much of the research investigating mystical and other spiritual experiences has focused on either their causes or their associations with other variables, such as psychological well-being (R. W. Hood & Chen, 2013). Numerous quantitative measures have been developed to investigate them. The most widely used include the Religious Experiences Episode Measure (REEM; R. W. Hood, 1970), Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES; Underwood, 2011), the Spiritual Experiences Index-Revised (Genia, 1997), and the Index of Core Spiritual Experiences (INSPIRIT; Kass et al., 1991). These experiences are associated with intrinsic religiosity (e.g., R. W. Hood, 1970; Kass et al., 1991) and may be connected to many of the effects of religiosity and spirituality (see pp. 31-37). Studies using these measures have found robust positive associations with psychological wellbeing, primarily due to increasing positive affect (e.g., Ellison & Fan, 2008; Underwood,

2011). Daily Spiritual Experiences are associated with reduced burnout for medical practitioners (Holland & Neimeyer, 2005) and with teachers in England finding their work more meaningful (Woods, 2007). Studies have also found associations between mystical or spiritual experiences and a number of individual differences such as transliminality (Ghorbani et al., 2014; Thalbourne & Delin, 1999), absorption (Granqvist et al., 2012; Luhrmann et al., 2010), suggestibility (Granqvist et al., 2005), and disorganized attachment styles (Granqvist et al., 2012).

These associations can help us understand various aspects of spiritual and mystical experiences, but the usefulness of the measures for exploring the relationship between experiences and beliefs is limited. Numerous items on the scales appear to be more general measures of religious commitment and/or belief, and the high internal consistencies found in the validations of the scales suggests this is a significant aspect of what is being measured by them. For example, the DSES includes items for finding strength and comfort in religion (or spirituality) as well as feeling God's love (Underwood, 2011). Many of these items also overlap with concepts used in common measures of belief, such as the Beliefs and Values Scale (M. King et al., 2006) and the Belief Inventory (Holland et al., 1998). This conceptual overlap, the lack of specificity in many of the items, and broader issues with the conceptions of religion and spirituality used, means that exploring the relationship between spiritual experiences and beliefs using these measures would be unlikely to generate meaningful findings rather than superficial associations.

Experimental manipulations of spiritual or mystical experiences can be ethically problematic, but the 'Good Friday Experiment' (Pahnke & Richards, 1966) provides a powerful example of how such experiences can have strong and lasting effects on

individuals. In the experiment, some graduate divinity students were given psilocybin before attending a religious service which stimulated profound spiritual experiences during it. A 25-year follow-up found all except one of the participants in the active group continued to characterize their experience as a high point of their spiritual lives that was genuinely mystical in nature (Doblin, 1991). A more recent, similar study found that at a 14-month follow-up, over half of the participants given psilocybin rated their experiences as one of the most meaningful in their lives and considered it to have increased their personal well-being (Griffiths et al., 2006). Further experimental manipulations involving spiritual or mystical experiences are clearly needed, but they require resources and legal permissions that were not available. These studies show, however, the lasting influence that experiences like these can have in people's lives.

When investigating experiences deemed religious or spiritual, it is important to remember that spiritual interpretations and attributions are not always fixed. Individuals learn from those around them and the sources of value, significance and meaning in an individual's life often change during their lifespan (Ozorak, 1997). Kraus (2014) showed how the same individuals can view an activity, such as belly dancing, as either spiritual or not at different points in their lives. She concluded that people have the agency to decide whether to infuse a particular activity with spiritual meaning and that this process is fluid. As people engage and disengage with relationships, groups, and ideas, both their practices and the meaning they give to those practices can change. This dynamic of changing attributions and interpretations can also be seen in many ethnographic studies (e.g., Luhrmann,

1991; Strhan, 2015). Saucier and Skrzypińska (2006) found that religiousness had a stability of 0.78, on a scale of 0-1, across 9 years and Saucier (2008) found tradition-oriented religiousness had a 4-year stability of 0.85. These values are high compared to many other personality traits (Saucier, 2019) but they show that changes in religiosity occur even when measured at a relatively crude level.

People's understanding of themselves, the world, and their God develops throughout their lives and they often develop increasing complex understandings of what they consider divine as events in their lives make them confront and reflect upon their prior convictions (Fowler, 1981; Goldman, 1964). How individuals make sense of their experiences can change when they convert between different religious traditions (Beckford, 1978; Rambo, 1993) but they can also change without such radical transformations (Fowler, 1981; Streib & Keller, 2004).

Luhrmann's (1991, 2004, 2012) research suggests cultural influences on religious and spiritual experiences affect more than just how individuals interpret those experiences. Her work, which includes studies of magic users in London (Luhrmann, 1991) and evangelical Christians in the United States (Luhrmann, 2012), suggests that practitioners of religious and spiritual activities not only learn to interpret certain thoughts and feelings in particular ways but are also encouraged to engage in activities that stimulate such experiences. She describes this process as 'metakinesis', a term taken from dance criticism that is used to depict how emotional experience is carried within the body and conveyed to others through expressively and uniquely personal gestures (Luhrmann et al., 2010). Luhrmann argues that spiritual experiences are learned in various ways including relationally, cognitively, linguistically, and metakinetically. Her research has suggested that

regular kataphatic and apothatic spiritual practices both increase absorption and the aptitude for internal imagery and imagination (Luhrmann, 2012; Luhrmann & Morgain, 2012).

Relationships with Supernatural Beings

Contact with the sacred, however that is understood, is perhaps the most basic of religious experiences (Argyle, 1999; Stark, 1997). These experiences are frequently described using the language of human relationships and the beings encountered usually have at least some of the properties of people (Boyer, 2002; Gervais, 2013; B. M. Hood, 2009; Shtulman & Lindeman, 2016). Many religious practices are focused on ensuring a good relationship between people and their gods (McCauley & Lawson, 2002; Rappaport, 1999). Neuroscientific studies have also suggested that religious experiences have a fundamentally social-relational aspect (Azari et al., 2005). Understanding the relational aspects of spirituality, both between individuals and between individuals and their god(s), is important if we want to understand either ‘religious’ phenomena or how individuals use ‘religious’ ideas to make sense of the world in which they live. Humans are social creatures and learning from trusted others can change both implicit and explicit beliefs (Barrett & Lanman, 2008).

Many religious traditions use parental language to describe their deities, such as ‘Father God’ or ‘Mother Goddess’ (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). These choices often reflect conceptions of the divine as both the source of life and as a source of care and protection for believers. Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969)

offers a useful theoretical framework to help explore the relationships that many experience with that which they consider sacred (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). A supremely powerful and benevolent divine being, who is always available and offers protection and love, has the potential to be an ideal attachment figure and many believers describe experiencing such relationships (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Hvidt et al., 2013).

Although most of the research has been conducted in the West, the evidence suggests that many individuals form secure attachments to God that mirror their attachment relationships with their parents. Some other individuals, who had insecure or inadequate human attachment relationships, form a compensatory secure attachment to God (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Murphy & Loewenthal, 2017). Rowatt and Kirkpatrick (2002) found that anxious attachment to God is a significant predictor of neuroticism, increased negative affect, and decreased positive affect, after controlling for other dimensions of religiosity. Miner et al. (2017) also found that secure attachment to God was associated with decreased anxiety, depression, and stress, for Muslims. Attachment styles have also been found to be associated with particular types of spiritual experiences (Granqvist et al., 2009, 2012). This research suggests for many people the relationship between themselves and their god(s) is important. However, it often relies on simple self-report measures and the mechanisms by which secure attachments may benefit individuals are not fully understood (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002).

Despite these potential similarities in function, the actual experiences of individuals from different religious traditions vary significantly. The relationship between a charismatic-evangelical Christian in an industrialized country is radically different to that

of an indigenous tribesman whose relationship with the sacred spirits and their ancestors is mediated through rituals performed by a shaman or priest (McCauley & Lawson, 2002). Recognizing and understanding these differences, and the effects they may have, is important if the aspiration is to understand human experience more generally. Relationships with something transcendent are likely to have played a fundamental role in our development as a species and our history, as well as continuing to help shape the lives of billions (Rappaport, 1999; Taylor, 2007).

These differences in how people experience relationships with something beyond themselves do not only exist at the level of cultures or religious traditions. Even within specific congregations, different individuals will have a diverse range of experiences and these have been extensively documented in ethnographic studies (e.g., Luhrmann, 2012; Strhan, 2015). Lived religious experiences are often far more complex and varied than the 'official' doctrines of a community may suggest (Chaves, 2010; M. B. McGuire, 2008; Slone, 2004). Religious traditions can be thought of as distributive or epidemiological cultures, pools of ideas and practices from which individuals draw based on their personalities and experiences (L. Lee, 2015; Saucier, 2019). This means that examining these individual differences is important to develop a full understanding of the phenomena.

Several studies demonstrate how perceptions of, and relationships with, God can vary within religious populations and that these variations can have significant consequences. In a study of US Catholics, Benson and Spilka (1973) found that loving and accepting images of God had a strong, positive association with self-esteem that explained 22% of the variance. More recently, Wood et al. (2010) found

that positive attitudes towards God were associated with other measures of religiosity, while disappointment and anger with God correlated with negative religious coping and lower religious participation. Exline et al. (2015) have shown that viewing God as distant is associated with increased religious doubts and that perceptions of God as cruel is associated with both anger at God and the belief that God is angry with the individual. The relationships between these variables are likely to be complex and multifaceted, but these studies show how for many people the way they view and relate to God has significant effects on other aspects of their lives.

Even at a particular point in time, the same individual can have a range of conflicting beliefs about, relationships with, and experiences of what they consider sacred (Chaves, 2010). For example, Sharp et al. (2017) found that Christians who believe in a triune God often conceptualize and relate differently to different aspects of the Godhead. These differences in relationships are likely to be significantly amplified in polytheistic or animistic contexts, where wildly different sacred beings exist in a complex world (McCauley & Lawson, 2002; Whitehouse, 2004). There is also evidence that suggests many people may have distinctly different explicit and implicit concepts of the sacred, that are inconsistent with each other and used in different contexts (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Barrett & Keil, 1996). People neither understand nor relate to that which they consider sacred in a consistent and unchanging way; they have multiple ways of relating to the sacred that evolve and change over time (Shults & Sandage, 2006). This means the methods used to study these relationships must be sensitive to their dynamic nuances.

Implications

Religion and spirituality are complex and problematic concepts, with differing meanings for various groups and individuals. The widespread use of these terms and the unwieldiness of alternatives means they remain useful, but they should be understood as primarily emic rather than etic labels. Adopting a meaning-systems approach to their study, and using ‘worldviews’ terminology, encourages a more nuanced and comprehensive exploration of how people experience and make sense of the world. This mirrors the stance advocated by Hood et al. (2018) to focus on people’s meaning-making processes while remaining agnostic about the underlying nature of the religious or spiritual phenomena that they describe.

A wide range of social and cultural resources and experiences contribute to the development of individuals’ worldviews. Experiences that are deemed religious or spiritual appear to sometimes have an important yet overlooked role in the process. Supernatural beings, powers, or other entities are often an important part of many individuals’ social realities, yet their influence is often neglected in academic research. To develop a rich understanding of these experiences and their relationship with individuals’ worldviews requires methodologies that are sensitive to the complexity and nuances of both individuals’ beliefs and their experiences. An expansive and holistic perspective is also required to explore the many connections between different elements of people’s lives.

The Self

At the center of one's worldview is the self, the individual who is experiencing and seeking to understand their world (Johnson et al., 2011; Redfield, 1952). As this next section will show, how somebody understands the world and how they understand themselves are intimately and inherently linked. The self is a topic of perennial interest to psychologists and philosophers (Gergen, 1971; B. M. Hood, 2011; Leary & Tangney, 2012). Many people intuitively feel they know who 'they' are and yet the concept, both philosophically and psychologically, is far less clear. Leary and Tangney (2012) identify five different ways the term 'self' is used within the behavioral and social sciences, ranging from conceptions of the totality of an individual to the view of the self as an executive agent that regulates behavior. They argue equating the self with the totality of an individual or their personality is unhelpful and suggest reflexive thinking and consciousness are the essence of the self. This consciousness is of a creature within a world.

Cognitive approaches to the self view it as an object, towards which individuals have attitudes just like they have attitudes towards other objects like cereals or sports teams (Hattie, 1992; Rosenberg, 1965). These attitudes can be measured, like other attitudes, and thousands of studies have done so (Schmitt & Allik, 2005). These cognitive appraisals about ourselves can change when faced with contradictory evidence, although they do not always do so (Hattie, 1992). The extensive number of studies that have used measures like Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale strongly suggest that people have attitudes towards themselves, but the cognitive approach gives only a partial understanding of the self. Relational approaches (e.g., James, 1890; Mead, 1934) emphasize that who we are is more

than just attitudes and that our relationships are an intrinsic part of us. The self is both something we experience and something that experiences (Gergen, 1971).

Epstein (1973, p. 407) concluded that “the self-concept is a self-theory. It is a theory that the individual has unwittingly constructed about himself [sic] as an experiencing, functioning individual, and it is part of a broader theory which he holds with respect to his entire range of significant experience.” An individual’s understanding of themselves is implicitly and unavoidably bound up with their understanding of others and the broader world. Sedikides and Gregg (2007, p. 93) suggest the self is “the totality of interrelated yet distinct psychological phenomena that either underlie, causally interact with, or depend upon reflexive consciousness.” This totality is tripartite and includes individual, relational, and collective representations that are symbiotic (Sedikides, 2002).

Both internal and external forces influence how people view themselves and understanding how they shape individuals’ sense of identity and self is important because how we view ourselves also affects our actions and feelings (Gergen, 1971; Sedikides, 2002). Positive conceptions of the self are strongly correlated with subjective wellbeing and have been associated with many benefits for the individual (Brewer & Pickett, 2002; Campbell, 1990; Sedikides & Gregg, 2007).

The Self as Narrative

Humans appear to be natural meaning-makers (Bruner, 1990; Kegan, 1982) and narrative or hermeneutical approaches to the self recognize the centrality of this. These approaches argue that both our sense of self and how we understand our

lives have a fundamentally narrative structure (Schechtman, 2011). Some philosophers, such as Strawson (2004), contest this claim that the way humans understand their lives is inherently narrative, arguing that this is only true for some people and that others have episodic dispositions. The extent to which individuals form grand narratives to explain their entire lives does vary, but this does not negate the fact that most people have a deep need to find some meaning in their experiences or that some experiences play important roles in how people understand who they are (Hood et al., 2018; Park, 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

As Sarbin (1986) suggested, our experience of phenomena, including ourselves, always involves attributing significance to them and placing them in a broader context. The conceptualization of the self as a theory (Epstein, 1973) is implicitly narrative, as it contains explanations and agency. These narratives are not always explicitly formulated, but experiences are interpreted and understood based on previous experiences and knowledge (Schechtman, 1996). The same actions can be interpreted as a wide range of activities, depending on its purpose and context, and these attributions are fundamental to how they are understood (MacIntyre, 1984).

Selfhood is inextricably intertwined with the interpretative frameworks that enable us to make sense of the wider world (Taylor, 1989). These narratives are not, and cannot be, objective or detached accounts of our pasts but are constructed, creative acts that define us as we make and remake them (Crossley, 2000). Even though the self may be a fiction, that in some ways does not actually exist, it is a useful one that enables people to live lives of perceived meaning, purpose, and agency (Dennett, 1991; B. M. Hood, 2011). This imbuelement of meaning into actions and events is not merely trivial.

The Self as Relational and Embodied

The stories people tell themselves, about themselves, are inherently relational and embodied (Baumeister, 1998; Cassam, 2011; Cavell, 2011). They involve the individual interacting with others with purpose, and these interactions shape the view they have of themselves. These relationships are so important that it has been suggested that without interpersonal experiences the self may not exist (Carmichael et al., 2007). Individuals must learn to make sense of both their own actions and those of others (Malle, 2002). It is through relationships that individuals come to know themselves and others can profoundly shape an individual's sense of self (Gergen, 1971, 2009; James, 1890; Mead, 1934).

These experiences are intimately tied to people's bodies, as people can only know the world through their senses and it is their bodies that interact with the world beyond them. Bodies receive, encode, and transmit sensory information and the brain processes that information and uses it to develop an understanding of the world (B. M. Hood, 2011). These physical experiences mean the sense of self is embedded in the physical environment (Gordon, 2012; Stevens, 2010). If how somebody perceives themselves is shaped by what they think and do, then their conceptions of their self must be shaped by the world around them. The broader culture around an individual shapes how they experience themselves and the world (Carmichael et al., 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

A central concept within Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is that group memberships are meaningful aspects of people's identities which shape how they act and perceive others. Individuals both learn from the groups they

identify with and also, to a certain extent, learn to become part of those groups. A person's representation of themselves and the groups they identify with overlap and are both formed from a common pool of underlying knowledge about the world (E. R. Smith, 2002). An individual's view of themselves and their broader worldview are intimately and inherently connected. Others can also be included within the self as a way of expanding it, increasing perceived self-efficacy and reducing uncertainty (Aron & Aron, 1986; Wright et al., 2002). This inclusion of others in the self is particularly the case with those who are loved and in close relationships, with evidence suggesting this sense can be sustained and enhanced through shared activities (Aron & Tomlinson, 2019). Places (Gordon, 2012) and symbols (Kashima et al., 2002) can also become important aspects of the self.

The Self as Dynamic and Multiple

Although there is some continuity between who somebody was in the past and who they are now, people change throughout their lives (B. M. Hood, 2011). This is especially true during childhood and adolescence, but the processes of dynamic change and evolution of the self continue throughout the entire life span (Erikson, 1980; Loewinger, 1976). This capacity for change is also fundamental to many forms of psychological therapy, which seek to change how an individual experiences or thinks about themselves (Gonçalves et al., 2009). The self is not a fixed object and an individual's conceptions of who they might become are based on both who they have previously been and what those around them think they might be (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The appraisals of others play an important role in shaping a person's appraisal of themselves (Gergen, 1971, 2009; Videbeck, 1960). As social creatures, humans frequently

have experiences with others that have the potential to either challenge or reinforce their understandings of themselves. These experiences do not always have the same impact on them and Gergen (1971, p. 49) identified that the views of others were most likely to influence people when: “(1) the appraiser is credible and personalistic in his approach; (2) he advocates great change in self-conception and he does it often; (3) his appraisal is not contradicted by other information; and (4) his appraisal is a positive one.” This suggests that relationships with others who are perceived as trustworthy and authoritative are especially important, particularly when they offer positive appraisals that are reinforced by others. Negative feedback and criticism from others, especially when repeated and from those who are respected, can also have a powerful and lasting effect on how individuals view themselves (Erikson, 1980; Gilbert, 2009; Loevinger, 1976).

The dynamic nature of individuals’ attitudes towards themselves have some similarities to how attitudes towards other objects and concepts change. People have attitudes towards many things, some of which are more transient than others, and attitudes often change because of experiences (Maio & Haddock, 2007; Visser & Cooper, 2007). Attitudes affect behavior in many different ways and an individual’s actions can also change their attitudes (Festinger, 1957; Mills & Harmon-Jones, 1999). Attitude change can be the result of both conscious reflection and more peripheral or heuristic influence (Visser & Cooper, 2007). A person’s environment, both physical and social, can both reinforce and challenge their attitudes and when they evaluate new information about an object the source of that information can shape how they respond to it.

Rather than a single fixed self that changes over time, evidence suggests people simultaneously have multiple selves (B. M. Hood, 2011). Jung (1928/1953) described these different versions of how we act as personas, likening them to masks that people wear and roles they perform to meet the expectations of the world. Considerable research has explored how, in different environments and contexts, people can act very differently. Neisser (1988) identified five distinct ways an individual can perceive themselves: the ecological, interpersonal, private, extended, and conceptual selves. He argued these were not distinct selves but different ways that people think about who they are in different circumstances. How somebody thinks about themselves in any specific context, and how they act because of that, is shaped by that context (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The idea of a fixed and enduring self is a powerful and useful illusion, but it obscures a far more fluid and complex reality.

Implications

As this brief review has shown, there are clear links between how individuals view themselves and how they view the world. Individuals' beliefs, about both themselves and others, are intimately and intrinsically linked. Understanding individuals' meaning systems and personal worldviews thus requires also understanding how their sense of self develops and is sustained. The self is both hermeneutical and relational (Schechtman, 2011), and others play an important role in shaping how individuals make sense of their experiences. Individuals' selves are also both embodied and embedded in their environments (Cassam, 2011). The attitudes and beliefs individuals have about themselves are shaped by a broad and encompassing context. Relationships, symbols, and affiliations all contribute to the self

and each of these areas can include religious or spiritual elements. Understanding why individuals consider certain phenomena to be religious or spiritual, as well as how they experience and make sense of them, requires also exploring these broader processes.

The research discussed here shows how this complex process is shaped by and in turn influences a wide range of other elements. Although some (e.g., Sedikides & Gregg, 2007) advocate breaking down the different elements of the self to make them more amenable to what they consider ‘scientific study’, it seems clear that understanding the holistic interactions and connections between the different elements is also important (Cavell, 2011; Sedikides, 2002). An idiographic focus on how individuals make sense of their many experiences and life-world can explore these issues and has the potential to help untangle this complexity.

Review of Other Relevant IPA Studies

After the decision to use IPA as the basis for this research was made, a systematic search of the extant research literature was conducted to identify previous IPA studies investigating religious and spiritual experiences. A summary of this process is provided in Figure 1 (p. 87). This review helped ensure the originality of the research, the appropriateness of the methodology, and provided a range of useful insights that helped shape the design of the studies.

The search was initially conducted in 2016 and then updated in April 2020. The final systematic search, which is presented here, used expanded criteria to also capture studies of Christian, Muslim, and Hindu groups that may not have been

explicitly described as spiritual or religious. PsycINFO, Scopus, and the Atla Religion Database were searched using the following string: (“interpretative phenomenological” OR IPA) AND (religio* OR spiritual* OR christian* OR muslim OR islam* OR hindu* OR baptis*). This initially identified 478 peer-reviewed publications. 145 duplicates were eliminated, leaving 333 unique studies.

192 publications that either did not use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or investigate religious or spiritual phenomena were eliminated at the initial screening stage. This included numerous studies that used IPA to describe other phenomena or organizations, such as the Institute for Propaganda Analysis or Intimate Partner Abuse. Studies which only identified religiosity or spirituality as a theme in their analysis when investigating other phenomena were also excluded at this stage. Articles which claimed to use IPA to analyze qualitative data within them but which did not actually do so (e.g., Renz et al., 2013) were also excluded, although mixed-methods studies which had a significant IPA component were not excluded.

The remaining 141 studies were examined more closely and classified into groups based on their primary topic; details about their participants and geographical location were also noted at this stage. The categories were developed inductively and topics with fewer than five studies were grouped together as ‘Other Topics’. The majority (n = 84) of the studies were conducted in Europe. 51 of these were conducted in the UK, which reflects IPA’s origins and history (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). It should also be noted that only 52 of the studies were published earlier than 2015, suggesting a growing interest in these topics and an increasing recognition of the usefulness of IPA.

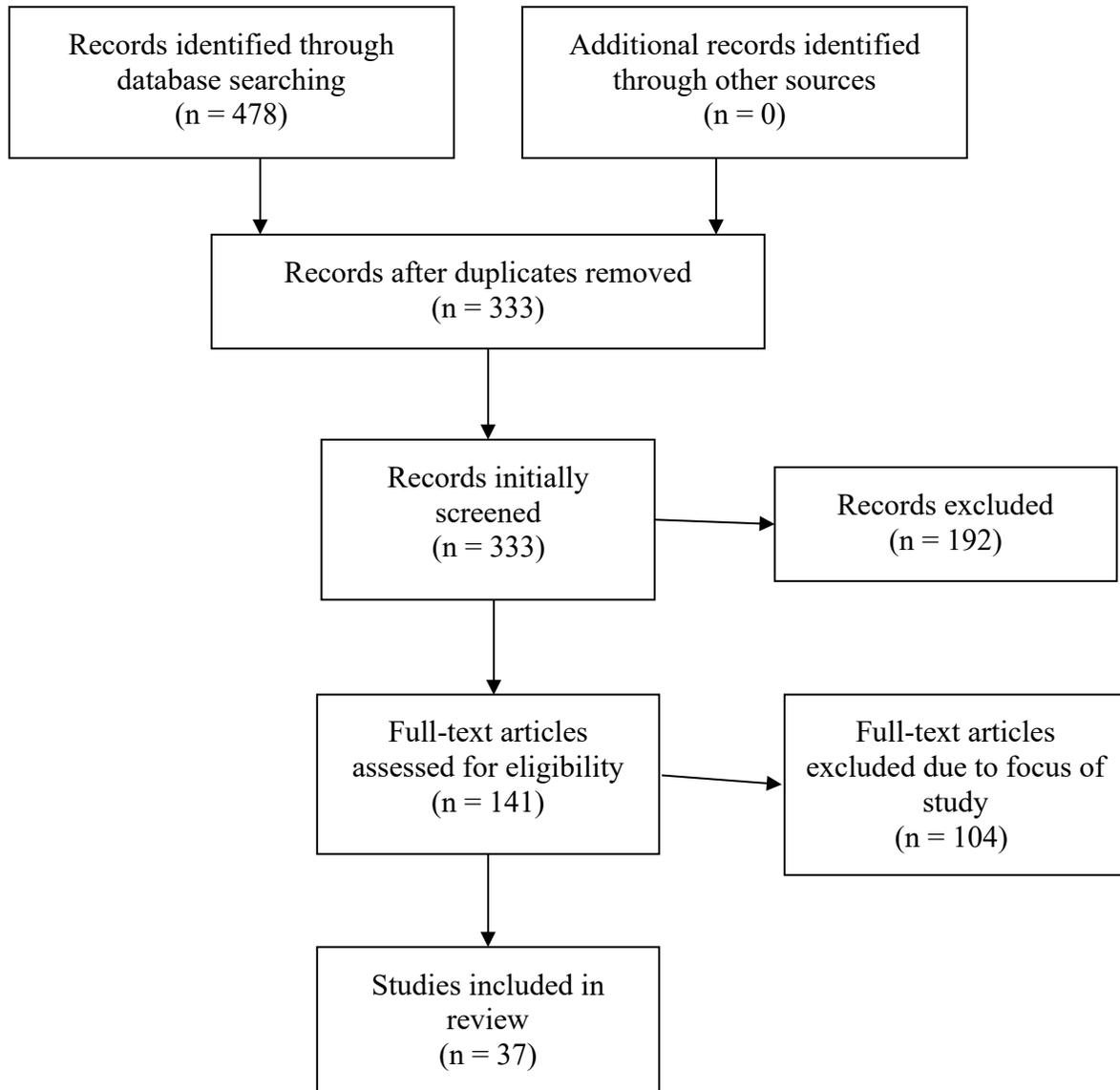
The most common religious groups studied were Christianity (n = 45) and Islam (n = 15), although a surprisingly high number of studies (n = 29) did not specify the religious identities of their participants. These were mostly studies of spirituality, particularly in clinical or educational contexts. It is concerning that so many studies did not consider the religious identities or backgrounds of their participants to be significant. Many of the studies also did not adequately consider the theoretical and conceptual issues surrounding religion and spirituality discussed earlier in this chapter.

53 studies explored clinical topics involving physical or mental health, with an additional 10 studies focusing on religious coping or experiences of trauma. 32 studies focused on issues related to professional practice, primarily in either clinical, educational, or religious vocations. 8 studies investigated issues related to forensic psychology, including prisoner rehabilitation and religious terrorism. Many of these studies were of a high quality and made valuable contributions to their fields but they were excluded at this stage as they had only limited relevance to this thesis.

The included articles (n = 37) comprised two groups, those focusing on specific religious or spiritual experiences and those focusing on the experience of social identities, including transformations of identity. The key findings of each of these are summarized in the following sections.

Figure 1

Previous IPA Studies of Religious or Spiritual Experiences and Identity.



IPA Studies of Religious and Spiritual Experiences

19 articles were primarily focused on studying religious or spiritual experiences, 11 of which were conducted in the UK. These studies covered a broad range of topics. However, this review found that many common religious or spiritual experiences have not been studied using IPA.

Five studies investigated different forms of meditation. Kjellgren and Taylor (2008) studied zazen meditation, comparing experienced and inexperienced practitioners. They identified several effects on the individuals' personal development and how they searched for meaning in life. Their comparison also identified several differences in the experiences of the two groups, suggesting long-term adherence to the practice had significant effects on the individuals. Prakash et al. (2009) examined the experiences of Vihangam Yogis and how their outlook towards the world and themselves was changed by their perceptions of an inner, divine light. A study of Mindfulness Awareness Training also suggested it broadened participants' understanding of the self, changed some of their attitudes, and was perceived as enhancing wellbeing (Shonin et al., 2014). Shaner et al. (2017) studied the lived experiences of long-term meditation, including both 'peak experiences' and the broader transformational effects of the practice. They found teachers or mentors were important in individuals' development. Kaselionyte and Gumley (2017) also found teachers and traditions influenced how individuals interpreted their experiences. These five studies show how meditative practices are associated with a wide range of spiritual experiences and suggest both the practices

themselves and the wider social and cultural contexts of the practitioners are important to understanding those experiences.

Four studies explored anomalous experiences surrounding death. Wilde and Murray (2009, 2010) found that how individuals fitted their out-of-body and near-death experiences (NDEs) into the broader biography of their lives was important and that individuals often focused on the elements of them that were most personally meaningful for them. Bianco et al. (2017) suggested meaning-based approaches could help understand NDEs and identified both intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics as important parts of the experiences. McDonald et al. (2014) explored how palliative-care professionals interpreted unusual spiritual phenomena they encountered around death and found they were often perceived to help individuals accept their imminent death. These studies show IPA can meaningfully explore how individuals interpret extraordinary experiences and the way they are shaped by a range of factors.

Heriot-Maitland et al. (2012) compared psychotic-like phenomena, such as hearing voices, having visions, and possession, in clinical and non-clinical groups. They found such experiences were usually preceded by emotional suffering and were often functional. They could trigger new ways of thinking or providing emotional fulfillment. Rather than there being any fundamental differences between the psychotic-like experiences of the two groups, the distinguishing feature between them was in how the experiences were appraised and incorporated. This was shaped by both the backgrounds of the individuals and their relationships with others. These findings support the view that it is attribution and meaning-making processes that distinguish religious or spiritual experiences from others (Park, 2013; Spilka et al., 1985; Taves, 2009).

Snell and Simmonds (2012) studied how individuals from a range of religious backgrounds had diverse spiritual experiences in nature. These experiences were considered beneficial and enhanced the sense of connection the participants felt with natural environments. Havik et al. (2015) also found that nature played a crucial role in the spirituality of individuals at a Dutch spirituality festival. These experiences in nature helped them connect with a deeper sense of themselves and something transcendent. Flower (2016) explored the peak experiences of professional ballet dancers and found they were considered extraordinary and spiritual, with a lasting impact that helped nurture their love for ballet. These studies show individuals can consider a broad range of experiences to be spiritual and that these experiences are often perceived to have lasting and beneficial effects.

A study by Roxburgh and Roe (2013, 2014) explored the purpose, process, and nature of mediumship for 10 members of the Spiritualist National Union. They explored both the experiences of the mediums and how they made sense of them, describing how the participants valued and benefited from them. Their holistic approach to studying the phenomena showed how the combination of anomalistic experiences and social or relational factors shaped participants' beliefs, behaviors, and experiences. Pietkiewicz and Lecoq-Bamboche (2017) analyzed the experiences of a Mauritian woman who had an exorcism, to try to deal with the consequences of prior childhood abuse. They also found that prior personal events, social relationships, and cultural factors prior to the exorcism shaped how it was experienced and made sense of. Gorichanaz (2016) investigated how Catholics experience the Bible, in different forms, as a source of religious information. He

found it was an important part of their religious practice and journey through life. His participants used the Bible to make connections between the information within it, other sources of information, events in their own lives, and others. Fung (2016, 2017) studied how music facilitated the holistic development of two Chinese-Australian Christian musicians. She found the participants' viewed their talents as gifts from God that had to be used to serve him and that music formed an integral and inseparable aspect of their religion. These studies show how IPA can explore a range of experiences deemed religious or spiritual and show how religion and spirituality can be usefully viewed as integrating phenomena that are connected to many aspects of an individual's life.

IPA Studies of Religious or Spiritual Identity

18 articles explored topics related to social identity and beliefs, including how they could develop and change. Eight of these studies were conducted in the UK. Many religious or spiritual groups have not yet been studied using IPA.

Two recent studies of religious conversion both show IPA can investigate how individuals undergo significant changes in their understanding of the world. K. A. Lee and Gubi (2019) explored how individuals converted from evangelical Christianity to atheism. They found that this process of change was gradual and non-volitional, involving a range of experiences and many negative feelings such as guilt, regret, and shame. Iqbal et al. (2019) investigated a woman's conversion from Judaism to Buddhism. The use of IPA enabled both the meaning-making and experiential elements of the conversions to be explored and useful insights into the processes to be developed.

Seven studies investigated the intersections between LGBT and religious identities. Coyle and Rafalin (2001) found the experience of identity conflict was central for gay Jewish men, that this conflict affected their social relationships, and that they developed a range of strategies for minimizing and coping with the conflict. Two studies of gay Muslim men (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014; Jaspal & Siraj, 2011) both also emphasized the perceived conflict between the two aspects of the participants' identities, including the risks of ostracization and physical violence. They found one strategy for coping with these challenges was hyper-affiliation to the religious group. Three studies of Christian groups (Lassiter, 2015; Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016; Wolff et al., 2017) also found participants experienced a challenge trying to reconcile sexual and religious identities that many others viewed as conflicting. They identified social support as crucial during the participants' process of constructing a personal understanding of their faith and identity. Cheng (2018) found homosexual Buddhists experienced a more inclusive and accepting religious community, without the stigma found in the studies discussed previously. This social acceptance helped the participants accept themselves and stemmed from doctrinal beliefs the author described as 'homosexual-friendly'. These studies show communities' theological beliefs can have significant effects on individuals and how individuals can develop their own understanding of these beliefs to help deal with challenges and conflicts they face.

Seven other studies explored how a range of symbols helped religious groups maintain a sense of community and identity. Sinclair and Milner (2005) studied the experience of being Jewish and found social and religious identities

were important to all the participants, but that they expressed and combined these identities in different ways. Jaspal and Coyle (2010) explored the role of language in shaping religious and cultural identities among British-born South Asians, finding that liturgical languages were often sanctified and became symbols of community. Jaspal and Yampolsky (2011) focused on the role of social representations of the Holocaust in constructing Jewish Israeli identity. They found the perception of shared loss enhanced the participants' sense of belonging and affected how they understood relationships between and within groups. Television helped Greek Orthodox Christians in Turkey construct a social reality and sense of self (Tunç & Ferentinou, 2012). Litchmore and Safdar (2016) explored how Canadian hijabi's experiences were shaped by an interplay of internal and external experiences, with both their religious communities and broader society affecting them. Aziz (2019) examined how students at madrasa in Britain developed their religious identities through instruction and relationships and found these could sometimes complement and sometimes conflict with their experiences in mainstream schools. K. M. McGuire et al. (2020) explored how Black Christian fraternity members embodied their multiple identities and the contentious intersections between them. The fraternity brothers did so by consciously working against stereotypes and seeking to adopt leadership roles in their communities. These studies all show how a range of cultural and social factors help shape the identities, beliefs, and actions of distinct groups, constructing boundaries and differentiating between in-groups and out-groups (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wright et al., 2002).

Cassar and Shinebourne (2012) studied what spirituality meant to four individuals who considered themselves spiritual. They found their participants' spirituality involved both internal processes and external relationships. The participants' spirituality was a

holistic part of who they were, and they also sometimes encountered hostility when expressing this aspect of themselves with others which could shape their behavior. Grivell et al. (2014) studied how members of the Thierian community, who believe they are part nonhuman animal, underwent a journey of self-discovery before embracing their identity despite the hostility they sometimes encountered from others. Like those in the more conventional groups discussed above, they had to find ways to balance their own experiences and the expectations of society; this process was multifaceted and idiosyncratic.

Implications

These 37 studies demonstrate the utility of IPA for studying a wide range of religious and spiritual phenomena. The quality of the studies varies, but they also generated at least some useful insights into the objects of their inquiry. The studies show the wide range of effects that personal experiences, both ordinary and extraordinary, can have on individuals' lives. People's social and cultural contexts appear to influence the experiences individuals have and how they make sense of them. The studies suggest that developing a full understanding of phenomena requires the many contextual details that may affect it, not only during the experience but also before and after it, to be considered.

However, only a limited range of religious or spiritual experiences and groups have been studied using IPA and further studies of different groups and phenomena has the potential to make useful contributions to our understanding. Many of the studies suggest that meaning-making is an important element of

religious and spiritual experiences but few adopted a meaning-systems approach in their conceptualization of phenomena (Paloutzian & Park, 2013). Adopting emic perspectives relatively uncritically can provide good insight into how the participants understand their experiences but limits the broader insights that might otherwise be developed. Most of the studies have a tight focus, which is often useful in IPA studies (J. A. Smith, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009) but the more holistic studies (e.g., Cassar & Shinebourne, 2012; Sinclair & Milner, 2005) suggest that taking a wider range of experiences and social and cultural factors into consideration can develop a richer understanding of phenomena. Comparisons between similar groups (e.g., Heriot-Maitland et al., 2012) also have the potential to enhance our understanding of phenomena.

Researcher Background

In any piece of research, particularly those using qualitative and interpretative approaches, the researcher's own experiences influence the research in many different ways. Reflexivity and reflection are crucial to ensuring the transparency and validity of qualitative research and IPA emphasizes the importance of these hermeneutic processes (Bolton, 2010; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). These issues will be discussed more later in this thesis (see p. 169-170, 392-395), but the integral nature of the researcher to the research means it is important to be clear about my own experiences and positioning. This account helps explain why I chose to research this area and shows how my prior experiences prepared me for this research. Further reflections on how my past influenced the research process and findings can be found on pp. 395-399.

Childhood and Teens

My family were Christians, and religion was an important part of my childhood. The church was an important part of our lives, and we attended events several times a week. These early years were happy and three experiences that occurred during them had lasting impacts on my life relevant to this account.

My parents had been told they couldn't have children but, after several years of trying, received a prophecy that God would give them a boy and a girl. I was born within a year, with my younger sister following 21 months later. Then, when I was two years old, I fell off a cliff while playing. Instead of falling to my death, I was 'miraculously caught' by a small bush growing out of the cliff-face. At the age of five, I had a potent experience of personal salvation that further reinforced this sense of being special. Fowler (1981) notes that intuitive-projective children who are exposed to certain types of religious teaching sometimes undergo precocious identity formation, and I internalized the faith I was surrounded with during those early years. I was told each of these stories often during my childhood. They imbued me with a sense that I was special and chosen. I was taught God had great plans for me and that I'd spend my life serving him.

When I was seven, my family moved from Kent to a village in Wales, where we knew absolutely nobody. I found the transition difficult and refused to compromise my self-identity to fit in more easily. Mishandling of bullying I experienced during this period taught me that authorities could not always be trusted, and I grew increasingly independent and self-reliant.

My family's search for a new church exposed me to the diversity within Christianity and, as an inquisitive and intelligent child, I took particular interest in the many differences I saw. We didn't find a single church that met all our needs, so we attended three churches for different functions. This diversity of liturgical and theological traditions stimulated my interests in theology and history, which soon expanded to also include mythologies and other religious traditions. I never doubted that 'my' God was real, and had many intimate experiences of his presence, but started to question various aspects of religious practice. My family, especially my maternal grandparents, happily discussed those issues and encouraged my interests. I excelled at school, played many sports, and generally had a happy and stimulating childhood.

We moved back to Kent when I was 14, and I again found the transition difficult. My new class at school were exceptionally badly behaved, and I refused to join in their antics. This led to several years of severe and sustained bullying that was verbal, emotional and physical. My suffering drove me further into the arms of my God for comfort. I spent hours each day praying, worshiping and studying scripture. Religious teachings had given me the expectation that others would hate me because I loved God and this helped me make sense of my pain, sanctifying my suffering and giving it purpose.

I had a wide range of spiritual experiences during this period of my life. These included both energetic, charismatic ones (cf. Luhrmann, 2012) and what Groeschel (1984) describes as infused contemplation - quiet, mystical experiences that shaped my spirit and gave me a profound sense of awe, wonder and love. The church was my sanctuary and provided me with friendships and support I could not find elsewhere. The Internet, still in its early days, also enabled me to engage with a much wider group of people than would

have been possible previously. I spent a lot of time on religious message boards and developed friendships with people from around the world and with many different theological backgrounds. My beliefs became more complex in this period, but I trusted my God completely.

School improved dramatically in my final two years, but I also faced a series of challenges. These included the loss of a close friend and the onset of serious and enduring health problems. I wrestled with feelings that God had abandoned me, experiencing a 'Dark Night of the Soul' (Groeschel, 1984). I emerged from that through a week of transformational experiences at a Christian summer camp. I felt God's presence powerfully during collective worship and when I prayed privately I had intense mystical experiences. Throughout the week, many people independently delivered a string of prophecies that felt remarkably coherent and accurate. They affirmed my own feelings and growing sense of purpose. The week culminated with me being anointed and 'sent out' into the world to change it.

At this stage in my life, my faith defined who I understood myself to be and shaped all my decisions. I volunteered with Youth For Christ, led my school's Christian Union, taught bible studies, and preached both at my church and others. I exhibited most of the charismata (Turner, 1996), prophesying with what seemed like uncanny accuracy and ministering a gift of healing that encompassed physical, social, and emotional dimensions. My driving passion was for the people of the world, who I thought deserved unconditional love and needed saving from the things that enslaved them. I was prepared to sacrifice everything for them.

Changing Faith

I decided to study theology at university, rather than natural sciences as I'd previously intended to, in part because although my health had improved it still limited me significantly. I chose to study at King's College London (KCL), rather than a denominational bible college, because I wanted to be able to explore topics more freely so I could reach my own conclusions on doctrinal disagreements. I immersed myself in studying the bible and learned Greek and Hebrew to understand it better. I focused on the more historical options offered, exploring the beliefs and practices of both Jews and Christians during and after the period when the biblical texts were composed.

I found many aspects of this challenging and came to question many of the assumptions and teachings I'd been brought up with. I tried to persuade myself the views of more evangelical scholars were sustainable but eventually came to accept the scholarly consensus on issues such as the dating and authorship of the biblical texts (Carr, 2011; Ehrman, 2003; Sturdy, 2007etc.). Studying the biblical texts closely, and exploring what they revealed about the beliefs and practices of the communities that produced them, led me to question an expanding range of theological doctrines which eventually included both who Jesus was and the nature of salvation. During this period of my life, I continued to believe in God, have many spiritual experiences, and attend church. However, I was forced to acknowledge I was becoming increasingly heretical.

My faith, like many Protestant Christians, had been based on the combination of the scriptures and my personal experiences of God. As I started to increasingly question the accuracy and authority of the biblical texts, I relied more and more on my experiences to affirm my faith. I still *knew* God was real and true, because I'd spent so much time with

him and seen so many seemingly miraculous things. However, I was also aware that many others from radically different religious traditions also had compelling spiritual experiences, and I became increasingly uncomfortable with asserting that my experiences were true while they were all either wrong or deceived. I began to explore alternative explanations for spiritual experiences and decided to test my own more rigorously. Despite desperately wanting and needing my own experiences to be indisputable, I realized they were often more ambiguous than I'd been aware. A series of secret tests of the prophetic gifts of those I trusted made me strongly question whether any of us were really speaking with or for an external God.

The process of 'losing' my faith was gradual and took approximately three years. Exposure to a diverse range of other belief systems, both Christian and not, posed questions which my dedication to truth and integrity, instilled in me by my religious upbringing, forced me to confront (cf. Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; K. A. Lee & Gubi, 2019). Moral and historical questions both contributed to my growing doubts and I eventually reached the point where I had to accept that I had gone beyond simply being a heretic. This realization broke me, shattering my sense of identity and making my entire worldview crumble to dust. I was forced to confront the possibility that my closest friend not only was gone from my life but had perhaps never existed at all. I no longer belonged in my social networks, which remained predominantly Christian, and felt like I could no longer trust my own judgment. If I'd been wrong about the thing I'd been most sure of, how could I ever trust anything again?

The impact of my health during this time, and subsequently, is difficult to quantify, but the development of seriously limiting chronic conditions affects every aspect of an individual's life (Dobbie & Mellor, 2008; Leventhal et al., 2004). However, I do not believe these issues had much direct influence on my changing beliefs about God. Hardship had always drawn me closer to God, and I was not angry with God about my suffering. When I was 17, I had a spiritual experience where God asked me to choose between healing others and healing myself - and without hesitation I chose to heal others. My chronic medical conditions and disability are now an important aspect of who I am that influences how I view and experience the world. They significantly affected my social life and academic career, but any impact they had on my changing faith was indirect.

Searching for Understanding

In many ways, my search to understand the world has always been an important part of my life. When I was younger, I was driven by the desire to know what was true and right. This is a common developmental task, but one that I explored more deeply than most. By the time I graduated from KCL, that interest had shifted as I came to accept that there are many things we may never know with much certainty. I saw how people, both historically and in the contemporary world, believed many different things and that they often lived and died for their beliefs. I decided that understanding why people believed things was more important than understanding the beliefs of any specific historical group and shifted my academic focus accordingly. My undergraduate dissertation had explored 'The Social Function of Prophecy in the Early Corinthian Church' and it reviewed a comprehensive range of prophetic and oracular traditions from the ancient world. It

concluded there wasn't the evidence to draw firm conclusions but reinforced my belief that spiritual and religious experiences were vital in shaping many people's lives throughout history.

I considered both sociology and psychology as disciplines for postgraduate study, but decided psychology was a closer fit for my research interests. I wanted to study the beliefs, experiences, and practices of individuals and groups. I deemed psychology more useful for that, although as will become clear I continue to find the work of many sociologists and other social scientists valuable. I needed to find a new way of understanding my own experiences and studying the psychology of religion offered the possibility of doing that. It was a challenging process but, over several years, I gradually developed more insight into the phenomena I was studying. As a teenager, I had insisted that I was "right, a liar, or insane" when I discussed my spiritual experiences. I came to realize that, however convincing an experience may feel, it was always an interpretation of phenomena that was at least mediated by the mind, and so could be misinterpreted or misunderstood without malice. I slowly learned to accept both my past and my new self, rebuilding a new identity and reclaiming much of who I'd always been (cf. Gilbert, 2009; Winell, 2007). This process continued throughout the course of this research, and I expect it will continue for the rest of my life.

Implications

My background is important because it explains my interest in this research area and also influences how I interpret the phenomena I am studying. My own

experiences also make me particularly equipped to study these topics. I intimately understand many of the types of experiences I am studying and but am longer bound by a particular explanatory system for them. I am a hybrid of insider and outsider (Chryssides, 2019; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), who retains the ability to bridge both approaches to develop a richer understanding of the phenomena. This is relatively rare (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997), especially in combination with my academic training. It is impossible to be entirely neutral and objective when studying issues of such ultimate concern, and many psychologists of religion are drawn to study religion because of their own faith and beliefs (Batson, 1997). Throughout the entire research process, I have been alert to how my own experiences were influencing my choices and interpretations, taking numerous steps to mitigate this as much as possible (see pp. 169-170, 392-399). My own experiences and expertise also enriched the research in various ways and made valuable contributions to the analysis. My prior experiences undoubtedly influenced my approach and interpretations, but as the above account shows I have always been committed to following the evidence, wherever it may lead and whatever the personal cost.

Spending the last five years studying these phenomena has, of course, caused me to reflect extensively on my own beliefs and experiences. I intentionally and consciously remained open to the possibility that the interpretations offered by the participants may be 'right', but on balance still do not consider these emic interpretations to be particularly likely. Instead, I believe the diverse experiences of my participants show how complex and fascinating our social, cultural, and psychological worlds are.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter draws upon many of the insights discussed in the preceding one to develop and present the methodology used for this research project. It discusses the ontological and epistemological positions taken and explains why these positions make IPA a suitable and effective methodology for investigating this project's research questions. The chapter then develops a new form of multiperspectival IPA that can explore the phenomena more broadly than would be possible in singular IPA studies. Specific details about how the methodology was applied in these studies can be found in the subsequent methods chapter (see pp. 141-171).

Ontology, Epistemology, and Critical Realism

The Nature of the Sacred

As discussed in the contextualization chapter (see pp. 46-77), the ontological natures of religion and spirituality are problematic to conceptualize (Oman, 2013; Paloutzian, 2017). Different cultures and traditions have varying understandings about what should be considered sacred or divine, and almost anything might be considered sacred in some circumstances (Taves, 2009). It is important to avoid viewing particular conceptions of religion or spirituality, such as those developed in the West under the influence of Christianity, as universal when many cultures do not share the same assumptions about the nature of the world (Fitzgerald, 2000). This thesis adopts a functionalist, rather than substantive, definition of religion/spirituality (Oman, 2013) and is inherently agnostic about the ultimate 'truth' of the experiences being studied. 'Religion' can be treated as a social

fact, with real impacts on how people live and understand the world, and studied in similar ways to other social phenomena (Dillon, 2003).

Studying how humans experience and relate to that which they consider sacred avoids many of the ontological pitfalls that having been critiqued by scholars in the critical religion movement (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2000; McCutcheon, 2019; Taira, 2018). Both the ‘psychic reality’ (Jung, 1931/1960; Rizzuto, 1981) and ‘social reality’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Searle, 2010) of these experiences are appropriate objects for psychological study. Such experiences can have profound effects on how individuals and groups experience the world (see pp. 65-72). Anomalistic and parapsychologists (French & Stone, 2013) may try to explore whether particular phenomena, such as near-death experiences or clairvoyance, are ‘real’ but metaphysical questions about ultimate truth or transcendent reality are beyond the scope of the methodology used here (cf. Dillon, 2003; R. W. Hood et al., 2009).

The studies in this thesis are open to the possibility that the experiences the participants describe are encounters with something transcendent or divine, but neither assumes this is or is not the case. The participants experienced something profoundly meaningful to them and, in some cases, these experiences had lasting effects on their beliefs and shaped their future behaviors. Understanding how they experienced and made sense of these moments in their lives is the principal focus of these studies. This does not preclude the possibility of drawing some conclusions about the experiences being studied, but helps ensure the conclusions are derived from the data rather than being used to interpret the data. The experiences of

individuals from different religious traditions, as well as those of different individuals within the same tradition, may or may not involve the same underlying psychological (or spiritual) processes and phenomena. Adopting an idiographic and phenomenological approach (Murphy, 2017; J. A. Smith et al., 2009), with a conscious openness to these different possibilities, can help avoid making inaccurate assumptions and facilitates exploring the phenomena in their own terms.

Critical Realism

Critical Realism was developed by Bhaskar (1975, 1998) as a critical response to both positivism and relativism. It provides a systematic account of both science and reality that deals with the critiques of positivism without adopting a position of radical relativism. Critical Realism reconciles the context-bound nature of descriptions of the world with the ontological existence of something beyond those descriptions (Scott, 2005). Critical Realism begins by recognizing the existence of a reality that is independent of our beliefs about it. Our beliefs about things are always transitive, but the things themselves are intransitive (McGhee & Grant, 2017). Critical Realism views the social world as an open system, where social structures have emergent properties and interact with individuals. Individuals and groups create social structures, but those social structures in turn exert a causal but non-determinative influence on individuals (Cruickshank, 2012). Our understanding of the world, and phenomena in it, will always be partial and limited, but this does not mean that all subjective interpretations of it are equally accurate or valid.

Critical Realism conceptualizes three distinct layers of reality that interact with each other. These three layers are the Real, the Actual, and the Empirical. According to Bhaskar

(1975), the Real is what actually exists and may be physical or social. Real objects have causal powers and when those powers are activated, they operate at the level of the Actual, which involves events and outcomes. However, although these two layers of underlying reality exist, our experiences of events and outcomes occur at the third level - the Empirical, which is where sentient beings subjectively experience real and actual phenomena. Mechanisms and causal powers may not always be observable, but this does not diminish their reality (McGhee & Grant, 2017). The interactions between the three layers of reality means that studying empirical events and experiences enables inferences to be made about the real and actual phenomena that lie behind them. Critical Realism suggests we can construct models of reality based on our subjective, empirical experiences. These models will never be entirely objective or transcendent of our transitive perspectives, but they can still give us important insights about reality itself rather than merely about our relativistic constructions of reality (Bhaskar, 1975; McGhee & Grant, 2017).

Critical Realism acknowledges that all descriptions and explanations are inevitably partial and so are always open to critique and improvement. However, it disagrees with radical relativism's claim that reality itself is unknowable (Cruickshank, 2012). Instead, Critical Realism allows for our understanding of the world to be constantly improved without making absolute truth claims. Judgmental rationality allows us to assess and evaluate competing claims about reality and develop provisional judgments about what reality is objectively like (Sayer, 2000). These judgments are epistemologically conditional, and new evidence may cause them to be reconsidered and revised. However, the evidence for some descriptions

of reality may be so compelling that they can be judged unlikely to be false and considered an 'alethic truth' (McGhee & Grant, 2017). That is, they may be considered true and accurate for practical purposes. From a Critical Realist perspective, research and the development of knowledge are always iterative and ongoing. As our understandings are refined, they become closer and closer to the truth - like an asymptote that approaches a line without ever reaching it. Rich, qualitative data can provide important insights into the Empirical domain. Exploring these subjective experiences enables the development of an understanding of the underlying objects and phenomena.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research methodology that explores how individuals experience and make sense of phenomena. IPA was originally developed within health psychology but has since been used in a broad range of psychological domains including clinical, educational and social psychology (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). It has also been used by researchers in other disciplines, particularly in health-related fields. IPA views people as 'self-interpreting beings' (Taylor, 1985) whose minds actively interpret the world around them to make sense of it. It acknowledges that these interpretations can be influenced by a broad range of cultural and social influences. IPA draws upon philosophical principles from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) to investigate both how people experience particular phenomena and how they make sense of their experiences.

