This is the opening of an article
that appeared in volume 3 of

NLP world

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Exploring the Spiritual Panorama

Ninety-four years ago, William James published *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In this psychological study, James suggested that religious experiences like conversion, possession, religious ecstasy, mysticism, enlightenment, etc., are closely related to their everyday counterparts. And that considering these phenomena as extraordinary or supernatural is only a matter of context and interpretation. In his excellent style, James provided many convincing examples.

William James was, in a way, an NLPer *avant la lettre*. He studied the structure of subjective experience in a manner similar to NLP and he was also a profound pragmatist. This article is dedicated to William James, who in our spiritual panorama still has some powerful submodalities.

Treating religious experience as ordinary psychology did not make James popular with everyone; religious leaders called it blasphemy, and even the Pope condemned him. The problems James encountered with his book are typical for its subject matter. Religion and spirituality seem to be the fiercely-defended territory of people who believe they own it. Thus we may expect any psychological analysis of spirituality to discomfort some people, as it disturbs their sense of security and puts into doubt things that they consider to be sacred.

Over the last decade we have seen a rise in the popularity of the spiritual aspects of life. Where this affected NLP, we have witnessed an upsurge in workshops, articles and books connecting NLP to the spiritual. But as far as we know, the structure of spiritual experience, and the modelling thereof, has not been a prominent feature of these NLP activities.

Social and spiritual

How can we model spirituality? We may, like James, make use of the written and verbal reports of people who have had, or claim to have

had, spiritual experiences. The search for common characteristics in these experiences will reveal, as it did to James, some of their secrets. But the answers found by this means will most probably be open-ended. And we may find ourselves stranded where many have been stranded before: naming the nameless; saying the unsayable, or writing the unwritable. So we will take an alternative route.