

Chapter 7

Who Relates to the Divine as Feminine? Transnational Consensus and Outliers Among Young Adults



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Abstract A Q-analysis generally favors large inter-group differences, whereas consensual statements that are shared by most participants tend to receive less attention, as do unusual views, which characterize small groups of participants. In this chapter, we start by exploring consensus statements and offer some thoughts on their meaning. We then consider views that are outside of the individual horizons of most participants. We identified these views through statements towards which most of the samples tended to be indifferent or neutral.

Against the backdrop of these transnational statement preferences, we proceed to discuss irrelevant statements through the lens of “religious outliers”; individuals for whom the statements in question were, in fact, highly relevant and important. We then attempt to characterize these “types” through sets of statements, which were not part of any national prototype, and analyze the subjectivities of those who endorse them, by presenting holistic analyses of their interview narratives. Jointly, these analyses help us assess to what extent we can set aside the idea of national-cultural boundaries in favor of other levels of FQS statement analysis – the transnational and the idiosyncratic.

Keywords Religious outliers · Faith Q-Sort · Religious subjectivity · Transnational religious types · Mystical experiences · Belief in female deity

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7.1 Introduction

What can religious outliers, namely individuals who lie outside of the common patterns of religiosity in their countries, tell us about the interactions between the global, the cultural and the personal? Since culturally-shared social foundations result in commonly shared response patterns, the Faith Q-Sort (FQS) is likely to capture the most common orientations towards religiosity in each national context (for more on the FQS, see Chap. 1 in this volume). Might smaller patterns of subjectivity surface transnationally? We argue that such patterns exist and are invisible in the FQS findings, since they are not shared at the national level where prototypes are identified.

This argument is particularly relevant to what Voas calls “spirituality based on personal experience and well-being” (2007, p. 159). In challenging quantitative studies on religion, he notes that studies of spirituality and holism often make claims about the growth or breadth of such phenomena (cf. Heelas, 2007; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Roof, 1999), yet few quantitative studies seem to match such claims empirically. Due to the quantitative underpinning of how prototypes are generated, the challenge identified by Voas could be applied to the study *Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective (YARG)* as well. The suggestion is that notions of holism and religious/mystical experiences rarely surface in the FQS data because of the method’s preference for prevalent patterns and commonalities at a national case study level. If this is so, FQS might fail to identify important undercurrents in the dataset, such as holism and/or direct experience.

This chapter explores the hypothesis that rare religious outlier types exist in the data and can be identified on a transnational level. To test this hypothesis, we use the entire FQS dataset ($n = 562$) to explore whether statements, which are rarely endorsed by participants, might form the core of unusual ‘types.’ We acknowledge that this ‘top-down’ analysis is a secondary use of the FQS, which was designed to identify ‘bottom-up’ profiles of subjectivity, but we also argue that it offers added value to the primary FQS use, attesting to the tool’s versatility and utility.

In order to distinguish the deductively obtained patterns, which we intend to explore, from the inductively derived “prototypes” of the FQS, we term the former “types.” The analysis is explorative in two ways: based on theoretically driven hypotheses, it begins with conjectures about “types” in the data based on consensus and irrelevant statements. The explorative nature of the analysis is reflected in the fact that we did not test to what extent these “types” present statistically significant distinct FQS patterns, although we do offer descriptive data to indicate that they are different from other FQS patterns.

The expectation to find shared transnational trends in the data, reflecting the existence of human universals (Brown, 1991), finds support in the contemporary world being more of a “global village” than ever before (Lechner & Boli, 2012). During the past two decades, global trends in spirituality and religiosity include emphasis on individuality and personal choice (Hood et al., 2009) and accelerated rates of religious switching (Putnam & Campbell, 2012; Pew Research Report,

2017). There is an emphasis on post-materialist values and spirituality (Norris & Inglehart, 2011), and there are fundamentalist reactions to the pace and direction of change (Eisenstadt, 2002). These trends are expected to show up in most national samples, and indeed many of them do. However, to every trend there are counter-trends, reflected in individuals who seem to go against the current and operate at the outer edge of what is statistically common (Gladwell, 2008). This too is a global phenomenon (James, 1902/1997). We call such individuals ‘religious outliers’ – people whose spiritual antennae, so to speak, are especially finely-tuned. James devoted most of his *Varieties of Religious Experience* to what he called “religious geniuses” (James, 1902/1997, p. 25): “individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever rather. [...] Creatures of exalted emotional sensibility.”

We did not aim to identify religious geniuses in our data; our sample of 562 individuals is too small for such a venture, and the life experience and maturity associated with religious genius is less likely to be found in a sample of emerging adults. However, our exploration of religious outliers was informed by James’ notion as we searched for individuals characterized by religious creativity or idiosyncrasy or by religious or spiritual sensibilities that consume a major part of their thoughts and behaviors. Such characteristics are likely to make religious outliers different enough from their compatriots to allow them to stand out in some way. In our sample, religious outliers are characterized by patterns of religious subjectivities, which lie outside of what is considered relevant by a majority of the FQS sample.

