



Dreams as Non-Verbal Communication in Contemporary Psychology of Religion: A Religious-Psychological Approach

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Abstract

The article examines dreams as a primordial, non-verbal mode of communication within the framework of contemporary Psychology of Religion. Dreaming—especially in the REM phase—predates articulated speech by hundreds of millions of years (around 500 million years), is observable across both vertebrate and invertebrate species, and operates as a psychosomatic interface linking conscious and unconscious processes, as well as the human realm with what is perceived as the metaphysical. Within the Christian tradition, from biblical accounts to patristic writings (e.g., Clement, John Chrysostom, Augustine), dreams have been interpreted as vehicles of divine disclosure—prophetic encounters or experiences of God and angelic beings. In the present day, a considerable number of Christians still affirm that God communicates through dreams, imparting guidance, warnings, or spiritually charged experiences that shape everyday religious life and personal spirituality. The study concentrates on symbols of transition (such as the ladder, flying, and upward movement), drawing in part on Desoille's technique of the guided waking dream (*rêve éveillé dirigé*). These symbolic motifs are understood to express ontological transformation, the resolution or surpassing of crises, rebirth, and the transcendence of spatial and temporal limits. In this perspective, dreams arise from multiple sources and function as ritualized passages that mediate movement toward psychological or religious forms of reality.

Keywords: Dreams; Nonverbal communication; Psychology of Religion; Divine revelation; Transition symbols; Ladder – flight – ascension; Rite of passage; REM sleep

1. Introduction

Non-verbal communication does not cease with the onset of sleep; rather, it persists in transformed form within the imaginative and often striking scenarios of dreaming. A single dream may recruit one or several sensory modalities—vision, audition, touch, taste, kinesthetic and vestibular sensations, and occasionally pain, while olfactory elements are relatively rare—and remains fundamentally non-linguistic, predating spoken language by millions of years (Givens & White, 2021). From Descartes through Freud, numerous theorists have advanced hypotheses regarding the functions of dreaming, yet research in the 21st century has still not yielded a definitive, unifying account. Dreaming appears to be widely distributed across both vertebrate and invertebrate species, with an evolutionary history estimated at around 500 million years. Its deep neural underpinnings and phylogenetic persistence underscore its centrality within sleep architecture, particularly with respect to processes of memory consolidation, emotional regulation, and adaptive functioning (Franklin & Zyphur, 2005).

The most intense and elaborate dreams typically occur during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, when fast ocular movements take place beneath closed eyelids. Such dreams are often audiovisual in character and are accompanied by pronounced affect—ranging from elation to terror—together with imagery based on remembered experiences or imaginative constructions, gustatory and tactile elements, and strong spatial sensations such as falling or flying. These

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experiences frequently unfold in quasi-narrative sequences, which are retrospectively organized into temporal order when recounted in speech (Givens & White, 2021).

Within contemporary Psychology of Religion, dreams and other anomalous or paranormal phenomena—such as visions, encounters with supernatural entities, and prophetic episodes—are investigated both as possible vehicles of divine revelation and as psychological events grounded in ordinary brain processes (e.g., REM physiology or hyperactive agency detection, HADD) (McNamara & Bulkeley, 2015; McNamara et al., 2018; Nordin, 2011 ; Fountoulakis, 2024). Evolutionary models of Theory of Mind further explain how dream-generated supernatural agents (Nordin & Bjälkebring, 2019; McNamara et al., 2015; Nordin, 2025) may emerge from cognitive mechanisms originally developed for intention attribution and social cognition (Drigas & Mitsea, 2023). Cognitive and evolutionary approaches in the cognitive science of religion conceptualize dreams as experiential spaces in which representations of supernatural agents (gods, angels, spirits) are generated, often interpreted through social simulation theory or threat simulation models. In parallel, neuroscientific work links these experiences to neurochemical dynamics analogous to those observed in psychedelic or ecstatic states (McNamara, 2016; Bulkeley, 2008).

