

## Dr. A.M.—A Case of a Modern Mystic? Implications for Psychology and Medicine

Enrico Facco

University of Padova and Institute Franco Granone,  
Italian Center of Clinical & Experimental  
Hypnosis, Turin, Italy

Daniela Lucangeli

University of Padova and Human Potential  
Network Research Foundation, Padova, Italy

Patrizio Tressoldi

University of Padova

In this article, we report some excerpts from the writings of Dr. A.M., an adult female, regarding the knowledge she acquired during the regular mystical experiences she has been having since April 2014. This case is exceptional for multiple reasons. First, she experienced this particular state of consciousness without any associated medical or neurological illnesses. Second, these experiences did not harm her professional or personal life; rather, they have had, and continue to have, a positive impact on her life. Third, her case is exceptional because of the stability and longevity of her involvement with mystical experiences. And fourth, the knowledge she has been acquiring encompasses philosophically, religiously, and historically relevant aspects, the content of which extends far beyond her personal cultural and scientific knowledge. This case of a modern mystic supplements our traditional cultural and scientific ideas about the relationship between ordinary human mind activity and spirituality and between our inner and outer worlds.

*Keywords:* mysticism, anomalous experiences, mental health, consciousness

Mystical experiences (MEs; Gellman, 2014; Wulff, 2014) represent a specific category of *nonordinary mental expressions* (NOMEs), a term we consider semantically more appropriate than *altered state of consciousness* (ASC) because it emphasizes their nonpathological nature (Cardeña & Facco,

2015; Facco, Agrillo, & Greyson, 2015). In fact, the ASC classification questionably merges both physiological (e.g., sleep, dream, meditation, hypnosis, MEs) and pathological phenomena (e.g., coma, vegetative state, delirium, epilepsy) as a whole, implicitly suggesting that all of them are less-than-typical or pathological phenomena. Indeed, the term NOMEs has been introduced to define the former from a physiological point of view, avoiding any arbitrary hint of dysfunction. Accordingly, Oxman et al. (1988) have shown that both the language and the subjective experiences of mystical ecstasy are different from those of schizophrenia and hallucinogenic drug-induced states. This is a key point, because the ruling physicalist approach of the last century has often led to NOMEs being disparaged and/or a priori considered as culturally deviant or psychopathological, given their formal similarities to hallucinations.

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Enrico Facco, Studium Patavinum, University of Padova, and Institute Franco Granone, Italian Center of Clinical & Experimental Hypnosis, Turin, Italy; Daniela Lucangeli, Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialization, University of Padova, and Human Potential Network Research Foundation, Padova, Italy; Patrizio Tressoldi, Department of General Psychology, University of Padova.

We acknowledge Cinzia Evangelista for the translations of the Dr. A.M. transcripts.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Patrizio Tressoldi, Dipartimento di Psicologia Generale, via Venezia 8, 35131 – Padova, Italy. E-mail: [patrizio.tressoldi@unipd.it](mailto:patrizio.tressoldi@unipd.it)

This also shows that the topic is endowed with relevant epistemological implications.

MEs represent a sort of bridge between ordinary conscious activity and a spiritual or transcendental dimension and might have an important cognitive value. The distinctive aspect of several MEs appears to be the experiencer's emotional and cognitive encounter with a spiritual reality or entity.

The scientific interest in MEs is primarily based on the possibility of getting information on consciousness in itself (beyond any mental object and category) and inner world, as well as on the symbolic meaning of their content, appearing as a sort of hallucination, including communication with a numinous world. Any suggestion of other hypothetical, transcendent worlds is not a matter for science and remains the competence of religion and philosophy. From a scientific point of view, it is essential to neither reject MEs a priori nor to consider them simply as hallucinations (in the pathological sense), relegating them to psychiatry because of their ostensible strangeness with respect to adopted axioms and paradigms. The origin of this stance—stemming from post-Enlightenment rationalism, positivism, and the ruling mechanistic–reductionistic paradigm of scientific medicine—can be traced back to the 17th century, that is, to the birth of the new sciences and their compromise with the Inquisition. At that time a more and more dualistic perspective was adopted, where *mind* and *soul* (refer to Descartes' *res cogitans*) and *physical reality* (refer to Descartes' *res extensa*) were defined as independent entities with different ontology. Galileo, following abjuration, well defined the compromise with the Church, stating that the mystery of the universe belongs to a “higher science than ours” [*a piu alte dottrine che le nostre*]*—*that is, a matter of theology—and the scientist “must be satisfied to belong to that class of less worthy workmen” devoted to the Galilei (1914) “rough and shapeless exterior” of matter only. In medicine, this allowed for a progression through the idea of the *Man Machine* by La Mettrie up to positivism, physicalism, and objectivism, leaving consciousness and soul to philosophy and religion (de La Mettrie, 1996).

In other words, Western philosophy and science, somehow or other, have evolved toward a clear-cut separation between the two metaphysical principles, where the exclusivism of the

Church helped to prevent science from dealing with ostensibly immaterial things, including consciousness; this, in turn, helped the monist materialist scientists to refuse a priori anything ostensibly “immaterial” and to adopt an objectivistic view. Fortunately, in the latter 20th century, an increasing dissatisfaction with the dualistic separation of mind and body—helped by the development of neuroimaging and neurophysiological techniques—has arisen; as a matter of fact, an unyielding objectivistic stance is unable to comprehend and manage clinically relevant subjective phenomena, like pain, suffering, and NOMEs. At the same time, the newborn science of consciousness has started facing the still mysterious nature of subjectivity and experience (Zeman, 2005, 2009). This complex philosophical problem, the analysis of which is far beyond the limits of this article (for further details, see Facco, 2018; Facco et al., 2015; Facco, Lucangeli, & Tressoldi, 2017), is deeply involved in the debate on the foundation of the science of consciousness, especially concerning the so-called hard problem.

An unyielding objectivistic stance, criticized by Husserl (1970), is no longer tenable because it would prevent the understanding of a significant, although nonordinary, physiological part of the mind and its cognitive capacity. In itself, it is independent of any form of religion and theology, whereas its ostensible lack of plausibility is mainly due to the so-called spirit of time (i.e., *Zeitgeist*), which is conventional and axiomatic in nature. In ancient times, visions, internal voices, or even premonitory dreams were well accepted and considered a source of knowledge and decision making, whereas in the modern era they have come to be considered illusion at best or a psychiatric disorder at worst. Despite their presumed strangeness, MEs have nonetheless been investigated within NOMEs and religious experiences since William James's (1902) seminal book; although Forman (1998) has wisely pointed out how MEs and meditation might aid in the understanding of the nature of consciousness, allowing for an insight into two different states of consciousness, which are as follows:

*the pure consciousness event* (a wakeful but content-less consciousness, an interior stillness), which has been described in several traditions. In Veda, it has been named

*turiya*, the fourth state—beyond ordinary wakefulness, sleep, and dreams—which is the condition under which enlightenment might be reached.

*The dualistic mystic state or unitive mystical state*, which has been defined as heightened cognizance of awareness itself plus consciousness of thoughts and objects, where a unity of one's own awareness *per se* with the objects around one is perceived, realizing a quasi-physical unity of self–objects–people.

In terms of definition, Forman (1998) introduced the concepts of *apophatic* and *kataphatic* mysticism. The former is nonsensory and non-imaginistic, like the “blank tablet” described by Maister Eckhart in Western mystic tradition, the “*turiya*” discussed in Veda, or the “no-mind doctrine” in Zen Buddhism (see Facco, 2014, 2017, for further details). The latter involves visions, traditionally called *hallucinations*—albeit, that is a questionable term. In fact, the distinctive feature of a hallucination is the subject's certainty of his or her reality; however, if the subject is aware that hallucinations are a product of his or her own mind, then the “visions” would be better regarded as imagination (or, perhaps, eidetic imagination), a clearly non-pathological phenomenon.