7.2 Method

We identified outlier statements that were considered irrelevant by most participants against the backdrop of the most strongly endorsed (+3/+4) and highly rejected (−3/−4) statements in the sample. While strong support or rejection of a statement entails an opinion towards it, statements that are ranked −1, 0 and +1 could be characterized as eliciting neutrality or a sense of irrelevance. Using this criterion, we sorted the FQS statements from “high irrelevance” to “low irrelevance” by mean, median, mode and cumulative percentage, then focused on those FQS statements that were ranked −1, 0 or +1 by over 65% of the sample.

For theoretical reasons some irrelevant statements were more intriguing to explore than others. Here are five religious exemplars and outlier-types suggested by previous literature (Hood et al., 2009; Jacobs, 1978; James, 1902/1997; Stark & Glock, 1969), that were not reflected in the national prototypes derived from the FQS:

1. Religious “mystics”: Individuals who have experienced divinity up close and personal and aim towards a state of “Unio-Mystica” (Stark & Glock, 1969).
2. “Sick souls”: Individuals whose religiosity is dominated by a dark undertone of beliefs about the nature of reality and evil, combined with religious guilt, shame, fear or regret (James, 1902/1997).

3. “Eschatological” types: Individuals who live their life in expectancy of the world-to-come, global salvation, the Messiah or Armageddon (Kimball, 2009).
4. Worshippers of a female deity: Individuals who think of God, the divinity, or the spiritual world in feminine terms (Hood et al., 1991).
5. Religious “harmonizers”: Individuals who set great store by harmony, symmetry, and religious aesthetics, perhaps reflecting the accent on such characteristics found in Daoism (Wulff, 2019).

In order to identify any of these five types in the data, we flagged core and secondary statements for each possible type. A core statement is one that we would expect an exemplar of this type to rank highly. A secondary statement is one that we would anticipate an exemplar of this type to rank highly, but to a lesser degree. We then examined whether the core or secondary statements we identified were “defining statements” of any national prototype (i.e. ranked +3/+4 in any of the 62 prototypes which were identified by the national Q-analyses). In those cases where we found that they were indeed part of a national prototype, we excluded them from our analysis, retaining only those sets of statements that were true outliers by virtue of not being defining statements in any national prototypes. This process resulted in the association of certain statements with theoretically derived types.

In a second step, we focused on individuals who, contrary to the general trends, understood one or more of the irrelevant statements as highly resonant with their own viewpoints, asking ourselves whether the way in which they responded to the irrelevant statements reflected them being religious outliers in a broader sense of the term. We created a list of participants who fulfilled the inclusion criteria, noting their national origins, statements ranked +4 or –4 and other details. This list amounted to our quantitative dataset, from which we proceeded to extract meaningful patterns.

In the final step, we collected all transcribed interviews for religious outliers and analyzed them using a version of the Consensual Qualitative Research method (CQR; Hill et al., 2005) to develop a holistic understanding of the narrative structure and emerging themes, later comparing them to identify shared themes and narratives. This analysis reflects our own interpretive lens and is but one possible way of understanding these narratives.

7.3 Transnational Highly Consensual Statements

In the following, we present the most strongly endorsed and highly rejected statements in the full FQS dataset (see Table 7.1).

Among the FQS sample, the most highly endorsed statements (ranked +3/+4) reflect the tendency to support religious and moral choice and an optimistic perspective on humanity. Examples include “Supports individual freedom of choice in matters of faith and morality” (FQS100), which was endorsed by 66% of the sample ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.52$) and “Believes that one can be deeply moral without being

Table 7.1 The eight most endorsed and most rejected statement as ranked in the YARG study (n = 562), presented on a scale ranging -4 to +4

Most strongly endorsed statements	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mode	Median	Strongly endorsed %
Supports individual freedom of choice in matters of faith and morality [FQS100]	2.72	1.519	4	3	65.7%
Believes that one can be deeply moral without being religious [FQS083]	2.58	1.704	4	3	63.6%
Is profoundly touched by the suffering of others [FQS077]	2.00	1.588	3	2	43.1%
Actively works towards making the world a better place to live [FQS057]	1.70	1.548	2	2	32.7%
Believes that human progress is possible on a worldwide scale [FQS095]	1.50	1.626	1	2	29.2%
Sees personal self-realization as a primary spiritual goal in life [FQS093]	1.47	1.823	1	1	34.2%
Feels spiritually moved and deeply sustained by music, art, or poetry [FQS033]	1.42	1.643	1	1	29.4%
Believes in some way, but does not view him- or herself as religious [FQS028]	1	2.240	4	1	32.4%
Most highly rejected statements	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mode	Median	Highly rejected %
Believes that religion should play the central role in the ruling of the nation [FQS071]	-1.98	2.014	-4	-3	51.1
Has dedicated his or her life to serving the divine [FQS036]	-1.48	2.007	-2	-2	34.5
Feels contempt for all religious institutions, ideas and practices [FQS025]	-1.29	1.883	-2	-1	30.2
Personally finds the idea of divinity empty of significance or meaning [FQS055]	-1.20	2.075	-2	-1	30.4
Takes no interest in religious or spiritual matters [FQS024]	-1.10	1.997	-1	-1	27.6
Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment [FQS099]	-1.09	2.135	-4	-1	31.0
Feels that one should remain loyal to the religion of one's nation. [FQS046]	-1.09	2.017	-2	-1	27.4
Feels adrift, without direction, purpose, or goal [FQS035]	-1.02	1.987	-2	-1	26.7

