

Article

Psychedelics, the Bible, and the Divine [†]

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[†] NB: Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are from the NRSV translation.

Abstract: The current psychedelic renaissance intersects with Christian practices in two key ways. First, as psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT) becomes more common, Christians undergoing therapeutic medical treatment may seek outside support for integrating into their religious lives mystical experiences that occur during psychedelic sessions. Second, with increasing legal access to psychedelics, more Christians may explore their spiritual potential outside of a medical context, either individually with spiritual guides or collectively in organized retreats. Many will have mystical encounters related to the Divine. Whether the experience involves the overwhelming presence or absence of the Divine, these Christians, too, will seek integration support. This essay argues that the Bible can serve as a rich source for such integration, because it contains significant material about mystical experiences marked by altered states of consciousness. First, I summarize the importance of the psychedelic renaissance, especially the scientific studies being conducted, as it relates to Christian practices of spiritual formation. Second, I explore new work being conducted by biblical scholars regarding *embodied* religious experiences with the Divine (and others), including mystical experiences. Third, I consider the Apostle Paul's embodied mystical experience, with special attention to 2 Corinthians 12:1–10, as one example of biblical material that might intersect with or inform psychedelic mystical encounters that contemporary Christians might experience (whether in a medical therapeutic or non-medical spiritual formation setting). Finally, I indicate directions for further research and discussion.

Keywords: psychedelics and the New Testament; psychedelics and the Bible; psychedelics and religion; psychedelic therapy and religion; mystical experience; visionary experience; divine encounters; psychedelics and Paul; psychedelics and theology; psychedelics and Christianity; embodiment; consciousness; altered states of consciousness; entheogens; bad trips

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1. Introduction

Psychedelics (e.g., psilocybin, mescaline, and ayahuasca) have long been used for spiritual purposes across cultures.¹ Lately, psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT) is being studied and deployed for a stunning array of medical conditions, including alcohol use disorder; treatment-resistant PTSD; end-of-life distress; nicotine addiction; eating disorders; chronic pain; and more. The scientific literature copiously documents the “consistent presence of SERT (spiritual, existential, religious, and theological) experiences in PAT, often focusing specifically on mystical-type experiences” (Palitsky et al. 2023, p. E1).² The same holds true for studies involving novice meditators; long-term meditators; and, more recently, religious professionals.³ Mystical-type experiences may be considered “phenomenological states whose characteristics include changes to sense of self, meaningfulness, and connectedness, which acquire existential, spiritual, or religious primacy for individuals or communities” (Palitsky et al. 2023, p. E1). Especially striking is the importance ascribed to mystical experiences as potential mediators of healing: “Not only do psychedelics induce intense mystical experiences. Current evidence seems to suggest that psychedelics have the potential to treat a range of mental health disorders *because they induce such mystical experiences*” (Cole-Turner 2022, p. 2). Significantly, 66–86% of participants rated these experiences among their top five most meaningful and spiritually significant experiences, or even as the single most

meaningful experience, even when asked again in follow-up surveys conducted 14 months later (Griffiths et al. 2006, 2008; Leary 2007; Johnson et al. 2017).

Meanwhile, the Christian church, broadly construed, is arguably largely unaware of, or uninvolved with, the so-called psychedelic renaissance. It is ignorant of the medical/therapeutic trajectory, which is regularly presented in mainstream news media, and even more so regarding movements in the larger culture involving access to and use of psychedelics beyond medical contexts. However, people who have had encounters with the Divine either in a medical setting or other non-church settings regularly express the desire and even need for resources to aid in integrating these experiences into their quotidian lives, including their lives of religious faith. Questions about ontology, epistemology, cosmology, ecclesiology, anthropology, and a host of other theological considerations arise.

My work in the area of psychedelics aims to build a bridge between the medical and the spiritual, two areas currently not well integrated and sometimes antagonistic. I am a Field Scholar for the Emory Center for Psychedelics and Spirituality, which fully integrates clinical psychiatry and spiritual health.⁴ I was a study participant in the clinical trial at Johns Hopkins in which religious professionals ingested psilocybin in two separate sessions one month apart. I have completed the Certificate in Psychedelic-Assisted Therapies and Research through CIIS. I am an ordained Baptist minister and seminary professor whose job entails attention to the spiritual formation of students and those to whom they will minister upon graduation. Finally, I am a New Testament scholar whose current research focuses on the intersection of psychedelics and Christian lived religion, with special attention to sacred texts. Thus, while I now work closely with and draw upon the work of medical researchers and clinicians (and will continue PAT training), the primary academic training and expertise that I bring to this bridge-building exercise is weighted toward religion and spirituality.

From its inception, the Christian tradition has housed mystical experiences and is replete with resources for exploring them.⁵ Christianity is based upon the claim that people personally encountered (and still do) a dead man (Jesus) who had been executed by the Roman government in an act of capital punishment, who was then resurrected, and who called them to a particular way of life that we now call Christian. In other words, Christianity itself is fundamentally based upon mystical experiences had by the first followers of Jesus. Easter, the most important day (and season) in the Christian liturgical calendar, celebrates these resurrection encounters.

