The dynamics of spirituality: A cross-cultural analysis of untranslatable terms

Psychology of Religion and Spirituality

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Abstract

The notion of spirituality is increasingly prominent in academic and cultural discourse alike. However, it remains a nebulous concept, capable of diverse interpretations, particularly cross-culturally. In the interest of exploring this diversity, yet also with the aim of identifying common themes, an enquiry was conducted into conceptualizations of spirituality across cultures. Specifically, the enquiry focused on so-called untranslatable words, i.e., which lack an exact equivalent in another language (in this case, English). Through a quasi-systematic search, together with conceptual snowballing, over 200 relevant terms were located. A grounded theory analysis identified three key dimensions: the sacred, contemplative practice, and self-transcendence. Based on these, a conceptualization of spirituality was formulated that may be valid cross-culturally, namely: engagement with the sacred, usually through contemplative practice, with the ultimate aim of self-transcendence.

Keywords: cross-cultural; spirituality; sacred; contemplative practice; self-transcendence.

The Dynamics of Spirituality: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Untranslatable Terms

Until fairly recently, spirituality and religion have been inextricably intertwined, and even treated as synonymous (Sheldrake, 2007). Etymologically, spirituality derives from the Latin *spiritualis*, in turn an adaptation of the Greek *pneumatikós* (πνευματικῶς), an adjective which signifies being with or of the 'spirit of God.' A spiritual person therefore denoted one in whom this spirit 'dwelt,' or was receptive to it, and was a label that tended to be reserved for particularly devout people, e.g., monastics (Dempsey, 2007). The term religion was then deployed to describe the institutions that crystallized around spiritual exemplars. The term is thought to have entered English in the 12th Century, via French, as an adaptation of the Latin *religio* – which connoted obligation and reverence – which in turn possibly derived from *religare,* meaning 'to bind' (Saler, 1987). In earlier patterns of usage, religion tended to refer specifically to monastic communities, and the ideas/practices that emerged within these (Burton, 1994). Then, in later centuries, it came to denote the institutional instantiation of the faith more generally.

However, with secularizing trends over recent centuries, the concept of spirituality has become increasingly differentiated from religion, and from theistic belief systems. Even while traditional religions have lost their relevance or appeal for large numbers of people, many still report that spirituality has some meaning for them. For instance, a recent survey by the Pew Research Center (2012) estimated that 18% of the US general population describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, while an American Religious Identification Survey put the figure even higher at around one third of the population (Kosmin & Keysar, 2013). That said, Ammerman (2013) cautions against a growing tendency to depict religiosity and spirituality as oppositional constructs, since in many people's lived experience, the boundary between them can be fuzzy and porous. Nevertheless, it is notable that many contemporary

definitions of spirituality do not necessitate the involvement of a religious tradition or institution, as reflected in Koenig's (2009) description of it as "something individuals define for themselves that is largely free of the rules, regulations and responsibilities associated with religion" (p. 281). Nor is spirituality necessarily theistic, as seen for instance in the way many followers of Buddhism do not regard it as such, but nevertheless view it as spiritual in some way (Lomas, Cartwright, Edginton, & Ridge, 2014).

But, if spirituality requires neither religion or theism, what *does* it mean? Perhaps its most common conceptualization is in terms of the 'sacred.' This is a complex and evolving term in itself. Etymologically, it entered English around the 12th Century, derived (via French) from the Latin *sacrare*, which encompasses meanings such as to anoint, consecrate, dedicate, immortalize, and make holy (Feather, 2013). In contemporary academia, many conceptualizations of the sacred rest upon the pioneering work of Durkheim (1912), who contrasted it with the profane: the latter pertains to ordinary everyday life, while the former concerns "things set apart and forbidden" (p. 47). Thus, the sacred describes phenomena regarded as 'other' and non-ordinary. This can include divine beings, and the places and objects connected to these (Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough Jr, Swyers, Larson, & Zinnbauer, 2000). However, as noted above, it does not necessarily imply theism, but can simply denote phenomena that are deemed 'numinous' in some way (Braud, 2001). (That said, in Otto's (1923) original articulation of the numinous – which he developed based on the Latin term *numen*, meaning divine power or presence – this concept itself was generally interpreted and discussed in theistic terms (Ware, 2007).) Indeed, the sacred can even refer to items that are 'just' precious or meaningful, such as a memory or object that a person holds especially dear (Goldstein, 2007).

Thus, we might say that spirituality involves some kind of "search for the sacred" – a conceptualization often credited to Kenneth Pargament (e.g., Pargament & Mahoney, 2009,

p. 611). Religion can then be interpreted as the group-validated and -organized means and methods of this process of searching (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Furthermore, given that both spirituality and religion can be defined in terms of this 'search,' spirituality can be further identified as more an *individual* attribute or process (as opposed to the social and institutional nature of religion). For instance, in the context of Piedmont's (1999) Spiritual Transcendence Scale, spirituality is operationalised in trait-like terms as "an intrinsic motivation of individuals to create a broad sense of personal meaning within an eschatological context" (Piedmont, Ciarrochi, Dy-Liacco, & Williams, 2009, p. 2). However, such definitions notwithstanding, spirituality remains an elusive concept, one with diverse meanings, particularly cross-culturally. It would therefore be helpful to reach a more comprehensive understanding of spirituality, one that encompasses the range of ways in which it is experienced and conceived, but which also identifies common themes among this diversity. This paper aims to do this through the innovative method of studying untranslatable words.