Phenomenology

J. A. Smith et al. (2009) describe IPA as a research method inspired by phenomenology that builds, in particular, upon the work of Husserl (1927/1971), Heidegger (1927/1962), Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) and Sartre (1943/1956). The focus of phenomenological enquiry is the fundamental nature of human experiences and it attempts to move beyond the assumptions of both the experiencer and researcher to find the essence of an experience (Moran, 2000). Traditional phenomenology has done this through a systematic process of phenomenological reduction and epoché (bracketing), that tries to set aside prior assumptions and beliefs about a phenomenon to examine its essences in their purest form. IPA does not make use of this technique and offers an alternative way to achieve a similar goal, while acknowledging that it is impossible for anyone to entirely bracket their previous experiences and beliefs (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

This key difference has led some phenomenologists (e.g., Giorgi, 2011; van Manen, 2017) to argue that IPA is not really a form of phenomenology. J. A. Smith (2010, 2018) strongly contests these claims, adopting a broader understanding of phenomenology and arguing that the methodology he developed applies the insights of the philosophy. It is probably more accurate to describe IPA as 'phenomenologically orientated' rather than strictly phenomenological (Finlay, 2012). Whether IPA is truly phenomenological has only minimal practical significance, and this dispute does not affect its usefulness or legitimacy as a research methodology. IPA combines elements of phenomenology with insights from other philosophical traditions and it should be evaluated on its own merits,

rather than by comparison to the work of phenomenological pioneers. IPA is a psychological, rather than a philosophical, methodology and it develops and applies key phenomenological insights alongside broader scientific and psychological principles.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, the study of interpretation, also provides an important element of IPA's intellectual foundations (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). IPA recognizes that experience is inherently an interpretative act. Most, if not all, human experiences are inherently ambiguous and our brains process the raw sense data they receive to construct an internal representation of external events (Kegan, 1982). These mental representations are not entirely accurate and our minds rely on a wide range of cognitive heuristics to help make sense of the data they are processing (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Memories, and interpretations of them, can change as we integrate them with other experiences and beliefs (Loftus, 1979; Newman & Lindsay, 2009). IPA typically adopts a center-ground position between what Ricoeur (1970) describes as a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of empathy (Larkin et al., 2006). Experiences are viewed in both their own terms and using other theoretical perspectives to help understand them. When exploring the experiences of others there is always a 'double hermeneutic' involved, as both the individual who had the experience and the one learning about it try to make sense of it. This means considerable care is necessary when analyzing any experiences and the processes of IPA facilitate the critical examination of the interpretations of both participants and researchers.

A key technique IPA adopts from hermeneutics to help with this process is the 'hermeneutic circle.' Analysis in IPA is an iterative, rather than linear, process that involves

both studying each element of the data in its own terms and also in conjunction with the rest of the data. It is “concerned with the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole, at a series of levels. To understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts.” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). The iterative and dynamic nature of the analysis is an important facet of IPA, with each step deepening the emerging understanding of the phenomena and reaching beyond the interpretations of the participants themselves. The researcher’s broader experiences also form part of this hermeneutic circle, as they cannot be wholly bracketed (J. A. Smith, 2007).

Idiography

The third key influence on IPA that J. A. Smith et al. (2009) identify is idiography. In contrast to many other approaches within psychology, IPA is idiographic rather than nomothetic. Instead of studying large groups or populations as single entities, with the data from many participants being aggregated, IPA focuses on exploring the details of particular individuals’ experiences and examining both the convergence and divergence between them. IPA recognizes that human experiences are complex and influenced by a diverse range of factors so collects and analyzes data to explore this complexity. However, IPA’s idiographic focus on particular individuals’ experiences does not mean that it cannot generate much broader insights and understanding of the phenomena it studies. Idiography involves taking a ‘bottom up’ approach to studying phenomena that proceeds from a rich understanding of the particular to developing a deep understanding of the more

general (J. A. Smith et al., 1995). Studying how a phenomenon is experienced and made sense of by individuals can lead to a fuller understanding of that phenomenon than those created by nomothetic approaches which often obscure crucial details when they aggregate their data. These individual sense-making processes are often precisely what makes the phenomena psychologically influential. This process of exploring the particular to understand the universal echoes the interest of philosophical phenomenology in exploring the essences of experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Interpretative Analysis

A key feature of IPA research is that it is both interpretative and analytical, rather than merely descriptive. IPA studies explore a phenomenon and develop an understanding of it. This analysis is always strongly grounded in the data on which it is based but the role of the researcher is to investigate how the participants experience something and make sense of it, rather than merely to summarize the participants' own accounts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). As with other phenomenological approaches, IPA studies involve both description and interpretation (Finlay, 2012). More descriptive research approaches can make valuable contributions, particularly when investigating phenomena that are relatively unexplored, but IPA seeks to go beyond emic understandings of phenomena. J. A. Smith et al. (2009) identify being 'too descriptive' as a common weakness in many IPA studies, particularly those conducted by inexperienced researchers. IPA investigates phenomena and explores data to develop accounts that help understand it.

Interpretation in qualitative research is an act of composition that involves the "logical extension of simple description but also will include contemplative, speculative,

even aesthetic extension” (Stake, 2010, p. 55). As Patton (2015, p. 570) notes, “interpretation, by definition, involves going beyond the descriptive data. Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world.” Questions of causation are contested topics within the philosophy of science (see J. A. Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015) but “causation is intimately related to explanation; asking for explanation of an event is often to ask why it happened” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 23). Exploring such issues is an important and appropriate aspect of interpretative analysis, although the distinction between description and interpretation should be clearly made (J. A. Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

Developing full understandings of phenomena is one of the explicit goals of IPA (J. A., Smith et al., 2009) and phenomenological analysis has always sought to “grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon” (Patton, 2015, p. 573). IPA is designed to allow researchers to make more general claims as the final step in the analytical process, after each individual case has been fully explored (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). These generalizations are developed cautiously using idiographic principles to establish them inductively (J. A. Smith et al., 1995; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). From a critical realist perspective, observations of the Empirical enable inferences about the Actual to be made (Bhaskar, 1975; McGhee & Grant, 2017; see also pp. 105-109). The processes involved in doing so include explicit comparisons between different cases that

explore both the divergence and convergence between them, testing different explanations to find the best fit for the data (cf. J. A. Maxwell, 2004, 2013; Patton, 2015).

IPA was developed as an integrative approach (J. A. Smith, 1996) that allows researchers to “draw upon a considerable interpretative range and make connections with an array of other theoretical positions as part of the process” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 186). This capacity to explore the links between participants’ experiences and understandings and broader theoretical frameworks is one of IPA’s key strengths. Analysis in IPA must remain grounded in the principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography but it can and should go beyond the participants’ understandings as it investigates phenomena and develops an interpretative analysis of them. IPA studies involve two types of research questions, primary and secondary (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Primary research questions focus on how people understand their experiences and are exploratory rather than explanatory. In contrast, secondary research questions explore more theory-driven questions and can evaluate existing theories and models (Flowers et al., 1997). Secondary research questions must be explored cautiously, and may only be partially answered due to limitations in the data, but part of IPA’s value lies in its ability to engage with them.

It is important to note that, in common with many other qualitative approaches, the accounts produced using IPA are always interpretative and so do not present claims of absolute ‘objective truth.’ Explanations, including perceived causal relationships, developed in the analysis throughout this thesis should thus be understood as interpretations of the data. Such analysis will always be shaped by the researcher’s own experiences to some extent (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This limitation applies to all research, including

quantitative and positivist approaches (J. A. Maxwell, 1996), and should not be viewed as a weakness of the methodology. Explicitly acknowledging the role of the researcher in shaping the analytical process enables steps to be taken to mitigate against its influence. This means the analysis can be more critical and robust than research which is less reflective. Analysis developed using IPA will always be subjective, but it can still be rigorous, systematic and persuasive (J. A. Smith, 2011). The reader must decide for themselves how persuasive they find the offered interpretations.

Ensuring Quality in IPA Studies

J. A. Smith (2011) has developed a set of criteria for assessing the quality of IPA studies and these provide further insight into what he considers the most important elements of the methodology. He argues that, in order to be considered acceptable, IPA studies must meet the following four criteria. Firstly, they must subscribe to the theoretical principles of IPA - they must be phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic. Secondly, the methodology used must be transparent and well documented. Thirdly, the analysis must be plausible, coherent and interesting. Finally, sufficient extracts should be included to support each theme. Studies that meet these four criteria should be accepted for publication and included in relevant systematic reviews. J. A. Smith also presents additional criteria that elevate a study from being merely acceptable to being 'good.' Good IPA studies should be focused and offer an in-depth analysis of a specific topic, with both strong data and analysis of it. This analysis should be presented in a way that is both

engaging and enlightening, rigorously exploring both the convergence and divergence of the participants' experiences. J. A. Smith also emphasizes the importance of both depth and clarity when presenting IPA research. Space is always limited to some extent, and so a succinct narrative that clearly communicates the phenomenon being studied is crucial. J. A. Smith's (2011) criteria encapsulate Yardley's (2000) four principles of quality in qualitative research. Projects that meet them will be transparent and coherent, showing commitment and rigor in their approach. They will also show sensitivity to their context and have clear impact and importance.

Suitability of IPA for Studying Religiosity and Spirituality

IPA's flexible and inductive approach makes it suitable for exploring a wide range of experiences and how people make sense of them (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). It is "a particularly useful methodology for examining topics which are complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden." (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41) Religiosity and spirituality are all three of these things. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) suggest IPA is useful for studying spiritual experiences, and previous studies have investigated a range of different religious and spiritual phenomena using IPA (see pp. 84-95). The relatively small sample sizes IPA requires (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) also makes it especially useful for investigating groups from whom recruiting many participants is difficult.

The centrality of meaning-making within religiosity and spirituality (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Park et al., 2013; see also pp. 53-64) makes IPA particularly useful for studying religious and spiritual phenomena. If religiosity is the "search for significance in ways related to the sacred" (Pargament, 1992, p. 204) and nothing is inherently sacred (Taves,

2009) then the core of religiosity is simply the search for significance and meaning. Understanding experiences which individuals deem religious or spiritual involves exploring both how they make sense of particular experiences and why they view them as significant and/or sacred. IPA's idiographic and hermeneutic approach can explore these processes. This is particularly important if the experiences and interpretative processes are highly complex and idiosyncratic, as they are with many religious and spiritual phenomena (Chaves, 2010; Murphy, 2017; Slone, 2004). This explicit emphasis on understanding meaning-making and its idiographic commitment make IPA more suitable than Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013) for exploring these research questions.

Good qualitative research should go beyond describing data and phenomena, developing meaningful insights that go beyond what is already known (Thorne, 2020; Yardley, 2000). As noted previously, IPA is an integrative approach that can go beyond participants' own conceptualizations to explore more theory-driven secondary questions and make links with other findings (Flowers et al., 1997; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Grounded Theory is frequently used to develop explanatory accounts of phenomena, focusing on the 'how?' and 'why?' of events (Nolas, 2011; Payne, 2007). However, using a Grounded Theory approach would have required a more limited scope for the investigation, and its open-ended and iterative nature also makes it problematic for projects with fixed timescales (Hawker & Kerr, 2007). IPA, when done well, can develop deep understandings of phenomena and useful insights into them (J. A. Smith, 2011). IPA studies can both explore the richness of particular cases and integrate them with the wider research literature. A wide range

of methodologies should continue to be used to investigate religiosity and spirituality (see p. 37-46) but one aim of this thesis is to demonstrate why IPA should be used more widely within the psychology of religion.

Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Most IPA studies involve exploring the experiences of a particular group of individuals, in a particular context, to develop a rich understanding of a phenomenon. Such studies typically identify members of a relatively homogeneous group and conduct a single, semi-structured interview with each of a small number of purposively chosen participants before analyzing the data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). However, J. A. Smith et al. (2009, p. 52) suggest a single IPA study is insufficient for a PhD thesis and that three related studies are more appropriate. They also recommend sample sizes of 3-6 participants and note that, rather than using more participants, more advanced research should instead strive to improve the depth and clarity of its analysis.

There are many ways that multiple studies can be linked together, including mixed-methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) and pluralistic (Frost, 2011; Frost et al., 2010) approaches. These all have advantages and disadvantages that enable them to answer different types of research questions effectively. J. A. Smith et al. (2009) also identify what they describe as “bolder” and “more adventurous” research designs that can be used with IPA. These include longitudinal designs, where the participants are interviewed before and after a key event (e.g., J. A. Smith, 1994a), designs involving more extensive data collection like follow-up interviews (e.g., J. A. Smith, 1994b), and multiperspectival designs where the same phenomenon is studied from

different perspectives (e.g., Larkin & Griffiths, 2004). Each of these approaches place additional demands on the researcher(s) but also have the potential to develop deeper and more persuasive insights than more basic designs (Larkin et al., 2019; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Multiple Studies, Multiple Perspectives

When this project began, in 2015, relatively little guidance on conducting multiperspectival IPA had been published. J. A. Smith et al. (2009) contains just a single paragraph on multiperspectival IPA. This notes (p. 52), “the exploration of one phenomenon from multiple perspectives can help the IPA analyst to develop a more detailed and multifaceted account of that phenomenon.” The advantages of using a multiperspectival approach to study religious and spiritual experiences across several different groups to develop an understanding of the underlying phenomena seemed clear. The underdeveloped literature on the practicalities of the methodology also provided an opportunity to make a significant new contribution to psychological research methodology.

There is more extensive literature on qualitative research synthesis (e.g., Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006) and its principles and techniques were used to develop the approach used in this thesis. Larkin et al. (2019) have subsequently published a paper further developing the theory and justification for multiperspectival IPA approaches. They primarily focus on exploring why multiperspectival approaches are useful and only offer broad suggestions rather than providing detailed instructions on how to conduct them.

Their insights and suggestions correspond closely with the approach taken in this project, providing additional support for the methodological decisions taken during the early stages of the research.

There are three key benefits to using a Multiperspectival IPA design, which are all also advantages of qualitative research synthesis more broadly. It can help develop a better understanding of the phenomena being studied, be more persuasive, and increase the applicability and impact of the research (Larkin et al., 2019; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). These advantages build upon and reinforce each other. In particular, the better understanding developed by examining phenomena from multiple perspectives makes it more persuasive and likely to apply to contexts beyond those in any single study.

The ancient parable of the Blind Men and an Elephant (Ireland, 1997) helps illustrate the potential flaws of a single perspective approach and explain why the combination of multiple perspectives can develop a richer understanding. A group of blind men encounter an elephant for the first time, and each of them touches a different part of its body to learn what it is like. One touches its trunk and thinks an elephant is like a snake. Another touches an ear and thinks an elephant is like a fan. A third touches a leg and thinks an elephant is like a tree. Others conclude the elephant is like a spear or rope. Each of the perspectives is partially correct, but also significantly wrong - and it is only by all the perspectives being compared and combined that a full appreciation of the complexity of the elephant is possible. Each perspective must be taken seriously in this synthesis, and yet the picture that emerges will be more than just a collection of five disconnected objects.

Synthesizing studies that explore a phenomenon from multiple perspectives enables the development of a richer and more complete understanding of it (Larkin et al., 2019;

Noblit & Hare, 1988). Careful synthesis of different studies enables the effects of contextual factors to be explored and new insights to be developed. The development of new insights beyond those in the synthesized studies is a key goal of research synthesis (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006) and synthesizing multiple qualitative studies facilitates theory development beyond that which is possible in single studies (Estabrooks et al., 1994; Paterson et al., 2001). These insights should be interpretative and not just descriptive, especially when the included studies are themselves interpretative (Larkin et al., 2019; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006; Suri, 2013). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014, p. 9) explicitly note that “comparing multiple IPA studies on a particular problem may provide insights into universal patterns or mechanisms.”

Multiperspectival or synthesized designs can also develop arguments or theories that are more persuasive than those from individual studies (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski, 2012). Using data from multiple studies can increase confidence that findings are not limited to just one specific group. Transparent triangulation of the convergences and divergences can help us understand the underlying reasons for those differences (Larkin et al., 2019). These processes of comparison and rigorous interrogation closely fit those that J. A. Maxwell (2004, 2013) and Patton (2015) suggest are necessary to develop explanatory understandings of processes through qualitative research (see pp. 42-44, 113-116). The additional evidence provided by a synthesis, in comparison to individual studies, makes the interpretative understandings developed more persuasive, although the analysis is still an interpretation of the data and does not

claim to discern absolute truth. This increased persuasiveness of the analysis, and any theories or explanations developed within it, can also increase the impact and applicability of research, especially in applied contexts (Larkin et al., 2019; Pope et al., 2007).

Larkin et al. (2019) have developed a useful taxonomy of multiperspectival IPA designs that describe the different possible relationships between the groups in a study. This terminology has been adopted in this thesis, although during the early development of the SMIPA approach it was not used. Dyadic designs explore how a shared experience that is important to two people is experienced from each of their perspectives. For example, a clinical situation can be studied from the perspectives of both the patient and the medical professional (Larkin et al., 2009) or from the perspective of both the patient and their partner (Clare, 2002; McGregor et al., 2014). This approach can be extended to explore the same situation from the perspectives of more than two participants, using ‘family group’ or ‘cohort’ designs (e.g., Dancyger et al., 2010). In both these types of design, it is often useful for the intermediate level of analysis to be the dyad or family (Larkin et al., 2019).

The other two multiperspectival approaches that Larkin et al. (2019) identify use directly or indirectly related groups to study a phenomenon. ‘Directly related groups’ designs study two or more subgroups who all have experiences of the same phenomenon but where each group is likely to have a distinctly different experience of it. For example, Rostill-Brookes et al. (2011) studied the failure of foster placements using three groups: young people in foster care, foster carers, and social workers. Unlike in dyadic or family designs, in a directly related groups design the intermediate unit for analysis is the type of participant (e.g., the social workers) rather than a cluster of all the participants in one situation (e.g., one young person, their foster carer, and their social worker). Indirectly

related group designs are similar, but the connection between the groups is more conceptual - with distinct but related phenomena being explored. (Larkin & Griffiths, 2004) used an indirectly related group design to explore how individuals rationalize and conceptualize risk using one group who regularly used Ecstasy and another who were frequent bungee-jumpers.

An indirectly related group design was chosen for this thesis, to study the experiences of members from a diverse selection of religious traditions. Initially studying each group individually ensured that their experiences could be fully and respectfully explored, generating a useful understanding of how they made sense of their own lives. A subsequent synthesis of the studies could then explore the convergences and divergences in their patterns of meaning and potentially develop a more complete and richer understanding of the underlying phenomena and processes.

Stratified Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (SMIPA)

The limited literature on multiperspectival IPA design required the development of the methodology used in this thesis, 'Stratified Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' (SMIPA). It is consistent with the principles of IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009), the later suggestions of Larkin et al. (2019), and the theoretical literature on qualitative research synthesis (e.g., Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). Although this technique has been developed for use with IPA studies, the same principles could also be applied

to other similar qualitative techniques such as Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

SMIPA's advances over previous Multiperspectival IPA designs are focused primarily on the two areas: how the groups used in the study are selected and how the data it generates is synthesized. Stratified purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011) generates a diverse range of perspectives on the phenomena being studied and each group within the study is first analyzed separately (cf. Larkin et al., 2019). This enables the studies to then be synthesized, using the techniques of qualitative research synthesis, to generate new insights that go beyond those of the individual studies (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006; Suri, 2013). This potentially enables the development of both a deeper understanding of how the phenomena are experienced and also stronger theoretical understandings of them (Estabrooks et al., 1994; Paterson et al., 2001). Even single IPA studies can explore secondary research questions, and doing so is important if their findings are to have practical value beyond just describing the experiences of marginalized groups (J. A. Smith, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). SMIPA projects retain IPA's idiographic, hermeneutic, and phenomenological commitments while exploring the broader manifestations of phenomena to develop a deeper understanding of them.

Stratified Purposeful Sampling

IPA studies use purposeful sampling to select a small number of cases that help understand broader phenomena (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). A purposeful approach is also necessary in multiperspectival IPA studies and similar principles apply when selecting which participants (and groups of participants) to investigate (Larkin et al., 2019). In many multiperspectival IPA studies, especially those with dyadic or family group designs, the

research question will clearly dictate which groups should be sampled. In other studies, a wide range of possible subgroups may all be appropriate. For example, Larkin and Griffiths (2004) could have chosen from hundreds of different groups that engage in risky-but-rewarding behavior. In designs that use only two subgroups, it can be sufficient to simply choose any two groups that reflect the diversity of the phenomena and which the researchers believe will help understand it. A more systematic approach to identifying the subgroups within a multiperspectival design has the potential to increase the insights it generates and maximize the benefits of the additional work involved.

Patton (2002) identifies 16 different types of purposeful sampling that can be used in qualitative research and (Suri, 2011) extends their use to qualitative research synthesis. These different strategies have a range of advantages and disadvantages, and which are used should be determined by the research question and phenomena being investigated. These sampling strategies can also be combined in various ways and traditional IPA studies make use of several of them. For example, intensity sampling involves the selection of cases that are ‘information rich’ and provide excellent examples of the phenomena being studied. IPA also makes use of relatively homogeneous sampling, and many studies use snowball sampling to identify suitable participants. The overriding principle when sampling in IPA studies is that the researcher should select a range of cases that will provide a diverse range of insights and enable them to develop a robust understanding of what they are studying (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This principle also applies in multiperspectival IPA studies and researchers should choose participants they think

will help them develop strong answers to the both the primary and secondary research questions they are investigating (Larkin et al., 2019).

Stratified purposeful sampling divides the possible subgroups for a study into a number of distinct strata, which differ from each other on key dimensions of variation (Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011). This enables the major variations between different strata to be explored and can also identify commonalities shared across the phenomena. Selecting subgroups for a stratified purposeful design has three stages. The key dimensions of variation need to be identified and then used to define the strata that will be used. One subgroup that meets the criteria of each stratum should then be purposefully selected, ensuring that it will provide the researchers with a sufficiently intense and accessible data. Unlike in stratified random sampling, the goal of this approach is not to achieve statistical representativeness, but it should provide a range of insights that help develop a fuller understanding of the phenomena being studied (Patton, 2002).

Each perspective included in a study should have the potential to generate insights into both its own specific context and also the broader phenomena. The dimensions of variation chosen should be theory-based, drawing on existing research to identify criteria that are relevant to the phenomena being studied. These can include types of incident, periods of times, characteristics of the individuals involved, or representations of theoretical constructs. Good theoretical sampling facilitates “elucidation and refinement of the variations in, manifestations of, and meanings of a concept as it is found in the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 239). Rigorous comparison and contrast between different manifestations of a phenomenon requires a sufficient range of variation to be included in the data collected. As Suri (2011) notes, clustering cases according to key dimensions of variation is

also commonly done when analyzing qualitative data even when it is not explicitly identified as a sampling strategy, because it can help us understand the differences within it.

Stratified Research Designs

In its simplest form, SMIPA can explore subgroups selected with just a single dimension of variation between them. For some dimensions, a relatively clear and binary distinction can form the basis for the division. For example, strata could be defined based on sex, political affiliation in a two-party system, or whether people have attended college. However, many dimensions will form a spectrum rather than being dichotomous - such as a theoretical construct that is measured using a test. Other non-dichotomous dimensions may be more subjective and not easily measured. In such cases, the expert judgment of researchers can be used to classify subgroups as long as the justifications for doing so are transparent (cf. J. A. Smith, 2011; Yardley, 2000). The primary function of stratification is to generate a diversity of perspectives, rather than aspiring to be representative of the entire group.

There are several possibilities for dividing a non-dichotomous dimension of variation. The simplest approach is to categorize each possible subgroup as either 'high' or 'low' by comparing them to the average, in a process similar to a 'median split' (Gelman & Park, 2009), although the division may be made using something other than a statistical median. Alternatively, the dimensions may be divided into three bands by adding a 'medium' option. In some research designs it may be desirable to use all three divisions, but in others researchers may choose to use only

the higher and lower bands to increase the variation within the study while reducing the resources required to conduct it. The approach does not necessarily aim to sample extreme cases or achieve maximum variation (Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011) but can retain many of the advantages of such approaches and facilitate the identification of both essential and variable features of phenomena.

After identifying the strata which will be used for sampling, the selection of individual subgroups should be made purposefully. Illuminating cases should be chosen that are excellent but not highly unusual, with sufficient variation between them but which still present fairly typical examples of the phenomena. There is no need for researchers to compile exhaustive lists of all possible subgroups for inclusion, but they should consider enough possibilities to ensure that those chosen provide the desired diversity of perspectives. Depending on the research questions, such a list might number less than 10 or more than 100 possible subgroups. Randomized selection of subgroups may offer a facade of greater representativeness, but the benefits of purposefully choosing the most appropriate and useful groups are much greater (Patton, 2015). Pragmatic considerations, such as access, should be considered when choosing between equally appropriate groups. Selections can also be made because certain groups are viewed as politically important, critical cases, or are of high relevance to stakeholders involved in a project (Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011).

More advanced forms of SMIPA can investigate variation across multiple dimensions. Such approaches require more resource but also amplify the benefits of a multiperspectival approach. A 2x2 design, where four subgroups are chosen to investigate differences across two different dimensions of variation, is the most complex that remains

practical for doctoral theses. It effectively involves four distinct IPA studies with a fifth study that synthesizes them. This level of design complexity is also likely to be the most appropriate for many other studies, as it has enough data to provide meaningful insights while still enabling deep analysis of the data. Table 1 (p. 137) lists some more complex designs that are possible within the approach outlined here. As with standard IPA studies, more data does not necessarily lead to better analysis and is often detrimental rather than beneficial (J. A. Smith, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The aim of the sampling strategy in a multiperspectival IPA study should be to achieve data sufficiency, rather than data saturation (Paterson et al., 2001; Suri, 2011).

Approaches to Synthesizing Qualitative Data

Numerous approaches to synthesizing qualitative research have been developed, many of which share strong similarities but have been described in slightly different ways by different researchers (Suri & Clarke, 2009). They all emphasize the creation of new knowledge, which advances our understanding by going beyond merely describing the findings of the studies used within the synthesis (Estabrooks et al., 1994; Jensen & Allen, 1996). It is this synthesis and the integration of the data that differentiates a qualitative research synthesis from the more common literature review (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Suri & Clarke, 2009). As with primary qualitative research, there is not a single qualitative research synthesis approach that is suitable for all research questions. The objectives of a

study and epistemology of the research should determine the choices that are made (Suri, 2013; Suri & Clarke, 2009).

Meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988) is one of the earliest methods for synthesizing qualitative research (Suri & Clarke, 2009), and it is not limited to synthesizing only ethnographies. Noblit and Hare (1988) developed their approach to be inductive, interpretative, and flexible. Meta-ethnography applies many of the techniques used in developing ethnographies to construct new interpretations of previous studies that “clarify and resolve” the inconsistencies between them and produce accounts that are “consistent, parsimonious, elegant, fruitful, and useful” (Noblit & Hare, 1988, p. 16). Rather than developing overarching generalizations, the primary goal of meta-ethnography is to translate studies into each other and synthesize them to find shared patterns of meaning across the studies.

In contrast to many of the more interpretative approaches for qualitative research synthesis, qualitative metasummaries (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006) aggregate the findings of multiple studies and investigate the frequency of findings to seek evidence of shared features across the studies. Although qualitative metasummaries do involve a degree of abstraction, their focus on manifest frequencies and intensity effect sizes reflects a positivist epistemology that is inconsistent with IPA and more suited to synthesizing deductive qualitative studies.

The approach adopted for the synthesis of studies in SMIPA is based on Sandelowski and Barroso’s (2006) form of qualitative metasynthesis, although the more encompassing term ‘qualitative research synthesis is preferred (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Suri & Clarke, 2009). This is because, as the studies are all conducted by the same

researchers, the synthesis falls in what Sandelowski and Barroso (2006, p. 20), describe as the “borderlands between secondary analysis of qualitative data, within-study syntheses, and qualitative research syntheses” and is what Larkin et al. (2019) describe as a mini-metasyntesis. This purpose of such a synthesis is to develop “an interpretive integration of qualitative findings that are themselves interpretive syntheses of data” (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006, p. 18). The synthesis should involve “the creation of a new interpretation of a phenomenon that accounts for the data, method, and theory by which the phenomenon has been studied... It creates the possibility of articulating theories that account for contradictions and complexities...” (Paterson et al., 2001, p. 13). The synthesis should not just summarize the findings but must use them to answer deeper questions by analyzing the connections and differences between them.

Synthesizing Studies in SMIPA

As noted previously, in Multiperspectival IPA studies with directly or indirectly related groups it is usually appropriate to analyze each subgroup individually before synthesizing the findings (Larkin et al., 2006, 2019). Treating each subgroup as a distinct study and fully analyzing them helps maintain the idiographic commitment of IPA. Each of these studies should at least satisfy J. A. Smith’s (2011) criteria for ‘Acceptable’ to enable the synthesis to be of a high quality and develop robust insights. This should include both descriptions of the themes and also discussion of them, connecting the findings to the wider research literature. Making sure all the synthesized studies are robust and rigorous is a

crucial prerequisite for a robust and persuasive qualitative research synthesis (Paterson et al., 2001). Depending on the research questions and the nature of the groups chosen, the interview schedule and research questions can potentially be shared across the studies.

The analytical process when synthesizing qualitative research is iterative, rather than strictly following a linear sequence of steps (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). This is similar to primary qualitative research, which is also often imaginative and fluid. The goal is to explore the data and develop a deep understanding of it, while rigorously ensuring the resultant interpretations are firmly grounded in the data (Lyons, 2007). Many of the techniques used to move from individual cases to an overall understanding of the phenomena are also applicable in this process. The aim of the synthesis is not simply to describe the similarities and differences between the studies but to integrate them (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006) and produce an interpretation that adds something to the research literature beyond the individual studies (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Suri & Clarke, 2009). To distinguish them from the themes within the individual studies, the themes developed by the synthesis are described as ‘metathemes’ because they describe a higher level of abstraction and are developed out of the themes of the studies.

Many of the early stages within a qualitative research synthesis, such as identifying research questions and selecting the data to be included, have already been completed in a SMIPA study before reaching the synthesis stage. The first stage of the synthesis is therefore to look again at the themes identified in each of the studies and begin exploring the similarities and differences between them. Constructing a matrix or taxonomy that lists and groups all the themes across the studies is a useful early step in this process (Larkin et

al., 2019; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). This taxonomy can go through several iterations and is similar to the construction of a master table of themes in an individual IPA study (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The objective, at this stage, is to identify and investigate patterns of meanings across the data.

The next stage in the synthesis process is reciprocal translation. Reciprocal translation uses one part of a dataset to help understand another, by making targeted comparisons between concepts and interpretations in order to integrate them (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). It is an iterative process that ‘translates’ the concepts and themes in each study into those of the other studies to see whether they also can represent the experiences described in those studies or whether new metaphors and themes are necessary to adequately describe the combined data (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Pope et al., 2007). This process involves using the ‘metaphors’ (Noblit & Hare, 1988) of each study to try to explain the data in the others, refining them in the process and developing a new set of interpretative elements, patterns, and themes that help elucidate the totality of the data. This process has similarities with the hermeneutic processes used in individual IPA studies, where one part of the data is used to help understand the whole (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Reciprocal translation is most appropriate when the studies being synthesized are about similar things and do not directly refute each other. Major differences, or refutations, between the studies can also be synthesized through a similar process after they have been made explicit (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

The concepts and interpretations used to synthesize the data can be either *in vivo* (i.e., contained within one of the studies) or *imported* from other theoretical or empirical literature. Some synthesists argue that only the data from the participants should be included in the synthesis, but within IPA and other interpretative approaches the researchers' comments and discussion are an integral part of the analysis and so should not be excluded (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006; J. A. Smith et al., 2009; Suri, 2011). The synthesis, like the analysis in individual studies, should remain grounded in the data. However, to explore the phenomena deeply and fully, researchers should draw on all the resources and knowledge at their disposal, including theoretical insights from beyond the studies if they are useful. As part of this iterative and creative process of developing new metathemes, techniques such as abstraction and subsumption (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) can also be useful.

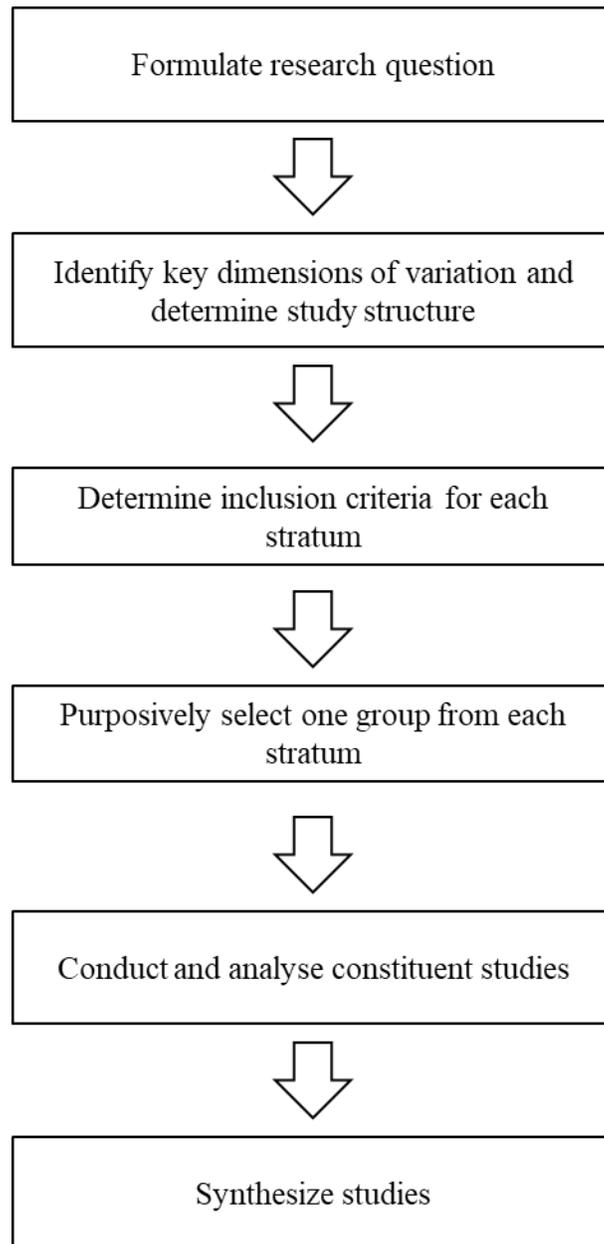
As with all qualitative research, the analytical processes used should be documented by the researchers, not only to facilitate transparency and demonstrate rigor but also because doing so can aid the analytical process itself (Patton, 2015; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The decisions taken in the analysis, and reflections by the researchers on the data, should be documented to help ensure transparency and enable others to audit the research process (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000). Discussions between co-researchers can help refine themes and provide credibility checks that ensure they reflect the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; R. Elliott et al., 1999). As with individual IPA studies, inter-rater reliability has no place within SMIPA but a robust independent audit trail helps make sure the conclusions drawn are sensitive, rigorous, coherent and transparent (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000).

SMIPA Summary

The stages involved in conducting a SMIPA study can be seen in Figure 2 (p. 138). The first step in any study is to identify appropriate research questions and ensure they are suitable for the methodology chosen. In SMIPA studies, there should be both primary and secondary research questions (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) that cover both the individual and combined studies. Either directly or indirectly related group designs can be used, depending on the research question. In either case, key dimensions of variation should be identified based on the researchers' expertise and existing literature. An appropriate research design (see Table 1, p. 137) should then be selected and inclusion criteria for each strata determined. After the strata have been determined, one subgroup from each should be selected for inclusion in the study. After the research design and the subgroups have been decided, standard IPA studies should be conducted with each of the groups and fully analyzed. These studies can then be synthesized to produce a rich understanding of the phenomena being investigated, although as with any qualitative study they may only partially answer the research questions (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Table 1*Selected SMIPA Study Designs*

Design	Dimensions	Divisions	Total Strata
1 x 2	1	2	2
1 x 3	1	3	3
2 x 2	2	2	4
2 x 3	2	3	6
2 x 2 x 2	3	2	8
3 x 3	3	3	9
3 x 2 x 2	3	2-3	12
3 x 3 x 2	3	2-3	18
2 x 2 x 2 x 2	4	2	16

Figure 2*SMIPA Summary Flowchart*

METHODS

This chapter details the methods used in each of the four IPA studies that constitute this thesis and describes the analytical process used in their metasynthesis. These studies each explored how a distinct group experienced and made sense of that which they considered sacred. As discussed in the previous chapter, the method used in each study was intentionally very similar. To avoid unnecessary repetition, these shared components are described here once rather than in each of the subsequent chapters. These shared elements include the development of the interview schedule, participant selection strategies, general ethical considerations, and the analytical processes. Details that are specific to individual studies, such as the particular groups recruited, are described in the relevant chapters. As a multiperspectival IPA study, the method used in each of the studies closely follows the usual processes for IPA (Larkin et al., 2019; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). As noted in the previous chapter, at the time the research was conducted there was very little published guidance on conducting multiperspectival IPA. The process for analyzing and synthesizing the studies was developed by drawing on broader principles of qualitative research synthesis.

Design and Recruitment

A 2x2 SMIPA design (see pp. 128-130) was chosen for the project to enable a broad range of perspectives to be investigated. This involved four individual IPA studies, each using an indirectly related group, with strata determined using two dimensions of variation. J. A. Smith et al. (2009, p. 52) suggest three studies is often most appropriate for a PhD but

adding a fourth study enabled the exploration of multiple dimensions of variation and had the potential to generate additional insights. Larger and more complex designs, such as 2x2x2 or 3x3, were clearly beyond the scope of a doctoral thesis and a four study design was sufficient to test the methodology.

Different religious and spiritual groups were conceptualized as indirectly related examples of similar experiences (cf. Larkin et al., 2019). All the participants had experiences of something beyond themselves which they considered sacred, spiritual or religious. As Loewenthal (2000) argues, there are psychological themes common to most religious traditions even though there are also important differences between them too. These differences make assuming all the participants were experiencing the same underlying phenomena problematic and mean a single, combined IPA study would have been inappropriate. The participants' themselves were all comfortable being part of a larger project that examined a range of religious and spiritual groups. This reflects their shared conceptualizations of religion and spirituality, which are likely the result of their common cultural and geographical context.

Dimensions of Variation

Identifying key dimensions of variations to guide the selection of individual groups for study is an important and distinguishing feature of the SMIPA approach (see pp. 128-130). As discussed previously, there are many ways for potential groups to be categorized and the decision about how to do so should be theoretically driven and draw on the experience and expertise of the researcher(s). Religious

traditions have been categorized in various ways, including on the basis of geography and their type of theism. However, rather than focusing on specific details of religious traditions, their broader structure and approach to key aspects of religiosity seemed more likely to generate useful insights into the formation of individuals' worldviews and their experiences of that which they deemed sacred (cf. Fowler, 1981; Fowler et al., 2004)

Loewenthal (2000) identifies behavior, thoughts, and feelings as the three key domains of religiousness. Similarly, Schnell (2003) suggests that myth, ritual, and experiences of transcendence are the fundamental of religiosity. Paloutzian (2017) also suggests that people's thoughts, feelings, and actions should be the starting point for understanding religious phenomena. Following Glock (1962), Paloutzian identifies the dimensions of religiousness as Ideology, Ritual, Experience, Understanding, and Consequences. These five dimensions can be split into three groups which correspond with those suggested by Loewenthal (2000) and Schnell (2003): Ideology and Understanding; Ritual and Consequences; and Experience. As experience is the primary focus of this study, it should not be used as a dimension of variation within it. This left behavior/practice and thoughts/beliefs and both of these broad domains have demonstrated links to religious experiences (R. W. Hood et al., 2009; Paloutzian, 2017).

As discussed in the contextualization chapter (see pp. 46-77), beliefs are an important part of many religious traditions but the degree to which doctrinal beliefs are considered important varies (Day, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2000). In some traditions, and in some cultural contexts, heresy and apostasy are treated very seriously; they can lead to persecution, excommunication, and even death (e.g., Cameron, 1991; Marshall & Shea, 2011; Nolt, 2016). In others, simply being a member of the community is enough and a

wide variety of beliefs are tolerated or even actively encouraged (Day, 2011). Fowler (1981) suggested the extent and way individuals conform to the beliefs of their group is a key feature of religious development, although his model was heavily influenced by his own Christian theology. However, the extent to which a community shares and enforces requirements for specific beliefs, either explicit or implicit, seems likely to significantly influence how individuals in that community develop their worldviews and experience their religiosity. For this project, this variation has been conceptualized as forming a spectrum ranging between high and low degrees of expected orthodoxy (right thought).

Religious behavior encompasses many different aspects, including both ritual practice and everyday conduct (Loewenthal, 2000; Paloutzian, 2017). Rituals and other explicitly religious practices are an important component of many individuals' lived religious experiences (M. B. McGuire, 2008) and it has been suggested rituals are fundamental to the development of society and culture (e.g., Bellah, 2003; McCauley & Lawson, 2002; Rappaport, 1999). There is, however, great variation in the forms that religious rituals can take and the precision or flexibility with which they must be conducted (McCauley & Lawson, 2002; Rappaport, 1999; Taves, 2009). These differences often reflect different understandings of how the world and the sacred work. Most religious traditions also place demands on the conduct and morality of their adherents (Nielsen et al., 2013; Zell & Baumeister, 2013). Some groups have strict social norms that they enforce harshly, using techniques like ostracization or even execution (e.g., Cameron, 1991; Marshall & Shea, 2011; Nolt, 2016), while others are more flexible and tolerant of

deviation. These very different attitudes towards religious behavior seem likely to influence individuals' religiosity in various ways. For this project, these different attitudes have been conceptualized as forming a spectrum between high and low degrees of expected orthopraxy (right practice).

As a 2x2 design was chosen, potential groups needed to be categorized simply as either 'high' or 'low' on each of the two dimensions. This was a subjective and relative judgment, based on prior knowledge of the groups and other traditions. These classifications were discussed by the primary researcher and supervisory team until a consensus was reached about how particular groups should be considered. Most religious traditions have a range of different attitudes towards both different behaviors and beliefs but this internal diversity does not prevent meaningful and relative comparisons being made between the demands of different groups. The primary purpose of this stratification process was to ensure the groups chosen for the studies had sufficient diversity to allow the development of rich insights rather than to make representative claims about types of religiosity.

Group Selection

After selecting the strata for the study, the next stage in selecting the specific groups to include in the study was identifying the broad religious traditions from which each should be chosen. A hierarchical process was used to progressively narrow down the field of possibilities before selecting a single group. As IPA requires reasonably homogeneous groups (J. A. Smith et al., 2009), each study focused on members of a single community of shared faith, such as a Church. For example, after initially deciding to include a Christian

group, a specific denomination was then chosen before specific congregations were contacted. This approach avoided the need to consider hundreds of potential groups on an individual level and made the process more manageable.

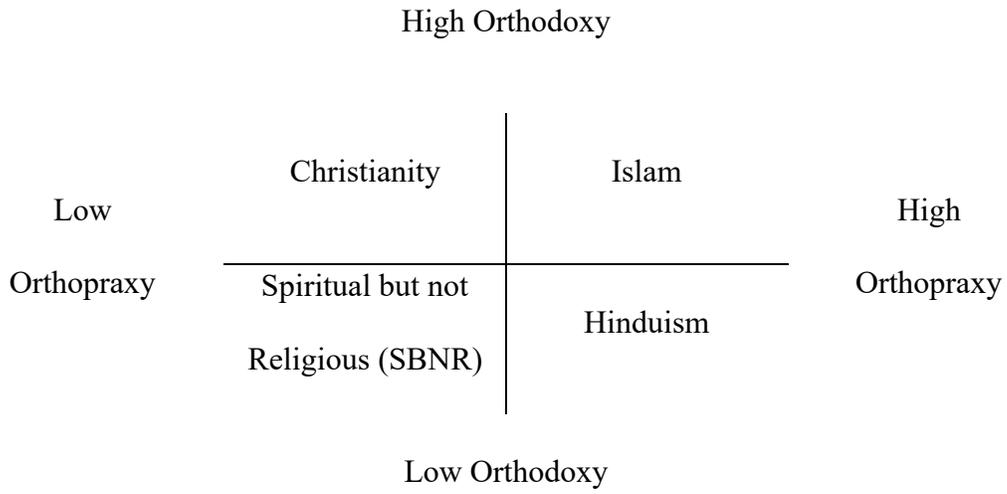
The four religious traditions initially selected were Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and the 'Not Religious' (see Figure 3, p. 146). These are also the largest four religious groupings in both the UK and the World (ONS, 2013; PRC, 2017). The decision to focus on the most populous groups increased the political importance of each study and their potential impact (Patton, 2002). Due to the size of each of these groups, there is obviously considerable diversity within each of them and individual groups were not intended to represent the entire religious tradition from which they were drawn.

Potential suitable communities for each of the studies were identified within the South East of England, using a combination of online research and personal knowledge. The geographical area was restricted both to ensure the groups shared a common social/cultural environment and to minimize travel costs. Including groups from a wider geographical area would have helped correct the disproportionate focus on Western psychology (Henrich et al., 2010; Sue et al., 1999) but unfortunately was not a practical option because of the resources available and the limited linguistic skills of the primary researcher. A degree of convenience sampling is commonly used in qualitative research (Robinson, 2014) and the experiences of the communities selected are neither more nor less valid than those in other locales. Further details of each of the groups chosen can be found in the subsequent chapters.

It would also have been possible, because of the diversity within them, to sample four groups from within a single 'World Religion'. This would have provided a more focused and homogeneous perspective but at the expense of limiting the applicability of any findings. The geographical limits of the study meant such an approach would have needed to focus on Christianity, on which the psychology of religion already has a disproportionate focus (Loewenthal, 2000). The decision to include four different religious traditions in the study was a risk, but previous research suggested there was likely to be sufficient common ground between them to allow a meaningful synthesis. However, even if this had not been the case, the four studies would still each have been meaningful IPA studies in their own right that explored topics and communities that had not previously been investigated in this way.

Figure 3

Dimensions of Variation and Strata



Sample Size

IPA studies are idiographic and study a relatively small number of cases in detail to develop a deep understanding of the phenomena they are studying (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This means they typically use fewer participants than many other qualitative methodologies and it is usually better to explore individual cases in more detail rather than adding additional cases. Some IPA studies have been conducted with as many as 42 participants (J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007) but there is now a consensus towards much smaller numbers of participants (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; J. A. Smith, 2011). Even studies with a single participant can be enlightening (J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007) but between three and six participants is often a suitable sample size (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Studies of this size balance the need for rich exploration of each individual case and the investigation of the convergence and divergence between cases. In IPA studies it is often more problematic to have too many participants, rather than too few, as large numbers hinder the ability to adequately analyze the data idiographically (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

J. A. Smith's (2011) criteria for assessing the quality of IPA research suggest that for studies with 4-8 participants each theme should be documented with extracts from at least three participants. He also recommends that, where possible, extracts from at least half the participants should be used. Studies with either five or six participants can meet these two suggestions even if themes are not present in the data from two participants. This is important as the lack of a theme within a particular account does not always mean it is not relevant to that participant, sometimes it may just reflect how a particular interview unfolded (Braun & Clarke, 2013; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This is especially pertinent with unexpected themes that the semi-structured interview questions are not explicitly asking

about. As this project had four studies, rather than the three suggested by J. A. Smith et al. (2009), five participants were recruited for each study as a compromise between the competing demands for depth, breadth, and the resources available.

Participant Recruitment

The eligibility criteria for individual participation were kept fairly simple and broad. Participants had to be between the ages of 18 and 65 years, British, identify as part of the group being studied, and to have not converted to their present faith within the last two years. The participants also could not be classified as ‘vulnerable’ in other ways. These limitations were determined primarily by ethical and other practical factors. In particular, recent converts were excluded because the process of reflecting on their changing beliefs may have had a lasting effect on those beliefs (Alea, 2018; Beckford, 1978).

Individuals from suitable communities, determined using the above processes, were approached to act as gatekeepers and help recruit individual participants for each of the studies. Using gatekeepers is common when seeking to recruit participants from relatively distinct groups that the researcher does not belong to, especially when it is important that all participants belong to the same community (Patton, 2015). It would have been impractical to recruit members of specific organizations or groups without using gatekeepers as lists of their members were not publicly available. Each gatekeeper was given the participant information sheet (see Appendix 2) and asked to identify a diverse range of potential participants who met the eligibility criteria. This diversity focused primarily on age

and gender, but also considered ethnicity and socioeconomic factors. Ensuring a diverse range of experiences within the homogeneous sample is an important aspect of IPA's methodology (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). It also helped partially redress the disproportionate focus of previous research on the experiences of affluent, white men (Henrich et al., 2010; Sue et al., 1999). Each gatekeeper asked to participate in the study, so they could reassure other participants about its appropriateness, and these requests were granted as each gatekeeper met the eligibility criteria for participation. Details about which participants acted as gatekeepers are not disclosed to help protect their anonymity.

The gatekeepers approached potential participants and if they expressed interest their details were passed on to the researcher and direct contact was made. At this stage their eligibility to participate was confirmed and a mutually convenient time and location for the interview was agreed upon. This confirmation of eligibility was based on self-identification and no forms of formal identification were requested from the participants. This was partially a response to the Windrush Scandal and the governments' 'hostile environment' policy (Wardle & Obermuller, 2019), as requesting any documentation may have been perceived as unnecessarily hostile and inappropriate, particularly by those participants from ethnic minorities.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was granted by Canterbury Christ Church University's ethics committee on 15th November 2016 (see Appendix 1). The studies were designed and conducted in accordance with both the British Psychological Society's (2009)

standards for ethical research with human participants and the university's own code of conduct. The key ethical issues raised by this research are discussed below.

Participating in the research had the potential to cause changes in the participants' beliefs or cause them to reevaluate their perspectives on certain experiences or relationships. This is because the interviews explored what they believed and why. Telling stories and explaining their significance involves more than providing accounts; they are acts that actively construct meaning (Mishler, 1986; Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006). Memories are not infallible and asking participants to examine their memories from new perspectives may both alter those memories and change the significance ascribed to them (Loftus, 1979). Events may gain or lose significance in the retelling, and these changes could have lasting effects on how the individuals see themselves and their lives. These processes occur during daily life and are not inherently harmful, but steps were taken to minimize their effects. Vulnerable individuals (e.g., children) were excluded from the study as were recent converts whose beliefs were likely to be less stable due to their ongoing process of reconstructing their understanding of their life (Beckford, 1978; Rambo, 1993). Using participants who had not converted within the last two years both reduced the potential for the interview to alter the individuals' beliefs significantly, and made it more likely the data collected would reflect settled and deeply held beliefs.

The information given to the gatekeepers and participants before the interviews was carefully considered. It was important they understood the focus of the interview and the topics they would be asked to speak about. This ensured their

consent was sufficiently informed and that they were comfortable disclosing potentially intimate experiences from their lives (Madill, 2012; Patton, 2015). However, disclosing too much information in advance could have risked either priming the participants to focus on certain topics or provide answers they thought were wanted (Madill, 2012; Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006). These competing demands required a careful balance. The briefing and interview questions were intentionally broad, giving the participants the space to discuss the events they considered significant. However, individuals knew they had been selected because of their affiliation with specific groups and that religious issues were the focus of the research. The focus on the primary research question, and the participants' own experiences, helped in this regard. The secondary research questions, and the researcher's own beliefs, were disclosed during debriefing and the participants all remained happy to have participated after learning them.

There was a high likelihood of sensitive or emotional topics being discussed in the interview, because of the nature of religious experiences and beliefs. Traumatic or challenging events have been linked to religious changes and experiences and such events are often an integral part of individuals' life stories (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Rambo, 1993). This raised potential concerns for wellbeing of both the participants and researcher. To manage these risks, participants were informed they did not have to answer anything they were uncomfortable discussing and careful attention was paid to their emotional state during the interviews. When the participants shared emotional or sensitive material extra care was taken when probing for more details. Participants were given time at the end of the interview to make sure they were okay. If they had disclosed especially traumatic or troubling material, the researcher checked they were receiving appropriate

psychological or pastoral support. The supervisory team also monitored the wellbeing of the interviewer and provided opportunities for more distressing aspects of the data to be discussed. To protect the participants, several extracts that were particularly revealing were not included in the write-ups of the studies but that data still contributed to the analysis.

Ensuring the anonymity of the participants was important because of the personal, and sometimes sensitive, nature of the research. For this reason, only minimal and general details of both the groups and individual participants have been included in each chapter. Contextual factors were often important to understanding aspects of the data, and they often helped shape the analysis, but in many cases their disclosure may have risked identifying participants and jeopardizing some of their relationships. This risk was relatively high due to the small size of the groups that the participants were recruited from. Participants were informed that their identities would be protected as much as possible, but that there was a risk that other participants may identify them. The participants were all comfortable with this risk. Participants were also assigned pseudonyms to help provide them with anonymity in the presentations of the research (Madill, 2012).

All participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point during or after the interview, but none of them did. Many of the participants expressed gratitude for being able to take part in the study and most were curious about the wider research being conducted. Several participants also said they had shared information they had not been comfortable telling others before, which suggests the

briefing process was successful and that a high degree of trust and rapport developed during the interviews.

Interview Development

IPA can explore a broad range of qualitative data types but there are good reasons why semi-structured interviews with individuals are used most often (Shinebourne, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews can collect rich, detailed accounts of people's experiences and explore how people make sense of experiences (Coyle, 2008). They enable the researcher to ask exactly what they need to and their flexibility allows a more natural exploration of how the interviewee views their own experiences. Questions can also be altered to reflect what the participant has already said, such as using their own preferred terminology, and follow-up questions can probe for more details and explanations (J. A. Smith, 1995). This responsiveness helps to develop rapport and create richer data than in a structured interview (J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007). A semi-structured approach helps ensure each interview covers all the topics required by the research questions and helps the researcher focus on what the participant is saying (Madill, 2012).

Interviewing participants individually, rather than in focus groups, can allow them to discuss difficult experiences and share controversial opinions more comfortably. It also enables a much deeper exploration of the experiences of each individual, enhancing the investigation of contextual factors and enabling more analysis of the convergence and divergence between different participants (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007). Several interviews involved the disclosure of very personal information that

enhanced the studies and this might not have occurred if they had not been confident that everything they said was confidential.

Developing the Interview Schedule

A single interview schedule was developed for use with all the participants, rather than creating different interview schedules for each study. This helped ensure the questions did not make assumptions about the practices, beliefs, and preferred terminology of the participants. Putting aside predetermined categorical and conceptual systems is an important element of phenomenological research (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) and making sure the interview was suitable for individuals from any religious background helped do this. This open approach allowed individuals to share their own experiences in their own terms, collecting rich and authentic data.