The Bible can serve as a rich resource for contemporary Christians seeking to integrate their own mystical experiences (including those arising in psychedelic sessions) because it contains significant material about mystical experiences marked by altered states of consciousness. What do I mean by the integration of mystical experiences? The definition, role, and methods of “integration” in psychedelic medicine have recently become prominent and vigorously debated, prompting new studies to be conducted, but after reviewing 24 distinct definitions of integration, Bathje et al. (2022, p. 04) offer the following synthesized definition:

Integration is a process in which a person revisits and actively engages in making sense of, working through, translating, and processing the content of their psychedelic experience. Through intentional effort and supportive practices, this process allows one to gradually capture and incorporate the emergent lessons and insights into their lives, thus moving toward greater balance and wholeness, both internally (mind, body, and spirit) and externally (lifestyle, social relations, and the natural world).

Katzman and Schwartz (2024, p. 270) provide this elegant, compelling description: “Integration of peak experiences involves identifying the vestigial threads in the tapestry of the altered state, then weaving these ephemeral filaments into the warp and weft of one’s daily life and usual sense of self. Successful integration incorporates the psychological, somatic, relational, transpersonal/spiritual, and practical realms of our experiences.” Given that psychedelic experiences can be powerful, ranging from transcendent and revelatory

to terrifying and potentially destabilizing, the importance of offering space for people to process those experiences and determine how they cohere (or not) within one's current frame of meaning-making is being recognized (Bathje et al. 2022, p. 02). Christian practice assumes that such powerful experiences beg for interpretation and integration into one's life of faith. This usually entails placing one's experience in conversation with the inherited tradition, including the Bible, which Christians consider an authoritative source for discernment and meaning-making. I provide the example of the Apostle Paul as one source of integration for Christians who have had embodied mystical experiences. Historically, for Christians, Paul's reflections on the life of faith, including experiences of sublimity and suffering, are foundational. There Christians may find points of contact between their mystical experiences and the autobiographical mystical experiences he narrates. The scope of the essay does not allow treatment of the Bible as a whole, though I briefly discuss the larger biblical context before turning to Paul and indicate numerous other texts for consideration in the conclusion of the essay.

In what follows, I first summarize the importance of the psychedelic renaissance, especially the clinical studies being conducted on it, as it relates to Christian practices of spiritual formation. Second, I explore new work being conducted by biblical scholars regarding *embodied* religious experiences with the Divine (and others), including mystical experiences. The reader may wonder why I use the term "embodied mystical experiences"; after all, are not all experiences embodied? Christian spiritual practice has often been so logocentric and cognitive, prioritizing doctrines and ideas that the body has been dismissed at best and maligned as an obstacle at worst. Additionally, only recently in biblical scholarship has the body been taken seriously epistemologically. Credit for this is due, in part, to methodologies developed in feminist studies, womanist studies, disability studies, and queer studies. Recent developments in sensory theory and affect theory are centering the roles that the senses and emotions play in lived religion. This essay aims to contribute to taking the body seriously when Christians seek to integrate psychedelic mystical experiences into their religious framework and practices.

After noting the developments in biblical studies, I then consider the Apostle Paul's embodied mystical experience, with special attention to 2 Corinthians 12:1–10, as one example of biblical material that might intersect with or inform the psychedelic mystical encounters Christians might experience (whether in a medical therapeutic or non-medical spiritual formation setting). Finally, I indicate directions for further research and discussion.

2. The Psychedelic Renaissance and Christian Spiritual Formation: Intersections

The psychedelic renaissance intersects with Christian practices in two key ways. First, as psychedelic therapy becomes more common, Christians undergoing medical treatment may seek outside support for integrating mystical experiences that occur during treatment into their lives. Second, with increasing legal access to psychedelics in the U.S., more Christians may explore their spiritual potential, either individually with spiritual guides or collectively in organized retreats. Many will have mystical encounters related to the Divine. Whether the experience involves the overwhelming presence or absence of the Divine, these Christians, too, will seek integration support.

2.1. The "Science" of Mystical Experiences in Medical Contexts

Psychedelic scientists debate (a) whether mystical experiences constitute an appropriate subject of scientific research, (b) how to define mystical experiences, and (c) what tools to use to collect data from participants regarding their mystical experiences. A recent paper, "Psychedelic-Induced Mystical Experiences: An Interdisciplinary Discussion and Critique" (Mosurinjohn et al. 2023), raises questions about the place and nature of mystical experiences in scientific psychedelic research. Some would argue that "mystical experiences" do not belong in scientific research at all. For them, "mysticism arguably connotes a metaphysics that is intertwined with religious/theological and supernatural suppositions, and therefore may appear to clash with physicalist/scientific materialistic

assumptions implicit in scientific research to a greater degree than alternative similar concepts” (Mosurinjohn et al. 2023, p. 2). Others, however, do consider mystical experiences appropriate for scientific research. For instance, Mosurinjohn et al. define mysticism as “the practice of techniques enabling access to metaphysical insight through self-transcendence and/or extrasensory perception” and argue for its inclusion in the scientific investigation of psychedelic-induced mystical experiences (Mosurinjohn et al. 2023, p. 2).

Research in clinical trials has typically relied upon assessment tools such as the MEQ (Mystical Experience Questionnaire), Hood Mysticism scale, or 11D-ASC scale to obtain feedback on mystical experiences. Most of the terms derive from the work of Walter Stace who drew upon the work of William James.

The MEQ-45 contains seven factors:

- Internal unity;
- External unity;
- Deeply-felt positive mood;
- Transcendence of time and space;
- Ineffability and paradoxicality;
- Sense of sacredness;
- Noetic quality.

The Hood Scale contains eight factors:

- Unifying quality;
- Positive affect;
- Temporal/spatial quality;
- Ineffability;
- Noetic quality;
- Religious quality;
- Inner subjective quality;
- Ego quality.