MEs have been reported in the Bible (e.g., Ezekiel's vision of the chariot and Jacob's ladder) by Christian mystics (e.g., Saint Francis of Assisi, Maria Teresa of Avila), in mystic currents of other Abrahamic traditions (e.g., Qabalah, Sufi), and in Eastern philosophies and religions. What is of interest here is that MEs belonging to different traditions seem to share a common experiential core that can be scientifically studied (Chen, Qi, Hood, & Watson, 2011). Mystical-like experiences and those involving direct contact and/or union with a transcendent reality or entity have also been reported within different kinds of NOMEs, including the following:

ingestion of psychotropic substances (such as psilocybin, LSD, peyote, ayahuasca, iboga, etc.; for a review, see Facco, 2010), leading to a question about the correctness of the term *hallucinogen* and emphasizing the link between their

effects and religious fervor (Jaffe, 1990; Nichols, 2004);

deep states of meditation and hypnosis (Adams, 2008; De Benedittis, 2015; Facco, 2014, 2017; Otani, 2003);

near-death experiences (NDEs; Facco, 2010; Greyson, 2014); and

neurological disorders, such as epilepsy (Greyson, Broshek, Derr, & Fountain, 2014).

NDEs are defined as an ASC or, better, a NOME occurring during an episode of unconsciousness as a result of a life-threatening condition (Facco & Agrillo, 2012b; Facco et al., 2015). Their main elements are the vision of a tunnel, a bright light, deceased relatives, a condition of better than normal mental clarity, a review of their lives, and out-of-body experiences (OBEs, in which they describe a feeling of separation from their bodies and the ability to watch themselves from a different perspective). NDE-like experiences are similar to NDEs, but they occur under normal conditions and are much more uncommon than NDEs (Charland-Verville et al., 2014; Facco & Agrillo, 2012a); as a matter of fact, they share some features with MEs and probably represent a link between NDEs and MEs. As previously suggested, some common features of all these NOME—including hypnosis, meditation, and experiences triggered by psychotropic drugs in shamanic rituals—might help to overcome their actual separation and move toward a more comprehensive approach to the inner, nonpathological, and still mysterious activities of human mind, with their meta-cognitive value and transformational power (Facco, 2012; Facco & Agrillo, 2012a).

Despite the fact that in recent years MEs have been better defined and studied with psychometrically validated questionnaires (e.g., Barrett, Johnson, & Griffiths, 2015), there is still a paucity of first-person detailed reports published in scientific journals because of the seeming rarity of people experiencing real and lasting MEs who agree to share these experiences.

In this article, we report an uncommon case of recurrent, deep MEs in the absence of any possible medical or neurological disorders and with no drug or psychotropic agent intake. According to aforementioned Forman (1998) def-

initions, Dr. A.M. can be classified as a katephatic mystic.

## Case Reports

### Biography

Dr. A.M. is a middle-aged woman working in a government institution with a permanent position at the top management level.<sup>1</sup> Her medical history excluded major illnesses, psychiatric symptoms, and use of psychotropic agents. She received a traditional Catholic education and was observant since childhood, but she neither studied theology nor completed formal or informal in-depth analysis of religious texts.

She reported experiencing a few sporadic episodes of OBEs and precognitive dreams during her adolescence, the most important of which was a dream she had the night before her father's death in which he spoke parting words to her. She was troubled by this odd but poignant episode, which led her to reject and prevent further interest, in any form, in spirituality, either scientific or nonscientific (i.e., New Age arguments), and to devote her academic studies to formal logic and other mainstream scientific topics.

She had no more NOMEs until the age of 48, apart from a single NDE with OBE that occurred during a difficult delivery in which she hemorrhaged and experienced a transient loss of consciousness at the age of 35. During this OBE, she watched from the ceiling of the delivery room as the medical staff worked on her body, then saw a great bright light, followed by a feeling of bliss and a unitive mystical state, feeling herself as an inseparable part of the infinite universe. Later, as a result of stress in both her professional and private lives, she suffered from myofascial pain and sought treatment with alternative medicine, including a course of meditation to learn relaxation techniques, but avoiding any further investigation of spiritual arguments.

### ME History

Just before her first, recent ME, she suffered an episode of dizziness followed by tinnitus associated with increased diastolic pressure; she had an EEG and CT angiography that excluded

any organic cause, and the symptoms spontaneously disappeared within a few days.

The first episode unexpectedly occurred on April 2, 2014 during a meditation exercise guided by an iridologist, who suggested that she visualize a black screen and to go inside it, imagining that she was going inside of herself.

Almost immediately, she perceived herself as a being of light, and the farther she went into the dark tunnel, the more light there was. This experience lasted about 5 min.

The following morning, at 7:00 a.m. on April 3, she tried repeating the same exercise while lying in bed and using a mantra that she had learned in a previous meditation course. The following vision automatically arose, together with that of an eye positioned where a human forehead would be. The eye had a bright outline inside of which different kinds of sensations were triggered, the duration of which was subjectively judged to be a few milliseconds.

The first vision was a dynamic Mendeleev's periodic table of the elements with the chemical elements depicted geometrically, similar to representations of Ribo-Nucleic Acid (RNA), with enormous hands of light moving them without actually touching them.

This vision was then suddenly replaced by another, comprising images of an eagle and a wolf, identified as sacred companions. Immediately, the wolf was understood to be a temporary guide, and it conveyed this message: Soul must protect itself while it grows. Added to the image of these two spiritual guides was a vision of the physical/invisible bond composed of vibrations of golden light that varied in intensity and permeated every mineral, plant, animal, and spiritual creature.

The total duration of this experience was later estimated to be around 1 min and was followed by tingling in the forehead and the top of the head. Just after this experience, Dr. A.M. realized that she had just experienced something very unique and felt the strong urge to record it on her smartphone. She continued to do so for all her subsequent experiences.

The following is a verbatim description of her first experience (the original transcripts in Italian

<sup>1</sup> Further personal information cannot be disclosed to protect Dr. A.M.'s privacy.

are available at [https://figshare.com/articles/dr\\_AM\\_original\\_transcripts\\_in\\_Italian/2246770](https://figshare.com/articles/dr_AM_original_transcripts_in_Italian/2246770):

Mendelev's table hands and positions—soul must protect itself while it grows.

dream of fire, animal, brain, wolf

Out the front door, I want to go home.

physical bond through collective breath: minerals, plants, animals, creatures

If you seek with apprehension you do not hear.

I remember yesterday's vision of eye, tunnel . . . you tell me to enter the tunnel.

I cannot do it; I do not go in . . . it gets hotter, changes as I walk.

Ahead, the darkness stops each step—like meeting a semblance of light emitted by body.

There's no darkness.

. . . Remember, and keep in mind your route through the dark as it splinters when you search . . .

The door . . . I'm coming back . . . it's open a crack . . . I can enter but I sit.

Others have to arrive . . . they can find the tracks on the sand. . . . They're heavy tracks, they mark the sand because I'm made of matter and my body's weight leaves a mark.

The tracks show where I've been and lead them here . . . the struggle to go in by myself wouldn't make sense. I came to search.

. . . I feel a part of God.

There's no arrogance in feeling part of God. . . .

Jug of water pours water into heart bowl and splashes out.

I hear the water in the heart.

My whole body kneels under it . . . under the splashing from the bowl heart, and I let it wash over me.

Suddenly, I feel once again as if I'm only wings. I wait for the horde of brothers.

There's the song/vibration of everyone.

It calms me.

I listen to the verse of the sounds.

I need to remember the vibrational verse song . . .

. . . I'm seated by the door, a human shape appears; it looks leprous, it's dragging a ball and chain attached to its right ankle.

It approaches, and the leprosy looks like the living dead.

Water . . . there's the jug's water . . . dissolves the leprosy like the sun on snow.

The large body frees itself from the chain.

It approaches, it's enormous, it's made of emotional debris . . . of fears of God.

. . . the pieces are kept together like there's an energy magnet.

They fall apart, and inside there's only sky like everywhere.

peace and praise

How do we remove fears?

Vibrations, we must emit vibrations.

A voice: Wash yourself with the lamb's water.

Free people from fear.

It offends God's heart.

God forgives if the mind is confused and confuses.

Amen. I'm available . . .

What did you understand from the leper's vision?