Before the decision was made to develop a unique interview schedule for the study, several widely used examples were first reviewed and evaluated for their suitability. IPA, unlike some other qualitative approaches, does not require that exactly the same questions are asked to all participants but a good interview schedule can still help ensure that questions are easily understood by participants and are not leading (J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007). A good interview schedule can also help ensure that the data generated will be useful for answering the research questions. The questions in a research interview should be distinct from the research questions themselves, eliciting data that helps the researcher investigate the research questions more fully (J. A. Maxwell, 1996).

The Faith Development Interview (FDI; Fowler et al., 2004) was developed to investigate how individuals make sense of the world and to assess interviewees using development stages originally developed by Fowler (1981) and subsequently developed by Streib and many others (Fowler et al., 2004; Streib, 2005). Its questions explore how participants make sense of the world and their lives, including existential issues. However, the FDI is highly structured and intended to be analyzed following strict schema, in a particular theoretical framework. This renders it unsuitable for an IPA study but many of its individual questions, which have been extensively tested, provided a useful basis for questions exploring issues of faith and meaning-making.

The Life Story Interview (LSI) has also been used extensively to explore how participants make sense of their life experiences (Atkinson, 1998). It guides participants to tell the story of their life and identify the most important events and experiences within it. The LSI is reasonably flexible, offering a large selection of questions for researchers to choose from, but focuses primarily on major life events. Only a small number of the interview questions explicitly explore spiritual experiences or beliefs and so using the LSI was unlikely to elicit suitably rich data about these issues to explore the research questions of these studies.

Suitable questions from both the FDI and Life Story Interview were identified and pooled together, along with some additional questions based on other research or developed by the author. These additional questions focused in particular on the participants' spiritual experiences, practices, and beliefs. The potential questions were grouped thematically and then a suitable selection was chosen to explore the relevant aspects of individuals' lives within a reasonable interview duration. One advantage of semi-structured interviews is their

flexibility and the questions were intended primarily to help the researcher collect rich data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007). Both the wording and ordering of questions could be altered to fit the individual interviews. This was particularly the case with the questions that ask about spiritual or religious topics, where the participants' own terminology was adopted by the interviewer.

The wellbeing and comfort of participants were important considerations when developing the interview schedule, because of both ethical duty and to improve the quality of data collected. Establishing trust and rapport is important in any interview, especially when the topics are potentially sensitive or intimate (Madill, 2012; Patton, 2015). General questions about the participants were placed at the start of the interview schedule to help the participants relax and adjust to the interview dynamic. These questions also provided important contextual information that informed subsequent questions. The most important topics, with regards to the research questions, were situated in the middle of the interview to balance increasing rapport against any potential fatigue that may develop. This also ensured there was always sufficient time for exploration of this aspect of the data with the participants. The interviews finished by reflecting on the changes experienced in the participants' lives. This provided an opportunity to review and clarify previous answers and for the participants to help make sense of their own experiences.

Interview Overview

The complete interview schedule used in these four studies can be found in Appendix 4. It includes seven primary questions and 64 potential secondary

questions to help explore the issues in more detail, although many of these were usually covered naturally in the participants responses. As the interviews were only semi-structured, they did not all follow the order of questions precisely and the participants were given the freedom to speak about what they believed was relevant or important. After the participants had finished sharing, they were asked relevant follow-up questions before returning to the interview schedule to explore other topics.

Interviews began by asking the participants to speak about who they are and their background, including their childhood and family experiences. Participants were then asked about their perspective on life and the world, with prompt questions exploring the sources of meaning, purpose and value in their lives.

It was only after this point that participants were explicitly asked whether they believed in God and, if so, what they believed God was like. However, many participants spoke about their faith or spirituality in response to earlier questions. This section of the interview explored the participants' spirituality and beliefs. It asked how they experienced God in their lives and whether they participated in any religious or spiritual activities. As noted above, the language used in individual interviews was intentionally flexible and reflected that used by the participant themselves. The interview then explored some of the participants' spiritual experiences in more detail. This usually focused on the experience the individual considered most significant, their first experience, and their most recent one. Participants had the flexibility to discuss other spiritual experiences too and their prior discussion of their religious or spiritual activities usually also involved experiences they considered spiritual.

The penultimate section of the interview asked the participants to reflect on whether their beliefs and practices had changed during their lives. If they had, they were asked to explore when, how, and why they believed these changes had occurred. The interviews ended with the participants being given an opportunity to share anything else they felt was important about themselves and their experiences, including elaborating on elements which had already been discussed.

Conducting the interviews

Each interview was conducted at a time and location that was mutually convenient for the participant and interviewer. Some interviews were conducted during the working day, others were held in the evening, and several were done at the weekend. The interviews were conducted in either the participant's own home, the home of the researcher, or at the home of a third party who lived in the geographical area of the study and offered a suitably quiet and private venue. All participants were given the option to be interviewed at one of the university's campuses or at the buildings affiliated with their faith communities but none chose to do so. The participants received copies of the participant information sheet and the consent form by email, before the interview (see Appendices 2 & 3). They were also given the opportunity to ask questions about the study to help them decide whether to participate.

Prior to each interview, a few minutes were spent in general conversation, and refreshments were offered. Several minutes were then spent making sure that the participant understood the research process and obtaining informed consent

from them. Participants were also briefed that the interview would be different to a normal conversation, with a focus on their own experiences and thoughts (Madill, 2012). They were told that they could ask questions about the interviewers' own experiences and beliefs, and about the research, after the interview. However, they were asked to refrain from asking questions, other than to seek clarification, during the interview itself. All participants understood why this was important and followed these instructions during their interviews.

The participants engaged thoughtfully in their interviews, sharing a rich range of their own experiences and thoughts. Rapport with the interviewer seemed to be good and many of them shared intimate and/or traumatic experiences, suggesting a high degree of trust in the interviewer. Interviews lasted between 22 and 102 minutes, excluding the time spent before and after the transcribed portions. The mean interview duration was 53 minutes. This variation in interview length reflected several factors, the most important of which was how many relevant experiences the participants had to discuss and how important religion or spirituality was in their lives.

After each interview, participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the research project or the researcher's own experiences. Most of them exhibited significant curiosity about these topics. This also provided an opportunity for the researcher to ensure those participants who had shared traumatic or other emotional experiences were settled and emotionally stable. This debrief process could be quite extensive, sometimes lasting approximately 30 minutes. In several instances, participants remembered something else they wanted to share during the post-interview conversation. Those additional contributions

were recorded, with the participants' permission, as a postscript to the interview and included in the analysis.

The interviews were recorded on two digital devices, one located closer to the participant and the other beside the interviewer. This helped ensure that everything was captured clearly and provided an important backup in case of technical glitches. Such glitches occurred in two interviews, but there was always one clear recording that could be transcribed and analyzed. Before transcription, the clarity of the recordings was enhanced using Sonocent Audio Notetaker. This was particularly useful in some of the interviews, conducted in the participants homes, where there was significant background noise.

Analytical Processes for IPA Studies

The analytical process in IPA is complex and iterative, developing an interpretative understanding of the data through a flexible and recursive process. This process involves the researcher immersing themselves in the data and seeking to understand the experiences described within it from both emic and etic perspectives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA adopts a hermeneutic approach that uses specific facets of the data to enrich the understanding of the wider data but that also uses the broader data to understand specific details and elements within it (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The following description provides an overview of the approaches used to analyze the data but the different steps often merged into each other as the analysis deepened (Storey, 2007). In keeping with the traditions of IPA, each interview was first analyzed individually before all the interviews within a

study were examined together to develop a richer understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Appendix 5 provides a worked example of one theme being developed.

Transcription and Preliminary Analysis

For each interview, the clearer of the two recordings was carefully transcribed to facilitate analysis. These transcripts were verbatim (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) and carefully checked to ensure their accuracy. The transcripts and recordings were then both imported into Nvivo. Nvivo 11 was originally used, but this was upgraded to Nvivo 12 by the university in the middle of the project, at which point the project moved to the more recent version of the software.

Many IPA researchers prefer not to use qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), because it can restrict the way the researcher works and its efficient use requires time to learn (Langdridge, 2007). However, QDAS assists the researcher when working with large amounts of data and can reduce disorganization and enhance the development of themes (Silver & Lewins, 2014; Wagstaff et al., 2014). The layout of Nvivo is not perfect for IPA but the ‘annotations’ function is good for preliminary notes and the ‘nodes’ function is useful for coding themes (Pietkiewicz & Lecoq-Bamboche, 2017; Wagstaff et al., 2014). The decision to use QDAS ultimately comes down to researcher preference and the use of a powerful computer with two large monitors helped mitigate the disadvantages of QDAS by enabling many elements to be viewed and processed simultaneously.

The next stage of the analysis involved carefully reading through the transcript several times to develop a holistic understanding of the data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007). This helped ensure the participant remained the focus of the

interpretation and that the analysis was firmly grounded within the data (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). During this process, notes were made on the data using the ‘annotations’ feature of Nvivo (Wagstaff et al., 2014). These notes included comments on the content of the participants’ descriptions, their use of language and the wider context of what they said. Some initial interpretative comments were also made at this stage. These annotations helped to identify the most significant sections of the data and started to explore them. They also began the process of examining how the participant made sense of their own experiences and developing a more etic perspective on them. These initial notes helped guide the subsequent stages of the analysis and identified possible topics to examine more closely (Shinebourne, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Initial themes were then identified in the data (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) and coded as nodes within Nvivo (Wagstaff et al., 2014). These themes remained closely grounded in the participants’ own accounts and at this stage were often primarily descriptive rather than interpretative. The IPA literature generally describes these as emergent themes (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) but this term can misleadingly downplay the interpretative nature of the process (Braun & Clarke, 2013). They are therefore described simply as ‘themes’ within the studies of this thesis, which encompasses both the initial or potential themes (J. A. Smith & Eatough, 2007) that were part of the analytical process and the subordinate and superordinate themes presented in the final analyses. Initial themes were always linked to specific extracts from the data and often the same extract was linked to multiple potential themes.

Developing and Consolidating Themes

Initial analysis identified many potential themes in each study that needed to be developed further to produce a more coherent and insightful account of the data (J. A. Smith, 2011). This process was iterative and involved careful consideration of the experiences described by the participants to identify convergence and divergence between them. Several techniques were used to develop and combine potential themes, in an iterative process that considered different possibilities before choosing the option that seemed most credible (Braun & Clarke, 2013; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Themes that shared similarities were grouped together either under a new title, through abstraction, or under one of the existing themes through subsumption, if one of them was appropriate. Themes which were oppositional were also often combined under a higher level organizing device, a process that J. A. Smith et al. (2009) term polarization. Both the function of themes and their context, whether temporal or cultural, also helped to develop higher levels of meaning and organization in the analysis.

During this process, related themes were also organized under superordinate themes which conveyed higher patterns of meaning-making within the data (Smith et al., 2009). This created a two-tier hierarchy of subordinate and superordinate themes, as is conventional in IPA studies. Theme tables, including extracts, were constructed and used to help organize the data throughout this process and to help ensure the analysis remained grounded in the data (Shinebourne, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Attention was also paid to the frequency with which themes appeared in the data, with only themes present in at least half the participants' experiences included in the final analysis (J. A. Smith, 2011).

Hermeneutics is one of the philosophical underpinnings of IPA and the ‘hermeneutic circle’ (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) played an important role throughout the entire analytical process. The wider data helped develop an understanding of specific sections of the data and this broader understanding was developed by understanding specific sections, in an iterative and recursive process. Each participant’s experiences were first analyzed separately, to develop a rich understanding of them, before later making comparisons between both different cases and the broader literature to develop a fuller understanding of the phenomena being investigated (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Throughout this process, every effort was made to reflect upon the influence of the researchers’ experiences on the interpretation of the data. IPA explicitly acknowledges that such influence is unavoidable rather than attempting to completely bracket prior experience, as advocated by some other forms of phenomenological research. Various reflexive techniques (see pp. 392-395) were used to monitor the impact this had on the analysis and help ensure it was a fair and reasonable reflection of the participants’ own experiences (J. A. Smith, 2019; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

The ‘writing up’ of qualitative research is an integral part of the analysis and themes continued to be refined during this stage (Braun & Clarke, 2013; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Significant developments often occurred at this stage, as it was only by elucidating the themes that their significance and the connections between them became more apparent. This could lead to further consolidation. Theme titles, in particular, were developed further to convey the essence of the themes more clearly and evocatively than the ‘working titles’ used in earlier stages of the analysis.

For each theme, extracts were selected that illustrated and helped explain its key features. J. A. Smith (2011) advises that each theme should be supported by extracts from at least half the participants, and so a minimum of three extracts from different participants were included for each theme. These extracts helped ensure that, although interpretative, the analysis remained firmly rooted within the data. It is important to note that the extracts reported within the write-ups of each study are only a small fraction of the data the analysis is based upon. Brevity and protecting the participants were also important considerations when selecting extracts. Extracts that could not be conveyed succinctly or which potentially compromised the anonymity of participants, were not used but their impact on the underlying analysis was often valuable and significant.

After each theme was inductively developed and presented as a discrete entity, the analysis was placed into the wider context of the research literature and its implications were explored (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This separation of ‘results’ and ‘discussion’ is a common approach in IPA studies that helps maintain a clearer boundary between the data and external interpretative frameworks (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). In each of the studies, there were many different connections with previous research and only the most relevant and resonant were included in the final write-ups of the individual studies (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The strengths and limitations of the analysis were also considered as part of this process, and pertinent limitations are noted in each chapter. Further discussion of these issues, where they affect multiple studies, can also be found in the final two chapters of this thesis (see pp. 344-345, 384-392, 395-399).

Synthesizing the Studies

As discussed in the previous chapter (pp. 132-135), after the four studies were completed individually, they were synthesized to further investigate their findings and integrate them. There are a range of techniques that can be used in qualitative research synthesis and those used should be determined by the nature of the project and the data (Pope et al., 2007; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006).

Qualitative analysis always involves imaginative work by the researcher as they interpret and make sense of the data and rigidly adhering to a predefined set of steps usually limits the analysis rather than enhancing it (Coyle, 2007b). Qualitative research synthesis is always an interpretative process that seeks to enhance our understanding of a phenomena by integrating the data from multiple studies but, like all qualitative research, the same data can often be interpreted in more than one way (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

The first stage of the synthesis, after closely reading each of the individual studies, was a taxonomic analysis that constructed a matrix to summarize the data. Taxonomic analysis is an inductive form of domain analysis that explores and organizes the conceptual range of findings in the data (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). To develop a taxonomy, the themes and other key findings from each of the studies were examined and conceptually grouped to identify both similarities and differences within the data. This information was organized as a table that also included relevant extracts to illustrate each of the themes. This process was conducted using Microsoft Excel, which enabled many different variations to be created and easily compared to determine which best represented the underlying

data. The matrix provided a visual representation of the themes within the studies and helped identify the similarities and differences between them (Bennion et al., 2012; Larkin et al., 2019). This matrix provided a foundation for the subsequent development of metathemes. The matrix was further developed and refined throughout the synthesis process and the final metatheme tables (pp. 315-316, 320-321, 325-326, 330, 334-335, 339-340) are the result this iterative development.

Reciprocal translation was then used to further develop the synthesis and interpretively integrate the data (see pp. 132-135). Reciprocal translation uses the concepts and themes in the different studies to help understand each other (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). Both in vivo and imported concepts were used to integrate the data (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006), although the distinction between the two was partially blurred as many imported concepts had already been used to help explore the findings of individual studies. The data from the studies and the wider literature helped illuminate each other and develop an integrated synthesis of the four studies. The use of imported concepts to help integrate the findings and make sense of the data was inductive and did not impose pre-existing categories onto the data. Aspects of the data were compared with external concepts and, if they provided a useful way of understanding the data, then they became part of the synthesis. The data and external concepts were often only partially congruent and in these cases the synthesis remained firmly grounded in the empirical data of the studies and the differences between the external theories and the synthesis were reflected on and discussed. The integration of external data, gathered using a wide variety of methodologies, with the synthesis increases the validity of the findings and

helped develop a richer and fuller understanding of the phenomena investigated (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Pope et al., 2007).

Developing the metathemes had many similarities with the processes of consolidating and developing the themes within the individual IPA studies. It was iterative and involved considering a wide range of connections and differences between aspects of the data before choosing the patterns that seemed most credible and enlightening and developing them into an account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The synthesis did not aggregate the findings but instead continued the idiographic trajectory of the overall project, using particular instances to help understand the wider phenomena (Larkin et al., 2019; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006; J. A. Smith et al., 1995). Each stage of the analytical process took an increasingly broad perspective, starting with the particularity of individual data extracts and eventually considering the data as a whole.

The writing-up process was also an integral part of the synthesis and describing the themes helped elucidate their key elements and the patterns within the data. Due to the integration of imported concepts within the synthesis, the discussion of each theme was combined with the analysis and each metatheme is presented as an interpretative summary. To reduce repetition, the themes that contributed to each metatheme and supporting extracts from the data are presented alongside the summaries rather than within them (see Tables 7-12). Additional discussion of how the findings help answer the original research questions can be found in the final chapter of this thesis (see pp. 348-370).

Ensuring Rigor

The same tools were used to help ensure the rigor and validity of the individual studies and the synthesis (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000; see also pp. 392-399). The data and the interpretations of it were discussed extensively with the supervisory team to ensure they were well supported and credible (Braun & Clarke, 2013; R. Elliott et al., 1999). Their comments suggested alternative ways to view aspects of the data and helped shape the development of the themes, ensuring they were firmly supported by the data. This approach is more suitable for IPA than techniques such as coding by multiple researchers (e.g., Berends & Johnston, 2005), which are epistemologically inconsistent with IPA's interpretative approach (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Research memos were made throughout the entire process of analysis and synthesis, to document the decisions that had been taken and the rationale behind each choice (Charmaz & Bryant, 2008; Patton, 2015; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). After each interview was conducted, reflective memos were written to summarize initial thoughts about the interview and its main themes, as well as any pertinent information about the interview itself that was not in the audio recording. This could include thoughts about the participant, their emotional state during the interview, or information gathered either during the briefing or debriefing processes. These insights helped build a fuller picture of the data and were particularly useful due to the delay between data collection and analysis (a period of several months in some cases.) Additional memos were written after the transcripts had been annotated and when themes were identified within each interview. Further memos documented how these themes were developed during the analytical process. Drafts of

earlier versions of themes were also retained. Care was also taken when describing the studies and methods used to be transparent and coherent (Yardley, 2000).

THERE'S A GOD WHO I KNOW

Christianity is the largest religious group in the world, with over 2.2 billion adherents (PRC, 2017). In the UK, 33 million people (59.5% of the population) identified as Christian in the 2011 census (ONS, 2012). This means it is important to understand the relationship between Christians' beliefs and their experiences, even though the academic study of religion has focused disproportionately on Christianity (Fitzgerald, 1990; R. W. Hood et al., 2009).

The origins of Christianity are often traced to the 1st Century, where it diverged from Judaism when the followers of Jesus believe he lived, died, and was resurrected for the salvation of humankind (Partridge & Dowley, 2014; Peters, 2005). Christianity has a long and complex history, including many schisms, and there are now many Christian denominations and independent churches, which have a diverse range of religious practices and traditions (Jasper, 2003; Partridge & Dowley, 2014). Most of these share core beliefs agreed at the early ecumenical church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries (Jasper, 2003; Peters, 2005). However, it is important to note that there have also been many groups that have identified themselves as Christian but who deviated from some of these beliefs (Ehrman, 2003; Kelly, 2012). Despite these exceptions, Christianity can be considered to require a relatively high degree of doctrinal orthodoxy, especially within specific denominations which are often defined by theological distinctions with other Christians. The wide range of religious practices in Christianity today mean it should also be considered relatively heteropraxic; even denominations that are relatively strict about how

their rituals should be conducted generally still recognize members of other denominations as still being Christian.

The Baptist Union of Great Britain, also now known as Baptists Together, has nearly 2,000 churches that are all autonomous congregations (Baptists Together, 2020). Baptist congregations dissented from the established Church of England after the reformation and Baptists believe individual churches should be able to act independently without an ecclesiastical hierarchy (Baptist Historical Society, 2020). Relatively little research has studied members of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. The PsycINFO database only contains a single match for “Baptist Union” relating to the UK, a dissertation comparing religious concepts of children between churches in the USA and UK (Heflin, 1994). This study is probably the first psychological study to examine the lived experiences of British Baptists in the 21st Century. Understanding how these Christians experience their relationships with God and develop their beliefs is therefore important both in its own right and for the insights it can generate into those processes more generally.

Method

This study investigated the experiences and beliefs of five British Baptists using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The participants were all members of the same church, which was a member of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and had been established for more than 100 years. The church was in a large town in the South East of England and had an ethnically and economically diverse congregation.

A gatekeeper (Patton, 2015) helped recruit participants who met the eligibility criteria. Participants had to self-identify as Christian, British, aged between 18 and 65, and as not possessing any characteristics that made them vulnerable. Participants were purposively selected to provide a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity (Madill, 2012). Three participants (Gareth, Havir, and Ian) were male and two (Jenny and Karen) were female. Three participants were White, one was Black, and one was Asian. The participants had diverse economic circumstances, ranging from a practicing medical doctor to an unemployed single mother. Three of the five participants had attended university.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. These interviews were transcribed and then analyzed inductively and iteratively, following the principles and processes of IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The participants all gave informed consent to participate in the study and reported after the interview that they were happy to have taken part and shared their experiences. Further details of the methods used in the study can be found in the methods chapter (see pp. 139-170).

Results

Eleven recurrent subordinate themes, each found within the accounts of all the participants, were identified and organized into two superordinate themes: 'Knowing God' and 'Living in the World' (see Table 2, pp. 175-176). Each subordinate theme occurred in the accounts of all five participants, except 'Studying Scripture to Understand God' which was not found in Jenny's interview. These themes were complementary, and subordinate themes often had connections to many others.

Table 2*There's a God Who I Know: Summary of Themes with Example Quotes*

Theme	Example Quote
Superordinate Theme: Knowing God	
Experiencing a loving and nurturing relationship with God	"Jesus is my homeboy." (Karen)
Studying scripture to understand God	"The Bible would be the main way I think I know God, so, as He is revealed in His Word." (Ian)
Talking to God as a daily companion	"If I see something, I pray about it. And if I need to do something, just to pray that God will help me..." (Jenny)
Connecting to God through worship	"When you worship, God comes to you... you have such a clear connection with God..." (Karen)
Feeling God's touch and guidance	"[God is] like a light. He's a light and you feel warm in yourself..." (Jenny)
Seeing God's hand in events	"[What] has sustained that belief over the years has been a remarkable coming together of events... some would call them coincidences. I would call them answers to prayer." (Gareth)

Theme	Example quote
Superordinate Theme: Living in the World	
Being supported by other Christians	“He made being a Christian very fun for a child... he had a lot of influence on me, um, on my Christian beliefs...” (Karen)
Interactions with other perspectives influence beliefs and behaviors	“I started really kind of searching, comparing, you know, my beliefs, my faith, with that of someone [from a] ... polytheistic background and faith.” (Havir)
Responding to challenging situations	“Some of them were struggling in their failings and their fallen-ness and therefore my preaching became very much about trying to affirm people in who they are.” (Gareth)
Finding meaning and purpose	“There is something more than what’s in it for me, in the sense of the bigger picture, which certainly adds purpose.” (Ian)
Faith affects everything	“God’s the center... everything flows down from that.” (Havir)

Knowing God

For all the participants, Knowing God was a central and defining part of their lives. They all considered a personal relationship with God to be the central feature of their Christian experience and the most important thing in their lives. This relationship appeared to be developed and sustained through various means, as captured in the following subordinate themes.

Experiencing a Loving and Nurturing Relationship with God

All five participants described experiencing a loving and nurturing relationship with God. There were some differences in these relationships, but each participant described their relationship in ways that suggested it resembled one with another person. The participants used a range of male language to describe God, and this analysis reflects their experiences. Ian described how, “There’s a God who I know and have a personal relationship with... He’s probably more ‘Daddy’ rather than ‘God.’” Ian’s use of such an intimate and familiar term to describe the God he knows and has a relationship is directly contrasted with a more distant and formal conceptualization. Ian knew God as both the powerful creator of the universe and also as a loving, familial figure in his life. Karen’s relationship with God shared the intimacy of Ian’s and she declared joyously that, “Jesus is my homeboy.” God was a friend who was always there for her, somebody who she thought was “a lot like us, but, um, just more. He’s just more.” For the participants, God was both a person and a divine figure.

The participants described complex relationships between themselves and God, which included negative emotions and disagreements. The participants experienced God

asking them to do things they did not want to do and also times when God did not do what they wanted. For example, Karen said she could be “a little hardened, or stubborn... He might be giving me little signals, do this, do this, and I’m like, I don’t want to do that!” Jenny, who has significant ongoing medical issues, said she sometimes pleaded with God and prayed: “Look, I want to be healed! I want to be [in] no pain! Um, please just heal me!” The language used when describing these experiences showed both the intimacy and vibrancy of the relationships. The participants were comfortable being open and honest with God, striving to please God and yet still able to express their feelings with authenticity because they knew that God loved them.

These arguments and disagreements with God did not appear to diminish the bonds that the participants experienced with God. They seemed to strengthen their faith in God, especially when they experienced positive outcomes related to the conflicted situations. For example, when a serious relationship Karen was in ended, she was angry and thought God had let her down, but “a couple of years later, I met my husband. And I was, like, oh, I get it now... I’m sorry, Lord. You were working it out for me and I got mad at you. I’m really sorry.” The participants learned to trust God through their experiences of doubt as well as their experiences of affirmation. Each participant described how the way they understood and related to God had changed during their life. The participants developed their dynamic and loving relationships with God through a diverse range of personal experiences, as the following themes will show.

Studying Scripture to Understand God

The Bible played an important role in the lives of all five participants. They considered it to be God's revelation to mankind, and they studied scripture to better understand what God was like and what God wanted. Ian, Havir, and Karen believed the Bible was the primary means by which God reveals himself to people. They described regularly studying the Bible and finding it an edifying experience. Ian said, "the Bible would be the main way I think I know God... He is revealed in His Word - so His teachings, philosophy, and caring for other people." Karen expressed similar sentiments, saying "I think, um, everything that we need to know, how to live, to become closer to Him, I think it's all in the Bible." For Karen, how to live her life and know God was everything that she needed to know. This emphasis on the sufficiency of the Bible is a key feature of the Protestant Christianity that the participants all shared. The participants experienced God in various ways throughout their lives, but they believed the Bible was the reliable bedrock on which they could base their faith and lives.

Gareth's perspective on the Bible was more critical, but it remained important to him. He attributed his conversion to the preaching of the gospel and continued to value preaching highly. Gareth now believed that the Bible is a collection of documents written by men about God, but he still "enjoy[s] Theology... digging around in commentaries, unearthing the mysteries." His beliefs about the Bible's nature made individual claims within it less authoritative for him, but he still studied it as a primary means of learning about God.

Even though the participants had different beliefs about the nature of the Bible, and made use of it in different ways, it was an important element of all their relationships with

God. Only Jenny, who was dyslexic and struggled to read and study, did not speak about reading the Bible for herself - but she still valued its contents and learned about it through sermons and conversations with other Christians. For the participants, the Bible was both a source of information about God and a way God communicated with them.

Talking to God as a Daily Companion

Prayer was an important part of the participants' daily lives. They each spoke about how prayer was not something they only did in formal contexts; it was also an important part of their 'normal' lives. Jenny said she often talked to God while washing up, Gareth said he often prayed while walking his dog, and both Ian and Havir mentioned praying for guidance or support while at work. Havir described how when he prayed it was "very personal" and Jenny summed up her attitude to prayer by saying, "If I see something, I pray about it. And if I need to do something... I just... pray... anywhere." This approach was common to all five participants, and shows the importance they placed upon God's guidance, their belief God acts in the world, and the intimacy of their relationship with God. The participants believed God was interested in every aspect of their lives, and they could approach him at any time and without formality. They experienced God as a daily companion who they could always talk to.

Despite this intimacy, 'conversations' between the participants and God were usually one-sided. Only Ian reported an experience of God speaking to him audibly. The participants frequently requested guidance or divine intervention, but

they reported the outcomes of such intercessions were mixed. Their memories of positive outcomes appeared most salient, and these seemed to mitigate the potential effects of negative outcomes on their faith. Gareth summarized this attitude, saying, “although there are many times when prayers don’t get answered as you would wish, and things don’t go according to plan, the fact that there are enough times when things have worked out... [means you can] make sense of the disappointments by recognizing that there have been many times when those things have happened.” Gareth’s choice of words here shows how he made sense of things by differentiating between his own wishes and God’s intentions. He could be disappointed by the outcome of a situation, without it meaning that God did not exist or care, because he did not view prayer as something that compelled God to act. To Gareth, God was a companion in his life who sometimes intervened to help him but who had his own will, plans, and agency.

Connecting to God Through Worship

Musical worship (singing devotional songs) was also an important part of the participants’ lives, and they described how it created a more intimate and emotional connection between them and God than prayer. Like prayer, this worship was not limited to church settings. The participants regularly played Christian music in their cars, homes, and other contexts. Gareth spoke of how, “If there’s nobody looking on the motorway, I’ll sing my lid off at some of these things and really, you know, belt it out.” Similarly, Jenny said she, “listen[s] to Christian songs at home... if I’m cleaning up, I listen to them and sing them, and it’s uplifting.” Worship was an emotional and enjoyable experience for the participants that extended throughout their daily lives.

Singing songs that expressed their beliefs and identity encouraged positive feelings for the participants, but their experiences went beyond this. Karen spoke about how “during worship, you’re communicating directly with God... When you pray, you come to God, but when you worship, God comes to you... It does feel like you have such a clear connection with God when you are really enjoying worship.” The sense of connection the participants’ felt while they were worshipping God went beyond what they felt at other times in their lives. The joy they experienced because of this intimacy was a powerful motivator of their continued practice and these experiences deepened their understanding of God. Ian, who described himself as usually more cerebral, echoed these sentiments and described how “the emotional, the spiritual - that bit takes over. And for me that’s when worship stops being me to God and becomes more kind of two-way and open - a relationship.” It was through the intimacy of worship that Ian experienced knowing God at an intimate and personal level, rather than simply knowing about God in a more abstract way. The connections the participants felt with God when they worshiped appeared to be an important element of the intimacy they felt with him, that built upon and extended their other experiences of God.

Feeling God’s Touch and Guidance

The participants all described experiencing God’s touch and guidance during their daily lives. This was often, though not always, connected to practices such as prayer, worship, and studying scripture. The participants described having tangible feelings of God’s presence and also attributed certain thoughts to his inspiration and

guidance. These experiences seemed to play a crucial role in affirming and reinforcing their beliefs about God and their relationship with him.

Participants' feelings of God's presence were somewhat ineffable, but tangible, somatic, and emotional. Ian described them as: "a really, really ecstatic, but in control, happy feeling - almost like the nice warm glow you get if you've had one drink too many... It's warm, fuzzy... hard to describe. It just is." Jenny used similar language and said God is "like a light. He's a light and you feel warm in yourself..." These feelings of joy, affection, and gratitude were experienced by all the participants in a wide range of circumstances, and they could both affirm and stimulate faith.

Gareth's conversion to Christianity, at a Billy Graham rally, involved such a bodily response. After the sermon, during the altar call, Gareth's "head changed. [I felt] ... tingles, all the rest of it... and that was what converted me." The preacher suggested that those gathered would be able to feel God reaching out to them and that these sensations would prove his words were true. When Gareth experienced the somatic sensations that the preacher promised, he accepted the explanation for them too. Believing he had experienced God's touch provided a powerful and convincing affirmation that God was real, active and cared about him. This direct experience of something he had previously doubted changed how he viewed everything and also changed his life completely.

The participants also spoke about 'just knowing' that some of their thoughts were from God, although often they lacked certainty about these ascriptions. These inspired thoughts could take many forms, including recalling Bible verses, but they all involved a conviction they were (or at least might be) from God and should be heeded. Ian described this feeling as "a sense of certainty, a sense of intuition, or maybe word of knowledge

might be a way to describe it.” Despite the conviction they felt, the participants often showed a hesitancy to ascribe these thoughts to divine inspiration and did not do so uncritically. They sought the input of trusted others and compared their thoughts to scripture for confirmation. Jenny demonstrated this tension, saying, “I don’t feel I hear God that much, but I do, because people say to me, yeah, that’s from God... I need a second opinion before, before I realize it’s God.” Gareth acknowledged the potential to be wrong about what God is saying in a situation and attributed such errors to the need for God to speak, “through the filters and the impressions of our minds and because of that we sometimes will get it wrong.” This lack of certainty and clarity about particular instances of God speaking helps explain the iterative way that their relationships with God, and beliefs, developed. They all believed they experienced God’s touch and guidance, but this had an inherent ambiguity that required them to integrate many different experiences into a more coherent and reliable set of beliefs.

Seeing God’s Hand in Events

The participants also described how they saw God’s activity in the events of their lives. These experiences nurtured and reinforced their beliefs about God, particularly the beliefs that he was real and cared about them. Gareth described how, “One of the things that has sustained that belief over the years has been a remarkable coming together of events. Some would call them coincidences. I would call them answers to prayer.” These experiences sustained his belief because he interpreted them as answers to prayer, rather than as mere coincidences. He was

aware that other interpretations were possible, but his worldview appeared to support itself through an iterative process of reinforcement. All five participants told similar stories about unlikely but meaningful circumstances that helped shape their lives. These ambiguous events included people finding jobs after lengthy searches and medical issues being less severe than they might have been. For the participants, these experiences demonstrated that God answered their prayers and kept his promises.

Ian reported the most dramatic experiences, saying that, "God's protected me. Supernaturally, a couple of times... there was a sense, you know, quite miraculously - God's protecting us." The story he told to illustrate this involved an angry confrontation with a soldier wielding a grenade and the unexpected intervention of a bystander who defused the situation. For Ian, this was a clear example of divine intervention, although a more mundane interpretation is also possible and the extent to which participants were comfortable acknowledging the ambiguity of the situations varied. They all considered certain events they described as powerful and confirming evidence that God was real, that he loved them, and that he protected them throughout their lives. Karen highlighted the importance of these events, saying that when people ask how she knows God is real, her answer is that she has "experienced God in my life even before I was a Christian." She interpreted her entire life through the prism of her faith and viewing God's hand guiding her entire life affirmed her sense that she knew and could trust God. These experiences of God intervening in their lives were not the primary basis for the participants' relationships with God, but they appeared to reinforce and bulwark them.

Living in the World

The personal and dynamic relationships with God that each participant reported experiencing did not occur in isolation. The participants all lived in England and described lives that were varied and social. They had many relationships and engaged with all aspects of modern life. The participants' interactions with other people, and involvement in a wide range of situations, influenced how they experienced God and life.

Being Supported by Other Christians

The support of other Christians appeared to play a crucial role in developing the participants' faith and relationships with God. The participants all reported being members of multiple churches at different stages of their lives, and these communities influenced what they believed and did. Close friendships and romantic relationships with other Christians were particularly important to the participants, providing support and helping to guide and affirm their faith. Participants who had been born into Christian families described how their early influence had an enduring effect on them, often shaping their beliefs, activities, and relationships they subsequently developed.

The apparent effects of these interactions sometimes endured longer than the relationships themselves. Karen described how a family friend had a lasting influence on her beliefs. She said he "was just really so passionate - such a passionate Christian. And he had lots of discussions with us... He made being a Christian very fun for a child... He had a lot of influence on me, um, on my

Christian beliefs...” Other Christians were important role models for the participants as they grew in their faith. The examples of people they trusted and respected helped them become the people they wanted to be.

The importance of other Christians in the development of the participants’ faith is clear in Gareth’s conversion narrative. He described how persistent friends at university, “took me to church on Sunday nights... I’d never experienced anything like that... To encounter this whole generational thing, that young people could believe this and live this was, was significant.” The passion and commitment of his friends showed Gareth a type of Christianity he had never encountered before, and it intrigued him. They showed him a way of seeing the world, and of living in it, that he would otherwise not have considered. Their example, support, and encouragement were integral to the development of his new beliefs about God. Without their influence, he would not have attended the service that changed his life, and his subsequent conversion and life of Christian ministry may never have happened.

Other Christians also encouraged and supported changes in the participants’ doctrinal beliefs and religious practices during their lives. After his conversion, Gareth initially adopted the strict, Calvinistic doctrines of his first church. Later, after graduating from university, he was surrounded by Christians with a different theology, and he attributed his beliefs becoming more inclusive and liberal to their influence. He said, “You’re not conscious at times of the subtle changes in your thinking that are taking place... I can look back and think of some... wonderful prayers and preaching... [that] contribute[d] to a reformation of the theological mindset and approach.” Both the explicit teaching and the implicit values of the participants’ communities appeared to influence how they perceived themselves, God and the wider world. As noted previously, others also

played an important role in helping the participants understand events in their lives and affirming that particular experiences were ‘of God’. They were also often affected by the experiences and stories of family and friends.

The Christian families of the participants appeared to play an important role in each of their lives, and God had a central role within their families. The participants all thought it was important to raise their children to be good Christians. Teaching their children about faith encouraged them to live out their own beliefs. Havar summed this up by reflecting that, “it is so important to steer them in the right direction... the way Jesus wants us to lead our lives. I think those truths have been drummed home a lot more because we want the kids to be like that.” Regularly explaining what he believed to others seemed to make those ideas more salient to him. By focusing on helping others do what he believed God wanted, he also helped himself do the same. Relationships with other Christians helped the participants keep God at the center of their lives and develop into the people they wanted to become.

Interactions with Other Perspectives Influence Beliefs and Behaviors

The participants did not live isolated lives, surrounded by only Christian influences. Their closest family and friends shared their beliefs, but they still lived in a society that increasingly did not, and they were clearly influenced by the wider society around them in various ways. Exposure to views and beliefs that conflicted with their own sometimes changed their beliefs about certain issues. These

encounters could either lead to the participants altering their beliefs or becoming more convinced of them.

Havir, who went through an extended period of a more nominal faith despite being raised in a Christian home, described how a relationship with a Hindu girlfriend caused him to think about what he believed and what he wanted from life. He “started comparing... really kind of searching, comparing, you know, my beliefs, my faith, with that of someone... [with a] polytheistic background and faith.” He said this reflection caused him to re-embrace his Christian heritage and rekindled his faith. His girlfriend presented him with the possibility of an alternative way of life and made Havir need to choose how he wanted to raise his future family. He had not stopped identifying with Christian beliefs, but they had diminished in importance to him until she triggered an active process of evaluating them. This reflection was the catalyst for a profound change in the importance he placed on his religion and how he lived his life.

Other encounters with differing perspectives caused participants to change some of their beliefs. Ian described how his beliefs about homosexuality had shifted over the previous decade and he identified close, gay friends as a key catalyst for that change. He also suggested that the liberal attitudes of wider British society may have influenced his beliefs on the issue, and this caused tension for him. These two examples show the contrasting ways the wider society around the participants could influence them.

Interactions with others sometimes caused them to question aspects of their faith and this process could lead to either them altering their position or to becoming more convinced of it.

Responding to Challenging Situations

Experiencing challenging situations and events often drew the participants closer to God, who provided security and comfort in times of crisis. Jenny had experienced many traumatic experiences, including severe physical illness, poverty, and abuse. She described how God was “a light... and he helps you in difficult times.” She also viewed her suffering as having purpose and value because it helped her get “to the point where I had to rely on God. Um, I didn’t do that before. It took two years in this horrible place. I had to learn stuff.” Her emphasis on how she ‘had to’ suffer and learn these lessons shows the importance she places on the lessons she learned through her adversity. She believed she was a far better person because of her suffering and so framed it as a positive, despite the pain it caused her at the time.

The participants frequently looked for positives when they experienced adversity and often gave God credit for situations they faced not being even worse. For example, Jenny described how, “He’s helped me through my health, um, everybody is praying that he will heal me, but I know he’s there holding on because, for seven years, I could have been on dialysis.” Here she compared her situation both to the ideal outcome, total healing, and to the more negative outcome she feared. She viewed avoiding the ‘worst’ outcome as an answer to prayer, even though things could also have been better. She felt supported and strengthened by God as she endured the challenging situation. Like the other participants, she turned to God in challenging times and when they found comfort in the midst of difficulties it strengthened their relationship with God.

Challenging encounters or events also sometimes posed difficult questions for the participants and required them to reconcile their beliefs with the world they experienced. For example, the participants sometimes found suffering and pain theologically challenging to reconcile with their conception of a loving and omnipotent God. Gareth described how seeing the pastoral needs of others as they lived through difficult situations led to him softening his doctrinal beliefs. He said compassion for challenges in others' lives led him, "to rethink [his theology], because I need to be able to affirm these people as legitimate, bona fide members of my congregation... They need to be affirmed... therefore, my preaching became very much about trying to affirm people in who they are." Encountering these challenges did not stop the participants from being Christian, but it could alter what they understood 'being Christian' to mean and they viewed these changes as their faith maturing.

Experiencing challenges in their lives caused the participants to reflect on their beliefs but also to turn to God and other Christians for support. Challenging circumstances often functioned as catalysts for change in the participants' lives. When Karen experienced difficulties at the start of her marriage, she decided to go "to a Christian marriage counseling service, which was really helpful, and then we became baptized. And so that has made a huge difference to our marriage." Experiences of adversity appear to have often led to significant and lasting changes in the participants' beliefs and behaviors that could outlast the challenging situations themselves.

Finding Meaning and Purpose

The participants' faith helped them develop a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. They believed their actions and choices had eternal significance, and this imbued them with great importance. Ian described how his faith meant "there is something more than what's in it for me - in the sense of the bigger picture, which certainly adds purpose." Havir went further, saying that he believed that without God, and an eternal afterlife, things would be "futile" and "meaningless." However, most of the participants simply thought, like Karen, that their faith made things "more meaningful." The participants often cared deeply about other people, but their faith altered their perspectives and affected their choices.

The participants spent considerable amounts of time helping others, and they described how these relationships made their lives more meaningful. When asked about his greatest achievements, Gareth chose times when he had made lasting differences in other people's lives. For him, "those human legacies... are incalculable" in value. Making differences in other people's lives made the participants feel that they were achieving worthwhile and meaningful things with their own lives.

Jenny described how helping others now helped her make sense of the many struggles she had been through. She now worked with a church-based charity and said she'd "actually come to the conclusion that... If I wasn't bullied and I didn't go through what I did, I wouldn't have the real experience to tell people... [God] has changed, changed the challenging bits to, OK, positives." Reframing her negative experiences into something more positive, giving them purpose and meaning,

helped her make sense of her suffering. It helped her create an empowering narrative about herself and her life, as somebody who wasn't just a victim but who now helped others. This didn't entirely remove the pain of her suffering, but it did transform how she felt about it and herself. The participants' faith helped them find meaning and purpose both in their ongoing lives and in their pasts.

The participants believed the calling to live their lives for God was an inherent part of being a Christian. Gareth and Ian, who had both chosen Christian vocations, articulated this sense of divine calling most explicitly, but the other participants also shared stories that gave their lives a sense of sacred purpose. This sense of having a sacred calling often had profound and lasting effects on the choices they made. Ian felt called to be a missionary when he was a teenager and learned he had a limited choice of careers if he wanted to access certain countries. He decided that he "wanted to be a doctor, with a view to being a missionary doctor. Which was my sense of calling which stayed with me." Decades later, after spending many years training and helping others, he said the sense of calling he felt had not diminished. Other participants found their sense of calling in less extreme tasks, such as raising their families and making sure they were happy and would go to heaven. The participants believed they were called by God to do what they were doing, and this enabled them to view their daily activities as sacred and significant. The belief that what they were doing truly mattered helped them transform mundane activities into something more and nurtured their sense of living lives that were sacred and meaningful.

Faith Affects Everything

For these five participants, their relationships with God and Christian faith affected how they lived their entire lives. God and faith were not just discrete facets of their lives. Their faith influenced the activities they did, choices they made, and relationships they had. Havar described how, “God’s the center. That’s it, really... everything flows down from that.” For these participants, this was the reality of how they lived their lives and made sense of the world. God was not their entire lives, but he was at the center of them and connected to everything else they did. The participants attributed their blessings to God and turned to him for support when dealing with adversity.

The boundary between the secular and the sacred was at least blurred, if not meaningless, in the participants’ lives because they included God in every situation and interpreted events through their faith. As Gareth noted, despite his awareness of how many factors influenced his faith he could not “separate faith from life because to me they are entwined.” He recognized that not every aspect of his life directly involved his faith and yet his faith still affected everything else. Ian described how “worship is all our life, and everything that we do and sacrifice to God,” and the other participants shared similar sentiments. They aspired to live lives where God affected everything. This aspiration was encouraged and supported by their faith community.

Ian also described how his faith was not a crutch but was “more like a mountaineer’s pole - it helps you, but because of it you can climb mountains that you wouldn’t otherwise climb.” This shows how the participants were aware that

others sometimes viewed their faith negatively, and yet rejected those perspectives because they experienced their faith as an overwhelmingly positive influence in their lives. The participants believed they had achieved things with God that they could not have achieved alone. These participants' faith influenced everything they did, and they experienced God as a supporting presence in every area of their lives.

Discussion

The experiences of five Baptists from the South East of England were analyzed using IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) to explore their relationships with God and investigate the connections between their beliefs and spiritual experiences. The participants reported experiencing relationships with God that were similar to the relationships they had with other humans. Each participant's relationship with God was personal and unique, but these relationships with God had central importance in the lives of all the participants. The direct relationships between the participants and God were a fundamental part of their lived experience and they affected all aspects of their lives. Interactions with other people and impersonal events all influenced how the participants viewed themselves, God, and the wider world. The participants' lived experience was of living in a world that their God was an intimate, active, and integral part of.

The idiographic differences between the experiences of the participants were important and helped understand both the current lives, experiences, and beliefs of the participants and also how they have changed. This study supports the further use of IPA, and other idiographic methodologies, to explore the processes by which individuals experience the world and make sense of it. Fully understanding individual aspects of the

participants' experiences of the world, or their behavior within it, requires considering the ongoing impacts of their faith and their relationships with God. The participants' relationships with other people, their life choices, and their overall wellbeing were all connected to, and rooted in, their belief that God was a living presence within their lives.

Living in a Sacred World

The experiences that participants attributed to God were diverse and included both perceptions of major supernatural interventions in the world and less dramatic (but no less important) experiences of divine intimacy and perceived protection. There were not clear boundaries between what the participants considered sacred and the rest of their lives. God was an active presence in everything they did. Any situation, however mundane, could encourage them to pray and they could perceive any situation as the work of God. These findings echo Ammerman's (2014) work in the United States, that found religion permeates social boundaries and both influences and is influenced by interactions in other spheres of individuals' lives.

The participants' experiences of such a sacralized world are unlikely to be shared by all Christians. More nominal Christians, who do not frequently attend church or participate in other religious practices, probably do not have similar relationships with God or the same experience of living in a world where God is active. Havar's experiences demonstrate how an individual can understand being a Christian in disparate ways at different points in their life. In contrast to his more

recent experiences, for many years Havar's faith had little influence on his life. This fits with the idea that each individual believer constructs what it means to be a Christian out of the many cultural resources they have available. These personal worldviews do not always give a prominent place to God or broader existential ideas (L. Lee, 2015; Murphy, 2017).

How individuals understand themselves and the world changes during their lives, and significant changes can occur more than once (Streib & Keller, 2004).

The idiosyncratic blending of diverse beliefs and practices by each individual suggests that care must be taken when using a fractionating approach (White, 2017; Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014) to study specific religious phenomena. The combined effects of the diverse elements of an individual's worldview may be greater than the sum of their individual practices and beliefs. For example, both prayer and worship were important to the participants, but it was the combination of the two practices, combined with their broader beliefs and social contexts, that seemed to sustain the participants' faith and guide their actions. It is clearly important to study individual 'religious' phenomena, but how these phenomena are experienced, the meaning ascribed to them, and the effects they have may both influence and be influenced by a wide range of other beliefs and related experiences.

Constructing a Sacred World

The importance of socialization in the formation and development of religious beliefs is well-established (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; R. W. Hood et al., 2009), and the influence of social and cultural factors was clear in the accounts of all the participants. Most people accept the existential interpretations and explanations of those they trust

(Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004), though as this study shows they do not always do so uncritically, and various experiences may cause them to question or reject such explanations. God was a real and important part of the social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) the participants shared and their faith in him had wide-reaching consequences. Understanding their lives and actions without appreciating the role God played in them is impossible. For these participants, meaning-making was both an implicit and explicit part of their religious and social lives.

The participants, both as individuals and as a group, generally interpreted events in ways consistent with, and reinforcing, their shared worldview. Ambiguous events were often attributed to divine intervention (Spilka et al., 1985) and the encouragement and support of trusted others could help overcome doubt and affirm perceptions of God's intervention (Taves, 2017). These believers did not live isolated from challenging situations and divergent explanations of the world. The interactions of these complex webs of different influences, both Christian and non-Christian, contributed to the idiosyncratic beliefs of each individual (cf. Chaves, 2010; Slone, 2004). The five participants were part of the same church and espoused the same doctrinal beliefs, but they had very different lived experiences that influenced both their physical and psychological lives. The accounts of the participants support viewing beliefs about God, the self, and the world as part of a cohesive, but idiosyncratic, worldview that each person develops during their life in response to their experiences (Murphy, 2017; Taves et al., 2018).

Experiencing a Relationship with God

The experience of knowing God directly was of central importance to each participant. These relationships provided the bedrock for the participants' ongoing faith. The relationships between the participants and God developed over time and, like most relationships, had both negative and positive features. The participants experienced the full range of human emotions towards God, from love to anger. They spoke about times when they felt God was ignoring them and their needs, but believed God was always acting in their best interests. The participants described their relationships with God as being like a relationship with a close friend or family member, and it is plausible that this similarity to other relationships reinforced their belief that it was with a real and independent being. Their relationship with God was a source of comfort for the participants, consistent with the theory that God can function as a surrogate or complementary attachment figure for some individuals (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004).

The accounts of how the participants learned to experience God's presence in their lives are consistent with the process of metakinesis, as conceptualized by Luhrmann (2004, 2012). This process involves learning to identify sensations as signs of God's presence and using these attributions to develop relational practices. The participants spoke of learning to hear and feel God better, engaging in regular spiritual activities and being guided by those around them to interpret experiences as God's presence. The participants' experiences shaped their beliefs, but these experiences were themselves shaped by their beliefs and by the beliefs of those around them. This process is ontologically ambiguous, and neither assumes nor denies the validity of individuals' emic interpretations of their experiences.

These participants developed a relationship with God through experiences of love and mercy; they responded with love and service of their own. The Bible and the traditions of their church helped shape the participants' knowledge of God, but their own experiences of God appeared especially influential. Emotional, intellectual, and social factors supported each other and gave the participants a robust and cohesive experience of living with their God. Their experiences of being in a loving relationship with God and feeling his touch in their lives assured the participants of the sacred reality they believed in. The support of other Christians helped develop these beliefs and provided encouragement and guidance in times of crisis. The combination of these many elements of their lives helped them to grow closer to God and sustain their faith.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

IPA allows for rich and insightful exploration of participants' experiences, but it should not be used to the exclusion of other research methodologies. IPA can explore issues and nuances that other approaches struggle with and should complement, rather than replace, them. Researching 'religion' requires a broad range of methodological tools that allow problems to be examined from multiple perspectives (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). IPA's interpretative approach allows researchers to integrate their own data with that from other studies and can bridge between different methodologies and findings. As demonstrated by this study, IPA can both explore idiographic details and

contextualize them in ways that can refine and illuminate our understanding of phenomena.

This study does not claim to describe the experiences of all Baptists in Britain, let alone all Christians. A sample of five participants cannot convey the full range of experiences of the group but can provide important insights into their experiences and suggest how those experiences are related to each other. IPA does not attempt to provide an overarching description of the experiences of a broad group, and its strong idiographic commitment is a strength, rather than a weakness. A broad range of qualitative studies, each exploring a different group and conducted across diverse cultures, can provide valuable insights into how religiosity and spirituality affect people's lives. This research must pay attention to the broad range of influences on individuals' beliefs and experiences, examining the different ways these influences are integrated by individuals. The conclusions that can be drawn from any single study are limited, but the aggregation of findings from multiple studies can increase the reliability and transferability of the research (Larkin et al., 2019).

IPA's reliance on a double hermeneutic, where experiences are unavoidably filtered through both the participants and researchers, means it is inherently subjective (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This subjectivity is not unique to qualitative research, but it is important to be aware that the broader beliefs and culture of the participants and researcher shape both the data and its analysis. The triangulation of these findings with other research strengthens the analysis, but this interpretative account does not claim to present an objective truth about the phenomena. It is one perspective that must be viewed and evaluated in the context of the wider research literature. Further discussion of the steps taken to reflect on and mitigate

the influence of the researcher's experiences on the analysis can be found on pp. 169-170 and 392-395.

This study shows the importance of the interactions between many different experiences in the development of individuals' worldviews. It also shows the role that seemingly mundane experiences can play in shaping and sustaining beliefs. Future research should attempt to capture the full range of individuals' lived religiosity and spirituality rather than focusing on just narrow aspects of it. It should be attentive to both the diversity of experiences between individuals and the different ways that seemingly similar experiences can be made sense of by different individuals, or the same individual at different times.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates both the importance of religiosity and spirituality in some individuals' lives and the valuable contribution that IPA can make to their study. It justifies the theoretical stance and methodological choices adopted in this thesis and supports the continued use of these methods to explore the experiences of other groups. Examining, in detail, the idiosyncratic nuances of the participants' experiences, and exploring the differences between them, enabled the development of a more complete understanding than would have been possible using a more nomothetic approach. This helped reveal and investigate the complexity of the relationships between different aspects of the participants' lives and experiences.

Each participant described a unique relationship with their God that was a central and vivid part of their lived experience. These relationships were shaped by

the world around the participants, including the social and cultural influence of other Christians and non-Christians. The participants' relationships with their God intertwined with every aspect of their lives. Understanding their experiences required a holistic perspective that did not view their faith as something that is simply added onto an otherwise secular life. For these five individuals, God was an active and integral part of their world. Their beliefs were not merely intellectual or doctrinal propositions; they were grounded in experiences of a dynamic and intimate social relationship with someone who was trusted and loved by the participants and those closest to them. The direct experiences of the participants, and the supporting experiences of those around them, helped them develop idiosyncratic worldviews which they used to understand the world. Gareth, Havir, Ian, Jenny, and Karen all lived not only in a world where their God existed, but they lived in that world with their God.