The 11D-ASC contains four factors:

- Experience of unity;
- Spiritual experience;
- Blissful state;
- Disembodiment.⁶

These assessment tools have begun to be critiqued. For instance, some consider them to be overly influenced by Christianity, especially a perennialist form of it. Mosurinjohn et al. emphasize the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to develop “next-generation” assessments that merge scientific–medical and social sciences–humanities approaches. Until then, the MEQ and Hood scales are likely to remain primary (Mosurinjohn et al. 2023, pp. 2–3).

2.2. The Importance of Integration of Mystical Experiences for Healing and Transformation

Such serious and influential interdisciplinary work at the intersection of spirituality and medical–scientific research is being conducted by members of the Emory Center for Psychedelics and Spirituality. In their pioneering 2023 paper “Importance of Integrating Spiritual, Existential, Religious, and Theological Components in Psychedelic-Assisted Therapies,” Palitsky et al. (2023) express concern that medical scientists lack sufficient training regarding the spiritual, existential, religious, and theological (SERT) experiences that commonly arise in PAT. This is especially concerning since the SERT experiences are positively correlated with beneficial outcomes. In fact, “a systematic review of SERT-integrated psychotherapies in real-world settings observed effective applications for trauma, eating disorders, severe mental illness, and depression. There is also evidence for successful application of SERT-integrated psychotherapies in cancer survivorship and palliative care” (Palitsky et al. 2023, p. 3). They argue that mystical-type experiences are prevalent, and that the meaningful integration of such experiences should be a priority in the treatment process.

It is important to note that not all aspects of mystical experiences are considered to be positive ones by those who have undergone them. Note that the scales currently used include factors such as blissful state, positive affect, and positively felt mood but do not always offer the opposite possibilities that may be experienced, including destabilization.⁷ The study of adverse effects (AEs) in psychedelic experiences is a vibrant area of research.

From the standpoint of Christian practices of spiritual formation, integration is necessary for all mystical experiences, not just those involving psychedelics. In what follows, I will demonstrate how one element of the Christian tradition, the Bible, addresses mystical experiences. Contemporary Christians may find a rich store of material for integration and meaning-making by drawing upon this scriptural tradition.

3. Biblical Studies: Embodied Religious Experience of the Divine

While scientists debate the nature and classification of psychedelic mystical experiences, there has been an explosion of interest in biblical studies around religious experience and the role of bodies in it. Human bodies and the non-human bodies of creation, God's body, and Jesus' body are all in view.⁸ Foci include the senses, affects and emotions, embodied cognition, and altered states of consciousness. The Christian Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, narrates mystical experiences and even various induction techniques to invite them. Thus, when contemporary Christians have psychedelic mystical experiences, whether in the context of medical treatment or intentional spiritual formation practices, they stand in a long line of religious ancestors who have traveled this terrain. Such experiences belong not only to famous figures like Ezekiel, Isaiah, Amos, and Zechariah, but also to those without social power. The prophet Joel (2:28–29) reports the following words from God: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit."

Anathea Portier-Young's groundbreaking new monograph *The Prophetic Body: Embodiment and Mediation in Biblical Prophetic Literature* (Portier-Young 2024) addresses such experiences and techniques, and here, I will privilege it for three reasons. First, she uses the kind of interdisciplinary approach that Mosurinjoh et al. urge. Second, the book is unprecedented in the expansive methodological range it applies to a particular set of biblical figures: prophetic bodies. Third, though it is limited to HBOT⁹ material, it has provided me with definitions and categories that shape my view of the New Testament texts, including the treatment of the Pauline material in the next section.

Portier-Young insists on the centrality of the prophetic body in all its states of consciousness, motion, health, emotion and affect. Quoting Birgit Meyer, she notes "in order to account for the richness and complexity of religious experience, we need theoretical approaches that can account for its material, bodily, sensational and sensory dimension" (Portier-Young 2024, p. 33). Drawing from anthropology, psychiatry, and neurobiology, she argues both that the prophets experience transformative embodied encounters with (a sometimes embodied) God and that they mediate transformative encounters of God for others through their own embodied religious experience.

Particularly helpful is her attention to altered states of consciousness. Drawing from the field of transpersonal psychology, she defines consciousness as "the subjective awareness and experience of internal and external phenomena," while "states of consciousness refer to the spectrum of ways in which experience may be organized" (Portier-Young 2024, p. 112). ASC's include "dreaming, deep sleep, intoxication, hypnosis, and successfully induced meditative states, among others. Such alternate states may be spontaneous, as in the case of sleepiness, daydreaming, or dreaming, may result from injury or illness, or may be induced by a variety of means including psychoactive substances, drumming, rhythmic movement, prayer, fasting, sensory deprivation, breathing techniques, relaxation, and meditation" (Portier-Young 2024, pp. 112–13). This is why Portier-Young says that understanding the embodied character of prophetic ecstasy "requires attention not only to observable bodily techniques and behaviors, but also the embodied nature of consciousness

itself and the changes in the body that accompany ASC's. Indeed, this embodied character of human consciousness is one factor enabling study of religious ecstasy across times, places, and cultural contexts" (Portier-Young 2024, p. 113).

While some mystical experiences appear to occur spontaneously (Moses encountering the burning bush; Paul experiencing a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus and becoming temporarily blind as a result), the Bible also depicts particular induction techniques for such experiences, including incubation, ascetic practices, and ecstatic practices, all of which "could alter both the...body and consciousness" (Portier-Young 2024, p. 84). In this context, Portier-Young addresses the stories of Hannah and Samuel (sleeping in holy places); Moses' fasting for forty days and nights on Mt. Sinai; spirit possession in 1 Sam 10 and 19; and the visionary experiences of Ezekiel (Ezek 1–3, 8–11, 37, 40–48) and Balaam (Num 24).

