



# 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 50<sup>th</sup> 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.

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## Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



### **Ways to Go Beyond, and Why They Work: Science and Spiritual Practices**

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#### **Abstract**

Spiritual practices are being investigated scientifically as never before, and many of them have been shown to have measurable effects on physiology, brain activity, well-being and health. The effects are generally beneficial. There is a wide range of spiritual practices, including meditation, prayer, rituals, pilgrimage, and even practices that are not normally thought of as spiritual, like sports, can have a spiritual dimension. Trinitarian models of ultimate consciousness or spiritual reality make it easier to understand how such different activities can all have spiritual effects.

#### **Introduction: preliminary notes**

I met Sir Alister Hardy only once, in Oxford, in the early 1980s, soon after my first book *A New Science of Life*, was published. He was friendly and open minded. We had several overlapping areas of interest, including his suggestion that evolution could involve telepathy-like connections between animals – as in the spread of the opening of milk bottle by blue tits – which I thought of in terms of morphic resonance, the hypothesis advanced in my book.

I was inspired by his work in the RERU, and like the idea of building up a natural history of mystical experience. Subsequently I have myself collected more than 12,000 accounts of unexplained human and animal abilities, classified in a computer database into more than 100 categories.

Religious experience is very much the theme of my Sir Alister Hardy memorial lecture in 2019. Spiritual practices are important because they lead to experiences. Many of the cases studied by Sir Alister were spontaneous, but we now know much more about a wide range of practices than when Sir Alister set up the RERU fifty years ago.

Never before has any civilisation had access to almost all the world's spiritual practices. In major cosmopolitan cities, it is now possible to attend rituals from a wide range of religious traditions, to learn to meditate, to practise yoga or chi gong, to take part in shamanic practices, to explore consciousness through psychedelic drugs

(albeit illegally in most places), to sing and chant, to participate in a wide range of prayers, to learn martial arts and to practise a bewildering array of sports.

All these practices can take us beyond normal, familiar, everyday states of consciousness. They can lead to experiences of connection with more-than-human consciousness, and a sense of a greater conscious presence. Such experiences are often described as spiritual.

The experiences themselves leave open the question of the nature of the spiritual realm. As I discuss in my recent book, *Ways to Go Beyond, And Why They Work*,<sup>1</sup> there are several possible interpretations of spiritual experiences, including the materialist view that they are all inside brains and that there are no more-than-human forms of consciousness 'out there'.

At the same time, spiritual practices are being investigated scientifically as never before. We are at the beginning of a new phase of scientific, philosophical and spiritual development.

This convergence of science and spiritual practices is surprising from the point of view of materialist orthodoxy, in which the vast majority of contemporary scientists have been trained. Yet it is entirely consistent with the scientific method, which involves the formation of hypotheses – guesses about the way the world works – and then testing them experimentally. The ultimate arbiter is experience, not theory. In French, the word *expérience*, means both 'experience' and 'experiment'. The Greek word for experience is *empeiria*, the root of our English word 'empirical'. The exploration of consciousness through consciousness itself is literally empirical, based on experience. Spiritual practices provide ways in which consciousness can be explored empirically.<sup>2</sup>

There are many kinds of spiritual practice, and in my new book I discuss seven: the spiritual side of sports, learning from animals, fasting, spiritual openings through cannabis and psychedelics, prayer, holy days and festivals, and being kind. In my previous book, *Science and Spiritual Practices*,<sup>3</sup> I discuss another seven. All these practices have measurable effects. In various ways they affect our physiology, breathing, heart rates, autonomic nervous systems, hormone levels, brain activities, mental abilities, feelings, emotions, visual imagery, sense of beauty, feelings of wellbeing, happiness, and compassion.

But how can such very different activities – like meditation and sports, fasting and chanting, taking psychedelics and participating in rituals – all have spiritual as well as physiological effects? Why do they work?

<sup>1</sup> Sheldrake, R. (2019) *Ways To Go Beyond, And Why They Work*. Coronet, London.

<sup>2</sup> The pioneer of this field of enquiry was William James in his classic book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which were the Gifford Lectures in 1901–2 (James, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Sheldrake, R. (2017) *Science and Spiritual Practices*. Coronet, London.

In our contemporary secular context, many people take up spiritual practices for their health benefits, or to become happier and more successful. But traditionally, in their original religious contexts, the beneficial effects of such practices were not the primary reason for doing them, but by-products of an underlying desire to come into conscious relationship with more-than-human forms of consciousness.

Through spiritual practices, many people feel a connection to a greater consciousness, or presence, or being. They often experience this connection as blissful or joyful. Even one brief experience of a state of blissful connection can be enough to change the course of someone's life. And such life-changing experiences can come spontaneously without any spiritual practices at all, as in near-death experiences and spontaneous mystical experiences.<sup>4</sup>

But do these experiences of connection really relate to forms of consciousness 'out there'? Do spirits, gods, and goddesses actually exist? Is there a conscious ground of being that underlies the universe, or an ultimate state of bliss that Buddhists call nirvana?

Or are all these experiences inside our bodies, and especially inside our brains? Is the experience of connecting with a consciousness greater than our own an illusion? Is it no more than an altered state of our own mind that is generated by unusual patterns of neuronal activity? As I discussed in the introduction to this book, most atheists and materialists answer 'yes' to these questions.