At the same time, Psychology of Religion acknowledges that dreams may consolidate religious convictions, shape everyday spirituality, and operate as a putative “channel” for transcendent or sacred experiences, even while remaining open to psychological explanations such as continuity hypotheses or symbolic processing in the unconscious (Tsitsigkos, 2017). Empirical evidence suggests that dream content is meaningfully associated with waking religiosity and spiritual attitudes, indicating that dreams may both reflect and contribute to the formation or consolidation of personal religious orientation (Bulkeley, 2009).

The connection with paranormal phenomena is therefore contested. Some scholars regard such experiences as loci of religious creativity and transformation, whereas others interpret them primarily as natural mental events that are intensified and structured by cultural and religious expectations (Balch et al., 2025; Nell, 2012). In this article, dreams are approached from a religious psychological standpoint as a non-verbal conduit between the intrapsychic domain and the metaphysical, with particular attention to the Christian tradition and to symbolic motifs of transition.

2. The Non-Verbal Nature of Dreams and Religious Experience

Non-verbal communication does not cease with the transition from wakefulness to sleep; rather, it is recast in the form of vivid, multisensory dreaming. A single dream episode may recruit one or more sensory channels—vision, hearing, touch, taste, kinesthetic and vestibular sensations, and, less frequently, pain or smell—such that dreaming can be understood primarily as a psychosomatic mode of experience (Flamand, 2018). The most elaborate, emotionally saturated, and perceptually rich dreams typically arise during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which is physiologically marked by the characteristic lateral movements of the eyes beneath closed lids.

In this stage, conscious awareness is immersed in intensified sensory and affective activity: strong emotions—ranging from euphoria and awe to fear and anxiety—co-occur with audiovisual imagery derived from memory or imaginative elaboration, alongside gustatory and tactile impressions and localized bodily sensations of falling, floating, or flying. These elements tend to be woven into a quasi-narrative sequence with a recognizable onset and conclusion, yet they are not initially ordered through linear, conceptual language. Dreams thus constitute an internal “story without words” that becomes linguistically structured only in retrospect, when it is recalled and recounted (Givens & White, 2021).

This fundamentally non-verbal architecture renders dreams a particularly fertile object of inquiry for the Psychology of Religion, which is concerned with experiences of the supernatural, the ecstatic, and the revelatory phenomena that often exceed the bounds of straightforward linguistic articulation (Fountoulakis, 2024). Within this field, supernatural and paranormal events—visions, prophetic dreams, near-death experiences, and encounters with transcendent agents—are not approached to establish their ontological status, but to elucidate how they are lived, interpreted, and integrated by the experiencer. Much like dreams, religious experience is not primarily given as propositional discourse; it is first encountered as an event in which images, symbols, and emotions precede and ground subsequent conceptual formulation (McNamara, 2016). In dreaming, the sacred is not so much “thought about” as it is directly undergone at a pre-reflective level, which makes the dream state structurally comparable to mystical and ecstatic modes of consciousness.

Within the Christian tradition, dreams have long been regarded as privileged loci of divine self-disclosure. From the biblical narratives of Joseph, Pharaoh, and Jacob to the reflections of the Church Fathers, dreams were treated as authentic sites of revelation and prophecy. Clement of Alexandria and Augustine interpreted dreams as indicative of the relationship between humans and God, while John Chrysostom acknowledged the possibility that God’s guidance might

be mediated through dream experience (Nell, 2012). Such theological interpretations do not deny the psychological dimensions of dreaming; rather, they underscore a point of intersection at which psychic processes and theological meaning converge in the concrete texture of lived experience.

In contemporary contexts, even though systematic theological treatment of dreams has become more limited, research in the Psychology of Religion indicates that many believers continue to regard dreams as channels of divine communication (Amir, 2025; Nordin, 2024; McNamara et al., 2015). Dreams may be experienced as conveying messages, warnings, or responses to prayer, thereby exerting a significant influence on everyday spirituality and religious self-understanding (Salem et al., 2013; Schredl & Mönch, 2023; Nordin, 2023; Balch et al., 2025). From this perspective, dreams can be conceptualized as non-verbal psychoreligious events endowed with profound existential significance.