God doesn't care about our debris, only about our core essence.

Evil, like matter, is an illusion of this dimension because God chose free will.

Your thoughts are not your own but of other-worldly souls who have conquered them and who now give them to you for the world's soul.

Everybody is one soul.

The following day, under the same conditions, the experience was characterized by a type of mental (not verbal) dialogue with the eye and a vision of the "door." This architraved door, which will come up often in subsequent experiences, was seen as standing by itself on terrain similar to desert sand, awash in diffuse light, with columns. Its top part was made of a material on which are carved all the symbols of human knowledge, for example, the five-pointed star, the circle, the pentagon enclosing Vitruvian man, writings in various languages, dragons, and so forth, accompanied by the vision of her own tracks on the sand leading to the door, with the eagle above and the wolf beside her. Approaching the door there was a small gap in the energy that she felt she could go through, but stopped just before it. The other significant image was that of Solomon's ring, which allowed for communication with the animal guides.



The following is a complete description:

What's happening to me? Am I going crazy? Am I being misled?

Who's inside me? A living soul . . . that's not my mind!

What if it is my mind?

It would use its symbols to redress the search for eternal good.

I'm certain of God's existence because it has always been physically missing from my heart like an eternal apnea . . . I feel my soul in this time-space so immersed in this dimension that it can rarely take a breath . . . like a soul diver . . . soul submerged in a beautiful world but not a natural one like my sky's world.

I breathe in spirit . . . but it's only enough to keep me alive, and then I resubmerge.

If my mind also lies to me/us with its symbols . . . it follows the soul like a blind person in a maze.

And God is patient throughout all the blows we take . . .

When I'm frightened, now I can always take shelter at the foot of the door.

I lean my back onto it, and it refreshes me.

There's no judgment here.

But I see that guilt diminishes us . . . I see the body crumpling and becoming like an insect . . . guilt swallows it up.

But . . .

I think of the air of light around me, and I'm myself again.

I see the iris as a dark circle surrounded by flames of fire sun.

In the dark circle within the iris a forming ray of light emerges . . .

It looks like the outline of a cradle . . . there's almost a cradle song.

I'm thinking: Is it conceited to look for God's writings?

No . . . it's necessary.

I ask for the blessing of Christ's heart for every creature.

And I see it come . . .

I'm lying down.

I feel my heavy heart almost going through my back.

Why is it as heavy as lead?

Something to do with the thymus? What has the thymus breath opened?

I'm watching.

It becomes a cave with an opening from which working creatures exit.

Inside there's a magma of burning fire.

What are they doing?

They're forging.

Forging what? What?

I cannot go and see.

What will I do now?

I just want to go home, but I have to stay here instead.

I watch . . . I see an image in front of me, parallel to me.

I recognize it; I've been seeing it for a while.

It's a negative of a negative image (a positive) of the face on the Shroud, the outline is made of light.

I love it, but I do not calm down . . . I'm defiant though because I'm hurting.

I'm hurting . . .

Even Christ needed The Magdalene beside him.

For what purpose did I choose the experience of this solitude?

At this moment, I'm trusting in pain and defiance.

I'm very tired, and I let myself go . . .

The eagle takes me, and I fall asleep on its wings while in flight.

The wolf below accompanies us.

I understand that in this stage sky and earth are needed.

Interruption. The question is still in my mind . . . What are they forging in that fire?

The question is hammering inside my head, and my mind is annoyed and restless.

I hear the reply clearly: They're forging Solomon's ring.

But what is this Solomon's ring? What can it share with me?

My mind is irritated.

Dammit, what is Solomon's ring?

How did it enter my mind?

Crazy . . . better to leave.

Anyway I have to live here and now.

After these episodes, she felt very frightened and worried about the integrity of her mental health and consulted the authors she knew for their scientific approach to the NOMEs, for help in understanding and properly managing these unusual experiences. Eventually, after having undergone these experiences repeatedly, her fear for her sanity reduced and she developed the ability to manage them with calmness, equanimity, and detachment, such that she was minimally affected and could record them as objectively as possible. She was also better able to trust in their importance and to maintain her ability to record them accurately. Her referred typical emotions during these experiences are of joy, gratitude, love, surprise, and numinous and awe-inspiring feelings.

Depending on the intensity of the experience, she would variously feel a sort of heat in her hands and shoulders, pins and needles on her scalp that spread to her whole body, followed by cool sensations in her hands and feet, and recurrent episodes of back pain lasting, on average, 1 day, which she treated with massages.

### Long-Term Impact of These Experiences on Dr. A.M.'s Life

After some 100 MEs, she developed the ability to elicit them voluntarily by settling her mind and putting herself in a meditative state. At present, she's had more than 300 experiences of this type, the contents of which have been transcribed on more than 450 pages, though she is still wondering whether and how to disseminate them publicly.

Dr. A.M. is continuing her academic and managerial life as usual, sharing her experiences with only a few, select friends. However, her vision of reality and the meaning of her life has changed deeply. At present, apart some periods of discomfort with the normal life problems as mother, professor, manager, and wishing to "remain" in her mystical status forever, she now has a clearer vision of the meaning of life and how to move her scientific and professional interests and duties toward an integration with the "insights" derived from her MEs.

### Psychological Assessment

The following tests were administered, with Dr. A.M.'s consent: The State-Trait Anxiety

Inventory, Form Y (STAI; Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, & Jacobs, 1983; Italian version: Pedrabissi & Santinello, 1998); the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996; Italian version: Ghisi, Flebus, Montano, Sanavio, & Sica, 2006); the Creative Experiences Questionnaire (Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Muris, 2001); the Multidimensional Inventory for Religious/Spiritual Well-Being (MI-RSWB; Italian version; Stefamissagli, Huber, Fink, Sarlo, & Unterrainer, 2014); the Revised Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ30; Barrett et al., 2015).

The results of the preceding tests are summarized in Table 1. Both STAI and BDI-II scores were normal, with scores well below the threshold of clinical anxiety and depression. The score of the Creative Experience Questionnaire indicated an average level of creative experience, whereas the total scores of both the MI-RSWB and the MEQ30 suggest a high level of ME.

### Analysis of the ME Transcripts

A detailed description of all the verbatim transcripts is far beyond the available space and scope of this article, therefore, herein, we report only a few essential excerpts, followed by a qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), aimed at identify the nine main themes of mysticism of Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns studied by Chen et al. (2011), who identified these themes by the responses they got from their semistructured interviews with 46 nuns and 93 monks who practiced two different Buddhist traditions.

For each of the nine mystical themes, we have added one or more excerpts drawn from Dr. A.M.'s writings of her MEs. Note that she spontaneously wrote down original compound words (e.g., *HeartofGodLove*) or split words (e.g. *re-velation*), to which she assigned special meanings.

1. Ego Loss (e.g., Lose physical senses; Out-of-body experience; Mental function ceases): "I see a sphere that draws me to it: it looks like Light of Light . . . it attracts like a magnet pulling me inside its nucleus of Living Energy of Pure Love. I feel myself immersed in the Heart of God Love. I lose my boundaries

Table 1  
*Psychological Tests Administered to an Individual Reporting  
 Mystical Experiences*

Psychological test	Score	Mean scores (SD) of normative samples or clinical cut-off scores
STAI, Form Y		
State: Anxiety	25	40
Trait: Anxiety	29	40
Beck Depression Inventory-II	2	10
Creative Experiences Questionnaire <sup>a</sup>	6	7 (4.5)
Multi-Dimensional Inventory for Religious/ Spiritual Well-Being		
General Religiosity	48	
Forgiveness	13	
Hope Immanent	41	
Connectedness	42	
Hope Transcendent	12	
Experiences of Sense and Meaning	45	
Total	201	179 (25)
Revised Mystical Experience Questionnaire <sup>a</sup>		
Mystical	74	
Positive Mood	30	
Transcendence of Time and Space	24	
Ineffability	14	
Total	142	75 (4) <sup>b</sup>

Note. STAI = State-Trait Anxiety Inventory.

<sup>a</sup> Compiled with the original version, given Dr A.M. is fluent in English. <sup>b</sup> Psilocybin group.

