

# Alexander Moreira-Almeida

Alexander Moreira-Almeida is a Brazilian psychiatrist who has carried out empirical studies of mediumship and spiritual experiences.

## Career

Alexander Moreira-Almeida trained in psychiatry and cognitive-behavioural therapy at the Institute of Psychiatry of the University of São Paulo, Brazil, where he obtained a PhD in health sciences. Formerly a postdoctoral fellow in religion and health at Duke University, he is now professor of psychiatry at UFJF's School of Medicine and founder and director of NUPES, the Research Center in Spirituality and Health, Brazil. He is chair of the Sections on Spirituality of the Latin American (APAL) and the Brazilian (ABP) Psychiatric Associations, and former chair of the Section on Religion, Spirituality and Psychiatry of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) (2014-17 and 2017-2020). He coordinated the proposal and approval of the [WPA Position Statement on Spirituality and Religion in Psychiatry](#) ([World Psychiatry 15:87-88, 2016](#)), and the translation of it into [Portuguese](#), [Spanish](#), [French](#), [Dutch](#), and [Arabic](#).

## Spiritual Experiences

Moreira-Almeida's main research interests are the mind-brain relationship and empirical studies of spiritual experiences, together with the methodology and epistemology that underly them. In a 2012 paper, Moreira-Almeida underlines the difficulty of trying to accommodate such phenomena within the standard reductionist model, which explains consciousness as a by-product of brain activity. These data support a philosophical shift away from reductionism towards other models of consciousness such as dualism and panpsychism, Moreira-Almeida argues.<sup>1</sup>

He expands on this theme in [Exploring Frontiers of the Mind-Brain Relationship](#) (2012), arguing against reductionist accounts of consciousness and advocating instead a balanced psychobiological approach, one that bridges the philosophy and science of mind to examine transcendent phenomena such as mystical states, near-death experiences and past-life memories.<sup>2</sup>

In a 2013 paper,<sup>3</sup> Moreira-Almeida notes a large increase in scientific studies on spirituality as a generic subject but also a relative lack of scientific awareness of spiritual experiences themselves, arguably the essence of spirituality. Spiritual experiences often involve altered states of consciousness, reports of anomalous experiences and of consciousness beyond the body, notably phenomena such as end-of-life and near death experiences, mediumship and putative memories of previous lives. Moreira-Almeida argues that an understanding of these opens the door to a larger view of human consciousness beyond brain-based models. Studies of meditative states show top-down causation of intention on brain states and end of life, while near death experiences reveal normal or even above normal mental

function under severe brain damage and stress. He points out that growing scientific attention to spiritual experiences<sup>4</sup> has exposed the shortcomings of reductionist accounts of consciousness.

## **Alister Hardy**

In a 2021 paper, <sup>5</sup> Moreira-Almeida discusses the academic contributions made by Alister Hardy, a British marine biologist, towards understanding spiritual experiences, outlining Hardy's methodological and epistemological approaches. His analysis of his large collection of spiritual experiences led him to believe that their transcendental core is the source of all religious and spiritual beliefs.

## **Spirituality Survey**

Moreira-Almeida and co-authors describe an investigation into the prevalence of spiritual and religious experiences (SREs) in Brazil (important because most surveys are limited to Europe and the United States).<sup>6</sup> Sixteen SREs were categorized in four groups: mystical, mediumistic, psi-related and past life/near-death experiences. A total of 1,053 Brazilians were surveyed. Ninety-two percent reported a single spiritual or religious experience in their lifetime and 47.5% experienced at least one SRE frequently. Mystical experiences (35%), psi-related experiences (27%), and mediumistic experiences (11%) were also reported. The authors conclude that spiritual and religious experiences are common and deserve more attention by the academic community.

