Doehring, C. (2021). *What makes care spiritual and trustworthy?* Iliff School of Theology.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**What makes care spiritual and trustworthy?**

What makes care spiritual? Consider this question in terms of your own experiences. Have you sought out or received help that you would describe as spiritual care? What made that care spiritual?

How you explore this question will likely be unique to you. Imagine spirituality as fingerprints imprinted on experiences we describe as spiritual. In recalling an encounter where we received care, and thinking about whether this was spiritual care, we are revisiting a scene, casting ‘spiritual fingerprint powder’ on this scene, and then looking for aspects of this scene that each of us might describe in our own ways as spiritual. The pattern of fingerprints that identify aspects of an experience that are spiritual might well be different from one experience to the next. Perhaps it was the person you spoke with, the setting, what you talked about, how you felt during the conversation, or the impact this conversation had on you—any of these could make a conversation spiritual care for you.

The example I will offer highlights what makes care spiritual for me. I want you to pay attention to aspects of your experience that might be like or different from mine. The interreligious approach used throughout this chapter respects differences, assuming that our practices, values, and beliefs are, like fingerprints, unique to each of us. In listening to each other’s stories about what makes care spiritual, we will likely listen for similarities, ‘translating’ the ways another person talks about religious or spiritual aspects of their lives into the words we each use. Our human tendency to search for similarities and overlay our experiences on another’s often contaminates another’s story by smearing our fingerprints on top of theirs. Differentiation is a process of continuously separating our stories from another’s, as though we have suited up in coveralls, boots, cap, and gloves so that we do not destroy clues to what is unique and distinct to another’s values and beliefs about suffering and their practices for coping.

Spiritual differentiation is a foundational capacity for practicing interreligious spiritual care that helps rather than harms. I argue throughout this chapter that spiritual care becomes trustworthy when we respect differences. When we monitor our tendency to search for similarities and instead pay attention to differences, we are less likely to impose our values, beliefs, and practices on another, erasing differences, devaluing, and perhaps even desecrating what is sacred for them. Spiritual care that does not respect what is sacred for another has caused profound and irrevocable harm, as I will elaborate later.

Spiritual trust is a foundational dynamic of spiritual care that makes spiritual care is helpful rather than harmful. I invite you to pay attention to whether you experience my writing as spiritually trustworthy for you. Pay attention to moments when you experience my descriptions of spiritual care as devaluing yours. Pause, and reflect upon whether memories of spiritual harm are evoked for you. I value your reactions as indicators that you have been spiritual harmed and may not experience me as spiritual trustworthy.

Before sharing an encounter that I would describe as spiritual care, I also want to recognize readers for whom the terms spiritual or religious are not relevant or meaningful, and even offensive. Religious beliefs have been used to justify prejudice and abuse, and to erase, devalue, and denigrate what is sacred for others. As a result, many people experience religious and spiritual struggles with God and those representing religious and moral authority.[[2]](#footnote-2) Exploring what makes care spiritual may stir up spiritual struggles, and memories of spiritual care that was harmful. We can learn a lot from those painful experiences, so I hope you will pay attention to and value your reactions as a source for understanding what is uniquely important and meaningful for you.

**A memorable experience of spiritual care**

A few years ago, during a long break in a faculty meeting at Iliff (the graduate school where I teach spiritual care), Jennifer Leath, one of my faculty colleagues, and I went for walk. It was a beautiful October day in Denver. The sun was shining on trees laden with burnished gold leaves against the backdrop of an azure blue sky. At one point, there was a lull in the conversation. Then, she turned to look at me, paused, and asked, “How are you doing?” She knew I was living with grief after two recent deaths in my family. I experienced her pause, her eye contact, her tone of her voice, and her body language as an invitation to respond at an emotional and spiritual level.