- and am annihilated into Pure Being in God . . . How can I say it?"
2. Timelessness-spacelessness (e.g., Lose touch with the world; Know the empty nature of time and space): "I see a spiral . . . like an energy corridor between dimensions: I feel and see myself swallowed up . . . with no forcing . . . with respect . . . like being accompanied . . . Inside and outside the spiral's dimensions . . . as if here and there . . . there wherever the simultaneous State of existence in God may be . . . of God . . ."
  3. Introvertive unity (e.g., Unity in emptiness, large self-emergence): "We are the essence/s of love. Almost reunited with the "all". . . I find myself immersed in a total sea of blue . . . like an abyss . . . a space-time channel between parallel dimensions . . . I sense myself as only wings. Only wings in flight . . . like an outline of light in a flying shape. I look at myself and feel this body essence . . . It's me . . . Where am I going? What am I doing?"
  4. Extrovertive unity (e.g., Unity of the world in diversity; Everything is inherently connected): "I let myself glide . . . Then, it's huge, a Hot Liquid Light I reach at the end of the Spiral . . . It's like a Source of Return—I don't know how to say it—where each one becomes part of the All but remains Itself . . . Don't know how to say it . . . I feel a sort of pulse . . . it's voiceless and voiced . . . it has no sound but it pulses . . . like a Universal Heart . . . a pulse in which I and every other Creature and Creation join together: Pulses of the one Pulse"
  5. Inner subjectivity (e.g., All things are spiritual): "All Live limbs of the Same Mystical Body . . ."
  6. Ineffability (e.g., Higher wisdom that cannot be put into words): "It's a sensation that words can't convey . . . there is no language for the Source of Return . . ." Words are shadows . . . they cannot describe what I felt as a live particle of the dense nucleus of Highest Love.



7. Positive affect (e.g., Profound joy and wonder, purity, tranquility, or peacefulness): “Love in Spirit is from the Father to its Creatures and from the creatures to their Father.”

Each creature’s attributes are directly embedded into its soul from God and when the soul asks, it begs Love.”

8. Sacredness (e.g., Feel presence, or see light of Buddha): “Where should I put myself? And I understand: it makes no sense protecting myself from Spirit . . . I must become its vibration . . . synchronize with its frequency of Light . . . become a particle of the vortex. . . .” I raise my gaze and suddenly the darkness around me has disappeared . . . as if dissolved. . . . There’s the Immense Sun . . . that rises in front of my flight path. And I understand: I’m completing my flight toward the Source . . . I want . . . I am the flight to God . . . I bow my soul . . .
9. Noetic quality (e.g., Absolute realized in all things): I feel my soul expanding breathing in God and holding it inside . . . I remain distinct . . . aware of being myself while I’m inside the All . . .

As far as the Sacredness theme is concerned, it is clearly influenced by or (perhaps better) depicted according to the spiritual tradition of the experiencers (i.e., Buddha for the Buddhist monks and nuns, Christ for Dr. A.M.). It is worth considering here whether these different scenarios are simply cases of affect or conditioning by one’s cultural–religious background and beliefs or whether they are individual expressions of the same universal philosophical concepts and values from the point of view of different cultures (as is the use of different languages). The latter allows the move from a more superficial, formal, comparative analysis of different religious traditions to a more meaningful comprehension of their common roots as part of a unique universal knowledge, beyond their official outward appearance.

Beyond Chen et al.’s (2011) themes, it is worth to show some others considered particularly relevant for our participants.

## Spiritual Guides

Starting from the initial vision of Solomon’s ring, the evolution of the experience was guided by different sacred animals, each with its own role and meaning, and the latter may help to deepen the understanding of MEs. The guides of the eagle and lion were required for the evolution. The eagle is a powerful symbol of superior knowledge (the ability to “see farther”), whereas the lion is a symbol of sovereign power as well as the penetrating power of light and word. The butterfly (or a winged girl) was a symbol of Psyche in ancient Greece, whereas its metamorphosis from chrysalis to butterfly represents the power of transformation and resurrection. The serpent is a symbol of creative power, transformation, and overcoming dualism. The lamb was seen in periods relating to Christ (Lamb of God is a title for Jesus that appears in the Gospel of John).

The eagle takes me and I fall asleep on its wings while in flight.

The wolf below accompanies us.

I understand that in this stage sky and earth are needed. . . .

Here comes the lion and then the eagle. And the wolf . . . and the butterfly . . . and snakes . . .

I’m overcome with emotion at finding my animals again! The poignancy pervades me and brings tears to my physical eyes . . .

I understand . . .

All of us here have been permitted into the wait for the Savior . . .

We all look towards the Source. . . .

I hold the lamb in my arms

Because it’s with the Lamb that I want my soul to gain knowledge

I hug it . . .

I see us inside a metaphysical sphere of light that envelops us and closes in on Itself. . . .

A rattlesnake appears

I’m not frightened

If it’s here to harm me I know that the eagle will brandish it

In my system of symbols the snake is negative . . . I don’t understand

I’m thinking: if it’s an evil creature it’s only a temporary state of the soul

I try to convey the thought to it  
 There's no sense in it being an enemy  
 Maybe it isn't. . . .

For a few milliseconds I retraced my symbolic road . . .  
 the Eagle . . . the Lion . . . the stairway . . . the Immense  
 Sun . . . my Door . . . guardians of the threshold . . . the  
 Akasha . . . images like stills . . .

## Existential Messages

You made your plan with God. You already know it  
 . . . ancient soul. Walk and plan . . . you're not alone.  
 You're divinely loved. . . .

Emotions and thoughts are like cosmic vortices of  
 one's individual spiritual life in this dimension . . . they  
 create energy that expands through reflection and re-  
 fraction. When the energy trail is heavy, it remains in  
 the etheric body like a burden to be released. . . .

If the tracks that follow free it, everything follows the  
 laws of the spirit. If the subsequent tracks are heavy, they  
 pass from the etheric to the physical body and leave their  
 mark on it. The energy trails are to be released and  
 freed. . . .

Every soul must become wedded to God's love . . . It's  
 not between souls, because each soul is only a reflec-  
 tion of Source

This is why the eagle doesn't answer when we ask  
 about our human loves . . . we mustn't mistake dust for  
 the whole universe. . . .

The universe responds by assigning a sister soul to  
 each soul - one that possesses the needed properties  
 and helps the other soul's upward climb. . . .

Every soul owes divine respect to the love given it by  
 the supporting souls

Only an awareness of the journey to the source allows  
 forgiveness and absolution of all the falsehoods that  
 the mind overwrites between reflections and the  
 Source. . . .

Freedom . . . Here's the huge gift from Spirit . . . a gift  
 we can't glimpse, hidden by Maya out of necessity . . .  
 Hidden so as to compel us to experiment and free  
 ourselves from the darkness. . . .

And I see the hands of light that make and control the  
 infinite-eight . . . and I understand again . . . We are in Its  
 Hands . . . and we are its own hands . . . hands that remove  
 the veils and complete the freeing of the Spirit. . . .

And I understand. Freedom is the core of the Image  
 and Likeness of the Creator . . .

This is the Project of Man . . . this is what Jesus chooses  
 to give this dimension's Consciousness . . . To redeem is  
 to once again bring each Spirit to sharing with the Spirit  
 . . . Consciousness to Consciousness. . . .

All One . . . passing through separation . . . and the  
 Cross . . . we Re-Surrect . . . we Re-turn, Source to the  
 Source.

Why Re-Velation?

Why is the Truth Re-Vealed?

Veiled again?

Understand, understand . . .

And suddenly I understand what we all came here to do  
 . . .

Un-Veil the Re-Vealed Truth . . .

We got it . . . Re-Demption was given to us as a gift. . . .

We have it . . .

But it was Re-Vealed . . .

Veiled again . . .

Because each soul Un-Veils it to itself and its siblings . . .

This is what we came here to do . . .

To complete our Discernment to be Image and Like-  
 ness . . .

Like Children . . .

Made of God . . .

To complete our individual Discernments . . .

In Re-Cognition

In Discernment we re-cognize . . .