religious" (FQS83), endorsed by 64% of the sample ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.70$). The most highly rejected FQS statements (ranked -3/-4) reflect totalistic tendencies, strong conviction, outgroup exclusion and particularism. Examples include "Believes that religion should play the central role in the ruling of the nation" (FQS71), which was rejected by 51% of the sample ($M = -1.98$, $SD = 2.00$) and "Takes comfort in thinking that those who do not live righteously will face suffering or punishment" (FQS99) which was rejected by 31% of the sample. ($M = -1.10$, $SD = 2.10$). Overall, the participants' views seem to be characterized by moderation, inclusion and a focus on individuality, spirituality and humanism.

Statements that were considered irrelevant by most participants did not tap into common subjectivities regarding religion. Only 2-14% of participants had strong feelings towards any of them. These statements had a different ‘flavor’ than the most endorsed or rejected statements. Most of them were about experiences rather than attitudes. Some examples include: “Seeks to intensify his or her experience of the divine or some otherworldly reality,” (FQS49) considered irrelevant by 66% of the sample, “Understands and relates to the divine as feminine” (FQS19), considered irrelevant by 66% and “Views symmetry, harmony, and balance as reflections of ultimate truth” (FQS94), ranked -1, 0 or +1 by 73% of the sample.

This is the backdrop against which religious outliers can be understood and analyzed.

7.4 An Analysis of Two “Types” of Religious Outliers

In this section, we describe two coherent religious outlier types identified in the data: those who experience divinity up close and personal and those who worship divinity as feminine. Limited space precludes the presentation of all the five outlier types which we found, but we hope that these examples will indicate how the other types might be analyzed as well.

7.4.1 *The Experience of Divinity Up Close and Personal*

This type had one core statement: “Has experienced moments of intense divine, mysterious, or supernatural presence” (FQS10) and five secondary statements: “Has a strong sense of a spiritual or higher order of reality in the midst of nature” (FQS11); “Senses a divine or universal luminous element within him- or herself” (FQS44); “Seeks to intensify his or her experience of the divine or some otherworldly reality” (FQS49); “Is often keenly aware of the presence of the divine” (FQS78) and “Has experienced moments of profound illumination” (FQS89). Of these six statements, five were among the ten most irrelevant statements in the entire dataset. All six statements that form this type were positively intercorrelated, with 11 of the 15 intercorrelations exceeding $r = .20$ and reaching $r = .36$.

Before turning to the analysis of the participants who matched the criteria for this type, we checked whether any of these statements appeared as defining statements in the 62 national prototypes. The core statement “Has experienced moments of intense divine, mysterious, or supernatural presence” (FQS10) appeared as a defining statement in two of the 62 national prototypes, but neither included secondary statements. 17 national prototypes included a *negative* (-2 to -4) ranking of the secondary statements among their defining statements. It is safe to conclude that the set of statements analyzed was neither common nor coalesced into a prototype in any of the national samples.

Ten participants fulfilled these criteria: four were from Ghana, two from Finland, two from the U.S., one from Russia and one from Israel (Hebrew).

In addition to sharing the theoretically derived defining items, six of these participants ranked the statement “Believes in a divine being with whom one can have a personal relationship” (FQS53) as +4. Three ranked the following statements as +4: “Has dedicated his life to serving the divine” (FQS36) and “Feels confident of attaining eternal salvation” (FQS38). They also shared a strong rejection of anti-religious statements such as “Takes no interest in religious or spiritual matters” (FQS24) rejected by three of them at -4; and with statements expressing emotional instability, such as “Feels adrift, without direction, purpose, or goal” (FQS35) rejected by four of them at -4.

Nine of ten interviews with these religious outliers were translated into English. A narrative analysis of these interviews identified three subtypes within the type “Experiencing divinity up close and personal:”

1. The highly religious. Three individuals were characterized by being deeply religious. Being adept at practicing religion, they expected and indeed experienced the presence of God in their life. One participant is a Born-Again conservative Christian, one is a fundamentalist Biblical Christian and the third belongs to a non-Christian “Godly Church”. YGHBF079 describes his faith thus: “I believe in a supernatural being and I feel that the supernatural being guides me and protects me in everything I do and also, like, through the supernatural being I found out that there is eternal salvation.” YGHFB145P belongs to a hybrid Christian-Muslim-Indigenous African church: this highly spiritual group believes in direct worship with no intermediaries and in the importance of the human journey after death to the spiritual world. He describes the active role that God plays in his life as ranging from protecting him from the detrimental effects of witchcraft (in which he believes), to helping him succeed in exams:

I was writing two papers on that day, and the second paper, I got everything jammed. But sitting down for thirty minutes, talking to Him that he should let me relax and remember all the things that I had learnt, within the fifteen minutes, I started writing.