Before turning to specific biblical examples, Portier-Young explores the subjective experience of transcendence in religious ecstasy, delineating intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal dimensions. The intrapersonal quality denotes an interior dimension of enhanced insight and self-awareness. Interpersonal transcendence connects individuals to others and their environment, and transpersonal experience extends to a greater reality, potentially including union with a divinity or the cosmos (Portier-Young 2024, pp. 113–14). These dimensions resonate with elements of mystical experiences and align with observations in the MEQ and Hood scales as well as the session reports of PAT participants (transcendence of time and space; new insights; union with a divinity; greater connectedness to nature and the cosmos; greater sense of connection to others; access to new knowledge about the self).¹⁰ Portier-Young further suggests that the behaviors and experiences of prophets in the HBOT indicate the presence of alternate states of consciousness and some of the embodied practices that can be used to produce such states. She states the following:

Prophetic ecstasy may produce trance states marked by decreased motor activity, altered time sense, narrowed attention, and selectively heightened senses. It may produce feelings of affliction or constraint. The prophet in ecstasy may be transported to other lands or experience visions of otherwise hidden realities. The body in ecstasy forms a bridge between places and times and between human and divine realities. (Portier-Young 2024, p. 116)

This reflects both contemporary reports of psychedelic-induced mystical encounters and experiences documented in both the HBOT and the New Testament (NT). Two important points are in order regarding the best way to put into conversation these overlapping categories of features of mystical experiences in contemporary experience and ancient texts that I have noted (such as transcendence of time and space). First, in current clinical practice, there are numerous different scales being used to capture and categorize mystical experiences. I listed the MEQ, Hood scale, and ASC at the beginning of the essay. No one scale includes every aspect. In fact, the recent article by Stocker et al. (2024), "The Revival of the Psychedelic Experience Scale: Revealing Its Extended-Mystical, Visual, And Distressing Experiential Spectrum with LSD and Psilocybin Studies" calls for using a scale that covers the psychedelic experience more comprehensively. Table 11, found on page 96, titled "Some basic psychedelic themes covered or not covered with the three most comprehensive questionnaires used to measure psychedelic experience," uses the PES100, 5D-ASC, and HRS to indicate which elements are included in which scale. For instance, one often hears that a mystical experience is ineffable, impossible to convey with words. The PES includes this category, whereas the ASC and HRS do not. Thus, there is currently no consensus among scientists and categorizing these experiences remains an inexact science. Second, the goal of this essay is to place modern experience in conversation with resources from antiquity. The goal is neither to attempt to map without remainder the experience of biblical figures onto a perfect scale that may someday be created, nor to take that scale and map it without remainder onto the ancient texts. Rather, the goal is to indicate the fruitful meaning-making that can arise for contemporary Christians who have mystical experiences (whether they fill out a mystical experience scale or not) and put those experiences into

conversation with those who precede them in the faith who also had mystical experiences. We will return to this point after treating the specific experience of Paul.

4. A Pauline Example

The Apostle Paul, by his own account, had deeply embodied mystical religious experiences. He experienced numerous encounters with the resurrected Christ, which he refers to in Gal. 1:12, 15 and 2 Cor. 12:1–10. In yet another passage, he indicates that he was one of over 500 people to whom the resurrected Christ appeared on different occasions.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that **he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time**, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. **Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.** Last of all, as to one untimely born, **he appeared also to me.** For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” (1 Corinthians 15:3–9)

Paul also experienced spirit possession that resulted in a transformation of his person ontologically and vocationally. Paul’s experiences provide a solid place to ground the conversation as they cohere well with the elements that we find from phenomenologies of mystical religious experiences all the way from William James to the work of Portier-Young. In addition, we know a lot about him and the trajectory of his life.

4.1. Introduction to Paul

We do not know when Paul was born, and scholars debate exact dates concerning his ministry, but Paul’s call to be an Apostle (sometimes referred to as Paul’s “conversion”) is dated somewhere between 32 and 36 CE. The New Testament does not narrate his death, but scholars place it between 62 and 67 CE (Powell 2018, p. 261). While thirteen letters of the NT are attributed to Paul, most scholars consider only seven of them to be “undisputed” (Romans, 1 and 2 Cor, Galatians, Php, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians). Thus, Paul wrote more books of the NT than any other author. The six disputed letters that bear his name are generally referred to as the Deutero-Pauline Epistles and include Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Thessalonians.¹¹ Finally, Paul features prominently in the biblical book known as the Acts of the Apostles.

Paul is a towering figure in Christianity. He was a theologian, church planter, and pastor. Paul depicts his own call in (Jeremianic) prophetic terms (Gal. 1:11–24). Paul’s mystical experiences appear to share some commonalities with mystical experiences described by those in the psychedelic clinical studies.¹²

4.2. Spirit Possession and the Apostle Paul

Giovanni Bazzana’s 2020 monograph *Having the Spirit of Christ: Spirit Possession and Exorcism in the Early Christ Groups* extensively addresses the older (somewhat methodologically limited) scholarship on Pauline mysticism and the newer scholarship on the body and religious experience in Paul. For instance, he engages Colleen Shantz’s *Paul in Ecstasy* (Shantz 2009), which, he notes, “shows how neurobiology enables us to understand that Paul talks about ‘altered states of consciousness’” (Bazzana 2020, p. 104). For Bazzana, this is a “very welcome” methodological change of pace particularly “because her focus on terms such as ‘spirit possession’ and ‘altered states of consciousness’ provides the opportunity to study Paul’s experiences, not in isolation (as if they were completely unique events in the history of humankind) but in comparison with what has been observed in other cultural and chronological contexts” (Bazzana 2020, p. 104). Having canvassed the work of additional scholars (such as John Ashton’s *The Religion of Paul the Apostle*), Bazzana is convinced that “the experience of spirit possession constituted the very foundation of Paul’s thought...” (Bazzana 2020, p. 105).

