

Editorial

Autumn reflections with generative AI: A season of non-sensual contemplations

Mara Steenhuisen, PhD

The old story of Eyes and No-Eyes is really the story of the mystical and unmystical types. "No Eyes" has fixed his attention on the fact that he is obliged to take a walk. For him the chief factor of existence is his own movement along the road; a movement which he intends to accomplish as efficiently and comfortably as he can. He asks not to know what may be on either side of the hedges. He ignores the caress of the wind until it threatens to remove his hat. He trudges along, steadily, diligently; avoiding the muddy pools, but oblivious of the light which they reflect. "Eyes" takes the walk too: and for him it is a perpetual revelation of beauty and wonder. The sunlight inebriates him, the winds delight him, the very effort of the journey is a joy. Magic presences throng the roadside, or cry salutations to him from the hidden fields. The rich world through which he moves lies in the foreground of his consciousness; and it gives up new secrets to him at every step. "No-Eyes," when told of his adventures, usually refuses to believe that both have gone by the same road. He fancies that his companion has been floating about in the air, or beset by agreeable hallucinations. We shall never persuade him to the contrary unless we persuade him to look for himself.

Evelyn Underhill, 1914

With the hot summer behind us, we have arrived in the relative quiet stillness of autumn. A time to repose, reflect and prepare for the colder season ahead. Traditionally, the symbolism of autumn stands for a time of transition, as nature shows us with the falling of leaves in their myriad hues and the rhythms of shorter days and longer nights, with colder and misty weather. Sounds change, smells change, the atmosphere changes. We see the harvest of the lands: pumpkins, apples, acorns, chestnuts, hazelnuts, pinecones, grapes, depending on where you live and how close you are to see those harvested from the soil, the trees, the vines. Birds go, others come in to stay over for the winter. There is abundance, there is soberness as heaps of leaves are ruffled by the October winds and gradually the branches turn into impressive bare structures.

Evelyn Underhill describes contemplation and connection to oneself, in self-reflection and embodied in the living environment: metaphorically for eyes to see. Sir Alister was clearly an 'Eyes' person: seeing, contemplating and integrating his myriad talent for observing and interpreting experience into works of art that still touch mind and heart. He would scientifically illustrate publications, such as *Great Waters* (1967), his artistic rendering of the

wonders of marine life as huge as whales and as tiny as microscopic plankton during the sea expedition aboard the *RRS Discovery* from 1925-1927. Or his two-part series of *The Open Sea*, (*Part 1* in 1956, with 142 watercolour paintings and *Part 2*, *Fish and Fisheries* in 1959). Later, his watercolour paintings of the English 'countryside' would become well-known for their intricate detail and artistic skill, published in *A Cotswold Sketchbook* (1984), while he took his bike from Bath where he lived, meandering through the Cotswolds, absorbing and sketching, and painting the harmony of nature, sky and the atmosphere along the way. In 2019 during the festive special conference of the Religious Experience Research Centre's 50 years, I marvelled at his beautiful watercolours displayed at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in Lampeter, Wales. Sir Alister's temples, shrines, and other sacred places in the Far East brought me back to my own travels, and moreover, enabled me to look temporarily through his 'Eyes', even for a split second, in beholding real paper with their real watercolours instead of digital or hardcopy reproductions.

The above may seem ambiguous in the light of this issue's cover as is created in collaboration with AI. And also, ironically, the image shows the two-faced characteristics of generative AI: the digital rendering has a tree carved from its very own material and it displays a layered composition built of paper and bark, with warm colours as it signifies autumnal imagery. In a human life, autumn symbolises maturity. Does AI know the cycle of letting go, reflect, repose and renew? Has AI a notion of what autumn signifies? Has it 'Eyes' to see? Plentiful 'answers' are generated by AI when asking it, produced from 'feeds' as it eats and divulges, 'algo rhythms' as it dances to the same beat every time, 'prompts' that construct its eyes. Seeing?

