



Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



Introduction

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2019 was a busy and exciting year for the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC). We celebrated the 50th anniversary with a special conference at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in Lampeter. It was wonderful to see so many people in Lampeter discussing over three days the spread and future of the study of religious experience. In addition, the Alister Hardy Trust celebrated the foundation of the research centre in Oxford and invited scholars and members to its annual Oxford meeting to reflect on the legacy of Sir Alister Hardy's work as well as the growing archive of personal accounts that is held in Lampeter. These events demonstrated once again the strength and significance of the study of religious experience. One of the issues that became very evident was the diverse nature of the experiences that do not fit any longer squarely under the label 'religious'. While some scholars started to refer to religious and spiritual experience, others began to describe them as non-ordinary which would also include the experience of people that do not identify as religious nor spiritual. This openness was at the heart of the collection from its beginning. The archive contains numerous accounts of experiences that took place during a walk in nature, while listening to the radio, or while reading a book. Some experiences also took place in a religious setting such as a church, though not always during a service but when visiting the church alone. Many experiencers explicitly mentioned that they had distanced themselves from their religious upbringing at the time of the experience. Consequently, many would not describe themselves as religious. How can then their experience become labelled religious?

But the debate goes further. In addition to the debate on which label to give an extraordinary experience, it is also important to avoid limiting the experience to mainstream phenomena. As already Alister Hardy pointed out in his work, our field is not only the study of visions of saints or other figures. We are also researching phenomena of seeing light, dreaming, trance and more. And these experiences have a wider impact on the experiencers as we have shown in another recent publication, the edited volume *Spirituality and Wellbeing: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Religious Experience and Health* (Schmidt/Leonardi 2020). The impact of having an extraordinary experience on wellbeing has been yet little studied but is worth to pursue

as the book shows. It also demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of our field with contributors from a range of different academic disciplines.

The sixth volume of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* reflects this diversity of the area. The study of religious experience is indeed multi-disciplinary and vibrant. In light of the celebrations last year the volume will be divided in two issues. One issue which will be published later this year contains articles derived from the Lampeter conference. It is edited by Jack Hunter, honorary research fellow at the Religious Experience Research Centre, and represents a selection of the papers presented at the conference.

This first issue which is published today contains the Alister Hardy Oxford lecture given in October 2019 by Rupert Sheldrake which presents an overview of his research. He also explains his links to Sir Alister Hardy and the research centre. The next article is by Mark Fox in which he outlines his more recent research on the accounts. It is a fascinating example of how useful the accounts are to further our understanding of religious experiences. The third article is by Mara Steenhuisen, a PhD student at UWTSD who researches orb phenomenon. For this article she also looked at accounts in the RERC archive that mentioned experiences with seeing orbs. While orbs are usually linked to digital photography, some are also seen without the technical lens as the article explains. The fourth article is a fieldwork report by Adam Powell and Christopher Cook in which they present insights into their fieldwork about experiences taking place in the boundary between wakefulness and sleep. Based on a qualitative study with Christians and Spiritualists their contribution demonstrates the vibrancy of research in the field of experiences whether they are religious, spiritual, non-ordinary or ordinary.

There are currently two more special issues of the Journal in preparation. One will be edited by Jack Hunter and will feature articles around the wider topic of ecology and religious experience. The second special issue will be edited by Wendy Dossett, Andy Burns and Bettina Schmidt on ordinary experiences. These two special issues will be published later this year and will add to the diversity of the study of religious – and ordinary – experience.

References

Schmidt, Bettina E. and Jeff Leonardi. 2000. *Spirituality and Wellbeing: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Religious Experience and Health*. Sheffield: Equinox.