ALLAH HAS TOLD US EVERYTHING

Islam is widely considered one of the ‘World Religions’ and there are 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide (Partridge & Dowley, 2014; PRC, 2017). In the UK, 6% of the population (approximately 4 million people) identify as being Muslim (Curtice et al., 2019). Many British Muslims are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants and, depending on an individual’s cultural heritage, the way they practice their faith can vary significantly (Ansari, 2002). Islam traces its origins to the revelations of the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century and there are long and authoritative traditions of interpreting both the Qur’an and the Hadiths (Morgan, 2010; Murata & Chittick, 2011; Peters, 2005). Islam has five pillars of faith (practices that Muslims view as obligations) and six articles of faith (core beliefs) (Abu-Raiya, 2013; Murata & Chittick, 2011). This means Islam should be considered high in its expectations of both orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

The global significance of Islam means it is important to understand Muslim experiences of God. As a primarily non-Western faith, it represents a distinctly different tradition to Christianity, despite sharing some elements with the other ‘Abrahamic’ faiths (Peters, 2005). Islam does not distinguish between the secular and the temporal, instead offering models for relationships between people and for the relationship between humanity and God (Moughrabi, 1995). This means a holistic approach to understanding the experiences of Muslims is particularly important. In the 21st century, the actions of Islamist extremists and terrorists have increased the prominence of Islam within British political discourse (L. Brown & Richards, 2016; Gilliat-Ray, 2014) and this heightens the need for high quality and sensitive research exploring the lived experiences of British Muslims.

Previous studies of Muslim experiences using IPA have explored a range of topics (see pp. 84-95). These include how Muslims deal with particular health or professional situations (e.g., Muishout et al., 2018; S. W. Watts et al., 2014) and how they reconcile aspects of their lives that are perceived as conflicting (e.g., Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014; Semlyen et al., 2018). Many of these studies touch on issues related to their participants' religious experiences but none of them have focused directly on those experiences or on the relationship between individual Muslims and Allah.

Method

This study explores the experiences of five British Muslims using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). A large town in the South East of England was selected for the study. The town had a single mosque that formed the center of the local Muslim community. Participants were purposively recruited using two gatekeepers (Patton, 2015), using predetermined eligibility criteria. Participants had to self-identify as practicing Muslims and members of the local community. They also had to be between the age of 18 and 65 and not have converted to their faith within the last two years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant individually, in several private locations chosen for their convenience. Transcripts of the interviews were then analyzed inductively and iteratively, following the principles of good IPA research (J. A. Smith, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Further details of these processes are provided in the methods chapter (see pp. 139-170).

Participants were purposively recruited to reflect the diversity of their community. They had diverse ethnic backgrounds, but all came from Muslim families and identified as Sunni. Three of the five had attended university, and they had varying economic backgrounds and circumstances. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to help preserve their anonymity: Aatifa, Bahiya, Chahid, Dahra, and Ebrahim (Madill, 2012). Three participants identified as female and two as male. The interviews occurred during Ramadan, although this was not deliberately planned. There were also several high-profile terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists in the period preceding the interviews (BBC News, 2017, 2019). These circumstances may have influenced the interviews and their effects were considered during the analytical process. Some participants were initially cautious about the purpose of the research, but they chose to participate after their concerns were allayed. As the interviews progressed, the participants appeared increasingly relaxed and open, suggesting good rapport and trust developed. During the debriefing, the participants all said they were pleased to have been part of the study and expressed interest in the wider research project.

Results

As described in the methods chapter (see pp. 139-170), the analytical process was inductive and iterative, identifying many potential themes in the data. From earlier candidate themes, two superordinate themes comprising seven emergent themes were ultimately selected. These were developed and refined using the hermeneutic principles of IPA to construct the following understanding of the participants' experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). These themes are summarized in Table 3. 'Submitting to God' and 'Being a

British Muslim' were both fundamental aspects of these participants' lived experiences. Each subordinate theme was present in the accounts of all five participants.

Table 3

Allah Has Told Us Everything: Summary of Themes with Example Quotes

Theme	Example quote
Superordinate Theme: Submitting to God	
Following the Qur'an	"Allah has told us everything." (Dahra)
Prayer is a Key Pillar of Faith	"[When] you really are doing prayers to... the best of your ability... you feel your heart is at peace, and ...your mind is clear... [you] have that connection to your god." (Chahid)
Times of Religious Focus Strengthen Faith	"When you start regularly fasting in that month... it's just different. It's more religious than your whole life, really." (Aatifa)
Feeling Connected to Allah	"[Allah is] always there you know, watching over... always with you... always there... I know that directly, physically, [he is] not in front of me... but in my mind... I know that he's always there." (Aatifa)

Theme	Example quote
Superordinate Theme: Being a British Muslim	
Belonging to the Ummah	“...being part of the Muslim community...we’ve got the local...the community is quite large and growing.” (Chahid)
Family Provides a Secure Foundation	“From a very small age, we are taught about our religion... and, obviously, because that goes into our mind, we started to believe...” (Dahra)
Embracing Multicultural Britain	“My parents did allow us to kind of, like, integrate with other people, and to make the most of what we had around us” (Bahiya)

Submitting to God

All the participants spoke extensively about how they knew, experienced, and submitted to Allah in their daily lives. This submission to God was the heart of their faith and they worked hard to make it a reality in their lives. They believed God had revealed himself to humanity and that it was their duty to worship God in accordance with that revelation. The participants believed that Allah, the Creator and Most Holy, was supreme and that the only correct response to that knowledge was to submit themselves to God’s will (Morgan, 2010; Murata & Chittick, 2011). The Qur’an, prayer, and other religious

practices all helped them to understand what Allah desired and to experience a sense of closeness to him. This feeling of belonging to a sacred community that stretched back hundreds of years helped them to make sense of their lives and guided their actions and relationships.

Following the Qur'an

The Qur'an was very important to all the participants. As Ebrahim said, "[The Qur'an] is a way of life. For human[s], for Muslims... it tells us about the history, it tells us about the science, it tells us about the way the life should be... The Qur'an's role is the fundamental, basic role of a Muslim ideology." Throughout their interviews, the participants repeatedly referred to the Qur'an to explain their other beliefs and their choices. The belief that Mohammad is God's prophet is part of the core confession of the Islamic faith and for these individuals it was the bedrock on which their lives were built.

The participants believed the Qur'an is direct, divine revelation - dictated by an angel and recorded for all time. It had great authority and guided their lives. As Chahid said, "The Qur'an, we believe, hasn't changed in 1434 years now. You know, since it's been revealed... we believe it hasn't changed a single word... There is no orthodox/unorthodox in Islam, from my understanding, there is only Islam." For him, like the other participants, Islam was what Mohammad taught and its origins were rooted in an act of divine revelation.

As God's literal message to humanity, the Qur'an was the principal source of knowledge for these Muslims and it shaped how they understood the world and

the divine. When asked how she knows what Allah is like, Dahra replied, “The books and the Qur’an... the teachings of Islam... Allah is, obviously, he’s not a human being... He has the power, and this world, whatever happens in this world, is just because of him.” Later in the interview she commented that, “Allah has told us everything.” These five words succinctly convey the way that Dahra viewed the world. Allah is the source of all knowledge and has revealed everything that humanity needs to know through the Qur’an. She viewed this revelation as completed and historical; no experiences of her own could change that. The Qur’an provided the framework by which she understood both herself and the wider world.

The participants studied Arabic so they could understand the Qur’an better. They needed to navigate competing interpretations of it to know what God required of them. Misunderstanding the Qur’an was viewed as the reason many Muslims did things that they considered wrong. Ebrahim, when discussing extremists, noted how if the “Qur’an says something - if you don’t understand the full meaning of it, you can be very easily misguided by somebody who wants disturbance in the world.” For Bahiya, “reading the Qur’an and actually knowing what it meant” was how she made the faith her own and internalized it. She believed her “continuous practice of... educating myself and finding out” was her most important religious practice. Studying the Qur’an for herself enabled her to interpret its teachings without the patriarchal, cultural influences that she found troubling.

There were elements of traditional Islamic teaching the participants found difficult or challenging. As will be discussed subsequently, some of these teachings were dismissed or downplayed by identifying them as part of Islamic cultures rather than Islam itself. This

strategy could not be used to deal with every problematic issue. In these situations, the participants drew on their other experiences and the elements of their faith that they were sure of helped them accept the more difficult teachings. For example, Chahid discussed the existence of angels and djinn and how he found that difficult to reconcile with his scientific understanding of the world. Despite these difficulties, he concluded that, “You can’t prove everything, but things that I can see around me, that I’ve been told, does that fit in with... what I see about life... I then have to, logically, if I’m believing this, this and this, I have to then say, OK, for me, this is the truth.” Their belief that Islam was a complete and final revelation meant that evidence for any element of it was seen as evidence for it all. For these participants, the Qur’an was Allah’s revelation to the Prophet and so it could be trusted completely.

Prayer is a Key Pillar of Faith

Prayer, or more accurately Salah, is one of the five pillars of Islam and played a central and crucial role in the participants’ lives and faith (Abu-Raiya, 2013). Following ritual ablution, it involves a series of prescribed postural changes during which particular prayers and verses from the Qur’an are recited. Salah is not the only form of Islamic prayer but the participants discussed it far more extensively than other forms of prayer. Most of the participants spoke only about Salah, and they used the word prayer to describe it despite the theological imprecision of doing so (Murata & Chittick, 2011).

Praying gave the participants feelings of peace and connection to God. This experience was somewhat ineffable, but Dahra described how when she prayed she often felt, “direct contact between him and you... you do get peace, you do get satisfaction.” This sense of connection to God during prayer could be powerful. When Ebrahim prayed, “if the connection is made right... I feel that a kind of electricity, going from top to bottom... It’s, like, a very good feeling... you feel good... you are feeling a bit lighter.” In prayer, the participants experienced a tangible intimacy with the divine that affirmed their belief in the reality of their God and his revelation.

For all the participants, the quality of their experiences while praying varied and they attributed this to the differing ways in which they approached prayer at different times. Simply performing the ritual and going through the motions brought only minimal benefits but when they focused on what they were doing, and did it with conviction, they found the effects were usually more profound. In Dahra’s own words, “it’s all about belief.” She described how when she prayed and truly believed it had more of an effect than when she prayed without that sincere conviction. Aatifa also described how, over time, prayer had become more meaningful and valuable to her. She said she used to pray because she had been taught to but “never really got it.” Her attitude towards faith and prayer had developed as she grew older and she said she now “get[s] something from it, whereas before I wouldn’t say I would.”

The participants all believed they should pray five times a day, as taught by the Qur’an, but admitted they often did not. Prayer requires time and space to be set apart and that is not always easy in contemporary Britain. Chahid expressed regret as he reflected on his prayer habits during the interview and resolved to pray more frequently again, due to

the benefits he felt it brought him. He said he was “not as strict with myself as I would like to be... it’s like my faith has weakened but I still believe in it fully committedly.” This relationship between praying regularly and their broader faith was echoed by other participants. Bahiya “had moments where... [I’ve] doubted everything... so I’ve stopped doing my prayers... Me not doing my prayers is... my disconnect from the faith.” For these participants, praying was a key expression of their submission to God and when they were experiencing doubts, they often found prayer more difficult and less meaningful. This could, in turn, amplify their doubts and feelings of disconnection from God.

Despite having experienced periods of doubt and wavering belief, all the participants remained committed to their faith. They described how times of crises could stimulate a return to more regular prayer and said this often strengthened their faith. Aatifa spoke about how she prayed, “if I’ve got something important coming up like exams... [or] interviews and I do believe that, that it’s led to the sort of success... I feel that has impacted my life.” The participants’ described how when they experienced positive feelings or consequences after prayer it revived their flagging faith and sometimes began an upwards cycle of positive thoughts and practice that led them back to God. Experiences of peace and closeness to Allah during prayer provided affirmation of their faith. The ritual act of praying was a literal act of submission for the participants. It focused their minds on God, on who they were as Muslims, and on how they should be living their lives.

Times of Religious Focus Strengthen Faith

Like prayer, Ramadan and the Hajj are also pillars of Islam (Murata & Chittick, 2011) and both were important in the participants' descriptions of their faith. Each of the participants mentioned times of heightened religious focus within the calendar that had benefits beyond the periods themselves. Taking part in these rituals, with their communities, strengthened their faith in God and sense of being Muslims.

Ramadan is a sacred month in the Islamic calendar during which the participants fasted and observed other religious rules. The demands of following Ramadan were not considered easy, particularly in a non-Muslim country, but the participants did not view it as a burden. The participants experienced Ramadan as a sacred time when they felt closer to God and their fellow believers. Aatifa described Ramadan as a blessing, describing how she strictly observed it when she could and saying that "if you don't... you feel like you're missing out on something... When you start regularly fasting in that month... it's just different. It's more religious than your whole life, really." This extract shows Aatifa thinks 'religious' is a positive adjective; her faith is a blessing and defines goodness. Her sense of missing out was based on her previous experiences of the benefits of participation, rather than due to a sense of obligation or the expectations of others. Aatifa wanted to be more religious and feel closer to God, so when medical issues prevented her participation in a practice that would help her achieve that she felt understandably disappointed.

Ramadan was a time that the participants looked forward to and saw as an opportunity to reflect on their lives and make changes to be more like the people they wanted to be. Chahid described how, "Ramadan helps you... It's one of the beauties of Islam that Islam gives you that month to really... stop being lazy, to stop procrastination,

and... get going, basically.” He then compared Ramadan to the lock system in a canal network, providing an opportunity to stop the flow of bad choices in his life and to drain away negative habits. Each year, Ramadan drew the participants’ focus on to God and reminded them of what they believed they should do as good Muslims. It offered them the support and encouragement of other believers, who were also turning their attention back to God. They found this made it easier for them to connect with God and transform their lives. Dahra described how Eid brought the Muslim community together in this way, saying “you get love from everywhere. Like, you know, people calling and everybody is in a happy mood.... Everything is like positive.”

Pilgrimage served a similar function, although for logistical reasons it was far less common than Ramadan. Every Muslim is required to make the Hajj once (Morgan, 2010), if they can, and many of the participants had not yet had the opportunity to do so. For those who had, there were similar dynamics to those experienced during Ramadan. They focused their attention on God and made an extra effort to do what they considered pleasing to Allah. The process made them feel closer to both God and their fellow Muslims. Bahiya had visited Mecca twice and described how, “going into the Mecca and looking at the Kaaba, I think I was in complete awe... There was no division between people. Everyone was there of all colors, um, and it was just like we were all there to do the same thing... I liked doing it... it was exhausting, physically and mentally [but] I was buzzing.” The many ritual acts involved in the Hajj were suffused with significance and meaning for her. They were a tangible demonstration of her submission to God. Performing

them with millions of others affirmed her beliefs and made her feel she was part of a large community that had a special and enduring relationship with Allah.

Stories about their experiences on the Hajj were shared with other believers on their return and helped to nurture anticipation in those who were still waiting for the opportunity to experience it themselves. This desire to participate despite the logistical challenges explains why Dahra had a tinge of sadness in her voice when she spoke about the Hajj. She said she'd, "love to [do it] and we have been trying... [but] until and unless Allah wants, we can't." Undertaking the Hajj would be an important demonstration of her faith, but she believed that God had ultimate control over whether she could do it, just as he controlled everything else that happened in her life. Ramadan and the Hajj, as well as other less important religious occasions, were experienced by the participants as blessings for the whole community that were gifts from God. They drew the participants together with other Muslims and encouraged them to focus on and embrace their faith. Doing so had a lasting impact on how they viewed themselves and acted in their daily lives.

Feeling Connected to Allah

Allah was a central figure in the lived experiences of all the participants. They experienced God tangibly when praying and less directly through the teachings of the Qur'an and the Islamic community. They also attributed the events of their daily lives to the will of Allah, making God an intrinsic part of their lived experiences. Dahra described this sacralization of her life: "Our fate is: whatever happens is from Allah... When he gives us good health, money, everything is there, we're happy, we're thankful to him. But, on the other side... at times, he's testing us, our patience." Experiencing positive events often

stimulated positive feelings towards God and helped nurture an affirming relationship with God. In contrast, negative events seemed to usually not create negative feelings towards God, and the participants did not perceive malice as the cause for such events. They trusted in God's plan and viewed negative experiences and struggles as having a purpose, which helped them cope with them.

Each participant also reported times, outside prayer, when they experienced a tangible connection with God, but these feelings of connection were not constant. The participants believed that, even when they could not feel it, they were not alone. Aatifa described how Allah was: "always there you know, watching over, erm, always with you... always there... I know that directly, physically, [Allah is] not in front of me... but in my mind... I know that he's always there." Her repeated use of 'always' is important here, as is her use of the verb 'to know.' Aatifa has learned that God is always with her and watching over her, both from the teachings of the Qur'an and her own experiences. She did not experience God as a physical presence, however, although she was aware of it and sometimes did feel it more viscerally.

Bahiya described similar experiences, saying she'd "had times when I have felt very spiritual and I feel like I have got someone watching over me... I wouldn't say it was a guardian angel but... I've got that closeness or connection there." The feelings of being close to God that the participants described were often somewhat ineffable (and sometimes ambiguous) but that did not diminish their importance in sustaining the participants' faith. During trials and tribulations, the memories of

such experiences reminded them that their God was real and often caused them to seek divine comfort again.

The relationships the participants described between themselves and God included negative experiences, as well as the many positive ones. They described having previously perceived Allah as somebody who was much harsher than they now understood him to be. Allah is described in the Qur'an in many ways and these include names such as 'The Destroyer' and 'The Humiliator' (Morgan, 2010). An emphasis on living by certain rules to please God sometimes created quite a stern impression of God, particularly when the participants were younger. Ebrahim described this experience and how, as he grew to know more about the Qur'an and God, this changed. "When I was young, I'm more scared... Allah is all about punishment... [but] I realized, Allah is not all about punishment... Allah is all about mercy, forgiveness... He is more generous than he is angry... If you ask forgiveness... then Allah will forgive you... we know that Allah is more kind than 70 mothers..." This softening of his relationship with God came through both personal experiences of God forgiving him and exposure to teaching that enabled those experiences. Perceived interactions with God and learning about actions attributed to God appeared to change how the participants experienced and related to God. Their sense of connection to Allah was not fixed but evolved dynamically over time.

Being a British Muslim

Being Muslim was a core part of the participants' self-identity. They saw themselves as part of a global and historical community that stretched back centuries and that was distinguished by its submission to God. However, the participants were also

conscious of the fact that they were British Muslims in particular. They did not see these two identities as being in conflict with each other; instead, being British shaped how they were Muslim - and being Muslim shaped how they were British. The participants were explicitly aware of the diversity within Islam and how culture shapes the ways Islam is practised. They recognized that their values and practices resulted from their upbringing within a specific cultural context and they embraced being both British and Muslim.

Belonging to the Ummah

The participants strongly identified as Muslims and the importance of their shared beliefs and traditions to them was clear when they spoke about them. Dahra, describing the essence of Islam, said, “It spells like I-S-L-A-M... I would say, ‘I Shall Love All Mankind’ - so that’s what it is. That’s what our aim is.” This shift towards the plural was common and shows the communal nature of their beliefs. Being part of a global and historic community appeared to make their beliefs seem more credible and give them more confidence expressing them. All the individuals in this study were born into Muslim families and they had viewed themselves as members of this community, the Ummah (Murata & Chittick, 2011), for their entire lives. The participants lived their lives as part of this community, not only during Ramadan but throughout the entire year.

Visiting Muslim countries and historical sites associated with Islam affirmed the participants’ identities and beliefs. As noted above, it was sometimes challenging to follow all the perceived requirements of Islam in England. Some

obstacles to practicing their faith did not exist in other countries, such as limited availability of food that met dietary requirements or not having time for their daily prayers. It was, according to Aatifa, “nice to... go into a country where everyone around you is the same... believing the same beliefs and things.” In such countries, rather than being a minority that stood out as different they perceived themselves as simply part of the faithful majority.

The sense of common identity with other Muslims was rooted in their shared faith in the Prophet and the Qur’an, but the participants were aware of the diversity of global Islam. While working in Saudi Arabia, Bahiya, “started learning that how much is really cultural and how much is religious... I look at things and I think, no, that’s cultural, that’s got nothing to do with the religion.” This distinction, between cultural and core elements of Islam, allowed the participants to navigate the diverse ways that Islam was taught and practised while maintaining their belief in the truth and oneness of Islam.

The diversity of Islam was not only experienced internationally. The local community the participants were recruited from was active and there was, according to Chahid, “lots of discussion... on a range, a wide range, of subjects and people have obviously got their different opinions... it’s quite open and it’s quite healthy.” Some female participants did not experience this diversity as positively. They found the conservative beliefs of some other Muslims oppressive and limiting. Bahiya described how she, “can’t go to the local mosque, not because of religious reasons but because the people who are there... are power hungry... [they have] their own practices... which don’t reflect the religion as such.” This experience of exclusion did not make Bahiya feel that she was not part of the Ummah, but it affected how she, and other female Muslims, experienced their place within it. As Aatifa noted, “the men tend to go to the mosque.” Despite these

different, gendered experiences the participants all viewed themselves as belonging to one, global community. Belonging to the Islamic community unified them and was seen as a fundamental part of being Muslim, even when ‘cultural factors’ caused conflict.

Family Provides a Secure Foundation

Every participant was raised in a practicing Muslim family and their families had an enduring influence on them. They were all aware their upbringing had shaped their beliefs and values. The participants’ parents took them to the mosque, taught them how to pray, and to read the Qur’an. As Dahra described it, “From a very small age, we are taught about our religion... and, obviously, because that goes into our mind, we started to believe... You will see your adults, your parents, other siblings doing those things like praying. So although at that age, you don’t understand what they are doing, but just with the actions, we would just follow them.” The way Dahra used collective and plural pronouns here shows how strongly she identified as part of the Muslim community and how she viewed that community as a group defined by its shared practices and attitudes. The actions of the people surrounding her provided a powerful example to follow. She learned to follow their actions even before she was old enough to understand and appreciate them. As she grew older, her family and the wider Muslim community taught her to also understand who they were and why they did what they did. For the participants, being a good Muslim involved being part of the community and their families had ensured they always understood their place within it.

The participants described their parents as not being excessively strict, but the importance of the Qur'an and its teachings was made clear to them from a very early age. Bahiya "was never told I had to do this, or I didn't have to do that, but, um, I knew where my boundaries were." The participants said they slowly learned, by observing others as they grew older, what was and what wasn't acceptable for Muslims to do. They appear to have not doubted or questioned their identity as Muslims, as it was rooted so strongly in their family and ethnic backgrounds. This process of learning was gradual, and the participants viewed this as a natural part of growing up. With time, religious practices and beliefs became more important and meaningful to the participants. For example, Aatifa spoke about how although she prayed when she was younger she "didn't really understand it [prayer] - didn't really get why. Just knew that my parents did it and... that you kind of had to do it five times a day. But I never really got it. Whereas now... it is purposeful. It is meaningful." The support of her family was crucial throughout this process, supporting and encouraging her as she developed her own faith and learned how to live.

Many of the participants now had families of their own and they made sure that their religion was a central part of their family life too. Ebrahim described how, "Religion is definitely... a big part of our family... It's part of our life and there are five pillars, which you have to follow... Religion is the binding force of the family as well." Being good Muslims and teaching their children to be good Muslims were among the participants' highest priorities - and the second was an intrinsic part of the first. Even as adults, their families provided a secure place where they could express and live their faith.

Embracing Multicultural Britain

Chahid, when describing his family life, said he had “tried to raise my children to be Muslims, but also British Muslims.” This emphasis on being British Muslims was important to many of the participants. Their awareness of the diversity within Islam, and the impact of culture on how the religion is interpreted and practised, allowed them to embrace both being British and being Muslim. They considered many of their core values, such as being kind and respectful, to be both British and Islamic. The participants socialized with many non-Muslims and enjoyed a wide range of common activities, such as sports. These participants lived in an area where they were a clear minority and they were socially engaged, integrated members of their communities. The participants appreciated and valued the multicultural and tolerant society they lived in, even if it sometimes made it harder to practice their faith. They saw this as something that benefited both themselves and their families. As Dahra said, when talking about raising her children, “it’s a multicultural... this country is multi-, and I love it... it’s difficult and it’s lovely because at least they’re learning about other cultures, other beliefs...”

The participants described how they loved living in Britain and its tolerant attitude towards them. Bahiya described herself as “very English” and the participants identified as part of British culture, rather than distinct from it. She said, “my parents did allow us to kind of, like, integrate with other people, and to make the most of what we had around us.” The last phrase here shows how she viewed British society as a source of positive opportunities that she wanted to embrace.

This sense of personal desire is emphasised by her description of being ‘allowed’ to do so – which suggests that at times she experienced some opposition to integrating. This opposition was due to perceived conflicts between some aspects of ‘British’ and ‘Muslim’ culture.

Chahid expanded on the challenges of living in a multicultural society, admitting that “there’s been a few times where I’ve been like, ‘I really wish I wasn’t a Muslim.’... Some of those rulings, some of those things that I wanted to sort of not do, break away from.” Dietary restrictions, including the prohibition of alcohol, and limitations on their behavior that differed from the rest of their society, sometimes tempted the participants to act in ways they considered unacceptable. Despite these challenges, the participants were all grateful to be living in Britain and to have the opportunities associated with that. They had friends from many different backgrounds, received a high-quality education, and could pursue whatever careers they wanted to. The participants saw themselves as being different to most of the people around them, but they were proud to be British Muslims and embraced both aspects of that identity.

Discussion

Interviews with five Muslims from the South East of England were analyzed using IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) to investigate the relationship between their lived experiences and beliefs. The participants’ Muslim faith was an integral part of their lives. They viewed themselves as part of a distinct group that recognized and submitted to the will of God, as revealed by the Prophet Muhammad in the Qur’an. This revelation taught them about God, the world and themselves. It provided an overarching meaning system that helped them to

understand their lives and made them meaningful. Islam means submission to God (Murata & Chittick, 2011) and their submission to God affected many aspects of their lives. They were British Muslims and this affected most aspects of their lives.

From an early age, they were taught the importance of the Qur'an and how to live lives that would please God. They experienced a sense of connected to Allah in their lives and personal experiences of God helped them develop and grow in their faith. Prayer and other religious practices, such as Ramadan, allowed the participants to feel close to God and they attributed events in their lives to his will. They learned to trust Allah through these experiences, and this helped them to follow what they understood as his guidance. For the participants, the Qur'an was tangible proof of God's existence and nature. It supported the teachings of their community and explained their spiritual experiences while having its own, sacred nature affirmed by those same things. Their families and community encouraged them to continue to follow its teachings. Communal religious practices, especially Ramadan, reinforced their identity as Muslims and reminded them of the place that God should have in their lives.

The Qur'an and Intratextual Fundamentalism

The participants' worldviews were firmly rooted in the Qur'an, and they considered it highly authoritative in their lives. Understanding how the Qur'an shaped their experiences and beliefs is essential to understanding them. As the title of this chapter suggests, the participants' belief that "Allah has told us everything" was a central part of their lived experience and identity.

R. W. Hood et al. (2005, p. 13) argue the principal criteria for identifying religious fundamentalism is that it “elevates the role of the sacred text to a position of supreme authority and subordinates all other potential sources of knowledge and meaning.” They show how fundamentalist meaning systems are often highly complex and comprehensive, rooted in personal experiences of their sacred text(s) and the practices associated with it. Liht et al. (2011) identify three underlying dimensions of religious fundamentalism as an external locus of authority, a fixed conceptualization of religion, and an elevation of the sacred over the worldly. Recent work suggests this form of intratextual fundamentalism is unidimensional (Hammer & Lazar, 2019) and that religious fundamentalism is a categorical rather than dimensional phenomena (Beller & Kröger, 2017).

Religious fundamentalism is often conflated with extremism or radicalism, but militancy and authoritarianism are not core features of fundamentalism (R. W. Hood et al., 2005; Sadowski et al., 2019). Islamism, extremism, and radicalism are all important topics to research (Moghaddam et al., 2013; Verkuyten, 2018) but the participants in this study were not any of these. The participants did, however, appear to have an intratextually fundamentalist worldview that shaped how they experienced the world (R. W. Hood et al., 2005; Liht et al., 2011). Many Muslims score highly on the intratextual fundamentalism scale (Sadowski et al., 2019) and beliefs about the divine nature of the Qur’an are historically understood as a core tenet of Islam (Morgan, 2010; Murata & Chittick, 2011).

R. W. Hood et al. (2005) debunk many myths about fundamentalism and argue that fundamentalist worldviews are effective at providing a unifying philosophy of life and a sense of coherence, purpose, meaning, and self-worth. Ysseldyk et al. (2010, p. 67) argue that “religious identification can offer a robust social support system, a comforting and

compelling worldview, and a unique psychological enrichment to which many people hold fast.” This seemed to be the case for these participants. The participants also appeared to find their faith useful in helping them cope positively with difficult and challenging situations in their lives. This echoes and supports the findings of Phillips and Ano (2015), who found fundamentalism was associated with positive forms of religious coping. The findings in this study support the usefulness of the conceptualization of intratextual fundamentalism, support the claim it is not intrinsically authoritative or militant, and suggest individuals can find this style of religiosity beneficial and effective.

Relationships and Identity

The participants’ families, and the wider Muslim community they belong to, played important roles in shaping and sustaining their faith. Other Muslims taught the participants both that they were Muslims and also what it means to be good Muslims. Being Muslim was a central element of the participants’ social identities and identifying as Muslims affected their beliefs, behaviors, and sense of self (Salzman, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Duderija (2008) argues that both scriptural interpretation and socio-cultural relationships are important elements in how western-born Muslims construct their religious identities and these factors appear to have both been important in shaping the identities and worldviews of the participants in this study. As Peek (2005) shows, the process of moving from an ascribed religious identity to one that is chosen and declared is shaped by the social and historical context of the individual. The participants’ faith

helped them construct ecological and cybernetic identities that made sense of their autobiographies and gave them symbols to express that identity (Marranci, 2009).

The participants were all integrated into the society in which they lived (Berry, 1997; Berry et al., 2006), with friends and colleagues from a diverse range of backgrounds. However, they maintained their own religious and cultural identities, rather than assimilating into the more secular society they lived in (Kramer, 2003). The participants' religious community maintained important boundary markers (including prayer and dietary requirements) and these appear to help them preserve the distinctions between themselves and non-Muslims. Their personal experiences of British society as welcoming, tolerant and multicultural seem to have enabled them to avoid feeling marginalized or pushed towards extremist ideologies (cf. Verkuyten, 2018). The differences between them and others around them sometimes created practical difficulties, but this did not lead to them feeling hostile towards their neighbors. It seems likely that several factors help explain this, including the area in which they lived and their relatively comfortable economic circumstances. Growing up, studying, and working as a visible but accepted minority helped them develop many close relationships with non-Muslims. These relationships helped them feel accepted by non-Muslims and part of an open and tolerant society. This supports suggestions that both a supportive faith community and diverse public spaces, including schools, are important for helping the positive integration of minority communities with wider society (Aziz, 2019; Kramer, 2003).

Experiences of God

The analysis of these participants' experiences suggests that a third factor, in addition to the two identified by Duderija (2008), was also important in shaping the participants' identities and worldviews. Personal experiences which the participants deemed sacred (Taves, 2009) also seemed to play an important role in developing and sustaining their faith and beliefs. Each participant described experiences where they had felt a personal connection with God and said these strengthened their faith. These experiences were interpreted using a framework provided by the Qur'an and their religious community. This attribution of experiences to specific supernatural causes in which the individual already believes, and the subsequent interpretation of these experiences as confirmatory evidence for those beliefs, is common across a wide range of religions and other belief systems (cf. French & Stone, 2013; Luhrmann, 2012; Spilka et al., 1985). The participants also described how these practices became more effective and meaningful over time, echoing Luhrmann's (2004, 2012) process of metakinesis and how regular practice enhances the efficacy of meditation (Farias & Wikholm, 2015). Their experiences during religious practices and the interpretative framework of their belief system seem to have reinforced each other, forming a positive feedback loop. The Qur'an helped them understand their experiences, and their experiences helped them understand and trust the Qur'an.

The participants' described developing relationships with Allah that appeared to influence their lives and beliefs in some ways that were similar to their relationships with important people in their lives. God seemed to be a non-human

supernatural agent (Boyer, 2002) who played an important role in their psychological and social realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Searle, 2010). As a supremely powerful and benevolent being, Allah also appears to have functioned as a source of security for the participants (cf. Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). The participants believed God communicated with them, and all of humanity, through the Qur'an and chose to submit to Allah's will in their lives. They trusted God was always right and tried to follow his guidance. These relationships affirmed the participants' sense of self and social identity.

Constructing Their Worldviews

These participants' meaning-making processes made use of a range of social and cultural resources (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1967; L. Lee, 2015; Searle, 2010) to create and sustain the social realities in which they lived. However, the Qur'an and the participants' faith in Allah provided the principal foundations of functional worldviews that met their needs and guided how they lived their lives (R. W. Hood et al., 2005; Park et al., 2013). Their sacred text, religious community, and personal experiences of the divine all contributed to and enhanced their faith. When they had doubts, they turned to their faith for support and answers. They understood everything that happened as Allah's will, which meant they believed everything happened for a good reason. Ultimately, the explanations offered by their faith, and their trust in the revelation of the Qur'an, helped them make sense of difficult events in their lives and tolerate uncertainty (cf. Hood et al., 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study provides a rich understanding of the experiences of the participants, but it cannot be assumed that other Muslims, living in different contexts, will have the same lived experiences. The narrow focus on a particular group of Muslims is an important element of IPA's methodology and should not be considered a weakness. The data analyzed here shows how some individuals make use of, and integrate, the diverse cultural resources at their disposal to create a meaningful understanding of themselves and the world. It seems likely that the Qur'an, prayer, times of religious focus and feeling a connection to Allah will also be important elements in many other Muslim's lives, even if how they are used in different contexts varies (cf. Abu-Raiya, 2013; Moughrabi, 1995; Murata & Chittick, 2011). Similarly, social influences and identifying as being Muslim are likely to also be important in other contexts. Additional studies, investigating the experiences of different groups of Muslims in a wide range of geographical locations, should be conducted to explore these potential differences.

The interviews for this study were conducted in the UK during Ramadan and in a period when the country had recently experienced multiple Islamist terrorist attacks (BBC News, 2017, 2019). As one finding of this study is that Ramadan heightens the salience of individuals' Islamic identity, the interviews may have generated different data than if they were collected at a different time. The recent terror attacks, and the accompanying media coverage, may also have made their identity as Muslims more salient and influenced how they viewed themselves in

relation to their wider society (cf. Peek, 2005). Both these factors should be kept in mind when considering the transferability of these findings.

The non-Muslim identity of the researcher may also have influenced the data gathered in the interviews. Interviews by outsiders can increase the salience of differences and may also make the participants try to present a more positive or acceptable version of their community. However, interviews with an outsider who is perceived as non-judgmental can also make it easier for participants to admit deviations from the social norms of the group (Chryssides, 2019; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000). The good rapport between the participants and interviewer suggests this probably did not weaken the data collected. Interviews conducted on other days, or by a different researcher, may have been very different and the data only provides a partial insight into the experiences of the participants; all interview data is co-constructed by the participant and researcher (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006).

Conclusions

This study provides another demonstration that IPA can produce rich insights into the lived experiences of religious individuals. The interpretative and inductive approach enabled the exploration of the different elements of the participants' experiences. The study suggests that different experiences, beliefs, and practices are integrated as individuals develop their personal worldviews and that they do so in mutually reinforcing ways. The combination of different factors and influences appears to be greater than the sum of the individual elements and this has important implications for studying the effects of religious practices and beliefs.

The Muslims who took part in this study were integrated members of British society. Their beliefs and identities were strongly shaped by their Muslim families, their experiences of God, and their experiences of living in a tolerant and inclusive society. They lived in a society that is increasingly secular (L. Lee, 2015) but their world remained sacred. Allah was an active part of their world; they believed God will not only judge them after they die but also determines the course of their lives. These beliefs are rooted in the revelation of the Qur'an, whose truth they have accepted since childhood and which has had extensive influence on them. Through studying the Qur'an, praying, and participating in the life of the Muslim community, they developed an enduring and meaningful relationship with God. Through their lived experiences, they learned to trust Allah and chose to submit to what they understood as God's will. As they did so, they also taught and encouraged others to do so, sustaining their community and the faith that they valued so highly.

I BELIEVE IN SOMETHING

Hinduism is the fourth largest religious group in Britain, with about 800,000 individuals (1.3% of the population) identifying as Hindu in the latest census (ONS, 2013). It is also the fourth largest religious group globally, numbering approximately 1.1 billion people (15.1% of the population) identifying as Hindu (PRC, 2017). Hinduism has its origins on the Indian sub-continent and most Hindus in the UK are either immigrants themselves or the descendants of immigrants. Hindus in the UK have relatively high rates of economic activity, are more likely than the general population to have higher education, and are more likely to work in professional or managerial positions (Berkeley, 2006; Fredman, 2011).

Hinduism has been described as both the oldest and the youngest of the major world religions. It has roots that go back to at least 2500 BCE but only really began to be perceived as a single, cohesive religious tradition in the 19th Century (Jacobs, 2010). Hinduism is diverse, with many texts that are considered sacred and practitioners can be polytheistic, monotheistic, henotheistic or even atheistic (Jacobs, 2010). There are multiple paths to liberation or salvation in Hinduism, including through devotion to a specific deity, through specific behaviors, and through the attainment of certain understandings (Jacobs, 2010; Knott, 2016). In addition to regional and caste/class variations, Hinduism is also often practised differently in the diaspora than it is in India itself, with many such individuals incorporating elements of other religious traditions into their practices (Brekke, 2019). No single study can capture the full richness of this diversity, nor is it necessary for

it to, but it is important to be aware of the religious and cultural context the participants belong to.

This group is important to study because there have been few psychological studies examining the experiences of Hindus in Britain and the way their worldviews develop and are sustained may be very different to those from other cultural contexts. The only previous IPA study of Hindu spirituality examined the experiences of yogi in India (Prakash et al., 2009), which are significantly different to those of most Hindus in the UK. Hinduism has a rich range of religious and cultural ideas and so is a highly heterodox tradition. The relative rigidity of many specific rituals, and relatively strict expectations of moral conduct, mean it is also relatively high in orthopraxy.

Method

This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) to explore the experiences and beliefs of five British Hindus from a community in South East England. This community lived in a small geographical area in the South East of England and was not affiliated with a specific place of worship, as the nearest Hindu temple was not local. Participants were purposively recruited, using a gatekeeper (Patton, 2015), in accordance with predetermined eligibility criteria. The participants had to self-identify as Hindus, British, aged between 18 and 65, and as not possessing any characteristics that made them vulnerable. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant and these were transcribed and then analyzed iteratively and inductively, following the

principles of IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Further details of these processes can be found in the methods chapter (see pp. 139-170).

The five participants were each assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity (Madill, 2012). Two participants (Madesh and Panev) were male and the other three (Nalika, Olena, and Rachana) were female. All five were relatively well educated and affluent, which reflects the nature of the community chosen for the study. The participants all provided informed consent to participate in the study and at the end of the interview reported they were happy to have taken part and shared their experiences.

Results

The analysis identified many potential themes in the data and these were developed inductively and iteratively, retaining only those with strong empirical support and which were present in at least half the cases (J. A. Smith, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). These themes are summarized in Table 4 (p. 238). For these participants, two superordinate themes capture the core of their spiritual experiences and beliefs. They thought ‘everybody has their own way’ of finding and expressing spiritual fulfillment but lived their lives ‘focusing on this world’ rather than thinking much about what may happen after they die. Each theme was present in the accounts of all five participants.

Table 4*I Believe in Something: Summary of Themes with Example Quotes*

Theme	Sample Extract
Superordinate Theme: Everybody Has Their Own Way	
Believing in ‘Something’	“I don't believe in God... [but] there must be something. I don't know what it is... There's something pulling back.” (Rachana)
Experiencing spirituality and peace	“[I] recite shlokas...religious verses. I think it has more like a meditative effect... I don't know if it does anything...[but] it clears your head.” (Olena)
Rejecting some doctrines and customs	“The customs should, and the myths should, actually replicate what is possible... most of them are impractical.” (Madesh)
Embracing inclusivity and uncertainty	“Everybody has their own beliefs... There are different ways to reach God...to reach their God everybody follows their path.” (Nalika)
Superordinate Theme: Focusing on This World	
Finding Meaning by Helping Others	“Life is not about 'me, me, me' ... Do something that will be beneficial to others. That's it. That makes your life meaningful.” (Madesh)
Being Hindu	“We were all brought up in, like, intense Hindu faith – but none of us really practice as such.” (Olena)

Everybody Has Their Own Way

The participants each described complex entanglements of personal beliefs, practices, and non-beliefs. They all believed in something greater than themselves and engaged in some religious or spiritual practices but rejected many traditional Hindu doctrines and customs. The participants had an inclusive and tolerant attitude to different religious beliefs and practices, accepting and embracing their own uncertainty as part of the mystery of life. They believed that everybody has their own way to find peace and happiness in the world and that conclusive answers to existential questions were not necessary to achieve that.

Believing in ‘Something’

The participants all believed in something greater than themselves, but they were consciously ambiguous about what that entity was actually like, or whether a word like entity was suitable to describe it. They did not believe in literal, anthropomorphic deities but instead believed that there was some sort of higher power or divinity beyond the rational and materialistic realm in which they lived. The participants struggled to communicate their thoughts and beliefs about this topic and seemed to find the concepts available to them inadequate to reflect their experiences and beliefs. For example, Rachana initially stated that “I don’t believe in God,” but she continued to say, “I don’t know how to explain, but there’s something there - but I don’t know what it is.” Later in the interview, after discussing a difficult time in her life, she again affirmed with conviction that: “there must be something. I don’t know what it is... There’s something pulling back.” Rachana’s words here reveal how she struggled to form a coherent explanation for some of her

experiences. Her experiences convinced her that some higher power existed and cared for her, but she found the traditional explanations offered by the major religions, including Hinduism, inadequate or unconvincing. Her repeated use of ‘something’, rather than ‘someone’, suggests that she isn’t even sure that the higher power is a being or agent, yet she still views it as having exerted active agency in her life.

Madesh echoed these thoughts using similar language, saying he was certain that “Something is there. Some power is there.” Like Rachana and the other participants, he believed that there was more to the world than naturalistic explanations allowed but he did not have confidence or certainty about what the nature of that ‘something’ was. The participants shared a belief that the unseen or spiritual elements in the world were difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend or explain. However, their experiences of this ‘something’ suggested it was quite abstract and distant from human affairs. For Panev, “The universal intelligence is a blade of grass. It’s in the wind, it’s in the dog, it’s in the cattle, it’s in you, it’s in me, in everything.” Not all the participants took such an explicitly pantheistic or panentheistic approach, but they did all reject the notion of a personal God while affirming their belief in some other form of higher power. Olena, who said her best friend was a Christian, wasn’t sure if she believed in God “exactly”. She said she believes there is “an energy in the world which you call God and when you die your energy... goes back to that energy... It’s Hinduism mixed with science.” The participants were aware of the limitations of language when discussing such topics but all had beliefs that, despite their ambiguity, were still important to them. The

belief that something greater than themselves was watching over them and their loved ones, or that when they died they would return to something eternal, provided them with comfort and reassurance. Knowing that something was there was far more important to them than understanding it.

Experiencing Spirituality and Peace

The participants described taking part in a range of religious and/or spiritual practices which they found beneficial. Many, but not all, of these were Hindu in origin. Performing these practices gave the participants feelings of peace and made them feel more spiritually attuned. Their experiences during rituals and other spiritual practices helped affirm their belief in something greater than themselves and their sense of being Hindus.

The participants kept small shrines in their homes, where they lit candles and said brief, daily prayers as part of the ritual of Pūjā. Rachana suggested that, although it was something she did every day, it was not something she considered especially important. She said, “We have got a small place - God’s place here, which I keep to light the lamp, that’s all it is, morning and evening... it makes me feel calm.” This sense of calmness when performing spiritual practices was a recurring theme in the participants’ descriptions of their experiences. Olena elaborated on this saying, “[I] recite what are called shlokas... religious verses. I think it has more like a meditative effect.... It sort of takes you into a trance and it’s like meditation... I don’t know if it does anything... [but] it clears your head.” Olena also performed other forms of meditation and it was the practical benefits of reciting shlokas that motivated her to continue doing so. She, like the other participants, did

not know whether there were any supernatural benefits to their practices but that did not seem important to her - what mattered was that they made her feel better.

Several of the participants attended Temple irregularly and Nalika described how sometimes when she visited a local Temple she experienced feelings of connection and peace. She spoke about how, “the vibrations, the sound... the chanting of the mantras... really gives you a resonance... That has happened a few times, but not exactly every time you go to the Temple...” The participants did not expect their religious or spiritual practices to elicit these positive feelings every time. It was enough for them that they sometimes did, and the memory of such times was enough to encourage their continued participation. Madesh described how performing rituals and other religious practices gave him, “some type of solace... [a] little bit of confidence, that’s it.” The modifiers applied in his descriptions here suggest he felt these effects were only small, yet they did have some benefit to him. The participants appeared to have low expectations about the impact of their spiritual practices but found the benefits were worth the relatively low investment they made into them.

Festivals and other celebrations were viewed by the participants as an important part of their heritage and they looked forward to them with enthusiasm. They provided an opportunity for them to celebrate and spend time with the people they cared about. In addition to traditional Hindu festivals, the participants also celebrated Christmas and seemed to view it as similarly important to them. For example, Olena spoke about how “We had Diwali last week, so we lit the lamp and put it outside the house. Christmas, Easter... [we] try and do everything, do a bit of

everything, really.” The festivals each had their own set of traditions and they participants felt they brought them closer to those around them. The spiritual benefits of these festivals appeared to be far less important to the participants than the joy they experienced celebrating them with their families and friends.

One participant, Madesh, described having a more transformative and mystical experience. The experience occurred in India, while he was recovering from major surgery, and he described his experience as follows. “In the second night, I have a feeling... I’m the stretcher. I’m the bird... Something, some force is lifting me and taking and banging my body into this and then I’m coming back... I don’t know what happened... My feeling is like this: I’ve been thrown out and come back here... Then I realized something is there. That is the world change over point for me basically...” Madesh continued to talk about how the experience occurred while he was heavily medicated and dehydrated, and after multiple religious rituals were performed on him during the day by a female relative. Madesh said that this experience had convinced him there was ‘something’ beyond the physical world and that before it occurred he doubted that. As with the more minor experiences discussed previously, this experience gave him a sense of peace and that something spiritual was real, even though he remained unsure about its nature.

Rejecting Some Doctrines and Customs

Despite these clear Hindu influences on their beliefs and practices, all the participants also rejected many elements of the tradition with which they continued to identify. These rejected elements included both rituals and beliefs, including some important elements of traditional Hindu theology. For example, all the participants did not

believe in literal reincarnation, and so by implication in the cycle of Samsara or Moksha which are central to traditional Hindu cosmology and soteriology (Jacobs, 2010; Knott, 2016). Nalika was the most open to the possibility of reincarnation but even she said, “I’m still exploring [the idea of Reincarnation], but I don’t have a feeling it’ll be real. Even if it is, I don’t bother!” This demonstrates the low priority the participants gave to understanding such issues and how they perceived theological and transcendental issues as often being irrelevant to their lives.

Olena described how she and her friends were “all brought up in, like, intense Hindu faith, but none of us really practice as such.” She, and the other participants, knew and understood many Hindu myths and practices but this knowledge and respect for them did not mean they believed in them. They considered them an important part of their cultural heritage, and so did not reject them entirely and wanted to preserve the traditions, but did not believe they revealed the true nature of the world. Madesh expressed this point rather tactfully, saying “the customs should, and the myths should, actually replicate what is possible... most of them are impractical.” Madesh’s use of the term ‘impractical’ here deviates slightly from conventional usage, but his point was that he believed many of the practices and stories he associated with Hinduism made claims he did not feel were credible. His words show he clearly had a firm understanding of how the world works that was largely determined by science. He, and the other participants, were skeptical of supernatural and historical claims that contradicted scientific evidence and understandings. However, he did not want to eliminate

rituals and myths entirely; he wanted myths, rituals, and customs that fit with how he understood the world.

The participants viewed some traditional Hindu practices and teachings as being actively harmful. Rachana spoke about how practices like extreme fasting, self-mutilation, and other forms of self-discipline, “doesn’t make sense and it’s hurting your whole body.” As discussed further in the next theme, the participants’ focus was on living their lives as best they could and the elements of Hinduism concerned with what happened after their deaths did not interest them much. Things which caused suffering in this life but were claimed to relieve future suffering did not appeal to them because they did not believe in either their need or efficacy.

The participants’ beliefs about existential issues were often tentative and implicit; they believed in some things and disbelieved others. The way these beliefs formed and developed was deeply personal to each of them. They rejected some doctrines and customs but being Hindu remained an important part of how they understood themselves (see pp. 250-253). They knew this made them different to many other Hindus but did not find these differences problematic. Nalika summarized this by saying, “I do have a belief... but not the way that lots of other people do... Everybody has their own way.”

Embracing Inclusivity and Uncertainty

The participants had an open and inclusive approach to other religious traditions. Madesh attributed this to Indian culture, saying, “We Indians believe in all religions. We are Hindu majority, yes, but we do believe in all other customs.” The use of collective pronouns here shows how he retained a strong sense of a shared identity as ‘Indian’, and

that his heritage was a source of personal pride that encouraged him to embrace diversity. The participants had grown up with friends and neighbors from other religious traditions and not only tolerated this diversity but embraced it as something positive that enriched their shared experiences. Rachana described how, as a child, her community “used to have all the three festivals... Ramadan... Diwali... Christmas.” It should be noted that she listed them in chronological order, rather than prioritizing Diwali, suggesting they had similar importance to her. Several of the participants described sometimes attending church and, for them, it was similar to attending a Hindu temple (although they were also aware of the many differences.) The participants’ attitudes towards other religions was accepting and inclusive, rather than being just tolerant.

Olena explained why she found Hinduism to be more inclusive than many other religious traditions. According to her, “Hinduism... believe[s] that everything is God, so we don’t see Christianity as a different religion. We see it as an extension of our religion.” Subsuming other religious traditions under the broad umbrella of Hinduism allowed the participants to engage with their religious practices without too many difficulties, though they rejected exclusivist explanations and doctrines. Hinduism, as the participants understood and practiced it, accommodated myriad different perspectives on the sacred. For Olena, and many other participants, worshiping Jesus or Allah was not different to worshiping Vishnu or Shiva. They were all aspects of the same, mysterious and unknowable divine truth and different people found their own ways to connect to that.

The participants emphasized the importance of individuals having agency in their own choices of beliefs and practices. As Nalika noted, “Hinduism: it’s like very vast. Everybody has their own beliefs, in the thing, so there are different ways to reach God... so everybody follows their path to reach their God.” The repeated use of possessive pronouns here shows the importance she placed on individuals making their own choices and finding their own way to their own destinations. This reveals how she did not think there is a single path or destination that should be forced onto people, including herself.

Despite explaining their acceptance of other religious traditions as being part of Hinduism, and thus implicitly privileging a Hindu theology, the participants remained agnostic about the true nature of the universe and the divine. As discussed above, the participants all believed in ‘something’ but were not sure exactly what that something was. This uncertainty did not appear to cause the participants any difficulties, and they were comfortable with their own limited understanding. Rachana summed this up succinctly by saying, “I’m quite happy not knowing. I think it’s difficult to find... the right ideas...” She was sure that there was something beyond the material world, but she did not feel the need to explain such things. Panev said, “Nobody really understands. Nobody really understands. It’s, it’s out there somewhere... so in my household it’s been open system.” Like the other participants, he was sure that there were answers, but he located them beyond the possibility of human understanding. This placed all religious traditions on similar footings and helped explain why his family were open to combining elements and teachings from different traditions. What mattered, ultimately, to these participants was that they lived good lives and that their spiritual practices helped them to do that. If a practice made them

feel better and did not harm anyone else, they did not need to understand how it worked to use and benefit from it.

Focusing on This World

It was clear in each interview that the participants were more concerned with living their lives within this world than with thinking about anything beyond it. They worked hard to provide for themselves and their families, finding meaning and purpose in their ability to help others. Their families, both close and extended, played an important role in developing and sustaining their identity as Hindus. Hinduism was an important aspect of their identity and lives, but they understood their heritage in ways that was markedly different to many of their older relatives.

Finding Meaning by Helping Others

All five participants believed it was important to help others as much as they could. For example, Olena described her values as striving to “be kind, work hard, respect other people.” These three elements were echoed in the accounts of the other participants and are all focused on living well in this world, rather than looking towards more transcendent concerns. This emphasis on being kind and respecting other people reflects both the type of character the participants’ worked to develop and the relationships they wanted to have with others. They tried to be positive presences in the world who made others’ lives better. The desire to work hard, although perhaps more focused on the self than the other two aspirations, was also linked to their desire to help others. For these participants’ and their families,

having financial resources was important because they enabled them to take care of others (and themselves.) Their continued links with India made them acutely aware of the consequences of poverty and they believed that working hard enabled them to avoid it for themselves and alleviate it for others.

Both money and time were finite resources in the participants' lives that limited their ability to improve the world. Rachana spoke about how she "[would] like to help people, more than what I can. I can't give more, but I'm thinking of how to help people once I've retired." She was a compassionate individual, as were the other participants, and she worked hard so she could be kind and helpful towards others. She believed doing this was the purpose of her life.

This focus on helping to relieve the suffering of others was far more important to the participants than resolving more esoteric questions. Panev, a highly educated and thoughtful man, described how he spent little time thinking about existential questions because "being in the moment, now, is more important... all effort is in that. What I see, everybody, I see a five-year-old struggling, I see a hundred-and-five-year-old struggling, and they look pensive in their mood." Panev saw others suffering and struggling around him and this compelled him to spend his energy, both physical and mental, on trying to fix the immediate problems they faced and teaching them how to improve their situations.