3. Transition Symbols: Ladders, Flight, and Ascension

Motifs of flight, vertical elevation, and the ascent of ladders or mountains recur with striking frequency in dreams and frequently emerge as dominant elements, both at the individual and cross-cultural level. These images are not merely decorative or contingent; they bear substantial symbolic significance and are closely associated with processes of transition, transformation, and transcendence. Among them, the ladder stands out as a paradigmatic symbol of passage from one mode of being to another, linking distinct ontological levels: the immanent and the transcendent, the conscious and the unconscious, life and death.

Drawing on Mircea Eliade, ontological transition is understood as neither neutral nor simply linear, but as unfolding through rituals of rupture and metamorphosis—birth, initiation, marriage, and death—that mark the abandonment of one existential condition and entry into another (Eliade, 1960, pp. 115–117). These rites of passage are suffused with intense and ambivalent emotional states—fear intertwined with joy, attraction coexisting with repulsion. A similar ambivalence is reflected in dreams of ascent, where the dreamer simultaneously experiences a sense of losing the familiar and an anticipatory orientation toward transcendence (Sparrow & Hurd, 2024; Dordevic Belic, 2024; Laughlin, 2011).

Dream images of climbing a ladder or scaling a mountain are frequently associated not only with access to sacred or elevated space but also with death. Across numerous religious and mythological traditions, the journey of the deceased soul is portrayed as an upward movement: walking mountain paths, ascending trees, or rising into the heavens—imagery that encodes the transition from earthly existence to another ontological state (Eliade, 1960). In this symbolic economy, the ladder, as a vertical axis, functions as an axis mundus, a cosmic connector that enables communicative passage between differentiated planes of reality.

Within a psychoanalytic framework, Sigmund Freud interpreted ladder ascent as a disguised expression of sexual desire, situating it within the broader logic of symbolic satisfaction of repressed impulses (Freud, 1900/1953). Although this reading has been criticized as reductive and overly narrow, it can nonetheless be integrated into a more expansive understanding of ascent as a transition from a stagnant or blocked psychic configuration to a renewed form of existence. Sexuality itself may be seen as a rite of passage, involving profound bodily and psychological reorganisation. In contexts of psychic crisis, dreams of ascent can thus be read as indicating an urgent need for radical change, reintegration, and the restoration of inner equilibrium.

The link between dream symbolism and therapeutic intervention is developed with nuance in the work of Robert Desoille. Through his method of the guided waking, Desoille systematically employed images of climbing ladders, ascending mountains, and flying as vehicles for psychic regeneration and release from internal deadlocks (Desoille, 1961). Even in cases where classical psychoanalytic treatment had proven ineffective, the deliberate activation of these symbolic forms within directed imagination often yielded striking therapeutic results. For Desoille, the “waking ascent dream” constituted the practical application of a spiritual technique within the domain of unconscious psychic activity.

Flight, especially when coupled with imagery of light and altitude, condenses a powerful constellation of transcendence and liberation. Whether in dreams, myths, rituals, or ecstatic experiences, upward movement signifies a break from a fixed or immobilized condition and opens the possibility of entry into a qualitatively new mode of being (Eliade, 1960). Such motifs reappear across folklore, the history of religions, and mystical literature, where the soul’s elevation toward the divine, mystical ecstasy, and the overcoming of spatial and temporal constraints represent central experiential themes.

When viewed across interconnected levels—dream experience, active imagination, mythological narratives, ritual practices, and metaphysical interpretations—a recurring pattern becomes discernible: emergence from a state of

blockage or crisis through a decisive rupture that enables renewed movement and transformation. At a deep psychic level, the motif of climbing a ladder or mountain in dreams can be understood as an experience of symbolic “rebirth”—the resolution of a crisis and the reintegration of the self. A parallel intuition is found, for example, in Mahayana Buddhist metaphysics, where the Buddha’s ascent to the Center of the World is interpreted as a transcendence of both Space and Time, since the center coincides with the origin of the cosmos and thus with the suspension of temporality (Eliade, 1960).

