



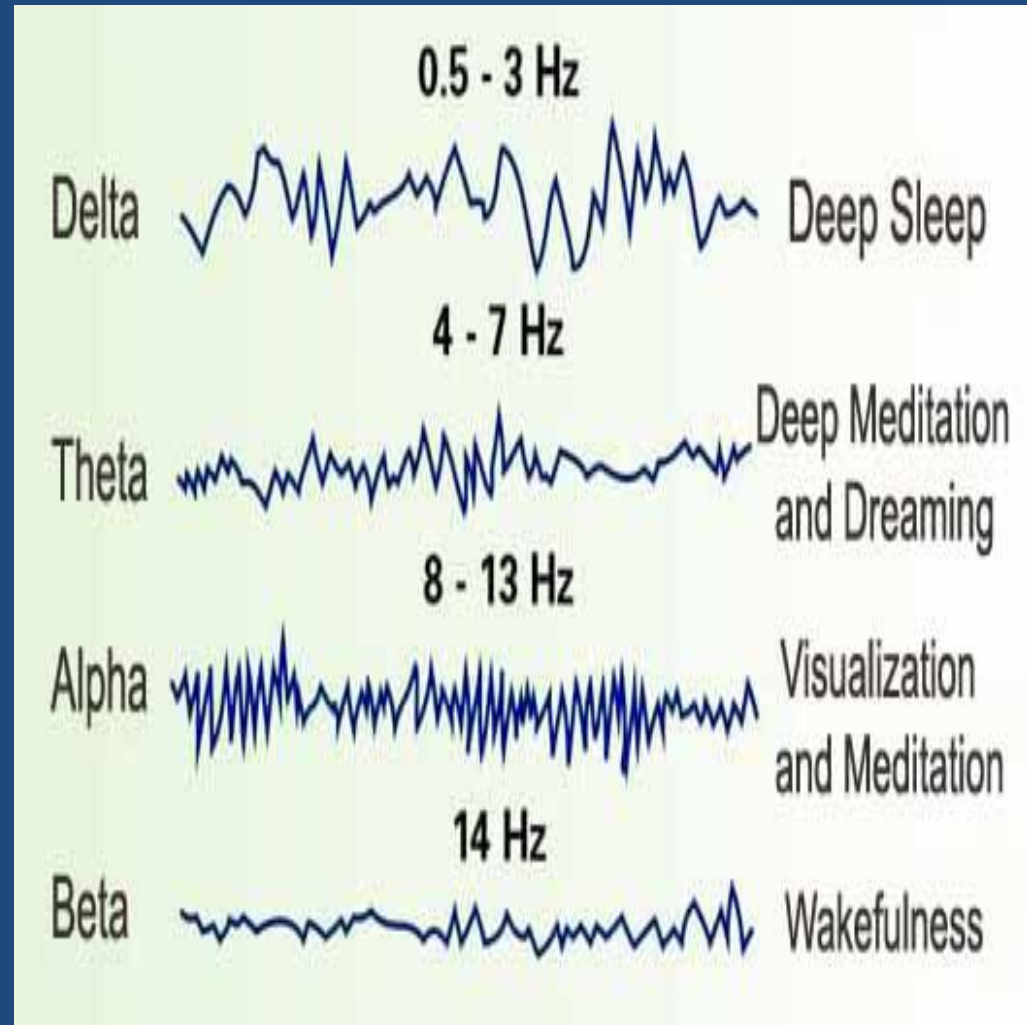
Altered States of Consciousness and
Religion/Spirituality

By Thomas Alsop

What is Consciousness

Consciousness- involves being able to link present awareness with past experiences; to respond to stimuli appropriately in the present; and to be aware of one's surroundings (John 2003; Low 2004).

Altered State of Consciousness-
When the person is not reflectively aware of mental contents or environmental cues of the present; also referred to as detachment of surroundings (NG 2000; Bourguignon 1978).



How Does This Relate to Religion/Spirituality?

