

**Editorial:**  
**Religious Experience and Ecology**

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Welcome to Vol. 7 No. 2 of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*. This special issue is an exploration of a theme that was very close to the heart of the founder of our research centre - the relationship between ecology and religious experience. Indeed, Sir Alister Hardy (1896-1985) started his academic career as a marine ecologist, and in that field is most widely known for his contributions to the study of plankton and their many fundamental connections to other parts of marine ecosystems. Hardy is also credited with the invention of the Continuous Plankton Recorder (CPR), used for documenting plankton levels in the ocean, and his research is still the benchmark for current work in this area (Continuous Plankton Recorder Survey, 2021). Following his retirement in 1969, after a string of prestigious university posts, and in order to pursue another of his life-long fascinations, Hardy established the Religious Experience Research Unit (RERU) at Manchester College, Oxford, and began the process of collecting, documenting and analysing contemporary reports of religious and spiritual experience. Today the archive is housed at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter campus (with the new name of 'Religious Experience Research Centre'), and contains over 6,000 first-hand accounts of religious experiences submitted by the general public (RERC, 2021).

Hardy's fascination for religious experience co-evolved with his love for, and curiosity about, the natural world. In his autobiographical notes, Hardy recalls having powerful and transformative experiences in nature during his childhood years, which would have a significant impact on the later unfurling of his life and work. He explains how as a student he would occasionally slip into reveries while observing the behaviour of butterflies, or experience moments of ecstasy when walking along the banks of the river near his school in Oundle, Nottinghamshire. He writes:

There is no doubt that as a boy I was becoming what might be described as a nature mystic. Somehow, I felt the presence of something which was beyond and

yet in a way part of all the things that thrilled me - the wildflowers, and indeed the insects too. I will now record something [that] I have never told anyone before, but now that I am in my 88th year I think I can admit it. Just occasionally when I was sure that no one could see me, I became so overcome with the glory of the natural scene, that for a moment or two I fell on my knees in prayer - not prayer asking for anything, but thanking God, who felt very real to me, for the glories of his Kingdom and for allowing me to feel them. It was always by the running waterside that I did this, perhaps in front of a great foam of meadowsweet or purple loosestrife (Hardy, cited in Hay, 2013).

The philosopher and scholar of mysticism W.T. Stace (1886-1967) identified nature mysticism as one of the main forms of mystical experience more generally. He suggested, however, that these experiences be referred to as 'extrovertive' - as distinct from much more inward facing 'introvertive' experiences - because they are often triggered by, and 'transfigure,' the external physical landscape and environment, frequently inducing a sense of the underlying unity of the natural world (Stace, 1960, p. 15). The RERC archive contains numerous similar accounts of extraordinary and transcendent experiences apparently induced by immersion in vibrant ecological systems (a small sample of these accounts has been collected in Hunter, 2019b). In his pioneering study of the reports contained in the archive, *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (1979), Hardy identified 'natural beauty' as one of the most common triggers of religious experiences (p. 81), marginally more common than religious worship, clearly suggesting an important correlation between natural environments and extraordinary experiences. More recently, Paul Marshall (2005) has conducted an extensive study of the relationship between mystical experiences and the natural world. In the preface to his book on the subject, Marshall explains the value in taking a renewed look at extrovertive mystical experiences:

Apart from their significance as life-transforming events, the experiences are of considerable theoretical interest. They have been important in the modern study of mysticism, constituting one of the major types of mystical experience recognised by scholars [...] and they promise to be important in the future development of the field [...] The experiences provide an important test case for evaluating explanations [...] Extrovertive experience is also of interest for the stimulus it could give to the study of mind [...] Are there non-sensory forms of contact with the world? Does mind exist beyond the brain? (Marshall, 2005, p. vii).