As an indication of his faith, the third member of this subgroup, YFIKD139T, chose deliberately to devote his FQS +4 column only to cards describing God. He experiences a personal relationship with God and with Jesus and describes a sense of constantly dwelling with God: “I’ve experienced very, sort of moments when like, I feel very strongly the presence of God and have experienced things that I can’t in a way explain through science or in any way with like reason.”

2. Spiritual seekers. This second subtype included two individuals who actively made use of various methods to connect with divinity. These individuals described themselves as being more spiritual than religious. Neither belonged to an institutional congregation, but both had spent considerable time seeking experiences of oneness with the beyond. They had tried to enhance these experiences, and interpreted them with the aid of texts and other media. YUSP014 says:

I think, ultimately, I would want an experience like that to show me that there is either something within me or much bigger than me that I can connect to and understand better. There's something, whether it's me, myself, or something bigger.

3. Emotionally volatile. Four individuals¹ report experiencing emotional instability. They typically experienced possessions or a one-time mystical experience around these moments of mental or personal crisis. Two of these described themselves as religious – Muslim or Born-again Christian – and one practiced esoteric spirituality. YILSK040 has felt that God directs her actions in life, but sometimes she also experiences negative possession:

For example, I feel that – I feel that – the demon tells sometimes “Do that”, do you understand? “Do this” and – like, as if there is someone, something in – I have something inside my head, or I know that there are two things in my head, one tells me this, and the other tells me that.

Across subtypes, several common themes surfaced. Most of the experiences reported as moments of connection with the divine came across as individual, privately experienced and very personal, with no intention of sharing them. Correspondingly, none of the participants described themselves as political, and several noted explicitly that they are a-political.

Most of the experiences followed James' definitive traits for a mystical experience, although few expressed all four: noetic – having a sense of enlightenment or understanding after the experience; ineffable – feeling that they cannot describe in words what they have experienced; transient – experiencing divinity for very brief periods at a time; and passive – a sense of being overtaken, a trance, a loss of control. Two of the participants clearly reflected all four (YRUPV014 and YUSKT014). Others reported some of these features, such as hearing a voice but not experiencing enlightenment, and may be considered a bit “lower” on James' “mystical ladder.”

Across subtypes, participants reported various triggers and “periods of awakening” for their mystical experience. Examples include wandering around monasteries, stumbling across an enlightening book (YFIKD141), taking a course at university, taking LSD (YUSKT014), reading the Bible, losing a parent (YGHBF023), picking berries (YRUPV014) or praying fervently (YILSK040).

However, there were also themes on which this group expressed diversity. One such theme is the temporal dimension of the experiences reported. Some of the participants reported experiencing God (or a spirit) as continually present (e.g. YFIKD141), while others described specific time-bound incidents (e.g. USTP014). Furthermore, the theologies manifested in these spiritual experiences were quite divergent, including a view of God as pantheistic (YFIKD141), supernatural (YGHRG079), immanent, and inter-personal (USTP014). Some experiences were described vaguely and not directly related to a being (YRUPV014). There was even a reflection of a gnostic perspective of evil and good deities competing for power and influence on one of the participants' minds (YILSK040).

¹YGHFB315, YGHBF023, YILSK040 and YRUPV014.

Some individuals came across as experimenters, as their interviews included accounts of trying out drugs (USTP014), switching careers (YFIKD141), changing communities (USTP014) and lifestyles. Others could better be described as questers, for whom seeking appeared to be a goal in life, rather than the path to an end-point.

Following are three vignettes of individuals reflecting each mystical subtype²:

Abigail – Born-Again Religious Abigail is a 22-year-old female from Ghana, highly religious, and the only one in the Ghanaian group who reports a specific mystical experience.

She begins by noting that these days she is very sensitive to the suffering of others (FQS77), but that when she was growing up, she was wealthy and pampered, and therefore selfish and egocentric. Then tragedy struck her family:

A series of events happened at a very peaked place of my life. Just when I went to Senior High School, I lost my mom. My dad lost his job. My brother lost his job. Everything in the house is like, there is nothing. Yes, we had to sell most of the stuff at home.

This shook her to the core. She compares her experiences to the biblical Job's trials and notes that she knows now that her belief is unshakable, due to the difficulties she experienced. Her faith became fervent following a personal experience:

On the day of the funeral [of her mother], 28th February, 20XX. Um, I – that was the day of the funeral actually and hmm, I heard a divine being sent to me. Yes. Being sent to me. Something I have never heard before and that was what comforted me and gave me the comfort and the assurance that everything will be fine.

The mystical experience was enhanced by the ministering of a friend, who was an ardent believer. Until then, Abigail reports that she was “unliked” and did not really have any friends. Her new friend comforted her and showed her the way to Christ: “She encouraged me. Taught me the way and she never did anything outside the will of God. That is when I started seeing things from that perspective.”

Today she describes her belief thus: “It doesn't matter what I do. It's never about me; it's about Him [referring to Christ]”. The change in her life was so profound, that Abigail sees herself as a different person: “My chain of friends has changed. My decisions have changed. My priorities have changed – [I am] more sensitive and calm.” Today, she lets Jesus choose her university courses, hoping this will help her realize her dream: She wishes to create an orphanage in Ghana and an old-age home which will take care of the suffering in ways which today are unavailable in Ghana: “my faith says we should take care of the poor and the needy in the society. Care for the widow. Feed them. Clothe them.”