From the standpoint of the Psychology of Religion, these symbolic structures are especially significant because dreams constitute non-verbal sites at which psychic, somatic, and religious meanings converge. Through images of ascent, flight, and elevation, the dreamer experiences imaginatively the possibility of exceeding given existential conditions and of reconfiguring their relationship to self, world, and—for many believers—the divine. Contemporary re-readings of Freudian theory within cultural and religious analysis help broaden the interpretive horizon of such dream motifs. As Fountoulakis and Simos (2026) argue, Freud’s psychoanalysis should not be reduced to a narrow account of religion as collective neurosis; it can also be understood as a comprehensive cultural hermeneutic in which the unconscious continually generates symbols, myths, and artistic forms. Within this framework, dreams are not merely mechanisms for the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes, but primary laboratories of symbolic production. Images of ascent, flight, and elevation may thus be viewed as expressions of deeper cultural archetypes that connect individual psychic dynamics with shared schemas of transcendence, salvation, and transformation. Psychoanalytic interpretation in this sense does not invalidate religious experience; rather, it discloses structural affinities between unconscious symbolism and religious imagination (Nordin, 2025; Sparrow & Hurd, 2024; Schredl, 2024).

Moreover, Fountoulakis and Simos (2026) emphasize that Freud is situated within a broader intellectual constellation that seeks to relate psychological inquiry, artistic creation, and metaphysical questioning. The unconscious—conceived as a dynamic field of desires, anxieties, and symbolic reconfigurations—functions as a common ground for both aesthetic production and religious experience. Dreams, in this light, may be regarded as “cultural events” that weave together individual conflicts with collective patterns of meaning. The ascent of a ladder, for instance, is not only a marker of psychic transition or a sexual symbol; it can also articulate a culture’s quest for transcendence, its aspiration to approach the sacred, or its need for existential re-interpretation. When embedded in a wider cultural and religious-psychological perspective, the psychoanalytic approach thus contributes to a multi-layered understanding of dreams as non-verbal spaces in which the unconscious, culture, and religious experience intersect and mutually illuminate one another.

4. Sources of Dreams and Psychosomatic Dimension

Dreams can often be understood as the psyche’s attempt to work through conflicts, tensions, and existential dead-ends that arise in waking life. They are not straightforward reproductions of external events, but concealed, symbolically configured narratives that persist only as traces in memory. Strictly speaking, a dream has no independent existence apart from its recollection and narration: we know we have dreamt only because we remember and report it. From deeper strata of memory, images, faces, locations, objects, and events that have been buried by time re-emerge and are creatively recombined in the dream space, giving rise to a distinct experiential world.

Dreaming is, by its nature, bound up with projection. The dreamer projects aspects of the self—desires, anxieties, and expectations—onto the “screen” of the dream, which functions as an intermediate arena for the processing and reconfiguration of meaning. Research in dream psychology has shown that the generative sources of dream imagery are multiple and interrelated (Putois et al., 2020; Vallat et al., 2018; Paquette, 2018). Key categories include: (a) external sensory stimuli that, although not consciously registered during sleep, are absorbed into the dream in transformed or symbolic forms; (b) internal or subjective sensory activations, visual or auditory, that surface as attachment to the external environment loosens; (c) organic bodily stimuli—such as respiration, circulation, interoceptive cues, and pain—that are typically minimized or ignored during wakefulness but can become powerful sources of dream impressions; and (d) purely psychic processes, emerging from imagination, memory, and unconscious dynamics.

That a sleeper may awaken in response to a strong sensory input indicates that contact with the external world is never fully suspended during sleep. Yet these stimuli are rarely incorporated into dreams in a direct, realistic fashion; instead, they are reshaped and woven into symbolic scenarios, underscoring the nonverbal and interpretive character of the dream experience (Flamand, 2018).

The psychosomatic nature of dreaming becomes particularly evident in the active role of the body in structuring dream content. During sleep, the individual ceases to bracket or downplay bodily sensations—as frequently occurs in waking life—and internal somatic cues themselves become sources of experience and meaning (Schredl, 2024; Vallat et al.,

2017; Domhoff & Schneider, 2018). Dreams are therefore neither exclusively psychological nor exclusively physiological phenomena; they are quintessentially psychosomatic states in which body, affect, and imagination coalesce into a unified experiential event.