We could also add the ecological crisis to this list of reasons for taking a renewed look at extrovertive mystical experiences. Many commentators have suggested that the current ecological crisis has its roots in the perceived disconnect between humans and our natural environment, which has emerged, especially in the Western world, over the last two hundred years (Roszak, 1993). The restoration of a sense of connection to the natural world has, therefore, been proposed as one important way of bringing about change in social and cultural attitudes and behaviours towards the environment. In a review of the research literature on what has come to be known as “connectedness to nature theory” (CNT), Restall & Conrad (2015) explain that:

[.] a relationship with the natural world directly affects people's physical, mental, and overall wellbeing due to benefits gained by increased exposure to nature and positive experiences in the natural world [...] Direct experiences with natural settings seem to have very profound emotional effects on people [...] and a stronger commitment to nature could lead to higher human interest in environmental protection (Restall & Conrad, 2015, p. 1).

Extrovertive mystical experiences - with their ‘profound emotional effects’ on the experiencer - may represent powerful facilitators of nature connectedness and pro-environmental behaviour. This could be an important area of future engagement for religious experience research going forward (cf. Kettner *et al.*, 2019).

### **Phenomenology and Ecology: Unity and Diversity**

The next section will consider some of the key phenomenological features of extrovertive experiences, and consider in what ways they might resonate with ecological functions and processes (see Hunter 2021c, for a more thorough exploration on this thread). Extrovertive experiences in natural settings, as Stace pointed out, are often associated with a sense of unity and oneness in nature - a trait that links extrovertive experiences to classical mystical-type experiences, as cultivated in many of the world’s mystical traditions (Anthony, Hermans & Sterkens, 2010). Take, for example, the following account of an extrovertive experience from the RERC archive:

Some 12 years ago I used to have four tall Elm Trees on our garden lawn [...] I was strongly drawn to these trees and used to stroke the trunks and talk to them [...] I always felt their response through a strong vibration through my hands then

through my whole body. This convinced me that I am One with All Beings; the same life force which flows through my body flows through all vegetation, animals, birds, fish, minerals, under the ground or sea, even the very stones we walk on. Every animate and inanimate thing is held together with atoms which are of the whole 'Divine Being.'

RERC Reference: 002384, Female, 1960.

The oneness of nature appears to be the essential theme of this experience - nature is understood as a single 'Divine Being' - but there are also extrovertive experiences that seem to reveal and emphasise diversity, complexity and multiplicity, rather than a purely monistic-unitary vision. The following account for example, emphasises not only the unity of the natural environment, but also the variety of different living and non-living forms that comprise it as a whole. The experience took place under the exceptional circumstances of the front-lines of the first world war in 1917:

[...] The nearer I drew to the village the more alive the surroundings seemed to become. It was as if something which had been dormant when I was in the wood were coming alive. I must have drifted into an exalted state. The moon, when I looked up at it, seemed to have become personalised and observant, as if it were aware of my presence [...] A sweet scent filled the air. Early shoots were breaking from sticky buds of the balsam poplars [...] The river conveyed that it had seen me before [...] A feeling that I was being absorbed into the living surroundings gained in intensity and was working up to a climax [...] [It] seemed to come out of the sky in which were resounding majestic harmonies. The thought, 'that is the music of the spheres' was immediately followed by a glimpse of luminous bodies - meteors or stars - circulating in predestined courses emitting both light and music.

RERC Reference: 000035, Male, 1917.

Experiences such as this could be thought of as flashes of animistic insight - a realisation that, as Graham Harvey has eloquently put it, 'the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others' (Harvey, 2005, p. xi). In the above experience a dialogue is established between the experiencer and the river, the moon and the trees. But these multiple voices are just the prelude to the climax of the experience - a symphonic harmonising of the many diverse voices of nature into a whole conceived as 'the music of the spheres.' Extrovertive experiences, then, reveal an

image of the world as *both* fundamentally ‘unitary and interconnected’ *and* ‘diverse, complex and multiple.’