Amy – A spiritual Seeker Amy is a 21-year-old woman who studies at a Liberal Arts college in the United States. Her father is Jewish and her mother is Christian. She recalls that her mother would take her along when she attended a spiritual center as a child, “all very open-ended and very spiritual – I really enjoyed it.” This left

²Each participant was given a pseudonym to make the narrative flow smoother. “Amy” is YUSP014; “Abigail” is YGHB023; “Boris” is YRUP014.

a positive and lasting impression on her. She attributes her sense of spirituality to that community.

Her more recent experiences in college, however, play the main part in her current spirituality. The first of these is a course she took at college with a rabbi. The class, titled “Science and the Sacred,” brought science and religion into dialogue and “actually showed us that no, it can work, it’s not so black and white, that really enthralled me.” She experienced this as a turning point: “I was just raving about this class.”

Her second defining experience involved taking LSD:

I basically had this strange experience with a really close friend of mine where we had taken LSD and we were just walking around in nature. And we came to this dock that goes pretty far out into the bay, and we walked out to the very end of it. And I don’t know what happened but we both just started hysterically crying and it was super-intense. [...] and it was all really beautiful and emotional and intense.

This experience occupied her thoughts and she wondered whether it reflected a higher reality. Concerned, she brought up the experience in the rabbi’s class and he told her this might be a mystical experience. Amy concluded that indeed the experience had a deeper meaning and decided to continue searching for such moments of enlightenment. Her idea of the divine oscillates between immanent and transcendent. Seeing herself as a spiritual seeker, she tries different paths:

And I can’t say I’m a part of, like, one set community. I’m just kind of like floating around in all of these different ones. And I like that. I don’t like being felt as if I’m tied down to certain people or things. I’d rather get a little taste of it all.

Amy comes across as a religious multiplist, and any specific path such as an institutionalized religion is less meaningful to her. She is also highly sociable, and ultimately, to her, spirituality is about personal connection. “I think it comes down to the relationships I have with people: that’s really important to me.”

Boris – An Emotionally Volatile Mystic A 29-year-old Russian male, Boris is strongly opposed to *any* authority, be it family, school, state, or religion: “I don’t like being part of the system. I think it’s vicious.” He has strong negative feelings about the human race: “A mindless herd.” He describes himself as “strongly egocentric, a narcissist, {SG} a snob, um – an introvert and a misanthrope.” His view of the world is a mixture of the dark and the utopic. On the one hand, he feels that the world is rife with evil forces at work: “it seems to me everyone’s unhappy.” On the other hand, he has dreams of healing humanity:

I imagined how I was going to build a utopia and so on, how I was going to lead everyone to harmony and order. Actually, I really liked this thought and I often find myself daydreaming about this or that. So I built a model of the world, for example, I invented laws for it, well, I do it regularly, I return to it, invent more laws, create moral mindsets and so on and so forth.

His emotional stance is characterized by powerful ups and downs:

I’m a man of extremes in general and I’m full of contradictions, so this polarity surprises me at times. A week, well, maybe a month ago; I realize that a month ago I – could provide

only one association with the word “life” and it was “pain”: life is pain; life is suffering. And now I’m saying that life is the most wonderful thing. [...] Basically, that’s what is so surprising for me now because I feel omnipotent now.

Boris reports having had a very difficult childhood, clashing with parents, family and schools over issues of boundaries and authority: “I think that – the entire system {SG} is made of boundaries, and the education system – well, I just don’t like it. I don’t think it’s right. And I do a lot of useless stuff at the university and I don’t like the control [so I’m dropping out].”

Boris fully rejects organized religion which he sees as a way of enslaving the masses, describing the God of the Old Testament as “an impulsive, willful – {SG} and petulant child, who’s also a schizophrenic and a pervert at the same time.” However, he feels quite differently about spirituality: “I – I’m into esoteric, the occult and other {SG} pseudo-, pseudo-scientific, para-scientific practices {CG}. [...] And I’m genuinely interested in it, uh, and I’ve experienced {SG} – an understanding of a divine presence, enlightenment and so on. And I’m really eager – to dig deeper.” He reports direct mystical experiences:

Once, when I was – I don’t remember how old I was, about fifteen, probably, when I – I don’t remember, I was doing some day-to-day – Oh yes, I was in the country, gathering berries, and I felt as if – I had been struck in the head by a lightning and I realized that all people {LG} lived their lives wrongfully and that {SG} there was no harmony in the world. – I don’t know what were the prerequisites but this awareness came to me unexpectedly and intuitively.

He describes this as a moment of distinct enlightenment: “my inner god gave me the directions I needed and, well, that he – saw that I had made the wrong turn and, roughly speaking, he saved me.” Boris also experiences states of mystical trance and possession when he writes poetry:

Every poem of mine started with me writing down one line which was stuck in my head and then I entered some sort of a trance – um, and – a few dozen lines poured out of me, and I don’t know, I don’t feel as if I made them up; I feel as if – someone’s dictating them to me.

