



## Introduction: Journal for the Study of Religious Experience

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The academic study of religious experience is, while it can look back on a relatively long history, still in its infancy. The work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was fundamental in locating religious experience at the core of religion; however his essentialist approach led to a relatively limited understanding of religious experience which does not reflect any longer today's view. While Schleiermacher and other scholars such as Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) privileged a Christian, in particular Protestant, understanding of religious experience as an experience of God, scholars today do not limit any longer the definition in such a euro-centric manner but embrace a range of experiences, whether they are called religious, spiritual or even non-religious. This broad understanding of religious experience is at the heart of the new *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*.

The journal is published by the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. The centre was founded by Sir Alister Hardy (1896-1985), a renowned scientist, who promoted a disciplined and scientific approach to the complex field of religious and spiritual experience, similar to the way in which he approached natural science. His first step was to gather data by asking people from the public to send him accounts of first-hand experiences with spiritual or religious powers. Inspired by the overwhelming response to the so-called Hardy Question ("Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self") which appeared in newspapers such as the Guardian, Observer, Times and Daily Mail, Hardy established in 1969 the Religious Experience Research Unit at Manchester College, Oxford which later was renamed Religious Experience Research Centre. The aim of the centre which is funded by the Alister Hardy Trust is to promote the academic study of religious experience, to support further research into as well as teaching of religious experience. By establishing this new open access journal we continue Sir Alister Hardy's vision of the study of religious experience. We want to promote a wide understanding of religious experience which embraces spiritual and non-religious experiences and is not limited to research in the West but reflects the universal character of religious experience.

This first issue of the journal demonstrates the richness of research into religious experience. The articles represent a selection of topics and academic disciplines. The

first article is by Peggy Morgan, the former Director of RERC, who highlights the transatlantic context of the early study of religious experience, focusing on the work of William James and Alister Hardy. Her article gives an informative insight into the history of the study of religious experience and links successfully the founder of the Religious Experience Research centre, Sir Alister Hardy, with the current debate about the study of religious experience within the academic study of religions. The following two articles are also inspired by the work of Alister Hardy and make valuable contributions to the debate on science and religion. Leslie Francis, the Chairman of the Alister Hardy Trust, presents a scientific analysis of a case of mystical experience. Coming from psychology of religion Francis showcases the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale as a way to study religious experience from a scientific angle. Jeff Astley, the first Alister Hardy Professor, looks from a theological perspective at the debate of scientific reductionism. He explores the distinction between methodological and ontological types of reductionism and presents an alternative epistemology. Both articles engage with the fundamental methodological challenges of religious experience that go back to Alister Hardy and his aim to develop a scientific study of religious experience.

The following three articles of this first issue represent the diversity of experiences. Cafer Yaran gives an overview of recent research about religious experience in Turkey, hence within an Islamic context. His article highlights the universality of religious experience and presents a strong argument about any limitation of its study. The same is the case with the following article about shamanism and ecstatic religions. Peter Connolly challenges in his article in particular Mircea Eliade's distinction between ecstasy and enstasy and presents the topic a wider academic context. And, finally, Jack Hunter presents in his article his anthropological research on spiritism in the UK. His article challenges reductive explanatory modules and argues in favour of an ontologically open-minded participatory approach.

These six articles represent a range of approaches and experiences and show impressive developments of the study of religious experience in recent years. Following issues of the journal will take the journey further. As the editor in chief of the journal my aim is to ensure the multi-disciplinary character as well as the wide understanding of the experience in future issues.