This both/and understanding of the natural world is also echoed in the structure and functioning of ecological systems - which are both holistic and multiplex in nature. The plant biologist Frederic Clements (1874-1945), for example, thought of ecosystems as large-scale organisms in their own right, consisting of a multitude of smaller interconnected organisms (plants, animals, and so on). Indeed, Clements observed that ecosystems have a tendency to develop *towards* increased complexity, and higher levels of biodiversity and interconnection over time. He called this process ‘succession,’ which he understood as a teleological (directional) progression toward what he called ‘climax vegetation,’ such as a forest. Clements conceived of the climax ecosystem as an ‘organism or “superorganism” with its own life history, which followed predetermined, teleological paths,’ constantly moving in the direction of greater biodiversity and ‘the overall harmony and stability of the superorganism’ (Foster & Clarke, 2008).<sup>1</sup> From Clements’ perspective, natural systems may be thought of as harmonic wholes consisting of multiple component parts, a realisation arrived at through the observation of ecological systems, but that also resonates with the nature mystical experiences described above.

Extrovertive experiences, then, might be understood as instances when the experiencer no longer perceives a separation between themselves and the ecosystem that surrounds them, becoming simultaneously aware of the diversity and interconnectivity of life, as well as its underlying unity and their nested position with it. In these moments, when experience is in harmony with ecological reality, we might say that the experiencer has entered into a state of ‘ecological consciousness,’ or that they have developed an awareness of the ‘ecological self.’

### **Extraordinary Experience and the Ecological Self**

The concept of the ‘ecological self’ derives from the writings of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009), founder of the ‘deep ecology’ movement. Naess suggested that through the process of what he called ‘self-realization’ human beings will ultimately move away from egoic (bounded, individual) conceptions of the self towards an ‘ecological self.’ Naess does not give an explicit definition of the ecological self, but does

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of some of the controversies surrounding the idea that ecosystems might be teleological super-organisms, as well as its off-shoot and extension - the Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock, 2000) - see Hunter (2020) and Hunter (2019a). It is also interesting to note, as I have done in Hunter (2019a) that popular writers on the paranormal, such as journalist John Keel (1930-2009), also came to similar conclusions about the Earth as a living super-organism, though unlike ecologists his ideas were based on years spent chasing ghosts, monsters and UFOs (Hunter, 2019a, pp. 25-27).

offer a brief sentence, suggesting that the “ecological self of a person is that with which [the] person identifies.” He explains:

This key sentence (rather than a definition) about the self shifts the burden of clarification from the term "self" to that of "identification," or rather "process of identification" (Naess, 1995, p. 227)

The ecological self emerges, therefore, when a person comes to identify the environment with themselves to the extent that they realise that conservation of the natural world is simultaneously an act of self-preservation. In essence, it is a realisation that there is no solid, impermeable boundary between the self and the ecosystem - that the self is deeply embedded within, and is a part of, the wider ecological system, and is connected to all other aspects of it. The science of ecology has long highlighted the complex connections between phenomena in the natural world - from interactions between species within an ecosystem, to interactions between ecosystems in the wider global system, and beyond. Ecological consciousness is an awareness of this fundamental interconnection, and the ecological self is the model we construct from that knowledge to orient us in the world.

In the previous issue of this journal - on the theme of ‘The Future of the Study of Religious and Spiritual Experience’ - I wrote an article (Hunter, 2021a) that sought to show how there are very often considerable overlaps between those experiences that are labelled as ‘paranormal’ - even the most extreme of paranormal experiences, referred to as ‘high strangeness’ cases - and those experiences that are frequently classified as ‘religious,’ ‘mystical’ or ‘spiritual.’ There are phenomenological similarities - the role of light in many extraordinary experiences, for example, as well as similarities in terms of their after-effects. All manner of extraordinary experiences have been found to be associated with the emergence of greater identification with the natural world. Life-time experience with psychedelics has been found to be associated with an enhanced sense of nature connectedness, for example (Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017). An apparent connection between out-of-body experiences (OBE), near-death experiences (NDE), alien abduction experiences and a renewed sense of connection to nature has also been recognised in the literature (Ring & Valarino, 2006, p. 125). Is it a co-incidence that paranormal, religious and other extraordinary experiences are associated with both expanded notions of the self and an enhanced sense of nature connectedness?<sup>2</sup>