Untranslatable Words

This paper draws on work by Lomas (2016b), who is in the process of developing a lexicography of untranslatable words pertaining to wellbeing. Although untranslatability is a contested phenomenon – e.g., some linguists argue that it is hard to find exact translations for *most* words (Hatim & Munday, 2004) – it essentially refers to a word that does not appear to have an equivalent lexeme in a given other language. A well-known example is the German term *Schadenfreude*, describing pleasure at the misfortunes of others. The interest in such words is manifold.

First, they can assist in understanding other cultures. As Wierzbicka (1997) puts it, "words with special, culture-specific meanings reflect and pass on not only ways of living characteristic of a given society, but also ways of thinking" (p. 5). The theoretical context here is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – developed by Sapir (1929) and Whorf (1940) – which

holds that language influences how people experience, understand, and perceive the world. The stronger version of this hypothesis is linguistic determinism, whereby language inextricably constitutes thought. By contrast, the milder version, which is endorsed by most scholars, simply asserts that language shapes thought and experience (Perlovsky, 2009). In relation to untranslatable words, the stronger deterministic view submits that only people enmeshed within the culture that produced the word can truly understand or experience the phenomenon it signifies (Taylor, 1985). However, the milder relativistic perspective holds that such words are to an extent accessible to people outside the culture, holding some universal relevance.

This latter point highlights a second element of interest regarding these words: beyond being informative vis-à-vis the culture that created them, such terms may enrich *other* lexica. Indeed, this phenomenon of cultures 'borrowing' words from one another is central to language development. For instance, of the more than 600,000 lexemes in the Oxford English Dictionary, the percentage of borrowed words – i.e., which cannot be traced "to the earliest known stages of a language" (Lehmann, 1962, p. 212), which in the case of English are those not part of the West-Germanic Anglo-Saxon dialects brought to the British Isles around the 5th Century CE – is estimated to be as high as 41% (Tadmor, 2009). Such borrowings are known as loanwords, although more specific terminology has also been developed to reflect varying levels of assimilation into the host language (Durkin, 2014).

Of particular interest here is *why* words are borrowed. Haspelmath (2009) identifies two main reasons: 'core' and 'cultural' borrowings. The former is when a loanword replicates a word that already exists (i.e., with a similar meaning) in the recipient language. This tends to happen for sociolinguistic reasons, e.g., the cultural capital associated with using foreign words (Blank, 1999). This type of borrowing, while interesting, is not of concern here. However, the second category of cultural borrowing is central. Haspelmath refers to these as

"loanwords by necessity" (p. 46), where the recipient language lacks its own word for a particular referent (e.g., if a new practice or idea is introduced to that culture). Thus, as Blank (1999) elucidates, the loanword is cognitive and socially useful, enabling speakers to articulate concepts they had previously been unable to. In the terminology of Lehrer (1974), such words fill 'semantic gaps,' i.e., "the lack of a convenient word to express what (the speaker) wants to speak about" (p. 105). It is this notion of a semantic gap that makes a word untranslatable. Essentially, such words indicate the existence of phenomena that have been overlooked or undervalued by a given culture, but which another culture has noticed, identified, and labelled.

Thus, a central premise of Lomas's lexicography is that such words can enrich the English lexicon, and thereby enhance its speakers' understanding of the world. In saying 'its speakers,' this refers to English speakers in general, but more specifically to academia. In addition to any benefits the lexicography may hold for English-speaking cultures more broadly, it may augment the nomological network in fields like psychology (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). There are numerous reasons why such augmentation is desirable, foremost among which is the notion that, from a critical perspective, academic psychology tends to be Western-centric (Becker & Marecek, 2008). Much of the empirical work in the field has been conducted with participants described by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) as WEIRD, belonging to societies that are Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic. Moreover, many scholars themselves are situated within such contexts, which will inevitably, to an extent, influence their perception and interpretation of the world. For instance, it has been suggested that psychology has been strongly influenced by Western tendencies towards individualism (Izquierdo, 2005).

As a result, one could argue that the current nomological network in psychology is incomplete, having been largely founded upon concepts that happen to have been identified

in English. The aim of the lexicography project is therefore to augment this network with constructs which have not yet been identified in psychology, as signalled by the existence of an untranslatable word. Clearly, there is a wide range of phenomena that could potentially be of interest. As such, to narrow the focus of the lexicography to a manageable area of enquiry, its focus is on wellbeing specifically, a key aspect of which is spirituality. Thus, the current paper aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this latter topic through the study of relevant words.

