

## Article

# “Limit Situations” and Sociological Theory: Implications for the Study of Vulnerability and Engaged Spirituality

Benedetta Nicoli 

Department of Sociology, Catholic University of Milan, 20123 Milan, Italy; benedetta.nicoli@unicatt.it

**Abstract:** This paper aims to advance sociological theory by systematizing the concept of “limit situation”, a term that Berger employs throughout his work, though only in a hinted and unsystematic manner. To achieve this objective, the paper develops a theoretical framework that incorporates different contributions and perspectives. Within this framework, the concept of “limit situation” translates into an analytical tool for the sociological study of vulnerability, particularly in relation to engaged spirituality. The concept is tested through an empirical study based on in-depth interviews with founders, workers, and volunteers from organizations that provide care for individuals facing vulnerability. The analysis shows that encounters with vulnerability, under specific circumstances, create a liminal situation that promotes spirituality at both existential and operational levels. This process informs the value systems of the involved actors and activates specific social practices and relationships.

**Keywords:** limit situations; sociological theory; vulnerability; engaged spirituality; Peter Berger

## 1. Introduction

Peter Berger, drawing on the phenomenological tradition of Alfred Schütz, argues that social interactions occur within a specific context: the “ordinary, everyday ‘life-world,’” which is the “taken-for-granted world of commonsense” (Berger 1974, p. 129) that Schütz (1945) calls the “paramount reality”. In modern societies, this reality coincides with a secularized framework that relies exclusively on immanent, mundane, and “prosaic” criteria (Berger 1967, p. 100; see also Berger 2014; Taylor 2007). As Max Weber observed (Weber [1919] 1946, p. 139), this framework reflects the disenchanting “belief that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation”.

This framework differs significantly from the premodern one, which was characterized by a “sacred canopy” that encompassed the entire universe and imbued events with profound meaning by connecting them to “more powerful sources than the historical efforts of human beings” (Berger 1967, pp. 25–26). The meaningful order derived from such sources was extremely solid and stable for two primary reasons. First, it was socially shared. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue, the greater the social consensus surrounding a specific reality, the more that reality becomes “plausible” (Ivi:111) and, therefore, can be taken for granted. Second, the legitimacy of this order existed “beyond the contingencies of human meanings and human activity” (Berger 1967, p. 43), thereby rendering it unquestionable. Eliade (1959, p. 21) argues that experiences perceived as more real than mere sensory and mundane reality can serve as a “founding of the world”, as they “reveal the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation”. Living without this “absolute fixed point”



Academic Editor: Alex Villas Boas

Received: 29 March 2025

Revised: 14 May 2025

Accepted: 19 May 2025

Published: 21 May 2025

**Citation:** Nicoli, Benedetta. 2025. “Limit Situations” and Sociological Theory: Implications for the Study of Vulnerability and Engaged Spirituality. *Religions* 16: 656. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050656>

**Copyright:** © 2025 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

ISSN 2077-1444

risks leading individuals to become “paralyzed by the never-ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences” (Eliade 1959, p. 28).

Modernization leads to a collapse of this “sacred canopy” (Berger 2014). In its place, multiple worldviews emerge, encompassing both religious and non-religious perspectives. Religious worldviews, in particular, become increasingly unstable, as they no longer rest on an unquestioned, universally recognized authority. Instead, they are shaped by shifting individual interpretations (e.g., Berzano 2019; Giordan 2004, 2007). This dynamic gives rise to a process of relativization, in which religious beliefs are continuously subject to questioning and doubt (Berger 2014; Joas 2014; Taylor 2007). Conversely, non-religious worldviews gain plausibility. Berger (2012, p. 314) argues that modernity promotes a “secular discourse” which achieves a “taken-for-granted” and exclusive status, ultimately functioning as the dominant or “default” narrative in contemporary society. Similarly, Taylor (2007, p. 3) highlights the cultural shift from a time when belief in God was “unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic” to one in which such belief is merely one among many options and often “not the easiest to embrace” (see also Joas 2014). This transition marks the emergence of what Taylor (2007, p. 543) calls the “immanent frame”—a self-sufficient “constellation of orders, cosmic, social, and moral”. Within this frame, individuals increasingly see themselves as the “masters of the meanings of things” (Ivi:38). As such, the immanent frame constitutes a disenchanting context in which modern individual and social life is situated<sup>1</sup>.

Within this new framework, the very notion that there is anything beyond “prosaic” reality—defined by rationality, material progress, and immanent criteria—becomes increasingly implausible (Berger 1967, p. 2014). As Berger (1969, p. 14) notes, “the divine, at least in its classical forms, has receded into the background of human concern and consciousness”. Similarly, Eliade (1959, p. 20) observes that modernity is grounded in a “homogeneous” worldview, in which reality is conceived as exclusively physical and physiological, leaving little space for the sacred or the transcendent.

Nevertheless, the growing legitimacy of secular discourse does not entirely eliminate the persistence—or even the re-emergence—of religious and spiritual dimensions within modern life. As Berger (1969, p. 155) notes, “Secularized consciousness is not the absolute it presents itself as”. He continues, “If the signals of transcendence have become rumors in our time, then we can set out to explore these rumors—and perhaps to follow them up to their source”. By “signals of transcendence”, Berger (1967, p. 214; 1974, p. 131; 2003) refers to specific existential experiences that point beyond the immanent frame. Across his works, he uses various terms to describe these phenomena, including “transition points” (Berger 1970, p. 218), “breaches” (Berger 1974, p. 130), and “marginal situations” (Berger 1967, p. 32). The latter—also translated as “limit situations” from the German *Grenzsituation*—originates from Karl Jaspers, who used the term to describe moments of profound disruption, distinct from everyday experience, in which individuals are placed on the boundaries of their existence. These limit situations—exemplified by suffering, struggle, death, or chance—reveal otherwise hidden existential truths, such as the finitude of life or the fragility of the human body. According to both Berger and Jaspers, these experiences expose a fundamental condition of human existence (*Dasein*) and simultaneously open the possibility of encountering a reality that transcends the immanent and disenchanting worldview. As Jaspers (1970, pp. 204, 679) argues, “the limit thus fulfills its authentic function, namely that of being in immanence, a referral to transcendence” (see also Guardini 1964, pp. 179–80).

In contrast to the classical theses of secularization, which view modernity as a gradual decline in religious and spiritual life, the perspective outlined above opens space for exploring contemporary manifestations of spirituality and their implications in terms of

engaged spirituality<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, as will be argued, understanding secularization as the declining plausibility of religious worldviews does not imply the complete disappearance of religious or spiritual dimensions from individual and social life. On the contrary, this perspective draws attention to “limit situations” that challenge secularized interpretations and open space for the emergence of spiritual experiences that transcend rationalized and disenchanted frameworks.