For Paul (who was heavily influenced by Stoicism), spirits are material, not immaterial.¹³ Bazzana highlights Paul's expression "in Christ," by which Paul means he is literally possessed by the spirit of Christ, ontologically, and that spirit causes him to think and behave in very particular ways, Christian ways. What is more, Paul considers all Christians to be spirit-possessed. This enables Greek-speaking Gentiles, upon being possessed, to cry out in Aramaic, as seen in Galatians 4:6: "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba! Father!" (cf Rom 8:15).

4.3. Paul's Mystical Experience

We begin with one of Paul's own descriptions of his deeply embodied mystical encounters with God found in 2 Cor. 12:1–10:

2 Cor. 12:1 It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. 3 And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—4 was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. 5 On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. 6 But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, 7 even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 8 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

4.4. Encounter with Otherworldly Beings While Spirit-Possessed, Including Sights and Sounds

As we learned From Bazzana, Paul's expression "in Christ" (*en Christō*) refers to actual spirit-possession: Paul is possessed materially by the spirit of Christ. Paul's narrative of his experience demonstrates all three prongs of Portier-Young's definition of religious ecstasy: "Prophetic ecstasy describes a type of religious experience accompanying a prophet's encounter with supernatural beings, revelatory visions, and auditory revelation" (Portier-Young 2024, p. 105). First, Paul has religious experiences accompanying his encounters with both God and Satan. Second, he has revelatory visions (v.1). He notes both visions (*optasia*) and revelations (*apokalypsis*); furthermore, he notes that they were "exceptional," "hyperbolic" (v. 7, *hyberbolē*). Of course, one wonders what scale Paul is using to distinguish unexceptional visions and revelations from exceptional ones. The main point here is that Paul does not need to justify the legitimacy of the revelations; he assumes such experiences are part of the religious life. Paul is, after all, a Jew immersed deeply in his own Scriptures (what Christians refer to as the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament), where many mystical encounters with supernatural beings and religious ecstasy appear. Third, Paul experiences auditory revelation. On the one hand, he "heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (v. 4). It is not clear from whom he heard these particular revelations. From God's mouth to Paul's ears? One cannot help but wonder about the undisclosed content. On the other hand, God speaks to him directly and Paul shares that material with us. All four of these features—encounters with otherworldly figures, revelatory visions, ineffability, and auditory revelation—feature in psychedelic mystical experiences as well.

4.5. Disembodiment/Bodily Transcendence of Space

Paul has no idea (and does not seem to care) whether he was in his body (*en sōmati*) or outside of it (*chōris tou sōmatos*), a point he makes twice. This is in keeping with reports of psychedelic mystical experiences as well as reflected in the MEQ, Hood and ASC scales. It also coheres well with the model posed by Mosurinjoh et al., falling under the “Psychedelic Alterations of Self-Experience,” which is divided into bodily self-experience and mental self-experience. The bodily experience is further divided into body location, body ownership, body awareness, body boundaries, and body representation (Mosurinjoh et al. 2023, p. 8).

Paul insists that he was transported to another realm, which he calls both “Paradise” (*paradeisos*) and the “third heaven” (*treis ouranos*). Notice that he was “snatched away” (*harpazō*) into Paradise. Those on psilocybin journeys often report the experience of a sudden launching or being pulled forward and not in control of where they are going (as they, too, transcend space).

4.6. Challenging Experiences

The next element we will address at some length is Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” due to (1) its alignment with challenging aspects of psychedelic mystical experiences and (2) its implications for whether the studies consider these experiences as fully or in as nuanced a manner as the biblical authors (including Paul) might have us do.

Paul directly heard the voice of God addressing him, yet it might not have been a message he desired—a “challenging experience”—per the studies. He suffered from an unspecified bodily affliction, termed a “thorn in the flesh,” leading to speculation about its nature: Epilepsy? Eye malady? People suggest all manners of things, but it remains unknown. Despite Paul’s pleading three times for relief, God refuses.

Much attention is given to set (mindset; intention) and setting (physical environment) in preparation for psychedelic sessions. Paul wanted healing of his physical ailment. Whatever it was, it was bad enough that he calls it “a messenger of Satan sent to torment (*kolafizō*) me.” This is a loaded statement. First, this word for torment is rare in the NT, occurring only four other times, always in harsh contexts. Furthermore, he considers the thorn a messenger (*angellos*, angel) of Satan. Notice the passive verb—the thorn was “given” to him; this is a circumlocution for God. That is to say, God, not Satan, gave Paul the thorn. In addition, notice that God works through Satan here. This may seem strange given the many stories in the NT (and in the common understanding in contemporary popular culture) where Satan is the direct enemy of God who fell from heaven, but here, Paul is alluding to the book of Job, seeing himself in Job’s place.¹⁴ In the book of Job, Satan serves as an accuser in the heavenly court, questioning Job’s faithfulness to God. In a nutshell, Satan says Job is only faithful to God because he has a great life with lots of stuff, a beautiful family, status in his community, etc. So begins Job’s experience of deep agony and affliction, physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. Paul identifies with Job’s suffering despite his own righteousness, seeing it as distinct from suffering due to sin.