Methods

Initial Data Collection and Analysis

In the original paper which established the lexicography, Lomas (2016b) identified 216 untranslatable words pertaining to wellbeing, located through a 'quasi-systematic' review of academic and grey literature (*quasi* in that there was insufficient material in academic journals to utilise conventional academic databases). These words were analysed using a variation of grounded theory (GT), a qualitative methodology which allows theory to emerge inductively from the data, via three main coding stages (open, axial, and selective) (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, in a process of open coding, the data (i.e., the list of 216 words and their definitions) were examined for emergent themes. Then, axial coding involved comparing themes with one another, and aggregating these into categories based on conceptual similarity. Six categories were produced, which in turn were paired into three meta-categories: feelings (positive and ambivalent), relationships (love and pro-sociality), and psychological development (character and spirituality). Finally, selective coding saw the identification of a single core category, which in that case was wellbeing.

Subsequent Data Collection and Analysis

Subsequent to the publication of this initial paper, the lexicography has expanded to nearly 1,000 words currently. This is partly through contributions to a webpage created to

host the evolving project (www.drtimlomas.com/lexicography), and partly through follow-up enquiries into the categories generated in the original paper via conceptual snowballing. The term snowballing derives from a recruitment procedure, whereby participants recommend or facilitate the participation of additional people, particularly those who may be hard to reach (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010). Similarly, conceptual snowballing refers to the process by which enquiries into a concept – in this case, a given untranslatable word – leads a researcher to encounter related concepts. However, despite the addition of numerous new words, these did not altered the structure of the lexicography, as it was possible to accommodate these within the existing framework of categories.

The current paper focuses specifically on the category of spirituality, which comprises over 200 words at present. These are words that can be regarded as fundamentally spiritual in nature, rather than those merely associated with it (although admittedly this is a tricky distinction to make at times). The lexicography features numerous terms which are connected to spiritual traditions, such as concepts relating to wisdom or morals. (Indeed, as with most qualitative analyses, there is considerable overlap between categories, with some themes capable of being situated within more than one.) However, although such phenomena are *associated* with spirituality, they are not inherently or necessarily spiritual, since there are plenty of secular frameworks around morality and wisdom. Thus, the overarching concern in this category is words that *directly* concern spirituality. For this present paper, these 200 or so words were again analysed using the variation of GT developed in Lomas' (2016b) original paper. In the first stage of open coding, words were examined for thematic content, and were then grouped into themes. Finally, a single core category was identified, which in this case was spirituality.

Results and Discussion

The words analysed fell into three broad themes: the sacred (phenomena regarded as sacred, and the properties/qualities of such phenomena); contemplative practices (activities enabling people to engage with the sacred); and transcendence (experiences of encountering the sacred, usually as a result of contemplative practice). Thus, across the diversity of traditions, there was arguably sufficient common ground to arrive at a broad conception of spirituality that holds across these varied contexts: namely: engagement with the sacred, usually through contemplative practice, with the ultimate aim of self-transcendence. These three themes will be discussed in turn, illustrated using a selection of relevant words ($n = 56$) from the lexicography, as shown in Figure 1 below. (The full and up-to-date list of words in the ongoing project, which with respect to the category of spirituality currently numbers over 200, can be found at www.drtimlomas.com/lexicography.)

[please insert Figure 1 here]

The Sacred

Although the sacred is conceptualized in diverse ways, across this diversity, relevant terms fall into two main areas. Some describe phenomena that are conceptualized as being *outside* the person, including notions of a sacred realm, force, or being(s). Others words denote phenomena situated *inside* the person, i.e., a spiritual dimension or aspect within people themselves. Each of these types will be considered in turn.

The idea of a sacred realm or force is found across cultures. One of the oldest recorded examples is *Brahman* (ब्रह्मन्), references to which are found in the *Védas* (वेद), parts of which date back to the 2nd millennium BCE (Sharma, 1972). While *Brahman* is polysemous (i.e., having multiple meanings, as do many words), Holdrege (1995) suggests the *Védas* deploy it in four main ways: as the spiritual power inherent in the text; as the knowledge encompassed by the teachings; as the collective body of practices; and, most pertinently in

this present context, as the ongoing process of Creation itself. This latter meaning is thought

to have evolved during the many centuries over which the *Védas* were composed.

Radhakrishnan (1914) argues that whereas early Vedas expressed an animistic polytheism,

there emerged a philosophical and spiritual urge to identify a unifying principle beneath the

flux of multiplicity and change. This principle became referred to as *Brahman*, which Ho

defines (1995) as the "ubiquitous, absolute, formless, immaterial, immutable" ground of

everything that exists (p. 124).