Alongside that initial question—how are you doing? —another question she asked a little later stands out in my memory: “What helps?” Once again, it was her body language that conveyed her willingness to listen deeply and follow closely whatever I might share. I sensed she was not anxious. Nor did she need reassurance that I was ‘managing’ grief. And so, I responded by saying something about spiritual practices that held me in moments of turbulent grief—knitting me into relational webs of life that had been torn asunder by tragic deaths. I described my early morning practices of listening to sacred choral music while I watched the rising sun cast its pearly pink then fiery gold light onto western foothills and mountains. Describing how this daily spiritual practice helped me made her part of these practices. Afterwards, our conversation took on a life of its own in my memory, reverberating at moments when I checked in with myself about how I was doing and what helped. My sunrise practice of being held within the beauty of sacred choral music evoked moments of feeling held with spiritual cares conversations like my conversation with Jennifer.

This spiritual care conversation helps me identify what makes care *spiritual* care for me: it is a sense of spiritual trust. When she asked, “How are you doing?” I felt that I could spiritually trust her, and so I told her about my struggles with grief. When she asked, “What helps?” I knew that I could entrust her with a practice that was sacred to me. This trust made it safe for me to receive her care, without my usual worries about being misunderstood or being a burden. There are many aspects of my colleague that inspire trust. The Rev. Dr. Jennifer Leath is a brilliant and creative womanist scholar, a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and a faculty colleague who creates safe spaces for honest dialogue. What made me spiritually trust her in this conversational exchange were her gifts of listening, following, apprehending, and respecting the ineffable mystery I experienced in my spiritual practices. She was not simply trustworthy as a scholar, minister, or colleague. She was spiritually trustworthy, which is what made this conversation spiritual care.

**What makes trust spiritual?**

Psychologists describe trust as a relational process involving “a willingness to be vulnerable based on the trustor's positive expectations of the trustee” (PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016, p. 18).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Many or most reviews converge on the idea trust involves a trustor (subject) and trustee (object) that are somehow interdependent; involves a situation containing risks for the trustor (which also implies the trustor has goals); is experienced by the trustor as voluntary (implying a sense of autonomy, agency, and intrinsic motivation). (p. 124)

Building upon this definition, I describe spiritual trust as a relational process of being spiritually vulnerable with someone who respects the mystery of who I am. I take risks and voluntarily share what is sacred for me, with several goals:

* to experience a sense of compassionate accountability for practicing spiritual self-care
* to search for core values that give a sense of purpose to experiences of suffering and moral stress
* to co-create meanings that help me lament suffering and, over time, spiritually integrate experiences of stress and suffering, and embed me in relational webs of giving and receiving care that extends to include the human family and creation.

Spiritual trust for me becomes an experience of transcendence when my trustee’s care is part of relational webs of goodness imbued with a sense of transcendence.[[4]](#footnote-4) Some might describe this sense of trust as feeling held by God, Allah, or the wisdom of Buddha. I use the symbols, practices, sacred texts, and music of Christian traditions to describe how I experience being held within transcendent relational webs. I visualize this sense of being held as a root system that connects me to my immediate relational webs that are, in turn, connected to webs extending far beyond me in the past and present.

I imagine myself as a quaking aspen tree that reproduces by sending up new stems from a single root system. “While one stem has a relatively short lifespan, the entire clone can live for tens of thousands of years” (<https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide/Plants-and-Fungi/Quaking-Aspen>). Imagining myself as one stem of an ancient clone of aspen trees gives me a cosmic perspective on my life, and deepens a sense of mystery, humility, and gratitude. Practices of spiritual self-care feed me, like the bark of an aspen tree that produces sugar through photosynthesis, unlike trees whose leaves produce sugar during spring and summer. When autumn comes, those swatches of golden aspen trees against early snow remind me of this deep sense of spiritual connection generating goodness, even during dormant spells when snow blankets the ground and the dark hours of the day lengthen.



*This photo of Maroon Bells, the mountains surrounding Maroon Lake outside of Aspen, Colorado, was taken by my late husband George Magnuson on a trip we took with Alex, my son, and his stepson.*

**A felt sense of spiritual trust connecting body, heart, and mind**

For me, spiritual trust is grounded in a sensory and emotional experience of goodness. My spiritual self-care begins with this simple calming practice of slow, deep breathing[[5]](#footnote-5):

* Inhaling to the count of four
* Holding my breath for a few seconds while relaxing my shoulders and facial muscles
* Exhaling slowly
* Resting for a few seconds.