Building on these considerations, this paper aims to advance sociological theory by systematizing the concept of “limit situation”. To achieve this objective, the paper develops a theoretical framework that incorporates different contributions and perspectives. Within this framework, “limit situation” translates into an analytical tool for the sociological study of vulnerability, particularly in relation to engaged spirituality. The concept is tested through an empirical case involving in-depth interviews with professionals (founders, workers, and volunteers) from organizations that provide care to individuals facing vulnerability. The analysis shows that encounters with vulnerability, under specific circumstances, create a liminal situation that promotes spirituality at both existential and operational levels. This process informs the value systems of the involved actors and activates specific social practices and relationships.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. *Limit Situations and Everyday Life*

Berger (1974, pp. 129–31) discusses the concept of “limit situations” within the interpretive framework of Schütz’s theory of multiple realities (Schütz 1945). He defines limit situations as experiences that interrupt the ordinary flow of everyday life, which Schütz refers to as “paramount reality”. These experiences are perceived as exceptional and disorienting because they fall outside the conventional definitions of everyday reality. Examples of such experiences include dreams, pure intellectual activity, and aesthetic moments. According to Berger, such situations are universal across human societies, since social reality is continuously co-constructed by individuals and the broader community. This ongoing construction renders social reality inherently open to disruption and reinterpretation, underscoring the constant need to reaffirm its legitimacy.

As previously discussed, secularization entails the gradual dominance of a secularized, disenchanted view of reality, accompanied by the progressive delegitimization of religious and spiritual worldviews (Berger 1969, 1974, p. 132). Within this context, Berger observes (Berger 1970, p. 217) that limit situations not only challenge the plausibility of ordinary reality but also “threaten” the secularized and immanent frame itself, rendering it “problematic as a whole” and potentially leading to its “dissolution”. By shifting the “accent of reality” toward an extraordinary dimension, limit situations reintroduce the possibility of conceiving a reality beyond the secularized one. As Berger (1974, pp. 130–31) argues, “in the course of this shift in the apperception of reality, all mundane activity in everyday life is radically relativized, trivialized—in the words of *Ecclesiastes*, reduced to ‘vanity,’ while awareness arises”—even if “at times it is only held dimly”—that “there is another level ‘beneath’ it” which appears “more real” than the mundane one. For this reason, Berger argues that limit situations—though not necessarily religious in themselves—serve as “potential mediators of religious experience” (Ibid.). Indeed, they function as “possible transfer stations to the ‘other condition’”, a term derived from Robert Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*, which, while “not yet identical with the latter”, can serve as “potential occasions for its attainment” (Berger 1970, p. 218).

Other sociologists have theorized experiences that challenge the secularized and disenchanted paramount reality. Taylor, for example, describes these as experiences of “fullness”—moments marked by a sense of higher meaning or depth, whose source is

perceived as transcending the human mind and surpassing ordinary human flourishing. Taylor (2007, p. 251) contrasts such experiences with those described by Kant, who, in the context of aesthetics, locates the object of wonder and reverence within the human capacity to act according to universal moral law—the “moral law within”.

Experiences of fullness, as well as the experiences that interrupt ordinary reality described by Berger, challenge the belief that the immanent and disenchanting frame is “all there is” (Ivi:372). Instead, they point to the need for a broader interpretive horizon. An example is the experience of love that, as Taylor argues—drawing on Nietzsche—can awaken in the individual a longing for eternity. In this way, such experiences “may break through the membrane” of the immanent frame (Ivi:360), creating openings for religious or spiritual interpretations of the world. In line with Berger (1974, p. 131), we can understand these breaching experiences as moments that render exclusively rational and materialistic interpretations less convincing, while simultaneously highlighting the “precariousness of everyday life and all its work”.

Situations that interrupt secularized reality are also theorized by Joas (2021, pp. 241–44), who refers to them as “shattering experiences”. These arise from extraordinary events that go “beyond anything familiar from everyday life” and call the boundaries of the self into question<sup>3</sup>. Joas derives the concept of shattering experiences from Durkheim’s theory of sacralization processes. However, he critiques Durkheim for focusing exclusively on collective forms of sacralization, overlooking the interpretive processes through which individuals may undergo personal transformations, such as the adoption of new value systems and worldviews. Among the types of shattering experiences, Joas highlights those that confront individuals with a deep awareness of their own vulnerability and finitude, for example, serious illness, the fear of death, or the suffering and loss of loved ones.

Shattering experiences, which are “pre-reflexive” and “affective”, involve a “passive dimension”, a sense of “being seized” by “stirring forces”, and that “something must be at work” beyond the self. In this sense, Joas argues, these experiences “necessarily lead to the attribution of the quality of the ‘sacred’—though of course the actors involved may not necessarily use this particular term”. Because these experiences subvert established conceptions of the self and its relation to the world, they may motivate individuals to adopt “a new system of values and interpretations”, leading, in some cases, to a profound personal transformation or even a sense of rebirth (Ibid.). This outcome resonates with Berger’s account of limit situations. Berger (1970, pp. 218, 224) argues that when such situations are not immediately reabsorbed into the framework of ordinary reality—typically through secular interpretations such as those offered by psychology or modern science—they can open individuals to the possibility of novel and unfamiliar “modes of being”. These experiences can reshape not only one’s understanding of the world, but also the perception of the self and others. However, Berger emphasizes that this existential shift requires “specific social relationships that serve to confirm and sustain its reality”, especially within a broader secularized culture (Berger 1970, p. 227). More precisely, Berger (Ivi:229) argues that community life plays a crucial role in maintaining contact with the extraordinary for two reasons. First, relationships among individuals who share a similar worldview reinforce its plausibility. Second, practices such as prayer, meditation, and other rituals typical of religious communities help to embed the extraordinary within the ordinary without reducing the former to the latter. In Christian terms, as Berger notes, these practices enable individuals to live “in the world, but not of it”. Nonetheless, Berger (Ivi:226) also observes that institutional religion, throughout history, has always encapsulated breaching experiences in what he calls “ecclesiastical routines”. This process, however, risks leading to secularization and disenchantment—a dynamic also theorized by Weber in his concept of the “routinization of charisma” (Weber [1921] 1978).

## 2.2. Limit Situations and Liminality

The concept of limit situations, as theorized by Berger and applied to the contemporary context of secularization, also shows significant points of connection with the concept of liminality. Originally developed by Van Gennep and further elaborated by Turner, liminality refers to the transitional, in-between phase of a rite of passage—a period in which previous structures are dissolved, but new ones have not yet taken form. Sociologist Szakolczai (2009) extends this concept to describe social situations marked by the “suspension of normal, everyday life”, during which established norms and certainties lose their “validity and grip” (Szakolczai 2007, pp. xvi–xvii). This disruption, very similar to the one Berger describes, is “liminal” because it constitutes a “threshold” (in Latin, “*limen*”) to access a possible new order. Berger (1974, pp. 130–31) even uses similar imagery, describing limit situations as moments in which ordinary reality is stripped of its central status and becomes an “antechamber” or “outer court” of another, deeper reality. In this sense, both concepts highlight threshold moments—experiences of suspension and transition—that have the potential to give rise to new interpretations, values, and social formations.