The usual materialist worldview is that we live in an unconscious universe. The only forms of consciousness are those that have emerged in complex brains, and above all in human brains. Other animals may be conscious to lesser degrees, dogs probably more than frogs; lower animals, like worms, have less mental activity, if they have any at all. Perhaps on other planets, in other solar systems, there are biological beings with brains analogous to ours – in other words, aliens or extraterrestrials. But there are no immaterial gods or spirits 'out there'. Spiritual practices work through their physiological, chemical and physical effects on bodies and brains, not by contacting mysterious spiritual beings outside the physical world.

By contrast, all religions agree that the ultimate reality is conscious, with a far greater consciousness than ours, unimaginably beyond our limited human conceptions. And yet this ultimate reality is related to the world in which we live, and to our own minds and societies. What is the connection between ultimate consciousness and nature?

## The threefold nature of ultimate consciousness

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<sup>4</sup> Hay, D. *Something There: The Biology of the Human Spirit*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2006.

The ultimate reality is indescribable, without qualities – nirvana, the Godhead, Nirguna Brahman. But the interface between this ultimate reality and the natural world is widely thought of as threefold or trinitarian.

The threefold nature of God is reflected in nature itself, and in human life and minds. Our minds reflect the divine mind. To use a modern mathematical metaphor, they are fractals of the ultimate mind.

According to the *Kena Upanishad*, one of the foundational holy books in the Hindu tradition, Brahman, God, is not an object. God is not something that the eyes can see, or the ears can hear, a thing among other things. Instead, Brahman is that by which the mind comprehends, by which the eye sees, by which the ear hears. Atman, which is at the centre of our own conscious being, is the eye of the eye, the ear of the ear, and the ground of all knowing. Our minds participate in the mind or knowing of Brahman through knowing themselves: 'What cannot be seen with the eye, but that whereby the eye can see: know that alone to be Brahman.'<sup>5</sup>

In the Hindu conception, Saguna Brahman, Brahman with qualities, God as manifested in the world, has three fundamental aspects *sat*, *chit* and *ānanda*, being, consciousness and bliss, *sat-chit-ananda*. As Bede Griffiths put it, 'God, or Ultimate Reality, is experienced as absolute being (*sat*), known in pure consciousness (*cit*), communicating absolute bliss (*ānanda*). This was the experience of the seers of the Upanishads as it has been that of innumerable holy men in India ever since. It is an experience of self-transcendence, which gives an intuitive insight into Reality.'<sup>6</sup>

Different schools of Indian thought have their own versions of this trinity. In Kashmiri Shaivism, the ground of all being is called *Parashiva*; the source of form and order is *Shiva* and the primordial energy of the cosmos is *Shakti*. Shakti is feminine.

Within the Christian tradition, God is the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The ground of all being is the Father. The Son is the Word or Logos, the source of form and order; the Spirit is the breath, wind, or energy, like Shakti. In Indian languages, the words for spirit – *ruach* in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and *pneuma* in the Greek of the New Testament – become Shakti. Like Shakti, *ruach* is feminine. All three aspects of the Holy Trinity constitute the unity of God acting in and through the universe, creating and sustaining it.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Word of God is primarily the spoken word, not the written word. Speaking is the fundamental metaphor for the Christian conception of God as Holy Trinity. Spoken words involve on the one hand structures, forms, patterns and meanings, and on the other hand a flow of breath or spirit. Think of your own speech. You are the being on which both your words and your breath depend and from which they come forth.

<sup>5</sup> Mascaro, J. (trans), *The Upanishads*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, Collins, London, 1982, p. 27.

In this metaphor, you are the ground of Being. If there are only words in your mind, unspoken, they remain latent. They are unmanifested Logos. If there is an outflow of breath and no words, there is merely an energetic flow, with no form or meaning, Spirit without form. But when the form and order of your words are carried on your outbreath, your words can communicate and connect. The Logos and Spirit work together.

Although we can distinguish between the speaker (the ground of Being), the words that are spoken (the Logos) and the breath on which they are carried (the Spirit), in speech all three aspects have an underlying unity. They are three in one and one in three.

In some Christian interpretations of the Holy Trinity, like St Augustine's psychological model, God the Father is the knower, God the Son or Logos the known, and the Holy Spirit is the joyful love between them. This conception is very similar to *sat-chit-ananda*.

In both the Hindu and Christian traditions there is an ambiguity about the dynamical principle, namely Shakti or Spirit. On the one hand she is bliss, joy and love, and on the other hand she is the principle of movement or change – creative and destructive power, cosmic energy, breath, wind and life-spirit. What is the relationship between bliss and energy, which are both aspects of Shakti or Spirit?

Divine consciousness is essentially blissful, and this blissful aspect, *ānanda*, is distinguishable from the ground of being, *sat*, and knowledge or consciousness, *chit*. The ultimate conscious being, Brahman or God, is full, not in a state of need or lack or desire. And yet this is not a static bliss or joy beyond all movement and change, but the basis of all movement and change. As Griffiths put it, the *ānanda*, the bliss or joy of the Godhead, is 'the outpouring of the superabundant being and consciousness of the eternal, the Love which unites Father and Son in the non-dual Being of the Spirit.'<sup>7</sup>

In the Muslim tradition, God's oneness likewise includes being, consciousness, and bliss, which are called *wujud*, *wijdan* and *wajd*.