For these participants, as Nalika expressed, life was, "about sharing, caring and being a closer society... it's not about just... yourself." Madesh expressed similar sentiments and said, "We start with 'life is not about me, me, me'... Do something that will be beneficial to others. That's it. That makes your life meaningful." The participants were explicit that they believed it was their relationships and actions that gave meaning and

purpose to their lives rather than anything transcendent. They were all concerned about the people around them and spent time and money trying to make the world a better place. Helping others in this way gave their lives meaning and purpose.

Being Hindu

All five participants described themselves as Hindu and this was an important aspect of how they saw themselves. Despite their rejection of some traditional Hindu beliefs and practices, as discussed above, they did not question whether they remained part of the Hindu community. Being Hindu was an integral part of who they thought they were. They had been born Hindu, raised Hindu, and continued to be Hindu. This sense of belonging was reflected in how they spoke about themselves and their beliefs. Madesh, for example, referred to “my Hindu culture” in contrast to the culture of those around him in Britain. This shows the sense of belonging he felt - it was his culture and heritage, even though he disliked some parts of it. For the participants, being Hindu was not primarily about doing or believing certain things. Being Hindu instead involved belonging to a community with a legacy of traditions that helped orientate them in the world.

Family was important to all the participants and all of them had married other Hindus, although one had since divorced her spouse and returned to living with her parents. The participants all maintained good relationships with their parents and extended families, viewing these networks as an important element of their cultural heritage. Madesh described having a “very good, close knit family life” and an elderly, female relative played an important role in the transformative

spiritual experience that has been described above. She was there for him in a time of acute crisis and her faith helped to rekindle his. The relationships between the participants and their families provided both support and enjoyment. Nalika spoke warmly about how she and her husband had, “a close relationship with the immediate family, as well as the extended family... we really like that... [we] keep in touch and we tend to meet them as often as possible.” Their families were a priority for all the participants and these familial networks gave them a sense of belonging to the wider Hindu community too.

The participants’ emphasis on family and community reflected their childhood experiences, which they described in positive and affectionate terms. Olena described her childhood as, “Perfect. Absolutely perfect... [a] very close, loving family.” Similarly, when Rachana was asked what her childhood was like she said it was, “Really happy. Went to school, come back, played games. That’s it really.” This does not mean their childhoods were devoid of hardships or suffering but they felt loved, wanted and a sense of belonging. The extended families, and networks of families, the participants associated with appear to have helped them develop their positive and tolerant outlooks on life. Even when they rejected aspects of traditional Hindu culture, they could still positively associate themselves with the rest of it through their bonds of kinship. These relationships, which the participants valued so highly, appear to have helped draw their focus to the people and events around them rather than encouraging them to dwell on more esoteric or otherworldly concerns.

The participants had been brought up as Hindus, but they described how many of their older relatives were far more devout than they were. Olena, when discussing her experiences and those of her Hindu friends, said, “[we] aren’t really religious, it’s just the parents...” This contrast between the beliefs and actions of the younger generation and

those of their parents and grandparents was important and created a tension that they needed to navigate. Being Hindu meant something different to Olena and her peers than it did to many older Hindus, but this did not mean it was unimportant to her. As discussed above, Hinduism helped shape her beliefs and certain aspects of its traditions were embraced. The participants did not cut themselves off from their extended families and heritage, but they interpreted and made use of it in their own ways. Madesh, who was probably the most religious of the five participants, described how he was “very religious... [but] we tend to adapt our religious beliefs between our work culture.” Madesh valued both his Hindu heritage and his professional identity and tried to reconcile the two. In some ways, the participants lived in two very different cultures and saw value in each of them. They were part of modern, British society and yet they also wanted to keep their identities as both Indians and Hindus.

The diverse nature of Hinduism helped them to navigate this complexity, as did the tolerance towards other forms of religious practice and belief that they saw as an integral part of Hinduism. Their sense of Hinduism’s inclusivity, discussed as part of a previous theme, appears to have enabled them to accept their own divergence from some aspects of traditional practice without much difficulty. They did not believe that performing specific rituals, or believing particular teachings, was necessary to be a good person or a good Hindu. Stories and rituals helped them to find peace in their lives but they had the freedom to choose which ones they found useful. For these participants, what mattered most was belonging to their community and working together to help others.

The Hinduism they were taught by their families and communities continued to shape how they viewed themselves and the world. It made them different from many of those around them and enriched their lives. Being Hindu was a crucial element of the participants' experiences, but they knew what being Hindu meant to them was very different to what it meant to many others.

Discussion

Semi-structured interviews with five Hindus, who lived in the same town in South East England, were analyzed using IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The iterative and inductive analysis developed six subordinate themes that were organized into two superordinate themes: 'Everybody has their own way' and 'Focusing on this world'.

The participants described believing in 'something' greater than themselves and they all engaged in some form of spiritual or religious practice. However, they rejected many traditional Hindu beliefs and practices and were unsure about the nature of the 'something' in which they believed. This uncertainty did not seem to cause them distress and their spirituality gave them a sense of peace and comfort. They believed many different spiritual paths were equally valid and, although there were some strong Hindu influences on their beliefs and practices, they engaged with elements of multiple religious traditions while living predominantly secular lives.

Being Hindu was an important element of the participants' identity, but they focused on living within the world rather than on existential or esoteric concerns. They devoted their energy to helping others and found meaning in the relationships they formed with those around them. The participants' families and heritage were important to them, but

they perceived significant differences between how they understood Hinduism and how their older relatives did.

Divergence from Expectations

The divergence between the beliefs and experiences of the participants and those more traditionally associated with Hinduism presented some challenges for the analysis. This included questioning whether the sample should be considered sufficiently Hindu, and so whether the participants should have been excluded from the study after the interviews. The boundaries between religious groups are often hotly contested, with some individuals within traditions claiming that divergent groups or individuals are not true believers. These claims are inherently political and reveal important social dynamics (Fitzgerald, 2000; McCutcheon, 2017) but emic definitions of religion are often problematic and should not be used uncritically by researchers (Murphy, 2017; Oman, 2013). Lived religion is often diverse and can diverge from the theological orthodoxy of the tradition in question (M. B. McGuire, 2008; Slone, 2004). People's beliefs (and practices) are usually complex, multi-faceted and idiosyncratic and it is a fallacy to assume that they are always entirely congruent (Chaves, 2010; Murphy, 2017). All the major world religions are diverse and this is especially true of Hinduism (Fitzgerald, 1990). Hinduism contains a very long tradition of atheism and/or the rejection of supernatural beliefs; although such individuals are only a small minority, they are generally accepted as a valuable part of the broader tradition (Frazier, 2013; Jacobs, 2010).

The criteria for inclusion in the study was self-identification as Hindu and excluding them because their experiences differed from the researcher's expectations would have been both undesirable and inappropriate. IPA focuses on the experiences of those being studied and how they make sense of those experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). As such, what really matters is not whether the participants match certain external criteria or categories but rather how they make sense of their own lives. The participants considered themselves Hindu and were accepted as such by those in their families and wider social networks, and this justifies their inclusion.

The experiences of these participants are significantly different to those of many other Hindus, but understanding their experiences provides important insights into both Hinduism and secularism. This is particularly useful as research on religious traditions tends to focus disproportionately on those who are highly engaged with the tradition (Chaves, 2010; M. B. McGuire, 2008) and research on non-religion has been disproportionately focused on individuals with Christian heritages (Asad, 2003; L. Lee, 2015). One advantage of qualitative research is its ability to respond sensitively to data when it differs from expectations (J. A. Maxwell, 1996). This study ended up being different to the researcher's initial expectations, but this enriched rather than hindered it.

Believing in Belonging

The increasing disengagement of individuals in Britain from forms of organized religion (Curtice et al., 2019; L. Lee, 2015) remains the subject of ongoing research, particularly among sociologists of religion. Different, though often complementary, theories have been suggested to help explain and understand the trend. This work has often

focused on Christian and ex-Christian populations, in Europe and North America, with the experiences of those in other cultures potentially very different (Asad, 2003; Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2008).

Davie (1994) argued that most British people continued to believe in God but no longer felt the need to participate regularly in religious institutions. Two decades later, this ‘unchurched’ group is smaller but remains a significant segment of the British population (Davie, 2015). However, the participants in this study still felt they belonged to the Hindu community even though their formal participation within it was limited.

Day (2011) has suggested that what many individuals in Britain now believe in is really their relationships with other people. They identify with, and belong to, communities associated with beliefs even if they do not share all of the traditions’ beliefs themselves. In her fieldwork, Day (2011, p. 92) found that “belief was not absent but relocated to the social realm where it is polyvocal, interdependent, emotionally charged, and illustrative of experiences of belonging.” She categorizes such individuals, who now probably make up the majority of the British population, as ‘anthropocentrics’ who “articulate their beliefs primarily in reference to their human relationships” (p. 157). She contrasts these individuals with those who are ‘theocentric’ and structure their lives around a relationship (or relationships) with God, gods or other higher powers. This description is a good fit for the participants in this study, who focused their lives on the people around them rather than on things beyond this world.

Day's (2011) work primarily focuses on individuals from Christian backgrounds and she describes how many anthropocentric individuals are nominalists who have only minimal involvement with the Church. Even though they reject many of its doctrines, Christianity remains an important aspect of their identity that allows them to distinguish themselves from others. The participants in this study can be described as natal or ethnic nominalists, as their Hindu identity stems from being born and raised in Hindu families. The development of modern Hindu atheism and rationalism can partially be ascribed to the colonial period, when elements of Hinduism and Enlightenment ideals were consciously combined to create an identity that was perceived as both Indian and 'modern' (Frazier, 2013). The participants' cultural heritage and migration history influenced both their sense of identity and their understanding of what it meant to be Hindu.

As the participants themselves described, their form of Hinduism was different to that of many other Hindus. Their beliefs and practices should not be viewed as inferior or less Hindu; such value judgments are both inappropriate and unsustainable. This study suggests Day's theoretical analysis is useful beyond the predominantly white and Christian context in which it was developed. Believing that one belongs to a community can still provide meaning and psychological support to individuals who reject institutions or religious doctrines (Day, 2011).

Developing Idiosyncratic Worldviews

Describing the participants as anthropocentric individuals who retained a nominalist form of Hinduism (Day, 2011) only provides a partial and, in some ways misleading, picture of their beliefs and practices. These were important elements of how the participants

made sense of their lives and experiences in the world, but not the only ones. L. Lee (2015) has identified five types of 'existential culture' that individuals can use to formulate their understanding of themselves and the world and she suggests individuals often combine elements from the different existential cultures available to them. These participants' outlooks were primarily unexistential: they were not concerned with existential questions the vast majority of the time. "Everyday needs, responsibilities, and pleasures" (L. Lee, 2015, p. 169) were the participants primary concern as they lived their lives. However, the participants also had humanistic, agnostic and subjectivist elements in their worldviews.

This study can only offer tentative explanations for why the participants integrated the elements they did but their social environments and own experiences both seem to have played important roles in their meaning-making processes. For these participants, their family upbringing as Hindus had lasting impacts on how they understood the world. The participants blended elements of their families' cultures and wider British society, integrating and assimilating themselves into the world in which they lived (Berry, 1997; Kramer, 2003; Sinha, 2019). They described having many non-Hindu friends and not experiencing much racism or prejudice. This enabled them to feel a valued part of British society and gave them access to a wide range of cultural resources for developing their own spiritualities. Perceived threats to religious identities are often associated with developing fundamentalist beliefs and these participants did not experience such threats (Armstrong, 2000; R. W. Hood et al., 2005).

The participants' spiritual practices and experiences also helped shape their worldviews. They rejected many doctrinal claims, both from Hinduism and other religious traditions, but believed in 'something' because their own experiences convinced them that there was something more than the materialistic and rational. They found comfort and peace in the belief that there was something benevolent and greater than themselves, even though their relationship with it was usually distant. It seems likely the rituals they regularly performed helped stimulate their spiritual experiences and interpretations of phenomena. A key function of rituals is to communicate information to the individual about who they are (Rappaport, 1999) and the feelings of peace they experienced when performing them affirmed their beliefs that there was some value to them. There is also evidence that such regular participation in these sorts of activities can make individuals more open or attuned to spiritual experiences (Farias & Wikholm, 2015; Luhrmann, 2004; Luhrmann, 2012).

These participants show the limitations of many of the categories used to study religion and non-religion. They described themselves as both religious and not religious and this duality reflects how different understandings of 'religion' can affect the labels people use. The same emic labels can mean different things not only to different people but also to the same people in different contexts or at different times (Ammerman, 2013; Murphy, 2017). Language and other symbols are an integral part of how individuals make sense of the world and convey their worldviews to others. Accurate understandings of what an individual means by key terms is crucial and semi-structured or unstructured interviews excel at collecting such data. This study shows the value of taking a holistic perspective that examines, in detail, the many different aspects of individuals' lives. The participants'

meaning-making processes were multifaceted and complex, so a methodology that could capture and explore the nuances of their shifting beliefs and understandings was necessary to understand them.

Openness and Tolerance

The participants attributed their inclusive and accepting stance towards other religions to their Indian and Hindu heritage, viewing it as an intrinsic part of their cultural traditions. Tolerance of religious diversity is an important part of contemporary Hindu identity (R. H. Davis, 2008; Jacobs, 2010) and has been shaped by various events in the history of modern India (Adcock, 2014). The perception of Hinduism and other 'Eastern' religions as inherently peaceful and tolerant is common but unfortunately has little basis in fact (Farias & Wikholm, 2015). Hindu nationalists are often violent and prejudiced towards those from other faiths (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018; Battaglia, 2017) and historical cultures that have subsequently been described as Hindu have waged wars and oppressed the marginalized (Brekke, 2019; Jacobs, 2010). There is a substantial strand within Hinduism that encourages tolerance and peaceful behavior, but, like in Christianity or Islam, this strand of teaching does not always inhibit behaviors that violate it (Armstrong, 2000; Juergensmeyer, 2011). Further discussion is therefore needed to establish why the participants were so open and inclusive of others.

Rather than simply accepting other religious traditions and practices as equal to their own, the participants integrated and subsumed them within their own worldview. This approach to religious tolerance and diversity is relatively common

within Hinduism (R. H. Davis, 2008) and is facilitated by the diversity of Hinduism itself, with its many paths to salvation (Jacobs, 2010; Knott, 2016). Identifying with, and combining, the practices of multiple religious traditions is relatively common both on the Indian sub-continent (Gellner & Hausner, 2013) and in its diaspora (Sinha, 2019). This fusion of ideas often includes science and Western philosophy, alongside religious sources of truth or knowledge (Ecklund et al., 2019). This process of syncretism seems to have eroded some of the boundaries they may otherwise have perceived between themselves and other groups.

The links between religiosity and prejudice, the lack of which can be viewed as acceptance or tolerance, has been extensively investigated by psychologists. Religiosity, measured in various ways, has been associated with increased prejudice against a wide range of groups (Batson, 2013; Wulff, 1991). Early studies suggested that only extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, religiosity was linked to prejudice, but subsequent research has shown these findings to be flawed due to methodological issues; intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity are both associated with increased prejudice (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Batson, 2013). However, high scores on the 'Quest' dimension of religiosity have been associated with lower prejudice and increased tolerance (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Batson, 2013). Batson and Ventis' (1982) proposed additional 'Quest' dimension of religiosity measures openness to change, the readiness to face existential questions without reducing their complexity, and viewing self-criticism and religious uncertainty as positives.

It seems likely that the participants openness and own uncertainty about their own beliefs partially contributed to their acceptance of others and compassion towards them. This openness and acceptance of others is similar to that found in many individuals who

identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR). A search for truth with a subjectivist stance often also leads to a universalist stance that views all religious or spiritual paths as reflections of some greater truth (L. Lee, 2015; Mercadante, 2014). SBNR individuals also often construct pluralistic and hybrid spiritual identities (Bostic, 2018; see also pp. 282-289). These parallels are important to note, even though the participants continued to identify with their religious tradition, Hinduism.

Individuals who exhibit traits of high 'Quest' can be found both within and beyond religious traditions, as there are many more reasons for individuals to belong to faith communities than just shared beliefs (Day, 2011; Sherkat, 2003).

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

Good IPA studies are focused and use an idiographic approach to develop a rich understanding of phenomena by examining specific examples in detail (J. A. Smith, 2011; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This study does not describe the experiences of all Hindus in the United Kingdom; it explores how some individuals develop their own worldviews by drawing on the cultural resources available to them. This adds an important perspective to research on secularization and non-religion in particular, which has previously focused too much on the experiences of individuals with a Christian heritage (Asad, 2003; L. Lee, 2015). Future research should continue to explore the experiences of individuals from other understudied groups, including Hindus who have more 'traditional' beliefs and practices.

Studying a religious group as an obvious outsider can have various disadvantages, including potential distrust and unfamiliarity with key terms or

customs (Chryssides, 2019), but these did not appear especially limiting in this study. The participants were open and honest; as discussed previously, they appeared to have few reasons to be defensive or evasive. Careful follow-up questions helped ensure clarity around key concepts and the lack of assumed understanding may have encouraged such elaborations and explanations. All interviews are co-creations between the researcher and participant (Madill, 2012; Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006) and both the data and its analysis was influenced by the researcher in various ways but these are neither entirely avoidable nor intrinsically bad. For example, the participants may have been more open about their deviations from the cultural expectations of other Hindus precisely because the interviewer was not Hindu.

IPA is explicitly aware of the hermeneutics involved in qualitative research and the various limitations this creates on the analysis. It investigates phenomena that are difficult to describe linguistically and relies on data that is retrospective and self-reported (Coyle, 2008). Memories are not always reliable and narratives can be far more cohesive than the events they describe were (Loftus, 1979; Newman & Lindsay, 2009). Stories have purposes (Crossley, 2000) and IPA explores how participants make sense of their experiences as well as the experiences themselves (J. A. Smith, 2019). Vigilant and extensive reflexivity throughout the research process helped explore the potential impact of these issues and enhanced the rigor of the analysis (see pp. 169-170, 392-399). Additional studies, conducted by diverse research teams and using a wide range of methodologies, can triangulate findings and increase confidence in them (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). Individual qualitative studies, such as this one, make important contributions to developing our understanding of phenomena even though they cannot (and

should not) yield complete and definitive explanations of them (Coyle, 2008; E. B. Davis & Tisdale, 2016; Murphy, 2017).

Conclusions

This study provides important insights into the lives of a five British Hindus and shows the complexity of their lived experiences. These individuals were anthropocentric but continued to identify as Hindu, despite rejecting many traditional beliefs and practices associated with Hinduism. They had each developed their own, idiosyncratic worldviews that combined elements of both Hinduism and secular culture. Their experiences demonstrate the problems with a binary approach to religiosity and secularity, showing how it is possible to combine elements of different existential cultures (L. Lee, 2015) and live comfortably in a world that is ambiguous. Their lived experiences illustrate the limitations of both emic and etic labels, vividly demonstrating why caution must be taken when interpreting data that relies on broad categories of beliefs and identities. This data also suggests that this ambiguity may be associated with decreased prejudice and increased openness to different religious and spiritual expressions.

The experiences of Madesh, Nalika, Olena, Panev, and Rachana show how many individuals develop their own ways of making meaning in the world and add important nuance to conceptualizations of (non)religiosity and secularity that are often too binary. To paraphrase Nalika, these participants had beliefs, but these were different to the beliefs of those around them. Understanding these different

ways of believing, and not believing, is vital and future research must be sensitive to these complexities.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Fifty-seven percent of the British population now identify as ‘not religious’ but this is not a homogeneous group (Curtice et al., 2019). Many of these individuals identify as spiritual, with research suggesting they hold a diverse range of existential beliefs and participate in many practices they consider spiritual (Mercadante, 2014). This distinction between religion and spirituality is problematic at an etic level but a crucial part of many individuals’ emic identity (see pp. 46-77). These people form a growing section of the population and their experiences are equally important to those of people who identify with more formal and established religious traditions (L. Lee, 2015). The beliefs and practices of these individuals are diverse, with many of them intentionally eschewing organizations they perceive may limit them. Despite the methodological challenges this presents, understanding the experiences of individuals who reject organized religion is crucial to understanding contemporary spirituality. As Mercadante (2014) argues, qualitative methodologies are necessary to understand the diversity of this group and this study explores the beliefs and experiences of such individuals within South East England.

Studying a group that identifies as ‘spiritual but not religious’ (SBNR) can provide important insights into the lives of these people. It also has the potential to help understand how social influences and traditions shape individuals’ beliefs and experiences by approaching those topics from a very different perspective to that offered by more traditional religious groups. This group is low in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, as the individuals within it draw on and combine a wide range of explanations and practices to form their own spirituality (L. Lee, 2015; Mercadante, 2014).

Method

This study explores the experiences of five individuals who identified themselves as Spiritual but not Religious, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant individually, in a range of private locations agreed with the participants. One interview, with Thomas, was conducted on the telephone due to extenuating medical circumstances. The interviews for this study were conducted after those of the other three studies. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed inductively and iteratively, following the principles of IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; J. A. Smith, 2011). Further details of these processes can be found in the methods chapter (pp. 139-170).

The diversity of the SBNR and their lack of formal organization presented challenges to recruiting a suitably homogeneous sample for an IPA study. Many SBNR individuals actively reject memberships of formal groups and when formal groups form, they are often centered around particular practices. However, many who identify as SBNR attend a range of different events and often form meaningful relationships with others who share their beliefs and values (L. Lee, 2015; Mercadante, 2014). To gain access to one of these informal networks a suitable gatekeeper was required, and a chance encounter enabled such an individual, Samantha, to be recruited for the study. Samantha identified as SBNR, had many friends who also considered themselves SBNR, and was eager to participate. She selected and recruited the other participants to meet the following inclusion criteria.

The key inclusion criteria for this study were that participants lived in the selected geographical area (within South East England), were between the age of 18 and 65, and had identified as SBNR for at least two years. Participants were purposively recruited to ensure a diverse range of demographic features, particularly gender, educational level, and socioeconomic background. All five participants were white; this reflects both the fact that those who identify as SBNR and the area in which they lived were both disproportionately white. There were two female and three male participants. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to help protect their identity: Samantha, Thomas, Victor, William and Yvonne.

The participants were all happy to take part and showed no signs of discomfort, sharing highly personal details about their lives even in the early stages of the interviews. Ethical approval for the study was received from Canterbury Christ Church University and all the participants gave informed consent to participate (see pp. 149-153). After the interviews, the participants all expressed curiosity about the wider study and described finding the interview process as interesting and enjoyable.

Results

The analytical process identified many potential themes across the five participants' accounts and those that occurred in a majority of the cases were developed to construct the analysis presented here (see Table 5, pp. 270-271). The subordinate themes formed two superordinate themes, 'Experiencing Transcendence' and 'Constructing a Personal Spirituality'. Each theme was found in the accounts of all five participants.

Table 5*Seeing is Believing: Summary of Themes with Example Quotes*

Theme	Example quote
Superordinate Theme: Experiencing Transcendence	
Profound personal experiences are transformative	“I’ve also experienced my soul leaving my body.... I’ve experienced that. I know that it’s a thing.” (Yvonne)
Meaningful ‘coincidences’ suggest cosmic purpose	“I’ve also had..., quite incredible coincidences... I can’t really explain other than we are all connected and the thing that connects us is love or consciousness.” (Thomas)
Psychoactive drugs can help open the mind	“Doing them [drugs] with my brother, I definitely felt that there was more of a connection between nature, science, human. It kind of opened up my brain a little bit more than what I really perceived was originally there.” (Victor)
Actively developing spirituality through diverse practices	“I use [glossolalia] kind of like as a mantra, to kind of keep my monkey mind from wandering if I’m trying to focus on something or if I’m, you know, involved in some kind of meditation or some kind of healing practice...” (Thomas)

Theme	Example quote
Superordinate Theme: Constructing a Personal Spirituality	
Rejecting dogmatic religious authorities	“There’s a really good message in Christianity but it got taken over by a horrible power-hungry patriarchal bollocks... they used it as this massive control system.” (Yvonne)
Trusting themselves and their experiences	“Seeing is believing. Unless I can see it, I don’t really, don’t really believe it, but I do have faith: faith in myself and faith in humanity.” (Victor)
Finding value in humanity	“We appreciate the value of life and where and what goes on around us and... are very aware that it can change in a heartbeat for a multitude of reasons...” (Samantha)

Experiencing Transcendence

For all the participants, experiencing transcendence was a key part of their lived experiences and spirituality. These experiences included both profound, mystical experiences and more subtle (but no less significant) meaningful ‘coincidences’ which they believed showed that the universe was not just random. The participants described a diverse and eclectic range of spiritual beliefs and practices that were all grounded in their personal experiences. These experiences were often transformative, altering how they viewed themselves and the wider world. The participants all described using psychoactive drugs at some point in their lives and their experiences while under the influence of them appear to have helped open their minds to the possibility that the world is more than can normally be sensed. This sense that there was something more to life than the mundane and physical was an important aspect of why they considered themselves spiritual and they sought to experience these mysteries even while acknowledging that they may never fully understand them.

Profound Personal Experiences Are Transformative

Each participant emphasized the importance of potent, personal experiences that they considered spiritual. For most of the participants, these experiences were not common, but their effects were sufficiently profound that they had significant and lasting affects. As Samantha noted, “I believe that there is something because there have been... there are instance or occurrences in my life and other people’... lives, that I cannot and other people can’t explain... the scientific method does not work... for those situations.” Samantha first tried to find scientific explanations for her

experiences, but she found them inadequate. Her belief in something beyond ‘science’ emerged from a need to explain the otherwise inexplicable. These occurrences altered how the participants’ saw both the world and themselves, convincing them that materialistic or scientific explanations were sometimes inadequate. The participants reported diverse experiences, each different to each other. Despite these differences, a common theme was the experience of heightened awareness and a sense that, in the moment, they were seeing and understanding something that was always there but which was usually hidden from them.

These revelatory experiences were often empowering or liberating in some way, sometimes allaying their concerns or providing guidance for their future. Thomas described one such incident, when he was dealing with his own mortality following a diagnosis of terminal cancer. “There was like a heightened awareness... I was in the moment... it was like a heightened level of perception of reality... my eyes would settle on maybe a headstone which just say ‘peace’ ... It felt like the dead... were talking to me... saying, ‘There’s nothing to worry about, it’s all good... be at peace.’” This association between times of heightened spiritual awareness and stressful situations was common. Most of the more transformative experiences the participants described occurred in such circumstances. Thomas’ experience helped him to cope with a traumatic situation, altering how he viewed the situation and providing comfort in a time of crisis.

The participants reported that these experiences felt qualitatively different to normal life, and this was partially what imbued them with their sense of significance. The degree to which participants experienced an altered reality varied, but in some cases their experiences were dramatic. Yvonne provided the starkest example, describing how she had “also

experienced my soul leaving my body.... I've experienced the separateness... my consciousness coming out... I've experienced that. I know that it's a thing. I can't measure that... but I can say that it's true for me... Once you know that you can do that, you kind of know that you're infinite and you kinda know that everything is far more kinda cosmic than you... could possibly believe in the first place." Yvonne repeatedly used first person pronouns here to emphasize how her personal experiences were persuasive for her. She was certain there was something beyond the physical world because she has experienced it, and the experiences or explanations of others could not trump that for her. The vividness of her experiences, and their consequences, were convincing evidence for her that there is a spiritual world that she can connect with. Experiences like these transformed how the participants viewed themselves and the world. As Victor observed, for these participants "seeing is believing."

Meaningful 'Coincidences' Suggest Cosmic Purpose

As well as describing profound, personal experiences of something 'Other', the participants' accounts of their spirituality also emphasized the importance of meaningful 'coincidences' in their life stories. These events, which varied both in their significance and probability, affirmed the participants' beliefs that things were connected and not simply random. Thomas provided an extensive and reflective account of the importance of these events in his life, as shown in the following extract.

"I've also had kind of quite, quite incredible coincidences... This happened in my life... That could be totally, total coincidence, but... there's things... I can't really

explain other than we are all connected and the thing that connects us is love or consciousness... The way I see it is like, love is your access to that inner moment... it gives you access to everything in the moment... Once you're operating at that, in the moment in love at zero point, then magic happens a... whether that's God doing it or not, or I don't know, but that's, you know, it's an experience that I've had."

Thomas, like the other participants, acknowledged that the events in his life could have been merely due to chance but he found that possibility unlikely, unsatisfying, and inadequate. The events were too important for him to attribute to randomness and so he preferred an alternative explanation that tied into his wider spiritual beliefs and values. For Thomas, his experience of love and something that connects us all was very important, and he experienced these connections as something tangible and real. He was uncertain about how the connections and coincidences worked, but that lack of epistemological certainty did not diminish the importance of his experiences or his feeling they were connected. This sense of personal veracity was an important element of the participants' spirituality - they experienced meaning in the events, and that was enough for them.

For many of the participants, these experiences were relatively rare. However, for Yvonne they were a very common experience. She described how she, "get[s] it all the time... it's so ingrained in my life... I take that as a massive affirmation that I'm on the right path..." This sense of affirmation and encouragement from the experiences appeared to be what made them spiritual and significant for the participants. Not all experiences were construed in this way and there was a somewhat ineffable and intuitive element to the attributions. As Samantha explained, "Sometimes, I'm like, 'Oh, that was just a lovely coincidence.' Other times I'll be like, 'This is definitely simpatico'... or 'This was definitely

supposed to happen.” Ultimately, it was the participants’ own perception of events that determined whether they were considered spiritually significant, and these perceptions involved both intuitive feelings and conscious reflections. Other people sometimes influenced how they interpreted events, but the locus of authority in making such determinations was always located within the individual participant.

Psychoactive Drugs Can Help Open the Mind

Illegal and psychoactive drugs, of various kinds, played an important role in the spiritual development and lives of all five participants. The use of mind-altering substances, usually originally for recreational purposes, was described as having lasting effects on how the participants perceived themselves and the world. The participants’ experiences while under the influence of psychoactive drugs enhanced their sense of connectivity and altered how they understood reality.

Victor described how, “Doing them [drugs] with my brother, I definitely felt that there was more of a connection between nature, science, human. It kind of opened up my brain a little bit more than what I really perceived was originally there.” The language of ‘opening up’ was common in the participants’ accounts and the participants believed their experiences with psychoactive drugs had been transformative and revelatory. The vivid experiences the participants had while using drugs broke down barriers they had previously felt and gave them new insights. Yvonne, who now regularly has out-of-body experiences without the aid of drugs, spoke about how it was ketamine that first enabled her to have such an experience. She, “didn’t do it through meditation. I’d like to say that I did, but I didn’t... I was sort

of using quite a lot of drugs at the time...and found myself having quite a lot of out-of-body experiences and it was extraordinary.” Yvonne found her drug-assisted experiences powerful and liberating, but she also perceived drug-assisted spiritual experiences as inferior to those achieved through other means.

William also distinguished between experiences associated with psychoactive drugs and other spiritual experiences. For him, though not the other participants, drugs were not “a gateway to spirituality... that’s kind of separate to a much more kind of sober and defining experience.” The participants had nuanced, and sometimes inconsistent, understandings of what spirituality is and isn’t, drawing varying boundaries between what they considered spiritual and psychological. However, it was clear that even when the participants were reluctant to apply the label ‘spiritual’ to particular drug-induced experiences those experiences still had lasting effects on what they believed and how they felt. Yvonne summed this up with passionate intensity, “There’s just so much more than we know. And our minds...they’re the portals...and the use of psychedelics and... mind-altering substances, and meditation, and rationale, all of those things combined will help us somehow discover... this multidimensional fucking shit we live in.” Her language here reflects her ongoing desire to understand a world that contains things she struggles to explain. Mind-altering substances caused her to see the world differently. The participants rooted their spirituality and beliefs in their own experiences and perceptions of the world and the use of psychoactive drugs altered those perceptions, opening them up to possibilities they otherwise might not have considered.

Actively Developing Spirituality Through Diverse Practices

The participants valued their spirituality and actively developed it through a wide range of spiritual practices. They described eclectic and pragmatic approaches to enhancing their spirituality, making use of a selection of tools they found personally useful. These tools included both specific and formal techniques, such as Tarot or Reiki, and more expansive and informal elements such as music or nature. Both formal and informal activities enhanced the participants' sense of their spirituality, and this gave them considerable freedom to explore their spiritual identities. The participants had each developed their own collection of spiritual practices and resources, but there was considerable overlap between them and the participants made use of them in similar ways.

Yvonne spoke extensively about her different spiritual practices and the two examples that follow illustrate how her differing practices developed her spiritual identity and beliefs. She learned to read Tarot as a child, from her mother, and described the practice with considerable affection: "The Tarot are basically depictions of the entire human experience. ... Any time you lay those cards down they're vibrating with the energy where you are at the moment... It is completely magical, and it completely works, and it is to do with synchronicity and it's to do with spirit guides and it is to do with you know, I dunno..." Using Tarot fostered her sense of connection to the universe because she believed the Tarot enabled her spirit guides to help connect with her and guide her. Yvonne did not know exactly how Tarot 'works' but she was convinced it does because of her many positive experiences using them. She had integrated her use of Tarot into her broader belief system. In Tarot, Yvonne

had found a tool that enabled her to develop her spirituality and she actively used it to do so over many years.

Yvonne also described a potent and life-changing experience that she had when working with an experienced Shaman. Further details of this experience are not provided, to protect the participant, but it was life-changing in its effects. “I had this shamanic journey...she took me right back to [a] place of trauma... It was so powerful, and it released something in me that I’d been carrying around for a very, very long time... because I’d let go of that, I was allowed, myself, to be free.... I didn’t know then that I could love myself and forgive myself... I didn’t know that I felt guilty, even.” This spiritual experience was profound and liberating for Yvonne. It revealed a hidden need and resolved that need in a powerful and emotional way. This experience shows how the participants used specific spiritual practices to encourage powerful, personal experiences that shaped and affirmed their spirituality in a lasting way. The participants all described experimenting with a range of spiritual tools, but it was those that led to meaningful experiences that they valued most and used most often.

Not all the participants’ spiritual practices involved powerful experiences like those described above. Many of them cultivated a more muted sense of contentment, peace, or purpose. Samantha, who had previously identified as neopagan but no longer did, continued to mark the equinoxes and solstices in ways she found personally meaningful. She performed informal rituals that integrated each of the four elements and helped her to reflect on her life. Samantha described how, “It’s almost like you get sort of four to eight sort of new years... you can continually go... ‘The last two, three months haven’t been that great, but, we’re out of that bit, that cycle now... I weren’t that happy with this; I want to do

that.” The ritual calendar she followed helped her to structure her life and live more positively. By consciously reflecting on the past and future, each ritual enabled her to make a fresh start and move forward rather than lingering in negative feelings.

Music and nature were both important elements of the participants’ spirituality. They helped them experience a sense of connection and transcendence that could be expressed both in banal ways and, occasionally, in more profound experiences. William described how, when playing music, “there is that connectivity that you have... that’s pretty transcendent sometimes.” Music was probably the most important component of his spirituality and it helped connect him to other people and the world itself. It was less central in the experiences of the other participants but still an important element of their spirituality.

The participants described many experiences of connectivity and transcendence in nature. Sometimes these involved a simple sense of peace and belonging, but others were more extraordinary. These experiences sometimes appeared to be spontaneous, but the participants also intentionally cultivated them by spending time in natural environments and performing various spiritual practices in those contexts. Thomas described such an experience, that occurred while meditating on a beach in Asia. He, “felt like a whole of the forest behind me and the whole of nature around me was alive and was conscious... it feels like a lot of information, I can’t consciously re-convey to you... was downloaded at that point, where I was kind of connected into the earth and, and kind of a bridge between... I felt like the, the forest was a living, living, breathing entity behind me...that was a very real experience for me.” Experiences like these helped the participants develop a very tangible sense of connection with the

world. They viewed the world as something living and transcendent, and they viewed themselves as an intrinsic part of that world, connected and belonging to it.

The participants reported making use of an eclectic range of spiritual tools, drawn from many different traditions. Perhaps the most surprising of these was glossolalia (speaking in tongues), most commonly associated with Pentecostal Christianity. Thomas described how he had learned to speak in tongues in the church he attended as a child and how he continued to find it useful now. He said, “I use [it] kind of like as a mantra to kind of keep my monkey mind from wandering if I’m trying to focus on something or if I’m you know, involved in some kind of meditation or some kind of healing practice... I participated in that way in church... I myself am more skeptical because I think I made it up.” He continues to use glossolalia because he finds it personally useful. Reframing it as a learned skill, rather than a gift from God, allowed him to continue using the practice without theological difficulties. This demonstrates the two key reasons the participants made use of their chosen spiritual practices: they work for them and can be integrated into their broader conceptions of how the world works.

Each participant continued to use a wide range of spiritual tools and they had all also experimented with a much broader range than those they continued to use. They judged practices primarily on their effects, valuing those that they found useful in some way. If an experience or practice was perceived as beneficial, providing a sense of liberation, empowerment, contentment or purpose, then the participants were likely to continue to use it and to view it as spiritually significant. If it was not, then they might either disregard the practice entirely or, more often, concluded that it ‘wasn’t for them’ but remained open to the possibility that others might find it helpful and useful. The participants were primarily

focused on their own spiritual journeys. They encouraged those they cared about to try the practices they found beneficial but believed everyone was responsible for developing their own spirituality and had the freedom to do so in whatever ways they found most helpful.

Constructing a Personal Spirituality

The participants all described themselves as spiritual but actively identified as ‘not religious’, often in very strong terms. They trusted themselves, including their own experiences and reasoning, and rejected external authorities that clashed with their values or lived experiences. The participants each constructed a personal spirituality that was unique to and meaningful for them. They were the supreme arbiters of what the world they experienced was like and they highly valued their autonomy to do so. The participants looked to others for guidance and ideas, but they rejected interpretations of the world that did not match their own experiences and ideals. Their lives, spiritual and otherwise, were grounded in the people around them who they cared about. The desire to be happy (and for others to be happy) was important to all the participants; they found value and purpose in their shared humanity.

Rejecting Dogmatic Religious Authorities

The sampling criteria required all the participants to identify as ‘not religious’ but the depth of the animosity that many of them felt towards organized religion, and Christianity in particular, was greater than expected. Many non-religious individuals

do not have strong anti-religious sentiments (L. Lee, 2015) but these individuals all did. Yvonne expressed this the most provocatively: “I fucking hate Christianity. I hate it... there’s a really good message in Christianity but it got taken over by a horrible power-hungry patriarchal bollocks... they used it as this massive control system, control the world and they did it very, very well, and they were very clever at it and lots and lots of people died because of it. I’m not a fan, basically.” The repeated use of negatives here shows how strongly Yvonne felt about this topic, and her words reveal how she views institutional Christianity primarily as an effective but dangerous system for controlling others. She acknowledged that many of the teachings and principles of Christianity were beneficial but perceived the institutions as corrupt and harmful. Her words show how she values freedom and the importance she places on not causing suffering. This perception of organized religion as being a way of controlling people was expressed by most of the participants, and they all found this problematic.

There were two other recurrent elements in the participants’ rejection of organized religion. They questioned the veracity of the dogmatic claims made by religious authorities and found the conduct of those authorities, and individual practitioners, to be hypocritical. The questioning, and rejection, of specific dogmatic claims was most pronounced in the interviews with Thomas and Samantha, both of whom had been brought up within Christian households, but was also described by the other participants. Thomas described this process at length: “In my teenage years, I kind of started to question the historical man... the belief system really and... test it myself and, and found it, found it wanting.... since then have been kind of searching for my own interpretation and my own understanding of the spiritual and religious... without actually getting too caught up in any

dogmatic nonsense.” Truth and authenticity were important concerns for these people and in their quest for answers and understanding they looked at those offered by organized religious groups but found them lacking in various ways. The rejection of the dogmatic claims of religious authorities and their search for their own answers were interwoven.

The hypocrisy the participants perceived in the behavior of religious organizations and individuals was also an important factor in their rejection of their moral authority. As can be seen in the extract from Yvonne earlier, even the most hostile of the group saw some value in religious teachings, but personal experiences of the associated organizations failing to meet those standards greatly diminished them in the participants’ eyes. Victor objected strongly to a perceived lack of charity by the church. He focused on those most in need, “The Church of England, the money they have, and the homelessness, there shouldn’t be [any]... If it’s love thy neighbor, and all that, then they should at least welcome them in...” The participants felt that if people really believed in the religions they espoused, then they should live by them fully, including sacrificing their own comfort and convenience. When individuals or organizations did not meet their own standards and ideals, the participants’ perceived this as evidence their beliefs were not authentic.

The participants’ rejection of religious authorities was not limited to just Christianity, or even to traditional organized religions. Contemporary Paganism was also explicitly rejected by several of the participants. William expressed the underlying sentiment as, “I’m not a great fan of an organized framework.” The participants valued the freedom to choose their own beliefs and practices and strongly

disliked being told how they should do that. They also rejected non-religious existential frameworks. This was partially because the participants valued their spiritual identities and rejected materialistic beliefs, but it was also because they disliked how they perceived the attitudes and behaviors of certain anti-religious groups. Samantha was adamant that “I’m definitely, definitely not an atheist and certainly not a new atheist.” The dogmatic approach of atheists like Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris (see Kettell, 2013) was as unwelcome to the participants as other dogmatic claims.

Trusting Themselves and their Experiences

The participants’ distrust and dislike of authority was linked to a strong sense of trust in themselves and their own experiences. As the first theme explored, personal experiences formed a central element of the participants’ spirituality. Victor expressed this clearly and said: “Seeing is believing. Unless I can see it, I don’t really, don’t really believe it, but I do have faith: faith in myself and faith in humanity.” There is emphasis here both on believing his own experiences and disbelieving things that aren’t supported by his own experiences. He rejected organized religion and embraced a more personal spirituality because of this emphasis on authenticity and the authority of his own experiences. Victor’s reclamation of the word ‘faith’ here is also interesting, suggesting that he views it as a positive thing and places his beliefs on a similar level to those of religious faiths. Victor did not exclusively center this authority in himself, but also generalized it to all of humanity - but with the caveat, made clear elsewhere in his interview, that not everything people do is good. He believed that not only should he trust his own experiences as authentic, but that other people should also trust their own experiences too.

Yvonne also made a similar point, when discussing her experiences of a spiritual world beyond the mundane. “It’s one of those things you gotta experience to know it. It’s anecdotal, it’s not scientific...I’m like, ‘I’ve experienced it!’... I’m a great believer in that.” She viewed her personal experiences as sufficient proof for her to believe in various esoteric things but also acknowledged that her experiences alone are not enough to ‘prove’ her understanding and interpretation of the universe to others. This acknowledgment shows how the participants’ viewed the universe as inherently subjective and helps to explain why they were skeptical about the claims made by religious authorities.

The participants all spent considerable time and energy seeking to understand themselves and the world, but they were skeptical about the possibility of finding any form of ultimate truth. Yvonne described, with some frustration, how: “The more you try and find the truth, the more you realize there is no truth and that, you know, even if you do find the truth, it fucking hurts... It’s not very nice and then you have to face the truth, so most people don’t do it anyway.” The anguish expressed here was palpable and reflects the many challenges she had faced in her life. Her nuanced understanding of truth can also be seen in the extract. Even though she believed there may be no ultimate ‘Truth’ she still recognized there are many uncomfortable truths that can undermine specific worldviews. The participants were open to finding answers to their existential concerns but needed answers congruent with their own experiences. They felt compelled to pursue their own spiritual exploration to find meaning because they found those offered by organized religions inadequate or unacceptable.

Their pragmatic and individualistic approach to spirituality allowed the participants to be relatively open and warm towards religious individuals while maintaining their antipathy towards the institutions they found problematic. As Samantha observed, “If something works, or in your eyes works... so long as it is not... impeding anybody else or hurting anybody else, or yourself. I don’t really think it matters which pathway you choose to get to that...” The perceived right to experiment and find an individually fulfilling spiritual life included the possibility of finding that in organized religion. As William said, “Call it whatever you like, call it God, call it Mohammed... if that’s what leads you to a more fulfilling and richer experience, then that’s great... as long as that doesn’t detract from anybody else’s right to experience that in their own personal fashion too, and that’s fine.” For the participants, personal enrichment and authenticity were primary concerns and as long as people did not harm others, they could find that in whatever way they wished. This openness to the possibility of organized religions providing answers and spiritual fulfillment helps explain why the participants had studied and experimented with different traditions themselves. The traditions failed to meet their hopes and expectations, containing elements they could not accept without compromising their values and identities. The participants’ greatest objection to organized religion was the exclusive claims they perceived them as making. They perceived these to infringe on their spiritual autonomy and would not accept claims that undermined their own experiences, values, and interpretations.

Finding Value in Humanity

Despite their emphasis on independence and autonomy, the participants in this study were neither unsociable nor uninfluenced by those around them. Each participant described

a number of close and valued relationships, and these relationships were an important source of meaningfulness in their lives. They trusted these friends and family members, respecting and accepting their experiences and beliefs even when they differed to their own. Samantha described the informal group that participated in the study as a “Massive support network... we’re all kind of best mates and everyone’s got their own relationships and stuff.” These friendships had been developed over many years and William described how they had developed a “bond of brotherhood, mostly forged by strife.” They had learned who they could trust when life was difficult and reciprocated that support to other members of the group.

The participants’ families and childhoods had also had lasting influences on most of the participants’ beliefs and these were both positive and negative. Thomas’ dislike of organized religion and dogma was a rejection of the strict Pentecostalism of his family, and Samantha’s ambivalence stemmed from her experiences of Catholicism as a child. Some participants also described how religious family members, whom they loved, gave them insights into how organized religion could be positive for some people. Victor spoke affectionately about his Nan, who “was very religious.... she always was about faith... she was kind of like an angel in her own right really.” These mixed experiences help explain why they rejected the dogmatic claims of organized religion but accepted that their practice may be spiritually useful for some individuals. The participants valued people highly and helping others was of paramount concern to them, so anything that they saw as genuinely helping others could not be fully rejected.

The participants' strong sense of compassion and belief that people should do whatever made them happy, so long as it did not hurt others, appeared to be rooted in their own experiences of suffering. As Samantha explained, "I like being able to help people.... we appreciate the value of life and where and what goes on around us and... are very aware that it can change in a heartbeat for a multitude of reasons..." The participants had experienced a range of traumas and found meaning and purpose in helping others to survive and deal with the adversity they were facing. She acknowledged how helping others makes her feel and then switched to using plural language, showing how her values and experiences gave her a strong sense of collective identity with others who share her outlook on life.

The participants' feelings of compassion could, at times, boil into a sense of righteous indignation about things they perceived to cause suffering. Yvonne expressed this sentiment strongly: "I've got a deep sense of fucking injustice in this world and it fucks me off.... Finding how you kind of really, how you can help... I think a lot of our journey is about finding what that is, you know..." The participants' believed their own experiences of hardship compelled them to try to make the world better for others and doing so helped them cope with their own pain. Implicit in this was the belief that all people mattered and deserved not to suffer. Victor summarized the importance of helping others as he reflected on what was most important in life. "Life is what it is. It's about the memories you make with people.... When I don't feel like I'm doing much to help people, then I feel very lost in myself." For these participants, the world was a wonderful but often harsh place and it was other people that gave the suffering inherent in life meaning.

Discussion

This study used IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) to explore the experiences and beliefs of five individuals in South East England who identified as ‘Spiritual’ but ‘Not Religious’ (SBNR). The participants in the study were all thoughtful individuals who were seeking to make sense of the world around them. They all described various forms of experiences which they deemed spiritual, and these experiences of transcendence were important to them. The participants made use of a wide range of spiritual tools to help develop their spirituality and all had used psychoactive drugs at some point. They also described experiencing meaningful ‘coincidences’ in their lives, which contributed to the sense of cosmic purpose they felt. The participants strongly rejected organized religious authorities and institutions, instead trusting their own experiences and constructing personal spiritualities in collaboration with those around them who shared their values. They found meaning and value through the people around them, seeking to reduce injustice and make the world a better place. By identifying themselves as SBNR, they embraced the mystery of something beyond themselves while rejecting the traditional religious institutions they saw as restrictive and oppressive. Both their rejection of what they perceived as negative religiosity and their embrace of a more positive and open spirituality were important aspects of their self-identity.

Spiritual but not Religious

Definitions that distinguish between spirituality and religion are problematic (Ammerman, 2013, p. 201; Zinnbauer et al., 1997; see pp. 46-77) but for these

participants, like many others, the distinction was an important element of both their personal identities and their beliefs. This does not weaken the arguments for rejecting the distinction at the etic level, but the participants' experiences show how the terms can do important work for individuals and groups. For these participants, being spiritual was a core part of how they viewed themselves, but it was equally important for them to distinguish themselves from organized religions that they perceived negatively. Being 'spiritual' and being 'not religious' were both important aspects of their social identities, and this shaped their beliefs and behaviors in various ways (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This desire to both identify themselves and distinguish themselves from others shows the inherently political nature of religious identifications (Ammerman, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2000; Stausberg, 2017). Understanding why individuals choose and reject identities is a crucial part of understanding their wider worldviews as they draw on a common pool of underlying beliefs about the world (E. R. Smith, 2002).

The participants' lived experiences convinced them that there is 'something more' than the physical world and gave them a deep sense of connection to the rest of humanity and to the world itself. For them, this 'something more' was spiritual and their connection to it was their spirituality. This 'something more' may, or may not, include specific non-human agents (cf. Boyer, 2002) and the participants were generally comfortable acknowledging that what they experienced may not be true for others. Their rejection of absolute truth claims is typical of a subjectivist existential culture (L. Lee, 2015) and other studies suggest this is common among those who identify as spiritual but not religious (Besecke, 2014; Mercadante, 2014). Viewing themselves as spiritually connected was important to these participants; it was also important for them to differentiate themselves

from the organized religious traditions they believed were oppressive. Describing themselves as SBNR allowed them to assert their right to define their own spirituality and avoid being pigeonholed (Ceriello, 2018).

The participants valued their independence highly, not only in their spirituality but also in their lives more generally. Their questioning of various authorities often began at a young age. Bostic (2018) suggests the rejection of religious authorities by SBNR individuals is linked to a rejection of oppression and injustices and this appeared to be the case with these participants. Freedom, autonomy, and authenticity were perhaps the most sacred values for these participants. They followed their own convictions and believed others had the right to do the same, even when they conflicted with their own beliefs, as long as doing so did not harm others or curtail their freedom. Those who identify as SBNR often value authenticity (Fuller, 2001; Mercadante, 2014; Wuthnow, 1998) and this helps explain their rejection of authorities perceived as incongruent with their experiences and values.

Connection, Compassion, and Transcendence

A sense of compassionate connectivity was at the core of the participants' spirituality. The participants could not explain exactly how the universe worked, but they were convinced that it was not merely random: things happened for a reason, even if that reason was unknowable. They believed we are all connected to each other in some way, as well as to the world and our shared pasts. They found this sense of connectivity enriching and positive. The participants perceived the universe as

benevolent, despite the suffering they had endured and an awareness people often do cruel and hurtful things.

The participants described feeling a bond with the ephemeral and ineffable spiritual realm they experienced. This relationship could be with anthropomorphic entities, but it was more commonly described in a more general way, such as with nature. Despite the ambiguity and uncertainty, the participants felt about the nature of any higher power(s) or spiritual beings, the participants experienced their benevolent influence in their lives. They attributed positive events, both profound experiences and subtle ‘coincidences’, to something greater than themselves and believed these events showed that ‘something’ was watching over them and cared about them (cf. Mercadante, 2014; Spilka et al., 1985). They were emphatic that this was not the God of Christianity, or other religious traditions, but its presence gave them a sense of security and peace. By providing a sense of meaning, purpose, security, and enduring relationships the participants’ spirituality helped them cope with the challenges they faced in their lives (cf. Pargament, 1996; Pargament et al., 2013).

The participants had all experienced considerable suffering in their lives, and they described how this gave them a strong drive to diminish the suffering of others. They were focused on living the best lives they could and helping others to do the same. The participants seem to have used their own suffering as a catalyst for posttraumatic growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi et al., 2017). Their experiences of crises caused them to re-evaluate what they considered most important in life and make new choices about what to value in their lives (Exline & Rose, 2013). They viewed these changes as a central aspect of their spiritual journeys (cf. Collicutt McGrath, 2011). The participants were very compassionate and valued other people highly. Helping others was an integral part of their

spiritual identities; it was both a result and an expression of their spirituality. Injustice and oppression angered the participants and they tried to help create a world where people were free to be themselves.

The participants rejected institutions which they perceived as hindering these aims and sought to find, or make, their own place in a better world (cf. Bostic, 2018; Pevateaux, 2018). Rejecting religious institutions was sometimes painful for the participants, as these rejections could damage relationships with people whom they cared about. They tried to maintain these relationships by focusing their dislike on the institutions and specific doctrines, rather than on everyone associated with them.

The spirituality of these participants included elements of both vertical and horizontal transcendence (Coleman et al., 2013; Schnell, 2003, 2012). The participants' personal experiences of something greater than themselves were important in shaping how they understood their place in the world. Many of them believed there was some form of life after death, but they said it was their relationships with those around them that made their lives meaningful. For these participants, the distinction between vertical and horizontal transcendence was often not clear, as their spirituality blended the physical and the spiritual. What was clear was that they all experienced a sense of being connected to something loving and beyond themselves and that this helped to orientate their lives and give them meaning.

Experiences and Social Influences

Experiences that the participants deemed spiritual or sacred (Taves, 2009) were important, as already noted, in how they made sense of their lives and the world.

These experiences were diverse, not only between different participants but also within the lives of individual participants. They included spontaneous experiences, cultivated spiritual practices and events in their daily lives that were given special significance. The participants valued and trusted their own experiences; they provided the foundation on which their understanding of themselves and the wider universe were built. The participants' spiritual experiences were sometimes transformative and healing, having effects on their lives that went far beyond the intellectual. These other effects were more important to the participants than the insights they provided: it was how their spiritual experiences made them feel that encouraged them to continue their practices and which helped them to cope with life's stresses (cf. Mercadante, 2014; Pargament et al., 2013).