- Many Religions use an altered state of consciousness to communicate with a higher power; or achieve a greater understanding of one's own life (Baer 2001).
- Altered states may be accomplished through prayer, meditation, dance, drugs, etc. (Baer 2001; Goodman 1990; Lock and Kelly 1985; NG 2000; Walsh 1993).



Current Study

- Goals:
 1. What does it mean for a person to experience an altered state of consciousness, without the use of drugs?
 2. What does the experience feel like?
 3. What does the general public think about altered states of consciousness through religion/spirituality?

Why...

Participants

- I specifically focused on Buddhists and Pentecostals for the meaning and experience.
- Buddhists: Meditation
- Pentecostals: Glossolalia (speaking in tongues)



Theory

- Symbolic Theory- Focuses on how people put a meaning to a symbol (Des Chene 1996).
- For example speaking in tongues means that the Holy Spirit is speaking through the person. The **symbol** is the speaking in tongues; the **meaning** is that the Holy Spirit is communicating through the individual.

Methods

- Buddhists:

1. I visited two Buddhist temples and participated in two chanting services at one; and two meditation sessions at the other.
2. I held three personal interviews and one focus group with seven people.



Methods Continued

- Pentecostals:
 1. I visited one Pentecostal church and participated in their church service.
 2. I held two personal interviews and one group interview with four people.



More on Methods

- General Public:
 1. I handed out 54 surveys to students on campus.
- Survey Questions:
 - ❖ Six open ended questions.
 - ❖ Biographical data: age, gender, religion, and ethnicity.

Results

- Buddhists:
- While meditating, participants described different stages of meditation.
- **They do not consider these stages an altered state,** but different states of mind that they move through, and eventually through the different stages they may or may not experience what they consider an altered state.

Results

- Buddhists:
 1. Believe that an altered state of consciousness is when a person achieves an **awakening or enlightenment**.

This does not occur very often, and may take many years of meditation to accomplish. Through the awakening the person experiences how they are **connected to everyone** in the universe. The **experience is individually based**.

Results Continued

Personal Accounts:

1. “It is called Nirvana or wind. Awakening is both sides of the same thing, without awakening there is no nirvana. There is a goodness state of mind, where there is no me, I, my. No emotions, attachment of body...Sky state” (Male 73 yrs. old practicing Buddhist).

Results Continued

2. “It is a feeling that no humans words can describe. During my awakening, I saw that everyone is connected. I was not just believing in something, I was experiencing the belief. It is the experience that changes you and meditation allows you to experience this. Inside of a lotus there is the universe. When you tell people God dwells inside of you and you realize that when you eat the bread you are eating the flesh of God and everyone else in the room is eating the same flesh. **Everyone is connected.** So you are in everything, you are a part of the earth, the drunk in the street corner, the man on death row” (Male 71 yrs. old practicing Buddhist/ Roaming Catholic).

Results Continued

- Pentecostals:

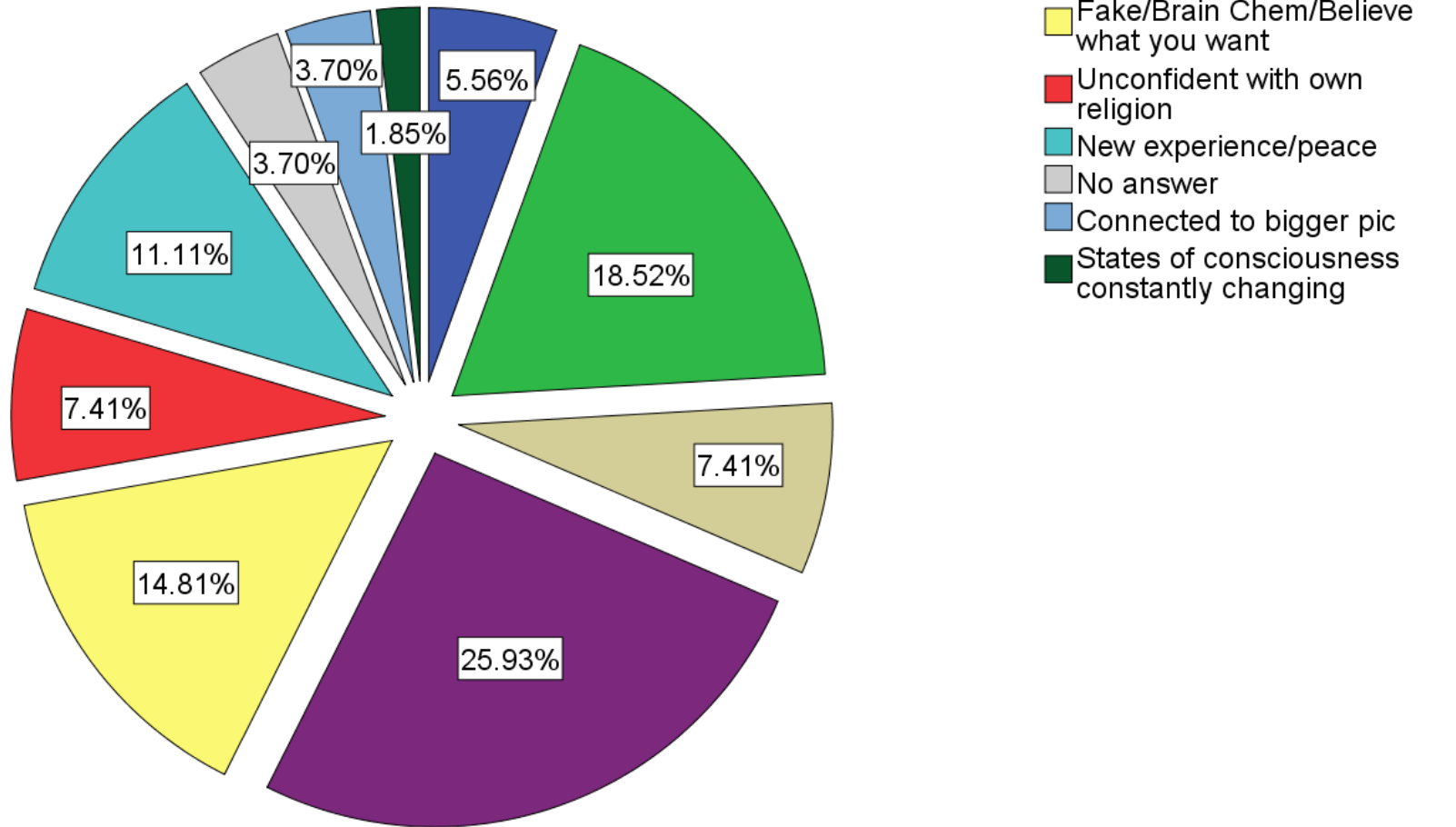
- 1. Do not believe** that being filled with the Holy Spirit is an altered state, however **intercessory prayer** can be considered an altered state of consciousness.

There are different reasons that a person speaks in tongues. The main reasons that people talked about were the Holy Spirit speaking through them; the Holy Spirit delivering a message to the church; and speaking in tongues during an intercessory prayer.