One possible line of reasoning that I have been exploring in relation to the emergence of ecological consciousness following extraordinary experiences is that these

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the relationship of the ecological self to extraordinary experiences see Hunter 2020b and 2020c.

experiences - whether an alien abduction experience, extrovertive mystical experience, of magic mushroom trip - effectively shake experiencers out of their everyday routines, cultural frameworks and habits and remind them that they are part of a wider living system. The ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood (1939-2008), for example, reported a transformation of consciousness that followed in the wake of a particularly intense, and highly extraordinary experience in the terrifying grip of a crocodile's death twist. Plumwood survived the ordeal, and went on to write about it in great detail, but what is of particular interest here is the way that the experience - much like the paranormal and religious experiences discussed above - shifted her perspective from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric point of view:

Before the encounter, it was as if I saw the whole universe as framed by my own narrative, as though the two were joined perfectly and seamlessly together. As my own narrative and the larger story were ripped apart, I glimpsed a shockingly indifferent world in which I had no more significance than any other edible being. The thought, *This can't be happening to me, I'm a human being. I am more than just food!* was one component of my terminal incredulity. It was a shocking reduction, from a complex human being to a mere piece of meat [...] Large predators like lions and crocodiles present an important test for us. An ecosystem's ability to support large predators is a mark of its ecological integrity. Crocodiles and other creatures that can take human life also present a test of our acceptance of our ecological identity. When they're allowed to live freely, these creatures indicate our preparedness to coexist with the otherness of the earth, and to recognize ourselves in mutual, ecological terms, as part of the food chain, eaten as well as eater (Plumwood, 2000).

Paranormal and religious experiences may also perform the same function as Plumwood's crocodile experience - in the case of alien abduction experiences, or other forms of entity encounter, for example, reminding the experiencer that they are part of a much larger 'invisible ecosystem,' and that they are not at the top of the food chain (Foster, 2019 and Grieve-Carlson, 2019). This may also go some way towards explaining why there can also be positive effects (such as an enhanced sense of nature connection and pro-environmental behaviour), as a result of very negative and frightening experiences (crocodiles and abductions), as well as from positive experiences (such as interactions with entities on psychedelics, or experiences of mystical union with nature, for example). Ecological consciousness, then, may be thought of more as a remembering of our embeddedness in ecological systems - a remembering brought about when the

blinkers of our cultural models slip aside - rather than necessarily as a byproduct, emergent property, or a pre-condition of extraordinary experiences. Extraordinary experiences of all different types appear to remind us of something that our cultural models have convinced us to ignore - our relationship with the world.

### **Decolonising Religious Experience Research**

Another of the suggestions for future directions for research on religious and spiritual experiences made in the last issue was for a greater engagement with indigenous research methods, the inclusion of indigenous research perspectives, and greater representation for indigenous research on extraordinary experience. Religious experience researchers have adopted a range of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies since the discipline's inception in the nineteenth century, which has contributed to our diverse and interdisciplinary field of research. Increasingly, however, historians of science are demonstrating that the research paradigms of the human and social sciences continue to perpetuate - often in subtle ways - out-dated colonialist models for understanding the world, as well as ontological assumptions that are not necessarily shared by non-Western (and especially indigenous) societies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

There is a tendency - even in work on religious experience - for social-scientific research methods to adopt positivist perspectives, methods and approaches that by their nature are at odds with the subject matter of religious experience research. Similarly, scientific research on religious experience has tended to be reductive in nature, attempting to find the location of a 'God Spot' in the brain, for example, or to create neat taxonomies of religious and spiritual experiences. These tendencies are a part of the cultural baggage that scientific religious experience research continues to carry, even when its own research findings often seem to point toward different ontological possibilities. Extrovertive experiences, for instance - which are very well documented in the literature, as we have seen - often seem to collapse any kind of distinction between the observer and the observed, or the subject and the object. This is, of course, a challenge to the notion of scientific objectivity itself, and leads to a sense cognitive dissonance in the field of religious experience research between what the data suggests and what the dominant paradigm will actually allow.