In sum, the narratives and experiences reported by Abigail from Ghana, Amy from the United States and Boris from Russia illustrate three subtypes of experiencing divinity ‘up close and personal’: trauma-related religious rebirth, mystical seeking, and emotionally volatile mysticism. While the spiritual world plays a key role in all their lives, the differences between them are compelling.

7.4.2 *The Experiencers of Divinity as Feminine*

Of the participants, 66% ranked the statement “Understands and relates to the divine as feminine” as irrelevant. Fifty-four of the 62 national prototypes entirely ignored this statement. Of the other eight, only one mildly endorsed this statement (Peru 2, “Religiously and experientially engaged” ranked it +2), while six prototypes rejected it strongly. These “rejecting” prototypes were highly traditional, implying

that relating to the divine as feminine may be experienced as incompatible with an emphasis on tradition and adherence.

Who, then, relates to the divine as feminine? We found nine people who ranked the statement “Understands and relates to the divine as feminine” (FQS19) as a +3 or +4 ($M = 3.67$). Three of these participants were from the U.S, two from Peru, and one each from Ghana, China, Finland and Russia. Other statements that were highly endorsed amongst these individuals included “Supports individual freedom of choice in matters of faith and morality” (FQS100; $M = 2.67$), “Considers hypocrisy – not practicing what one preaches – to be common in religious circles” (FQS101; $M = 2.22$), “Is positively engaged by or interested in other peoples’ religious traditions” (FQS81; $M = 2.22$) and “Feels spiritually moved and deeply sustained by music, art, or poetry” (FQS33; $M = 2.11$). The strongest levels of rejection for statements in this group were found for “Takes no interest in religious or spiritual matters” (FQS24; $M = -2.23$); “Believes that religion should play the central role in the ruling of the nation” (FQS71; $M = -2.22$) and “Feels contempt for all religious institutions, ideas and practices” (FQS25; $M = 2.11$). Collectively, these items suggest that in addition to perceiving the divine as feminine, these individuals pursue an interest in religious and spiritual matters, but not on a political level.

An analysis of the five out of nine interviews that were translated into English further confirmed the notion of the diversity of religious or spiritual ideas associated with understanding the divine as feminine. As the following vignettes indicate, the reasons for supporting this statement vary, and the interpretations and discussions are highly embedded in their cultural contexts. YFIKD141 identified as a Finnish Pagan, YCHJT189 did not associate himself with any religion or worldview, and YGHFB078, YUSTP007 and YUSTP025 identified with varied Christian traditions.

Despite cultural variation, several common characteristics of the individuals who understand and relate to the divine as feminine emerged. The first was the emphasis on authenticity. The disdain for hypocrisy stemmed from these individuals’ explicit desire to be themselves, also in matters of religion and spirituality. For example, YUSTP025, who is active in a Christian fellowship, says that he appreciates this group because “you have kids coming together who know [...] that they’re not perfect. Know that they make mistakes. Know that they just want to make a difference in the world.” His emphasis on how his religious convictions above all should reflect humanity recurs in his descriptions on what he posts on social media: “I don’t want to post religious things because I don’t want people to see me as a religious person. I want people to see how broken I am, kind of.” The interviews with YFIKD141 and YUSTP007 also reflect how their own religious and spiritual trajectories aim at their intent to reflect on what they genuinely are.

The second shared theme was an abiding interest in religious and spiritual matters. Many of the interviews include long accounts of how past reflections and experiences have resulted in the present state described and are characterized by a “theological-mindedness;” a well-thought-out theology. For example, YFIKD141 expands on rather sophisticated panentheistic understandings, in which the earth and the goddess “together appear in various types of divinities. [...] So it is something that exists within all living things”. YUSTP025 notes “I’m trying to work

harder on, like, not getting God like gender pronoun or anything. [...] Because I don't believe that God has a gender."

Third, there was a positive understanding of the female archetype. YGHFB078, who lost his mother as a teenager, sees women as embodying generosity, caring and love. YUSTP025 describes how he has experienced God as acting through his mother, whom he deeply appreciates. In the case of YUSTP007, who actively promotes female health issues, this feature is expressed in the form of an ideological endorsement of women – similar features characterize YUSTP025, who believes that God is a feminist.

The fourth recurring theme is an existential bent; dealing with existence, its meaning and its vicissitudes. YFIKD141T uses her experience of the divine as a method to "gain experience about how things really are." YGHFB078 is processing the loss of his two parents and friends and is deeply engaged with the existential question of the meaning of life in light of impending death. "Existential" also implies angst, often connected to loneliness. YGHFB078 who lost his parents, is not the only one who feels alone. YUSTP007 describes feeling like a black sheep. In broader existential terms, YFIKD141T is "going through this type of breaking phase", and YUSTP025 also describes a phase of "breaking."

Lastly, sexuality appears to be a shared theme for some of these participants: YFIKD141 comments: "Human sexuality almost is a sacrament of some kind". YUSTP007 also discusses her own understanding of sexuality as fluid and its importance in her religiosity.