Standing on the threshold, as Szakolczai observes, means inhabiting a precarious, risky, and often painful situation where the human subject is “moved onto the limit” (Szakolczai 2009, p. 148). Such a state is unstable and cannot be resolved by “rational” or “traditional” means because the reference points these logics rely on—once seen as objectively given—have been suspended by the liminal crisis (Szakolczai 2017, p. 234). As Szakolczai (Ibid.) notes, the resolution of this crisis requires an anchoring to a different point of reference. This shift is possible because, in a liminal state, “almost everything can happen”, including encounters with the extraordinary (Szakolczai 2009, p. 148). The sociologist, like Berger and Taylor, suggests that liminality creates the potential for encounters with grace, which he defines as “a surprise, a sudden irruption into the order of being” (Szakolczai 2007, p. 4). Grace is “whatever takes place beyond ordinary everyday life” and does not arise “from a conscious human initiative” but evades “the conscious reasoned control of conduct” (Pitt-Rivers 2011, p. 428). In this sense, Szakolczai (2007, p. 4) specifies, grace does not conform to the logic of science, economics, or law; rather, it follows the “logic of gift relations or logic of gift-giving”, which can appear irrational when viewed from the perspective of previously taken-for-granted systems.

Szakolczai (2009, p. 147) argues that the encounter with the extraordinary reality is an “event” that neither originates from nor depends on the human subject. It is also a “lived experience” that engages “not just our sense, but our entire existence as well”. In contrast to the standardized, rationalized, and “depersonalized” experiences that are typical in modernity, such as consumption experiences or activities based in digital media, liminal situations are emotionally intense and profoundly transformative. These experiences compel individuals to question and reassess their entire existence (Szakolczai 2009, p. 163). Berger and Taylor similarly underline how limit situations are “lived experiences” that involve the human subject as a whole, challenging the very foundations of its existence. This integral vision of the human leads Berger (1979, p. ix) to suggest that contemporary (Christian) theology should adopt an inductive approach. Theological reflection should begin with “ordinary human experience”, seek out the “signals of transcendence” inherent within it, and then move toward religious affirmations about the nature of reality. In the same way, the sociological study of contemporary religion and spirituality should strive to understand the meanings that social actors ascribe to their actions. This requires examining all dimensions of lived experience—not only intellectual and cognitive aspects but also affective and emotional ones, which are inseparable from the former. As Berger (1974, p. 127) asserts, “any human meaning must first of all be understood in its own terms, ‘from within,’ in the sense of those who adhere to it”.

Liminality not only affects individuals but, under certain conditions, can also involve entire collectives. For instance, Patočka (1990, p. 314) explores phenomena at historical crossroads that signify pivotal ruptures or anticipated changes, which “witness a reversal in the way being appears”. In this context, the philosopher views the Great War as a “paradoxical” and liminal event with both existential and “cosmic” significance (Patočka 1981, p. 153). The war, he argues, does not merely disrupt the causal chain, allowing the emergence of a new situation; it also challenges the interpretive frameworks that had previously been available (Stanciu 2018, p. 510). By showing the nonsense of the pillars of the nineteenth-century—science, reason, the nation, and progress—each of which sought to transform “all values under the sign of force” (Patočka 1981, pp. 159–60), the war also unveils the hidden mechanisms that elevated these “idols” (Stanciu 2018, p. 510). What humanity gains from this questioning, Patočka asserts, drawing on the war narratives of Ernst Jünger and Teilhard de Chardin, is the positive realization that human life should not be subordinated to a supra-entity, nor treated merely as an exchange value. Thus, the experience of the front, by confronting humanity with extreme danger, reveals a “profound and mysterious positivity”, ultimately leading to the emergence of a “powerful feeling of fullness of meaning” (Patočka 1981, p. 161)<sup>4</sup>.

Similarly, Wydra argues that any historical circumstance in which political societies confront a crisis or lack of meaning can be seen as a potential liminal condition. In these moments, individuals are often compelled to “seek integration against disintegration, cosmos over chaos” (Wydra 2015, p. 5). As a result, limit situations have the potential to give rise to “new structures of meaning” (Ivi:3). Specifically, these situations can disrupt the secular frameworks that contemporary societies adhere to, offering an opportunity to transcend immanent criteria such as “technological feasibility, economic rationality, brute power, utility, or pleasure” (Ivi:7).

An intriguing aspect of Wydra’s thesis is his claim that secularized society and the immanent frame inherently contain the conditions necessary for a limit situation to unfold. This, in turn, prompts a critical examination of these frameworks and invites consideration of religious or spiritual perspectives. Drawing on Weber’s insight, Wydra states that, “The more effectively the technological-scientific civilization in secular societies imposes its laws [...] the stronger the relative desire to escape this immanence becomes” (ibid.).

If limit situations represent a “collapse of order” (Thomassen 2009), whether at the individual or collective level, the encounter with an extraordinary dimension can be experienced as the event that resolves the crisis, offering a new set of values and ideas that differ from the previous ones. As Szakolczai notes, grace is often linked to the resolution of “situations of grave crisis” because “the power of grace is a gift granted to restore what was lost” (Szakolczai 2007, p. 4)<sup>5</sup>.

Modernity, Szakolczai (2017) argues, is characterized by a condition of “permanent liminality”. Berger (1970, p. 231) offers a similar diagnosis, noting that “modern man is prone to ‘alternation’ between discrepant worlds of reality”, as illustrated by Riesman’s concept of the “other-directed character”, Gehlen’s “subjectivization”, Schelky’s “permanent reflectiveness”, and the protagonist in Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*. However, this type of liminality does not encourage a questioning of the secularized, rationalized, “prosaic” reality (Berger 1967, p. 100); rather, it inhibits such questioning. Worldviews within modernity—such as those based on science, economics, or politics—seem all-encompassing and self-sufficient. This paradox defines the delicate situation of contemporary societies: while they present many potentially religious and spiritual limit situations, they also feature worldviews that neutralize this potential.

### 2.3. Vulnerability as Limit Situation and the Modern Attempt to Remove It

Secularized societies, which view the immanent frame as “all there is” (Taylor 2007), struggle to accommodate limit situations that challenge the taken-for-granted nature of secular worldviews, as well as what Taylor calls “exclusive humanism”, which limits human goals to the pursuit of human flourishing. Among all limit situations, death holds a unique significance because it is “the ultimate interruption of everyday reality” (Berger 1970, p. 222) and, thus, “the marginal situation par excellence” (Berger 1967, p. 32; see also Patočka 1981, 1990). According to Berger (1967, pp. 56–57), death “radically challenges all socially objectivated definitions of reality—of the world, of others, and of the self”. This is why religion plays a crucial role in every society. By constructing a sacred cosmos, it “provides man’s ultimate shield against the terror of anomy” and “chaos” (also see Eliade 1959). Religion, argues Berger (1967, pp. 56–57),

“Permits the individual who goes through these situations, to continue to exist in the world of his society—not ‘as if nothing had happened,’ which is psychologically difficult in the more extreme marginal situations, but in the ‘knowledge’ that even these events or experiences have a place within a universe that makes sense”.