I add the warmth and pressure of touch to the sensations of breathing by placing my hand on my upper chest. Adding touch fosters a sense of self-compassion, which research demonstrates is an important aspect of self-care (Neff & Germer, 2017). Self-compassion can enhance mindfulness—attention to the present moment in ways that help us be open and curious about what is going on within us and around us (Neff & Germer, 2017).[[6]](#footnote-6) I also try adding phrases or images that convey goodness, such as visualizing a place of beauty (such as the photo of golden aspens on a snowy mountainside) or words from sacred texts or meditation practices like loving kindness.[[7]](#footnote-7) I sometimes use slow, deep breathing when I listen to sacred choral music. The beauty of this music is amplified through its communal performance of interwoven voices, its textual meanings illuminated through a composer’s setting, and its history of cocreating beauty across many choral performances in liturgies and concerts.

Slow, deep breathing often helps me experience an oasis of calmness, making me more aware of how the systems of my body are embedded in relational and organic webs that often trigger stress responses within me. Calming practices open spaces to notice with curiosity what triggers stress and how I respond.[[8]](#footnote-8) These practices help me experience self-compassion and alleviate my tendency to be self-judgmental. Spiritual self-care makes me more likely to trust the process of spiritual care when I experience someone as spiritually trustworthy.

Here is a diagram describing how self-care practices might become spiritual.



**Compassionate accountability for spiritual self-care**

In courses on spiritual care, students are required to explore breath or body-centered self-care practices and use these as they do their weekly readings. They begin their weekly forum post by describing a practice and whether it helped them cope with stress, especially arising from the ways their life stories intersected with the topics of the week. Here is a typical weekly instruction:

We are experimenting with using body-aware practices that help us practice spiritual self-care by (1) tracking how we experience stress in our bodies, (2) tracking the emotions associated with such stress, and then (3) experiencing self-compassion and self-transcendence (potentially spiritual qualities of self-care). Describe a practice you used this week as you did your readings/weekly forum posting.

As I noted a few years ago,

These weekly exchanges demonstrate the infinite variety of such practices, which may be traditional (prayer, contemplative meditative practices, and devotional readings of sacred texts) or more particular to them or their traditions (e.g., running for those who are humanists or skeptics or earth-based practices for those in Wiccan or pagan traditions). (Doehring, 2019, p. 245)

Some students share music they listened to or composed; art they contemplated or created; poetry they read or wrote; photos of beloved pets or places that connect them with goodness; and sometimes, the ways that daily tasks, like bathing their children, folding laundry, or cooking were calming and good. Reading about and listening to each other’s practices have helped us learn about interreligious spiritual care that respects the unique and particular ways the people care for themselves, in what we call here spiritual self-care.

These weekly exchanges often create a sense of compassionate accountability for exploring self-care practices. Describing their self-care practices in small online groups of four or five is an opportunity for them to say something more, if they wish, about the stresses of that week, and especially stress evoked by the ways their life stories intersected with our weekly topics, like grief, trauma, or moral stress and struggles. For example, when we read about sexual violence, students describing their self-care practices could, if they wished, add details about whether/how their practices helped them cope with the stress of traumatic memories evoked by our topic. Grounding learning in intrinsically meaningful spiritual self-care practices becomes an integrative way of learning how to trust the process of spiritual integration for ourselves. Spiritual integration can be defined as “the extent to which spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences are organized into a coherent whole . . . [e.g.,] integration of spirituality into daily life, integration of spiritual beliefs and practices, and integration of spiritual motivation and practices” (Pargament et al., 2006, p. 130). In a chapter co-authored with my former Iliff colleague, Dr. Rúben Arjona, we described how we developed a spiritually integrative digital pedagogy for teaching about sexuality and spiritual care that included sharing our religious and spiritual struggles:

Sharing how we each spiritually integrate religious and spiritual struggles around aspects of sexuality also enhances trust. This trust fosters a sense of online community where we become mutually accountable to each other for searching for spiritual practices and meanings that are complex enough to bear our moral struggles with aspects of sexuality. Students experience the ways that online learning, like digital contexts, has the potential to mediate authentic religious and spiritual authority and communities. (Doehring & Arjona, 2020, p. 130)

