



Frequently Asked Questions

What is this blog about?

This blog is about extraordinary spiritual experiences (ESEs), meaning "events that appear to be direct perception of spiritual facts," for example, "near-death experiences." (Hufford. 2014. The Healing Power of Extraordinary Spiritual Experiences. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 32(3). 137-156.),

What does *spirituality* mean?

"(1) The adjective *spiritual* and the noun *spirituality* refer to the noun *spirit* (plural *spirits*); (2) belief in spirit(s) is problematized in modern discourse; and (3) contrary to the predictions of philosophers and social scientists since the nineteenth century, a wealth of data shows that belief in spirits is persistent and widespread among modern persons" (Hufford & Bucklin, 2006: 26.) The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, one of the best dictionaries available, defines *spirituality* as "the quality of being spiritual, and *spiritual* means. "1. Of, pertaining to or affecting the spirit or soul." (1993. P. 2990). That is, as the word suggests, spirituality inherently refers to *spirits* (e.g., God, gods, angels, souls, Bodhisattvas, saints, and so forth – the list across world religions contains many categories). The historical record shows that this is what English speakers have meant by the word for centuries, and despite some academic controversy, lexicography shows that this is still the meaning in ordinary English today.

In its link to spirits, spirituality refers to the supernatural, that which is beyond nature, not material, and that is the source of modern controversy: many modern people accept the materialist view that the supernatural denotes a kind of primitive belief, irrational, contrary to science.

In trying to avoid that embarrassing connotation, even many theologians have tried to create a more ambiguous definition of spirituality, a definition that does not suggest "ancient beliefs" (not really necessary since surveys have shown that a large majority of Americans believe in the existence of one or more categories of spirit!). Reluctance to



acknowledge the spirituality-spirits connection has been especially obvious in the field of spirituality and health. For example,

“Spirituality is a dynamic and intrinsic aspect of humanity through which persons seek ultimate meaning, purpose, and transcendence, and experience relationship to self, family, others, community, society, nature, and the significant or sacred.” (2014: 5).

Such definitions avoid connotations of the supernatural, but at the price of intelligible meaning. To take the extreme example, for a philosophical materialist who rejects as nonsense all the beliefs traditionally associated with *spirituality*, the ultimate meaninglessness of life may be the idea whose significance transcends all others. If the definition of *spirituality* can be stretched that far, the term itself becomes meaningless. For further discussion of this issue, especially in the context of spirituality and health research see David's "Spirit Hypothesis" in *The Ontology of Consciousness*. (2008. Pp. 273-312.)

References

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David J. Hufford. 2008. The Priority of Local Observation and Local Interpretation in Evaluating the 'Spirit Hypothesis,' in *Ontology of Consciousness: Percipient Action*, H. Wautischer, Ed. MIT Press. Pp. 273-312.

David J. Hufford and Mary Ann Bucklin. Chapter 2. The Spirit of Spiritual Healing in the United States. 2006. *Spiritual Transformation and Healing*, edited by anthropologist Joan Koss-Choino and theologian Philip Hefner (the founding editor of *Zygon*). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press (a subsidiary of Rowman and Littlefield), 2006. Pp. 25-42.



What is the difference between *religion* and *spirituality*?

Religion is the community, institutional, aspect of spirituality. "A particular religion" is a spiritual organization. Religions have both directly spiritual and indirectly spiritual aspects.

For example, most religions have prayer which is a directly spiritual activity because it addresses a spirit, such as God, a god, an angel, a saint, the soul of a departed loved one, etc., while a church's budget or ice cream social probably has a spiritual motivation but is not itself a directly spiritual activity. Obviously, for a particular person, anything or everything may be inherently spiritual, and for some who engage in religious organizations for non-religious reasons (e.g., business networking), even "directly spiritual" activities may not actually be spiritual.

References

David J. Hufford. 2012. Methodology. In *Oxford Textbook of Spirituality in Healthcare*. M. Cobb, C. Puchalski, B. Rumbold, Eds. Oxford University Press:309-322.

Is spirituality irrational? Does it conflict with science?

The short answer to this question is that no, spirituality is not inherently irrational nor is it contrary to science, despite common claims to the contrary, although some spiritual ideas and practices are. *Rationality* refers to the proper use of reason. That can be open to argument, but there is considerable consensus in modern thought about criteria for judging the soundness of particular instances of reason. Sound reasoning is a critical part of seeking correct conclusions, however sound reasoning may reach false conclusions because, for example, the evidence at hand may be ambiguous.