Similar notions of a universal spiritual principle creating and/or permeating existence

are found cross-culturally. These ideas have different nuances depending on the traditions

and worldview of the culture in question, and cannot simply be regarded as equivalent

(Callicott, 2000). Nevertheless, there are certain resonances among these ideas, suggesting

that many are expressing comparable insights about the nature of the sacred and the universe

generally. For instance, the Chinese concept of the *Tao* (道) has some parallels to *Brahman*, as

reflected in Oldstone-Moore's (2003) description of it as a "nameless, formless, all pervasive

power which brings all things into being and reverts them back into non-being in an eternal

cycle" (p. 6). (Grigg (1938) even speculated that *Brahmanic* philosophy was transmitted to

China around 1000 BCE, helping to inform the idea of the *Tao*.) Somewhat similarly, the

notion of a divine power is reflected in terms like *mana*, a central concept in Austronesian

cultures (Boyce, 2011).

In many cultures, this divine power is conceived of theistically and personified.

Indeed, entire pantheons have been created, and while it is beyond the scope here to cover

these in depth, there are some salient points that help to convey a sense of this arena. First,

polythestic schemas are common, particularly in older contexts, with deities often

personifying certain phenomena. To give an influential example, Greek mythology features

three generations of divinities, with its narratives centred on the complexities of their lineage

and interactions. First were the *Protogonoi* (Πρωτογόνος), i.e., 'first-born,' including *Khaos* (χάος), the void preceding the birth of the cosmos, *Gaia* (Γαῖα), the primordial Mother Earth, and *Ouranus* (Οὐρανός), sky or heaven. Together *Gaia* and *Ouranus* procreated the second generation of 12 historical deities, known as the *Titânes* (Τιτᾶνες), who in turn produced the contemporary third generation of Gods. These included 12 major 'Olympian' Gods – such as *Zeus* (Ζεύς), sky or thunder God, and supreme deity – which were also adopted in Roman mythology (with different names, e.g., Zeus becoming Jupiter).

In some cultures, polytheistic systems gave way to monotheistic theologies. That said, the distinction between polytheism and monotheism is not always clear. For instance, despite the panoply of deities in Hinduism, *Brahman* has sometimes been regarded monotheistically, with these deities being its aspects or incarnations (Sen, 1989). Even with traditions more commonly seen as monotheistic, their theology is not always straightforward. Christianity for example has developed the complex concept of the Trinity, conceived as "one God in three Divine Persons" (Burns & Oates, 1994, p.60). Then, even with a monotheistic idea of God, other grades of spiritual beings may be recognised. For instance, in the Judaic *Tanakh* (תַּנַ"ךְ), although the term *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) is sometimes used as a synonym for *Yhvh* (יְהוָה), it is also used in plural form to refer to other divine entities, often labelled in English as angels (which are similarly found in Christianity and Islam) (Barker, 1992).

The foregoing discussion, while obviously not exhaustive, has highlighted a diversity of conceptualizations of the sacred. This section can now broach the second point above: many cultures view the sacred as something that is not only exterior to people, but inheres *within* them in some way, as captured in English by terms like soul and spirit. The former label is somewhat culturally-specific, derived from the Proto-Germanic *saiwala*, which potentially means 'of the sea,' which was where spirits were regarded as dwelling pre- and post-life in some Northern European mythologies (Ottosson, 2013). Conversely, the latter

entered English in the 13ᵗʰ Century, derived from the Latin *spiritus* (breath), depicting the animating principle that endows beings with life (Allamani, Einstein, & Godlaski, 2013). Comparable meanings (e.g., pertaining to the breath) are found in terms like *pneuma* (πνεῦμα) in Greek, *qì* (氣) in Chinese, and both *prāṇā* (प्राणा) and *ātman* (आत्मन्) in Sanskrit.

The latter term features prominently in traditions such as *Védanta*, in which it is asserted that this spirit partakes in, or is a manifestation of, the sacred – as expressed in the phrase *Tat Tvam Asi* (तत्त्वमसि), which translates as 'Thou art That' (Ho, 1995). This ideal is known as *Ádvaita* (अद्वैत), often rendered as 'non-dual,' expressing the idea that that '*ātman is Brahman*,' i.e., that these are ultimately one. Liberation thus consists of experientially realising this oneness. Similar ideas are expressed in other traditions, albeit sometimes with difference nuances. An interesting point of comparison in this regard is Buddhism. While the Buddha aligned with Brahmanism in upholding the possibility of liberation, he disavowed the notion of some inner essence being the vehicle for or recipient of this. Instead, he argued for the principle of *anātman* (अनात्मन्), 'no self,' namely that phenomena lack an intrinsic or fixed identity. This notion was regarded as one of the three *lakṣaṇas* (लक्षण) – intrinsic qualities of existence – alongside *anitya* (अनित्य), i.e., impermanence, and *duḥkha* (दुक्ख), which translates as dissatisfaction or suffering. Thus, the Buddha's perspective was that liberation would come through seeing all forms of selfhood as ultimately characterised by *anātman* and *anitya*. This realisation would then prevent the arising of *duḥkha* – which is generated through denial or ignorance of *anātman* and *anitya* – thereby leading to the ultimate liberation of *nirvāṇa* (निर्वाण), a state of psychospiritual perfection commonly referred to as 'enlightenment' (Gombrich, 2006).