All these traditions share much common ground. As the theologian David Bentley Hart summarises it:

In God, the fullness of being is also a perfect act of infinite consciousness that, wholly possessing the truth of being in itself, forever finds its consummation in boundless delight. The Father knows his own essence perfectly in the mirror of the Logos and rejoices in the Spirit who is the 'bond of love' or 'bond of glory' in which divine being and divine consciousness are perfectly joined. God's *wujud* is also his *wijdan* – his infinite being is infinite consciousness – in the unity of his *wajd*, the bliss of perfect enjoyment. The divine *sat* is always also the divine *chit*, and the perfect coincidence is the divine *ānanda* . . . God is

<sup>7</sup> Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, Collins, London, 1982, p. 190.

the one act of being, consciousness, and bliss in whom everything lives and moves and has its being; and so the only way to know the truth of things is, necessarily, the way of bliss.<sup>8</sup>

Chinese philosophy starts from very different principles, but the Taoist conception of the polarity of yin and yang interacting in all nature is also trinitarian. In the familiar symbol of their relationship, yin, the dark swirl, contains within it a seed of yang, the light swirl, and vice versa. Their polarity is not a dualistic opposition, but rather an interdependence or complementarity. Both yin and yang are part of an ultimate unity, the Tao, which includes them both, symbolised by the circle that contains the interlocking swirls.

### Trinities and spiritual practices

Trinitarian models, explicit in Hinduism and in Christianity, and implicit in the mystical theology of Islam, provide a way of interpreting why very different spiritual practices provide spiritual connections to ultimate reality and are at the same time joyful. Without such models, it would be difficult to see how practices as different as meditation, chanting and sports could all have a spiritual dimension.

Meditation, which typically involves minimal physical activity, seems to be a way of connecting with the ground of being, *sat*, or the Father. The deepest forms of meditation can go further, beyond all differentiation within the divine, to the Godhead, or Nirguna Brahman or nirvana. This ultimate reality is blissful by its very nature. Participating in it gives the deepest possible joy.

Sports, by contrast, are not about stillness, but about movements directed towards a goal. The spiritual experiences that come through sports link more to the principle of flow, to Shakti, or spirit. They connect with the bliss of this flow. Likewise, singing, chanting, dancing and music connect with the flow of the spirit and the joy that accompanies it. Watching the graceful movements of animals also shows us a combination of form and energy coming from a common source.

By contrast again, the contemplation of the beauty of flowers (*SSP*, chapter 4) and other experiences of visual beauty have less to do with flow and more to do with form, or idea, or *chit*, or Logos.

Fasting is not in itself a spiritual experience, but is a practice that interrupts the normal habits of appetite and bodily desire. It creates a space in which spiritual realities can be more present. The decision to fast is taken with the intention of going beyond regular desires and habits. Fasting creates a mental and physical context in which other spiritual practices, like prayer and meditation, can be more effective.

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<sup>8</sup> Hart, D.B., *The Experience of God: Being Consciousness Bliss*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2013, pp. 248–249.



Holy days and festivals create spaces in which regular spiritual practices like prayer, chanting, singing and rituals can be the principal focus of activity, as opposed to work. These celebrations bind communities together, relating them to the cycles of the more-than-human world, and to the ultimate source of nature and humanity.

Prayer provides a way of explicitly linking our own minds, needs, fears and intentions to the greater minds of the spiritual beings to whom we pray. Petitionary prayer links us to the flow of events, and offers us the possibility of being co-creators of what happens, rather than passive recipients.

Some psychedelic experiences, especially with substances such as DMT and 5-methoxy DMT, take the experimenter to what seems like the ground of being itself, or *sat*. But most psychedelic experiences create an intense immersion in the realm of imagination with its ever-changing forms and meanings.

Psychedelic visions are combinations of form and energy in the world of the imagination, Logos and Spirit. And there may be many imaginations, not just our own individual imaginations. We may all participate in a collective human imagination, expressed through archetypal forms in our dreams, fantasies and visions, which the psychologist C.G. Jung called the collective unconscious, shaped by collective memories.<sup>9</sup>

Other species may also have imaginations that work through their dreams. We cannot ask animals what they dream about, but when they are sleeping, they show physiological changes, like rapid eye movements, very similar to dreaming humans. According to the *Oxford Companion to Animal Behaviour*, 'On the basis of the evidence, many scientists are willing to agree that many animals experience dreams that are akin to those of human beings.'<sup>10</sup>

For example, dogs dream, and probably dream about things that dogs can do, and perhaps about things they cannot do, like fly. Perhaps the dream worlds of different species sometimes overlap and influence each other. Maybe the entire planet, Gaia, has a dreamlike imagination; maybe the sun has a solar imagination; maybe the galaxy has a galactic imagination; maybe the entire cosmos has a cosmic imagination. And all these imaginations may be derived from and within the divine imagination, which contains all possible forms, ideas, words, meaning, experiences, and scenarios.

In dreams and in psychedelic experiences, we may not be confined to the imaginal realm of human minds, but contact the imaginal realms of other species, of the earth and the heavenly bodies, and ultimately of the divine mind in its joy.

<sup>9</sup> Sheldrake, R., *The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature* (2nd ed.), Icon Books, London, 2011, chapter 14.

<sup>10</sup> McFarland, D. (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Animal Behaviour*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981, p. 141.

In so far as all spiritual practices can lead us towards a greater sense of connection with the whole, or the All, or the love of God, then they expand our awareness of our kinship with other people, with other animals, with plants, with the earth, and with all nature. They motivate us to behave more kindly, and to live and work for the greater good.

