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LEARNING TO SENSE GOD: HOW COGNITIVE ABSORPTION AND MENTAL TRAINING SHAPE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Background: How does God become intimate for people when God is understood to be invisible and immaterial? This is not the question of whether God is real, but rather of how believers learn to make the judgment that God is present and to feel his presence directly with their senses. We are addressing this question through a neuro-phenomenological study of prayer and the related practice of tulpamancy—a contemporary practice adapted from Tibetan Buddhism wherein people cultivate personal relationships with invisible beings who are experienced as fully autonomous immaterial companions.

Aims: We aim to understand the neural and cognitive mechanisms underlying the cultivation of interactions with invisible beings (God for Pentecostal Christians and Tulpas for Tulpamancers).

Method: We are studying expert practitioners of Pentecostal prayer ($n = 20$) and tulpamancy ($n = 20$), compared to 20 control participants. Each expert participant undergoes a rich phenomenological interview detailing their experiences of cultivating a relationship with the invisible other, as well as a battery of questionnaires (including the Tellegen Absorption Scale, Brief Suggestibility Scale, and a host of other psychological and clinical measures). Participants also undergo an fMRI session where we specifically invite the invisible other to speak in the scanner. This design allows us to compare the brain activity associated with instances of non-agentive speech to other, more voluntary, forms of inner or external speech. Participants provide self-reports of their sense of agency throughout the scan.

Preliminary results: We are still in the midst of data collection and so have not yet analyzed our primary brain imaging data. The preliminary phenomenological reports of participants indicate that they have indeed cultivated, through training, an ability to relax the sense of control over their own thoughts such that they can come to experience an immaterial person communicating with them through various sensory modalities in a way that feels non-agentive, as if the invisible other is clearly “not-me”. Encouragingly, both Pentecostal Christians and tulpamancers report a capacity to bring on these experiences reliably even in the context of the fMRI scan. As such, we have been able to collect a rich set of phenomenologically-tagged brain imaging data involving direct communications from immaterial beings.

Keywords: Contemplative practice; Imagination; Agency; Prayer; Tulpamancy

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