Previous research has suggested that schizotypal personality traits, in particular magical ideation, and thin boundaries of the self are associated with New Age practices and beliefs (Farias et al., 2005). Wlodarski and Pearce (2016) suggest this association between schizotypy and spiritual experiences may be more general and not limited to those who identify with particular types of spiritual beliefs. In their interviews, many of the participants showed some evidence of these traits, although they were not formally assessed. It seems plausible that these participants' personalities and backgrounds predisposed them to the sort of unusual experiences that they deemed spirituality significant and that these predispositions were further cultivated by their continued spiritual experiences and practices (cf. Farias et al., 2005; Luhrmann, 2012).

Many of the more extreme experiences the participants described were associated with times of significant stress in their lives. Links between stressful stimuli and anomalous experiences have been found in studies of paranormal experiences (French & Stone, 2013)

and mystical experiences within religious traditions (R. W. Hood, 2005; McNamara, 2014; Paloutzian et al., 2013). Sudden and transformative religious/spiritual experiences have also been associated with insecure childhood attachments (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004) and many of the participants described traumatic and challenging situations in their early lives. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine the ontological nature of the participants' experiences, or to cast judgment on their ultimate veracity, but for the participants they were real and meaningful. They helped them to construct more positive and meaningful understandings of themselves and their place in the world, often giving hope, comfort or purpose in times of need.

The participants did not develop their spirituality in isolation. They emphasized the importance of autonomy and authenticity, but they also appreciated the importance of connections to other people (cf. Pevateaux, 2018). The participants learned many of their spiritual practices from others, and some of their spiritual practices had explicitly communal elements. All the participants spoke about how important their friends were to them, and many of their friends shared some of their practices and beliefs. Social influences on the participants also included less direct elements such as books, the internet and popular culture. The participants were part of a community of practice that was informal, dynamic, and rhizomatic but that supported their spiritual development (Wanless, 2017).

The informal nature of the participants' spiritual networks does not mean that those within them did not share certain core values or common approaches to their spirituality. Openness to different spiritual practices and interpretations is a defining

feature of the SBNR movement (Fuller & Parsons, 2018; Mercadante, 2014) and at the various workshops and informal gatherings they attended these attitudes were encouraged. Repeated exposure to ideas makes us more likely to believe them, particularly when they are held by those with perceived authority or whom we trust (Sunstein & Kuran, 1999). Seeing others act in ways that enhance the credibility of religious beliefs also makes individuals more likely to accept them (Lanman & Buhrmester, 2017). Social acceptance of unusual phenomena can help individuals integrate those experiences healthily and can encourage them to be viewed positively (Heriot-Maitland et al., 2012). The participants pursued their own spiritual development, experimenting and learning to interpret their experiences and feelings with the guidance of others whom they respected (cf. Luhrmann, 1991, 2012). The participants chose the practices and beliefs that resonated most with them and their own experiences were central to their spirituality, but their exploration and experimentation was supported by others.

Psychoactive Drugs and Spiritual Experiences

All five participants reported using various psychoactive drugs and these seem to have played an important role in their spiritual development. As described above, these experiences had lasting and transformative effects on how the participants understood themselves and the world. The use of psychoactive drugs, or entheogens, for religious or spiritual ends has a long history; it is only relatively recently that attitudes in many parts of the world have hardened against them (Partridge, 2018; Richards & Barnard, 2016). Individuals who identify as SBNR report using alcohol and psychoactive drugs at a higher

rate than the general population and these experiences are likely linked to their increased openness to mysticism and other forms of altered consciousness (Fuller, 2018).

There have been more than a thousand studies on the psychology of entheogens (Wulff, 2000) and the evidence is clear both that they can induce states of altered consciousness (see Beauregard, 2012; McNamara, 2014) and that they can have a lasting impact on those who use them (e.g., R. R. Griffiths et al., 2011; R. W. Hood, 1995; R. W. Hood et al., 2009). The most famous examples of this is the experiment by Pahnke and Richards (1966), often known as the ‘Good Friday Experiment’, which showed the use of entheogens, such as psilocybin, can elicit mystical or spiritual experiences with lasting effects on the participants. This experiment included participants who had not previously used psychoactive drugs, and they rated their experiences within the study as among the most spiritually significant of their lives. The participants in the experimental conditions reported significantly higher levels of mysticism not only immediately after the experiments but also in follow-up studies conducted up to 25 years later (Doblin, 1991; R. W. Hood et al., 2009). More robust and recent experiments (e.g., Griffiths et al., 2006; Griffiths et al., 2011) have replicated and extended these findings. They show one potential long-term effect of using entheogens is the opening of the mind that the participants in these studies described and suggest the participants’ experiences may not be uncommon.

The participants themselves had conflicting views about whether experiences facilitated by psychoactive drugs should be considered spiritual, but the degradation of such experiences has a dubious theoretical basis. Many, if not all, religious or

spiritual practices alter the activity of our brains and the distinction between natural and artificially induced states is arbitrary (Fuller, 2018; R. W. Hood et al., 2009; McNamara, 2014). The identification of specific phenomena as spiritual/religious or not is largely a political action involving the assertion of power, and such distinctions have little etic value (Fitzgerald, 2000; Murphy, 2017). As R. W. Hood et al. (2009) argue, it is also a mistake to not acknowledge that experiences induced by entheogens may have ontological validity – they might lead to a heightened awareness of, or sensitivity to, spiritual phenomena. Many ritual practices also alter how the brain perceives the world, but they are widely accepted as legitimate religious practices and entheogens should not be categorized differently to other spiritual tools (Hume, 2007; Partridge, 2018). This does not mean that the ‘truth’ of any religious or spiritual experiences should be accepted uncritically, but that arbitrary double-standards are unjustifiable.

R. W. Hood et al. (2009) suggest that, outside the context of a specific religious tradition it is unlikely spiritual experiences associated with entheogens will have life-transforming power. The experiences of these participants suggest otherwise. The lack of a suitable, pre-existing framework to make sense of their experiences led the participants to explore and develop their own. However, it is also possible that the subjectivist existential culture (L. Lee, 2015) is now sufficiently developed and established in our society and popular culture that it does in fact provide a framework for such spiritual seeking. As 34.2% of people in England and Wales (aged 16 to 59) report having at least tried an illegal narcotic (Home Office, 2019), and many more have been prescribed one or more psychoactive drug by medical professionals, the impact of the use of mind-altering

substances on individuals' increasing identification as spiritual but not religious warrants further investigation.

Developing Pragmatic and Eclectic Spiritualities

The participants' spirituality was eclectic and pragmatic, drawing on a wide range of cultural resources to develop idiosyncratic systems of belief and practice that worked for them. These global meaning systems were functional and helped them make sense of the world (Park, 2013; Silberman, 2005). Many of the participants' beliefs were implicit, and they were sometimes incongruent with each other. As Chaves (2010) argues, it is fallacious to expect individuals to have entirely consistent beliefs and people usually hold some contradictory or inconsistent beliefs in tension with each other. Global meaning systems, or worldviews, only need to be sufficiently functional to allow the individual to survive in the world and to give them a sense of significance and purpose (Park et al., 2013). These participants' spirituality gave them that sense of significance and purpose, helping them to find meaning in their lives and motivating them to live in certain ways.

The participants displayed the key traits of what Besecke (2014) identifies as 'reflexive spirituality'. They rejected religious literalism and scientism, disliked rigid rules, and embraced an open-ended search for meaning. However, the participants in this study retained far fewer elements of Christianity than those in Besecke's study and this was probably due to the very different cultural contexts in which they lived. Individuals in the modern world have a vast range of existential resources at their disposal to help them make sense of their lives and they can combine them in very

different ways (L. Lee, 2015). As discussed above, the participants valued their own experiences highly, but social and cultural influences shaped those experiences and their interpretations of them.

The participants did not seek to force their beliefs onto others, or claim they had ultimate answers to life's mysteries. They encouraged others to live the best lives they could, using whatever tools and resources would enable them to do so. The participants were explicitly pragmatic in their approach, embracing things they found functional and which enhanced their sense of authenticity. This eclectic pragmatism is common among individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious (Fuller, 2001; Mercadante, 2014). They recognized that others may have different experiences to them and believed that others should develop their own spirituality, just as they should develop their own. Each participant used their ongoing experiences to develop their own idiosyncratic worldview. They understood this as an ongoing process, with their beliefs evolving as they experienced new things. The processes of meaning-making formed a core element of the participants' spirituality; it was the search for meaning, rather than any specific answers, that they valued most. For these participants, seeing really was believing, but how they understood what they saw was influenced by their other experiences and the cultural explanations they were exposed to.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

As with any study, the sampling process limits the claims that can be appropriately made from the data. This is particularly true with idiographic studies that examine the experiences of small numbers of participants in detail. However, idiographic approaches

can and should yield more general understandings of phenomena (J. A. Smith et al., 1995). The purpose of IPA is not merely to describe but to analyze and help explain (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This study provides rich insights into the lives of this group of participants and helps illuminate how they make sense of the world.

Further studies are necessary to investigate the extent to which these participants' experiences are shared by other SBNR individuals both in the UK and abroad. These further studies should use a broad range of methodologies (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). However, the parallels with findings from research in the United States (e.g., Fuller, 2001; Mercadante, 2014) suggest that at least some of the findings have commonalities that transcend borders. The importance of cultural and social factors in shaping the participants' worldviews suggests that, even if the underlying processes are similar, how non-religious individuals in other cultures develop or describe their spirituality may be different. Further research in countries beyond Europe and North America is especially needed, as individuals in Muslim-majority countries and the global south are likely to have very different experiences.

In particular, the role played by psychoactive drugs in the development of the participants' spirituality is unlikely to be common to all individuals who identify as SBNR. SBNR individuals may be more likely than members of some more traditional religious groups to have experimented with psychoactive drugs, but many SBNR individuals have no experience of doing so. However, this does not diminish the need for further research to examine the relationship between psychoactive drug use and contemporary spirituality. Research into spirituality should, where possible, try to

ascertain whether mind-altering substances or practices have been used by participants at some point in their lives.

The importance of the participants' social networks and wider cultural influences in shaping their experiences may reflect, at least in part, the recruitment process used as completely isolated individuals could not be recruited by a gatekeeper. Other research (e.g., L. Lee, 2015; Mercadante, 2014) has also suggested social and cultural factors play a crucial role in the development of worldviews and so it is unlikely that these findings are purely a consequence of the recruitment strategy used. It should also be noted that participation in a social network does not mean that it will always be considered important or evaluated in positive terms.

Data collected through interviews and other self-reported measures is unavoidably influenced by the participants' subsequent experiences and changing beliefs, and so caution is always necessary in its analysis. Memory is mutable and often unreliable (Loftus, 1979; Newman & Lindsay, 2009). This can be particularly true when dealing with religiosity and spirituality, where religious change can often lead to biographical reconstruction (Beckford, 1978). These changes, however, are an intrinsic part of the meaning-making process. They limit the extent to which we can know about the original experiences but show how those experiences are meaningful in the participants' subsequent lives.

Conclusions

Those who identify as SBNR are a growing and significant section of the population who grapple with the challenges of finding meaning and significance in the modern world. The participants in this study rejected many of the traditional dogmas and institutions that

have provided existential meaning to previous generations and sought to find, and live, their own truth in a complex world. For these intuitive individuals, their own experiences of the world provided the basis on which they develop their understanding of it. They trusted themselves and doubted authorities whom they found oppressive and restricting. By embracing varied spiritual tools and experiences, these participants experienced the world as wondrous and affirming, even though they were not strangers to its many hardships. The participants' quests for significance and purpose were deeply personal but not lonely. Others who shared their values provided crucial encouragement, support and guidance in their lives. They were searching for happiness and peace in a broken world and wanted to help others do the same.

The globalized world in which these participants live provided them with many cultural resources to help understand it and they did so in an eclectic and pragmatic way. Their own experiences, both mystical and mundane, played a central role in this process. Understanding how they created meaning from their experiences and the cultural resources around them provides insights into how others, including those who identify as religious and non-religious, do the same.

SYNTHESIS: CREATING WORLDVIEWS THROUGH EXPERIENCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

The four preceding chapters each examined the ways that a specific group experienced and made sense of the world. This chapter synthesizes the findings of those studies, to explore the relationship between experiences deemed spiritual or religious and beliefs more deeply. It draws on the principles of qualitative research synthesis (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006; see pp. 119-138, 166-168) to integrate the findings of the different studies and develop a fuller and richer understanding of how individuals experience relationships with their God(s) and/or other sacred beings and objects. It examines how individuals develop these relationships and investigates the connections between their beliefs and the experiences they deem religious or spiritual. This examination of the similarities and differences between the experiences of multiple groups enables the development of a stronger, more persuasive, and more widely applicable understanding of the phenomena (Larkin et al., 2019; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). As noted previously (see pp. 113-116, 130-135), the understandings and explanations developed in this synthesis are interpretative. The relationships suggested between different elements of the participants' experiences have been developed from a close exploration of rich data that enables insights and observations about the structure of the experiences and processes to be developed (J. A. Maxwell, 2004, 2013; Patton, 2015).

The 2x2 SMIPA design for this study included four groups, each purposively selected to provide a wide variety of perspectives on the phenomena being investigated. The dimensions of variation used in the study (see pp. 124-138) were Orthodoxy (the

degree to which members were required to believe specific things) and Orthopraxy (the degree to which members were required to act in certain ways or perform specific rituals.) This decision led to the selection of four groups that were each studied separately using IPA. These four studies each explored the experiences of a specific group that was located in the South East of England. The four groups identified as Christians (Baptists), Muslims, Hindus, and Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR). Gatekeepers were used in each study to recruit five participants from the same community that reflected the diversity of experiences within the group. Semi-structured interviews with each participant were analyzed using IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009) to develop an understanding of how the members of each group experienced and made sense of the world. A summary of the findings of these studies can be found in Table 6 (pp. 307-308).

Table 6*Summary of Themes From Each Study*

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme
Study: There's a God Who I Know (Christians)	
Knowing God	Experiencing a loving and nurturing relationship
	Studying scripture to understand God
	Talking to God as a daily companion
	Connecting to God through worship
	Feeling God's touch and guidance
	Seeing God's hand in events
Living in the World	Being supported by other Christians
	Interactions with other perspectives influence beliefs and behaviors
	Responding to challenging situations
	Finding meaning and purpose
	Faith affects everything
Study: Allah has Told us Everything (Muslims)	
Submitting to God	Following the Qur'an
	Prayer is a key pillar of faith
	Times of religious focus strengthen faith
	Feeling connected to Allah

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme
Being a British Muslim	Belonging to the Ummah Family provides a secure foundation Embracing multicultural Britain
Study: I Believe in Something (Hindus)	
Experiencing	Believing in 'something'
Transcendence	Experiencing spirituality and peace Rejecting some doctrines and customs Embracing inclusivity and uncertainty
Constructing a Personal	Finding meaning by helping others
Spirituality	Being Hindu
Study: Seeing is Believing (SBNR)	
Experiencing	Profound personal experiences are transformative
Transcendence	Meaningful 'coincidences' suggest cosmic purpose Psychoactive drugs can help open the mind Actively developing spirituality through diverse practices
Constructing a Personal	Rejecting dogmatic religious authorities
Spirituality	Trusting themselves and their experiences Finding value in humanity

Method

The synthesis of the findings from the four studies followed the procedures described on pp. 132-135 and 166-168. Its aim was to develop an interpretive integration of the findings, developing a richer understanding of the phenomena that accounts for the complexities and contradictions in the data (Paterson et al., 2001; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). A matrix was developed that organized and grouped the key findings from each of the studies using taxonomic analysis (Larkin et al., 2019; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). Reciprocal translation (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006) then developed the nascent metathemes using both *in vivo* and imported concepts. This analysis was iterative and inductive, continuing throughout the writing up process as narrative accounts of each metatheme were created. The initial matrix was also developed into the tables that accompany each metatheme. These tables also include extracts from each study's data to support the interpretative synthesis.

The initial taxonomic analysis identified ten clusters of themes that were organized into four superordinate metathemes. There was significant overlap between these initial theme clusters, and the subsequent development of the analysis reduced them to six distinct metathemes. The initial clustering of themes was primarily descriptive and focused on the content of the themes. The final six metathemes were much more interpretive and explored how the various beliefs and behaviors described in each of the studies contributed to the meaning-making processes of the participants (cf. Larkin et al., 2019). Each metatheme drew on 5-10 contributing themes, including at least one from each of the four studies. The four studies had 31 themes and 32% of them contributed to more than one metatheme. This

overlap reflects how many important aspects of the participants' experiences cut across different themes and metathemes.

Results

The inter-connectedness of different aspects of the participants' experiences was a key finding in each of the four studies. There was a significant degree of overlap between many of the themes in those studies, and the account developed by the synthesis also found many of the metathemes had strong connections with other metathemes. These connections were often bidirectional, with different elements of the participants' experiences reinforcing each other. This web of connectivity is itself a significant finding and suggests an encompassing and holistic perspective is often necessary to fully understand religious or spiritual phenomena. Both personal and social experiences were important in shaping how the individuals learned to understand the world and relate to that which they considered sacred.

The first three metathemes primarily explore how the participants experienced and developed relationships with that which they deem spiritual. The next two metathemes show the importance of other people in shaping and nurturing these relationships and a sense of sacred identity. The final of the six metathemes then explicitly explores the connectivity between different aspects of participants' experiences and how they combine to create worldviews that can influence every aspect of their lives.

Experiences Deemed Spiritual Often Have Lasting and Significant Effects

“I’ve also experienced my soul leaving my body.... Once you know that you can do that, you kind of know that you’re infinite and you know that everything’s far more cosmic than you... could possibly believe in the first place.” (Yvonne, SBNR)

Across all four studies, personal experiences and practices that were deemed religious or spiritual were a central part of the participants’ lived experiences. These experiences often had lasting influence on the participants’ lives, affecting how they felt, what they thought, and the decisions they made. These experiences were very diverse and could occur either spontaneously or as the result of deliberate effort. The experiences they described varied in their intensity and could occur both alone and in communal contexts. Table 7 (see pp. 315-316) shows the themes that contributed to this metatheme and includes a range of supporting extracts.

Traditional spiritual practices such as prayer, worship, and other rituals gave the participants a sense of peace and affirmed their place in the world. They often created a sense of intimacy and connection with something greater than the individual. All the studies described at least one type of such experience, ranging from performing Salah (see pp. 212-214) to the casting of Tarot cards (see pp. 278-282). The intensity of these feelings was often relatively moderate but sufficed to encourage the individual to continue the practice and help sustain the beliefs associated with it. Many of the participants also reported times when their regular practices were far more profound than usual. These intermittent experiences of heightened spirituality appear to have increased their belief in the efficacy of

the practices and encouraged them to continue their religious or spiritual practices. Their experiences seem to have functioned as a form of intermittent reinforcement, which can be a powerful motivator of behavior and beliefs (Hogarth & Villeval, 2014; Jenkins & Stanley, 1950). Across each of the studies, the participants described using specific practices which they found personally beneficial and meaningful much more than practices they did not.

Significant experiences that the participants deemed spiritual could also occur spontaneously and not associated with religious or spiritual practices. These could be similar to classic ‘mystical’ experiences (R. W. Hood et al., 2009) or simply experiences of closeness to, or guidance from, a higher power. Examples of these include Bahiya’s feeling that Allah was watching over her (see pp. 217-219), Ian’s sense of being protected while on the mission field (see pp. 184-185), and Thomas’ sense of the dead offering him comfort and reassurance (see pp. 272-274). Such experiences gave the participants a powerful and affirming sense of a divine or supernatural reality that was active in the world and concerned for them as individuals. Most of the experiences that the participants deemed spiritual were associated with positive feelings. They often described having feelings of peace, intimacy, joy, love, and a sense of certainty or conviction. However, not all the participants’ spiritual experiences were unequivocally positive; they were sometimes challenging, disturbing or otherwise life altering (cf. Farias & Wikholm, 2015; Fletcher et al., 2020). Whether positive or negative, these experiences often had lasting influence on how the participants understood themselves or the world.

The most profound of the participants' spiritual experiences often occurred at times of crisis or transition in the participants' lives. Prior research has also found this association between spiritual or paranormal experiences and stressful situations (French & Stone, 2013; R. W. Hood et al., 2009). Opportunity and need both appear to be important precursors to significant spiritual experiences, but the participants were not always aware of their need prior to the experience occurring and many things provided opportunities for transcendent experiences. Why sometimes an experience was deeply desired yet unfulfilled and yet at other times experiences were unsought yet profound remains complex and perhaps inexplicable, certainly to the participants' themselves. The participants viewed such experiences as insights into something deeper than their mundane lives and they could either affirm their prior convictions about the nature of the world or, less frequently, challenge them. These infrequent experiences of transcendence often had especially significant and lasting consequences, such as Madesh's near death experience (see p. 241-243) which revived his faith in the supernatural after it had almost ebbed away. They also frequently helped the participants make important decisions in their lives.

For almost all the participants, the experiences they deemed spiritual were perceived as real and trustworthy. They affirmed beliefs, or potential beliefs, and often had deep and lasting effects on the participants' lives. The determination of whether a particular experience was considered spiritual was an integral part of this process. Not every strange or unusual experience was attributed to a higher, spiritual power. The participants often spent considerable time evaluating and reflecting upon whether their experiences were 'genuine.' They were aware that many feelings and other experiences could be the product of their own minds. When they were unsure, they evaluated them against whatever they

considered authoritative - often with the help of those they trusted. Only experiences that could be integrated with their wider beliefs were deemed spiritual. This process of evaluation and confirmation is important and demonstrates the communal element involved in even solitary practices.

In all four of the studies, the participants described, either explicitly or implicitly, processes of spiritual development where they learned to increasingly experience that which they considered spiritual. Repeated practices and experiences helped the participants to feel increasingly close to their God, or to the ineffable sacred in which they believed. Luhrmann (2004) has suggested that the process of metakinesis plays a key role in many people's spiritual development and the data in these four studies supports her theory. The participants described how they gradually learned to perceive sacred meaning and purpose in their thoughts and internal experiences. The support, guidance, and encouragement of others was integral to this process. With repeated practice, their spiritual experiences usually became more common and potent - although spontaneous and profound experiences could occur and were often transformative, as discussed above. Whether the realities that the participants were learning to experience exist at a psychological or metaphysical level is beyond the scope of this study to judge (Jung, 1938/1969a; F. N. Watts & Williams, 1988). Regardless of the ultimate nature of these experiences, they were often perceived as having a lasting and profound impact on the individuals who described them.

Table 7*Experiences Deemed Spiritual Often Have Lasting and Significant Effects*

Theme	Example quote
Study: There's a God who I Know (Christian)	
Talking to God as a daily companion	"There are many times when prayers don't get answered as you would wish... [but] there are enough times when things have worked out." (Gareth)
Connecting to God through worship	"When you worship, God comes to you... it does feel like you have such a clear connection with God." (Karen)
Discerning God's touch and guidance	"[God is] like a light. He's a light and you feel warm in yourself..." (Jenny)
Seeing God's hand in events	"God's protected me. Supernaturally... there was a sense... quite miraculously - God's protecting us." (Ian)
Study: Allah has Told us Everything (Muslim)	
Prayer is a key pillar of faith	"[When you are praying to] the best of your ability... your heart is at peace, and...your mind is clear... [You] have that connection to your God." (Chahid)
Times of religious focus strengthen faith	"When you start regularly fasting... it's just different. It's more religious than your whole life, really." (Aatifa)
Feeling connected to Allah	"I have felt very spiritual and I feel like I have got someone watching over me... I've got that closeness or connection there." (Bahiya)

Theme	Example quote
Study: I Believe in Something (Hindu)	
Experiencing spirituality and peace	“We have got a small place, a God’s place here, which I keep to light the lamp... morning and evening. It makes me feel calm.” (Rachana)
Study: Seeing is Believing (SBNR)	
Profound personal experiences are transformative	“I’ve also experienced my soul leaving my body... Once you know that you can do that, you kind of know that you’re infinite and... everything’s far more kinda cosmic than you... could possibly believe in the first place.” (Yvonne)
Psychoactive drugs can help open the mind	“I definitely felt that there was more of a connection between nature, science, human. It kind of opened up my brain a little bit more than what I really perceived was originally there.” (Victor)
Actively developing spirituality through diverse practices	“[I] felt like... the whole of nature around me was alive and was conscious... It feels like a lot of information ... was downloaded at that point, where I was kind of connected into the earth and... the forest was a living, living, breathing entity behind me...” (Thomas)

Individuals Often Attribute Events They Experience to Spiritual Causes and These Interpretations Reinforce Their Beliefs

“One of the things that has sustained that belief over the years has been a remarkable coming together of events. And some would call them coincidences. I would call them answers to prayer.” (Gareth, Christian)

In addition to these direct and personal spiritual experiences, the individuals in the studies also often perceived the hand of a higher power in other aspects of their lives. These less direct experiences typically involved events that might be seen by others as ‘coincidences’ being interpreted as meaningful examples of God or another spiritual power directly guiding or influencing their lives. The themes from each of the studies that contributed to the development of this metatheme can be seen in Table 8 (pp. 320-321). The boundaries between such experiences and more direct ones were not always rigid; participants sometimes made these attributions during the events. Experiencing these ‘divine interventions’ could trigger (or be associated with) more direct and personal spiritual experiences, but often was not.

These attributions of spiritual causes included the reevaluation of past events, often ones which were harmful or difficult, in a more positive light by identifying positive consequences of them or key lessons learned. For example, Jenny discussed how many traumatic aspects of her past enabled her to help others (see p. 189-191) and Dahra spoke about how during difficult periods she thought Allah had been testing her (see pp. 217-219). This attribution of events within their daily lives to God seemed to play an important role in sustaining their beliefs about the nature of the world. These events in their lives

were often considered less subjective than more internal experiences, and they were perceived as providing important evidence that the higher power in which they believed was real. These interpretations of events not only helped persuade the participants that their God, or some other higher power, was real, but they also supported their belief that God cared about them and their daily lives. Seeing events ‘come together’ in ways that they believed could only be the result of God’s intervention gave them something to cling to when they experienced subsequent doubts.

Spilka et al. (1985) suggest religious explanations for events are usually offered when they are congruent with the individual’s meaning-belief system, and a religious explanation represents a more potent source of self-esteem than a naturalistic one. They argue this reflects the operation of several underlying psychological drives: 1) to perceive events as meaningful, 2) to reduce uncertainty and provide a sense of control, 3) to protect or enhance one’s self-esteem. The vast majority of the events identified as spiritually significant by the participants appeared to meet all three of these needs. Samantha described how she viewed some events as just coincidences, but others were ascribed greater purpose and significance (see pp. 274-276). Similarly, Gareth noted how he viewed things that others may perceive as coincidences as answers to prayer (see pp. 180-181). The participants could have attributed their experiences to chance and circumstance or the intervention of something greater than themselves, and by doing the second of these options they enhanced their sense of meaning, identity, and security. By interpreting particular, unlikely events in their lives as instances of divine intervention, the participants’ self-esteem was enhanced (it showed that they were

important), their sense of uncertainty was reduced (something was looking after them - they'd be okay), and believing difficult or strange events had a purpose made them easier to deal with.

The way that 'normal' experiences in the participants' lives were often deemed spiritual (cf. Taves, 2009) also shows how faith can be an integral part of many religious or spiritual individuals' lives. The religious or spiritual was not just something that they 'do' at certain times or at special places, it was how they experienced the world as a whole (Ammerman, 2013; Murphy, 2017). Understanding both how their beliefs developed and how their beliefs affected their lives required a sensitivity to how seemingly innocuous events or minor experiences sometimes combined to create and support more substantial beliefs. Individuals were not always aware of the extent to which these small experiences influence them. More spectacular experiences were often more salient and more likely to form part of their personal narratives. The repeated reinforcement of their worldviews through 'smaller' events seems to have played a crucial role in sustaining and developing their beliefs. For some individuals, such experiences (and perhaps affects experienced during religious rituals) were the only spiritual experiences that they had, and yet that was enough to sustain their faith.

Table 8

Individuals Often Attribute Events They Experience to Spiritual Causes and These Interpretations Reinforce Their Beliefs

Theme	Example quote
Study: There's a God Who I Know (Christians)	
Seeing God's hand in events	<p>“One of the things that has sustained that belief over the years has been a remarkable coming together of events. And some would call them coincidences. I would call them answers to prayer.” (Gareth)</p>
Finding meaning and purpose	<p>“If I wasn't bullied and I didn't go through what I did, I wouldn't have the real experience to tell people... [God] has changed, changed the challenging bits to, OK, positives.” (Jenny)</p>
Study: Allah has Told us Everything (Muslims)	
Feeling connected to Allah	<p>“Our fate is whatever happens is from Allah...When he gives us good health, money, everything is there, we're happy, we're thankful to him. But, on the other side...at times, he's testing us, our patience.” (Dahra)</p>

Theme	Example quote
Study: I Believe in Something (Hindus)	
Believing in 'something'	<p>"I don't know how to explain, but there's something there - but I don't know what it is... There's something pulling back." (Rachana)</p>
Study: Seeing is Believing (SBNR)	
Finding value in humanity	<p>"Finding how you kind of really, how you can help... I think a lot of our [spiritual] journey is about finding what that is..." (Yvonne)</p>
<p>Meaningful coincidences suggest cosmic purpose</p>	<p>"Sometimes, I'm like, 'Oh, that was just a lovely coincidence.' Other times I'll be like, 'This is definitely simpatico'... or 'This was definitely supposed to happen.'" (Samantha)</p>

Supportive Relationships With Spiritual Beings or Powers can Sustain and Develop Beliefs

“[Allah is] always there. You know, watching over... always with you... always there... I know that directly, physically [he’s] not in front of me... but in my mind... I know that he’s always there.” (Aatifa, Muslim)

The Christian and Muslim participants described clear relationships with God or Allah that were a crucial part of their lives. The intensity and cadence of these relationships varied, but the participants all described direct and indirect experiences of their God. These experiences helped develop meaningful and emotionally significant relationships with God that had many impacts in the participants’ daily lives. The experiences of the Hindu and SBNR participants were more complex. The participants in these two groups had a much vaguer belief in ‘something’ greater than themselves, but in many cases they were uncertain exactly what that was. However, these higher powers were often still perceived to have provided guidance or help in times of need; they were generally viewed as benevolent and caring. For example, Yvonne spoke about how she was guided by spirits when she cast Tarot (see pp. 278-282) and Rachana was convinced something had been nurturing her family when it faced difficult circumstances (see pp. 239-241). The relationships these participants developed with the supernatural were usually less salient and significant than the Christians’ and Muslims’ but their importance seemed to increase during crises. Table 9 (pp. 325-326) shows the themes from each study that contributed to the development of this metatheme.

Previous research has suggested that, for many individuals, God can function as an attachment figure (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 2012). An all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving being is not merely a potential attachment figure but can be an idealized and perfect one. The view of God as a secure haven and protective, parental figure is common in many religious traditions. In both the Christian and Muslim studies, traditions that regularly represent God in these terms, the ways that participants described God fit this mold. Their relationships with God were a significant element of their lives. They gave them confidence and boldness to live their faith in a world that was often challenging. For these two groups, the data is consistent with the idea that God can and sometimes does function as an attachment figure in the psychological lives of his followers. As noted above, the SBNR and Hindu participants had more nebulous spiritual relationships that appeared less important to them than the relationships with God experienced by the Christians and Muslims. They sometimes experienced higher powers or beings offering them support and guidance, but not always. Prior research (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; W. Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002) has suggested that strong attachment to a God who is perceived in positive terms can be beneficial to individuals' wellbeing. The participants in all four studies described how their own experiences of, and relationships with, the higher powers they believed in enhanced their wellbeing.

The impact of these spiritual relationships extended beyond positive feelings and emotional support. These relationships often affected what the participants did and believed. The divine beings whom the participants experienced relationships with were a source of guidance and instruction for them. After the relationships had developed to the point where they were experienced as real, they appeared to have real power to shape the

participants' other beliefs and their behavior. This appeared to be similar to how relationships with other people influenced their beliefs and behaviors. The participants' spiritual experiences could either support or challenge the beliefs they learned from their other relationships.

Participants' relationships with God, or other higher powers were, also frequently a source of identity for them. The line between the sense of identity that comes from belonging to a religious group and from being in a relationship with a God was often blurred. Participation in their communities was important to many participants, and the relationships with God they experienced seem to have augmented their sense of identity as legitimate members of a sacred community. These spiritual relationships both demarcated their communities and gave them a sense of profound significance.

It was clear across all four studies that the relationships between the individuals and their God, or other higher beings, often influenced their actions and evolving beliefs. These relationships, like other significant relationships, were complex in their influence and involved iterative and ongoing interactions. For many of these individuals, their relationship with the God (or other higher powers) appeared to provide a way to integrate many different experiences into a comprehensible and powerful narrative. This aggregated narrative appeared to be much stronger than its individual elements.

Table 9*Supportive Relationships With Spiritual Beings or Powers can Sustain and Develop Beliefs*

Theme	Example quote
Study: There's a God Who I Know (Christians)	
Experiencing a loving and nurturing relationship	“There's a God who I know and have a personal relationship with... He's probably more 'Daddy' rather than 'God'... Abba rather than El Shaddai.” (Ian)
Talking to God as a daily companion	“If I see something, I pray about it. And if I need to do something, just to pray that God will help me...” (Jenny)
Connecting to God through worship	“The emotional, the spiritual - that bit takes over. And for me that's when worship stops being me to God and becomes more kind of two-way and open - a relationship.” (Ian)
Faith affects everything	“God's the center. That's it, really... everything flows down from that.” (Havir)
Study: Allah has Told us Everything (Muslims)	
Feeling connected to Allah	“[Allah is] always there you know, watching over... always with you... always there... I know that directly physically, [he is] not in front of me... but in my mind... I know that he's always there.” (Aatifa)

Theme	Example quote
Study: I Believe in Something (Hindus)	
Believing in something	<p>“I don’t believe in God... [but] there must be something. I don’t know what it is... There’s something pulling back.”</p> <p>(Rachana)</p>
Study: Seeing is Believing (SBNR)	
Profound personal experiences are transformative	<p>“There was like a heightened awareness... My eyes would settle on maybe a headstone which just say peace and... it felt like the dead... were talking to me... saying, ‘There’s nothing to worry about, it’s all good... be at peace’” (Thomas)</p>
Actively developing spirituality through diverse practices	<p>“Any time you lay those cards down they’re vibrating with the energy where you are at the moment... it is completely magical and it completely works, and it is to do with synchronicity and it’s to do with spirit guides and it is to do with you know, I dunno...” (Yvonne)</p>
Meaningful coincidences suggest cosmic purpose	<p>“I’ve also had kind of quite, quite incredible coincidences... There’s things... I can’t really explain other than we are all connected and the thing that connects us is love or consciousness.” (Thomas)</p>

Communities of Shared Faith Provide Support and Guidance

“From a very small age, we are taught about our religion... and, obviously, because that goes into our mind, we started to believe...”

(Dahra, Muslim)

Across all four studies, the participants described important relationships with other people who shared their beliefs. These communities provided support and guidance for the participants. Table 10 (p. 330) shows the various themes that contributed to the development of this metatheme. The communities the participants identified with were not static entities and many of them had left or joined various faith communities at different points in their lives.

Families, both nuclear and extended, were important and influential for many of the participants. The influence of family often began in their childhood, with early experiences often having a lasting effect on how the participants viewed themselves and the world (cf. Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Hay & Nye, 2006). Family seemed particularly influential in the lives of individuals who were ‘born into’ and then ‘remained in’ particular faith communities. This was seen most clearly in the Muslim and Hindu studies, where being part of a clear and visible minority appeared to reinforce their sense of having a distinct religious identity (cf. Berry, 1997). Not all the participants continued to share the faith of the family they were born into. Those who did not, often described their closest friends as ‘like family’ or had married somebody who did share their beliefs. Even in these individuals, the lasting effects of their childhood experiences were often apparent (e.g., Thomas or Samantha, see pp. 282-285). In some cases, they retained key values taught by

the families and, sometimes, their change of faith was a direct rejection of aspects of their childhood experiences (cf. Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997). For many of the participants, teaching their own children to be good members of their faith communities also appeared to reinforce their own faith. Wanting to provide a good examples, and answering children's questions, encouraged the participants' to reflect upon their own beliefs and actions.

In all four studies, interactions with others who shared their beliefs and practices were important to the participants, both supporting their beliefs and helping to maintain their sense of wellbeing. As noted above, learning to experience and relate to God did not occur in isolation. Family, friends, and congregations all contributed to the process - as did less direct relationships with books and other media. The participants all viewed themselves as members of specific groups and the impact of social identification on beliefs and behavior is well-established (Ellemers et al., 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Even the SBNR group identified themselves as those who were distinct from two other groups (the religious and those who were not spiritual.)

The participants did not simply adopt all the beliefs and practices of their childhood or faith communities. Over time, their beliefs and practices developed and their relationships with trusted others played important roles in that process. However, being part of a family or other group that shared beliefs and practices appeared to help bulwark their shared beliefs. In times of adversity, they looked to those whom they trusted to help them make sense of their experiences and lives. The simple act of being repeatedly exposed to ideas makes them seem more

credible (Hasher et al., 1977), so being part of communities that all shared the same faith is likely to have helped sustain their beliefs in the religious ideas of those communities. Those they were close to also encouraged them to continue their religious practices, and this also seems to have affirmed their religious identities.

The data in these studies support placing a high emphasis on the importance of these social processes in shaping religious beliefs and practices. Even in the SBNR group, which lacked formal organization or social hierarchy, many 'spiritual' activities were communal (see pp. 278-282, 294-297). Attendance at events and informal conversations with like-minded friends helped individuals to make sense of their experiences and encouraged them to persist in their spiritual practices, even in times of adversity or doubt. However, these social influences were entangled with the participants' experiences of God and/or other spiritual beings. The importance of these other factors should not be overlooked.

Table 10*Communities of Shared Faith Provide Support and Guidance*

Theme	Example quote
Study: There's a God who I Know (Christian)	
Being Supported by Other Christians	“He made being a Christian very fun for a child... he had a lot of influence on me, um, on my Christian beliefs...” (Karen)
Study: Allah has Told us Everything (Muslim)	
Belonging to the Ummah	“...being part of the Muslim community...we've got the local masjid... the community is quite large and growing.” (Chahid)
Family provides a secure foundation	“From a very small age, we are taught about our religion... and, obviously, because that goes into our mind, we started to believe...” (Dahra)
Study: I Believe in Something (Hindu)	
Being Hindu	“[We have] a close relationship with... the extended family... we really like that... [we] keep in touch and we tend to meet them as often as possible.” (Nalika)
Study: Seeing is Believing (SBNR)	
Finding value in humanity	“[We're a] massive support network... we're all kind of best mates and everyone's got their own relationships and stuff.” (Samantha)

Living in a Multicultural Society Can Both Challenge and Reinforce Beliefs

“I started really, kind of, searching. Comparing... my beliefs, my faith, with that of someone... [from a] polytheistic background and faith.”

(Havir, Christian)

All the participants lived in a diverse, multicultural society and this had a range of impacts on their experiences and beliefs. The individuals in each of the studies did not live isolated lives but frequently described working alongside and having friendships with people who did not share their beliefs and religious practices. The social influences on the participants came from the broad range of existential cultures that exist in modern Britain (L. Lee, 2015). Interacting with individuals who did not share their own beliefs and values could have a range of effects. Encountering different explanations for religious or spiritual phenomena sometimes caused individuals to think about their beliefs, leading to either re-affirmation of them or, less commonly, their reformulation or rejection. Table 11 (pp. 334-335) shows the themes that contributed to the development of this metatheme.

These interactions often caused psychological tension for the individuals. Being confronted by very different interpretations, explanations, and expectations often caused the participants to think about their own beliefs and the reasons for them. This process of self-reflection appeared to be most pronounced when the individual was particularly close to the other and it seems likely that there are two reasons for this. Firstly, when an opposing view is held by somebody who is respected, trusted and even loved, it is taken more seriously (Gergen, 1971). Secondly, the closer the relationship the more frequently the individual is likely to be exposed to the differing view and there appeared to be a cumulative effect from

repeated encounters (cf. Hasher et al., 1977). Having positive relationships with those of other beliefs appeared to foster tolerance and acceptance, and this is broadly consistent with intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Hewstone & Swart, 2011).

Experiencing hostility, or living in a world that made observing their beliefs challenging, could have two distinctly different effects on the participants. Sometimes, as with Ian's attitudes towards homosexuality (see pp. 188-189), the participants would modify their beliefs or behavior to fit in with wider society or make their lives easier. At other times, experiencing hostility or challenges would have the opposite effect and encourage individuals to cleave more closely to their beliefs and religious identities (e.g., when Samantha's encounters with 'New Atheists' made her assert her spirituality, see pp. 282-285). These responses of assimilation and separation are both common ways for a minority to respond to a dominant culture, and all four groups perceived themselves as minorities. However, although both these responses were described in the data, the participants in the studies primarily integrated themselves with broader society. They kept their own beliefs and practices while adopting many of the norms of wider British culture (cf. Berry, 1997; Kramer, 2003). The data do not allow firm conclusions to be drawn about the reasons for the differing responses but are broadly consistent with the existing research on acculturation (Berry et al., 2006). The potential for perceived hostility to heighten the salience and strength of religious identities is also widely noted in the psychological literature on religious fundamentalism (e.g., Armstrong, 2000; R. W. Hood et al., 2005).

Individuals who identified with the participants' own religious traditions could also have very different worldviews to them, and encounters with such individuals could also both challenge and reinforce the participants' faith. All the 'World Religions' are incredibly diverse (Partridge & Dowley, 2014; Ridgeon, 2003) and the globalized society in which the participants lived exposed them to more of this diversity than previous generations. For example, the Muslim participants spoke about knowing individuals from many different Muslim cultures and interacting with both those more conservative and more liberal than they were themselves.

Despite their differences, the participants in the different studies also shared many common values with each other and their wider society. For example, many of the participants spoke about the importance of helping others and found meaning and purpose through doing so. They also tended to value working hard and improving themselves. These values are shared broadly across British culture (Bullivant et al., 2019). Living in a diverse society gave the individuals access to a broad range of cultural resources to help them make sense of their lives and experiences. It also meant they directly encountered things that challenged their faith. These experiences shaped their beliefs and behaviors, and this process will be discussed more extensively in the next theme.

Table 11*Living in a Multicultural Society Can Both Challenge and Reinforce Beliefs*

Theme	Example quote
Study: There's a God who I Know (Christian)	
Interactions with Other Perspectives Influence Beliefs and Behaviors	“I started really kind of searching, comparing, you know, my beliefs, my faith, with that of someone, you know, um, polytheistic background and faith.” (Havir)
Responding to challenging situations	“[I had to] rethink [my theology], because I need to be able to affirm these people as legitimate, bona fide members of my congregation... they need to be affirmed... therefore, my preaching became very much about trying to affirm people in who they are.” (Gareth)
Study: Allah has Told us Everything (Muslim)	
Embracing multicultural Britain	“This country is multi-[cultural], and I love it... It's difficult and it's lovely because at least they're learning about other cultures, other beliefs...” (Dahra)
Theme	Example quote

Study: I Believe in Something (Hindu)

Embracing inclusivity and uncertainty “Nobody really understands. Nobody really understands. It’s, it’s out there somewhere...so in my household it’s been open system.” (Panav)

Study: Seeing is Believing (SBNR)

Rejecting dogmatic religious authorities “The Church of England, the money they have, and the homelessness, there shouldn’t be [any]... If it’s ‘Love thy neighbor’, and all that, then they should at least welcome them in...” (Victor)

Idiosyncratic Worldviews Are Developed Using an Individual’s Own Experiences and the Cultural Resources Available to Them

“There’s an energy in the world, which you call God and when you die your energy... goes back to that energy... It’s Hinduism mixed with science.” (Olena, Hindu)

All the participants, from each of the studies, had many beliefs. These included beliefs about how the world works, about themselves, and about others. The degree of certainty that individuals had in particular beliefs varied, as did the importance they ascribed to them. Strength of conviction and perceived importance did not always closely correlate with each other: individuals could be certain about things that were unimportant to

them or unsure about things they considered extremely important. Individuals' beliefs overlapped and interacted in a variety of ways. Beliefs could be incongruent with each other (Chaves, 2010) or 'theologically incorrect' according to the doctrinal authorities of the traditions they identified with (Slone, 2004). Each individual had developed their own, idiosyncratic worldview that enabled them to integrate and make sense of their experiences and to function successfully in the world (Murphy, 2017; Park et al., 2013; Taves et al., 2018). Experiences helped to interpret other experiences, as did explanations provided by other people. The themes that contributed to the development of this metatheme can be seen in Table 12 (see pp. 339-340).

The participants' beliefs about the world had both similarities and key differences. They all lived in the same physical world within a relatively small geographical area. They were part of the same society and shared many cultural influences - with access to the same media, working and living alongside each other. Most of the participants believed in something beyond the physical world, though what precisely this was varied greatly. These beliefs were rooted in their own experiences, which seemed to play an important role in creating and sustaining their beliefs. The belief that they, or those close to them, had personally experienced phenomena that they considered religious, spiritual, or supernatural meant they felt a high degree of certainty that there was something meaningful beyond the material world. However, despite these similarities they also, in a very real sense, lived in quite different social realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Searle, 2010), not only from each other but also from many of those around them. Similar experiences

could be described and understood in very different ways by individuals from the different groups because their explanatory models of the world were often very different.

To make sense of the world and their experiences within it, the participants drew on a wide range of resources. The human mind can process vast amounts of information and learns about the world from both its own direct experiences and from others it encounters (Bruner, 1990; Kegan, 1982). The data in these studies suggest religious and spiritual beliefs develop through similar processes. Spiritual or religious experiences provided the participants with information about the world, and they attempted to integrate this information with what they had already learned. Some new experiences, which were incompatible with their prior understandings, required profound shifts in the individual's underlying belief systems. More commonly, the individual had cultural resources that allowed them to make sense of their experiences without too much difficulty. They often perceived spiritual experiences as answers to challenges they were facing, and this perception seemed to help the participants integrate them more easily. The internal diversity of religious traditions appeared to help the participants meet their needs and assimilate their experiences without threatening their core identity.

Relationships, both real and perceived, play a central role in human lives. They help determine the experiences we have and how we interpret those experiences. The data in these studies adds further support to prior research that highlights the importance of social processes to shaping beliefs and behavior (e.g. Batson et al., 1993; Ellemers et al., 1999). However, as discussed above, these studies also suggest that for many individuals their relationship with God(s) or other supernatural beings can be equally (or even more) important. The participants considered their relationships with whatever they considered

sacred as being among the most important ones in their lives, and so it is not surprising they appear to have had significant psychological impacts on them. Regardless of the ontological nature of these relationships, they were experienced as real and had real effects (cf. W. I. Thomas & Thomas, 1928). The impact of these perceived relationships is too often neglected in psychological or sociological studies, and this can distort and limit the insights they generate.

Park et al. (2013) suggest personal meaning systems or worldviews only need to be functional, allowing individuals to make good decisions and minimizing the distress they experience. They argue the absolute truth and congruence of the beliefs are less important than whether or not the individual finds them personally satisfying and convincing (cf. Searle, 2010; F. N. Watts & Williams, 1988). In the modern world, most people only have superficial (or outright incorrect) understandings of technologies and other phenomena they rely on, but this usually does not hinder their ability to make use of them and thrive. In a similar way, religious or spiritual explanations for events do not need to accurately describe the underlying phenomena for them to be useful to an individual. Whether or not particular explanations are accurate is beyond the scope of these studies, but the participants clearly found them beneficial and sufficiently functional for their needs.

Table 12

Idiosyncratic Worldviews Are Developed Using an Individual's Own Experiences and the Cultural Resources Available to Them

Theme	Example quote
Study: There's a God who I Know (Christian)	
Studying Scripture to understand God	"The Bible would be the main way I think I know God... he is revealed in His Word – so His teachings, philosophy and caring for other people." (Ian)
Finding Meaning and Purpose	"[God] has changed... the challenging bits to... positives." (Jenny)
Study: Allah has Told us Everything (Muslim)	
Following the Qur'an	"Allah has told us everything." (Dahra)
Family provides a secure foundation	"From a very small age, we are taught about our religion... and, obviously, because that goes into our mind, we started to believe..." (Dahra)
Study: I Believe in Something (Hindu)	
Rejecting some doctrines and customs	"The customs should, and the myths should, actually replicate what is possible... most of them are impractical." (Madesh)
Believing in 'something'	"There's an energy in the world, which you call God and when you die your energy..goes back to that energy... It's Hinduism mixed with science." (Olena)

Theme	Example quote
Study: Seeing is Believing (SBNR)	
Rejecting dogmatic religious authorities	“Since then have been kind of searching for my own interpretation and my own understanding of the spiritual and religious... without actually getting too caught up in any dogmatic nonsense.” (Thomas)
Trusting themselves and their experiences	“Seeing is believing. Unless I can see it, I don’t really, don’t really believe it.” (Victor)

Discussion

This synthesis integrated the findings of four studies that each explored the relationship between experiences deemed spiritual or religious and beliefs in contemporary England. The groups for these studies were purposively selected using stratified sampling. Each study was conducted using IPA to investigate the experiences of members of a particular religious or spiritual group: Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and the SBNR. Inductive and iterative analysis developed six overlapping metathemes.

Experiences deemed spiritual can have lasting and significant effects on individuals’ lives. These experiences include not only mystical, ritual, and extraordinary experiences but also include more mundane or ambiguous events

which are attributed to a divine cause. Individuals can develop relationships with supernatural beings as a result of their experiences, and these relationships can be both important and influential in their lives. Social influences are also important in shaping how individuals learn to understand the world. Communities of shared faith can support and guide individuals to live and think in certain ways. Encounters with people who do not share an individuals' beliefs can make them think about what they do and believe, which can either reinforce or change their beliefs. Individuals develop idiosyncratic worldviews to make sense of their own experiences using both those experiences and the wider social and cultural resources at their disposal. This process is dynamic, iterative, and often implicit rather than explicit. Members of a group share many aspects of their belief systems, but a finer focus can reveal that there are also many subtle and important differences in how individuals make meaning in their lives.

The Effects of Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

The aim of a qualitative research synthesis is to integrate the findings of multiple studies, rather than to simply contrast and compare them (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). However, comparison is an intrinsic part of exploring the data in both qualitative research synthesis and IPA (Larkin et al., 2019; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The stratified sampling technique used to select the four studies facilitates explicit reflection on the effects of the dimensions of variation used in the study. However, differences between the four groups could also be because of many other factors. Due to this, and the limited amount of data, only tentative insights can be drawn, but these can still

help deepen our understanding of the phenomena and suggest avenues for future research to explore.

The orthodoxy dimension of variation appeared to be relatively significant. The two groups with high orthodoxy (the Christians and the Muslims) appeared to have much in common with each other. There were also many points of similarity between the two low orthodoxy groups (the Hindus and the SBNR). Several clear differences between each of these pairs of groups were also apparent.

The Christians and Muslims appeared to have clear beliefs about who God was and what was required of God's people. This seemed to support the development of strong communities that helped sustain those beliefs and which discouraged 'unacceptable' beliefs. More rigid beliefs can help create a stronger sense of group identity and to develop a robust social reality (Rappaport, 1999; Searle, 2010). These two groups experienced much clearer and more developed relationships with God than the Hindu and SBNR participants. If, as Luhmann (2004, 2012) has suggested, experiences of the divine can be cultivated through metakinesis then it seems likely that having a cohesive, consistent, and shared framework for interpreting such experiences can help aid that process. However, the participants in the two lower orthodoxy groups still described having a range of spiritual experiences, and they also learned to interpret them from those around them. Without a fixed interpretative framework, the individuals in these groups had greater flexibility to draw on a wider range of resources to construct their personal spiritualities. This appears to have led to increased uncertainty about their

interpretations, more diffuse spiritual relationships, and a greater acceptance of alternative explanations and beliefs.

The distinctions between the high and low orthopraxy groups were less clear. Individuals in all four groups had access to a diverse range of religious or spiritual practices. There were also behavioral norms in each of the groups, although these were less strict in the SBNR group than the other three. The lived experiences of the participants in the Hindu and Christian groups showed similar levels of orthopraxy that were greater than the SBNR group but lower than the Muslim group. One strength of qualitative analysis is its ability to adjust when the data deviates from expectations and the experiences of all four groups were still sufficiently different to generate a broad range of perspectives. Rather than providing two pairs for comparison, the study instead offers a spectrum of positions.

For all four groups, the rituals they performed and the rules for their behavior that they followed helped to define and demarcate their social (and personal) identities. The Muslim participants viewed practices like Salah and Ramadan as a central part of their faith and lives (see pp. 212-217). Their regular demonstrations of their faith affirmed their sense of being Muslim and increased the salience of their religious beliefs (cf. McCauley & Lawson, 2002; Rappaport, 1999). Activities like attending Church, studying the Bible, and living righteous lives were similarly important for the Christian participants and appear to have had similar benefits (see pp. 179-182). For the Hindu participants, even though they rejected some traditional practices, those they did still perform helped them feel connected to both their heritage and something greater than themselves (see pp. 241-243). The more flexible practices of the SBNR individuals reinforced their rejection of external religious authorities (see pp. 278-284). However, the practices they chose to participate in (and the

practices they chose not to participate in) also contributed to their sense of identity and affirmed their beliefs.

All religious practices, both implicit and explicit, appeared to both shape and be shaped by the participants' broader beliefs. More fixed practices appeared to be associated with more fixed beliefs. Less formal practices also appeared to be associated with a more informal relationship with the divine. However, the data does not allow strong conclusions to be drawn about these associations. Many more studies, examining a much wider range of cultures, are necessary.

Limitations

SMIPA, like IPA, is inherently subjective and interpretative. The account developed here is robust and transparent (cf. J. A. Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000), but other valid accounts of the data could be developed. The data itself also relied on the subjective accounts of the individual participants, which are not necessarily entirely accurate accounts of the events they experienced (Madill, 2012; Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006). Triangulating the experiences of the different participants with each other and the broader research literature enhanced its applicability and persuasiveness (Larkin et al., 2019; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). However, this enhanced applicability does not mean the findings can be assumed to apply universally.

The four groups studied had a wide range of different perspectives, practices, and histories. However, the groups were all located within the same geographical area and so caution is necessary when extending the findings more

widely. In particular, studies in non-Western settings, which have been relatively neglected and where individuals may have very different experiences and understandings, are needed to explore the limits of these findings (Henrich et al., 2010; Sue et al., 1999). Conducting several independent IPA studies, each investigating a very different group, is likely to generate the most useful insights in this regard.