Let's know once again the Divine Truth of which we  
 are the Temple . . .

Each tailored accordingly

## Christ-Related Content

What is Christmas? And as I feel incapable in mind  
 and spirit of getting the answer, I get a wave of sacred  
 images . . . in sacred words . . . "It's God who comes  
 to the Light"

In what way, if God is Light? And I understand . . . and  
 I bow to Grace in complete wonder . . .

And suddenly I understand it all it sprouts in my spirit  
 like a bud and spreads from spirit to spirit

Christmas is Revelation . . . It's God's Revelation . . .  
 And I understand . . . and I hear again echoes of the  
 Gospel of Luke: ". . . And she gave his first-born child  
 to the Light . . ." "Give to the Light" . . .

And I understand: Grace in Mary. . . . Immaculate  
 Daughter in Spirit . . . Mother of God's  
 Revelation. . . .

And I understand: The Light comes to the World . . . Because the world believes . . . The darkness of Consciousness cannot escape anymore . . . the Light of Creation's Resurrection has already arrived . . . and I understand and bow my soul

I see Joseph in front of Mary and at her bosom . . . I hear the fire crackling . . . like their astonished soul . . . stunned . . . trusting . . . faithful . . . I see the floor of dirt and dust . . . the manger . . . I can almost sense a pungent smell . . . of swaddling clothes dirty with human fluids. . . .

"Go beyond . . . What lies beyond the Cross?" The Resurrection . . . I replied. After the Cross comes the Resurrection . . . And I simultaneously found myself in the Holy Sepulchre feeling the moment the Holy Sheet becomes imprinted with the Resurrection of the flesh . . . What does it mean, I ask. . . .

And I understand: Christ-Man has risen . . . Of course . . . Spirit has no Death . . . And I hear again: "What lies beyond the Cross?" Man's Resurrection . . . of Man in Spirit. . . .

And I understand: we must go beyond . . . toward the time of the Resurrection of Man in Spirit . . ."

## Symbolic Content

I see doves returning in a single flock into the Spirit Sun

I see a circle with alpha and omega as adjacent points that almost meet and I see the two distances: the long almost-infinite circumference between the two points and the other almost non-existent one . . . straight almost coincident . . . between them, and I understand the distance between the beginning and end. . . .

In the meditation are also Visions of Eastern faiths . . . some chakras with their colors . . . a samurai with a scimitar . . . and a dragon in green light . . . a temple of silence that was a crystal containing all memories . . . I see a tornado of Air-Light . . . and I understand it's a Vortex of SpiritBreath . . . It passes, and everything lights up in its wake . . . but as it passes it removes all viscous realities . . . And I understand it will also come here. . . . and it's a Here-dimension. . . . I can sense its huge strength and I'm almost scared . . .

## New Dimensions

The eye opens to a vision of a tunnel . . . I see it from above . . . I see different energy levels inside it . . . as if seeing from above one end of a hole that vertically passes through the energy fields of created dimensions . . . I see them as dimensional layers. . . .

As if in each layer the state of existence creates vibrations varying in range, intensity, speed, frequency, mass . . . but they appear as vibrational rainbows more or less dense and bright . . . They're neither colors nor sounds . . . but that's how I perceive the differences in vibration of each round. . . .

I don't really know where I am . . . I never arrived here. At first I see in front of me something like columns of rainbow lights . . . they vibrate . . . if I touch them they vibrate . . . I don't understand, but I sense they are the foundations of NewKnowledge. . . .

Then a cone of ImmenseLight forms in front of me . . . It opens in front of me and vibrates spirally sketching a helix of Light. It seems to be made of Firethatburnsbutdoesn'tscorch. . . .

It takes me inside it and I spin, spin, spin . . . and at a certain point I begin to understand like there's telepathy between the Firethatburnsbutdoesn'tscorch and me. . . .

And I see the words overlapping each other . . . Re-Surge = to Surge Again. . . .

And everything that is created is alive . . . in the human body the toroid emission has its generative center just below the navel . . . I actually see bright rainbows of light bands generated and emitted by this point below the navel merging and flowing again . . . Chakras are like arranged junction boxes of focused energy flows . . . Just like body organs . . . each with its own role but all co-ordinated . . . And I understand that we are a perfectly designed Energy-System. . . .

## General Discussion

The contents of Dr. A.M.'s writings look to encompass two main themes at the same time, which are as follows: the main themes identified by modern scientific investigations of mystic experiences, providing a richer and more detailed account of them and several transcultural themes of paramount importance, belonging to both the Abrahamic tradition and Eastern philosophies, to be reappraised from a meta-religious and meta-philosophical perspective.

The meaning of the concepts of meta-philosophy and meta-religion in this context calls for being shortly defined, in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. The Greek prefix *meta* (μετά, meaning after or beyond) indicates an abstraction from another concept and in epistemology is used to mean *about* (its own category); this has given rise to concepts like *metacognition* (i.e., cognition about cognition) in psychology. Therefore, with the term *meta-philosophy* (a term endowed with several meanings, also called "philosophy of philosophy"), we mean the search for key concepts and meanings common to several or, possibly, all philosophies. It points to their unity beyond formal differences and different ways of theorization, seeking for "roots rather than fruits" (Zajonc, 2004, p. 277). The same is for the term *meta-*

*religion*: Both terms indicate a general model recalling the *philophia perennis* by Steuco (1540) and the *dialogue dans la méta-histoire* by Henry Corbin (as cited in Izutsu, 1984), which was also taken up again by Aldous Huxley (1946).

The meta-perspective allows a new approach to some significant aspects of knowledge that have been overlooked or even obscured due to century-old cultural filters and prejudices, introduced by the exclusivist stance of the Church; the progressive separation of science, philosophy, and religion in the 17th and 18th centuries; and the self-proclaimed superiority of Western culture (and worse, the White race) until the first half of the 20th century.

Despite their religious connotations, both the content and meaning of MEs are of scientific interest: In fact, they are the result of both conscious and unconscious processing, with their still unknown aspects, extending far beyond those described by psychoanalysis and belonging to the world of spirituality (see Facco, 2014, 2017; Sedlmeier & Srinivas, 2016; Walach, 2015). Of course, no conclusions can be drawn from single case reports like the present one, but their narration and clinical assessment provide valuable information on their phenomenology and help moving beyond the limited mechanistic perspective, which usually skips the meaning and value of subjective experiences.

Spirituality should be considered a faculty of the mind and, as such, should also be approached scientifically. This might lead to the reemerging of science and philosophy as one unit, thus overcoming century-old prejudices. Consequently, it might also lead to a proper understanding of the highest expressions of the human mind, with respect to physiology and meaning from a secular perspective. This calls for a paradigm shift, as has been previously advocated (Facco et al., 2015).

The consciousness and its subjective nature have puzzled both scientists and philosopher for centuries. The problem is endowed with profound epistemological implications which have given rise to a heated debate, the nature of which is metaphysical (where *metaphysics* is intended here as ontology) and marked by the opposition between dualist and monist materialist stances (Facco, 2018; Facco et al.,

2017). The so-called hard problem—that is, the mind–brain relationship and the problem of qualia—is the still unsolved issue at the heart of this debate on the foundation of the science of consciousness, where the reductive materialist perspective tends to consider what is mental as immaterial and, as such, an irrelevant epiphenomenon of brain circuitry (Bunge, 2007). As a matter of fact, it seems difficult, if at all possible, to get information on consciousness and awareness without taking into account the individual subject's experience, its meaning and introspection. The problem is even more critical with NOMEs, which often depend on introspection only, being mostly unrelated to sensory perception of the outer world. On the other hand, the relevance of introspection has been debated also, which is, at least partly, distrusted by some authors (Lamme, 2010) and espoused by others (Overgaard, 2010; Seth & Barrett, 2010).

