

**Editorial:**

**The Future of Research on Religious and Spiritual Experience**

Jack Hunter

Religious Experience Research Centre,  
Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture,  
University of Wales Trinity Saint David  
([jack.hunter@uwtsd.ac.uk](mailto:jack.hunter@uwtsd.ac.uk))

Welcome to Vol. 7 No. 1 of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*. This issue has its roots in the Religious Experience Research Centre's 50th anniversary conference, which was held on the weekend of 1st-3rd July 2019 in Lampeter. Most of the papers here were initially given as presentations at the conference, and have since been reviewed, edited and written up for publication. The theme of the conference was 'The Future of the Study of Religious and Spiritual Experience,' and with this in mind the papers collected in this issue explore different theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of a variety of religious and spiritual experiences. There is also an emphasis in the papers that follow on experiences that have tended to fall outside of the remit of academic research on extraordinary experience, but which may have a large contribution to make to our field if taken seriously.

My own paper, entitled 'Deep Weird,' for example, points to the stranger reaches of extraordinary experience research, and examines why some of the most unusual reports of extraordinary experiences come to be neglected in the scholarly discourse. Encounters with UFOs, fairies and other strange entities are often ignored in academic research precisely because they are so strange and do not fit into often quite rigid academic categories. As I point out in the paper, however, there are many reasons to think that these 'high strangeness' experiences share common phenomenological features and underlying processes with other more established forms of religious and spiritual experience. In the context of the theme of this issue, the paper suggests that a greater academic engagement with 'high strangeness' experiences could provide fruitful new directions for the future of religious experience research.

Alison Robertson's contribution also shines a spotlight on a class of extraordinary experience that has been marginalised in academic conversations. Robertson argues that the experiences fostered by practitioners of BDSM (bondage, dominance, sadism, masochism) share commonalities with other forms of ecstatic and religious experience, and as such also deserve to be taken seriously as the subject of research on

extraordinary experiences more generally. Indeed, one of the key points raised by Robertson in this paper is that the experiences that arise through these practices are co-created - that the experience itself results from the interaction of the experiencer (bottom/submissive) and their partner (top/dominant), and would not be possible without the participation of both parties. This challenges the common view that religious, spiritual, extraordinary and ecstatic experiences are inherently 'private' and 'subjective' in nature, and suggests instead that they may also arise through participation and interaction with others.

In her paper 'Secularization of/ or Mysticism,' Zsuzsanna Szugyiczki evaluates the ideas of the philosopher Richard H. Jones, and in particular those examined in his recent book *Philosophy of Mysticism: Raids on the Ineffable* (2016). Szugyiczki's paper is a critical appraisal of five key concepts that Jones uses to structure his argument - *secularisation, modernity, classical mysticism, today's mystical phenomena and the future of mysticism*. Szugyiczki problematises the concept of secularisation - which is often taken for granted in fields outside of religious studies - and demonstrates how mystical experiences continue to have relevance in the contemporary world. In conclusion to her evaluation, Szugyiczki suggests a range of questions that we can ask of mystical experiences in order to propel the field of religious experience research forward in new directions.

In his paper, Simon Dein presents a case-study of 'Spirit Possession in a Psychiatric Clinic,' which he uses as a vehicle for exploring different anthropological and psychiatric approaches to spirit possession phenomena. The paper argues in favour of greater interdisciplinarity in the study of religious experience, and suggests that both anthropological perspectives (with their emphasis on the socio-cultural context of possession experiences), and psychiatric perspectives (which emphasise the aetiology of extraordinary experiences in the individual), have much to learn from one another. The paper concludes with a comparison of exorcism practices and psychotherapy, and suggests some implications for the future of mental health care, in particular the need for greater cultural awareness, inclusivity and spiritual sensitivity.

To round off the papers in this issue, Leslie Francis' contribution - 'Exploring the consequences of religious experience within the Greer tradition' - evaluates the effectiveness of John Greer's (1932-1996) approach to the study of religious experiences and their effects on Irish students in the 1970s. This is achieved with a replication of Greer's famous study with a new cohort of Irish students in 2010. Francis argues that Greer's original research question - *Have you ever had an experience of God, for example, his presence or his help or anything else?* - still has meaning for contemporary Irish students. The paper concludes with a summary of the key observations and findings from

the study replication, and suggests further replications in the future for longitudinal comparison, as well as parallel studies employing different sets of research questions.

To conclude I would like to make a few summarising statements concerning the future of religious experience research. In light of the papers included in this issue, the future of religious experience research will have to be *inclusive* - expanding its scope out to explore experiences that have previously been 'damned' or tabooed in scholarly research (such as paranormal experiences, or ecstatic BDSM encounters), traditional concepts in the study of religion and religious experience will have to be evaluated (the subjectivity of experience, for example, and the concepts of secularisation, mysticism, and so on), theoretical models will have to be seen as complimentary, rather than as complete explanations in themselves (e.g. anthropological and psychiatric perspectives on spirit possession), and research methodologies will have to be adapted and developed to bring empirical religious experience research into the twenty-first century, while building on the foundations that are already in place.

Finally, I would like to offer another possible direction for religious experience research going forward - the application of indigenous research methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Religious experience researchers have adopted a range of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies since the discipline's inception in the 19th century, which has contributed to our diverse and interdisciplinary field of research. Increasingly, however, historians of science are demonstrating that the research methodologies of the human and social sciences continue to perpetuate 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. The burgeoning field of indigenous research methods (which begin from very different ontological starting points to western scientific research methods), may offer new and exciting avenues for research on religious experience going forward. An engagement with indigenous research, methods, theories and ontologies may also go some way towards decolonising the study of religious experience, and of religion more generally. Perhaps this could be a theme for a future issue. In the meantime, we sincerely hope that you enjoy this one!

## References

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.