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## Researching in the RERC Archive

Dr Mark Fox

### Introduction

'Researching in the RERC Archive' is a very appropriate title for a paper commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sir Alister Hardy's establishment of the Religious Experience Research Centre. But how to begin? Actually, the real question is: where to *stop*?! At the very least, I take the title to involve at least *some* degree of reflection on what it was like to actually *do* that research. What it *felt* like to work within the archive and what impact the discoveries I made had on me, the researcher. In fact, at the outset I realise that I have never actually done that. So I am going to try to do it now, at least to an extent, whilst quoting quite liberally from archival material: for there is no better way to describe what it is like to research in the RERC archive than to hear some accounts at first hand, unfiltered by the researcher and presented as they were written.

### Near-Death Experiences and the Common Core

My first extended examination of the RERC archive began almost exactly twenty years ago, as part of an attempt to *overturn* the contention of many NDE researchers that there was a common core to Near-Death Experiences which included an overwhelming sense of bliss and peace, an out-of-body experience, a trip through darkness, an encounter with light, a judgement, an order to return, disappointment at waking up, and so on.

Before I began, I was convinced that many of the early NDE researchers had imposed a false uniformity on the testimonies that they were examining: a 'false consistency' which had in turn 'skewed' the field for those that followed. Perhaps there were no such things as Near-Death Experiences at all, and it was all a horrible mistake: wrought, in large part, by the misleading and methodologically-suspect early work of Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom et al and extending right through to

more recent times (Moody 1975, Ring 1980, Sabom 1982). Using NDE and NDE-like accounts I found in the archive I sought to test the accuracy or even the very existence of the core that they had presented; thinking that I'd probably find enough material to overturn it. I certainly wasn't looking for commonality to 'outweigh' diversity. Quite the opposite, in fact. In the event, I found a consistency that I wasn't looking for and thought I wouldn't find. To be sure, not to the extent that Moody and the others had claimed. But it was there.

And this was the first thing that the unique and wonderful RERC archive permitted me to do. Because many of the people who had such experiences and wrote them down and sent them to Sir Alister did so before the term 'Near-Death Experience' even existed. Before there was anything like the current widespread expectation that this is what happens at the point of death. Yet there it was. Just a tiny part of Sir Alister's rich archival legacy. Confirmation that near death (and sometimes far from it) people really *do* have experiences that include episodes of darkness, lights, feelings of bliss and peace, and self-seeing. They use a wide variety of terms to describe these things, and even my use of a phrase like 'episodes of darkness' is interpretation-rich, but commonality there is. Or at least there is in the archive; suggesting that it exists outside of the archive too. I was surprised (Fox 2003).

## Archival Accounts

I was surprised, too, by the richness and detail of many of the accounts I came across. Being my first proper exploration in the archive, I did not quite know what to expect. There follows one of the very earliest experiences submitted to the RERC (when it was known as the Religious Experience Research Unit), in which the subject described how:

While making rapid recovery 14 days after one of [my] heart attacks, I suddenly had a complete cardiac arrest, when, (I was told), the E.C.G reading showed at least a 5 minutes clinical 'death'. (My family have seen the ECG graph taken at the time.)

Eventually a feeble flicker of a heart beat was nurtured electrically until the heart was able to carry on. During this time, while I was 'out for the count', I recall thinking to myself 'This is *it* – Death.' And 'looked around' to see straight ahead a bright light, sending warmth and benevolence, shaped like a crucifix with an additional cross superimposed diagonally. Elsewhere was darkness, and from my body, which seemed to be on some kind of catafalque, all pain and feeling melted away.

The light did not illuminate much more than my body's length away, but I was aware of a kind of screen to my right. I felt no fear, only a tranquility I'd never known before, nor did I recall any thought of relatives or life on earth. Only my brain seemed to have feeling, and I relaxed into sheer ecstasy, feeling I did not ever wish to leave this state.

There was no sense of time, no thoughts of anything in particular in my mind.

Then from behind the screen on my right, I heard soft footsteps and as they approached, the light grew brighter, and as it grew, a feeling of great joy within me. Was I at last to know the truth and meet the 'Living God'? But, alas, before the footsteps reached the end of the screen, I awoke to see the blurred face of a nurse above me, my wife at my bedside and all the trappings of sudden cardiac failure 'at the ready'.

The feeling as those footsteps approached was as if my 'inner self' was at last to meet someone who understood me, could guarantee tranquillity, judge me correctly and whose integrity I could respect and admire (RERC 000427).

This most interesting account calls for some comment before we proceed. There are very many like it in the archive – numbering in the thousands, in fact. Not all taking place near death or containing the same features, but nearly all as striking. From its numbering within the archive it is also possible to date approximately when it was written and sent in – which is how I knew it could be dated to a time before the term 'Near-Death Experience' existed. And here the *uniqueness* of the archive begins to reveal itself. For where else could a researcher find a significant number of experiences that occurred before their common features had become widely known? Permitting, perhaps, a researcher to test the hypothesis that expectation creates experience by opening up to him or her a number of experiences that occurred in the absence of such expectation? Virtually everybody today knows that at or near the point of death a consistent number of *motifs* are commonly reported by persons who survive. They did not know that in 1970, when the above account was written down. Here is another relatively early account, submitted on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1972, describing an experience that occurred in June 1944:

I was severely injured in a flying bomb incident. At the moment of impact I lost consciousness, regaining it only for brief spells during the next few days. Whether or not I was conscious at the particular time I would like to describe to you I cannot say but I felt as if I was slipping away, rather than dying, I mean, & could not hold on to life any longer (if that sounds contradictory, I am sorry, but it does convey how I felt). Suddenly I was aware of a brilliant coloured glow of light & it was as [if] I was somehow being reassured. It was as though something, someone, a presence

was reaching out to me but above all I was filled with a feeling of exquisite peace.