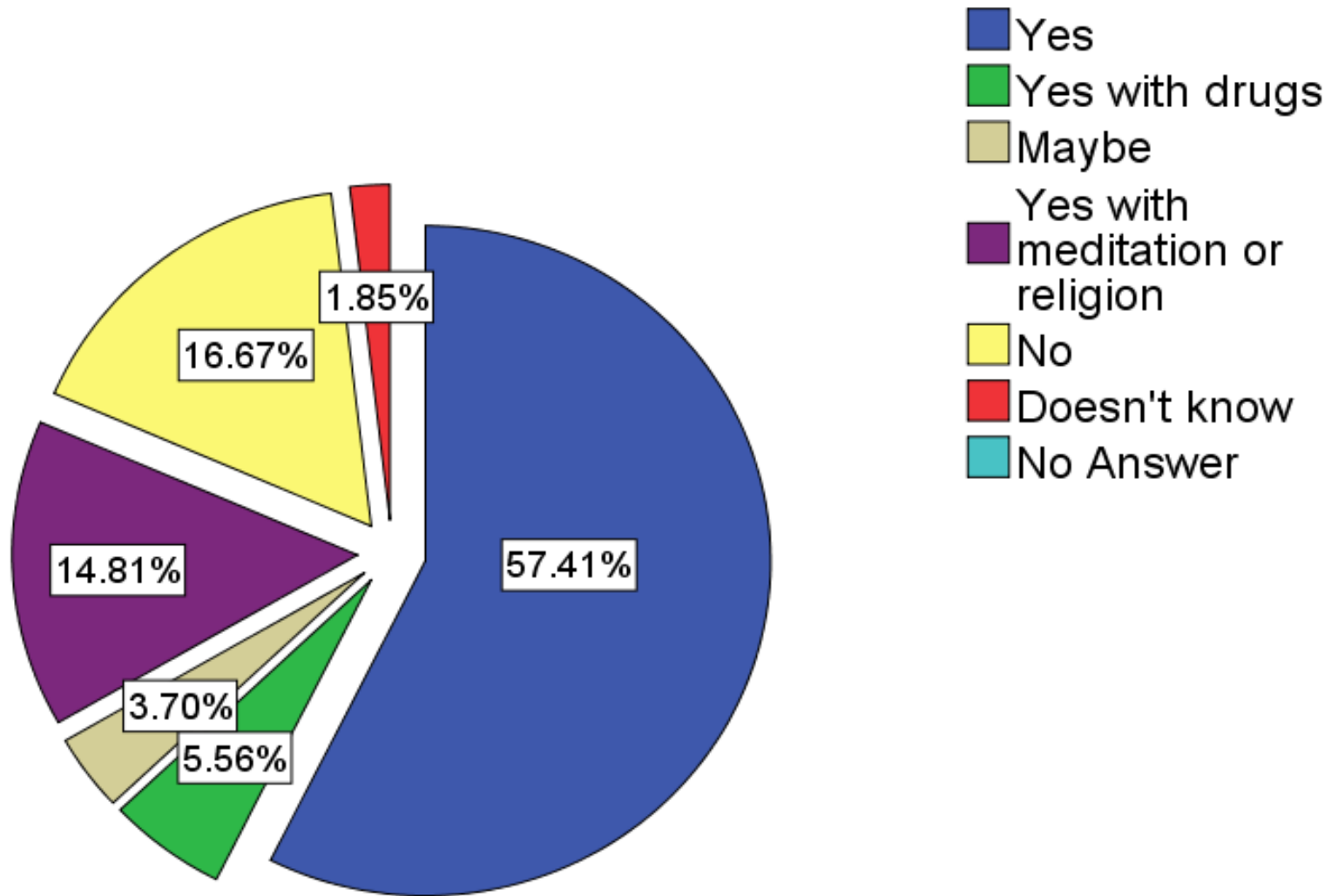
Results Continued

- Personal Statements:
 1. “I would refute that being filled with the Holy Ghost is an altered state because I am fully aware of what is going on” (Male 48 yrs. old Pentecostal).
 2. “But there is intercessory prayer where you lose what is around you. Basically what happens there is that the spirit comes into the person and they moan or groan and another person somewhere else is helped because of the event” (Male 44 yrs. old Pentecostal).

