



Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



Introduction

Bettina E. Schmidt
University of Wales Trinity Saint David
b.schmidt@uwtsd.ac.uk

The Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, founded by Sir Alister Hardy (1896-1985), houses a unique archive of personal accounts of a religious or spiritual experience. We have now over 6000 narratives, some very short and some over several pages long. Each of them present a unique insight into a personal experience with “a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self” as the so-called Hardy Question phrased it. Some narratives report a Near-Death Experience (NDE), Afterlife experience, or an experience with angels; others speak about the awareness of an overwhelming presence while walking in a crowd or in nature. Among the accounts are experiences from ordinary people of different beliefs and commitments, including agnostics. One of the first accounts describes the uplifting experience the person felt in a hotel room in London in 1948 (RERC 000001). Another refers to an experience in the West Indies, during a walk through the hills of St Kitts (RERC 000011). A common feature in most accounts is the sense of uniqueness of the experience, that it is not possible to repeat it and that it changed one’s perception of things, sometimes even their life. Because of the highly personal and subjective perception of the experience, the accounts are difficult to examine in an objectified, quantitative manner. Nonetheless, over time several scholars have worked with the accounts and published their analysis of them, from Alister Hardy (e.g., 1966, 1997) to David Hay (1982) and Peter Fenwick (1997), to name just a few. The new issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* continues the tradition of Alister Hardy and presents a range of approaches to the study of religious experience, some of them with reference to some of the accounts while others refer to different examples of non-ordinary experiences.

The first article is by June Boyce-Tillman and is based on her Alister Hardy Lampeter Lecture given in 2015. Focussing on the study of angels, Boyce-Tillman shows various analytical frames to examine stories on angels. One of her themes is the spiritual experience in music as Boyce-Tillman combines academic scholarship and rigour with her experience as performer. The following article by Jonathan Tuckett also discusses different methodologies in the study of religious experience. His focus is on

¹ All accounts referenced with a six digit number following the acronym RERC are from the Archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter, UK.

phenomenology of religious experience and he discusses the differences between two phenomenological accounts of what it means to study religious experience. His critical engagement with Ninian Smart and other phenomenologists presents an interesting insight into the study of religious experiences.

The following two articles present case studies that take the study of religious experience in two different areas. Valerie Duffy-Cross presents the result of a small-scale empirical study about children's spirituality and silence. Following in the footsteps of David Hay, a former director of RERC, Duffy-Cross, a former school teacher and current PhD student, investigates the impact of opportunities for, and attitudes towards silence and solitude on children's spirituality. Luc M. H. De Backer examines conversion, a religious experience with life-changing impact, however, not from a Christian background but from a Hindu tradition. De Backer shows in his study that is based on fieldwork in various European centres of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) the different understanding of conversion within Hinduism and how it affects people.

The final article is by Adam Powell who presents initial results of the 'Hearing the Voice' project (Durham University). The project explores within a multi-disciplinary framework hallucinatory-type phenomena in an attempt to reevaluate and reframe discussions of these experiences. The focus is on four cases of experiences with supernatural voices and visions in the United States from the first half of the nineteenth century. Powell uses the historical cases to examine the value of bio-cultural models of religious experience.

This third issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* shows the richness of the area and the range of scholars involved in it. From theoretical contributions to empirical studies, from historical cases to the 21st century, from professors, post-docs and PhD students, the study of religious and spiritual experience is diverse and multi-disciplinary, no longer a forgotten path for a few handful of scholars but a rich field that produces fascinating research projects and insights into human experiences.

References

- Fenwick, P. & Fenwick, E. (1997) *The Trust in the Light: An Investigation of over 300 Near-Death Experiences*. New York: Berkeley Trade.
- Hardy, A. (1966) *The Divine Flame: An Essay towards a Natural History of Religion*. Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit.
- (1979) *The Spiritual Nature of Man*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Hay, D. (1982) *Exploring Inner Space: Scientists and Experience*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.