The mechanist–reductionist paradigm is a valuable and powerful method born to explore the physical reality: In the issue of consciousness, it retains its validity in the solution of the easy problem (i.e., the neurophysiological and neurochemical aspects of mental activities and disorders); on the other hand, it is not enough in the study of subjective phenomena where both the first- and third-person perspectives are necessary to properly understand the subjective experience and its meaning. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that neurophysiological investigations, such as event-related potentials, might allow to get objective information about some aspects of introspective activity both in ordinary state of consciousness and hypnosis (Facco et al., 2015; Overgaard, Koivisto, Sorensen, Vangkilde, & Revonsuo, 2006).

The aforementioned epistemological implications at the basis of the study of consciousness are reflected in Dr. A.M.'s MEs as well. In fact, they are at risk of being considered as meaningless hallucinations from a reductive physicalist stance, especially when facing experiences of mystic or transcendental flavor. On the other hand, recent research suggests that up to 15% of people might experience hallucinations, which could be nonpathological, whereas OBEs—which have been mainly reported in NDEs (Facco, 2010; Facco &

Agrillo, 2012b; Facco et al., 2015; van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, & Elfferich, 2001; van Lommel, 2011)—may occur in up to 26% of typical subjects (Braithwaite, Samson, Apperly, Broglia, & Hulleman, 2011). In other words, we are all placed on a continuum, including ordinary experiences, NOMEs, and psychiatric disorders with their links and differences (Aziz, 2009; Bentall, 2014; Ohayon, 2000; Serper, Dill, Chang, Kot, & Elliot, 2005).

Braithwaite et al. (2011) interpreted OBEs as a hallucinatory aura in typical people with a proneness to perceptual anomalies and transient impairment of multisensory integration, involving temporal lobe related circuits. Nonetheless, mechanistic interpretations, despite their value, are only useful in understanding the physical brain's mechanisms that might be involved in the experiences and might completely overlook their significance. This problem can be better perceived in other so-called anomalous experiences, such as synesthesia. In the last decades, synesthesia was mainly considered a developmental failure in the separation of perceptual modalities or a byproduct of brain lesions and psychotropic drugs. However, in recent years the inclination has been toward high-level processing, dependent on a higher than normal brain connectivity, with important implications for creativity, which is quite the opposite of the concept of failure (Chun & Hupe, 2016; Grosenbacher & Lovelace, 2001; Safran & Sanda, 2015; van Leeuwen, Singer, & Nikolić, 2015). Furthermore, synesthesia is probably a wide-ranging phenomenon, more than the one acknowledged by traditional thinking (Mroczo-Wąsowicz & Werning, 2012).

The practical need for defining the limit between physiology and pathology in clinical medicine leads to the elaboration of diagnostic criteria, the nature of which is at least partly conventional and culturally sensitive (Berganza, Mezzich, & Pouncey, 2005; Wakefield, 2010). It is a ceaseless work in progress where the definition of disorders and diagnostic criteria disorders change over time, involving the following risks at any given time: (a) assuming as abnormal those nonpathological phenomena sharing some features with pathological ones, and vice versa; (b) taking medical symptoms for psychiatric ones, and vice versa; (c) taking psychi-

atric symptoms for expression of demonic or divine forces or taking spirituality and religiosity as symptoms of psychiatric disorders according to the *Weltanschauung* (worldview) and the so-called, ever-changing *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the times), that Jung set against what he called the *spirit of the depths* (Castro & Billick, 2013; Jung, 2009). As far as NOMEs are concerned, the profound transformative power of nonpathological ones (e.g., loss of fear of death in NDE experiencers) is hardly compatible with meaningless, hallucinatory phenomena, given the positive cognitive and metacognitive implications and the related enhancement of resilience.

To summarize, the aforementioned NOMEs, because of their supposed oddity, are at risk of being a priori considered less-than-typical (dysfunctional or pathological), but might result to be even better-than-typical, when seen from this perspective. This had already been wisely defined by Plato in the *Phaedrus* (265a) over 2,000 years ago, emphasizing the conventional nature of what may be considered as madness and its relationship with ruling beliefs: “. . . And of madness there were two kinds; one produced by human infirmity, the other was a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention” (Rowe, 1986). Neither culture nor human progress, not even science - for example, the revolution introduced by the theory of relativity and quantum physics - could exist without the second kind of madness.

As far as Dr. A.M.'s MEs are concerned, it is worth emphasizing the following aspects: Dr. A.M. has been having sporadic NOMEs (e.g., OBE) since her adolescence, a fact which may suggest a possible inclination of her personality toward them (instability of brain circuits or, rather, enhanced connectivity and cognitive capacities?). In this regard, it is worth recalling that she embraced and continually developed a highly rational, scientific stance, while maintaining a strong social sensitivity, empathy and cognitive flexibility. She had no MEs until the age of 48, when they were suddenly triggered by a session of meditation, that is, a deep introspective activity driven by intense concentration.

The formal contents of her MEs draw mostly from the Catholic tradition—evidence of her education and beliefs: for example, the Eye is



an ancient and well-known symbolic representation of God (see Figure 1).

They may however depend on both explicit and implicit memories, where the latter might give the false impression that the MEs are providing new information, rather than just old memories that the subject does not consciously recall. On the other hand, the spiritual guides, the symbolic contents, and the new dimensions she perceived are quite unusual and not reflective of Dr. A.M.'s current knowledge. Of course, even these contents do not prove anything—that is, that they result from a real connection with a hypothetical, transcendent spiritual dimension or other world—a more logical explanation could be that they are the product of her creativity, triggered by the meditative activity under a particular mental state.

Unlike Christian symbols, Dr. A.M. had no idea of what *akasha* (the correct transliteration from Sanskrit is *Ākāśa*) might be and, therefore, had to research it in order to understand its meaning. Despite that, we cannot exclude that it might have been dependent on cryptomnesia or implicit memory; however, the lack of knowledge of Eastern philosophy and terms, makes that unlikely, thus its appearance through the ME remains mysterious.

The term *ākāśa* means sky, atmosphere, ether pervading the whole cosmos, infinite universe, which stems from the term *kāś* (visible), *ā-kāśa* means that it is not visible, like Newton's ab-

solute space in the absence of any object. It is part of *bhūta*, the five primordial elements (space, air, fire, water, earth), and, being ether and space, it is closely related to *śhabda* (sound) and, thus, to Om. Om is the mantra and mystic sound par-excellence, representing the whole cosmos and defined in *Kāthopaniṣad* as follows: "This syllable verily is the Brahman, the supreme thing . . . The prophet who knows it was not born, will not die, has neither origin nor evolution . . . is eternal, primordial." The *bhūta* are endowed with a substantial quality (*tanmātra*), which make experience and cognition through the sense organs possible (i.e., the phenomenal experience, Prem and Monod-Herzen, 1982).

The main symbols and spiritual guides in Dr. A.M.'s visions are the wolf and the eagle, both of them powerful symbols for the whole of humanity throughout all ages, the origin of which is lost in prehistory. Their presence in the reported MEs is meaningful as symbols of the efforts required by the hard spiritual journey to be undertaken and its destination.

The wolf is an ambivalent symbol, representing two opposite qualities: (a) force, instinct (including both sexuality and the instinctive knowledge), destruction, savage brutality, also personified in the warrior and the devil; and (b) loyalty, vigilance, brightness, protection, and nourishment. Zeus Lykaios was represented as a wolf (from which the term Lycanthropus

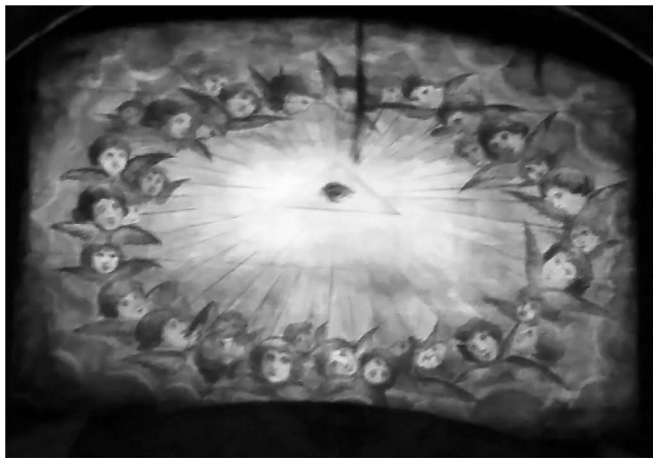


Figure 1. Representation of God as an eye in a triangle (Basilica of S. Maria Maggiore, Rome).

stems); Mormolyke, a female wolf, was the wet nurse of the Acheron, whereas the mantle of Hades was made of wolf leather in Greek mythology. On the other hand, the *Lupa* (the she-wolf) took care and nourished Romulus and Remus (see Figure 2).