In addition to death, which represents the most radical limit situation, other experiences, such as illness and old age, serve a similar function in society: they highlight the precariousness of human life and remind us that human beings do not permanently belong to the empirical world. As Manicardi (2014) suggests, death is the “memory of the limit”, understood not only as an “end” but also as a “threshold”. From Berger’s phenomenological perspective, limit situations like these undermine the taken-for-granted nature and plausibility of secularized worldviews.

In modern societies, death and situations that remind us of it are no longer primarily situated within a sacred cosmos, as Berger argues. In a sacred context, such experiences could coexist with ordinary reality, making them more acceptable, often through rituals that mark these transitions and integrate them into ordinary life. Instead, these experiences are now largely removed, isolated, and hidden from everyday life. At the same time, they are subjected to rational explanation and control, particularly through science and technology, leading to their “deconstruction” (Bauman 1992) and stripping them of their human qualities. This is evident in how hospitals, nursing homes, and hospices appear as “non-places” (Augé 1992; see also Ariès 1974; Elias 2001). These experiences also lie at the core of some transhumanist and posthumanist projects, which, through technological and scientific advances, aim to prevent or even eliminate death and its reminders (e.g., Kurzweil 2006). As Szakolczai (2009, p. 163) notes, these fundamental human experiences are avoided in modern societies because they are “rites of passage”—liminal situations that mark different stages of human life and transform the subjects who experience them.

The encounter with individuals experiencing various vulnerabilities is not only painful but also deeply unsettling and, in some cases, traumatic because these individuals are living through a limit situation. Vulnerability, from this perspective, brings to light what modernity attempts to conceal: the inherent liminality of human life, which can never fully belong to the empirical world, presented by modernity as exclusive and self-sufficient. Vulnerability challenges and transcends “the canons of secularized rationality” (Berger 1969, p. 103) by revealing an extraordinary dimension that exists outside of ordinary reality.

While modern secularized societies can manage vulnerability more efficiently and on a large scale through rational means, they often do so under the illusion of avoiding traumatic situations. Additionally, these societies have their own “secularized theodicies”—interpretations of death and suffering based on modern science. However, these secular explanations fail to offer a satisfactory interpretation or to make sense of the extremes

of human suffering, as they lack the ability to assign “ultimate meaning to human hope” (Berger 1969, pp. 106–8)<sup>6</sup>.

Vulnerability and the suffering associated with it, therefore, resurface in secularized societies, which are marked by widespread anomy—a sense of “metaphysical homelessness” or “homelessness in the cosmos” (Berger et al. 1973), referring to a profound sense of loneliness and alienation. This resurgence is a result of the loss of plausibility in a sacred cosmos, which once provided a solid foundation for ordinary life, or, in the words of Eliade, a “fixed point”. From this perspective, the experience of vulnerability in modern societies can also renew the demand for religious and spiritual interpretations. Situations at the margins of secularized reality, such as illness, death, psychological or spiritual suffering, or, on a larger scale, environmental catastrophes, pandemics, wars, or political crises, can reignite the spiritual quest. For this reason, it is important, in Berger’s view, to “explore” the “signals of transcendence” that continue to manifest in secularized societies through limit situations that temporarily suspend the immanent frame. In his well-known book *The Rumor of Angels*, Berger (1969, p. 325) uses this concept of transcendence to describe such signals:

“A few years ago, a priest working in a slum section of a European city was asked why he was doing it, he replied, ‘so that the rumor of God may not disappeared completely’”.

As this passage suggests, experiences that disrupt the immanent frame, particularly those involving encounters with human vulnerability, occur at the margins of secularized societies—areas where the empirical world is less “all-encompassing and perfectly closed upon itself” (Ibid.). In these spaces, the priest strives to maintain the “rumor of God” by working in places that are the antithesis of modern urban life: in impoverished neighborhoods and in the “waste” (Bauman 2003) of economically and technologically advanced societies. Vulnerable individuals, such as the homeless, migrants, those living in politically unstable environments (Thomassen 2015), or those facing illness and suffering, experience a liminal condition that exposes the limitations of a secularized order that presents itself as exclusive and self-sufficient. At the same time, these liminal experiences can bolster the plausibility of religious and spiritual worldviews, potentially encouraging a “rediscovery of the supernatural” and “a regaining of openness in our perception of reality” (Berger 1969, p. 155). This view of reality contrasts with the modern Kantian notion that humans alone impose order on an otherwise chaotic world, which is devoid of inherent meaning or structure (Szakolczai 2009). From this perspective, limit situations are not only transformative for individuals but also for society as a whole. For Berger, therefore, a key to breaching the immanent frame lies in embracing liminality, for instance, through the care and attention given to those who are fragile and live on the edges of society, such as the priest in the example above. The act of providing “the most careful attention” and “infinite care” to “each human gesture” emphasizes that it is within lived human experience, not depersonalized by rationalization, that we can uncover the “signals of transcendence” (Berger 1969, p. 155).

Building on these considerations, this article tests the analytical concept of “limit situation” through an empirical study involving in-depth interviews with founders, workers, and volunteers from organizations that provide care for individuals facing vulnerability. This concept is used with two primary objectives in mind. The first is to identify the conditions and processes that question the plausibility of secularized, rationalized, and disenchanting interpretive frameworks, leading to the emergence of spirituality that transcends these frameworks. The second objective is to investigate whether the limit situations identified, by fostering spiritual vitality at an existential level, also have implications at an operational level, particularly in terms of engaged spirituality.

### 3. Methodology

Data are derived from an international study conducted by the Center for the Anthropology of Religion and Generative Studies (ARC) at the Catholic University of Milan. The study, titled *Genius Vitae*, aimed to empirically investigate experiences, practices, and social relations that take place within various organizations around the world that provide care to individuals facing marginality and vulnerability, such as illness, end of life, poverty, and migration.<sup>7</sup>

The cases analyzed in this paper were selected based on two main criteria: (1) the organization's primary mission involves proximity to and care for individuals experiencing evident forms of vulnerability; and (2) the organization operates at the margins of modern secularized and rationalized society in various ways. These include, for example, being relatively unknown, not established primarily for economic purposes, and fostering a balance between individual care and community life. In order to identify organizations situated at the edges of secularized contexts, the study also considered cases located outside highly secularized countries, such as Kenya and Eritrea, or in peripheral areas relative to urban centers, as in the cases of *CA*, *OL*, and *FR*.<sup>8</sup> The cases included in this study are as follows:

- *CA*, Italy: A residential facility that offers healthcare and social support to minors, particularly children with severe disabilities and unfavorable prognosis. The facility also offers accommodation and emotional support to their families.
- *GC*, Eritrea: A non-governmental organization dedicated to protecting and assisting African refugees, with a focus on preventing victimization and advocating for the recognition of their human rights.
- *KC*, Kenya: An organization that promotes education and human development for marginalized street children, supporting their reintegration into society.
- *FR*, Italy: A volunteer-based organization that welcomes pilgrims, especially families who have lost a child, as well as individuals undergoing personal crises, offering them spiritual and emotional support.
- *OL*, Indiana: A community center located on the outskirts of a high-poverty American city, committed to serving individuals experiencing homelessness by addressing both their immediate needs and their long-term well-being.