If trust develops, they can help others search for meanings, values, and practices related to aspects of sexuality that are life-giving to them. The goal of intercultural spiritual care of sexuality is not conversion to particular beliefs, values, or practices; the goal is spiritual wholeness and justice in ways that fit the context of those seeking care. The pedagogical process of spiritual integration of one’s whole self and relationships, especially as shaped by sexuality that students learn is the process of care they will enter with others. (Doehring & Arjona, 2020, p. 137)

This trauma-informed pedagogy of beginning with spiritual self-care that is interreligious in the ways we respect the intrinsically meaningful practices of each person, draws upon scholarship and research about what makes spiritual self-care, especially of trauma, distinct from others kind of trauma self-care, and how trauma-informed spiritually-oriented pedagogy can help students practice spiritual self-care and engage in the life-long process of spiritually integrating their traumatic experiences.

**Struggles with spiritual self-care**

Experiencing spiritual trust through spiritual self-care may be close at hand, as I have illustrated by describing slow, deep breathing. As accessible as these practices are, people may struggle with spiritual practices that make them feel bad. As psychological research attests, religion or spirituality may help people cope with stress or may make their suffering worse (Pargament et al., 2016). Stress may generate religious and spiritual struggles that may include moral struggles, or struggles with religious authorities, communities, or struggles with a God experienced as condemning or absent.[[9]](#footnote-9) Transitory struggles may lead to spiritual growth, especially when people experience God or humanity as benevolent (Desai & Pargament, 2015). When struggles become chronic, people are more likely to experience “greater psychological distress, reduced well-being, and difficulty finding meaning in life” (Hart et al., 2020, p. 445). Chronic religious struggles predicted a higher rate of mortality in a longitudinal study of elderly patients (Pargament et al., 2001).

Whether religious and spiritual struggles lead to growth or decline depends upon one’s orienting system, which Pargament defines as “frameworks of spiritual beliefs, practices, relations, experiences, and values that consistently guide and direct the search for the sacred” (2007, p. 92).[[10]](#footnote-10) If our orienting system is grounded in core experiences and beliefs in benevolence or goodness, then we are more likely to experience a deepening of spiritual trust through spiritual practices. I use the term “goodness” as a litmus test of whether spiritual practices connect one with a sense of inherent and transcendent benevolence.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Another way that spiritual practices elicit struggles is when they pull us down into suffering that overwhelms us. For me, listening to sacred music sometimes elicits grief for Alex, the younger of my two sons, who ended his 27 years of life after struggling with deep depression, or for my husband George, whose vibrant love of life ended abruptly through a fatal accident.[[12]](#footnote-12) When spiritual practices release a wellspring of grief, I often speak to my son or husband when I exhale: “I miss you, Alex; I miss you, George.” This spiritual practice of slow, deep breathing is a life vest that helps me float in a sea of tears shared by others, rather than struggling alone in the turbulence of grief. If your spiritual practices draw you down into suffering, you might try offering yourself words of comfort, or expressing your wishes or prayers, to be present to suffering without becoming overwhelmed.

Spiritual practices may also bring us face to face with moral struggles when stress is exacerbated by conflicts in values. Moral distress may arise from shame or guilt about causing harm or from feeling betrayed by those entrusted with the care of others. We can easily feel isolated by moral stress— “beset…by obsessively remembered thudding guilts and scalding shames” (Schjeldahl, 2019).When spiritual practices open spaces for reckoning with moral stress, we need self-compassion. We may want to find trusted others for exploring these conflicts and searching for overarching values that provide a sense of purpose. Conversations of compassionate accountability may help us accept limitations, forgive ourselves, seek change if needed, and be in solidarity with others reckoning with suffering and injustice.