Thus, there are diverse ideas across traditions around the sacred and the spirit. There are even debates within traditions, which tend to feature divergent schools of thought. For instance, while Buddhism has generally held to the principle of *anātman*, there have been

doctrinal debates in relation to reincarnation, since if there is 'no self,' this raises the difficult metaphysical question of who or what it is that may thus be reincarnated (Becker, 1989). Nevertheless, across the diversity of perspectives, most traditions hold that the person in some way partakes in the sacred. Moreover, many traditions go further: this connection to the sacred is not simply an abstract idea to assent to, but adherents are encouraged to cultivate a personal *experience* of it, primarily through contemplative practices.

Contemplative Practices

Most traditions have developed forms of contemplative practice. These might serve various purposes; for instance, from a sociological perspective, these have been analysed functionally as social bonding activities (Saroglou, 2011). However, in substantive terms, and from the perspective of the traditions themselves, most such practices involve engaging with the sacred (as variously conceived). As with other two themes, there is such a wealth of terms in this arena that this section cannot provide more than an indicative sample of relevant activities. Nevertheless, it will help bring clarity to this topic if we regard such practices as in one way or another being a form of meditation.

This latter term derives from the Latin *meditatio*, meaning to engage in contemplative reflection. Indeed, 'contemplation' and 'contemplative' likewise derive from a related Latin term, *contemplatio*, which to an extent served as a synonym of *meditatio*. (That said, the latter is sometimes interpreted specifically as a form of *directed* contemplation, with *contemplatio* itself potentially being more open-ended, unconstrained, and expansive (Hart, 2009).) *Meditatio* was originally used in the West to refer generically to intellectual enquiry, as per 'meditations' on particular themes in philosophy, such as Descartes' investigations (1641), or to contemplative activities within religions traditions, such as reflecting on "the sufferings of Christ on the Cross" (Wildegren, 1961, p. 169). In more recent decades though, meditation has more commonly been used in reference to Eastern traditions, for instance as a

translation of the Sanskrit term *dhyāna* (ध्यान), which denotes meditative forms of absorption. However, when viewed functionally in psychological terms, most cultures have developed activities that could be described as meditative – or, if one prefers, as contemplative, such as centering prayer in Christianity (Fox, Gutierrez, Haas, Braganza, & Berger, 2015) – even if there is great variation among such activities. A helpful framework for conceptualizing these diverse meditative forms is provided by Cardoso, de Souza, Camano, and Roberto Leite, 2004), who differentiate these according to four parameters: (1) behaviours of mind (types of attention); (2) object (the focus of contemplation); (3) attitude (the emotional quality of the act); and (4) form (physical postures or activities enacted during the activity). This schema was deployed here as a framework for internally classifying the words within this second theme, all of which could be situated within one of the four parameters identified by Cardoso et al.

The first parameter, behaviours of mind, reflects the notion that practices can differ in how they encourage the deployment of psychological resources. In Buddhism, for instance, a distinction is made between *śamatha* (शमथ) and *vipaśyanā* (विपश्यना) forms of practice. The former is often described as 'one-pointed,' and has been operationalised in psychology as 'focused attention,' in which practitioners endeavour to concentrate for extended durations on a given stimulus (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). By contrast, the latter is usually rendered as insight or 'clear seeing' (e.g., into the nature of reality, such as the three *lakṣaṇas*). In contemporary psychology, this form has been operationalised as 'open-monitoring.' In contrast to the more selective attentional focus of *śamatha*, it is conceptualized as "an open field capacity to detect arising sensory, feeling and thought events within an unrestricted 'background' of awareness, without a grasping of these events in an explicitly selected foreground or focus" (Raffone & Srinivasan, 2010, p. 2). That said, many practices feature both types of mental activity. For instance, recent decades have seen a

burgeoning interest in mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) – a contemporary term based on the Sanskrit concept of *smṛti* (स्मृति) – which is often regarded as a variant of *vipaśyanā* (more commonly known by its Pāli cognate *vipassanā*). However, in actuality, many mindfulness practices begin with a period of focussed attention (e.g., on the breath) in order to stabilise practitioners' awareness before the more expansive phase of open monitoring (Chiesa, 2010).

The second parameter, object, reflects the notion that meditation can take diverse phenomena as its focus. As The Dalai Lama puts it, meditation is "a deliberate mental activity that involves cultivating familiarity, be it with a chosen object, a fact, a theme, a habit, an outlook or a way of being" (Gyatso, 2006, p. 98). One might reflect on bodily processes, as seen with the mindfulness of breathing, or *Qì gōng* (氣功), a practice centred on the aforementioned notion of *qì* (Astin, Berman, Bausell, Lee, Hochberg, & Forys, 2003). Or one might reflect on powerful ideas. For instance, contemplation of death – encapsulated by the Latin loanphrase *memento mori* – is found across cultures as a way of invoking spiritual insights (Perreira, 2010). People might reflect on meaningful phrases or sounds, known in Sanskrit as a *mantra* (मन्त्र), a loanword denoting a 'mind tool' (Rheingold, 2000). And of course, people can dwell upon phenomena directly associated with their notions of the sacred, such as divinities, and the narratives, ideas, and objects (e.g., icons) associated with them.