When I was able to hold a conversation after the first few days I told my father about my experience & he said that on the day of my accident he received a telegram from the hospital asking him to come at once because I was not expected to live more than a few hours. I mention this because, until my father told me, I had no idea that I was dying & therefore would have had no preconceived ideas (RERC 002446).

Here, the experience confounds expectation not simply in the sense that the subject could have had no familiarity with the then non-existent literature on Near-Death Experiences but also in the sense that he did not know that he was near death. We will have more to say about expectation and experience later.

### ***Lightforms and The Fifth Love***

As a result of the kindness and inspiration of a generous donor, I was able to undertake a second study within the RERC archive very shortly after completing the first. Here, I examined the considerably greater number of archival accounts containing a variety of light *motifs*, whether reported at the point of death or not. My brief was to see if there was a 'common core' and once more I anticipated greater diversity than unity but yet again I discovered the opposite: that there was a 'common core' which extended right through from the contexts of light-experiences all the way to their fruits. I present the results of my research in my book *Lightforms* but, in essence, what I discovered after examining over 700 accounts of unusual lights within the archive was that typically, persons in states of deep crisis – both physical and emotional – were reaching a point of extreme or maximum distress. At that point, when they felt they just could not continue, they encountered an unusual light. To be sure, it took various forms – hence the title *Lightforms* – and occupied various locations. It could displace the person's existing background, appear, as it were, superimposed upon it, or take a different form such as a beam, ray or shaft. But whatever form it took it seemed to represent a turning-point within the person's experience, triggering major life-changes and remaining unforgettable. Typical fruits of such an experience included a decreased fear of death, a developing awareness of the existence of spiritual realities, or the acquisition of new (usually spiritually-meaningful) hobbies or interests. (Fox 2008). Once again, I was surprised. So, too, were many of the subjects whose accounts I read. In the vast majority of cases they were not expecting to have the experiences they had. Nor could they adequately explain them in conventional terms, as the following account makes clear:

The mistress of the house had the task of telling me my brother had been killed in Italy. This was naturally a terrible shock...

That same evening I went to bed as usual in a bungalow attached to the main building. It was a dark night & the employers had gone out to a party so the main house was in darkness...

Suddenly there was a misty ball of light over towards the door of my room...this door opened on to the garden & in any case my employers were all out for the evening. My mind seemed to 'change gear'. I use car terminology to suggest a change of normal activity difficult if not impossible to describe. It was as if a voice spoke in my head 'Don't worry any more about [your brother,] he is quite well and happy.' On hearing this I suddenly felt quite relaxed after the great emotional storm of the day. I have never since then worried about the after-life & have been content to leave it in God's hands. During my years of agnosticism I have often recalled and tried to explain the foregoing experience to myself in terms of 'hysteria', 'overwrought imagination' etc. But today at age 40 I am convinced it was real, true, & not to be explained away. That it was a message to me for comfort and inspiration (RERC 000982).

No sooner had I finished the *Lightforms* project than another generous donor made possible my third and final study within the archive: one involving experiences of overwhelming, transcendent, love. Once again, I found a 'common core'. One, in fact, that bore more than a passing resemblance to the one I had previously found during the light research. And all the time this sense of subjects being *surprised* by their experiences. Surprised by light. Surprised by love. Surprised by joy: often in the midst of despair (Fox 2014).

### **“Words Scratch”**

So, after having conducted three studies and having read about a third of the accounts in the archive I came to a number of conclusions and two in particular. Firstly, there was more patterning – commonality – to experiences than I had previously supposed. And secondly, very many of the persons who wrote to Sir Alister and whose accounts constituted the archive I was examining were describing episodes that they *did not* expect to have. And their experiences did not simply reflect their culture or fulfil their expectations. Far less were they a product of their *language*. In fact, time and time again I saw language *break down*: a limiter, not a facilitator. Far less a creator or a determiner. The following account illustrates this rather well. The respondent was

trying to describe an experience he had in World War One when he was injured by an exploding mine:

Words are so limiting. How can they describe this burning confrontation which is as vivid today as it was fifty-odd years ago? I try to make little comparisons with worldly joys, but these are so trivial. Relaxing in a warm bath after a hard game; swimming at night in a phosphorescent tropic sea; finding the trail again after being lost in the jungle; seeing light at the end of long research; waking pain-free after an operation; being helped in my gardening by a friendly blackbird; listening to the Sahara as it settled for the night after a day's searing heat – such glimpses of the underlying peace which accompanies Love's release from fear or stress can come to all of us. They bring assurance to those who think. They wake joy, but are only faint echoes of my out-of-time communion with the heart of joy itself in ecstasy of becoming, the new birth (RERC 002817).

Or, as another of Sir Alister's respondents wrote when trying to convey her frustration at being unable to adequately describe what happened to her: "words scratch."

That religious experiences confound language was one of the most striking conclusions that my archival research permitted me to draw. It goes very much against the current academic 'grain' too, I know. For it has become a commonplace within the academy to see religious and spiritual experiences as being in some (usually unspecified) sense shaped – or even created – by the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their subjects. My research strongly suggests the opposite. In fact, in the light of it, I would respectfully suggest that a challenge beckons: an ideal one for any budding constructivist who wants to test my findings for himself. Pick a *motif* or a series of such, go to the archive, and have a look. You may end up being as surprised as I was.