## **Mediumship Studies**

### **Evidence Review**

In a 2012 study, Moreira-Almeida reviews the evidence for mediumship with reference to the mind-brain problem. In particular, the cases of [Leonora Piper](#) and [Chico Xavier](#) are found to demonstrate skills and knowledge unlikely to have been acquired by conventional communication routes. Moreira-Almeida discusses the implications of scientific research on mediums for understanding the mind-body problem.<sup>7</sup>

### **Chico Xavier**

A 2014 study investigated [Chico Xavier](#), a prolific Brazilian medium of the late twentieth century, focusing on 'letters' said to have been written in his hand directed by deceased individuals.<sup>8</sup> Thirteen scripts attributed to a single deceased person were identified and the information analysed. The likeliness of Xavier having access to the information by ordinary means were rated according in conjunction with documents and interviews with friends and family members of the deceased individual, using scales devised for this type of mediumship research. Of 99 items of information, 98 were rated as 'clear and precise fit', indicating that normal explanations in terms of fraud, chance, information leakage and cold reading were implausible. A second study carried out in 2019 analysed a single letter, in which 29 items of verifiable information were rated as a 'clear and

precise fit', including specific information such as names, events and intimate personal details.[9](#)

## **Failed Test**

In 2020, Moreira-Almeida and colleagues reported a test of the ability of eight mediums to write down accurate information concerning deceased individuals. Ninety-four blind proxy-sitters participated in 18 sessions, each rating a target mediumistic letter pertaining to someone they knew along with five control 'dummy' letters. Overall there was no difference in ratings between control and target letters, providing no evidence of anomalous information retrieval under controlled conditions. The authors argue that genuine mediumistic ability may be inhibited by a too strong emphasis on scientific controls, and recommend that future research aims for a more productive balance.[10](#)

## **Neuroimaging**

Psychography – the term given to a purported spirit communicating through a medium's hand – was investigated by means of functional neuroimaging of five mediums.[11](#) During this activity, the more experienced mediums displayed less brain activity compared to their normal (non-trance) writing than those that were less experienced, specifically in the left culmen, left hippocampus, left inferior occipital gyrus, left anterior cingulate, right superior temporal gyrus and right precentral gyrus. Also, a correlation was found between decreasing activity in the brain regions and increasing complexity of the writing produced during trance writing. Neither of these relationships is predicted by current brain-based models of consciousness.

In a 2022 paper,[12](#) Moreira-Almeida and co-authors describe a semi-naturalistic study (combining a degree of control with an ecologically valid design) of psychography (automatic writing). Three Brazilian mediums were continually filmed during readings. Twenty one sitters rated 26 automatically written letters. A large proportion (92.3%) of letters was considered as definitely or probably from a deceased relative. It was concluded that the promising results validated complementary investigative approaches to mediumship research.

## **Past-life Memories**

Moreira-Almeida and co-authors describe a review of 78 published investigations into past-life memories. They note that a large proportion (45%) were published between 1990 and 2010, with Asia the most investigated territory (58 studies). Eighty-four percent of investigations related to children. Unusual behaviours (74%) and birthmark/defects related to past-life personalities (37%) were most frequently recorded. The authors encourage investigations of past-life memories from all cultures.

## **Mental Health**

In a 2019 study, Moreira-Almeida and colleagues reviewed the most robust scientific evidence for a relationship between religiousness/spirituality and mental health.<sup>13</sup> They discuss possible mechanisms, such as life meaning, optimism, gratitude, social support, self-esteem, and aspiration for a healthier lifestyle. In scientific studies, individuals with higher levels of spiritual belief and religious practice demonstrated lower rates of depression, suicidal behaviour, and alcohol and drug use and abuse.

Moreira-Almeida contributed to a paper published in the prestigious *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* in 2021<sup>14</sup> describing the case of a Brazilian medium who, despite longterm psychotic symptoms, published more than 200 books and received several honorific academic awards. The authors propose that research aimed at differentiating pathological from non-pathological psychotic experiences is to be encouraged.