To us, it may be odd to attribute our affliction simultaneously to both God and Satan, but Paul attempts to make sense of the fact that his exceptional mystical, ecstatic experiences did not lead to the physical healing he longed for. He does so by turning to his scriptures (as can Christians today who find themselves in the same situation as Paul (or Job)).¹⁵ Those Scriptures assume the existence of a variety of supernatural beings, including angels, demons, God, the resurrected Jesus, and Satan. Because spirits can deceive, Paul insists on regular “discernment of the spirits” (1 Cor. 12:10). For instance, in the chapter just before his mystical visions’ narrative, he warns that “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). Paul’s experience raises questions about the challenging experiences reported in psychedelic mystical experiences, including encounters with demonic spirits and what to make of them.

Paul is not alone in experiencing ecstasy and suffering in the midst of a mystical encounter; his HBOT forebearers knew this terrain. Spirit possession and other forms of religious ecstasy can be accompanied by sensations of physical and/or psychic distress

(Portier-Young 2024, p. 86). For instance, Portier-Young shows that Ezekiel's experience of "the hand of the Lord as a force that grabs him, is 'strong' upon, and falls on him partly reflects and intersects with usage in which the divine hand denotes illness or other bodily affliction attributed to divine power" (Portier-Young 2024, p. 121).

Those after Paul, including those in the studies, may also relate. In discussing set in intentionally prepared psychedelic journeys, William Richards pens words that may apply well to Paul's set with respect to his ongoing mystical experiences, including the difficult aspects: "Set refers to the psychological and spiritual attitudes of the person who receives the entheogen. Above all it reflects qualities such as trust, honesty, courage, humility, reverence, and also a sense of adventure and a willingness to receive and learn, even if it should entail some degree of suffering" (Richards 2014, p. 658). It is often the case that participants decide that the suffering, while terrible in the moment, had a positive effect in the long run. Richards concludes his chapter on "Experiences of Meaninglessness, Despair, and Somatic Discomfort" as follows: "The examples in this chapter well illustrate some of the difficult and painful experiences that can occur during psychedelic sessions. Often the pain—physical, psychological, or both—does appear to have a purpose and a meaning, and it often culminates in very positive feelings of freedom and relief and new insights" (Richards 2015, p. 112). Certainly, this is borne out in qualitative studies in medical contexts (Barrett et al. 2015, pp. 1279–95).

Recently, however, the perceived lack of attention to "adverse effects"¹⁶ has been critiqued. Notice, for instance, that the scales tend to be biased toward the positive: "deeply-felt positive mood" (MEQ); positive affect (Hood); "blissful state" (ASC). A spate of new studies is being launched to investigate adverse effects more thoroughly. From the standpoint of Christian spiritual formation (as opposed to a merely medical perspective), these painful experiences must be viewed frankly and intrepidly in light of Christian theology, with no a priori pressure to put a "positive spin" on the kinds of experiences that later mystics would refer to as "the dark night of the soul." Paul knew that sometimes Satan is in league with God to some degree but that sometimes Satan merely deceives to destroy. Thus, the experiences will need to be faced directly and spiritual discernment will be necessary afterward.

Multiple studies have established that psychedelics are "essentially nontoxic as well as physically nonaddictive" (Richards 2015, p. 179). However, they are certainly powerful substances that can occasion spiritual struggle. Opting for psychedelic substances solely for a pleasurable escape from life's demands may be ill-advised. The pursuit of psychological and spiritual growth is a profound and "sometimes gut-wrenching business" (Richards 2015, p. 112).

Rachael Petersen eloquently testifies to this in her essay, "A Theological Reckoning with 'Bad Trips'" (Petersen 2022). Peterson calls for more investigation and discussion of difficult experiences. Particularly striking is her contention that when such difficult encounters are unmoored from deep spiritual traditions, which can happen in medicalized settings, harm can ensue. She points to the "collateral damage from mainstreaming mindfulness" as a cautionary tale for the medicalization of psychedelics. Valuable insights risk being lost when "technologies of transcendence" are divorced from their spiritual and religious contexts and are repackaged as purely psychological therapies (Petersen 2022, sect. 10). Biblical authors assume that approaching the holy should not be undertaken lightly and can be dangerous if not handled with care. Petersen opines: "No matter which term we choose—psychedelic or entheogen—we must reckon with how mind, soul, and gods can conspire against us. To encounter them completely entails risk and, sometimes, unwanted surprises" (Petersen 2022, sect. 1).

4.7. Transformation

Huston Smith famously said, "A religious experience does not constitute a religious life" (Smith 2000, p. 80). Many people in the clinical studies had profound transformational experiences. For many, those effects perdured over time. Paul, too, was transformed

enduringly through his mystical experiences, presumably because he reflected at length with fellow Christians on what they meant for him. What they meant, of course, was discerned in relation to his particular religious, cultural, social context. What they meant unfolded over time as he lived a life aimed at virtue (what he calls the “fruits of the Spirit:” love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). Virtue, by definition, is developed and honed over time and within a community of accountability and support that shares a commitment to developing spiritual wisdom.