The link between everyday anxiety and dream processing is especially salient in adolescence, a developmental period in which the school environment often operates as a site of intense psycho-emotional pressure, Simos et al. (2026) argue that school-related stress in adolescence is associated with heightened cognitive demands, pervasive social evaluation, and uncertainties around identity formation—factors that activate mechanisms of emotional arousal and hypervigilance. According to the continuity hypothesis of dreaming, experiences from waking life are carried over into dreams, frequently in disguised or symbolically transformed forms (Gieselmann et al., 2019; Tzioridou et al., 2022; Schredl et al., 2016). From this angle, dreams of falling, being chased, failing, or losing control can be interpreted as nonverbal representations of school-based anxiety and developmental insecurity. Integrating contemporary developmental and educational research thereby enables a more nuanced account of how dreams operate as psychosomatic mechanisms for stress processing, particularly during periods of intensified social and identity transitions.

Winnicott's theory of "transitional objects" is particularly illuminating for understanding the in-between quality of dreams. Winnicott observed that young children rely on concrete objects—a doll, a teddy bear, or a piece of the mother's clothing—to move from the waking world into the realm of sleep. These objects serve as intermediate carriers of security and meaning, facilitating the passage from one mode of existence to another. As language develops, such objects gradually lose their centrality, and linguistic mediation increasingly takes over their role (Winnicott, 1971).

By analogy, in adult life dreams may be viewed as a kind of transitional space, a psychological in-between zone positioned between internal and external reality, where experiences, conflicts, and existential questions that resist direct verbal articulation can be processed. Within this framework, dreams function as nonverbal modes of communication with one's inner world and, for many religious individuals, as points of contact with metaphysical or transcendent realities.

It is precisely this transitional and psychosomatic function that helps explain why dreams have historically been esteemed in religious and folk traditions as privileged arenas of revelation and as "ritual passages" into alternative realities. In dreaming, the individual does not simply move from wakefulness to sleep, but passes from one regime of meaning-making to another. From the perspective of the psychology of religion, this renders dreams a crucial field for the study of supernatural experiences, since they condense psychic, bodily, and religious significance into a single, nonverbal experiential configuration.

Recent research on emotional development in adolescence further enriches this understanding of dreams as nonverbal mechanisms of self-regulation, Simos et al. (2026) note that adolescence is marked by increased neurobiological sensitivity to emotional arousal, largely due to the asynchronous maturation of the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. This imbalance contributes to heightened anxiety, existential uncertainty, and affective volatility. Under such conditions, emotional processing does not occur only, or even primarily, through conscious verbal reflection, but frequently through nonverbal, imaginal, and somatically expressed processes. Emotional intelligence deficits are closely linked to executive dysfunction and reduced behavioral flexibility (Drigas & Sideraki, 2021).

This insight is of relevance to the psychology of religion, since the dream—especially during REM sleep—can be conceptualised as a space in which emotional experience is reorganised. Just as digital artificial intelligence systems examined by Simos et al. (2026) attempt to foster emotional awareness via nonverbal indicators and feedback, dreams may be regarded as natural, endogenous mechanisms of emotional processing. Dream motifs such as flying, falling, threat, or encounters with transcendent agents often mirror internal conflicts or transitional phases of identity, especially in developmentally sensitive periods. From this vantage point, dreaming is not merely an epiphenomenon of neurobiological activity, but a dynamic arena of emotional and existential restructuring. The convergence of neuroscience, developmental psychology, and religious-psychological interpretation makes it possible to conceptualise the dream as a nonverbal site of meaning-making, particularly in times of inner transition.

This theoretical view of dreaming as a mechanism of emotional processing is further substantiated when examined in concrete developmental contexts. In a case study of a fourteen-year-old student with a complex pattern of cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics, Simos (2026) illustrates the interplay of neurocognitive particularities, emotional dysregulation, and social difficulties during adolescent transition. The profile described is marked by discrepancies between cognitive capacities and emotional maturity, as well as intense inner conflicts that manifest behaviorally and psychosomatically.

