



Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



Introduction: Special issue on ‘Religion, Culture, and Extraordinary Experience’

Guest editor: Gregory Shushan

Honorary Research Fellow, University of Wales Trinity Saint David

g.shushan@uwtsd.ac.uk

Despite longstanding theoretical and methodological objections, scholarly research into so-called ‘religious experience’ continues to flourish. This issue of the Journal for the Study of Religious Experience is dedicated to exploring the relationships between religion, culture, and unusual experiences which are commonly viewed in religious, spiritual, or mystical terms within their own local contexts. Examples of such experiences include (but are not limited to) unitive, visionary, transcendent, numinous, mediumistic, near-death, and out-of-body, as well as other kinds of deathbed phenomena, supernatural healings, and divine revelations, voices, and precognitions. The contributions here are grounded variously in historical research and ethnographic and sociological fieldwork, though are all characterized by sound theory and method. It is especially gratifying that many are of an interdisciplinary nature.

The kinds of questions underlying this issue include:

- In what ways do people negotiate, interpret, and integrate extraordinary experiences into their beliefs systems?
- Can such experiences account for the origins of religious beliefs?
- Are extraordinary experiences ‘all in the brain’?
- In what ways does culture influence experience?
- Do extraordinary experiences challenge or support cultural-linguistic constructivist assumptions concerning religious phenomena?
- What are the implications of extraordinary experiences for debates surrounding terminology in the Study of Religions (e.g., ‘religion’, ‘religious experience’)?

In the first article, German ethnologist and photographer Dirk Schlottman guides us through the world of the Hwanghaedo tradition of Korean shamanism, while also questioning Western scholarly assumptions about spirit possession and other experiential phenomena. The article is supplemented by the author’s own evocative and artistic photographs.

The second article, by U.S. Hinduism scholar Loriliai Biernacki, is a highly innovative and interdisciplinary exploration of transcendent experiences in sports, interpreted through the lenses of Tantric practices and cognitive science.

Rudolph Steiner's writings are the subject of the third paper, which study of religions scholar Loren Fetterman utilizes in his critique of cultural/linguistic constructivist interpretations of mystical experiences, and to propose a theory that also draws upon transpersonal psychology and neuroscience.

Study of religions scholar (and Lampeter alumnus) Jennifer Uzzell then examines anomalous experiences in contemporary Pagan communities, and contrasts them with William James' definition of religious experience – particularly in relation to the notion of transcendence.

In our last formal article, Medieval historian Simon Young presents the results of his survey of children's fairy experiences, looking at the questions of how children integrate such experiences into their beliefs systems and spiritual development.

We are also pleased to include in this issue a special section on the eminent anthropologist Edith Turner (1921-2016), much of whose work highlights the centrality of extraordinary experiences in religious beliefs and rituals. First is a piece entitled 'The Body and the Spirit,' which Turner wrote for the symposium *Anthropology and the Paranormal*, held at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California in 2013. Though brief, it is rich with the experience, insight, wisdom, and warmth that typifies Turner's writings. She also very helpfully included a list of references to her works which concern the paranormal in anthropology. Accompanying this piece are reflections by anthropologist Jack Hunter on Turner's significance to the ethnographical study of religious experience. Finally, we are fortunate to be able to include a series of short personal narratives by three of Edith and Victor Turner's children, concerning their memories of accompanying their parents on fieldwork in Africa during the 1950s. Written especially for this issue, these pieces give us new insight into the physical, everyday contexts of the Turner's immense contribution to the study of religious ritual and experience across cultures. We hope that this small tribute will inspire further reflections upon and engagement with Turner's life and works.