Transformation is a leitmotif through Paul’s writings. He is a fan of it. He writes these majestic words in his final letter, Romans: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed (*metamorphoō*) by the renewal of the mind [*nous*, where we get the word noetic], so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and mature” (12:2, my translation). Psychedelic experiences have proven to be transformational to many people, liberating them from conformity to the world, sloughing off that which has kept them bound (e.g., fear, shame, addiction, and apathy), or adding that which makes life more meaningful and intentional (e.g., spiritual practices, healed relationships, vocational changes, and stewarding creation).

It is important to note, however, that psychedelic mystical experiences do not necessarily propel a person into a more virtuous life. There are reports of those who fall prey to solipsism or delusions of grandeur or narcissism. It may be instructive to note that Paul writes to communities, works out his religious experiences in community, and assumes that this is necessary for a person to deepen spiritually and avoid those dangers.

4.8. Integration

As noted earlier in the essay, increased attention among psychedelic medical researchers is being paid to the importance of the integration of the psychedelic experience if one is aiming for transformation that perdures.¹⁷ Paul spent his whole life undergoing integration of his mystical experiences and calling other Christians to do the same. As a religious leader, Paul saw his own experience as something given to him patently *not* for ego-inflation purposes, but to make him a servant leader, calling others into spiritual wholeness and journeying with them through high points and low. And there were many. Paul’s ministry was an endless exercise in managing conflict and learning how to remain faithful when he had much and when he had nothing (see his hardship lists to get an idea of how bad it got, e.g., 1 Corinthians 4:9–13; 2 Corinthians 11:23–33). For the rest of his life, he was invited to integrate the message from God that “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Having his ego moved out of the way made space for what he calls “the power of Christ” to “take up quarters/dwell” (*episkēnoō*) in him. (This is the same root word the Gospel of John uses when he says, “the Word [Jesus] became flesh and tabernacled (*skēnoō*) among us” (my translation)). Petersen, like Paul, continues to integrate her mystical experience and concludes her essay with words that Paul might somehow appreciate: “Some days, I think psychedelics healed me by not healing me at all—which may just mean they made me more comfortable with paradox. In a humble commitment to unknowing is where I now make my home” (Petersen 2022, sct. 13).¹⁸

4.9. Dying (and Therefore Living) Well

I teach a class at my seminary called “Evil, Suffering, Death, and the Afterlife in the New Testament.” We spend substantial time on what it means, from a Christian perspective, to die well. (I use Allen Verhey’s *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus* (Verhey 2011) as one textbook). I find it intriguing, then, that studies have shown that a well-supported psilocybin journey can alleviate end-of-life distress and mitigate the fear of death (Bossis 2021). Paul clearly had many mystical encounters with God and the risen Jesus. Were they responsible for his own fearlessness of death and his repeated call for his audience to imitate him in this?

- Philippians 1:21: “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.”
- Romans 8:38–39: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- Romans 14:8: “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

4.10. A Summary of Paul’s Experience

Paul had mystical experiences that forever changed him, dramatically. He moved from trying to destroy the church to sacrificing his life for its growth. He moved from being conformed to this world, desiring status, and gaining his identity from it (cf. Php 3:4–11) to being possessed by the spirit of Christ, leading to the renewal of his mind (which he refers to as having “the mind of Christ”). And he moved from repeatedly begging God to give him a better, stronger, medically cured body to declaring “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” According to Christian tradition, Paul, like Jesus, was executed by the Roman government, beheaded by the emperor Nero. His writings continue to profoundly serve all Christians who seek union with the Divine.

4.11. Paul (Un)charted

As noted with respect to the larger biblical canon, Paul’s mystical experiences can serve as a source of meaning-making for contemporary Christians. I have noted some of those touchpoints that appear in mystical experience scales. Again, there is no consensus scale currently in use. If one were to take the ASC scale as an example, however, one could note points of overlap with Paul’s own experiences, such as paradoxicality (power made perfect in weakness), transcendence of space, disembodiment, and non-ordinary insightfulness. However, much would be omitted or not sufficiently nuanced. For instance, Paul experiences incarnate beings (he considers himself physically spirit-possessed), he cannot put his experience into words (for a number of different reasons, not just one), and he experiences physical distress. He experiences transformation and spends the rest of his life revisiting these experiences and unpacking their meaning in community. None of these crucial aspects of his experience would be captured by mapping it onto the 5D-ASC. I highlight this to once again indicate that the goal is neither to cram the biblical material onto a particular mystical experience scale, nor to anachronistically impose the scales upon the biblical material. To do so would arguably diminish the depth and magnitude of Paul’s insights. Rather, it is to place these items into conversation that may prove to be fruitful.

5. Directions for Future Research

The Bible manifests manifold visions, revelations, and non-ordinary states of consciousness. Given the limited space of this essay, I have treated at length only one particular passage from the Pauline literature as an example, but much work remains to be done. The present essay is part of two larger current projects in which I am engaged, one a primer for Christians on the intersection of Christianity and psychedelics (*Psychedelics and Soul Care: What Christians Need to Know*, under contract with Eerdmans) and the other a monograph (*The Agony, the Ecstasy, and the Ordinary: Experiencing God in the New Testament*). I encourage others to join in this work. Possible avenues for future exploration include the following:

1. Comprehensive Book Analysis. One could address individual biblical books in their entirety. For instance, in a recent essay on the Gospel of John, I treated many points of contact with embodied mystical experiences (Clark-Soles 2023). Christians who have encountered or will encounter God during a psychedelic session may experience these elements found in John. The book of Revelation certainly needs thorough treatment in this regard, as does the book of Ephesians.