## Psychiatrists' Attitudes

Araujo and Moreira-Almeida carried out a study to evaluate the flexibility of psychiatrists' opinions on the mind body relationship (MBR) when they were exposed to non-materialist ideas. Thirty percent of the psychiatrists changed from a materialist to a non-materialist view of mind after attending a debate, while 17% changed in the opposite direction, entrenching materialist viewpoints. It was concluded that psychiatrists are generally open to non-reductionist philosophies and their opinions are relatively malleable.<sup>15</sup>

However, a literature review of academic psychology literature found widespread misrepresentations of the MBR and a strong bias against dualism and toward a physicalist approach.<sup>16</sup> Moreira-Almeida and Araujo discuss how this prevents psychiatrists from exploring a more encompassing viewpoint of human experience, in that of their clients.<sup>17</sup>

Michael Duggan

## Literature

Alminhana, L., & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2012). Personality, religiosity, and quality of life in individuals with anomalous experiences in religious groups. *Jornal Brasileiro de Psiquiatria* 62, 268-74.

Chibeni, S. S., & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2007). Remarks on the scientific exploration of "anomalous" psychiatric phenomena. *Revista de Psiquiatria Clínica* 34, 8-16.

Daher Jr, J., Damiano, R., Lucchetti, A., Moreira-Almeida, A., & Lucchetti, G. (2016). Research on experiences related to the possibility of consciousness beyond the brain: A bibliometric analysis of global scientific output. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 205/10, 1097-103.

Damiano, R.F., Machado, L., Loch, A.A., & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2021). [Ninety years of multiple psychotic-like and spiritual experiences in a Doctor Honoris](#)

[Causa: A case report and literature review.](#) *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases* 209/6, 449-53.

Freire, E. S., Rocha, A.C., Tasca, V.S., Marnet, M.M., & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2020). [Testing alleged mediumistic writing: An experimental controlled study.](#) *Science Direct*.

Ghinato Mainieri, A., Moreira-Almeida, A., Mathiak, K., Habel, U., & Kohn, N. (2017). Neural correlates of psychotic-like experiences during spiritual-trance state. *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* 266/10, 1016-1024.

Gomide, M., Wainstock, B.C., Silva, J., Mendes, C.G., & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2022). [Controlled semi-naturalistic protocol to investigate anomalous information reception in mediumship: Description and preliminary findings.](#) *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing* 18/5, 539-44.

Halbreich, U., Schulze, T., Botbol, M., Javed, A., Kallivayalil, R., Ghuloum, S., Baron, D., Moreira-Almeida, A., Musalek, M., Fung, Wai Lun A., Sharma, A., Tasman, A., Christodoulou, N., Kasper, S., & Ivbijaro, G. (2019). Partnerships for interdisciplinary collaborative global well-being. *Asia-Pacific Psychiatry* 11. e12366. 10.1111/appy.12366.

Moraes, L.J., Barbosa, G.S., Castro, J.P.G.B., Tucker, J.B., & Moreira-Almeida, A. [Academic studies on claimed past-life memories: A scoping review.](#) *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing* 3, 371-78.

Monteiro de Barros, M.C., Leão, F.C., Vallada Filho, H., Lucchetti, G., Moreira-Almeida, A., & Prieto Peres, M.F. (2022). [Prevalence of spiritual and religious experiences in the general population: A Brazilian nationwide study.](#) *Transcultural Psychiatry* (April 6).

Moreira-Almeida, A. (2006). Review of *Is There Life After Death?*, by D. Lester. *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 24, 245-54.

Moreira-Almeida, A. (2012). Scientific research on mediumship and mind-brain relationship: Reviewing the evidence. *Revista de Psiquiatria Clínica* 40, 233-40.

Moreira-Almeida, A. (2013). Implications of spiritual experiences to the understanding of mind-brain relationship. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 6, 585-89.

Moreira-Almeida, A., & Santos, F. (eds.) (2012). *Exploring Frontiers of the Mind-Brain Relationship*. 10.1007/978-1-4614-0647-1.