### **Religious Experiences?**

More than constructs, then; more than mirrors. Might we call these experiences *religious*? In a 1951 lecture entitled *Science and the Quest for God*, given at Essex Hall and sponsored by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, Sir Alister said this:

I do not wish to disturb or hurt the feelings of those who have certain fixed convictions, nor to try to convert them to a different point of view. I cannot, however, help feeling that it is likely to be more important for religion in the future to have a theology that is founded on the reality of



religious experience, than to have one that builds its doctrines on supposed events in the past: supposed events which some of the best scholars of history are unable to establish beyond doubt by the rules of evidence accepted in other fields of historical research (Hay 2011: 200).

A Study of Religions scholar may balk at Sir Alister's use of the word 'religion' in the singular here but the overall point is still clear: a theology based on experience was something that he saw as important and as becoming *increasingly* important – perhaps even desirable – when he gave his lecture. In that way, religion could be preserved: particularly at a time when its historical and doctrinal roots had been weakened by decades of critical enquiry.

And here we are: nearly seven decades on. Were his words prescient? Prophetic, even? The answers to those questions would require complex analysis and would take us far away from the focus of this paper. On the one hand, he was *surely* correct. A religion based on the reality of religious experience is surely to a significant extent impervious to the vagaries of historical enquiry. But as a result of my own research within the archive I have steadily come to the conclusion that it would be difficult – nigh-on impossible, in fact – to establish any kind of *religion* on what I found. Save, perhaps, for a rather vague universalism in which everyone can be the recipient of the sort of grace vouchsafed to those grateful persons who found love and light in the midst of their darkness.

In fact, this was another striking finding. Spiritual experience seems to be no respecter of doctrinal, denominational, or religious boundaries. Rather, it *transcends* religions: seemingly equally at home in all of them and none. In one of the most striking accounts I came across, the subject of her experience puts this well:

I came from the kitchen into the bedroom, sat at my dressing table, opened a drawer and began to do something quite ordinary, I can't remember what, when I was suddenly overwhelmed by the presence of God. I was absolutely astounded. I hadn't known there was a God at all. Having rejected the Roman Catholicism of my childhood while still in my teens, I was pretty much an atheist or agnostic and had no interest in religion. I had no such thoughts at the time, however. I was just shattered, shaken to the roots of my being...(RERC 004581).

Now, the reader might think it a pretty odd sort of Roman Catholicism if it never introduced this lady to the idea of God. Perhaps that's why she left it behind. Nonetheless, her point is clear, and she expresses it vividly and well: I'm not a religious person. I wasn't doing religious things. I had no religious beliefs whatsoever at the time of my experience. I wasn't even interested in religion. But it happened. And I was never the same again. In fact, she stresses this last point almost at the very end of her testimony, as she concludes:

[My experience] changed my life radically...I did not return to church; nothing seemed more obvious to me than that the Churches had no idea what they were playing with...[But] I am as convinced now...as I was during those astonished days immediately following the experience. Indeed, I am still astonished sometimes. Why should there be a God? I can think of no convincing *reasons*. And a personal God at that! It all seems so unlikely! Then I am astonished all over again (RERC 004581).

## A Dazzling Darkness

And yet...and yet...having said this there is *still* something in these accounts of something sacred. A sense that we are treading on holy ground when we hear or read them. A sense that we are being confronted by a sacred presence. An odour of sanctity; but one involving all of the senses. And none. There are very many examples that I could have used to illustrate this, but one will suffice. I came across it when researching for my light project. The subject writes:

As far back as I can remember there has been a sweet, cool presence in and around me – someone called it a Dazzling Darkness. This varies in intensity. It is in everything and is always there. On the rare occasions when it *has* receded I've felt frightened and alone. It is in me, it knows about me and I belong to it, but it is not a Person, so that praying in words seems crude. I prefer to 'inhale it' at prayer time, or at quiet moments in the day. I find this presence strongly in old churches, some old houses, in wild countryside, music, and in a few people. About 3 times it has intensified into what I suppose could be the mystical experience – a pinkish golden light which was in everything, was love, and made everything look beautiful, even Council Houses and a Corporation bus (RERC 000489).

This account, another one of the very earliest submitted to the archive, typifies many. The presence is often there although sometimes it recedes. 'It' is not really an 'it', but not a person either. There is something extra- or supra-linguistic about it so that all attempts to pray in words appear, to the subject, crude. Rather, this Dazzling Darkness is best inhaled; although even there the writer has put 'inhaled' in inverted commas. Certain spaces seem to embody or to convey it: sacred *and* profane. Occasionally it becomes intensified to the point of visibility, and that's when everything is transformed – even council buildings and a bus.

I often used to wonder about the subjects who sent their experiences to the archive. Who were they? What would it be like to meet them? Could I have picked them out in

a crowd? I always felt that I was handling something so special when I read what they had written. In fact, I often wondered if analysis of any kind was an appropriate thing to do with their accounts of what had happened to them. Did they really mean for anybody to categorize them in the way that I was doing? To put them under a sort of analytical microscope in a search for clues and common features? It never felt quite right. In fact, I usually tried to create some sort of sacred space when I was working directly with the testimonies. I'd put on Gregorian chant, light a candle, and say a prayer. *Can you sacralise a laboratory?* Well, I tried. And it may well have been easier in those days because I was, at least, handling paper. I'm not in the least denigrating the excellent work done on fully computerising the archive for search and retrieval purposes when I say that. I simply wonder what difference it makes when a researcher reads an experience on a screen, rather than in some other, older, form. The same when *writing* an experience down, come to that.