2. Exploring Specific Biblical Stories. To add a more holistic understanding of mystical themes, one could focus on particular stories that appear in multiple books, such as Jesus' Baptism, the Transfiguration, and the Resurrection.
3. Individual Figure Study. For instance, I considered here only one passage in Paul, but to be thorough would require attention to all of his undisputed letters. In addition, Paul is a major figure in the Acts of the Apostles, where his so-called "conversion" is narrated three different times, as is his being spirit-possessed and behaving in new ways as a result.
4. Cataloging Biblical ASC's. At a very basic level, it would be useful to have a list of all NT material that might fall under the category of "mystical experience" and the ways each might be considered using interdisciplinary methods.
5. Comparative Sacred Texts Analysis. Christianity shares connections with both Judaism and Islam. One might consider how the material in Christian sacred texts compares to the sacred texts of those other traditions, among others.
6. Terminology and Discourse Examination. Both the medical and social scientists included in this essay note the problems with the words "mystical" and "mysticism," not necessarily for the same reasons. However, it is still language used in, for instance, the Mystical Experiences Questionnaire and scholarly literature, so it remains in play. I have chosen to use it in this essay since, in keeping with the theme of this Special Issue of *Religions*, I am patently putting the medical literature in conversation with the biblical studies literature. I will address the nomenclature more fully in the monograph on experiencing God.

6. Conclusions: Loving Science, Discovering the Divine

In this essay I have suggested that, given the rapid pace at which psychedelics are becoming more widely available, more people will take them and have profound "SERT" or "mystical" experiences. Some will occur in medicalized settings and some in settings intended for spiritual exploration and growth. In the best scenarios, there will be ample preparation beforehand, skilled support during the psychedelic session, and meaningful ongoing integration afterward. People will have a wide range of experiences from the blissful, to the terrifying, to the underwhelming. In this essay, I have argued that, for Christians, the Bible may serve as a substantial resource at every point of the process. More work on the intersection of "psychedelics, the Bible, and the divine" is needed to provide a nuanced, critical appraisal of the promises and pitfalls of psychedelics as a way to invite an encounter with the Divine.

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Notes

¹ Consult the following: (Guerra-Doce 2015; Merlin 2003; Lutkajtis 2020).

² A helpful explication of each of the four terms in SERT is provided on p. E2.

³ See Griffiths (2015).

⁴ Located on the homepage of the Emory Center for Psychedelics and Spirituality, accessed on 29 April 2024, <https://psychedelics.emory.edu/about-us/index.html>.

⁵ For an extensive history on Western Christian Mysticism, see Bernard McGinn's four-volume series: *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (McGinn 1991). For attention to the ways that certain mystics or mystical experiences have been legitimated (or not) by church authorities, see Jantzen (1995) *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* and, more recently Amber L. Griffioen (2021) *Understanding Religious Experience*, especially the Prologue and chapter 1.

- 6 Scales can be found in Mosurinjoh et al. (2023, p. 04).
- 7 For an excellent recent article on using a scale that covers the psychedelic experience more comprehensively, see Stocker et al. (2024, p. 88), Table 4, titled “All items from the PES (Richards 1975, Appendix E, pp. 271–76) which are likely to involve a psychologically distressing experience”.
- 8 Consult the work of Deborah Forger (2020).
- 9 HBOT stands for Hebrew Bible and Old Testament. To use only one or the other term risks imprecision since each has referential limitations.
- 10 For a fuller treatment of such categories, see William Richards (2015).
- 11 Some people erroneously ascribe Hebrews to Paul; Hebrews, however, does not claim that for itself. See Powell (2018, p. 447).
- 12 In his entertaining book *The Immortality Key*, which has swept pop culture podcasts, lawyer Brian Muraresku wonders whether early Christians, including those in Corinth, used psychedelic substances in their ritual practices. Such inquiries presently remain speculative (Muraresku 2020).
- 13 “Paul treats Christ as a ‘spirit’ conceived in the sense that has been sketched already elsewhere in the book: ‘spirit’ as a person and not at all immaterial but not a ‘person’ in the modern sense of this self-contained and autonomous individual self either” (Bazzana 2020, p. 110).
- 14 For a fuller treatment of this Job theme, see ch. 6 of Clark-Soles, *1 Corinthians*, 96–97.
- 15 For a fuller explication of Paul’s mysticism, see ch. 6 of Clark-Soles, *1 Corinthians* and Clark-Soles, *Psychedelics and Soul Care: What Christians Need to Know* (Eerdmans, under contract).
- 16 For fuller description see Sarah McNamee et al. (2023).
- 17 See Frymann et al. (2022) and Earleywine et al. (2022).
- 18 If space permitted, it would be interesting to consider the experiences of Paul and Petersen with respect to negative (apophatic) theology. As McGinn notes in *The Foundations of Mysticism*: “...among the negative or apophatic mystics, presence and absence are more paradoxically and dialectically simultaneous. If the modern consciousness of God is often of an absent God (absent though not forgotten for the religious person), many mystics seem almost to have been prophets of this in their intense realization that the ‘real God’ becomes a possibility only when the many false gods (even the God of religion) have vanished and the frightening abyss of total nothingness is confronted. If everything we experience as real is in some way present to us, is not a ‘present’ God just one more *thing*? This is why many mystics from Dionysius on have insisted that it is the consciousness of God as negation, which is a form of the absence of God, that is the core of the mystic’s journey” (xviii–xix).

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