The wolf, being able to see in the dark, is also a symbol of the guide leading from the dark to the light; here, it turns into a solar or stellar entity, for example, the Dog Star, also known in China and Japan as the Celestial Dog (*Tiānláng*, 天狼). In short, both wolf and dog have a psychopompic role, similar to the jaguar in pre-Colombian cultures.

The eagle—the queen of skies with its powerful wings—is clearly a universal celestial and solar symbol, representative of contemplation, light, and superior spiritual states, as are angels (it is worth recalling here that seraphs and cherubs, being the highest angelic hierarchies, are the only angels with six wings, indicating their power). As the German mystic Angelus Silesius (1624–1677) said, “The eagle can fearlessly look at the sun, so you can look at the eternal light, if your heart is pure.” (Silesius, 1986) It is also an initiatic bird, the feathers of which were used by shamans for healing rites as well as for initiatic flights. Like the wolf, the eagle is a dual symbol, also keeping its role as savage bird of prey: In this regard, its use as an imperial sym-

bol indicates the hubris and perversion of its power.

This duality reflects the eternal dynamic co-existence—opposition between good and evil, angels and demons and, in general, all objects of phenomenal existence in the ever-changing world as perceived by ordinary consciousness. This seeming duality (which, according to both Taoism and pre-Socratic philosophers, is not made of separate, incompatible substances, but reflects two opposite attributes of the same, unique reality) has been deeply analyzed by Taoism with the concept of *yin and yang* and interpreted by Jung in modern psychology with the concepts of *Coniunctio Oppositorum* and *Unio Mystica*. According to Jung’s thought, symbols are the royal road to insight, individuation, and wisdom rather than simple ideas or facts, whereas truth is too deep to be grasped other than through symbols. They show unknown or only partially known meanings in a synthetic way—that is, fusing different meanings in an inseparable whole—which is the best way to represent them (Jung, 2017). On the other hand, reason and intellectual thought may only try to understand them one by one, splitting them in a hard analytical work of interpretation, where the separation may also lead to truth being lost. In other words, both symbols and mythos are the language of the uncon-



Figure 2. The she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus, symbol of the city of Rome (Palazzo dei Conservatori, Campidoglio, Rome)

scious—comparable to a parallel, analogical—synthetical processor—whereas reason is a serial, logical—analytical one, which can hardly understand deep meanings as a whole. Symbols show the truth as an inseparable, ostensibly contradictory, entity, without worry for its demonstration, whereas conceptual thought and logic may provide a rigorous demonstration. However, the need for demonstrations—according to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (Book IV)—reflects only the existence of different opinions; otherwise, it is meaningless.

Because the eagle is a symbol of enlightenment and spiritual regeneration, it is not surprising that Dr. A.M.’s trips with the eagle symbolically represent her interior journey toward awareness and spiritual light, in perfect agreement with Psalm 91:4 in the King James version (KJV) of the Bible: “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.” Likewise, in Isaiah (40:31 KJV) it is written, “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles.” The wolf–eagle pair is meaningful—a perfect depiction of the process of individuation and spiritual growth. This is initially driven by “inferior” inner forces (represented by the wolf) from ordinary life, then leads to progressively reach for higher awareness and contemplation (represented by the eagle). Interestingly, this process of self-transformation has also been described by ancient alchemists in terms of the search for the philosopher’s stone as “distilling gold from the lead of soul” (for a psychological analysis of alchemy, see Jung, 1997).

Dr. A.M.’s MEs included some neologisms, among which is the term *re-velation*, worth a brief discussion because of its profound transcultural meaning.

The Judeo–Christian tradition is marked by two fundamental episodes, the first being the revelation of God to the Hebrews, and the second is the revelation by Christ. The former was directed to the chosen people; the latter was a great revolution among the chosen people introduced by Christ, who turned the rigorously formal religious stance into a universal way of interior spiritual realization suitable for every individual. Similar to the symbols of wolf and eagle, the concept of re-velation includes two opposite meanings: (a) the teaching about God

and the spiritual way through the prophets and Christ and (b) the recurring *velation*, that is, the obscuring and concealing of the revealed truth by people and ministers of religions themselves (under the influence of ordinary consciousness, vis-à-vis, in the Abrahamic tradition, the original sin), and thus preventing one from having access to this knowledge.

According to Bloom (Bloom, 2006), Christ has been stifled by the imposing ideological superstructure in place throughout the course of history. One can also observe how Christ’s message has been too often betrayed, a fact that depends on the persistence of ordinary consciousness with its limited egocentric perspective, living in a world of *having* rather than *being*, and the pursuit of power (a concept represented by Christ’s temptations in the desert). This huge problem has been well analyzed from a psychological point of view by Erich Fromm (1976).

It is also a universal philosophical and epistemological problem, well defined also in the Buddhist tradition with the concept of *Māyā*, the “mask of illusion” of ordinary consciousness. *Māyā* is the decisive force of *samṣāra* (the world of becoming, of the ostensible multiplicity and suffering), which requires withdrawal in order to access reality beyond its phenomenal appearance and the ego projections into the outer world. A similar concept is also present in Sufism with the term *kashf* (unveiling), with mystic intuition allowing access to reality beyond its phenomenal appearance to the ordinary consciousness (Facco, 2014, 2017; Facco et al., 2017; Izutsu, 1984).

The mask of illusion implies the need for overcoming it and, therefore, getting rid of the ego. This concept appears to contradict common sense and the foundation of Western culture, which is strongly based on a rationalistic and ego-centered tradition, of which Descartes’s *Cogito Ergo Sum* (I think, therefore I am) is the cutting edge; on the other hand, it is of paramount importance and can be considered as a universal attainment of human thought in all cultures and all times. In fact, it has been a tenet of Taoism (see *Zhūangzǐ*) in China; Yoga, Veda, and Buddhism in India; as well as all mystic currents of the Abrahamic tradition, from Desert’s Fathers (e.g., Evagrius Ponticus) to Maister Eckart in the Christian tradition, to Sufism, in

which Ibn'Arabi proclaimed the need for achieving the Cosmic Ego, following the withdrawal of the ordinary ego. In similar fashion, the final stage of Yoga meditation allows one to overcome the mask of illusion and attain the fusion of individual *ātman* with universal *ātman*: Again, this supreme aim has a strong similarity and compatibility with Jung's concept of development of the self and individuation (Facco, 2014, 2017; Izutsu, 1984).

Clearly, the neologism *re-velation* is related to the term *re-cognition*, which implies the possibility of attaining true knowledge. Apart from the hard way to wisdom and enlightenment, this is the history of all human knowledge as well as the very history of science. The latter involves a dynamic process of acquiring knowledge through a never-ending revision of what is known; it includes both the acquisition of new information and the related changes to interpretations, as well as a recurring shift of paradigm, accurately described by Thomas Kuhn with the concept of scientific revolutions (Kuhn, 1962).

The preceding discussion provides a glimpse of the complexity and the valuable meaning of symbols and concepts included in Dr. A.M.'s MEs: They belong to philosophy, religion, and psychical life as a whole, providing important information in the field of psychology. In this article, the analysis is not under the banner of theology or metaphysical speculations: The interest springs from the need for open access to NOMEs and approaching them from a physiological perspective, in order to disseminate apparently strange but potentially significant aspects and faculties of the human mind. Despite appearing odd from the conventional materialist perspective, they might assist in understanding hidden, as yet unknown or misinterpreted, aspects of the unconscious life of typical people, with their connection to Jungian psychology, and might be essential for a wider understanding of the inner-outer world relationship.