Such a case is especially instructive for dream research because adolescence represents a period of intensified internal reorganisation of identity. The self-regulation challenges outlined by Simos (2026) suggest that emotionally charged experiences are often processed through nonverbal and symbolic channels. From the perspective of the continuity hypothesis, everyday social challenges and intrapsychic conflicts can be transformed into dream narratives with pronounced symbolic content—such as scenes of pursuit, failure, or metamorphosis. Here, the dream operates as an intermediate arena in which the adolescent experiments with alternative identity configurations and meaning structures, free from the immediate constraints of social evaluation.

The case study further underlines the necessity of a holistic perspective in which cognitive, emotional, and social factors are treated as mutually interdependent. This systemic approach is consonant with the psychosomatic understanding of dreams, which views dream activity not as an isolated cerebral function but as one that integrates experiential, bodily, and social dimensions. Within the psychology of religion, the adolescent's inner search, evident in such profiles, can be linked to existential questioning and symbols of transcendence, rendering the dream a site where developmental maturation and spiritual inquiry intersect.

A more complete understanding of emotional dysregulation at the individual level emerges when it is situated within the school context, where inner conflicts are frequently externalized as intense behavioral outbursts. Simos (2025) analyzes the dynamics of responding to such episodes, arguing that behavioral eruptions should not be interpreted merely as isolated acts of disobedience, but rather as expressions of overwhelming internal emotional states. This stance is consistent with neuropsychological models of self-regulation, which conceptualize behavior as the surface expression of the functioning—or malfunctioning—of connections between limbic structures and executive systems.

The reference to digital systems is introduced here analogically and not as a shift in the object of study. Dreams may be understood as primary, endogenous mechanisms of psycho-emotional self-regulation, whereas technological interventions attempt to externally simulate functions that are already carried out within the internal dynamics of the psyche. Structured ICT environments enhance autonomy and adaptive cognition (Chaidi, Drigas, & Karagiannidis, 2021).

Within this framework, the digital tools proposed by Simos (2025) are not designed as instruments of surveillance, but as supports for self-regulation and reflective processing. Biofeedback systems, early stress-detection technologies, and interactive reflection platforms can facilitate timely emotional discharge before a behavioral crisis reaches its peak. Theoretically, this role can be compared to the dreaming process, in which internal conflicts are worked through symbolically before they consolidate as conscious tension. Self-regulation, in this sense, is not only an educational objective but a fundamental psychobiological requirement, Simos (2025) also underscores the importance of supporting educators, who frequently act as key regulatory agents during crises. Effective management of intense behavioral episodes demands more than procedural techniques; it requires a nuanced understanding of the underlying emotional and developmental processes. For the psychology of religion, this perspective enables a broader reading of dysregulation as a form of existential instability or a search for meaning, particularly in liminal life phases. Consequently, the integration of digital interventions in school settings should not be restricted to behavior management, but should be oriented toward cultivating environments in which self-regulation, awareness, and meaning-making are mutually reinforcing processes.

5. Discussion - Synthetic Approach

The move from describing emotional dysregulation to systematically cultivating self-regulatory capacities is pivotal for any comprehensive account of mental health. Higher-order self-observation functions as a regulatory mechanism in emotional processing (Drigas & Sideraki, 2021). In a systematic review, Mitsea et al. (2023) demonstrate that digitally mediated mindfulness interventions substantially enhance emotional awareness, cognitive flexibility, and stress reduction, with particularly notable effects in adolescent and educational settings. In this literature, mindfulness is not framed merely as a relaxation technique, but as a metacognitive discipline that strengthens the capacity to attend to internal states without immediate reactive engagement. This perspective has important implications for the understanding of dreams. If dreaming is regarded as a natural mechanism for emotional processing (Mota-Rolim et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2015; Windt, 2010), then the cultivation of mindfulness in waking life may shape how experiences and conflicts are subsequently worked through at the level of dreams. Enhancing metacognitive abilities could increase reflective capacity, thereby diminishing the volume of unprocessed emotional material carried over into sleep. Systematic evidence on digitally assisted mindfulness interventions further confirms the strengthening of emotional regulation and metacognitive awareness across developmental stages (Mitsea & Drigas, 2023).