It is also important to note that these studies investigated the experiences of individuals who were actively embracing the tradition they identified with. The experiences of less active members who still identify with the religion, and of those who disaffiliate from their previous religious identity, are likely to be significantly different (cf. Day, 2011; Slone, 2004). Future studies should explore the experiences of those on the fringes of religious communities, as their experiences are no less important and may provide valuable insights into how spiritual experiences shape beliefs and identity.

These studies show that a holistic and idiographic approach can develop a rich understanding of the entangled nature of the many aspects of individuals' lives. The nature and context of participants' experiences were as important as their frequency. Methodologies like Grounded Theory (Nolas, 2011; Payne, 2007) and Ethnography (J. S. Jones & Watt, 2010) can explore this entangled complexity, but they generally require more resources to do so and usually need to focus on more specific phenomena. IPA and qualitative research synthesis, both separately and in combination like here, offer a pragmatic, effective, and robust way to explore and understand people's complex lived experiences. They should be used more widely within the psychology of religion, as part of a multi-level, interdisciplinary approach (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Paloutzian & Park, 2013).

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, the synthesis and analysis of these studies suggests people develop personal worldviews based on their own experiences and their relationships with others. A wide range of experiences and relationships can influence these processes, including those the individual deems religious or spiritual. Experiences they deem sacred sometimes have especially important and lasting effects on their lives, as the act of identifying them as sacred gives them additional significance and meaning. These experiences can help develop meaningful relationships between the individual, their community, and their God(s) or other higher powers. These relationships can become an important part of how individuals understand themselves and the wider world, influencing their behavior and attitudes towards many other things. The complex, reciprocal, and iterative nature of the interactions between individuals' many beliefs and practices means that a full understanding of any part of them requires sensitivity to the more holistic context of their lives. Careful idiographic research can not only appreciate this complexity but can also begin to untangle it and develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of people's religiosity and spirituality.

DISCUSSION

This chapter begins by returning directly to the three initial research questions (see p. 18) and re-examining the key findings of the studies to see the extent to which each has been answered. IPA studies, because of their nature, often only partially answer research questions, particularly secondary research questions (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This is because they follow and respond to the data, and the claims they make should not go beyond that data. Each of the four IPA studies, and the synthesis of them, have generated important and relevant insights and this chapter reviews and reiterates those findings.

The implications of these findings for a range of domains are then explored. These include the academic study of religion, public policy, and therapeutic and pastoral practice. Some of these topics have already been briefly touched upon in the preceding chapters, but here they are dealt with within the broader context of all the findings.

One of the main original contributions of this thesis is the development of Stratified Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (SMIPA). The usefulness of this new methodological innovation is discussed, evaluating its effectiveness for exploring the research questions of this thesis. This includes reflections on the methodological choices made during the research and lessons that can be learned for future SMIPA studies.

The reflective and reflexive processes used throughout the research project to help ensure its validity, rigor, and transparency are then discussed. This includes discussion of the role of my own experiences on the research and the impact of the research on me. The chapter ends with a brief summary of the findings and some concluding thoughts about its implications.

Key Findings

Within each of the individual studies and the synthesis, the analysis was guided primarily by the data and the themes developed reflect the experiences shared by the participants and how they made sense of those experiences. These explored issues related to the research questions, but the analysis was not closely framed by those questions. I turn now to a more explicit discussion of how the findings of the studies help answer each of the three research questions (see p. 18). These answers also draw on the wider research literature that helped inform the synthesis. The account presented here is interpretative and narrative, due to the data on which it is based (see pp. 113-116, 130-135). The claims and explanations within it should be understood in this light; they are grounded in the data and offer what I believe to be the most convincing interpretation of the phenomena (J. A. Maxwell 2004, 2013; Patton, 2015; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

This analysis shows the complexity of the phenomena and discusses the many factors that contribute to the development of individuals' worldviews and the relationship between some individuals and a deity or other supernatural beings. Perhaps the best metaphor for the process of worldview development and meaning-making is the creation of a web, with many different strands and connections that combine to form something far stronger than each isolated strand. Many different experiences and explanations help to interpret each other in an iterative process through which people continually makes sense of the world and their lives.

Experiencing Relationships with the Sacred

How do religious or spiritual individuals experience the relationship between themselves and their god(s) or other sacred beings/objects?

The starting point for any IPA study is the experiences of the participants. All four studies generated rich and detailed accounts of the participants' experiences with God (or other higher powers) that helped to answer this primary research question. As noted in the synthesis, these experiences often had lasting and significant effects (see pp. 311-316) and the participants' found the relationships supportive and sustaining (see pp. 322-326). The participants' relationships with what they deemed sacred could be intangible and/or ineffable, but they were also very real and meaningful to them (see pp. 177-178, 217-219, 239-241, 290-294, etc.) Rather than describing the rich detail of individual participants' experiences again, this section will briefly review the core features of these relationships.

The relationships between the participants and God (or other higher powers) were dynamic rather than fixed. Different individuals had different experiences, both across the studies and within them. The same individuals also described having a changing range of experiences throughout their lives. The sense of closeness and intimacy they experienced could both wax and wane. Rituals and other religious or spiritual practices were often important ways by which they experienced aspects of their relationships with the divine, but these sacred relationships could also be experienced as part of their daily lives (see pp. 177-186, 209-219, 241-243, 272-282, etc.)

For the Christian and Muslim participants in particular, there was a sense that God was always with them and that God was intimately concerned with every aspect of their

lives. Even when God was experienced as being distant, they felt God was still watching and this guided how they lived (see pp. 177-178, 217-219). The Hindu and SBNR participants were less concerned with trying to please spiritual powers or beings, but they still felt connected to and supported by something they considered spiritual and greater than themselves (see pp. 239-241, 272-274).

The participants' religious or spiritual relationships, both with God and others who shared their faith, were often an important source of their social identities (cf. Day, 2011; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). They affected how they saw themselves and how they wanted others to see them. They also shaped their daily behavior, both in 'religious' contexts and also in more secular ones (cf. Ammerman, 2014). These relationships were a core part of the participants' life narratives (cf. Bruner, 1990; Schechtman, 2011) and sense of self (cf. Aron & Tomlinson, 2019; Kashima et al., 2002). The 'Self' and the 'Sacred' were not two entirely distinct objects or entities for the participants. Their relationships with the divine or the spiritual had become an intrinsic part of who the participants were. The importance and centrality of these relationships to the individuals' self concepts varied considerably, in the same way that other relational elements of the self do (see pp. 77-84).

The participants in these studies were not selected as exemplars of their faith traditions or religious groups. They were fairly typical members of their religious groups, who all would acknowledge that some others may be more righteous, holy, or spiritual than them. Similarly, many who identify with the same religious traditions as the participants are less religiously active than they were. These

findings show many different types of relationship with God or other higher powers are possible. However, these relationships are often meaningful and important to the individual. In some cases, they can be the most important aspect of an individual's life and the foundation on which their identity and sense of self are built.

Developing Relationships with the Sacred

How do these relationships form and develop?

Despite the many differences between the relationships that individual participants had with their God or other higher beings, there were some remarkable similarities in how those relationships formed and developed. The process was gradual, organic, iterative, and dynamic. Even when there were key moments that marked the formal initiation or transformation of the individual's relationship and beliefs, this was part of a longer process (cf. Rambo, 1993). A period of questioning, struggle, and/or exposure to new ideas or influences often preceded the participants' formation of new spiritual relationships (see pp. 186-189, 274-276, etc.). Meaning-making processes (Hood et al., 2018) were an integral part of how these relationships were developed.

Social and cultural influences were important in the formation and development of these sacred relationships (see pp. 186-189, 220-223, 294-307, 327-330, etc.). The participants were taught about the world by those around them. Often, the values they considered most important were imparted to them from a very young age (see pp. 186-188, 220-223, 327-330, etc.). For most of the participants, except some of the SBNR individuals, the people around them all had individual relationships with God. Their communities also

shared a collective relationship with God, which often defined the community, its heritage, and its customs. Fully untangling the effects of these myriad relationships and interactions is not possible, but the combination of them often appeared to create strong webs that supported and nurtured the personal faith of the participants. Their families and wider communities also encouraged them to participate in rituals and other religious practices.

It is important to note, however, that having a supportive family who were religious did not always lead individuals to develop strong relationships with God. The SBNR participants, especially Thomas and Samantha who both had Christian upbringings (see pp. 282-285) show this most clearly but it can also be seen in other participants like Havir (see p. 188-189) or Olena (see pp. 246-249). In a multicultural and globalized society, like contemporary England, participants are exposed to many different interpretative frameworks and can have many different experiences. Each participant experienced factors pulling them towards certain religious identities and also experienced factors pushing them away from them. Explaining why some participants placed more emphasis on their relationship with God than others, even within the same religious group, is beyond the scope of this data. Many of the participants attributed this to factors beyond themselves, including to the will or actions of God (see pp. 184-185, 214-216, 274-276, etc.). Individual differences in personality or temperament also seem likely to account for some of this variation, but these studies do not allow specific causal links to be determined.

Sacred texts, such as the Bible and Qur'an (see pp. 179-180, 210-212) could also play important roles in the development of participants' relationships with the things they considered sacred. Both the contents of the sacred text and the community's attitude towards it affected the role they played in the lives of the participants. For participants who had an intratextually fundamentalist attitude towards their sacred text (R. W. Hood et al., 2005; see pp. 226-228) these provided the interpretative framework through which they made sense of the world. For others, for whom a particular text was only highly authoritative, this effect was less extreme but still noticeable. However, not all the participants considered ancient texts an important part of their lives. For the SBNR participants in particular, the rejection of such external authorities was a core aspect of their spiritual identities (see pp. 282-285). Across the four studies, it was clear that external authorities sometimes played an important role in shaping how the participants related to the things they deemed sacred. However, whether participants acknowledged a particular authority was as much part of their relationship as a precursor to it. Even when a certain text was considered sacred by a participant, they still had to interpret and apply it to their own lives and how they did this was shaped by their experiences and social relationships.

Experiences the participants deemed religious, spiritual, or sacred also played an important role in developing the relationships between them and God (see pp. 311-326). These included mystical experiences and more indirect attributions of events to a divine cause. Sometimes these experiences transformed how the individual saw themselves and the world. More often, they affirmed aspects of the participants' beliefs and developed them in more subtle ways. Many of the participants did not report having dramatic spiritual experiences, and it was often an extended sequence of 'smaller' experiences that developed

the relationship they felt with God. The relationship between these experiences and the participants' wider beliefs and worldviews will be discussed in the subsequent section (pp. 356-370). However, it is important to note that the interpretation of these experiences as spiritually significant and meaningful was an integral part of the experiences. Meaning-making processes (Hood et al., 2018) were therefore an important part of how the participants developed their relationships with God or other beings they considered sacred.

Trust, confidence, and understanding all then developed over time. Many of the participants' described this process as ongoing. Rather than 'blind faith' the participants learned to trust God, or the higher powers in which they believed, through an extended series of experiences that affirmed and shaped their beliefs. This process was rational, even though some of their beliefs may seem strange to the wider society in which they lived. The participants did not believe just because they had been taught certain things were true. They believed because their own life experiences supported the things they had been taught (see pp. 335-340).

For many of the participants, experiencing trauma and adversity strengthened their relationships with God or the other supernatural beings they believed in. These relationships often gave them a sense of comfort and security (see pp. 72-75, 322-326, etc.). The participants turned to God during times of crisis and experienced a sense of intimacy or peace that affirmed their beliefs about God. The rituals and other practices they used during the more difficult periods of their lives often reminded them of what they believed, offered them hope, and met some of their emotional needs. These positive religious coping techniques (Exline &

Rose, 2013; Pargament et al., 2013) not only helped them deal with the challenges they were facing but could also lead to posttraumatic growth (Park & Slattery, 2013) if they enhanced the relationship the individual experienced with God. This positive connection between adversity, religious coping, and posttraumatic growth echoes the findings of Prati and Pietreanto's (2009) meta-analysis.

However, experiences of trauma and adversity could also have the opposite effect if the individual failed to find comfort and support when they needed it most (see pp. 282-289). As Exline and Rose (2013) note, times of spiritual crisis can lead to either the strengthening of existing beliefs and relationships or to major shifts in belief as 'better' answers to the challenges faced are sought. These moments of crisis could transform individuals' relationships with the God(s) they believed in or even create new ones (see pp. 311-326, etc.). They were often also pivotal in the development of the participants' wider understanding of themselves and the world (cf. Taves et al., 2018). Whether these experiences catalyzed change that would otherwise have happened more slowly, or radically changed the nature of the individual's sacred relationships, is beyond the scope of this data. However, it seems plausible that both were true for the experiences of some participants.

The similarities between how the participants' relationships with supernatural beings developed and how their relationships with other people, places, or institutions developed were striking. Perceived interactions, both direct and indirect, developed an understanding of God that taught the participants about God and what they could expect from God in the future. These experiences then shaped how they thought about God and acted towards God, which in turn influenced their future perceptions of God. Over time,

these relationships could become increasingly important as aspects of the individuals' social identities and selves (cf. Aron & Tomlinson, 2019). Boyer (2002) suggests minimally counterintuitive concepts are more memorable and easier for the mind to relate to. This may partially explain why the participants' tended to think and speak about God in ways that were very similar to other categories and concepts. It may also help explain why the way their relationships with God developed had many similarities with how other relationships develop. If the human mind does have this tendency to view supernatural agents similarly to other agents, it is not surprising that relationships with them also have similar effects to other relationships with trusted individuals and groups.

The Relationship Between Beliefs and Religious or Spiritual Experiences

What is the relationship between beliefs and religious and/or spiritual experiences?

The Nature of Beliefs and Worldviews

The data in these studies show that people's beliefs include much more than just explicit doctrines and formal propositions (cf. Barrett & Lanman, 2008; Lanman, 2008). They also often include many implicit values and assumptions about the nature of the world and people in it. As discussed above (pp. 349-356), this includes individuals' understanding of themselves and how they should live. For example, many of the participants had strong beliefs about what was right and wrong that went beyond their explicit theological beliefs. They believed they were

good people and that good people acted in certain ways. Axiology and praxeology (Johnson et al., 2011; Taves & Asprem, 2018) were both not only important facets of their personal worldviews but also provided useful windows into their deepest (and often implicit) values. The beliefs they considered religious or spiritual were connected to these wider systems of beliefs, but it would be overly simplistic to say that either preceded the other.

For the participants who identified as religious, doctrines and other formal, shared beliefs were particularly important. Some beliefs functioned as key markers of the individual's identities and these beliefs could be very influential and affect those participants' actions in significant ways. The extensive and established literature on social identity theory (Ellemers et al., 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) shows the many ways that individuals' identities can affect how they think and act. The evidence in these studies suggests religious identities can be particularly salient and that participation in religious groups can influence how individuals think about the world and choose to act (see pp. 327-330).

Some key doctrinal beliefs not only functioned as identity markers but also formed the bedrock of individuals' worldviews. For example, the beliefs that the Qur'an was God's revelation to humankind, and that Muhammad was God's prophet, were absolutely foundational for the Muslim participants and affected many aspects of their lives (see pp. 210-212, 226-228). Similarly, the belief that God was real and that they had a real relationship with Jesus was something that shaped how the Christian participants experienced their daily lives (see pp. 177-178, 194-195). These core beliefs appear to be important because of their many connections to other beliefs that affected many aspects of the individual's life and sense of self. These beliefs could be both mutually dependent on

each other and also mutually reinforcing. Given the clear consequences that specific doctrinal beliefs can have, it is unsurprising that academics have studied them extensively, but further research into how these beliefs shape individuals' lives and wider worldviews is still necessary.

The participants in the other two studies also had core beliefs about the nature of humanity and themselves, even though they were often less theological and explicit. Schnell (2003, 2012) suggests that people's implicit religiosity (Bailey, 1999) consist of narratives that help make sense of the world (myths), practices that affirm their place in it (rituals), and experiences of connection to something greater than themselves (transcendence). These three elements were present in all the participants' accounts and each of the elements appeared to help support and develop the other two. These studies suggest that perspectives that encompass beliefs, actions, and feelings or experiences are important to fully understand both explicit and implicit religiosity. A worldviews approach (Johnson et al., 2011; Taves & Asprey, 2018) is thus more comprehensive and informative than one focused purely on cognitive attributions or articulated explanations.

Experiences Affect Worldviews

In all four of the studies, it was clear that experiences deemed spiritual or religious can reinforce and affirm religious or spiritual beliefs (see pp. 311-316). The participants described many confirmatory experiences that they viewed as compelling evidence their existential beliefs were true. Such confirmatory experiences could range from dramatic, mystical experiences through to almost

imperceptible feelings and intuitions in mundane situations. Previous research exploring how spiritual or religious experiences can change people's beliefs has tended to focus more on experiences that are sudden or dramatic, but the data in these studies suggest that 'smaller' but more frequent affirming experiences may be just as important for sustaining people's worldviews and beliefs.

There was also evidence in the data that experiences deemed spiritual or religious could also transform an individual's beliefs if they were inconsistent with them (e.g., see pp. 274-276). These changes could occur either within the bounds of what the participants' considered acceptable for their religious tradition or, in some cases, could lead to more radical conversions (see pp. 311-316; cf. Paloutzian et al., 2013). Situations and experiences which could not easily be integrated with an individual's prior beliefs sometimes catalyzed transformations in individuals' worldviews, encouraging them to seek new ways to make sense of their lives and the world (cf. Fowler, 1981; Rambo, 1993; Taves et al., 2018). This process will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections (see pp. 363-367).

As discussed previously (see pp. 322-326, 349-356), relationships between the participants and beings they considered sacred were both important aspects of their spiritual experiences and important elements of their worldviews. They believed that their God(s), or other supernatural beings, were real because they had experiences that they attributed to something greater than themselves. They had learned to trust these supernatural beings and their wider beliefs and values were influenced by what they believed these beings had told humanity. These relationships seem to be an important mechanism for both affirming and changing some people's beliefs (see pp. 322-326). Interpreting an experience as being

connected to a supernatural entity could make the experience sacred and more significant for the participant (Luhrmann, 2012; McCauley & Lawson, 2002; Rappaport, 1999; Taves, 2009). Experiences deemed sacred can be potent and highly salient; connecting many of them together into perceived relationships appears to have amplified their salience and significance of them for many of the participants.

Regardless of the ontological nature of these experiences, the ways the participants processed their effects appear similar to how they made sense of other experiences. If a new experience was consistent with their existing beliefs, it often strengthened those beliefs. If it was not, the individual had to either reject the experience, find a way to accommodate it with their existing beliefs, or accept it and reject or change their former beliefs (cf. Barrett & Lanman, 2008; Park, 2013). Sometimes such accommodations could be incongruent with other elements of their beliefs and these ‘inconsistencies’ were often either considered unimportant by the participants or simply were not thought about much at all. This helps explain the idiosyncratic differences between the worldviews of different participants from the same communities (cf. Chaves, 2010; Slone, 2004).

Worldviews Affect Experiences

The relationship between experiences and beliefs was not unidirectional. Individuals’ prior beliefs influenced their experiences in several ways. Perhaps most importantly, an individual’s beliefs influenced the activities that they engaged in and these choices had a large impact on the religious and spiritual experiences that

they might have. Experiencing feelings of divine intimacy and peace during musical worship (see pp. 181-182) or prayer (see pp. 180-181, 212-214) could only occur if the individual participated in those practices. Similarly, an individual who never used Tarot could not experience a sense of connection and purpose as the cards offered hermeneutic insight into their lives (see pp. 278-282). Many religious practices are intended to create or facilitate religious or spiritual experiences, and often deliberate choices to use those practices are required. These choice and practices are thus a consequence of the individuals' beliefs, hopes, and worldviews. Beliefs can beget experiences that affirm and reinforce those same beliefs.

Individuals' prior beliefs and worldviews also influenced how they interpreted experiences that they deemed religious or spiritual, including the very act of identifying them as religiously or spiritually significant (cf. Spilka et al., 1985; Taves, 2009). A core purpose of global meaning systems is to help individuals make sense of events in their lives (Park et al., 2013; Silberman, 2005) and these studies suggest prior beliefs can strongly influence how ambiguous events are interpreted and integrated into individuals' life narratives (see pp. 317-321). However, this was not merely a process of finding explanations after the events. Interpretation is an intrinsic part of experiences and the ongoing process of interpretation can affect how an experience unfolds (cf. Fontana, 2003; R. W. Hood et al., 2018, etc.). For example, associating somatic sensations with a spiritual cause can trigger religious thoughts and acts that become part of the experience (cf. Luhrmann, 2012). Meaning-making is an active and integral part of living life that brings thoughts and deeds together.

These interpretative processes were often communal activities. Trusted individuals, or historical traditions, could both offer support and guidance in how to interpret events and experiences. This applied to both the seemingly supernatural but also more mundane life challenges such as grief. The participants' worldviews and identities influenced the relationships that they formed and valued, which in turn influenced their actions and how they made sense of their experiences. Having trusted offers suggest or affirm spiritual interpretations of events encouraged the participants to understand their experiences and lives in those terms (see pp. 186-188, 327-330, etc.).

Madesh's experiences after his surgery (see p. 243) provide a good example of how an individual's worldview and beliefs can shape the experiences they consider spiritual. Laying in hospital after major surgery, dehydrated and heavily medicated, his experiences could have been interpreted simply as dreams or hallucinations that had no lasting significance. However, Hinduism offered another interpretation – that his experiences were 'real' encounters with something divine. The religious symbols and context provided by the rituals his relatives performed in his room made the possibility of a religious explanation more salient (cf. Spilka et al., 1985) and may have also had a more direct influence on the content of his experience. If Madesh had been Christian, he may have interpreted the 'something' he sensed as an angel or the Holy Spirit. However, he was not and so interpreted the experience in ways that were consistent with, and which reinforced, the Hindu beliefs of his childhood. These interpretations changed how he viewed himself and the rest of his life. They transformed a situation that was dangerous and beyond his

control into one that had positive and lasting meaning; rather than being continuing to be afraid of the uncertainty of death, it gave him a sense of comfort and control.

An individual's beliefs and worldview shape both their actions and their interpretations of events. Worldviews provide symbols and tools that minds can use to understand and express features of the world and themselves. Religious or spiritual experiences may be the bedrock on which religious systems initially develop (Rappaport, 1999), but for many individuals these systems of belief stimulate and shape experiences that are deemed spiritual or religious, both mystical and more mundane (see pp. 181-182, 241-243, 322-326, etc.). The relationship between existential beliefs and experiences deemed spiritual or religious is thus both reciprocating and iterative.

Conflict, Crises, Choices, and Change

The participants all had reasonably established and stable worldviews, due to the recruitment criteria (see pp. 148-149). However, they described enough periods of change in their lives that some key patterns can be identified in how their meaning-making developed. The participants in these studies appeared to usually interpret their experiences in ways that were consistent with their worldviews (see pp. 317-321). However, at times they experienced things that challenged how they thought about themselves and the world and these moments of hermeneutic conflict played a key role in the way their worldviews developed. As Park (2013) suggests, stressful events that are discrepant with an individual's global meaning system require reappraisal of either the event or of the person's broader understanding of the world.

Research into posttraumatic growth (see Exline & Rose, 2013; Tedeschi et al., 2017) suggests that traumatic events that create conflict between individuals' understanding of reality and their experiences can lead to reinterpretations and other developments in people's worldviews. When significant events in people's lives challenge their worldviews they often, though perhaps not always, attempt to find ways to make sense of those experiences. Experiencing trauma or crises often caused the participants to turn to religious coping strategies (cf. R. W. Hood et al., 2018; Pargament et al., 2013, etc.). Using these coping tools sometimes facilitated experiences the participants found comforting and considered religious or spiritual in nature. The participants believed such experiences affirmed their religious beliefs and helped cultivate positive relationships with the things they considered sacred.

Less frequently, experiences during periods of trauma and adversity could precipitate a period of existential questioning that led to significant changes in the individual's worldviews. These experiences included both some the participants considered explicitly religious or spiritual in nature and others they considered mundane. These periods of existential doubt and searching sometimes lead to the discontinuation of previous religious practices and/or the embrace of new ones. Both these types of change following traumatic experiences could be framed positively as spiritual growth by the participants, or those around them, if they were considered 'better' than their previous beliefs (Exline & Rose, 2013).

However, not all challenges to the participants' worldviews and meaning-making processes were traumatic or overtly stressful. Relatively trivial or mundane experiences could also cause individuals to question how they understood the

world. Paloutzian (2017) suggests that doubts, such as those caused by conflict with scientific explanations, and social influence can both lead to changes in an individual's meaning systems. For individuals who live in a diverse society, which contains multiple existential cultures, such competing explanations for events are not uncommon (L. Lee, 2015). Taves and Asprem (2018) also suggest these day-to-day experiences of more trivial conflict and dissonance can have important effects on worldview dynamics. The data in these studies supports this view. For many of the participants, these 'smaller' encounters with competing existential explanations challenged aspects of their worldviews and were sometimes sufficient to make them reevaluate some aspects of them. For example, Simon said his beliefs about homosexuality slowly changed because of frequent interactions with gay friends (see p. 189).

These observations suggest that experiences play a crucial role in both sustaining and changing people's beliefs. It seems likely that without a reason to question aspects of their beliefs, and in a context that repeatedly affirms them, most people are unlikely to undergo substantial changes in their core beliefs. However, experiences that do not neatly fit with an individual's worldview can create doubt and questions about what is real or true. Sometimes these questions can be ignored, sometimes they can be answered in ways that reinforce the individual's core beliefs, and at other times they can stimulate significant changes in how the individual understands themselves and the world. Figure 4 (p. 370) illustrates this process. Experiences, especially those that are deemed sacred and particularly significant, are the beating heart that drives the dynamic and ongoing development of individuals' personal worldviews.

Narratives and the Self

For all these participants, finding (or creating) a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives was important. In contrast to Strawson's (2004) assertions, all the participants used narratives to help understand and explain their lives and experiences (cf. Bruner, 1990; Schechtman, 2011). Past experiences, including negative ones, were considered meaningful because of their connections to subsequent ones (see pp. 274-276, 317-321, etc.). The participants' very sense of self was shaped by these stories they told about themselves; they were inherently relational and involved making connections between events, objects, and people. As Taves et al. (2018) suggest, meaning-making processes and narrative identities were closely linked for these participants. Their understandings of themselves were both conveyed through narratives and also, at least in part, constructed using them too.

In addition to their personal narratives, the Christian and Muslim participants all viewed their lives as part of larger narratives that transcended themselves. These metanarratives (Midgley, 1985) or myths (Schnell, 2003) were a central part of the religious traditions they belonged to and the institutional worldviews that they shared. These stories, which were deliberately and repeatedly shared, appeared to offer the participants a source of hope and comfort in the face of adversity. They enabled shared worldviews to be conveyed in a form that was easier for the participants to remember and understand. The Hindu and SBNR individuals were less certain about the ultimate purpose or meaning of their lives. However, they still attributed significance and meaning to key events in their lives and believed they suggested some sort of greater purpose or plan for their lives.

Different existential cultures (L. Lee, 2015) offered explanations and metanarratives to the participants and they used the ones they found convincing or useful (see pp. 335-340).

The participants did not just ascribe meaning to events through narratives; the narratives they used to understand the world also gave meaning to the participants themselves. The narratives they adopted, created, and shared placed them in a web of relationships with others (including supernatural beings) and these relationships were integral to the participants' sense of self (see pp. 322-330). Imbuing their experiences with significance, meaning, and/or purpose in these ways appeared to help the participants function in the world (Park, 2013; Silberman, 2005) and seemed to improve their wellbeing and self-esteem. It seems likely that both the relationships themselves and the perceived control (and decreased uncertainty) they gained through the meaning-making processes contributed to the benefits they perceived (cf. Hood et al., 2018). In these studies, narratives appeared to be a particularly potent type of belief which were both shaped by the participants' experiences and also used by the participants to help understand their experiences.

Summary

The relationship between beliefs and experiences deemed religious or spiritual was complex, iterative, and reciprocating. The experiences which the participants deemed religious or spiritual often played important roles in shaping and affirming their beliefs and worldviews. Similarly, their worldviews and beliefs shaped both the experiences they had and how they understood them. Figure 3 (p. 369) illustrates this iterative process. The participants' worldviews were systems of beliefs that collectively helped them understand

who they were, how the world worked, and how they should live in it (cf. Johnson et al., 2011; Taves & Asprem, 2018). The participants created and shared narratives to help them understand these existential questions. These acts of active meaning-making in response to life experiences could either affirm or, less commonly, change the way they understood the world and themselves. Some events and experiences became significant and meaningful because of the discursive acts that explained them and placed them in relationships with other events, people, and supernatural beings (cf. Taves, 2009). Beliefs related to these significant experiences could then have a lasting influence on how the participants lived and how they made sense of later experiences.

Figure 3

The Iterative Relationship Between Beliefs and Experiences

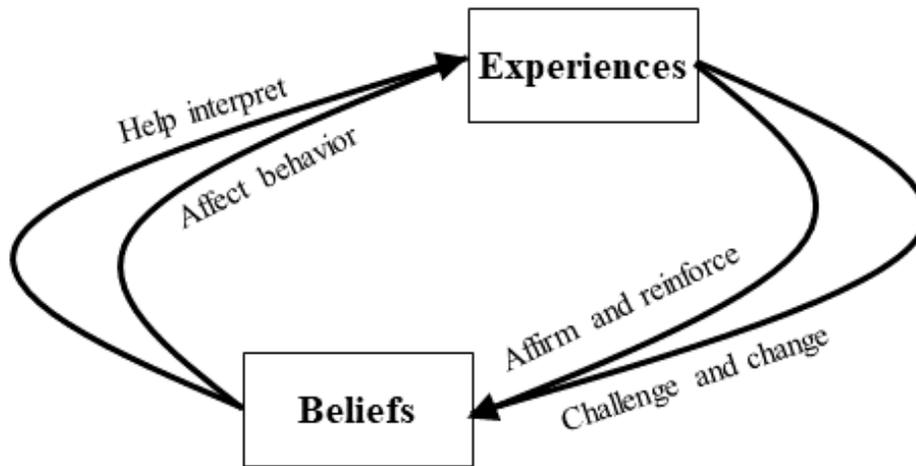
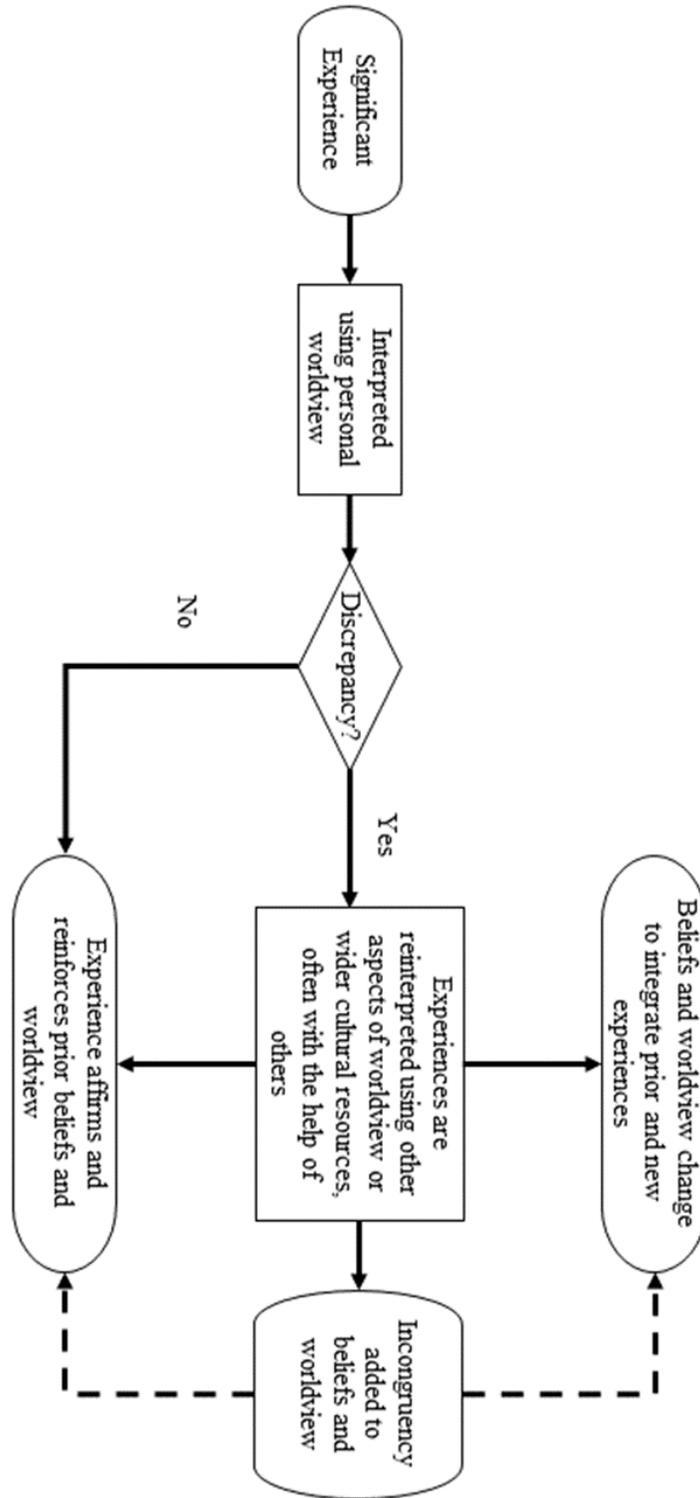


Figure 4

Significant Experiences and Worldviews



Implications

The findings of these studies have a broad array of implications. These include implications for the academic study of religion, for aspects of public policy, and for both therapeutic and pastoral practice. This section will briefly review some of these implications and make suggestions for further research to explore them. These implications are based on interpretative understandings of the data and where they go beyond the data they should be considered with an appropriate degree of caution. However, many of the participants expressed strong interest in the practical ways the research could help enhance their collective practice and benefit both members of their communities and society more widely. Concerns with living well and enabling others to live well were an intrinsic part of their worldviews (cf. Johnson et al., 2011; Taves & Asprem, 2018) and their participation in the study was because of those concerns.

Implications for Academic Study

These studies show phenomena deemed religious or spiritual are an important element of many people's lives, which affect how they think and act. Investigating the importance of such experiences should be an integral part of trying to understand human psychology. The diverse range of experiences that individuals report in different cultural contexts means developing a better understanding of them is an important part of diversifying psychology. As researchers increasingly include more non-WEIRD samples in their research (Henrich et al., 2010; Sue et al., 1999), they must be sensitive to how differently people can experience and make sense of the world. The importance of these

topics suggests more prominence should be given to them within both undergraduate and clinical psychological training.

These studies also show the importance of meaning-making within religious and spiritual experiences. This supports calls for a wider adoption of a meaning-systems (Park et al., 2013; Silberman, 2005) or worldview (Johnson et al., 2011; Taves & Asprem, 2018) approach, which foregrounds and explores how and why individuals experience and interpret phenomena in the ways they do. The findings of these studies also suggest that a holistic and encompassing perspective is necessary to fully understand these processes, as such experiences are often part of a comprehensive web of experiences, practices, and beliefs. Labels like ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ continue to be useful, but it is important that research does not view these as more than discursive categories without universal meanings. Research should also explore ‘non-religious’ (L. Lee, 2015) worldviews alongside ‘religious’ ones and not view religiosity as something that is added onto a secular base (cf. Taylor, 2007).

The diverse experiences of the participants, and the different ways they described them, demonstrates why it is important to adopt a more critical approach to categories and constructs within the psychology of religion. Despite advances in related fields, such as religious studies and the sociology of religion, too much research by psychologists continues to rely on overly simplistic categories and constructs. Exploring the associations between such constructs can generate some insights, but a more sophisticated and theoretically sensitive approaches are also needed (cf. Batson, 1997; Hood et al., 2018). Just collecting data about the

frequency of participants' religious activities or their certainty that God existed would have failed to capture the important interactions between their different religious activities and their shifting views about the nature of the divine.

As discussed on pp. 37-46, a wide range of research methodologies can help us understand phenomena deemed religious or spiritual. Quantitative and experimental studies continue to have an important place within the discipline, particularly for testing theories, but researchers should be more mindful of the limitations of such studies. Multivariate statistical approaches, including structural equation models and various kinds of multiple regressions, offer one way to deal with the complexity of 'religious' phenomena. These approaches are an important part of researchers' toolkits but their nomothetic nature means they unavoidably obscure some differences between participants. For some research questions this is not problematic, and can even be beneficial, but for other questions the details of individual participants' experiences are crucial to understand the processes involved. Fractionating approaches (White, 2017; Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014) that are culturally sensitive and investigate specific beliefs and practices of specific participants seem to have particular promise.

The participants in these studies show how the understanding or meaning of key concepts can vary even within a very specific religious group (and within the same individual over time) and it is important that any quantitative measures used are sensitive to these differences. Longitudinal research designs that sensitively measure how the same participants' beliefs and activities change over time are also necessary if want to understand worldview dynamics and meaning-making processes. These approaches are more expensive and complex than cross-sectional designs but high-quality studies, with strong sampling

techniques, are needed to study these phenomena quantitatively. However, as studies that manipulate participants' deepest beliefs are ethically dubious some natural experiments and retrospective designs will remain necessary.

Qualitative methods, with purposively chosen samples and rigorous analysis, offer an effective alternative to explore research questions related to meaning-making. Good interview techniques can elicit far richer data than many quantitative measures, particularly when retrospectively assessing changes. Methods like IPA (Smith et al., 2009) and Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013) are explicitly designed to explore how individuals experience phenomena and make sense of them. Similarly, various forms of Discourse Analysis (Coyle, 2007a; Holt, 2011) have been developed to study how language and other symbols create and sustain meaning. Each of these approaches, when executed well, go beyond simply describing phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Coyle, 2007b; Patton, 2015). A key tenet of good research design is that the methods used should be appropriate for the research question(s) and sometimes qualitative approaches are likely to generate richer or more insightful understandings than other approaches.

The transferability of the findings of any single qualitative study are limited, but this is also true of quantitative studies. In both cases, meta-studies enable the synthesis of multiple studies to develop richer and more widely applicable understandings and theories (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Suri & Clarke, 2009). Each of the four studies in this thesis developed useful insights about the individual group they studied but the synthesis of them enabled deeper patterns to be identified and explored (see pp. 305-346). While such syntheses can generate hypotheses that

are suitable for quantitative testing, this should not be seen as their primary function or the only standard by which their value is determined. Qualitative research generates a different kind of understanding that is not less valid or scientific than positivist and/or quantitative approaches (Coyle, 2007b, J. A. Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). For the psychology of religion to truly benefit from these insights, and if it is to generate richer and stronger theories in the future, researchers in the field need to increase their literacy about qualitative methodologies and what they are capable of achieving.

The multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Paloutzian & Park, 2013) provides a strong foundation for the ongoing study of religion. Both qualitative and quantitative studies can make valuable contributions to enhance our understanding of worldviews and meaning-making processes. Theories and understandings developed using one methodology should be tested and further developed using other methodologies and in different contexts. When doing so, it is important that the core principles of the different epistemologies and methods associated with them are respected, rather than inappropriately transplanting evaluative standards from one approach to another. Integrating research using different approaches can be challenging but a critical realist approach (see pp. 105-109) provides a suitable framework to do so.

As this thesis has repeatedly shown, other academic disciplines can make beneficial contributions to advance the psychological study of religion. An increased awareness of this literature would greatly enhance the quality of many studies. In particular, an increased awareness of the diversity of humanity's existential beliefs will help the field move beyond understandings that are often still rooted in Christian cultural assumptions despite decades of critique (cf. Batson, 1997; Fitzgerald, 2000, 2017). Interdisciplinary projects, drawing on

expertise from different disciplines, have the potential to generate strong and insightful research (Aldrich, 2014; R. R. Brown et al., 2015). The increased need for connections between researchers also includes better integration within psychology; this would benefit both the study of religion and the study of psychology as a whole (cf. Batson, 1997; R. W. Hood et al., 2009).

Implications for Public Policy

These findings also have several implications for public policy, because of the many domains of life that are connected to religiosity and spirituality (see pp. 29-37). The participants themselves were, as an intrinsic part of their worldviews, concerned with how to live well and how to enable others to do the same (cf. Johnson et al., 2011; Taves & Asprem, 2018). However, the participants had contrasting understandings of how others (and particularly children) should be encouraged or required to act. Such disagreements about what the aims of public policy should be are not uncommon. There are many who advocate the advancement of their own religion as a key function of good government and others argue governments should be secular and protect the rights of all equally (Modood, 2010; Shah, 2018; Topal, 2012). This research does not suggest what the aims of public policy regarding religiosity should be. It does, however, show the importance of various policies and suggest how certain goals may be achieved or hindered.

These studies show the importance of how children are raised and that this can have lasting effects on their beliefs, including about themselves. Questions about who has the right to determine what children are taught can be contentious

(e.g., Allgaier, 2010; Bi, 2020; Plutzer et al., 2020; Poole, 2018). In the UK, the rights of parents are not absolute and children who are deemed to be harmed can be protected by the state. In some cases, such as the denial of medical treatment the harm being caused by parents' religious beliefs is quite clear (Asser & Swan, 1998; McDougall & Notini, 2014). Less consideration is often given to the long-term harm that can be caused by raising children with homophobic, misogynistic, or other prejudicial attitudes towards themselves or others (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018; Mann, 2013). Weighing up the competing rights and best interests of children and families is not an easy task. The potential long-term consequences of children's upbringings on their subsequent actions and values suggest more attention should be paid to these issues, even though doing so may be politically divisive.

One area where this is particularly applicable is in schools. Attitudes and approaches to religious education vary considerably between countries and policies in the UK have also changed significantly over the last century (Clarke & Woodhead, 2015). This research suggests that if the aim is to teach children to accept particular theological beliefs, and not question them, then it is probably advantageous to separate them from alternative beliefs and surround them with a community that all views the world in a similar way. However, if the goal is to create a multicultural and tolerant society, then children should be encouraged to mix and make friends with people from a diverse variety of backgrounds (cf. Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

The data in these studies suggests, albeit tentatively, that including the study of a wide range of different worldviews within the education system, and encouraging children to think about why people believe the things they do, may cause them to question aspects of

their own beliefs. If done sensitively and appropriately, however, it should not encourage them to embrace particular beliefs (Commission on Religious Education, 2018; Freathy & John, 2018). Many of the participants reported having friends with different religious beliefs to them but this usually did not cause them to reject their families' beliefs. It is also important to remember that children have agency in their own beliefs and their autonomy should be encouraged (Hemming & Madge, 2012; Strhan & Shillitoe, 2019).

In recent years, the UK government has attracted considerable criticism for its policy of enshrining 'British Values' within the education system (Healy, 2019; Revell & Bryan, 2018; Struthers, 2017). Aspects of these criticisms are valid and important, such as about the vagueness of the concept and the dangers of implying the values are uniquely British. However, there does appear to be some merit in the attempt to imbue all members of society with a shared identity and some common values. The participants all wanted their children to be raised with a sense of belonging and values that were beneficial to them and society. These findings suggest a shared and cohesive narrative, about who and what a society is, can help develop such an identity.

This may be especially important when children are at risk of radicalization or are taught by their families to believe things that are considered harmful to wider society. These decisions are inherently political and can be very controversial. The UK government's Prevent scheme has received extensive criticism because of aspects of its implementation and the perceived effects it has on certain minority groups (Qureshi, 2015; Reed, 2016; P. Thomas, 2016). However, safeguarding

children should be considered an important responsibility and some worldviews can lead to dangerous or harmful behavior (Mann, 2013; Moghaddam et al., 2013). Sensitive and nuanced understanding of how children develop extremist ideologies appears to be an important topic for ongoing research. The findings of these studies suggest that a wide range of social and cultural factors may contribute to the development of such worldviews, as much other research has also shown (cf. Moghaddam et al., 2013; Verkuyten, 2018). These studies also suggest that these worldviews are likely to develop through the combination of these social influences and experiences that appear to affirm the developing beliefs. More focus on the role that such experiences can play within the process of radicalization appears warranted. It should be noted that these comments also apply to non-religious worldviews, including right-wing extremism and conspiracy theories like QAnon (LaFrance, 2020; Stevenson, 2019).

Worldviews and religiosity can be a crucial part of communities' identities that influence their behavior, and provide important resources for coping with life (Pargament et al., 2013; Park, 2013). This suggests that interventions in areas like public health might be made more effective by working with the existing values and practices of communities (cf. Long et al., 2019; Olivier, 2016). Framing interventions in ways that respect the beliefs of communities and using religious organizations to help reach members of society that may otherwise be difficult to contact could potentially have significant benefits to society. Encouraging and supporting such groups may also enhance the wellbeing of their members (cf. Koenig, 2012; Park & Slattery, 2013).

Implications for Pastoral and Therapeutic Practice

These findings also have implications for both pastoral and therapeutic practice. Many of the participants were explicitly concerned with how they could effectively support members of their community as they faced challenges in their lives. Several participants said the desire to improve our understanding of these issues was the principal reason they agreed to participate in the research. Collectively, these studies provide further evidence that religion and spirituality have the potential to help some individuals cope with and make sense of difficult experiences in their lives (cf. Pargament et al., 2013; Park, 2013). Religious leaders and communities often provide valuable support in challenging times, and this was commonly seen as part of their function and purpose. Individuals' experiences during these times of heightened stress appear to sometimes have a lasting consequences for their beliefs and worldviews (cf. Exline & Rose, 2013; Taves et al., 2018), which raises several potential ethical issues.

When the individual involved is already an active member of a religious or spiritual community, providing pastoral or spiritual care should not be considered controversial in most circumstances. In this context, the individuals' beliefs may still be changed by their experiences, but they should be supported in accordance with their wishes. In providing this support, it appears that maintaining supportive social relationships with other members of the community may be important and beneficial. Similarly, encouraging continued engagement with the groups' ritual practices may also help affirm the individual's sense of identity and help them find meaning. Where it is appropriate to the tradition, encouraging direct engagement

with God or other higher powers (such as through prayer) also has the potential to be beneficial. Providing comfort and support in these ways seems likely to help affirm the individual's sense of self and place in the world, improving their wellbeing and helping them cope with the adversity they face (cf. Pargament et al., 2013).

However, traumatic and other difficult experiences also have the potential to catalyze personal growth and an evolution in how an individual understands themselves and the world (see pp. 189-191, 284-286; de Castella & Simmonds, 2013; Exline & Rose, 2013). If an individual is doubting some, or all, of their prior beliefs it is not clear that these doubts should automatically be viewed as negative just because they go against the values of a wider community. Often there will be asymmetrical relationships of power between doubting individuals and the religious leaders in their community and attempting to reinforce the views of religious authorities in such circumstances could be harmful to the individual (Binon, 2012; Mann, 2013). This is particularly true if specific religious beliefs reinforce harmful stigmas that themselves cause trauma. In such circumstances, specialist support that helps the individual process their experiences and doubts may be appropriate and necessary.

In therapeutic contexts, sensitivity to and respect for the client's beliefs and culture are important (Pomerantz, 2020; Sperry, 2013). The integration of religious symbols or tools within therapeutic practice can sometimes make it more effective, particularly when the client has strongly held beliefs (Hook et al., 2010). Further research into how best to integrate religious tools to augment therapeutic work is necessary, but such integration should only occur with the express consent of the client and when the therapist has appropriate competency and religious literacy (Hook et al., 2010; Sperry, 2013). Secular

adaptations of some previously religious techniques, such as mindfulness (Cavanagh et al., 2014; Farias & Wikholm, 2015) or exercises to cultivate compassion and connection (e.g., Gilbert, 2009) also have the potential to be beneficial and should continue to be explored.

When one or more aspects of an individual's belief systems are causing harm there may be an ethical imperative to help reduce that harm (Knapp et al., 2017; Mann, 2013; Pomerantz, 2020). This applies whether the beliefs are religious or not. For example, an individual may struggle to reconcile being gay and being Muslim. In these sorts of situations, the therapy may need to engage with aspects of the clients' religious tradition and beliefs more directly. Many religious traditions are diverse and seemingly contradictory beliefs or desires may be able to be reconciled in some way. However, the consequences of changing religious affiliation or orientation (even within the same broader religion) can be severe and involve the transformation or loss of important supportive relationships. Ultimately, clients should be given the agency to make these choices for themselves. However, in supporting these decisions an awareness of the external pressures they are dealing with and the potential consequences of their actions is important.

Changes in beliefs and identity can take considerable time, and the support of a new community can be valuable during the time of transition (see pp. 186-188, 294-297, 327-330). Many religious communities intentionally devote resources to helping new converts integrate, and it seems that achieving a high degree of social integration can help consolidate and sustain the convert's new worldview. However, if the individual is transitioning from a religious worldview towards a non-religious

one, then they may not have access to a new support network in the same way (Winell, 2007). Building new social networks and finding new sources of meaning and affirmation can take considerable time, potentially longer than the period psychological support is available for, but appears important for nurturing the individual's long-term wellbeing. Greater awareness of the difficulties such individuals face, and increased provision of support groups and specialist therapists, would be beneficial to many. Non-religious chaplaincy services (Hurley, 2018; Schuhmann & Damen, 2018) can provide a vital service for religiously unaffiliated individuals and should be funded alongside religiously oriented provisions.

Individuals experiencing challenging or traumatic circumstances should be supported and encouraged to articulate their questions and doubts. If their existing worldview can help them resolve their problems, and they wish to draw on religious or spiritual resources, then they should be encouraged and guided to make use of them. However, if this is not the case, they should be supported to search for new sources of meaning, belonging, and identity. These can either be combined with or replace prior ones - until the individual has a new way of making sense of the world that gives them a sense of purpose and stability. The guiding principle should be that the care provided meets the individuals' needs and that they have agency in the type of care they receive (Liefbroer et al., 2017; Sperry, 2013).

Methodological Evaluation

The studies in this thesis show how IPA is a suitable and useful methodology for exploring religious and spiritual experiences. It enabled both the experiences themselves to be investigated and the ways that the individuals who experienced them made sense of them. The semi-structured interviews elicited rich and illuminating data that allowed the development of deeper insights into the lived experiences of the participants. Other qualitative approaches, such as reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2019), may have generated similar insights, but the idiographic approach of IPA facilitated a richer understanding of the complexity and relationships between the different elements in the participants' lives.

It is difficult for some of J. A. Smith's (2011) criteria for assessing the quality of IPA studies to be applied to one's own work. However, I hope it is clear that the analysis subscribes to the three theoretical principles of IPA - it is idiographic, hermeneutic, and phenomenological. I also hope that the analysis is at least coherent, plausible and interesting - and believe both the data and interpretation are strong. Only a limited amount of extracts could be included in the final version of the write-up, but each theme includes sufficient extracts to support it, and in many cases go beyond the minimum extracts from three participants per theme. I also hope the processes used to describe the development of the analysis are sufficiently transparent, although fully describing the iterative evolution of individual themes is not possible within the space available. Each of the studies presents an in-depth analysis of a specific topic, although for reasons explained in

the contextualization chapter (see pp. 46-77) and discussed further below (see pp. 387-389) those topics are intentionally relatively broad. Ultimately, only the reader can judge the last category that J. A. Smith (2011) outlines - whether the analysis is engaging and particularly enlightening. I hope that it is.

Developing Stratified Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

At the start of this project, I did not intend to develop a new way to conduct multiperspectival IPA. The intention was to apply existing qualitative research methods to help address the over-reliance of quantitative methods in the psychology of religion (Aten & Hernandez, 2005; R. W. Hood & Belzen, 2013). However, during the development of the final proposal for the project, it became clear that IPA was the most appropriate tool for addressing the primary research questions. As discussed in the methodology chapter (see pp. 113-116, 120-124), J. A. Smith et al. (2009) describe how IPA can also investigate secondary research questions, and how multiperspectival designs can assist with that. However, the lack of literature addressing exactly how to do that meant that a key element of the thesis became methodological innovation. This presented a number of challenges, and added considerably to the total workload involved, but also offered the opportunity to make a further original contribution that can benefit psychology more broadly, as well as the related disciplines that also utilize IPA. Despite Larkin et al.'s (2019) recent article, there remains a need for a more specific set of guidance for conducting multiperspectival IPA with directly and indirectly related groups. The approach presented here, SMIPA, meets this need.

The basic principles of SMIPA were relatively simple to develop, although the terminology and fuller explanations of the rationale took more time. As described in the methodology chapter (pp. 119-124), the goal of any multiperspectival study is to develop a richer understanding of phenomena than is possible with a single study. SMIPA provides a legitimate and useful way of sampling and synthesizing in such studies. A wider range of possibilities are presented in that chapter than could be tested in a single thesis, and some of them may be equally effective to the decisions made in the studies that followed. For example, although the use of a 2x2 design probably represents the best balance possible within the scope of a doctoral thesis it would still have been interesting and potentially useful to include more than 4 studies within the design. Similarly, a 1x2 or 1x3 design could also have been justified and may have been more appropriate for a doctoral thesis that also included significant methodological development and innovation. More ambitious and extensive designs, like a 3x3x3, have the potential to generate rich and deep understandings of phenomena, but to do so would require a significant research team and funding. Ultimately, only further studies in different domains and using different designs will determine the most effective way to conduct SMIPA projects, but this thesis provides an important ‘proof of concept’ for the process.

Evaluating the Conceptualizations of the Phenomena

Two of the riskier elements in the design of this project were the decision to treat religiosity and spirituality more holistically, rather than focusing on very specific phenomena, and the decision to treat different religious traditions as indirectly related groups. As discussed in the contextualization and methods chapters (see pp. 46-77, 139-146), there were sound reasons for making each of these choices, but they still represented a risk. The data could, and ultimately did, support this approach, but the only way to test the theory was to apply it. If the experiences of the four groups had been radically different, then the synthesis may not have been possible - but each IPA study would still have made a valuable contribution individually.