Sometimes moral struggles arise from coping with stress in life limiting or harmful ways. Facing and unraveling the tangled web of cravings, compulsions, and addictions may feel like we are grappling with legions of demons. Pastoral theologian Sonia Waters (2019) turns to the New Testament story in the Gospel of Mark of “the Gerasene demoniac’s legion to symbolize the existential and spiritual suffering of [addiction]… Like the Gerasene’s legion, addictions emerge from many forces that have organized into one voice” (2019, p. 7). Psychiatrist Judson Brewer (2017, 2021) offers resources for using mindfulness to create awareness and curiosity about anxiety and cravings.

Sometimes struggles are experienced in the very first step of finding ways to experience stress-releasing calmness. A simple practice of slow, deep breathing may put some people on high alert, if they have used this kind of breathing to prepare for an emergency response, or a military mission, or sports competition, or a performance that has a lot of meaning for them.[[13]](#footnote-13) A practice of simply being still may help people experience calmness. Others may find that sitting still and focusing inwardly makes them restless. Working with their hands (e.g., knitting, sewing, painting, coloring, or doing household tasks) or moving their bodies (e.g., yoga, walking meditations, or exercise) may help them be present in compassionate ways with how they experience stress in their bodies. Others living with chronic pain (e.g., painful breathing from the long-term effects of COVID-19) may need to use meditation practices that help them cope with pain as an entrée to spiritual practices. Finally, others may struggle with spiritual practices because past trauma makes them feel unsafe in their surroundings. Black therapist Resmaa Menakem (2017) offers many kinds of ‘settling practices’ that help people scan their environment and manage stress intensified by fear of harm, especially associated with racism.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Spiritual practices have the potential to deepen self-compassion and may make us more open to reflecting on our struggles, on our own or with others. For some, this kind of spiritual reflection may be solitary, or may include internal dialogues with spiritual guides, scholars, artists, musicians, novelist, and poets. Being part of spiritually oriented communities, meditation groups, book groups, or groups experiencing nature especially through one’s body (e.g., runners, skiers, hikers, climbers, kayakers) may foster this sense of deep connection with mystery, without a need for overt dialogue. For many, spiritual practices may compel them to search for a sense of purpose, especially during moral stress, or meanings that help them live with the mystery of suffering, and/or confront the harm of injustice.

**Conclusion**

The opening question, about what makes care spiritual for you, is an invitation to explore what make care spiritually trustworthy. I describe spiritual trust as a felt sense of being held within relational webs of goodness imbued with transcendence. Spiritual self-care practices that begin with our breath and our bodies connect our bodies, hearts, and minds in spiritually integrative ways. We pay attention to how we experience stress in our bodies, and how to feel held within goodness. This felt sense of spiritual trust enables us to sense when others are spiritually trustworthy, and to receive care that is spiritual from them. When we have ways to spiritually care for ourselves and receive care from others, we will trust the process of spiritual care, whether we are the ones receiving or offering care.

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1. Note to readers: This is part of a draft manuscript on the practice of socially just, interreligious, and research-literate spiritual care. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Research has found six kinds of spiritual struggles: divine struggles (e.g., feeling judged or punished by God); demonic struggles (e.g., feeling attacked by evil spirits); interpersonal spiritual struggles (e.g., feeling judged by religious communities or authorities); struggles with doubt; moral struggles (e.g., feeling responsible for causing harm); struggles with ultimate meanings (Pargament & Exline, 2021, p. 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. PytlikZillig and Kimbrought compare definitions of trust from business, management, organizational studies, psychology and sociology, economics cognitive and computer science and risk management studies in a three-page table in order in compiling this description of trust is a relational process. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am drawing upon a relational spirituality model articulated by psychologist of religion Steve Sandage and his colleagues, which defines spirituality as “ways of relating to the sacred” (Worthington & Sandage, 2016, p. 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Many experts on how we experience stress in our bodies advocate using some sort of breathing practice (see, for example, [this description from Harvard’s Medical School](https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/relaxation-techniques-breath-control-helps-quell-errant-stress-response)). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Center for Mindful Self-Compassion (www.centerformsc.org), founded in 2012, provides training and certification in their program designed to cultivate the life skill of self-compassion. Here is a sample instruction from this program and a description of how mindfulness practices help:

When you notice that you’re feeling stress or emotional discomfort, see if you can find the discomfort in your body. Where do you feel it the most? Make contact with the sensations as they arise in your body. Now, say to yourself, slowly: “This is a moment of suffering.” That’s mindfulness. “Suffering is part of living.” That’s common humanity. “May I be kind to myself.” That’s self-kindness. If you are having difficulty finding the right words, imagine that a dear friend or loved one is having the same problem as you. What would you say to this person, heart to-heart? If your friends were to hold just a few of your words in their mind, what would you like them to be? What message would you like to deliver? (pause) Now, see if you offer the same message to yourself. [ Adapted from: Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff, Mindful Self-Compassion Handout Booklet (San Diego, CA: Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, 2017), 35.] This practice is introduced early in the MSC program and is featured in Neff’s writing and video presentations, and this practice may be regarded as paradigmatic of the MSC practices. The practice is carefully constructed with evocative and somewhat open language so that persons with a range of experiences of self-criticism can employ it. This is in keeping with the description of MSC as being therapeutic, not therapy. The assumption is that the participants are functioning well enough to be able to adapt the scripts to fit their particular situation. The MSC practices take very seriously the somatic manifestation of the triggering uncomfortable feeling. Participants are invited to identify where in their body they are feeling the emotion and are taught gestures to bring a “soothing touch” to the affected area. There is specific training and practice time in which participants explore various self-soothing options (e.g., hands placed over one’s heart, a gentle hug) to find one that evokes a sense of care and comfort. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Brewer (2021) describes how loving kindness mediation helps many people let go of habitual life limiting ways of responding to stress. Loving kindness practices (*metta* from the ancient Pali language) decrease self-judgmental habit loops. Here is [a link](https://www.mindful.org/loving-kindness-takes-time-sharon-salzberg/) to a description and guided loving kindness practice by Sharon Salzberg (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Much has been written about how practices like mindfulness help us become aware of our habitual ways of coping shaped by our consumer culture (Brewer, 2017, 2021). Jon Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness this way: “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn 1995, p. 4). CPE educators and healthcare colleagues at Emory University’s [Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics](https://compassion.emory.edu/index.html) have used mindfulness practices in two programs: Cognitively Based Compassion Training (CBCT) and Compassion-Centered Spiritual Health (CCSH). See [their website](https://compassion.emory.edu/cbct-compassion-training/index.html), which includes links to [research](https://compassion.emory.edu/research.html) using this training. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Varieties of [religious and spiritual] R/S struggles include conflicts with deities, demons, and people over R/S problems, as well as personal struggles with R/S challenges involving morality, ultimate meaning, and doubt” (Stauner et al., 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A 2020 study found that four dimensions of greater wholeness in spiritual orienting systems (purposiveness, breadth and depth, life affirmation, and cohesiveness) predicted that people would grow when they faced religious and spiritual struggles (Hart et al., 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Schuhmann and her colleagues (2018) use philosophers Charles Taylor and Iris Murdoch to describe how spiritual care in secular contexts opens moral spaces for engaging with the Good, which Murdoch describes as transcendence beyond ego self-centeredness that helps us grapple with human vulnerability, suffering, and evil. Their efforts to articulate meaning making in spiritual care that is not tradition specific (Schuhmann & van der Geugten, 2017; Schuhmann et al., 2020) are part of what theologian Wesley Wildman (2016) describes as “Theology Without Walls: The Future of Transreligious Theology.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I describe the role of my spiritual practice of listening to sacred music in grieving Alex’s death in Doehring (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I am indebted to Jeff Zust, a retired Army chaplain who served for over 30 years, and currently a PhD student at Iliff and Denver University, for this insight. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In a review of research, Alesina and La Ferrara (2002) found that “the strongest factors associated with low trust are: (i) a recent history of traumatic experiences; (ii) belonging to a group that historically felt discriminated against, such as minorities (blacks in particular) and, to a lesser extent, women; (iii) being economically unsuccessful in terms of income and education; (iv) living in a racially mixed community and/or in one with a high degree of income disparity” (2002, p. 207). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)