The third parameter, attitude, reflects the notion that contemplative activities can be imbued with a range of emotional qualities. For example, Buddhism valorises *maitrī* (मैत्री), a term loosely translated as 'loving-kindness,' which is regarded in the Therevada tradition as one of four *Brahma-vihārās* (चत्वारि ब्रह्मविहारा). (This latter means 'abodes of *Brahma(n)*,' and refers here to the four 'immeasurable' qualities that practitioners are encouraged to cultivate, the other three being *karuṇā* (करुणा), compassion/empathy, *muditā* (मुदिता), sympathetic/vicarious happiness, and *upekṣā* (उपेक्षा), equanimity/neutrality.) Thus, people are encouraged to cultivate *maitrī* via practices like the *mettā bhāvana,* (with *mettā* being the more commonly-used Pāli

cognate of *maitrī*, and *bhāvana* (भावन) meaning practising or developing). Then, perhaps more positively qualified are practices that engender devotion, particularly towards divinities. Such activities are generally more prevalent in monotheistic traditions, which are founded upon revering a deity who is conceived as immeasurably more powerful, wise, and benevolent than oneself. This is the case, for instance, in Judaism and Christianity, both of which encourage the use of terms such as the Hebrew *Hallelujah* (הַלְלוּיָהּ) – literally 'praise ye YAH' (or 'God be praised,' in a Christian context) – as an expression of worship or rejoicing (Durousseau, 2014). However, reverential practices are also found in traditions not usually regarded as theistic. For instance, some Buddhist schools feature deity meditation practices – known as *iṣṭadevatā* (इष्टदेवता), where *iṣṭa* means liked or reverenced, and *devatā* denotes divine beings – although the ontological status of such deities is a matter of debate (Vessantara, 2002).

The final parameter, form, reflects the possibility that practices can involve a range of physical postures and behaviours. An exemplar in this respect is *yoga* (योग), a Sanskrit term derived from the root *yuj*, meaning to bind or yoke. *Yoga* is a generic label for a system of practices, dating back to the third millennium BCE in the Indian subcontinent (Varenne, 1977), designed to bring the person into union, including their physical, psychological, and spiritual natures. There are various branches, as many as 12 in some taxonomies, each of which describes a particular spiritual path (Feuerstein, 2002). These include *karma* (कर्म) (selfless service), *jñāna* (ज्ञान) (knowledge and study), and *bhakti* (भक्ति) *yoga* (devotion and care). However, most relevant here is *hatha* (हठ), the form most commonly found in the West (where it is often mistakenly regarded as *yoga* in its entirety (Quilty, Saper, Goldstein, & Khalsa, 2013)). This centres on various sequences of *āsana* (असन), postures, and *vinyāsa* (विन्यास), dynamic transitions between these, accompanied by meditative processes (e.g., breathing and focusing techniques) (Birch, 2011).

The foregoing discussion could be multiplied at length, and there are many more practices that warrant inclusion. Nevertheless, this theme has served to highlight the range of contemplative activities that have been created across cultures. Yet, despite their diversity, arguably all such activities are united by the common theme of aiming to bring practitioners into contact with the sacred (however this is defined) in some way. Specifically, they could be regarded as doing this by helping people transcend their conventional experience or view of themselves, as elucidated in the final theme.

Transcendence

Cross-cultural surveys of religious and spiritual traditions have suggested that at the centre of most of these is a process of self-transcendence (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Like the preceding themes, transcendence is a complex and contested concept, capable of being interpreted in various ways. However, again, across this diversity, there is commonality in that it generally involves a shift in the experience of the self. One's conventional mode of selfhood is experienced as being illusory or partial in some way, and instead one has a sense of being part of, or identified with, a larger context (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). This phenomenon is not necessarily spiritual in nature (although that depends on how one defines spirituality of course). For instance, analysis of crowd behaviour at large public events suggest these have the power to subsume people's identity (Armstrong & Young, 1999) – with potentially harmful outcomes – whereby a person is experientially swept away by forms of 'participatory consciousness' (Lutz, 2009). However, this theme is focused on processes of transcendence in which this larger context is specifically experienced as being spiritual.

In experiencing self-transcendence, this does not necessarily mean that one loses or disconnects from one's 'conventional' identity. Sometimes this *does* happen: for instance, in certain states commonly labelled as trance – perhaps brought on by psychoactive substances

– it is possible for a person to experience themselves in an entirely altered way, a 'loss of self' in which they 'forget' how they conventionally view themselves (Castillo, 1995). However, there are also forms of self-transcendence in which the conventional self is still perceived and acknowledged, but is 'seen through' as a construction (Epstein, 1988). Here the definition of transcendence formulated by Hegel (1807) is relevant. He deployed the complex verb *aufheben* – and corresponding noun *Aufhebung* – which can literally mean to 'raise up,' but as used by Hegel refers to a process of 'sublation,' meaning "at once to negate and preserve" (pp. 163-164). As Wilber (1995) explains, what is negated is an *exclusive* identification with a particular view of self. The old sense of self is still preserved, but is now contextualised by a larger experiential framework.