The decision to treat religious and spiritual experiences, or the relationships that individuals have with that which they deem sacred, as a single and inclusive phenomenon was made primarily because it enabled the participants' own sense-making to determine what was included in the study's scope, rather than importing external categories into the studies. As can be seen in each of the studies, the participants' religiosity involved many different and yet linked phenomena. Any of these, such as prayer or the Hajj, could have been legitimately studied as a single phenomenon using IPA. There is a surprising lack of such studies and they have the potential to enhance our understanding of many religious practices and phenomena (see pp. 84-95). This more focused approach, examining narrowly defined phenomena, is common in IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). However, more expansive studies can also be effective and IPA can study the lived experiences of homogenous groups (e.g., Cassar & Shinebourne, 2012; Sinclair & Milner, 2005). The participants viewed terms like 'religious and spiritual experiences' as valid emic categories and, despite

the definitional issues involved, these studies show they have some value as etic categories too - as long as the imprecise and expansive nature of the category is appreciated. Studying the connections between the different experiences of the participants and their wider contexts was necessary to understand any of the single experiences, with each part helping to understand the whole and the whole helping to understand each part (J. A. Smith, 2007; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

The second potentially problematic decision made during the design of the study was to treat different religious and spiritual groups as indirectly related. This decision could be critiqued from two opposing directions. Those advocating a more ecumenical or 'common core' understanding of religious experiences (e.g., Stace, 1960) could argue that the groups should be viewed as directly related instead. However, the assumptions of this group are highly questionable (see pp. 46-77) and in terms of design whether the groups are indirectly or directly related makes little difference. By treating them as only indirectly related, there was more scope in the analysis for the data to guide the determination of how close the connections between the experiences of the different groups should be. An alternative, and arguably more valid, objection would be that these different groups should not be viewed as related at all, and that categorizing them as such reflects Western biases (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2000, 2017). However, all the participants were humans who tried to make sense of the world and who had experiences that they considered spiritually significant. The objects and phenomena they were interacting with may have been ontologically different, but even if they were the process of making sense of their experiences and coming to deem them as spiritual or sacred was shared between

them (cf. Bruner, 1990; Taves, 2009). Discussions with the participants after the interviews suggested that they all viewed the other religious groups being investigated as sharing some key features with their own. The participants were all happy with labels like 'religious and/or spiritual' and 'worldviews' being applied to both themselves and the other groups. Viewing the four groups as indirectly related is a balanced compromise that acknowledges both the similarities and differences between them. If the analysis is judged to have generated useful insights into the broader phenomena, then the classification and design are pragmatically useful - and I believe it is.

Evaluating the Dimensions of Variation

The use of orthodoxy and orthopraxy as the dimensions of variation for determining the strata was probably the least satisfactory element of the overall study design. As the discussion in the synthesis chapter (pp. 341-344) explores, there were some clear differences between the groups regarding their flexibility of belief and practice. However, the diversity within each of the groups meant these differences were not always as distinct as they might have been. The Muslim group was the most homogeneous, and the participants had high degrees of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, although the participants within it still showed noticeable diversity within the bounds of what they considered acceptable. In contrast, the SBNR group showed low degrees of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, although this does not mean there were not many shared beliefs and practices between the participants. The Christian group also showed a high degree of orthodoxy, but while their practices were in theory more fluid than many Christian denominations, there was still a relatively high degree of orthopraxy between the participants. The Hindu group, who were intended to be

high in orthopraxy and low in orthodoxy, were in many ways similar to the SBNR group. They shared some religious rituals and some beliefs, but were relatively flexible with both. Ultimately, this diversity showed the complexity of lived religious experiences (M. B. McGuire, 2008) and how individuals often hold incongruent (Chaves, 2010) and sometimes ‘theologically incorrect’ (Slone, 2004) beliefs. It is a strength of IPA that these complexities could be drawn out in the analysis, and this issue underlines the importance of idiographic approaches that are sensitive to the full range of individuals’ beliefs and practices.

The goal of the stratification process in SMIPA is to ensure a diverse range of perspectives for inclusion in the synthesis, and the four groups selected met that aim. As discussed in the synthesis chapter (pp. 341-344), the dimensions of variation appear to have helped shape some of the participants’ experiences, and this suggests the rationale for using them was relatively sound. Alternative dimensions of variation, such as geographical origin or type of theism, are likely to have had similar problems because of the inherent complexity and diversity of religiosity. IPA recognizes that different individuals will have different experiences and that unraveling the divergence and convergence between cases helps understand the underlying phenomena. The divergence and convergence between the different groups helped develop a richer understanding of religious and spiritual experiences.

Evaluating the Synthesis Process

The approach taken to synthesizing the data was effective, enabling the development of multiple metathemes which each conveyed key aspects of the data. This integration was more than just descriptive or comparative, with the data and analysis of each study helping to develop a richer understanding of the underlying phenomena that the participants experienced (cf. Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006). Although there was little previous literature on synthesizing IPA studies specifically, the theories and techniques developed for synthesizing qualitative research more generally were epistemologically consistent with IPA and enabled effective analysis of the data. This grounding in established research methods helps ensure the validity of the SMIPA approach. The similarities between the methods used and those advocated by Larkin et al. (2019) further support the rationale and approach taken here. As with any methodological development, the ‘proof is in the pudding’. If the metathemes are judged to present an integration of a diverse range of experiences that enriches our understanding of the phenomena then it is a success and SMIPA has been demonstrated as useful. This does not, of course, mean it should be used for all multiperspectival IPA studies, but researchers should consider its use where appropriate.

Working on the synthesis of the studies, and studying the theory of qualitative research synthesis, showed the potential of this approach for developing deeper understanding and stronger theorizing than is possible within a single study. SMIPA is one way of achieving this, and I hope that the work here is used by others to explore a wide range of domains. However, a simpler and perhaps more important point is that qualitative research synthesis itself is neglected as a methodology. In many cases, a good quality

synthesis of previous qualitative studies may contribute more to our understanding of phenomena than an additional piece of primary research. The importance of meta-analysis is generally recognized by quantitative researchers, but qualitative research synthesis is not given the same status (and is rarely taught.) In areas where there are already more than a handful of primary qualitative studies, researchers should strongly consider synthesizing the existing studies before conducting new studies. Doing so will help develop a richer understanding of the phenomena and identify what aspects of the phenomena require further study.

Reflexivity and Reflections

As noted previously, reflexivity and reflection are important in any research project because researchers influence their work in many ways (Bolton, 2010; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This section elaborates on the reflexive processes used throughout the project to monitor and control the impact of my own experiences on the interpretative process (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). It then discusses my experiences while working on the research and the effects they may have had.

Reflexive Processes

As part of my previous postgraduate study, I had completed a reflective assignment that explored my own religious/spiritual development and narratives. I reexamined and updated this several times during the project, paying particular attention to my own beliefs and the reasons I attributed to them. When developing the interview schedule, I also tested it on myself and analyzed the transcript to

further explore my own beliefs and experiences. This study (Murphy, 2018) was not included as a direct part of this project but helped further develop my understanding of my own experiences. These reflections formed the basis for the account presented in the researcher background section of this thesis (pp. 95-103) and provided important context for the research. My experiences stimulated my interest in this area of research and helped equip me to study it effectively - but they also affected how I view the phenomena, making me more inclined to question and probe accounts more deeply. This process of ongoing, conscious reflection helped ensure that I was aware of the way my experiences were shaping the research and enabled me to articulate and question my assumptions more effectively (Bolton, 2010; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). My choice of a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach is also partially due to my own experiences of phenomena deemed religious or spiritual. They gave me an awareness of the importance of the detail of such experiences and the complex (but often implicit) processes by which such experiences are evaluated and then either integrated into, or rejected from, wider systems of belief.

The process of memo writing throughout the research process (see pp. 169-170) not only documented the decisions I made and my thoughts at different stages of the project, but also provided an opportunity for explicit reflection on what was shaping my thinking (Charmaz & Bryant, 2008; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Memos made immediately after each interview captured my initial reaction to the stories participants shared, as well as identifying the aspects of the interviews which seemed most significant. The iterative analytical process involved these initial reactions being re-examined several times, developing increasingly nuanced understandings of the data. Recording why I thought particular episodes or themes belonged together, or in some cases no longer 'worked',

helped ensure the reasoning for these decisions was robust and not simply intuitive (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000).

Supervision also played a crucial role in ensuring the validity of my interpretations and that they were rigorously developed and firmly grounded in the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2013; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Across the span of the project, there were five members of my supervisory team who all brought different insights and perspectives. Their thoughtful questioning often made me re-examine my assumptions and helped ensure the interpretations I developed accurately reflected the descriptions and experiences on which they were based. Discussing potential themes with others is an effective way of both testing emerging theories and sparking new ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2013; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The discussions with my supervisory team made the final analysis stronger and more rigorous than it would otherwise have been.

Other academic influences also shaped my thinking throughout the course of the research. I intentionally tried not to immerse myself too much into the research literature before conducting the interviews and analyzing the data, so that my analysis would not be unduly influenced by prior theoretical constructs (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). However, bracketing myself from the research literature entirely was neither possible nor desirable (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). My prior academic study and life experiences meant I brought knowledge and expertise into the study that could not, and should not, be set aside entirely. This expertise was important for designing the study and developing the methodology used, and ensuring the originality of the research concept.

Academic conferences also made important contributions to both the development of the research and my development as a researcher. They provided opportunities to present my ongoing work and receive feedback from experts beyond my supervisory team. Discussions with other scholars at these conferences, and their research presentations, exposed me to a wider range of theoretical and methodological approaches than would otherwise have occurred. The area where this influence can be seen most clearly is in my transition from ‘meaning systems’ to ‘worldviews’ terminology, a change that is largely semantic but which would not have been made without extensive interdisciplinary conversations with other scholars. These intra- and interdisciplinary influences are an important part of good scientific practice and helped develop a broader understanding of the phenomena being studied (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). However, it is important to acknowledge their influence and to be aware of the social dynamics that helped shape my own beliefs during this period.

Key Reflections

My own experiences helped me understand the vivid and convincing nature of some of the experiences described by the participants. When the participants presented certain experiences or events as ‘proof’ that their beliefs were true, I understood the depths of their convictions as I had made similar arguments myself when I was younger. This helped me take the participants’ experiences and beliefs seriously, even if at times the contents of them seemed strange. When the participants described feeling close to God or the sense of being communicated with by something beyond the human, I found it relatively easy to understand and show both empathy and suspicion towards their emic interpretations

(Larkin et al., 2006; Ricoeur, 1970). Similarly, when they attributed events to divine providence, I could both understand their perspective and also consider alternative interpretations. However, at times my interpretations of the phenomena described were probably still tinged by my own emotions and memories to some extent. Aware of this possibility, I was careful to always probe the participants' descriptions and tried to do so in ways that took advantage of my experiences without importing assumptions from them. This appeared to be successful, as participants' descriptions and interpretations sometimes reflected my own and at other times diverged from them significantly.

As discussed previously (see pp. 232-233), the effects of being an outsider (Chryssides, 2019; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) were most noticeable during the interviews with the Muslim participants. The participants were generally eager to tell me about their beliefs and practices but, in some cases, they appeared to be guarded in their responses. Some participants may also have responded differently to a female researcher. Each interview is always a co-creation of the participant and the researcher, and the data collected reflects both of them and the situations they are in when the interviews are conducted (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). IPA's idiographic nature allows the analysis to be sensitive to these factors, and it is important not to assume that the same data would have been collected in another place or at another time. The data provides a snapshot and insights into the participants' lives that can be explored but which is not exhaustive of their experiences.

During the interviews, the participants described many challenging (and sometimes traumatic) events they had experienced or encountered. These included death, grief, illness, poverty, and abuse. The level of trust required for these revelations suggests a high degree of rapport was developed within the interviews. The raw intimacy of some of the accounts also suggests they were honest reflections on what the participants considered most important in their lives, and it was often tangible how they were seeking to make sense of their experiences. This was sometimes difficult to deal with, particularly when their experiences closely mirrored my own. Throughout the interviews I tried to remain detached and neutral, listening to their accounts and probing them without sharing my own experiences. Having prepared the participants for this in advance, they responded well to my sympathetic body language and gentle probing to continue expressing themselves. It was a privilege to be trusted with such raw and intimate details, although to protect the participants some of these details have not been directly described within the text of this thesis.

The most difficult elements of the interviews occurred when participants shared beliefs that strongly opposed my own, or which seemed strange to me. Listening to a mother describe why she thinks vaccines are evil or dangerous was hard, as such a stance can do harm not only to her own children but also other children (cf. Benecke & DeYoung, 2019; Hotez, 2019). In a similar vein, some of the participants shared views that were misogynistic or homophobic. To build rapport and understand why they held those beliefs, a (mostly) non-judgmental attitude and non-confrontational attitude was required. This made me feel somewhat uncomfortable, but challenging these views was not appropriate in this context. It would have limited the quality of the data collected and probably have little

or no impact on the individuals' beliefs and values. Instead, exploring why the participants held those views by gently probing hopefully caused them to at least reflect on why they believe what they do. As a general principle and strategy, I tried to treat all the participants' opinions and experiences equally and to adopt a neutral and relatively quiet stance throughout all the interviews. The interview transcripts suggest this was successfully achieved.

Throughout the entire project, my research caused me to reflect upon many of my own experiences (see pp. 95-103). Many of my memories of the time in my life when I was very religious are now somewhat painful, or at least bittersweet. I was happier during that period of my life than I have been since. The ethical difficulties associated with trying to change people's beliefs are challenging, and yet the actions of society unavoidably have that effect. As discussed on pp. 376-379, I believe serious consideration needs to be given to who gets to determine the beliefs of children when they can have both beneficial and harmful consequences. Such determinations, however, are beyond the scope of this work.

I have also considered, at length, whether I would still have experienced the same, painful transition in my beliefs if I'd had stronger (or closer) support networks when I went to university. Might I then have found other ways to justify or explain the challenges to my beliefs I encountered? Or does my personality, intelligence, and childhood mean I was always likely to become an 'amazing convert' away from my faith (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997)? It is impossible to know, as many intelligent and compassionate Christians who studied alongside me did not undergo similar transformations of their beliefs. Ultimately, it is not possible

to fully know the reasons that any individual develops the beliefs they do. However, these studies show it is possible to at least find patterns of meaning-making and shared influences on the processes across different groups of people.

Looking at the diverse range of experiences and beliefs my participants held, it seems arrogant to assume that those of my family were right and everyone else is wrong. Throughout the course of this research I was open to my own beliefs changing again, and part of me wanted that to occur. That did not happen. I respect my participants' interpretations of their experiences and their lives, but find them problematic as explanations for the nature of life and the world. Ultimately, IPA cannot determine whether Yvonne was really spoken to by the spirits of ancient beings preserved in her collection of crystals. However, it can explore her perceptions of those experiences and suggest some tentative insights into the possible underlying actual events and real mechanisms involved in the process (Bhaskar, 1975; McGhee & Grant, 2017). My data and analysis does not preclude the possibility of supernatural components within the participants' worlds, but such a component does not appear to be either necessary or likely to me.

Conclusion

This study began with an intuition, based on years of experience of phenomena commonly considered religious or spiritual. That experience suggested religious and spiritual experiences often played an important role in shaping many individuals' beliefs. It also suggested that the experience of having a relationship with supernatural beings could be particularly significant and influential for some individuals. The findings of these studies broadly support those original intuitions.

The research presented in this thesis suggests that experiences deemed religious or spiritual are an important facet of many people's lived experiences and that they play a role in shaping and affirming the worldviews of many. Many people, both historically and in the contemporary world, have described experiences they consider spiritual or sacred. These experiences sometimes have profound effects on their lives and the lives of those around them. These experiences are intertwined with wider social and cultural factors. The accumulated influence of many experiences often appeared to be more significant than dramatic, singular experiences - although key experiences can play important roles within a broader nexus of experiences. For many people, the experiences and relationships they consider sacred can be an integral and integrating part of both how they view the world and how they understand themselves. This means they can affect many aspects of their behavior and a full understanding of the actions of such individuals requires sensitivity to the influence of their religious or spiritual identities and beliefs.

These studies also show how qualitative and idiographic methodologies can develop important insights into the complexity of religiosity and spirituality. These studies show how the details and nuances that nomothetic methodologies aggregate and obscure can be crucial to understanding phenomena. Synthesizing qualitative research also enhances the benefits of a qualitative approach, allowing the development of more robust and applicable findings. Many researchers (see pp. 15; 42-44) have called for more use of such approaches and this project shows the sort of contribution that can be made when researchers heed those calls.

People form their own understandings of the world as they live their lives, drawing on both their own direct experiences and the social and cultural resources at their disposal. Finding meaning and making sense of experiences appear to be fundamental aspects of being human. How an individual understands their self, their sacred, and their world are strongly linked. These understandings are inherently relational and narrative. They situate the individual in a wider world, with relationships that transcend themselves and offer explanations that guide how they live their lives. Understanding these attributions of significance, value, and meaning is a crucial and integral part of understanding human psychology. This thesis helps untangle this complex web. It shows how experiences, communities, and the attribution of meaning to experiences help create the worlds in which we live. Regardless of how they are described or categorized, the process of creating and sharing these stories is the essence of our shared humanity.

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APPENDIX 1: ETHICS APPROVAL CONFIRMATION

15 November 2016

Ref: 16/SAS/303C

Mr James Murphy
c/o School of Psychology, Politics and Sociology
Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences

Dear James

Confirmation of ethics compliance for your study “*The Self and the Sacred: A psychological examination of the relationships between believers and their God(s).*”

I have received your Ethics Review Checklist and appropriate supporting documentation for proportionate review of the above project. Your application complies fully with the requirements for proportionate ethical review as set out in this University’s Research Ethics and Governance Procedures.

In confirming compliance for your study, I must remind you that it is your responsibility to follow, as appropriate, the policies and procedures set out in the *Research Governance Handbook* (<http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/centres/red/ethics-governance/governance-and-ethics.asp>) and any relevant academic or professional guidelines. This includes providing, if appropriate, information sheets and consent forms, and ensuring confidentiality in the storage and use of data. Any significant change in the question, design or conduct of the study over its course should be notified to the **Research Office**, and may require a new application for ethics approval. It is a condition of compliance that you **must** inform me once your research has been completed.

Wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely



Roger Bone

Research Governance Manager

Tel: +44 (0)1227 782940 ext 3272 (enter at prompt)

Email: roger.bone@canterbury.ac.uk

cc: Dr Chris Pike

APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Aims of the Study

Many individuals have relationships with the sacred (God, gods or other divine beings) that play an important role in their lives. The aim of this study is to explore these relationships and to increase our understanding of how they develop and their effects on people's lives. Much of the research that has been done in this area has been conducted with Christian participants in the United States and this study seeks to broaden our understanding by working with individuals from a wide range of British faith groups. We are interested in learning about your experiences and beliefs.

It is hoped that your participation in the study will increase our understanding of the relationships that humans form with the sacred. These relationships can have many consequences for human wellbeing and yet have received relatively little academic study, particularly in 21st century Britain. It is hoped that the insights you share will help in the development of increased understanding and enable better psychological and spiritual support to be provided.

What's Involved?

Participation in the study involves attending one interview of approximately 60-90 minutes duration. During this interview you will be asked to share stories about aspects of your life, experiences and beliefs, with a focus on your religious or spiritual experiences. If you do not wish to answer any particular questions you do not need to do so - simply inform the interviewer that you do not wish to share that information. You may withdraw

from the study at any time during or after the interview without having to give a reason, and with no adverse consequences.

Your identity and participation shall be both confidential and anonymous unless you disclose something that there is a legal obligation to report. The interview will be recorded but this recording will only be used to create an anonymous transcript of the interview. All identifying information in your answers shall be changed prior to analysis and publication. If you wish you may suggest an alias for use in the study, otherwise the researcher will assign you one. After the interview you may be contacted via email and asked to provide clarification of any points that are unclear. Your information and the data you provide shall be securely stored for 5 years after publication of the research, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the university's own data protection policies.

During the interview itself we are interested in learning about your thoughts, beliefs and experiences. You will be asked open questions and given the opportunity to share your stories and opinions. After the interview is completed you will have the opportunity, if you wish, to ask the interviewer questions about the study.

Risks and Outcomes

Participation in the study has minimal risks but as you shall be asked to talk about some events that may be personal, sensitive or emotional there is a small risk that you may experience some distress or discomfort. Please remember that you do

not need to talk about anything that you do not wish to and may pause or terminate the interview if you need to.

This study is part of the principal investigator's PhD and it shall primarily be published as part of his thesis. Aspects of the study may also be published in academic journal articles or presented at conferences. In addition to this, summaries of the research may also be shared in other mediums such as blogs. Your participation and identity will be confidential and anonymous in all methods of distribution. If you wish to receive a digital copy of the final thesis then you may indicate this on the consent form.

Contact details of Principal Investigator and Supervisor

This research study is being conducted at Canterbury Christ Church University. The principal investigator in this study is James Murphy (james.murphy@canterbury.ac.uk). Please feel free to contact him with any questions or concerns that you have either during or after the study.

Dr Fergal Jones (fergal.jones@canterbury.ac.uk) is supervising the study and may be contacted if you have any issues that the principal investigator cannot resolve to your satisfaction.

If you have any questions about the information provided here please ask the researcher now.

APPENDIX 3: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH FROM

Please ensure you have read and understand the information given on the information sheet. If you are happy and wish to participate, please circle yes to the following:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the current study.

Yes No

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason.

Yes No

I understand that my information will remain confidential and anonymous.

Yes No

I agree to take part in the above study.

Yes No

I give consent for my interview to be recorded.

Yes No

I would like to receive a digital copy of the thesis that results from my participation in the study.

Yes No

Name:

Signed:

Date:

Email:

APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

This is a semi-structured interview designed to take 60-90 minutes to complete. During the interview, particular care must be paid to the researcher's use of language, particularly with regard to loaded terms like 'God' or the 'Sacred'. The preferred terms of the participant for these concepts should be elicited and used by the researcher in a sensitive and respectful manner. The interview consists of seven sections, each of which has an initial lead question that can be adapted as necessary. Additional guidance is supplied below for each section. Sample prompt questions are also provided, to indicate possible follow-ups if the participant's initial answer is brief. The participant should be encouraged to answer the questions openly and in a way that makes sense to them and that is true to their experiences. The order of questions is flexible, and the researcher should be responsive to the interview as it unfolds.

A. Can you tell me about yourself? (5m)

This section explores how the participant currently views themselves and their place in the world. The initial question(s) should be open, and not explicitly mention religion/spirituality. If the participant does not bring up religious or spiritual aspects of their current identity, then they can be asked specifically about them after they have provided an initial description of themselves.

- 1. What do you do for a living?**
- 2. What are the most important relationships in your life?**
- 3. Do you belong to any groups or communities?**

4. What do you enjoy doing the most? Why?**B. Can you tell me about your childhood and growing up? (5m)**

This section is intended to elicit information about the participant's background and previous experiences. Aspects of this may have previously been covered, but if they have not then prompt questions should be asked about their childhood, family and cultural background. Questions should explore the most significant events in their life, though these should be open and not explicitly mention religion/spirituality at this stage.

1. What was your family like when you were growing up?**2. What values were important in your family?****3. Can you tell me about your educational background?****a. How did you find school?****b. What did you do after school?****4. What do you think is your greatest accomplishment?****C. Can you tell me how you understand the world and your place in it? (5m)**

This section begins the transition into deeper topics, after rapport has been built during the previous questions. The questions here are focused on meaning and purpose, seeking to build up a picture of how the individual experiences their wider world. Questions should also be asked, if appropriate, about whether they have always viewed aspects of the world as they currently do and, if not, what they think caused the changes.

- 1. What makes life meaningful for you?**
- 2. Do you think that you have a purpose?**
- 3. What matters the most to you?**
- 4. How do you decide if something is right or wrong?**
- 5. Why do you think 'bad' things happen to people?**
- 6. Is there an overarching plan/guiding force to your life?**
- 7. What do you think will happen after you die?**

D. Can you describe God, as you know him/her, to me? (10m)

In this section of the interview, questions are explicitly asked about religion/spirituality. The terminology used for these questions should reflect the language used by the participant to answer previous questions, or in the absence of that should be based on the faith tradition with which they identify. These questions are designed to draw out both explicit and implicit theology: what the participant 'thinks' about the sacred and how they 'feel' about it. An explicit description of how the participant views 'the divine' should be sought at this stage. Follow-up questions should ask about the development of this concept. Anthropomorphic questions will only be used if the participant's answers make it appropriate to do so. This section also asks about what religious/spiritual practices the participant partakes in.

- 1. What do you think God is like?**
- 2. How do you feel about God?**
- 3. How do you think God feels about you?**
- 4. How do you think God feels about other people?**

- 5. How do you think God acts?**
- 6. How do you know this/why do you think this?**
 - a. What do you think about people who have very different experiences of God?**
- 7. What religious/spiritual activities do you take part in?**
 - a. How often?**
 - b. Why?**
- 8. Are there benefits from knowing God in the way that you do?**
- 9. Are there downsides or costs to knowing God in the way that you do?**

E. What experiences of the Sacred have you had? (20m)

In this section, narratives about specific 'spiritual' experiences are sought. Questions should be appropriate to previous disclosures about the participant's beliefs, but the standard format is to seek detailed accounts of at least three spiritual experiences: the first, the most recent, and whichever the participant deems most significant. If the initial accounts do not include them, then prompt questions can be asked about the antecedents and consequences of the experience, in addition to seeking to make explicit the meaning and interpretation that the participant attributes to each experience.

- 1. Can you tell me about the most significant/important spiritual experience of your life?**
 - a. When was it?**
 - b. What had happened previously?**

- c. What was it like?**
- d. How did it make you feel?**
- e. What happened afterwards?**
- f. Did it change anything?**
- g. If so, why do you think it did?**

2. Can you tell me about the first spiritual experience you had?

- a. When was it?**
- b. What had happened previously?**
- c. What was it like?**
- d. How did it make you feel?**
- e. What happened afterwards?**
- f. Did it change anything?**
- g. If so, why do you think it did?**

3. Can you tell me about your most recent spiritual experience?

- a. When was it?**
- b. What had happened previously?**
- c. What was it like?**
- d. How did it make you feel?**
- e. What happened afterwards?**
- f. Did it change anything?**
- g. If so, why do you think it did?**

F. Have your beliefs changed during your life? If so, when and why? (10m)

This penultimate section seeks to clarify any issues that have not been adequately covered in previous sections. In particular, it focuses on the developing and dynamic aspects of the participant's beliefs and of their relationship with 'their god(s)'. It also asks about their expectations for the future.

- 1. Do you think your beliefs have changed during your life?**
- 2. Have there been any sudden/radical changes?**
 - a. What has changed?**
 - b. What do you think the reasons are for those changes?**
- 3. Have there been gradual changes?**
 - a. What has changed?**
 - b. What do you think the reasons are for those changes?**
- 4. How has your relationship with God changed?**

G. Do you have anything else you'd like to say? (5m)

This final section asks the participant if there is anything important about their religious/spiritual beliefs and/or experiences that they would like to either add or clarify. It is a chance for them to resolve anything that they feel has not been covered satisfactorily.

- 1. Is there anything else about your religion/spirituality that we haven't spoken about, that you'd like to tell me about?**
- 2. Is there anything about yourself or your experiences, that you'd like to say before we finish?**

APPENDIX 5: WORKED EXAMPLE OF THEME DEVELOPMENT

Analysis in any IPA study is an iterative and interpretative process, during which the researcher(s) use a range of hermeneutic tools and seek to go beyond merely describing what the participants reported (Smith et al., 2009). Elements of the data are examined both in isolation and then collectively, with different insights helping to enlighten each other and develop a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and meaning-making (see pp. 109-117, 160-165). This process of repeated interrogation and constant refinement of emerging ideas is impossible to fully convey, however, in the interests of transparency and rigor (Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, 2000) this appendix shows the development of one subordinate theme: 'Times of religious focus strengthen faith.' This theme eventually became part of the 'Submitting to God' superordinate theme within the 'Allah has told us everything' study (see pp. 209-219).

Post-interview Memos

The earliest stages of analysis occur prior to coding the data, during the interviews themselves when the researcher(s) seek to identify key elements of the participants' experiences and explore them (Smith et al., 2009). This is an integral part of the semi-structured interview that guides the choice of follow-up questions asked. After the interviews, memos were used to record some of the interviewer's initial thoughts about the data and what elements within it seemed particularly important (see pp. 169-170, 392-395). These memos did not explicitly mention either Ramadan or Pilgrimages. However, several

of them did allude more generally to how communal religious practices were an important part of the participants' lives.

Initial Coding

The initial coding of data in an IPA study examines each participant's experiences in isolation and so the earliest coding within the analysis does not identify cohesive themes across the entire dataset (Smith et al., 2009). The first participant whose experiences were analyzed was Aatifa and Ramadan was clearly important and special to her. Bahiya, the second participant whose experiences were analysed, did not discuss Ramadan at all but she did speak quite extensively about her experiences visiting Mecca as a pilgrim and for her those experiences were clearly very important. The three remaining participants all discussed both Ramadan and pilgrimage, with a variety of nuances in their experiences.

As Ramadan and Hajj are two of the five pillars of Islam (Murata & Chittick, 2011) it was not surprising that they both featured so extensively in the participants' lived experiences. Further analysis was required to develop an understanding of the role these experiences played in the participants' meaning-making processes. Early stages of the analysis developed Ramadan and Hajj/Pilgrimage as two distinct themes, although they were eventually consolidated into a single theme. Not every extract related to the themes is included in the discussion below; the most pertinent and insightful have been selected and discussed.

Ramadan

Aatifa spoke extensively about Ramadan, as can be seen in the extracts below (Table 13). Provisional themes developed from her data included ‘Ramadan is good’ and ‘Ramadan makes you more religious.’ The initial annotations on her comments also identified that Ramadan was viewed as having practical benefits by Aatifa and that it was an inherently communal event for her.

Table 13

Extracts from Aatifa Discussing Ramadan

Extract	Comments
<p>“Ramadan comes along every once a year. Erm, and it's something that I've done since being a kid, you know. A child at a very young age, and it's quite big in the family, in my household we all sort of eat together and it's nice to have that whole month to that, Erm. So yeah, I do take part in that regularly, you know, strictly. Erm, I don't drink,</p>	<p>This long extract shows how important Ramadan is for Aatifa and how it has always formed an integral part of her family life. It's a communal activity, but one which she believes she derives personal benefits from. Her comments about missing out when she can't participate (due to accepted exemptions such as</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>we eat a certain type of meat which I'm quite strict on as well... I think it's a family thing, I mean I think they've got quite a big influence obviously my parents are quite religious. There is a big influence on ... you know doing it and being part of it. But... even when I was at uni and not living at home, I was still doing it. And that was sort of personally for myself. [I] quite enjoyed it and it is hard because you have to go without water as well. It's not just the food element, erm, but if you don't do [it] you feel like you're missing out on something. Because I've had, you know, experiences where I've not been well and not been able to do it. Erm, and I think that you do feel like oh I haven't done it today you</p>	<p>health-related reasons) show the importance she now places upon it.</p> <p>Her description of it making her feel good encompasses a range of benefits, including the social and the spiritual.</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>know it doesn't feel as good as maybe when you do do it.” (Aatifa)</p> <p>“I think it's [Ramadan] kind of like a... almost like a month of detox kind of, that kind of thing... Yeah, I think it just feels... you just feel a better person. You feel more sort of, coz your eating at certain times as well, so physically as well you don't feel, I mean you do eat at odd times but actually it feels quite nice and you kind of get used to it.” (Aatifa)</p>	<p>This extract explains more about why Aatifa finds Ramadan beneficial. There is an emphasis here on the physical benefits of the practice, but the wider context of her comments implies that this ‘detox’ also includes stepping away from other unhealthy practices/activities and focusing more on her faith.</p>
<p>“I think during fasting you're more in the zone of the whole religious place and maybe then you would start reading... I think it's just having the time, obviously. With work and everything you don't really get the time to do it. Erm, but yeah I don't do it as much as I should but during Ramadan it's kind of like there in</p>	<p>This extract underlines how Ramadan involves more than just fasting. It makes her religion more salient and because it affects her throughout the day it impacts her whole life. The final comment about it being ‘in her head’ more really reflects how during Ramadan she is</p>

Extract	Comments
your head and you do it kind of a lot more.” (Aatifa)	constantly aware of her obligations and identity as a Muslim.
“But when you start regularly fasting in that month you really experience, like, you know, just it's just different. Erm, it's more religious than your whole life really. Erm, and I think it was probably in that month that I, that it [my personal faith] kinda clicked.” (Aatifa)	Here Aatifa returns to the same point again, making it clear how Ramadan is different to the other months of the year for her. ‘Religious’ clearly has positive connotations for her, and the blessing of Ramadan is that it makes her whole life and faith make more sense.

The analysis of the interviews with Chahid, Dahra, and Ebrahim all found similar emphasis placed on Ramadan and its benefits. As noted previously, the analysis at this stage continued to explore each case independently (Smith et al., 2009). Provisional themes related to Ramadan developed in the analysis of these interviews included: ‘Ramadan helps restore faith’ (Chahid), ‘Ramadan and Eid are special times’ (Dahra), and ‘Ramadan purifies you and makes you a better Muslim’ (Ebrahim). The interview design intentionally did not ask about specific religious practices and so the absence of mentions of Ramadan within Bahiya’s interview does not mean it can be assumed that it was entirely unimportant to her; however, she did not consider it one of her most important religious experiences or

activities when asked about them. The extracts in Table 14 give a sense of how and why Ramadan mattered to Chahid, Dahra, and Embrahim.

Table 14*Extracts from Chahid, Dahra, and Ebrahim Discussing Ramadan*

Extract	Comments
<p>“Ramadan helps you, and that’s part of Ramadan. It’s part of Ramadan, it’s one of the beauties of Islam that Islam gives you that month to really...gives you that reason that will drive [you]...to stop being lazy, to stop that procrastination and get, you know, get going, basically.” (Chahid)</p>	<p>In this extract, Chahid makes it clear that he views Ramadan as something good (even though it is not easy.) He views it as something that God gives him as a blessing, to help him, rather than just as something that he does ‘for’ God.</p>
<p>“The way I see it, you know, [is] like a dam, and you’ve got... What’s it? Not a dam...where the boats come in... Er...locks. And, obviously, you’ve got your multiple locks, you’ve got your multiple locks. And then you take one of these locks out. I’m not drowning, the thing hasn’t...the water hasn’t come in. You’re like, oh, that’s OK.</p>	<p>This long comparison between Ramadan and a system of locks gives great insight into how Chahid not only sees Ramadan but also how he struggles to live his faith throughout the year. Life can be challenging, so over time his faith and practices become less than he’d like them to be. Ramadan, when the whole Muslim community comes</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>You don't know how many locks are there before the water crashes in. And that's how I see it. And it's the case where I have let too many of these go and the water has come in. And then you try to put those locks back in, and it's difficult to do that. You know? So, it's now the case where Ramadan comes in and the water sort of gets drained away; you can put those locks back in and, hopefully, you can try and keep those locks in place. And, yeah, that's probably the best analogy for me and hopefully that explains it a bit better." (Chahid)</p>	<p>together to refresh and affirm their shared faith, gives him a chance to fix the issues that have crept in before they become too catastrophic. It doesn't fix things permanently, but it provides an important opportunity for regular 'repairs' that prevent him reaching the point where things are beyond repair.</p>
<p>"But because now we know, no, we restrain from it, we cannot, just to please Allah, I'm not going to. Nobody is even going to hide and do it. Even children if, for example,</p>	<p>In this extract, Dahra talks about why she (and others, in her opinion) observe Ramadan. She repeatedly emphasises that it is to please Allah and because her religion tells her it</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>a child who is, just like, who wants to fast, they will never cheat anyone because they know Allah is there watching them. And they are doing it for Allah. So, again, I would say it is all about the faith and the belief you're doing and why you're doing. So, again, it's just a month to do. And, believe me, like now, what, today it's the seventh one [day], so it's just once your body gets used to it, and you get into that routine about getting up and, you know, breaking the fast and then doing other prayers and all, like very strictly, that's the month where you really do it most strictly because, you know, this is one of the blessings, the month which has been really blessed by Allah. So why not get the more rewards in</p>	<p>is required. For her, this was the driving reason behind observing Ramadan even though she also talked at other points about how it was beneficial and how she enjoyed the communal aspects of it.</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>this? So, yeah, it's all about because we have learnt our religion says to do it. So we are doing it." (Dahra)</p> <p>"I would say, especially with Ramadan, which, when it ends, so Eid, that's the most beautiful day, the most beautiful time for every Muslim, I would say. Somehow you feel different that day, believe me. Like, d'you know? Even that day, you would say thank Allah that I am Muslim. I don't know. It's the charm, it's...because you are rewarded, like, d'you know? Um, and then, obviously, on that day, you are having feasts and you are greeting people. You get gifts from each other. So, it's just a different scenario. Like you would say, 'Oh, yeah, that was really good.' Even at times, when we are fasting, you</p>	<p>Eid (al-Fitr) and Ramadan are intimately connected, as Eid marks the end of Ramadan. In her words her, Dahra suggests that part of the reason for Eid being so special is the sacrifices that have preceded it. It is a special time of the year which she considers beautiful for a range of reasons, both social and spiritual. Looking forward to Eid helps her when Ramadan gets difficult.</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>would say, ‘Oh...’ At times, you do think. After all, you are a human being and I would say, ‘Oh, gosh, it’s going to be a whole month!’ But no, it goes quick. And then in the end, it’s the reward you are after. Even for the little children, when we ask them to do some work, you do tell them, ‘Ok, if you do this, this, this, you will be rewarded, you will.’ And the children automatically do it. So, I think it’s human nature. When they think of any rewards, and why, what’s the aim behind it, you really look forward to it. But, yes, Eid, I would say that’s one occasion that is really, like, you can’t express your feelings on that day. It’s something different. And it’s really,</p>	

Extract	Comments
<p>really nice to, like, you know, celebrate it.” (Dahra)</p> <p>“Ramadan is not all about fasting. It’s not all about being not eating, not drinking anything. Ramadan is about feeling. Ramadan is about erm, sacrifice. Erm, the feeling of somebody who is not fortunate enough to feed themselves or their family, how they feel. Erm, the feeling of being thirsty, that how somebody who is working throughout the day in certain maybe has a very heavy burden you think. So, it’s a, it’s about feeling. It’s about charity. Er, in Ramadan Muslims all over the world give more charity than any other part of the year. So, Ramadan is about charity. Ramadan is about purification. Erm, like, erm, you</p>	<p>In this extract, Ebrahim emphasises how Ramadan is about so much more than just the physical act of fasting that is most commonly associated with Ramadan by non-Muslims.</p> <p>His words emphasise how Ramadan is about cultivating the right attitudes and becoming better Muslims, by doing all the things that he believes please God.</p> <p>He emphasizes that everything he does during Ramadan is ‘for Allah’ and that is the driving motivation behind all his acts of charity and sacrifice. For him, the emphasis of Ramadan is not on the benefits he or others gain from it; rather, it is</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>know, erm, stay away from sin, erm, don't do bad things, don't do the things such as like you know, is not reasonable, you know, any, any bad thing. You know, so it's, its weaning yourself away from the sin, going towards the purity and, er, of course you're doing it for, all for Allah. So, you've got to pray in Ramadan five times a day, try to recite Qur'an in the evening. In night prayers we do Du'a, which is an extension of prayers, twenty more prayers. So there are quite a lot of things involved in Ramadan. So, it's about, er, charity, so sacrifice, it's about, you know, giving away the bad habits and also giving away those things which is Halal, which is permissical, but you are giving it, giving it away for</p>	<p>on becoming better people so that God is pleased. He clearly found it beneficial in achieving that aim.</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>Allah, and to know that how other people feel if they haven't, they haven't got the means to feed themselves." (Ebrahim)</p>	

Taken together, the early stages of analysis suggested that the themes related to Ramadan from the different participants could be consolidated into a single theme, provisionally entitled: 'Ramadan is a blessing that helps you become a better Muslim.' It did this by drawing the participants closer to their community and God, increasingly the salience of their faith, and giving them an opportunity to begin afresh when their practices had fallen below the standards they aspired to. This provisional theme title conveys more than just the unifying content in the participants' data; it also captures and conveys the role these experiences played in the participants' meaning-making.

Pilgrimage

Bahiya and Chahid, the second and third participants to be interviewed, both discussed pilgrimages they had made to Mecca. It was immediately clear that these were significant experiences for them both and that they helped understand the way they made sense of their lives. Provisional themes developed from their data (see Table 15) included 'Experiencing comfort and awe in the House of God' (Bahiya) and 'Hajj is a good obligation' (Chahid).

Table 15*Extracts from Bahiya and Chahid Discussing Pilgrimages*

Extract	Comments
<p>“We went and we did one of the pilgrimages that you do. Um, going into the Mecca and looking at the Kaaba, I think I was in complete awe. Um, and it was, there was no division between people, everyone was there of all colours, um, and it was just like we were all there to do the same thing.” (Bahiya)</p>	<p>Bahiya’s first experience of pilgrimage was when she was quite young, and she identified it as one of the most important spiritual experiences in her life. Her words convey both the strong emotional response it provoked in her and also the central importance that the communal nature of the act had.</p>
<p>“I think when you’re doing it, for me, it’s just on a one-to-one basis so it was between me and God. I was in, um, I almost feel like I was entering God’s house as if I was a visitor there. So, um, yeah, it was just nice and it was just very, um, probably one of the most times that I have actually felt content and at ease.” (Bahiya)</p>	<p>Bahiya’s second visit to Mecca took on more personal significance for her, as she had a more internal focus during it. In contrast to her earlier feelings of awe, this time she felt comfort and intimacy.</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>“The second time I actually did it for myself and, um, so each step I took, I kind of like, I just had a complete understanding of why I was doing it. Um, and I liked doing it, you know. The way I felt, although it was exhausting, physically, um, mentally, you know, I was buzzing as such.” (Bahiya)</p>	<p>Bahiya elaborates on how her internal focus and increased understanding of the significance of each act she did made them more meaningful. Despite the physical exhaustion involved, her experience invigorated her mentally. Her increased understanding helped her shift her focus away from the external sights and crowds.</p>
<p>“I have been on pilgrimage. Um, but, oddly enough, I wouldn’t say that’s when I have been most connected [to God]. Er, it’s an act. I’m not saying it’s a bad act, I’m just saying it is a... I wouldn’t say act, that’s the wrong word. It is a, like I say, it’s a pillar, it’s a... What’s the word I’m thinking of? Um... It’s an obligation to do it. Yeah? So, just because you’re obliged to do it, er,</p>	<p>Chahid makes an important point here. While pilgrimage is a good and helpful thing, it isn’t a ‘magical’ fix to problems that guarantees a spiritual high point. Other factors also can affect how spiritual experiences are perceived, and equally it is possible to achieve closeness to God in other places.</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>it doesn't mean that that is where you are going to be most spiritually at your highest peak. It would be nice to be at your highest peak and I'm not to say I wasn't spiritually at a good place, but it doesn't mean necessarily that you are going to be at your highest, er, spiritual place just because you are there."</p> <p>(Chahid)</p>	
<p>"I won't say a specific time I've been at my most peak, but there's obviously been...Hajj included, the pilgrimage, there's been a good time when you are obviously in that environment, you've got brothers and sisters around you." (Chahid)</p>	<p>In this second extract, Chahid makes clearer that even though Hajj was not the 'best' spiritual moment in his life it was still a good and important one. He also stresses the importance of the communal aspect of the environment and he thinks this is part of what makes Hajj good.</p>

The other three participants had not participated in the Hajj or Umrah themselves, but all three mentioned them positively. Their comments showed how the influence of these acts of religious devotion extended beyond the pilgrimages and pilgrims themselves. Anticipating them gave hope to the participants and the retelling of stories about them helped affirm the faith of the wider communities that pilgrims belonged to. Provisional themes developed from this data included: ‘Hoping for Hajj’ (Dahra) and ‘The journey to Hajj’ (Ebrahim). Aatifa’s comments were not developed into a distinct theme within the initial analysis of her interview, as they were not sufficiently significant to her; however, they did help to inform the understanding of the theme that was subsequently developed (Smith et al., 2009). Table 16 shows the relevant extracts from Aatifa, Dahra, and Ebrahim’s data.

Table 16

Extracts from Aatifa, Dahra, and Ebrahim Discussing Pilgrimages and Religious Journeys

Extract	Comments
<p>“I’ve never been on a pilgrimage; however, I would like to eventually go...” (Aatifa)</p>	<p>Aatifa only briefly mentioned pilgrimage, and in response to a direct question about it. However, this extract shows it is something she views positively.</p>
<p>“I do always tend to go to places where for example it's like a Muslim-led</p>	<p>This extract, where Aatifa discusses visiting Muslim-majority countries</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>country. Or I like to go to those places, 'cause you know you've got... you can eat what you like, you know you can. You won't struggle, and I kind of like those to see what the culture is like in different countries of the same sort of religion... And because it's the country, everyone in the country... well not everyone, but most people, erm, and the laws and things are all different whereas here, because it's an English led country and English law, it is more relaxed... I think it's nice to, especially, when you're a believer of that religion, to then go into a country where everyone around you is the same... Sort of believing the same beliefs and things.” (Aatifa)</p>	<p>more generally, suggests some of the benefits that she experiences on such trips. Although not formal pilgrimages, these journeys to places outside her regular life also enabled her to increase her focus on her faith and be a better Muslim by removing some of the obstacles she experienced in Britain.</p> <p>As with Ramadan and for other participants on Hajj, being surrounded by other Muslims helped Aatifa focus on living in accordance with her faith and doing the things she believed she should do as a good Muslim.</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>“Once in a lifetime, we have to go to the holy place.” (Dahra)</p>	<p>The way Dahra spoke about this was filled with a sense of longing rather than obligation. She did not view it as a burden, despite noting that she ‘had to’ do it.</p>
<p>“I would love to, and we have been trying. Again, even this one, until and unless Allah wants, we can’t. Because, like, last summer, right, we planned that we would go. Because there are two things: there is one, Hajj, which is the special time of the year and you have to do it there. ...and, you know, like, all around the world, people get together there. And there are, so, billions and millions. But, yes, I would really...we are really planning to, but haven’t got the chance yet to go there.” (Dahra)</p>	<p>This longer extract makes Dahra’s longing to visit Mecca much clearer. In it, she centers the will of Allah in determining everything that happens in life. There was a wistful tone in her voice as she spoke about these things and it was clearly something she desired deeply but accepted was ultimately beyond her control. She had to wait and trust Allah for the opportunity.</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>“No, erm, but I decided to [go on Hajj], er, hopefully by the end of this year, I hope. It’s all about making the decision and then we as a Muslim believe that it’s not in our power. It’s actually decided by, we believe, by Allah and Prophet Mohammed. So, you know, I made up my mind to take my, my mother and my family, and my brother’s family together by the end of this year, inshallah.” (Ebrahim)</p>	<p>Like Dahra, Ebrahim hadn’t yet been on Hajj but he recognises its importance and is looking forward to it. His words again show the perceived importance of intent and trust in God to allow his desire to fulfil his obligation to be completed. It isn’t just the physical act of pilgrimage that is important; the decision and preparations are also importance acts of devotion for him.</p>
<p>“My Mum’s [been] there and she said there’s a very, very spiritual journey. Erm, the hardships and everything. But the first sight of, er, the Grand Mosque, which we call Ka’ba and, er, the Grand Mosque of Prophet Mohammed, the first sight is electrifying, you know, and you can’t stop, like, your emotions. Er, it</p>	<p>As Ebrahim talks more about why he is looking forward to the Hajj it is clear how the stories that other pilgrims share on their return can nurture the faith of their wider communities. He has been told by others that it is a special and electrifying experience and wants to experience it for himself.</p>

Extract	Comments
<p>just can't wait, and, erm, the main thing is when you go there, you've got to be very kind. Because everything, including the animals, erm, you can't hit a cat. Where you must, stuff like that, you've got to be very kind, with what you're doing. Absolutely everything.</p> <p>But it is very, er, physically demanding, but very rewarding in case of the spirituality's concerned. It's all about a spiritual journey, [rather] than anything else. So, when you pray there, we never, you don't know how the time flies by, but you enjoy each and every bit of it.</p> <p>Enjoy enough it's special, not in the materialistic sense. So that's what she told me and, erm, I'm looking forward to that." (Ebrahim)</p>	<p>The whole process of deciding to go on Hajj, preparing for it, completing it, and then returning to tell others about it is a spiritual journey for Ebrahim. The future promise of Hajj helps him focus on being a better Muslim now, so that he can enjoy the 'special' rewards that God will give him.</p>

Taken together, the data from all the participants suggested that Hajj and other pilgrimages played significant roles in the participants' meaning-making that extended both before and after the pilgrimages themselves. They were viewed as a special time in the participants' lives, when they could focus on God more than usual, and a visible expression of their devotion. The participants' experiences during their pilgrimages served as a lasting bulwark for their faith that also strengthened the faith of their families and communities. Looking forward to, preparing for, completing, and then remembering visits to Mecca all helped them focus on becoming closer to God, and so these themes were combined into one provisionally entitled: 'Drawing closer to God through pilgrimage.' Pilgrimage was not the only time that the participants tried to become closer to God but they viewed the act of pilgrimage as both a physical and spiritual journey towards Allah.

Consolidating Themes

As discussed above, the initial grouping of themes from the different participants identified 'Ramadan is a blessing that helps you become a better Muslim' and 'Drawing closer to God through pilgrimage' as distinct themes within an 8-theme provisional superordinate theme, 'Relating to Allah'. As part of the consolidation of themes (Smith et al., 2009; see pp. 163-165), the two were combined and the new provisional theme was entitled 'Times of religious focus.' Reducing the number of themes by finding deeper connections between them is an important part of the IPA process that helps develop an interpretative understanding of how the participants make sense of their life worlds (Smith

et al., 2009). This consolidation also meant the combined theme now encompassed significant aspects of each participants' experiences and meaning-making (Smith, 2011).

Both Ramadan and Hajj are pillars of Islam that form special times in the lives of Muslims. While Ramadan is more frequent, there were numerous similarities in how the participants both looked forward to, and drew strength from, these religious practices. Both themes involved the participants focusing more on their religious identities and practices at particular times in their lives. In both cases, there were also clear communal aspects to the activities and the participants described doing them both because they were obliged to and because they believed they benefited from them. The two themes clearly had similar functions for the participants and so were brought together during the abstraction process (Smith et al., 2009). As neither theme could be subsumed under the other, a new theme that encompassed both needed to be developed. As the key shared aspect of the two themes was that these were times when the participants' lives became (in the words of Aatifa) 'more religious' a new theme name was chosen to emphasise the increased focus by the participants on their faith during these periods and how they were perceived as making their faith stronger. This new theme title was: 'Times of religious focus strengthen faith.'

There were also several potential overlaps with other themes, such as the importance of family (which eventually became 'Family provides a secure foundation'), community (which ultimately became 'Belonging to the Ummah'), and 'Feeling connected to Allah.' This overlap between different thematic elements is not unusual within IPA studies and the themes mentioned above also had overlaps with numerous other themes (Smith et al., 2009). Due to their importance in the participants' lives, these aspects of the participants' experiences were developed into their own themes. However, some of these

connections (such as how these times of religious focus enhanced the participants' connections with other Muslims) remained an important part of them, as can be seen in the final write-up of the theme (pp. 215-217).

The theme with the greatest overlap with this one was 'Prayer is a key pillar of faith.' It would have been possible to develop a theme from the data that was focused around the five pillars of Islam. This approach would have obscured some of the important differences between how different religious practices functioned in the participants' lives. Combining these themes would also have projected an abstract theoretical concept into the participants' meaning-making, rather than allowing the data to shape how those processes were understood. Prayer was a time within their daily lives when they focused more on God and their faith. It also strengthened their faith and served as a boundary marker between them and non-Muslims. However, its much greater frequency meant that the participants' relationships with it were different. Prayer was never more than a few hours away and it was an integral part of their daily lives. Unlike Ramadan and Hajj, it was also something the participants sometimes neglected, and it did not have the same special place in their imaginations and memories. 'Prayer is a key pillar of faith' and 'Times of religious focus' were therefore kept as distinct themes, although their complimentary nature meant they were placed under the same superordinate theme.

Developing the Theme Name

The name and nuance of the combined theme changed subtly throughout the course of the analysis. A work-in-progress presentation of the study used the simpler title 'Ramadan and Pilgrimage' for this theme. In subsequent refinements, the theme title first

became ‘Participating in times of religious focus’ and then ‘Times of religious focus strengthen faith.’ These shifts in focus were an attempt to convey more about the function and meaning of the practices for the participants, rather than simply describing the activities themselves (Smith, 2011). This move from describing activities to interpreting their significance and function is an important part of the analytical process in IPA studies (Smith et al., 2009). As can be seen in the extracts above, the participants experienced these events as something that affirmed and strengthened their faith, reminding them of the Muslims they wanted to be and inviting them to focus on faithful obedience to Allah.

Developing the Superordinate Theme

As noted above, a central element of this theme was that the participants observed Ramadan and went on pilgrimages because they believed that Allah required it of them. They were acts of obedience and devotion. This sense of obedience to something greater than themselves was also clear in the themes ‘Following the Qur’an’ and ‘Prayer is a key pillar of faith.’ The participants’ religious acts, and wider lives, were given meaning by the historical revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. The participants viewed living their lives in accordance with this revealed will of God as the most important thing a person could do.

The fourth theme included in this superordinate theme, ‘Feeling connected to Allah,’ focused more on the relationship that the participants experienced with God. This relationship was affirming and yet also clearly not one between equals. The participants’ experienced God watching over them and sought his approval for their actions. The participants’ believed Allah was greater than them and in control of every aspect of the world. They trusted God and sought to accept what they perceived as Allah’s will, even

when it was difficult or painful for them. These four themes (see pp. 209-219) were grouped together because they were all about the relationship between the participants and Allah, while the remaining three themes (see pp. 219-225) were more focused on the relationship between the participants and other people.

As the literal meaning of Islam is ‘submission’, this was deemed an appropriate verb to encapsulate the central aspect of how the participants’ understood their lives, faith, and relationship with God. The concept of submission is also more encompassing than alternatives such as ‘obedience’ or ‘faithfulness’ and better reflects the way the participants’ understood the relationship between themselves and Allah. They did not simply do what Allah commanded or try to serve him, they tried to surrender their entire lives to his will (while believing that everything that happened was in accordance with Allah’s will.) For these participants, their faith and meaning-making involved continual acts of ‘Submitting to God.’ The Qur’an, and broader Islamic tradition, guided their understanding of what God required of them. Prayer provided a daily way of demonstrating and reinforcing their desire to live in accordance with those requirements. Times of religious focus helped them strengthen their faith and those of others around them. Together, these elements helped them experience lives that felt connected to Allah and which they believed were in accordance with God’s desires.