The growing field of indigenous research methods (which begin from very different ontological starting points to western scientific research methods), however, may offer new and exciting avenues for research on religious experience going forward - directions that do not rely on the assumptions that have shaped mainstream Western approaches to religious experience research. Indigenous research methodologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith,



for example, summarises the key differences between indigenous and dominant Western-scientific<sup>3</sup> epistemologies:

The indigenous research agenda is broad in its scope and ambitious in its intent. There are some things which make this agenda very different from the research agenda of large scientific organisations or of various national science research programmes. There are other elements, however, which are similar to any research programme which connects research to the 'good' of society. The elements that are different can be found in key words such as healing, decolonization, spiritual, recovery. These terms seem at odds with the research terminology of Western science, much too politically interested rather than neutral and objective (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 122).

Perhaps, unlike the positivist approach that has underlined most 'scientific' and 'social-scientific' research on religious experience in the past - and which denies the spiritual *a priori* - an approach that draws from indigenous methodologies might place the spiritual reality that these experiences seem to indicate on a level playing field with the social, cultural, psychological and other factors that are at play (and which Western science is much more willing to engage with). Arguing along related lines, in his chapter in *Greening the Paranormal* (2019), Ioway historian Lance Foster re-tells the story of Plenty Coups (1848-1932), chief of the Crow Nation, and his encounter with a water spirit while crossing the Missouri River. After a terrifying ordeal Plenty Coups and his band escape the Water-person, but rather than return to the site to investigate further, or to hunt for the mysterious creature to bring it home as a trophy, an offering is left and the location noted as an inhabited place best avoided. The story presents a radically different approach to extraordinary experiences to that generally employed in the Western scientific study of religious experience:

The indigenous way to encounter the invisible ecosystem was summed up by Plenty Coups: When you encounter strange things in this life, you just acknowledge their right to be here, the same as anything else; you leave them alone, and go on your way. But what I see is that it seems to be near impossible for the nonindigenous to leave things alone (Foster, 2019, p. 96).

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<sup>3</sup> Not all Western traditions necessarily share the same ontological assumptions as the 'Western-scientific' worldview.

Many indigenous societies understand that the world is fundamentally alive in a sense that is not recognized by mainstream materialist science. As an illustration of this key difference between indigenous and Western knowledge systems, biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer gives the example of the Anishinaabe word *Puhpowee*, which is defined as “the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth over night.” She goes on to add that “[t]he makers of this word understood a world of being, full of unseen energies that animate everything” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 49). Anishinaabe natural science is, therefore, an animistic natural science. These are very different foundations to those upon which the Western social scientific study of religious experience are built. Indigenous research begins from a holistic perspective rather than attempting to dissect, break apart or reduce the complexity of experience in the world. What, then, might the study of religious experience look like if it started from the principle of an animate natural world, or from an ontology of relationship, or holism, or complexity, or from a perspective that rejects the division of self and other, or internal and external? These are big questions and exciting opportunities for future exploration.

### Summary

To briefly summarise, there has been a long-standing recognition of the relationship between religious, mystical and spiritual experience and the natural world, indeed Sir Alister Hardy’s fascination with these two fields stemmed from his own extrovertive experiences as a young boy. Extrovertive experiences seem to reveal a dynamic relationship between unity and diversity in nature - some experiences seem to emphasise the underlying oneness of nature, while others emphasise multiplicity and complexity. This dynamic relationship is also reflected in perspectives that have emerged from ecological science, which point to ecosystems as holistic entities made up of many constituent interacting parts. Extrovertive experiences seem to be moments when the experiencer becomes aware of, and experiences themselves to be a part of, these wider systems of complexity. This may represent what Deep Ecologists have called ‘ecological consciousness’ or the ‘ecological self.’ Ecological consciousness emerges in situations where our cultural models are shattered or expanded, and we realise our place in the ecosystem. Ecological consciousness is not necessarily, therefore, a consequence or precondition of extraordinary experience, but rather may be a remembering of our embeddedness in ecological systems. Finally, perspectives from indigenous research methodologies and alternative ontological frameworks may help to overcome the cognitive dissonance that emerges when a discipline founded on positivist principles comes face-to-face with phenomena that seem to point to different ontological