To diversify the sample,<sup>9</sup> the study included both non-religious organizations, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and religious organizations, such as *FR*, which, in addition to being a volunteer-based initiative, also functions as a religious fraternity. Care was taken to ensure that both types of organizations involved lay workers and volunteers. This methodological choice was intentional. The goal was to examine situations in which spirituality was not presumed at the outset but could potentially emerge in response to a limit situation. For participants affiliated with non-religious organizations, the focus was on whether encounters with human fragility could give rise to a previously absent spiritual dimension. For religious participants, the aim was to explore whether such encounters deepened or transformed their spirituality into a more personal and "lived" experience.

The broader study within which this research is situated employed a combination of qualitative research methods. These included participant observation, in-depth interviews with key individuals, such as founders or inspirational figures behind the organizations, as well as staff members, volunteers, and beneficiaries, and the analysis of materials produced or selected by these actors to convey their experiences. These materials ranged from multimedia formats (such as videos and photographs) to creative expressions (including drawings, short stories, and songs), offering valuable insight into the lived dimension of their engagement with vulnerability.

This article focuses on the in-depth interviews conducted with founders, staff members, and volunteers of the selected organizations, aiming to explore their personal encounters with human fragility. The in-depth interviews began with the following open-ended prompt: “Let’s start with a brief introduction. Please share who you are, your role in [name of the organization], and how you came to be involved. . .”. From this initial question, the interviews explored several key dimensions related to the experience of vulnerability. These included the motivations behind the founding of/becoming involved in the organization, with attention to pivotal events, encounters, and relationships; the activities undertaken within the organization, both formal and informal, and how they evolved over time; meaningful relationships within the organization and their development; shifts in the interviewees’ self-perception and their understanding of their social and professional roles; changes in their perspectives on fragility, human limitations, others, and life more broadly; emotional responses elicited by their work, as well as discouraging and encouraging factors encountered along the way. Finally, the interviews explored transformations in the participants’ relationship with spirituality and/or religion.

The author employed a qualitative, interpretive analysis guided by the theoretical framework outlined in the preceding sections. Interview excerpts were coded based on whether they contained references to liminal situations (e.g., Berger 1967, 1970, 1974, 2003; Joas 2021; Szakolczai 2009). To identify these references, specific keywords and expressions drawn from the theoretical framework were employed, including references to turning points, life transitions, or inner transformations, such as “change”, “transformation”, “break”, or “crisis”, expressions of disorientation or reorientation—such as “everything shifted” or “nothing was the same after”, emotional or cognitive responses indicative of liminality, such as “surprise”, “awe”, “confusion”, “destabilization”, or a sense of being “lost”, “shaken”, or “deeply moved”.

These discursive elements were considered as indicative of moments in which the interviewees experienced a disruption in their usual frameworks of meaning, prompting processes of reflection, re-evaluation, and transformation. The selected excerpts were then interpreted within their broader narrative contexts to reconstruct the trajectories and underlying conditions of these experiences, with careful attention to tracing their connections to episodes involving encounters with individuals in situations of vulnerability.

A set of discursive and contextual indicators was drawn from the theoretical framework to identify references to spirituality. Specifically, interview excerpts were coded as markers of spiritual orientation when they included references to forces or entities beyond the self, such as the “divine”, “spirit”, “higher power”, “something greater”, or “beyond” (Taylor 2007; Joas 2021; Berger 1967, 1969; Szakolczai 2009), mentions of a purposeful “design” independent of human will or control, such as “providence” (Taylor 2007; Berger 1969), use of terms such as “grace”, “grateful”, or “blessed”, which evoke a perception of life as influenced by benevolent or transcendent forces (Szakolczai 2007), expressions of “self-transcendence”, such as “guided”, “pulled”, or otherwise influenced by something greater than oneself (Joas 2021), references to existential or metaphysical meaning, including terms like “fullness”, “meaning”, and “purpose” when used to convey experiences that extend beyond the material or instrumental (Taylor 2007; Berger 1967; Joas 2021), language of connection or deep relational engagement, including terms such as “compassion” or “love”, particularly when these were framed as experiences of unity with people, nature, the universe, or life itself (Berger 1969; Berger et al. 1973; Taylor 2007; Szakolczai 2009).

These references were analyzed within their broader narrative contexts to determine whether they related to turning points, life transitions, or inner transformations as described by the interviewees.

Additionally, the study employed indicators of engaged spirituality, focusing on participants' attitudes toward vulnerability, marginality, and care. Specifically, practices of compassion, justice, or service were interpreted as spiritually motivated when participants themselves linked these actions to a belief in a force, purpose, or presence beyond the human realm; for instance, when they described such actions as expressions of alignment with a higher moral or spiritual order.

Table 1 presents a list of the participants involved in the in-depth interviews.

**Table 1.** List of participants.

ID <sup>10</sup>	Organization	Role	Profession
Marco	CA	Founder	Administrative and Financial Manager
Grazia	CA	Director	Pedagogical Specialist
Sebastiano	CA	Worker	Social and healthcare worker
Silvia	CA	Worker	Physical therapist
Alice	GC	Founder and director	Humanitarian affairs officer
John	KC	Founder and director	Priest
Michael	KC	Worker	Educator
Fabio	FR	Founder and director	Priest
Ludwig	FR	Worker	Psychotherapist
Luca	FR	Volunteer	Artist
Steven	OL	Volunteer	University student
Irma	OL	Volunteer	Academic professor
Ryan	OL	Volunteer	University student

#### 4. Results

The study identified a range of conditions and processes that challenge the plausibility of secularized, rationalized, and disenchanted interpretive frameworks, thereby fostering the emergence of a spirituality that transcends these paradigms. Furthermore, the findings indicate that such limit situations not only stimulate spiritual vitality on an existential level but also have tangible implications in the form of engaged spirituality.

One key finding is that, for many interviewees, encounters with individuals experiencing vulnerability were deeply transformative. These encounters represented emotionally intense and extraordinary events that prompted profound reflection and led participants to reassess their value systems, the foundations of their identity, and their professional and social roles. In many cases, this re-evaluation resulted in a conscious decision to dedicate themselves to working with marginalized and vulnerable individuals. Alice, for example, recalls a business trip she took as a marketing manager for a large company to an African country. There, she unexpectedly encountered street children who had fled the war in Eritrea. When she asked one of them, "Is there anything I can do for you?", the child replied with quiet dignity, "We don't need anything". These words, rather than reassuring her, left Alice unsettled. "Those words and looks made me feel helpless", she reflects. "They opened my eyes and forced me to confront myself. And for that, I thank them". This encounter marked the beginning of a radical transformation in her life. "After that encounter, I only thought about how to save lives", she explains. She began by sponsoring the children she had met through long-distance support and soon started visiting refugee camps to, as she put it, "seek out the desperate of the earth". This journey ultimately led to the founding of GC, the NGO she now directs.