## The Unexplored Continent

It has been an ongoing privilege to have been able to spend so long in the archive, working on the three projects which made possible my first three books. In closing, how might I *sum up* that experience? And how might we look forward to the next 50 years? How might the next five decades of research build on the foundations that the last five decades have laid? Given Sir Alister's own careers in zoological and spiritual exploration, it seems fitting to use the metaphor of exploration with respect to these questions.

As will have become clear, the RERC archive is *massive*. For that reason, it might usefully be compared to a huge and still largely unexplored *continent*. Whilst other comprehensive archival studies are ongoing it still remains likely that much of the archival collection remains to be discovered and mapped. As is well-known, Sir Alister had a particular sort of transcendent episode in mind when he sent out his original appeals for accounts, but he received many kinds of experiences that he was not looking for. In a collection of some of those accounts published in 1990, the authors used the image of a fisherman casting his net upon the waters and finding a great array of creatures: some expected and some unexpected (Maxwell and Tschudin 1990: 6). It is a good image: one reinforced when one considers the archive as a vast continent and not just a teeming sea. There is much here to *surprise* as well as to *reassure* the researcher: something that is due in no small part to the fact that Sir Alister acknowledged and catalogued every account of every experience that he received, leaving so much for other researchers to examine. Many of us have been the beneficiaries of his foresight and remain forever indebted both to the work that he accomplished and to the collection of accounts which he left for others to explore.

As with any unmapped and still largely hidden continent there is so much about the archive that we still don't know. Basic things; such as its size. This struck me most forcibly during my time spent there. Estimates of around 6000 accounts seem to have been derived from the numbers given to each account. But examination of what Sir Alister received as a result of his various appeals for experiences reveals that many respondents included several different descriptions of different episodes in any single letter to him. Some of those letters extend to several pages and some detail a lifetime of experiences. So the actual number of specific and separate experiences within the archive may be much higher. The harvest is there; ready, and the workers have been comparatively few. The simple fact is that we do not know the size of what is there before us. Perhaps one day we *will* know, although like any living thing our largely unexplored continent continues to expand as more accounts are added. There is much work still to be done. Like many pioneers, Sir Alister led the way but there are very many areas of this continent of this continent which await the arrival of others.

Part of the ongoing challenge of navigating and exploring this massive territory lies in its *uniqueness*. It really is a one-off. I know of nothing, anywhere, comparable to the RERC archive – even in this age of digitization and the internet. The archives of the SPR may well be the closest match but, in reality, even *they* are very different: concerned, as they are, with very different things. How, then, do we explore the vast continent of the RERC archive, given that there are no other comparable explorations to help us? The result of this particular challenge has been the ongoing development of new methodologies, particularly as regards the location and retrieval of the 'types' of experiences germane to any particular project. What is absolutely clear is that the challenge of exploring this massive continent has given impetus to new ways of thinking and doing as regards collecting, storing, retrieving, and analysing accounts of religious experience and that this, in turn, has served to locate ongoing work within the archive at the 'cutting edge' of contemporary research into spiritual and anomalous experience. An exciting prospect, as we stand on the threshold of the *next* fifty years of archival exploration.

## A Risky Business

Of course, exploration of any kind can be a risky business. For me, research is about taking risks. That may mean challenging shibboleths; being methodologically incorrect, perhaps, or blazing entirely new trails. On the fiftieth anniversary of its founding, the archive stands before us – vast and still largely unexplored, yet ripe for harvest. T.S Kuhn reminds us that no new paradigm ever came about as a result of timidity or the shirking of challenges (Kuhn 1962). And this is the real risk – not to stay on the 'right side' of the line but to cross it. Why *do* the same motifs recur within NDE testimonies? Why do so many people have unusual experiences that confound their cultural-linguistic backgrounds and expectations? What might explain the 'common

core' to unusual experiences of light? How come there is so much unity-in-diversity in testimonies to overwhelming experiences of transcendent love? The reality that stands behind both the unity and the diversity may be too fleet of foot for our lumbering paradigms; rewarding the epistemologically incorrect, perhaps. But the archive provides rich opportunities for blazing new trails, as Sir Alister, a trail blazer extraordinaire, knew only too well.

Another ongoing challenge for any researcher tempted to explore this strange continent lies in what for want of a better word I shall call its 'otherness'. I am thinking here in particular of what any researcher may expect to find once his or her exploration is underway. Sir Alister knew full well what subsequent research has confirmed: that very many archival accounts can be put together and categorised into 'types'. A glance at *The Spiritual Nature of Man* and its classification of the first 3000 or so accounts provides ample testimony to this (Hardy 1979). But as I have already alluded to, there is a significant number of accounts that elude easy categorization and definition too: something that became very apparent to me when I was examining archival accounts of transcendent *love*. According to many respondents, these experiences are simply *ineffable*: *felt*, not understood, and certainly not 'name-able' or amenable to adequate, precise, definition. To complicate matters further still, many of the most unusual experiences in the archive appear to 'overlap' existing categories. An unusual experience of light, for example, may at the same time be usefully seen as a 'type' of religious vision or something even stranger, such as a poltergeist manifestation, as in the following example:

Not long ago I lived in a bungalow alone. One evening I made preparations as usual, about ten o'clock, to retire. I switched off the electricity at the mains leaving the place in total darkness. I went into the hall and bent down to lock the door. As I did so the hall was illumined with a soft light. Accompanied by a loud hissing. I stood up and turning around, saw a brilliant light, its edges flickering, and its centre in motion. I stood gazing at it for a period of fifteen or twenty seconds then it went taking with it the hiss and glow. I thought I had seen God.