As well as shared themes, there were also some distinguishing ones. The main distinction we identified was between those who conceived of the female deity as mother and those who conceived of her as a sexual-procreator. Some preferred the idea of a maternal (nurturing, loving) goddess archetype, while others leaned more towards the idea of a feminine deity reflecting sexuality, sensuality and procreation. Female participants sometimes combined the two, but the males did not.

Here are vignettes of three participants³ who embraced the notion of the divine as feminine, the first as a nurturing mother, the second as a sexual procreator, and the third combining both motifs:

Emmanuel – In Search of a Nurturing God The interview with 24-year-old Emmanuel from Ghana is characterized by frequent references to his Christian convictions. He believes strongly that "certain beliefs are crucial for salvation" (FQS22: +4). When he expands on why he strongly agrees with other statements, such as "Feels personally protected and guided by a spiritual being" (FQS74: +3) and "Becomes more religious or spiritual at times of crisis or need" (FQS17: +4), his replies begin with the expression "*as a Christian...*". Another recurring theme throughout the interview is Emmanuel's disapproval of hypocrisy, which he considers common in religious circles (FQS101: +3): "There are some people [...] They are not Christians per se. They go to church for people to know that they are also

³Each participant was given a pseudonym to make the narrative flow smoother. "Kaisa" is YFIKD141; "Emmanuel" is YGHFB078P; and "Kathleen" is USTP007.

going to church but it doesn't mean that they practice what they learn from the church." For Emmanuel, being a Christian impacts all sectors of his life and decisions.

As a teenager, Emmanuel lost both his mother and his father, as well as friends.

Some of the people you are very close to, they just die and you can't actually know the reason, but death is a part of life. [...] I think it has helped me to rethink about life that, at a point in time, you will die and what are you doing to yourself as at now. Are you doing what is expected of you as a Christian so that after death you gain eternal life or are you just living your life as you wish and then suffer after death? So some of these things have shaped my own thinking about life.

The death of his parents meant that he has had to live life differently from before:

Say, there were some things you could easily say to your parents, you can't say them to the people you are living with now. [...] When [...] your parents were alive you could just um – get anything without much difficulty, but now they are no more and you need to actually work for them. So that will bring about hard work.

The reason Emmanuel endorses the statement "Understands and relates to the divine as feminine" (FQS19: +4) relates to his image of God.

We call him Kwame that is man, masculine, but the relation to him is feminine in the sense that um, when we talk about females or feminine in general, we know them to be um, generous, caring, loving, you can mention all the attributes and I see God to be that kind of a person who is generous, caring, forgiving and all that. [...] Because men, I think, don't really have those kinds of attributes or qualities. So the relation is more or less like that of a feminine. Yeah, that is what I can say.

Kathleen – A Gender Activist Kathleen is a 17-year old who has recently begun her college studies. She comes from a Christian, Roman-Catholic background, but describes how recent years have entailed a move away from central Catholic values relating to gender issues and gender roles, for example regarding reproduction issues and everyone's right to marry. Kathleen describes her parents as "very conservative", and previous discussions on ideological issues have, for the most part, resulted in conflicts. Recently, her values have changed, as her high school constituted an environment where she found other like-minded students.

I just never realized that there were people in the world who felt the same way I did, 'cause I felt like everyone I knew had such a strong faith, but I was like the black sheep who didn't have that, couldn't agree with what was being said in the church. So it was nice for me to get to a situation where I felt like I could really express those questions that I had.

Her high school and college years entailed activism on gender-related issues such as establishing a gender-neutral bathroom on school campus. As part of her academic studies, she has also enrolled in a course on gender. Her parents are not aware of the extent to which her values have changed, because she feels that there is no point explaining to them her "very fluid definition of sexuality", and that they would try to ban her from her current engagements.

While Kathleen is critical of how the Roman-Catholic church handles gender issues, she does attend mass regularly, appreciating it more now that she no longer is forced to attend it, and sharing that this has led to a “religious awakening” for her. In the future, she wishes to be part of “a church that doesn’t seek to change my political views in the way that my own church did while I was growing, ‘cause that’s important for me, I don’t think that those two things should mix. I don’t think my priest needs to have an opinion on legislative matters.” The prevalent focus on gender issues during the interview makes Kathleen’s strong endorsement of FQS019 quite understandable.

Kaisa – Worshipper of the Goddess Kaisa is a 28-year old Finnish woman. Her experiences of a spiritual dimension and the way in which these experiences have formed her outlook on the world constitute central themes in the interview. She says that she grew up in a “very atheist type of family”, but as a teenager, her aunt, who is Orthodox, took her to visit monasteries. Because of Kaisa’s experiences in these monasteries, she “slowly started to experience a longing for religion and holiness.” Since then, she has been engaged in finding literature and internet sites which contain ideas that resonate with her own experiences and outlook. When asked, “What is your own religion?” Kaisa struggles with the answer, finally describing herself as a Finnish pagan: “I tend to believe in the idea of the earth and a goddess, which together appear in various types of divinities. [...] So it is something that exists within all living things”. She describes her religion as “individually centered” rather than collective. References to nature and the environment abound in the interview, as do references to the goddess, which could explain her identification with the statement “Understands and relates to the divine as feminine” (FQS19: +3). For Kaisa, religion is a constantly present dimension of everyday life that is part of human relationships and daily routines. A while ago, she moved from an urban environment to the countryside, and she describes her closeness to nature as an important reason for her move.