Another example of a limit situation emerging from an unexpected event is the case of John, a priest who had been sent to Kenya to launch a new magazine. There, he encountered

a local journalist who was deeply concerned about the rising number of street children. “I feel challenged to do something”, the journalist said, “Shall we do something together?” This encounter stirred a sense of “restlessness” and “inadequacy” in John, prompting him to question his social and professional role. “There are times in everyone’s life, even in a priest’s life, when you feel like you have become a professional”, John reflected. In response, he made a decisive change. “Other boys and I started to go around the streets of Nairobi in the evenings, even until very late, to meet these children and to understand how they lived and how to help them”. This initiative eventually led to the founding of *KC*, an organization dedicated to rescuing and educating street children, offering them a chance at a new life.

Significant life changes are often triggered by dissatisfaction with previous lifestyles, as seen in the experiences of other founders. Marco, who had spent 17 years as a university general manager, expressed a desire “not to think about retirement exit, but to put myself back in the game in a field in which [...] I can also give something” through “a more voluntary dimension of commitment to a life project that goes beyond the contractual issue”. This desire led him to found *CA*, an organization focused on caring for children with severe disabilities. Similarly, when Irma, a volunteer at *OL*, first entered the facility for homeless people, she felt “destabilized” by the immediate demands of the residents, who “asked her immediately for everything”. As she began to “meet these faces, these hands, these scarred, fragile, dirty bodies”, she found herself undergoing “a radical experience, which transforms you, changes you”.

In these examples, limit situations manifest as deeply involving experiences that compel social actors to fully invest in themselves. These encounters evoke the need to “put oneself on the line” and “to be there, with the heart first”, as expressed by two interviewees. Another aspect that emerges from these interviews is that encountering the vulnerability of others helps professionals become more aware of their own. As Ryan, an *OL* volunteer, reflects, getting to know the homeless makes him

“Think about my vulnerability and the fact that I may have privileges that hide wounds... and reflect on that. It’s not that there’s someone here with more problems or needs or fragilities: maybe they can’t keep that part of their story hidden, as I can”.

In encounters with vulnerability, which persist even after organizations are established, a significant shift in attitude occurs among both founders and practitioners. These individuals come to realize that they cannot solve the problems faced by those they aim to help. They understand that they are not in control of everything and that not all situations can be explained rationally. As Marco puts it, “You have to constantly deal with the limit”. As a result, these professionals “allow themselves” to be “guided”, “pulled”, and “surprised” by what “happens” through someone else, as several interviewees expressed. Sebastiano reflects on his experience with children with severe disabilities at *CA*:

“I think they are the ones, even if they can’t walk, who take you by the hand and lead you down these little roads. I think that’s kind of the contradiction, that we always think we’re accompanying them when in fact they’re the ones accompanying you”.

In some cases, this realization opens up an experience of a different logic or force—one that exists outside of the secularized, rationalized, and disenchanting framework. This could manifest as “grace”, a “spirit that lives and inhabits the community”, or “God”, who is present in “compassion” and in “becoming one with others”, according to various interviewees. Luca, a contributor to *FR*, encapsulates this shift in perspective in the following verses shared during an interview: “And realizing in a moment/To be part of

the immense/Of a much larger design/Of reality". These examples demonstrate how spirituality can be nurtured through limit situations, particularly through encounters with vulnerability.

Furthermore, the operators and founders of the organizations examined in this study encounter a logic that contrasts with rationality: the logic of the gift. Specifically, the interviewees emphasize that the gift does not pertain to what they provide for people in need, but rather to what they unexpectedly receive from these individuals. This gift is often viewed as "absurd" within a secularized and rationalized framework, where vulnerability and marginality are regarded as a "waste" (Bauman 2003) rather than a potential source of meaning. In many such instances, gratitude toward those in need serves as a bridge to experiencing gratitude toward a higher power or entity. For example, the founder of GC articulates her gratitude toward the refugees she is dedicated to assisting, as they "teach" her about love and compassion, which ultimately helps her experience the presence of God. Grazia, the director of CA, says, "Here I have discovered Providence. Yes, in the sense that it exists and is working". Once again, the encounter with vulnerability becomes a limit situation that facilitates the emergence of spirituality in some actors.

Encounters with vulnerability also provide a new perspective on others and foster openness toward them. The "buffered self" within the immanent frame sees itself as the "master of the meanings of things" (Taylor 2007, p. 38) and views others as obstacles to personal fulfillment. Conversely, encountering fragility can significantly alter this viewpoint. As a KC operator explains, "There are many things" in the African slum from which the street children housed by this organization come, "that you won't find elsewhere, like the bonding and coming together. It's a unique lesson in our need for each other".

Vulnerability is often perceived in our society as something to be managed and controlled, leading to the creation of systems designed to hide it. However, as Irma, a volunteer from OL, clarifies, "We all have needs that are not only material but also require friendship". This experience made Irma realize that "the relationship is always one of reciprocity, it is one in which each person can be for the other—whatever their position, whatever their role—a guide, a teacher, a fellow traveler". The founder of CA, echoing sentiments from others involved in the organization, shares that encountering a vulnerable person makes "every mask" and claim of "perfectionism" or self-protective barrier fall away. Sometimes, shedding the buffered self and becoming "porous" (Taylor 2007) to others can also facilitate overcoming a disenchanted way of relating to the world, leading to a deeper connection with the divine. As one KC operator notes, "Eventually, you come to God through these people".

Collectively, the references provided by the interviewees, encouraged by their liminal encounters with fragility, reveal a form of spirituality. In some instances, this spirituality is explicitly conveyed through references to entities or forces such as "spirit", "grace", "providence", or "God". In other cases, it emerges through accounts of profound transformation, connection, or existential significance, even when the interviewees do not explicitly label these experiences as spiritual. For example, Luca described a sense of being part of "a much larger design", while Irma spoke of a "radical experience" that "transforms you, changes you". Though these narratives refrain from using overtly religious language, they are interpreted as spiritually significant due to their deep existential and metaphysical dimensions.

Spirituality triggered by liminal encounters with vulnerability does not only manifest itself at an existential level. This spiritual vitality also influences how professionals in the organizations examined operate in their daily lives, shaping their value systems and activating particular social practices and relationships. One perspective that emerges from the interviewees' accounts is the acceptance of challenges that may initially seem impossible or illogical. This attitude stems from an awareness, gained through experiences

with vulnerability, that complex forces are often at play beyond one's control. This mindset forms the foundation of the distinct practices observed in the organizations studied.

For example, those working with GC adopt an approach that may seem irrational, particularly in their attempts to free prisoners from dangerous dictators and criminals, risking their own lives. Similarly, the workers at KC welcome street children in the suburbs of African cities, encouraging them not only to live differently but also to "flourish". The voluntary organization FR—whose founder claims to have rediscovered, through it, a new spiritual vitality after a period of deep crisis—supports parents who have lost a child, helping them reinterpret their loss through a lens of life beyond death. CA provides care for children discharged from hospitals who are deemed "hopeless". Their mission goes beyond simply accompanying these children for the limited time they are expected to live; they embrace the possibility that these children might have more time than anticipated. Furthermore, they recognize that the true impact these children may have on their families is unpredictable. As the director of CA expresses, their mission is to try to "build this witness that the children want to leave to their families".