The risk to consider MEs as plane hallucinations springs from the traditional approach, based on a formal logical-analytical evaluation of "symptoms" from a stiff third-person perspective, only considering as real and meaningful what of subject's experience meets the outer

world. This might lead to skip the cognitive and metacognitive value of mental imagery, an essential aspect of introspection wrongly considered as a feature of the less developed minds of children and primitive peoples from a narrow rationalistic perspective in the early 20th century (Thomas, 2014a, 2014b). Indeed, it is an invaluable gift of the most outstanding scientists of the 20th century, like Albert Einstein, the philosopher-scientist par-excellence (Einstein, 1949), and Nikola Tesla. The outstanding eidetic imagination of Tesla, as reported in his autobiography, is worth being mentioned in the following extract:

In my boyhood I suffered from a peculiar affliction, due to the appearance of images, often accompanied by strong flashes of light, which marred the sight of real objects and interfered with my thought and action. . . . This caused me great discomfort and anxiety. . . . They certainly were not hallucinations such as those produced in diseased and anguished minds. . . . I instinctively commenced to make excursions beyond the limits of the small world of which I had knowledge. . . . and so I began to travel—of course in my mind. . . . This I did until I was about seventeen when my thoughts turned seriously to invention. Then I observed to my delight that I could visualize with the greatest facility. I needed no models, drawings or experiments. I could picture them as real in my mind. . . . I do not rush in actual work. When I get an idea I start at once building it up in my imagination. I change construction, make improvements and operate the device in my mind. It is absolutely immaterial to me whether I run my turbine in thought or test it in my shop. I even note if it is out of balance. . . . In this way I am able to rapidly develop and perfect a conception without touching anything. . . . I put into concrete form this final product of my brain. Invariably my device works as I conceived that it should, and the experiment comes out exactly as I planned it. In twenty years there has not been a single exception. (Tesla, 2014, p. 20)

Of course, the eidetic imagery of Tesla is not the same as those of MEs, which belong to the still ill-known field of human creativity, an essential feature of science, arts, mythology, and religions, that is, the "World 3" according to Popper and Eccles (1977; for further analysis, see Facco, 2018). MEs look to share with dreams the language of the unconscious: They include symbols and an analogic-synthetic language, rather than the conceptual thought and a logical-analytical structure. If so, their understanding calls for an open-minded approach that can take into account these features and create an interface between these two different semantic



worlds—just as occurs in psychoanalysis, where dreams are “properly” interpreted.

The aforementioned classification of ASCs, an ill-defined (if not misleading) concept springing from an also ill-defined concept of the typical state of consciousness, combines under one heading both pathological and nonpathological conditions (Vaitl et al., 2005). This might lead easily to the incorrect assumption that any NOME is an abnormal or less-than-typical phenomenon (Facco, 2014; Facco et al., 2015), the probability of which is enhanced by the transcendental flavor of MEs. As a conclusion to this article, it is therefore appropriate to briefly outline the role of spirituality in neurosciences as well as in clinical practice.

Spirituality and religion and, more generally, anything with the flavor of transcendence have been a priori rejected by the unyielding neopositivist, materialist stance of science in the last century. The same has been the case for NOMEs (such as MEs, NDEs, hypnosis, meditation), which have been rejected outright when not derided or deemed to be psychiatric problems or illusions at best. Fortunately, interest has been continually increasing in recent years and, at this moment, over 3,000 articles are available in PubMed on spirituality and religion (Moreira-Almeida, Sharma, van Rensburg, Verhagen, & Cook, 2016).

Spirituality has important implications in both mental and physical health and in psychiatric disorders, in agreement with the aforementioned statement of Plato. Therefore, a proper open approach in clinical practice is mandatory in order to avoid possible diagnostic errors, caused by a prejudicial, narrow perspective and an axiomatic mechanistic–materialist stance. This perspective might be blind to the true meaning of an individual’s experience, and thus nonpathological NOMEs might be mistaken for plain hallucinations, delusions, or deliriums (e.g., two patients seen by the first author were administered sedative and antipsychotic drugs by the attending doctor after reporting their NDEs).

Both the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) and the World Health Organization have recognized the relevance of spirituality and religion in mental health as well as quality of life, while sections on spirituality and religion have been created by the WPA and several national psychiatric associations (Moreira-Almeida et

al., 2016). According to Moreira-Almeida et al. (2016), the term *spirituality* still lacks a universally agreed definition: It includes the dimensions of transcendence, sacredness, and ultimate reality and is closely related to values, meaning, and purpose in life.

Being an inescapable part of the human mind and life, spirituality may also undergo pathological changes, but these cannot be properly assessed when its usual features and physiology are unknown or ignored. In fact, open access to the physiology and psychology of spirituality may reveal a path to understanding the still poorly understood highest faculties of the human mind.

The MEs reported herein, with their profound philosophical, psychological, and existential implications, provide an interesting clue to the least known faculties of mind, and their comprehension requires insight into the symbolic content and meaning beyond the limited, though applicable, mechanistic approach.

Because spirituality is still far from being well defined, in concluding this article it is worth trying to provide a possible hypothesis on its nature. Being a faculty of the mind, it is independent of any religion, doctrine, or theology in itself; rather, it is the psychical base from which any religion can spring.

In our opinion, the aforementioned philosophical and religious disciplines as a whole suggest that the spirit is a non-ego-centered part of the human unconscious, latent in the human psyche but potentially accessible by consciousness. If so, an essential task of every human being is to recognize and develop it, beyond the physiological, but narrow, egocentric perspective.

Being non-ego-centered, its aspects are universal and may allow humans to become conscious microcosms of the whole world, realizing that they are an inseparable part of it in a mutual interrelationship with all beings. Its opposite, that is, the ordinary egocentric perspective, with its apparent duality of phenomenal reality, has the real potential to cause dissociation and alienation, leading one to believe in separation from outer reality and having the right to manipulate it at will (refer to Hobbes’s *cupiditas naturalis*). Indeed, anthropology and the capacity for mutual understanding among humans of different races and cultures depends on common universal features, be it Jung’s col-



lective unconscious and/or the spirit (two different but not antithetical concepts).

Being universal and non-ego-centered, the spirit is properly considered by theistic religions as a gift of God. All saints and enlightened men and women of all epochs and cultures clearly show this universal, non-ego-centered, nonegotistic stance, from Buddha, Lǎozǐ, Zhūāngzǐ, Christ, and all prophets, saints, and mystics of the Abrahamic tradition, up to Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who wisely said, “What is not given, is lost.” Apart from the ethical implications of spirituality, the loss of the limited ego perspective is also to be regarded as the most significant attempt to achieve a real, full third person perspective. Therefore, it might turn out to be the master way toward a true objectivity (free from ego projections, conventions, nouns, categories, nominalism, and cultural filters), which, incidentally, is the kernel of science.

### On the Relevance of the Study of Single Case Exceptional Participants

Might the experience of a single case, insofar as exceptional, be considered relevant in this field? Our opinion is a firm yes, it is. As in many other scientific fields (see e.g., the relevance in cognitive neuropsychology, Caramazza & McCloskey, 1986), the detailed study of multiple single cases offers a unique opportunity to investigate in deep this very special NOMEs. Even if cases showing the varieties of experiences of Dr. A.M. are very rare, we think that the accumulation of information of multiple transcultural experiences of this sort offer a richer and finer picture than do the data obtained by structured questionnaires for similar NOMEs like the NDEs and the OBEs with all their focus on the mind–brain, life–death debate. We sincerely hope the researchers interested in this topic will appreciate the importance of single case studies in this and other exceptional NOMEs. According to Forman (1998), a phenomenological approach cannot be the sole basis for any theory of reality, yet it remains an essential step in the pursuit of knowledge: “It is like the finger pointing in some direction, rather than the conclusive evidence for or against a particular thesis.”, p. 188. In the case of MEs, one is to see where

the finger is pointing: As an ancient Chinese proverb states, “when the finger points to the moon, the foolish looks at the finger.” Indeed, this looks to be the prevalent opinion on NOMEs in the last century under the influence of an unyielding reductive physicalism.

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Received August 1, 2017

Revision received February 12, 2018

Accepted May 14, 2018 ■