possibilities and a spiritual reality. Greater engagement with indigenous research methods and perspective may go a long way toward revitalising the holistic study of nature and religious experience.

### **This Issue**

The first of our papers exploring the connections between ecology and religious experience is Renaud Evrard's contribution, which introduces the work of French sociologist and writer on the paranormal Bertrand Méheust, and draws particular attention to his synthesis of parapsychological and ecological themes. The major themes of Méheust's work are examined in relation to ecology, and Evrard concludes by summarising some of the key points of overlap between the worldview implied by ecological science and the findings and implications of parapsychological research.

Next, Aitor Boada-Benito's paper looks at the role of nature in early Christian hagiographic texts. Specifically, the paper examines the *Acts of Shirin*, a text that narrates the birth, conversion to Christianity, and subsequent capture and execution of Shirin, a young female Zoroastrian aristocrat born in 7th century Iraq. The account of Shirin's brutal death at the hands of her Zoroastrian persecutors contains several descriptions of environmental transformations surrounding the execution, in particular changes in the weather, which were seen as proof of Shirin's sanctity. Boada-Benito argues that the understanding of nature presented in hagiographical texts such as Shirin's were an important component in the way that early Christians constructed their sense of identity.

In 'Forests and Giants,' Rick Fehr takes us on a dream-time wander into the dark forests of Northern Ontario, where the interplay of shadow and light gives rise to simulacra and the sense of being watched through the trees by non-human eyes. Through the lens of his own fictional writings about giants, and the influence of the trees on his writing process, Fehr explores the twilight world of the forest as the meeting point of ecology and the imagination - where uncanny experiences (real or imagined) give rise to stories of other-than-human presences that serve to further animate the environment and invite us to participate and dream.

Next, in 'Madoodiswan as Sacred Maternal Pedagogy,' Renee E. Mazinegiizhigoo-kwe Bedard begins the process of representing an indigenous perspective on visionary experiences. Rooted in Anishnaabe tradition and worldview, Bedard's paper explores the pedagogic function of the Madoodiswan (sweatlodge) ceremony in providing a maternal-reconnection to the first Mother, Aki (Earth), and Gizhew-Manidoo (Creator; Great Spirit Being; The Great Mystery). She shares the story of her own visionary sweatlodge experience as a "foundation for exploring the dynamics and complexities of Anishnaabe-

kwewag understandings of ecology in connection to land, ceremony, womanhood, motherhood, teaching, learning, and knowledge creation,” and as a point of dialogue about traditional knowledge for indigenous women.

Next, Kip Redick introduces the concept of ‘kenotic walking’ - ‘walking self-emptying’ - in the context of long distance wilderness hiking. Redick argues that long distance hiking can be understood as a contemporary form of pilgrimage, and that the trials and processes of such feats of endurance can help to shift hikers out of their normal state of consciousness into flow states and into greater communion with the human and extra-human constituents of the natural environment.

The final contribution to this issue is a short paper outlining the evolution of the MA in Ecology and Spirituality, currently being taught as an on-line distance learning course by the Sophia Centre, University of Wales Trinity Saint David. The paper features extracts from an interview with Dr. Andy Letcher, who helped to initiate the first incarnation of the MA at Schumacher College on the Dartington Estate in Devon. The paper concludes with an overview of the different strands currently being explored by staff and students on the MA in its most recent form.

I hope you enjoy the issue!

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