Furthermore, the digital scaffolding of mindfulness described by Mitsea et al. (2023) enables the personalization of interventions and the continuous monitoring of progress, thus reinforcing the durability of their effects. This dimension resonates with the broader theoretical orientation of the present study, in which technology is approached not as an apparatus of control, but as a medium for fostering self-awareness. In inclusive educational contexts, structured ICT environments have been shown to support autonomy, differentiated learning pathways, and the gradual strengthening of self-regulatory and metacognitive processes (Chaidi et al., 2021). Research on neuroplasticity indicates that immersive technologies such as virtual reality and brain-computer interfaces may facilitate structural and emotional reorganization processes similar to experiential simulation during dreaming (Drigas et al., 2022; Davidson & McEwen, 2012; Hölzel et al., 2011; Riva et al., 2019). Within the Psychology of Religion, mindfulness can be conceptualized as a practice of inner vigilance that supports the existential elaboration of experience, forging a link between biological processes, emotional maturation, and spiritual meaning-making (McNamara, 2016; Newberg & Waldman, 2009).

Complementary insights into self-regulation and metacognitive development emerge from the work of Kontostavrou and Drigas (2021) on the role of metacognitive competence in fostering giftedness in leadership. Their findings indicate that metacognitive skills—such as self-monitoring, self-regulation, and awareness of one's own cognitive operations—not only promote cognitive growth but are also closely tied to leadership potential, which presupposes a high degree of conscious self-regulation and adaptability in fluid contexts. Metacognition, in this view, is not reduced to passive observation of thought; it entails active engagement in steering and optimizing cognitive and emotional functioning, a profile frequently observed in environments that cultivate deep self-examination and reflective practice (Kontostavrou & Drigas, 2021; Flavell, 1979; Zimmerman, 2002; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008; Goleman, 1995).

In relation to dreams and mindfulness, these results support the contention that self-regulation in waking life—a core dimension of metacognitive skill—may influence not only emotional processing but also how dream experiences are lived and “managed.” If heightened awareness and self-observation enrich emotional insight in daily life, this capacity may be reflected in a more processed and coherent dream experience, reducing purely cathartic emotional “discharge” during REM sleep and reinforcing the broader self-regulatory function emphasized in this study (Kontostavrou & Drigas, 2021; Voss et al., 2009; Dresler et al., 2012; Walker & van der Helm, 2009; Goldstein & Walker, 2014).

Additional support for the metacognitive and emotional focus of this work is provided by Drigas et al. (2023), who analyze leadership through the lens of a nine-level pyramid model of emotional intelligence (EI) and the supportive role of new technologies. They argue that EI has become a key component of effective leadership, with the nine levels encompassing capacities such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social awareness, all of which can be cultivated via systematic metacognitive and meta-emotional strategies (Drigas et al., 2023; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008; Kolb, 2015). The authors further contend that emerging technologies—from serious games to virtual reality platforms—can scaffold the acquisition and practice of these skills by enhancing self-monitoring and emotional sensitivity in educational and professional environments (Drigas et al., 2023; Riva et al., 2019; Slater & Sanchez-Vives, 2016; Dede, 2009; Parsons & Cobb, 2011; Bavelier & Green, 2019).

Situated within the present investigation of dreams and mindfulness, this line of research offers both empirical and theoretical grounding for linking metacognitive skill development to psychosomatic and emotional processing. If the cultivation of metacognitive strategies in wakefulness promotes more effective self-regulation and heightened awareness of internal processes, it is plausible that these capacities extend into the dream domain, shaping how individuals experience, transform, and subsequently reflect on the emotions and symbols that emerge during REM sleep (Drigas et al., 2023; Walker & van der Helm, 2009). In this light, the relation between self-regulation and dream patterns can be conceived as a dynamic interplay between conscious and unconscious processes—a bidirectional relationship in which training in mindfulness and self-observation refines dream-based processing, while the dream itself contributes to the ongoing reorganization of emotional life (Drigas et al., 2023; Goldstein & Walker, 2014).