Kaisa’s family of origin lives by the idea that “each person has the right to believe in whatever he or she wants, but it is absolutely a private matter”. However, for her husband, who belongs to a conservative movement within the Lutheran church, religion is strongly connected to belonging to a community. Her pagan beliefs have been a source of tension between them, especially when her husband uprooted a tree, which Kaisa worshipped, an act which deeply hurt her. In trying to mend the rift, Kaisa has recently tried to pray together with her husband and attend church with him, but so far has not found this meaningful.

In sum, while Emmanuel from Ghana, Kathleen from the United States and Kaisa from Finland all share a view of deity as feminine, they arrived at this perception from different experiences, and prioritize different aspects – maternal, sexual or both – of the female Goddess.

7.5 Discussion

We began this analysis by identifying highly consensual FQS statements in order to identify possible “outliers” who hold views that most participants experience as irrelevant. Across national boundaries, most young adult respondents in the YARG study share a belief in the importance of choice, a tendency towards religious pluralism, and a positive view of humanity. Correspondingly, most participants dislike extremist or totalistic beliefs that tend to reject otherness and to express certainty. We might think of this as the ‘Zeitgeist’ of contemporary religious subjectivities.

These consensual attitudes were shared, incidentally, by the outlier profiles, which we proceeded to examine more closely. Their uniqueness did not lie in rejecting this ‘Zeitgeist’. Rather, it lay in an added powerful affinity to the domain of religious experience. The list of irrelevant statements suggests that direct experiences of the divine, practices of religious seeking and some interpretations of divinity are unusual in our YARG sample.

At this stage, it would be possible to argue that since these statements are the least relevant in the concourse, perhaps they should be dropped from the FQS altogether. They may just not reflect today’s shared religious subjectivities. If very few people around the world think of the divine as feminine, what is the justification for retaining that statement?

Our study counters this by finding that there are people for whom such statements mean a great deal, although they only surface in a “top-down” transnational search, and do not show up in the more common “bottom-up” national Q-analyses. In light of our findings, we argue that as long as any group of participants feels that certain statements reflect their own religious subjectivity, these statements should be retained and analyzed.

Our analysis of those who reported experiences of divinity “up close and personal” and those who understood divinity as feminine did identify some shared themes for each group. For example, personal experiences of the divine tended to be personal rather than communal, to have a discernable trigger and a period of awakening, and to have a noetic quality. Female deity worshipping entailed a positive view of the feminine archetype and a strong emphasis on personal authenticity. However, the range and diversity of the narratives was even greater than what these respondents had in common. Among those who saw divinity as feminine, the role of religion in their lives varied and the way in which they thought of divinity as female ranged from loving mother to sensual being. Similarly, the solitary mystic who rarely got along well with other people, and the young woman who shared a drug-induced mystical experience with a friend seem quite different, despite the commonality of having a spiritual awakening.

Our analysis of irrelevant statements and outlier “types” raises the question of whether we can set aside the idea of national-cultural boundaries in favor of transnational religious subjectivities. The answer is both “yes” and “no.” It is highly unlikely that the outlier narratives would have surfaced in national prototype analyses. They seem to share more with other seekers, mystics and feminists across the

globe than they do with their compatriots in their national samples. Yet, at the same time, their culture shapes and guides the details of their spiritual paths to such an extent that a dismissal of national (or cultural) distinctions would impoverish our ability to analyze and understand their stories. The role of culture stands out clearly as we juxtapose these narratives. The Finnish pagan who chose to live alone with her partner in the countryside, worshipping a female goddess as a reflection of mother nature, also reflects the powerful Finnish ethos of nature; the American Catholic who rebelled against her conservative upbringing sees God as female and as part of her own gender-fluidity and feminist social activism, two important themes in contemporary North America. The role of culturally bound values and practices in such examples is obvious.

It is also worth noting that these ‘types’ expressed important internal diversity. The “Divinity close and personal” type was best understood when separated into three subtypes: highly religious, spiritual seekers and emotionally volatile. Since each subtype was, by necessity, very small, we suspect that this is not an exhaustive list of subtypes, but that it rather highlights the variety and diversity of religious subjectivities.

Thus, our study on religious outliers ended up reinforcing a third fault-line, following the cultural and global ones: The idiosyncratic one. Each individual whose narrative we analyzed turned out to be a rich and unique microcosm, whose subjectivities reflected more than anything their own complexities of personality, life-experience and values. We attempted to demonstrate this through vignettes, by necessity brief and truncated. The idiosyncratic fault-line provides an important reminder for researchers working with FQS: shared religious attitudes may conceal an immense diversity of religious subjectivities. By way of summary, we encourage future researchers to consider at least three levels of analysis of such data: The global (or transnational), the cultural (or national) and the personal (or idiosyncratic). Only by integrating these three levels can we hope to comprehend the rich and diverse range of religious subjectivities among the young adults in the contemporary world.

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