Forms of transcendence are found across traditions. In Christianity, for instance, there are evocations such as "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20), implying the 'death' of the speaker's conventional self, supplanted by a self-experience that is connected to a larger spiritual context. However, this section shall conclude by focusing on Buddhism in particular. This is partly because the author is personally more familiar with this (and hence, in the process of snowballing, has investigated it in greater depth than other traditions), but also because it has developed especially detailed theories and practices around self-transcendence. Thus, while other traditions also have valuable insights into this topic – and indeed, even within Buddhism various pathways are identified – it will be instructive to study one particular framework in depth to appreciate the potential mechanics of this process.

The theory in question concerns the five *skandhas* (खन्ध). The latter translates as aggregrates or 'heaps,' and in the context of Buddhism refers to the elements which constitute the person (Prebish, 1994). By reflecting on these, the practitioner endeavours to 'deconstruct' their conventional self. This means coming to appreciate that the intrinsic

properties of existence – *anātman* (no-self) and *anitya* (impermanence) – apply to oneself. This isn't a form of nihilism, but rather an acknowledgement that the self is not fixed or enduring (as people commonly believe), but instead is continually coming into being dependent upon conditions. Similar ideas have been propounded by Western thinkers such as David Hume (1739) and William James (1895), who saw the self as an aggregation of the succession of qualia (as per the latter's notion of a 'stream of consciousness'). However, with Buddhism, not only is recognising this construction viewed as a pathway to liberation – which is not an explicit feature of Hume's or James' accounts – but there are practices to help people do so.

The practice in question involves meditating upon the *skandhas*, and upon how their sequential arising generates the experience of self. The first *skandha* is *rūpa* (रूप), matter or form, which here refers to the body, which is constructed from four *mahābhūta* (महाभूत), 'great elements': earth, water, fire, and air. In the context of the body, these refer respectively to solidity (e.g., bones), viscosity (e.g., blood), temperature (e.g., somatic qualities of heat), and motion (e.g., the breath). The second element is *vedanā* (वेदना), which implies both affective tone and sensation. Buddhism holds that at any moment, experience is either pleasant (denoted by the prefix *sukha* (सुख)), unpleasant (*duḥkha*), or neutral (*upeksha*). Moreover, these qualities arise in *conjunction* with sensation: when something is sensed in the experiential world, it is always already coloured by a basic feeling tone. Thus, one can see a sequence building: when *rūpa* encounters a stimulus, this is accompanied by *vedanā*, which generates the push and pull of aversion (to that which evokes *duḥkha*) and craving and attachment (to that which evokes *sukha*).

The activation of *vedanā* gives rise to the third *skandha*, *saṃjñā* (संज्ञा), which roughly translates as perception. However, this does not simply mean the sensory detection of stimuli (an act which pertains more to *vedanā*), but rather the higher order cognitive processes

21

through which the mind registers and identifies the phenomenon in question. This then

generates the fourth *skandha, saṃskāra* (संस्कार), a complex term which conveys meanings

including mental formations, volition, and karmic activities. To begin with, it denotes the

thought processes activated by a stimulus (i.e., 'mental formations'). It further describes how

these formations then prompt volitional impulses, which in turn generate *karma* (कर्म), i.e.,

skilful and unskilful actions leading to positive and negative future mental states respectively.

After all this has occurred (in fractions of a second), the final *skandha* is *vijñāna* (विज्ञान), which

translates as consciousness or discernment. Thus, only after a stimulus has been sensed,

registered, and generated a volitional impulse, does one become consciously aware of it

(Prebish, 1994).

Buddhism holds that if people truly appreciate the nature of the *skandhas*, on a deep

experiential level, they will see through the self, and be liberated. A pivotal exposition of this

possibility is found in the *Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya* (प्रज्ञापारमिताहृदय), The Heart of the Perfection

of Wisdom, more commonly known as the Heart Sutra (Lopez, 1988). Although its ultimate

origin and authorship are unclear, it is widely regarded as one of the most important of all

Buddhist texts, being among the most powerful articulations of its theory of awakening

(Conze, 1948). At the centre of the sutra is the claim that, once a person has fully understood

the process of the *skandhas*, they will have an experiential realisation of *sūnyatā* (शून्यता). This

latter is a pivotal term that is often rendered as 'emptiness'; however, this translation can be

misleading, as it is liable to nihilistic interpretations. Rather, it reflects the aforementioned

principles of *anātman* and *anitya*, conveying the idea that all phenomena are neither fixed nor

self-subsistent, but come into being dependent upon conditions. Indeed, seen in that way, the

manifest world is therefore no different from *sūnyatā*: as conveyed in the sutra, 'form is

emptiness and the very emptiness is form.' If a person thus attains a deep understanding and

appreciation of this teaching, they are then thought to have fully transcended the self, and to have reached *nirvana.*