6. Conclusion

The present study has portrayed dreams as paradigmatic forms of nonverbal communication that occupy a central and multifaceted position within contemporary Psychology of Religion. Rather than being reducible to epiphenomenal byproducts of neurobiological activity during sleep, dreams emerge as complex experiential configurations in which psychodynamic, bodily, symbolic, social, and religious dimensions of human existence converge (Bulkeley, 2008; McNamara, 2016). Psychologically, dreams belong to the domain of the unconscious as articulated in Freudian and Jungian traditions, operating as arenas in which repressed conflicts, desires, and archetypal patterns find symbolic expression. At the same time, the pronounced corporeality of many dream experiences—sensations of falling or flying, pain, touch, or intense euphoria—highlights their psychosomatic nature, underscoring that dreaming constitutes an encounter between body and mind rather than a purely “mental” event (Flamand, 2018).

From a religious-psychological standpoint, dreams assume particular importance as experiential media through which religious beliefs are formed, reinforced, and reinterpreted. Empirical findings suggest that dream content can shape everyday spirituality, influence religious practices, and deepen or modify the sense of relationship with the divine (Nell, 2012; Balch et al., 2025). The widespread conviction among believers that dreams can mediate divine communication or guidance cannot simply be dismissed as illusion; it must be acknowledged as a psychoreligious phenomenon with concrete existential implications.

Within this broader framework, recurrent dream motifs of ascent, flight, and climbing acquire special theoretical weight. The present analysis has shown that these images function historically as symbols of transition and ontological transformation. Eliade (1960) links them to rites of passage, the overcoming of crises, and entry into new modes of existence, while Desoille's therapeutic work harnesses them deliberately as instruments of psychic regeneration and liberation from "blocked" states (Desoille, 1961). The convergence of mythological, oneiric, ritual, and therapeutic meanings suggests that dreams can be understood as a fundamentally transitional space in which rupture, change, and reintegration are imaginatively enacted.

Contemporary sleep neuroscience has rightly concentrated on REM sleep and its role in memory and emotion processing. Yet the Psychology of Religion reorients the inquiry from the question of how dreams are generated to the question of how they are experienced, interpreted, and endowed with meaning. From this vantage point, the dream becomes a locus for encountering the sacred beyond propositional language, through images, symbols, and affect—a kind of "divine voice without words" (McNamara, 2016).

In a cultural context characterized by pervasive verbalization and conceptualization, dreams remind us that some of the most profound forms of communication—with oneself and with the transcendent—remain fundamentally nonverbal, imaginal, and transformative. A systematic engagement with dreams in the Psychology of Religion thus makes a significant contribution to the understanding of human religiosity and opens new pathways for interdisciplinary dialogue on the interrelation of soul, body, and the sacred. When dreams are considered as nonverbal carriers of psychic and spiritual experience, the model developed by Drigas, Papoutsis, and Skianis (2023) offers a valuable integrative framework by linking emotional intelligence (EI), experiential development, and technologically supported self-awareness. Their nine-level EI pyramid is presented as a hierarchical mechanism for cultivating the emotional competencies required of leaders in complex contemporary environments. The model incorporates strategies with a pronounced metacognitive component—heightened awareness of one's cognitive and emotional processes—in order to systematically strengthen leadership capacities and overall well-being.

This perspective introduces an additional layer to the present discussion of dreams. If the development of EI and metacognitive strategies enhances self-regulation and self-awareness in waking life, it is plausible that these same capacities also shape the way individuals experience, interpret, and integrate their dream patterns during REM sleep. In this sense, the cultivation of EI may function as an endogenous "psychic mirror," enabling a more lucid and emotionally stable engagement with the symbolic content of dreams. The relationship between technologically supported EI training and dream processing thus opens promising avenues for interdisciplinary research, in which mindfulness, metacognitive development, and REM experience intersect to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the human psyche.

Compliance with ethical standards

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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