Liminal situations arising from encounters with vulnerability, by fostering an awareness that there are forces that transcend human action, also open the way for innovation. As Ludwig, one FR operator, puts it, "The pre-packaged experience [...] only makes one 'recreate what you already knew,' therefore, it 'prevents something new'". Similarly, the founder of KC reflects, "Through children you can feel the true power of life; and if you give life its space, you will see it grow, like a seed that sprouts". This innovation also translates into creativity, which is essential for navigating the bureaucratic and technical constraints that often challenge the organizations studied, as several interviewees pointed out.

The spirituality that arises from encounters with vulnerability and marginality influences the value systems of individuals within the organizations and triggers specific practices occurring within them. Furthermore, this form of spirituality fosters unique social relationships, shaping community experiences that lead interviewees to express feelings of "family", "fraternity", and "affection". These connections enable individuals to feel "at home" in environments where they truly "belong".

The following quotation from the founder of KC encapsulates how limit situations foster spiritual vitality at both existential and operational levels. He explains that interactions with street children in the slum compel individuals to perceive life "from a position of truth", which means "loving this life more, loving the people around you, committing yourself to them, and that gives meaning to everything you do".

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis confirms that, under specific circumstances, encountering vulnerability can become a limit situation. Through such interactions, individuals experience both the finiteness and vulnerability of those in need, as well as, reflexively, their own. This experience can lead to dissatisfaction or suffering with interpretations based exclusively on rational and disenchanting worldviews, thereby questioning their validity and prompting a profound transformation among social actors. This transformation fosters a spiritual vitality that acknowledges the presence of forces transcending human actions, upon which the individuals involved come to rely.

Additionally, this spirituality takes place within a community, where the presence of individuals who share similar experiences allows for the development of enduring practices. In this regard, organizations that provide care to individuals facing vulnerability might serve not only as spaces where limit situations can arise but also as environments that provide "plausibility structures" (Berger 1967, pp. 45, 192) for the systems of meaning these situations engender. This hypothesis might require further investigation.

The results raise several important considerations. First, they show that an ongoing lived spirituality provides an important framework of meaning for social actors, guiding their motivations and actions in various specific and concrete contexts. Such spirituality also continues to give rise to engaged spirituality and meaningful spiritual practices. These findings help to distinguish between formalized beliefs and practices and the lived experiences of individuals, challenging existing dichotomies such as religious versus secular and sacred versus profane (e.g., [Haimila 2023](#)). Specifically, they show that spirituality does not always manifest through explicit religious or spiritual vocabulary. While some participants referred to terms like “spirit”, “grace”, or “God”, others described profoundly meaningful experiences of connection, transformation, or existential awareness without explicitly naming them as spiritual. The interpretive framework employed in this article, therefore, allows for the inclusion of these “implicit” ([Nesti 1985](#); [Ammerman 2006](#); [Bailey 2008](#)) and “lived” ([McGuire 2008](#)) forms of spirituality, which are particularly relevant in secular contexts, where spiritual meanings often emerge beneath or beyond institutionalized systems of belief ([Palmisano and Pannofino 2020](#); [Palmisano et al. 2021](#); [Cadge et al. 2011](#); [Cornelio et al. 2021](#); [Giordan 2016](#); [Woodhead 2012](#)). Moreover, such a theoretical framework—particularly the concept of “limit situations”—provides a new analytical tool for exploring the antecedents of spirituality, focusing on the conditions and processes that lead to its emergence, as well as its social implications, particularly in terms of engaged spirituality.

Second, this study contributes to the advancement of sociological knowledge on vulnerability. It deepens our understanding of how experiences of vulnerability and marginality inform and reshape the value systems of those involved. By analyzing how these experiences influence individuals’ perceptions, priorities, and moral frameworks, the study elucidates how specific social practices and relational patterns develop in response. As a result, vulnerability appears not solely as a state of exposure or lack, but as a dynamic social condition that actively shapes particular forms of agency, normative orientations, and relational practices in specific contexts.

Lastly, in line with the principles of action research, this study promotes participants’ critical awareness and reflexivity regarding the social identity and role of the organizations being examined. Specifically, it encourages a deeper engagement with the underlying motivations and values that drive and sustain these organizations’ actions and missions. By fostering this reflective approach, the research not only supports organizational self-understanding but also contributes to the development of more coherent and ethically grounded practices that align with their stated social purposes.

In contemporary socio-cultural contexts—characterized by what [Szakolczai \(2017\)](#) terms “permanent liminality”, wherein transitional states no longer culminate in stable social orders—certain liminal experiences continue to challenge dominant frameworks grounded in rationalist, procedural, and immanent logics. Such disruptions reveal persistent fractures within modernity’s totalizing tendencies. Despite its drive toward standardization, instrumental rationality, and disenchantment, modernity still contains interstitial spaces where human experience, action, and thought may unfold freely and in more creative ways.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** At the time of data collection, approval from the Ethics Committee of my institution (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan) was not required. Nonetheless, I, in collaboration with the committee of the ARC Center of the Catholic University of Milan, confirm that the data were collected and processed in full compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR—Regulation EU 2016/679) and Italian legislative decree D.Lgs. 101/2018, which governs the protection of personal data. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and all responses were collected anonymously. No personally identifiable information was obtained, and

participants were not exposed to any risk. The data were used exclusively for research purposes, stored securely, and handled in a manner that ensured full anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the author on request.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Modernization is only a part of what Weber refers to as “*Entzauberung der Welt*” (“disenchantment” or “demagification of the world”). This process has roots in ancient Judaism, as noted also by Berger (1969). However, for Berger, the pluralism of worldviews brought about by modernization and the dominance of a self-sufficient secular discourse are crucial factors in diminishing the plausibility of religious interpretations of the world.
- <sup>2</sup> The term “engaged spirituality” refers to the various forms of social involvement, such as altruistic behaviors, participation in voluntary associations, social and political activism, which derive from and are informed by spiritual beliefs. See for instance Stanczak and Miller (2002), Stanczak (2006), and Oh and Sarkisian (2021).
- <sup>3</sup> The reference to Joas—and Wydra, who will be cited later—highlights a connection between liminality and the sacred, although the two terms are not interchangeable. Liminality refers to the transition between two different states of reality and is a fundamental aspect of any experience of the sacred. As Szakolczai (2007, p. 22) argues, “An exceptional encounter with the sacred may only take place under unusual, extraordinary, liminal conditions, which generate sensitivity and receptivity”. However, not all limit situations result in experiences of the sacred, as liminality represents “a situation where almost anything can happen”, which may encompass—but does not necessarily entail—the extraordinary (Szakolczai 2009, p. 148).
- <sup>4</sup> For an understanding of war as a limit situation, see the diary Wittgenstein wrote during his army service in World War I. Refer to Monk (1990) for more details.
- <sup>5</sup> This condition is excellently represented by Paul Thomas Anderson’s movie *Magnolia*, in which the desperate situations of the various characters—who cannot imagine their lives but within a nihilistic framework—are solved only by an extraordinary event, which appears absurd from a rational, immanent, and disenchanting point of view and reveals a tone that is—not surprisingly—biblical: a rain of frogs from heaven.
- <sup>6</sup> As Luhmann (1984) also argues—albeit from a different perspective than Berger’s—the primary function of religion is not to promote solidarity or civic values, but to preserve the sense of transcendence. Consequently, modern science or other potential “functional equivalents” cannot truly replace religion; at best, they can temporarily compensate for the latent aspects of its function.
- <sup>7</sup> For further details on *Genius Vitae* see the official website [www.geniusvitae.org](http://www.geniusvitae.org).
- <sup>8</sup> These codes were used to ensure participants’ anonymity.
- <sup>9</sup> The author reminds that the sample is not statistically representative but was intentionally constructed, based on the listed criteria, to conduct an exploratory and qualitative investigation.
- <sup>10</sup> Please note that IDs are fictional.