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has suggested that, viewed cross-culturally, spirituality features three main components: the sacred, contemplative practices, and self-transcendence. To begin with, there are manifold ways in which the sacred has been conceptualized in different cultures. Across this diversity, the relevant terms fall into two main types. First, there are words denoting phenomena *outside* the person, such as the notion of a sacred realm, force, or being(s). Second, and relatedly, other terms point towards a spiritual dimension within people *themselves*. Then, many traditions have developed repertoires of contemplative practices to help people 'connect' with the sacred, which can be analysed as forms of meditation. Finally, the overarching goal of such practices is to facilitate self-transcendence, i.e., a shift in one's experience of self, involving a sense of being part of, or identified with, some larger sacred context. Thus, across the diversity of traditions, it is possible to formulate a broad definition of spirituality, namely: engagement with the sacred, usually through contemplative practice, with the ultimate aim of self-transcendence.

However, this is merely a provisional analysis based on the words here. Moreover, this analysis has its limitations. First, even though the current paper only focused on a relatively small selection of words on this topic – just over a quarter ($n = 56$) of the words pertaining to spirituality that are currently in the lexicography – its treatment of these has been inevitably restricted. For instance, this treatment has been limited by the attempt to convey an overarching comparative analysis (i.e., rather than focusing on a small number of terms) within the constraints of a short article. Moreover, given that translation is such a problematic and contested exercise, it will not have been possible to arrive at a canonical description of any given word that would satisfy all speakers of the donor language. As with

any form of translation, one aims "to catch the spirit" of the original term (McClaren, 1998, p. 128). However, given the fluidity and complexity of language use, there will always be many possible ways of interpreting a given word. Thus, the descriptions of the words here are merely one possible way of elucidating these terms, and ultimately are based on the author's reading of the source material. That said, dictionaries and scholarly sources have been consulted in this process, and moreover efforts have been made to check the definitions with native speakers of the donor languages. In addition to issues around translation and hermeneutics, it must also be acknowledged that the analysis is by no means exhaustive. Beside the fact that only a small sample of relevant words from the lexicography have been included in this article, even the lexicography itself must be regarded as highly incomplete: out of potentially more than 7,000 languages in existence, only 80 are currently in the lexicography (and even with these, there are many more words that potentially remain to be identified). Moreover, some traditions have been considered in more depth than others (particularly Buddhism), which is a reflection on the author's personal interests, which drove the process of conceptual snowballing in particular directions. Thus, the lexicography, and its analysis here, must be seen as works-in-progress.

Given these points, it is hoped that this paper will provide the stimulus for a research agenda that may help to redress these limitations. This could have various components. To begin with, as already alluded to, it will be important to greatly expand the scope of the lexicography, which in the case of spirituality only includes just over 200 words, which must only be regarded as a small percentage of the potentially relevant terms. For instance, entire dictionaries have been published on Buddhism alone, featuring thousands of words pertaining to spirituality (Keown, 2003). This expansion could occur through consulting published works of this sort. It might also involve other data-gathering processes, such as qualitative interviews with bilingual practitioners within various religious and spiritual traditions, who

would be able to provide details about relevant terms within these. Then, beyond expanding the lexicography, it would be valuable to enhance our understanding of the terms within it. Consider, for instance, that thousands of studies have been published on the topic of *smṛti*, which is the basis for the contemporary calque mindfulness (Lomas, 2016a). These include psychometric studies elucidating its internal structure, such as Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, and Toney's (2006) Five Facets of Mindfulness Scale. Similar endeavours could be undertaken with other terms in the lexicography.

Furthermore, the mention of mindfulness brings up the possibility of this future research agenda also having an *applied* component. Recent years have seen the development of numerous mindfulness-based interventions, such as Kabat-Zinn's (1982) prototypical Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programme, designed to help people *cultivate smṛti*. Similar initiatives have been created in relation to several other words here, such as *maitrī*, which has been operationalised as Loving-Kindness Meditation (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008), and *Qì gōng* (Astin et al., 2003). One could imagine comparable interventions being developed for other concepts in the lexicography, helping people to cultivate experiential familiarity with these dimensions of spirituality. Such possibilities highlight the great potential of engaging with untranslatable words. It is not only that studying such words can enrich academic understanding of the psychology of religion and spirituality, e.g., complexifying the nomological network of concepts in this field. Going further, engagement with these concepts – including through applied interventions – has the potential to enhance people's *personal* experiences of spirituality. This not only means giving people the linguistic tools to articulate phenomena with which they may already be vaguely familiar (but hitherto lacked the words to conceptualize), but also potentially inviting them to explore *new* dimensions of the sacred (that they had perhaps not even realised existed). It will be interesting to see how these potentials unfold over the years ahead.

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Figure 1. The three dimensions of spirituality, with selected key words.