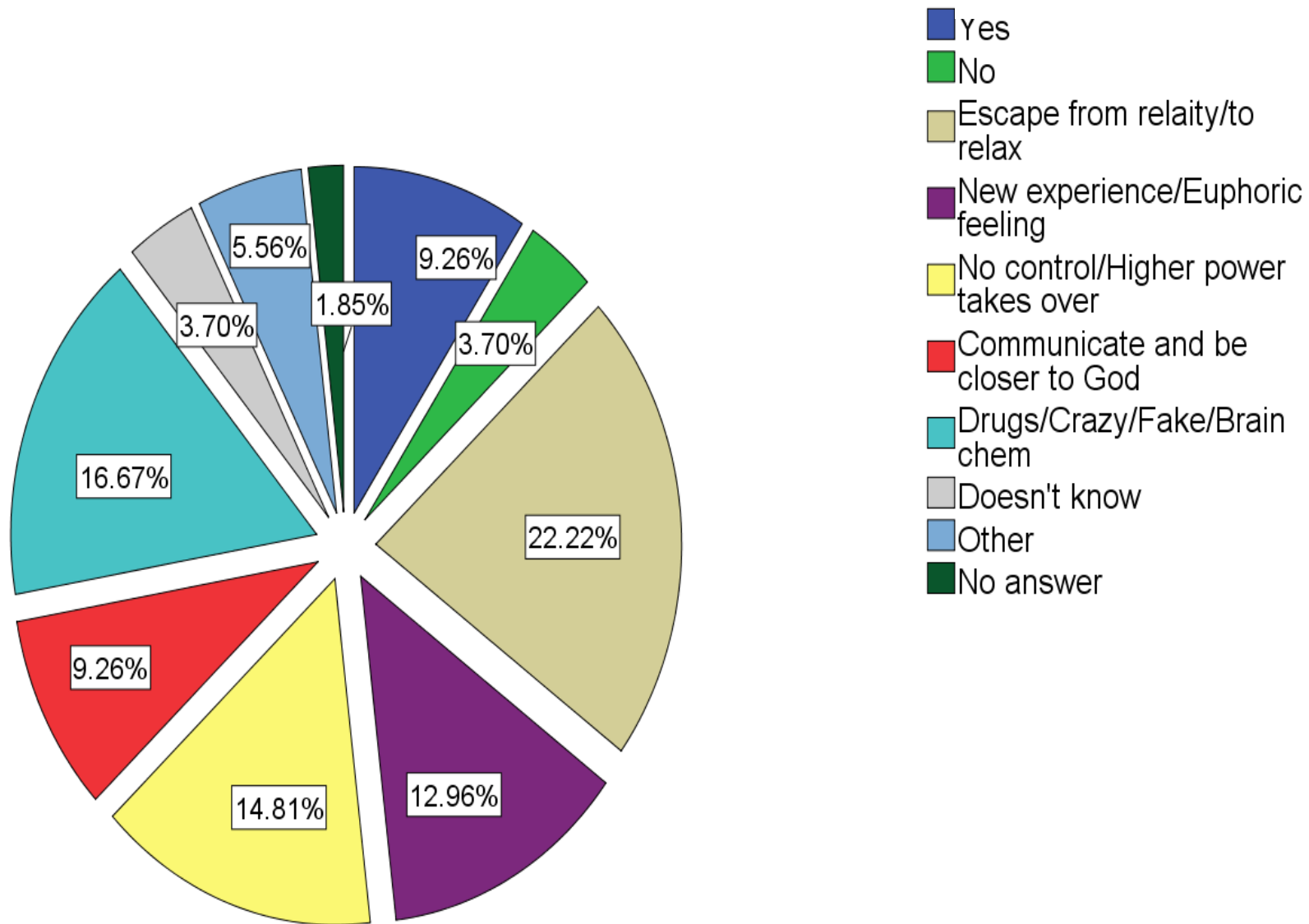
General Public Survey Answers



What does altered states of conscious in the context of religion mean to you?



Do you believe that anyone can experience an altered state of consciousness, without the use of drugs?



Why do you believe people enter altered states of consciousness?

Conclusion

- Buddhists do not consider meditation an altered state of consciousness but a state of mind.
 - Meditation can lead to an altered state of consciousness
- Pentecostals do not consider speaking in tongues an altered state of consciousness.
 - Intercessory prayer can be considered an altered state of consciousness
- How do the different religions relate to one another?
 - In terms of helpfulness of altered state
 - What they consider a state of mind.

Personal lessons learned

- Emic vs. etic perspective
- Linguistic limitations
- Various understandings of the concept “altered states”
- Other thoughts

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