## References

- Ammerman, Nancy. 2006. *Everyday Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ariès, Philippe. 1974. *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Augé, Marc. 1992. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Paris: Le Seuil.
- Bailey, Edward. 2008. *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*. Leuven: Peeters Publishers.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1992. *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2003. *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Berger, Peter L. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Berger, Peter L. 1969. *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*. New York: Doubleday.
- Berger, Peter L. 1970. The Problem of Multiple Realities: Alfred Schütz and Robert Musil. In *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Memory of Alfred Schütz*. Edited by Maurice Nathanson. Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, pp. 213–33.
- Berger, Peter L. 1974. Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13: 125–33. [CrossRef]
- Berger, Peter L. 1979. *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*. Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- Berger, Peter L. 2003. *Questions of Faith*. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing.

- Berger, Peter L. 2012. Further thoughts on religion and modernity. *Society* 49: 313–16. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Berger, Peter L. 2014. *The Many Altars of Modernity*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. London: Penguin Books.
- Berger, Peter L., Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner. 1973. *The Homeless Mind*. New York: Random House.
- Berzano, Luigi. 2019. *The Fourth Secularisation: Autonomy of Individual Lifestyles*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Cadge, Wendy, Levitt Peggy, and Smilde David. 2011. De-centering and re-centering: Rethinking concepts and methods in the sociological study of religio. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50: 437–49. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Cornelio, Jayeel, François Gauthier, Tuomas Martikainen, and Linda Woodhead. 2021. *International Handbook of Religion in Global Society*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *The Sacred and the Profane*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace.
- Elias, Norbert. 2001. *The Loneliness of the Dying*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Giordan, Giuseppe. 2004. Dalla religione alla spiritualità: Una nuova legittimazione del sacro? *Quaderni di Sociologia* 35: 105–17. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Giordan, Giuseppe. 2007. Spirituality: From a Religious Concept to a Sociological Theory. In *A Sociology of Spirituality*. Edited by Kieran Flanagan and Peter Jupp. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 161–80.
- Giordan, Giuseppe. 2016. Spirituality. In *Handbook of Religion and Society*. Edited by David Yamane. New York: Springer, pp. 197–218.
- Guardini, Romano. 1964. L'opposizione polare. Saggio per una filosofia del concreto vivente. In *Scritti filosofici*. 2 vols. Milan: Fabbri.
- Haimila, Roosa. 2023. Beyond Scientific Worldviews: Belief in Science and 'Supernatural' Explanations in Science-Oriented Individuals. Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.
- Jaspers, K. 1970. *Philosophy*. vol. 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Joas, Hans. 2014. *Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity*. Redwood City and Cambridge: Stanford University Press.
- Joas, Hans. 2021. *The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kurzweil, Ray. 2006. *Singularity is Near*. London: Duckworth Books.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1984. *Religious Dogmatics and the Evolution of Societies*. New York: E. Mellen Press.
- Manicardi, Luciano. 2014. *Memoria del Limite. La Condizione Umana nella Società Postmortale*. Milan: Vita & Pensiero.
- McGuire, Meredith B. 2008. *Lived Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Monk, Ray. 1990. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. London: Penguin Publishing Group.
- Nesti, Arnaldo. 1985. *Il Religioso Implicito*. Rome: IANUA.
- Oh, Seil, and Natalia Sarkisian. 2021. Spiritual Individualism or Engaged Spirituality?: Social Implications of Holistic Spirituality among Mind-Body-Spirit Practitioners. *Sociology of Religion* 73: 299–322. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Palmisano, Stefania, and Nicola Pannofino. 2020. *Contemporary Spiritualities: Enchanted Worlds of Nature, Well-being, and Mystery in Italy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Palmisano, Stefania, Monica Gilli, and Anna Lo Presti. 2021. Clustering spiritual but not religious. A survey on University Students in Turin. *Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale* XLII: 65–83. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Patočka, Jan. 1981. *Essais Hérétiques sur la Philosophie de l'Histoire*. Translated by E. Abrams. Lagrasse: Verdier.
- Patočka, Jan. 1990. Séminaire sur l'ère technique. In *Jan Patočka, Liberté et sacrifice*. Translated by E. Abrams. Grenoble: Millon.
- Pitt-Rivers, Julian. 2011. The place of grace in anthropology. *HAAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 1: 423–50. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Schütz, Alfred. 1945. On Multiple Realities. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5: 533–76. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Stanciu, Ovidiu. 2018. La Grande Guerre comme 'événement cosmique.' Jan Patočka et l'expérience du front. *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 4: 507–24. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Stanczak, Gregory C. 2006. *Engaged Spirituality: Social Change and American Religion*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Stanczak, Gregory, and Donald E. Miller. 2002. *Engaged Spirituality: Spirituality and Social Transformation in Mainstream American Religious Traditions*. Los Angeles: Center for Religion and Civic Culture, University of Southern California.
- Szokolczai, Arpad. 2007. *Sociology, Religion and Grace. A quest for the Renaissance*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Szokolczai, Arpad. 2009. Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events. *International Political Anthropology* 2: 141–72.
- Szokolczai, Arpad. 2017. Permanent (trickster) liminality: The reasons of the heart and of the mind. *Theory & Psychology* 27: 231–48.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Thomassen, Bjørn. 2009. The Uses and Meanings of Liminality. *International Political Anthropology* 2: 5–27.
- Thomassen, Bjørn. 2015. Thinking with Liminality: To the Boundaries of an Anthropological Concept. In *Breaking Boundaries. Varieties of Liminality*. Edited by Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen and Harald Wydra. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, pp. 30–60.
- Weber, Max. 1946. Science as a Vocation. In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Edited by Hans H. Gerth and Charles Wright Mills. Oxford: Oxford University Press. First published 1919.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society*. Oakland: University of California Press. First published 1921.

- 
- Woodhead, Linda. 2012. Introduction. In *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*. Edited by Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto. London: Routledge, pp. 1–33.
- Wydra, Harald. 2015. *Politics and the Sacred*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.