Reflecting on our special issue on AI and Religious Experience (Vol.11.No.2), we see that AI scrapes the internet not only for texts but also images under the motto of 'what you upload is what you get'. AI generates its 'art' from all those human artisan endeavours, insights, emotions and skills. Looking and considering AI generated art as a mere toolbox of pencils, paper, paint, canvas with at its base guidelines on composition, colouring and perspective, AI can *collaboratively* generate, not create, because emotions and feelings inherently define art and its human spectators. Since our special issue on AI and religious experience last year, and our specialist conference on the same topic in June this year, we all have noticed an increase in AI making big headlines in the media, and moreover, silently slipping more comfortably into its everyday technical environment of our (new) smartphones, TVs, computers, our homes and our lives. Do we still own them?

Spiritually, we can evolve when confronted with life's challenges whether it is in the autumn or in the spring of our lives. The five papers in this issue of the journal address diverse topics, highlighting the positive contributions to religious and spiritual experience from around the world. The first article by Mike Rush is based on his keynote presentation on spiritual crisis which was held last year on Friday, 13 June 2025, together with the responses from Dr Jeff Leonardi and Prof Marta de Freitas. In this article *Spiritual Crisis: Peer-Support and Grounding for Spiritually Transformative Experiences*, he reports on the findings from three related studies designed to investigate interventions for spiritual crisis.

For the individual concerned it often means an actual state of spiritual emergency, as addressed by and reflected in the second article by Wanting He. This article exemplifies a spiritual challenge in addressing the confrontation with *Chumaxian and the Construction of Subjectivity in Northeast Chinese Fox-Spirit Worship*, employing Jacques Lacan's structural account of psychosis and, notably, his concept of the *sinthome*, a stabilising structure that links the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real through ritual practice, interpretation, and social recognition.

Dimitrios Vachaviolos addresses in the third article how references to miraculous liquids, fragrance, and physical interaction with relics can shape the sensory dimensions of devotional experience in *Scent of Sanctity: Pilgrimage to the Tombs of Myroblyte Saints in Medieval Peloponnese*, mirroring contemporary spiritual contemplation.

The fourth article concerns Accursio Graffeo's postponed article, which was intended for the previous issue on AI and Religious Experience. The author's article highlights the example of Terasem and how technological advancements currently shape our aspirations and approaches using AI. In *About Death, Immortality and Technology: A Transreligious Perspective*, the author delves into what can be considered AI mediated New Religious Movements (NRMs), emphasising with Terasem the themes of death and immortality from a transreligious perspective and how beliefs in technological advancements such as cryonics form Terasem. As such, the article compliments the three previous articles, including the concept of spiritual 'resurrection' in dealing with life challenges, like the examples of peer-support groups provided in Mike Rush's article.

Whereas, in the fifth article Sára Heidl takes us to the joyous atmosphere of more secular but no less spiritual festivals in Hungary with *Resonant Festival Experiences: Empirical Evidence from Hungarian Festivals*, in the light (or sound) of Hartmut Rosa's resonance theory we end this issue on a festive note. Finally, we would like to express our appreciation and

special thanks to the Alister Hardy Trust in supporting the journal and our peer-reviewers for their valuable expertise and time to enhance our contributing authors' articles.

For those of you with 'Eyes' to see and those who aspire to, simply 'seeing' can evoke the most powerful and spontaneous experiences in nature where we don't need a digital interface to connect to the outside world, and to ourselves, in our fast-moving global home. As in Sir Alister's words:

'Our civilization has been built upon a spiritual interpretation of the world; if the majority of the population come to have a materialistic outlook the whole nature of our way may change and not I think for the better (1966, p. 14).'

Your editorial team wishes you a contemplative autumn and winter.

References

- Hardy, A. (1956) *The open sea: its natural history. Part 1: The world of plankton*. Collins.
- Hardy, A. (1959) *The open sea: its natural history: Part 2, Fish and fisheries*. Collins.
- Hardy, A. (1966) *The divine flame*. RERU.
- Hardy, A. (1967) *Great waters: a voyage of natural history to study whales, plankton and the waters of the Southern Ocean in the old Royal Research Ship 'Discovery'*. Collins/Harper & Row.
- Hardy, A. (1984) *A Cotswold sketchbook*. Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd.
- Underhill, E. (1914) *Practical mysticism: a little book for normal people*. J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd./E.P. Dutton & Co.