Moreira-Almeida, A., Caixeta, L., Leão, F., & Newberg, A. (2012). Neuroimaging during Trance State: A Contribution to the Study of Dissociation. *PloS one* 7. e49360. 10.1371/journal.pone.0049360.

Moreira-Almeida, A. & Araujo, S. (2015). Does the brain produce the mind? A survey of psychiatrists' opinions. *Archives of Clinical Psychiatry* 42, 74-75.

Moreira-Almeida, A. & Araujo, S. (2017). The mind-brain problem in psychiatry: Why theoretical pluralism is better than theoretical monism. *Dialogues in*

*Philosophy, Mental and Neuro Sciences* 10, 23-25.

Moreira-Almeida, A. & Lotufo-Neto, F. (2017). Methodological guidelines to investigate altered states of consciousness and anomalous experiences. *International Review of Psychiatry* 29, 1-10.

Moreira-Almeida, A., Araújo, S. & Cloninger, C. (2018). The presentation of the mind-brain problem in leading psychiatry journals. *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry* 40, 335-42.

Moreira-Almeida, A., de Freitas, M.H., & Schmidt, B.E. (2021). [Alister Hardy: A naturalist of the spiritual realm](#). *Religions* 12, 713.

Paraná, D., Rocha, A., Freire, E., Lotufo-Neto, F. & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2019). An empirical investigation of alleged mediumistic writing: A case study of Chico Xavier's letters. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 207/1, 1088-1097.

Rezende-Pinto, A., Moreira-Almeida, A., Ribeiro de Araújo, M., Laranjeira, R., & Vallada, H. (2018). The effect of religiosity during childhood and adolescence on drug consumption patterns in adults addicted to crack cocaine. *British Journal of Psychology Open* 4, 324-31.

Rezende-Pinto, A., Schumann, C., & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2019). Spirituality, religiousness and mental health: *Scientific Evidence*. [https://www.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21221-6\\_5](https://www.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21221-6_5)

Rocha, A. C., Parana, D., Freire, E. S., Lotufo Neto, F., & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2014). Investigating the accuracy of alleged mediumistic writing: a case study of Chico Xavier's letters. *EXPLORE: The Journal of Science and Healing* 10, 300-8.

Sech Junior, A., Araújo, S. F., & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2013). William James and psychical research: Toward a radical science of mind. *History of Psychiatry* 24, 62-78.

Silva, C. & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2018). Who does believe in life after death? Brazilian data from clinical and non-clinical samples. *Journal of Religion and Health* 58, 10.1007/s10943-018-0723-y.

Siqueira, J., Fernandes, N., & Moreira-Almeida, A. (2018). Association between religiosity and happiness in patients with chronic kidney disease on hemodialysis. *Brazilian Journal of Nephrology* 41. <https://www.doi.org/10.1590/2175-8239-jbn-2018-0096>

Sleutjes, A., Moreira-Almeida, A., & Greyson, B. (2014). Almost 40 years investigating near-death experiences: An overview of mainstream scientific journals. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 202, 833-36.

## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- [1](#). Moreira-Almeida & Santos (2012).
- [2](#). Moreira-Almeida (2012).

- [3.](#) Moreira-Almeida (2013).
- [4.](#) Chibeni et al. (2007), Moreira-Almeida et al. (2013).
- [5.](#) Moreira-Almeida et al. (2021).
- [6.](#) Monteiro de Barros et al. (2022).
- [7.](#) Moreira-Almeida (2012).
- [8.](#) Rocha et al. (2014).
- [9.](#) Paraná et al. (2019).
- [10.](#) Freire et al. (2020).
- [11.](#) Moreira-Almeida et al. (2012).
- [12.](#) Gomide (2022).
- [13.](#) Rezende-Pinto et al. (2019).
- [14.](#) Damiano et al. (2021).
- [15.](#) Moreira-Almeida & Araujo (2015).
- [16.](#) Moreira-Almeida et al. (2018).
- [17.](#) Moreira-Almeida & Araujo (2017).