That was the beginning of a series of phenomena continuing to this day. Soon after, occurring in the day and at night the bungalow shook under the concussion of terrific bangs upon one wall. One evening cooking in the kitchen I heard a loud bang from the dining room, and an intense feeling of being uplifted happened to me. I rushed into the dining room, but it was quite normal. Often phenomena have happened. If I listen at night I hear voices whispering around the room. I am not a religious conformist or a believer in Church dogma or ceremony, I believe that a mans home is his temple, and that love art beauty and home are the only things that matter (RERC 001093)

How might a researcher understand the ‘otherness’ of such an event, let alone try to classify or categorise it? Is he or she presented with the need to develop new categories or ‘types’ in such instances or is the entire utility of categorisation and classification called radically into question at such times? It is one thing to classify a *genus* or *species* in the natural world. Quite another to classify a ‘specimen’ from the supernatural world. Perhaps a whole new approach is called for. One that involves risk and which the next fifty years of archival research will develop, utilise, and present. Much of Sir Alister’s pioneering work was in this whole area of classification and it is exciting to see what he started being carried on by others: not least as regards the ‘fruits’ of such experiences.

### **The Next Fifty Years**

Of course, no continent – however strange – is entirely ‘other’. As we have already had cause to note, the incredible land that Sir Alister did so much to trailblaze has turned out to be both unfamiliar *and* familiar. Students of religious experience who have yet to set foot upon this land will have no difficulty in identifying at least some of the reports he received: visions, feelings of unity, out-of-body and near-death experiences, voices, a sense of being guided, comforting presences, and so on. It has been the sense of being somewhere both familiar *and* unfamiliar that has most vividly characterised my time in this wonderful land. It is my hope that the next 50 years will allow us to see it all even more clearly.

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Archival account numbers are given in brackets.

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## **Orbs: A Preliminary Search in the RERC Archives**

Mara Steenhuisen

### **Introduction**

Orbs can be generally described in their broad sense as luminous opaque or translucent spheres that are visible in still digital photographs and video footage and interpreted as circular anomalies. However, this description can be extended towards orbs that are noticed with the naked eye, and may interact with the observer, then acquiring a personal meaning or in the much wider context of humankind, the planet or the universe. Referrals then are to be found in adjectives as in “spirit orbs”, “ghost orbs” and “soul spheres”. Another feature of the orbs is the co-appearance of luminous, often coloured “mists”, also called “ectomists” (analogue to “ectoplasm” but considered by orb enthusiasts to be of a different, finer form of “spirit energy”,) “light waves” etc. which will not be further addressed here. This paper focuses on accounts of spiritual experiences with orbs, notably if precursors to orbs photographed in digital imaging may be present in the RERC archives as written accounts of experiences with them perceived with the naked eye. As it concerns a first acquaintance in order to assert if these accounts point to experiences with orbs resembling contemporary accounts, this paper presents a short introduction to the history of orbs in how a photographic technical term evolved into a household name to continue with accounts from the RERC online database.

### **History**

In the history of the orb as we presently know it in popular culture, the term was supposedly coined by the late American paranormal investigator/ghost hunter and radio host around 1996, Dr. Dave Oester (Oester, 2014, p.2) who then defined it as ‘the shape of balls of light that we observed passing through the walls. We described the spherical shapes of these balls of light as orb shaped.’ However it evolved rapidly into a method of identifying the shape with the anomaly. Oester further explained the term almost automatically was equated to an apparition or a ghost. On the other hand,



according to parapsychologist and paranormal investigator Steven Parsons (Parsons, 2012, pp.4- 5) orbs were first referred to as “lightballs” discovered on photographs resulting from a 800,000 pixel digital camera using flash during a paranormal investigation at the Ellesmere Port’s Boat Museum in 1998. English paranormal investigation groups quickly adopted the American term “orb” after hearing their American counterparts experienced the same circular anomalies in their photographs and video footage. Early other research into orbs was conducted by optical physicist Bruce Maccabee (2000) and skeptic of the paranormal Joe Nickell (1996, 2005). On the other side of the spectrum were the orb enthusiasts conducting their own experiments and relating their experiences (Goodwyn, 2007, Ledwith & Heinemann, 2007, Hall & Pickering, 2006). The opposition between orbs as an explainable mundane phenomenon and the “believers” who deemed them out-of-this world, multidimensional and otherworldly persists.

Orbs as photographic effects flooded pictures literally by the millions with the introduction of digital imaging in the mid-1990s and were mostly generated by the relatively cheap compact cameras as these had been made readily available for mass distribution and within easy grasp for the snapshot photographer. Their small size and built in flash close to the lens Parsons found, accounted for the orbs’ massive appearance. According to ASSAP (The Association for the Study of Anomalous Phenomena) the circles of confusion theory could be expanded with The Orb Zone Theory (or OZT) in which orbs as ‘purely photographic artifacts’ only tend to appear in a photograph within a certain bandwidth or zone using the flash (ASSAP, 2007; Wood, 2012). However, also in expensive high end cameras used by professional photographers such as DSLRs (Digital Single Lens Reflex cameras), orbs surfaced as “circles of confusion”, their initial name provided by digital camera manufacturers for their main explanation. Circles of Confusion (or CoC) is a historic term, transferred from the analogue to the digital era. Simply put, the photographic image is made up of many individual points and when taking the photograph of the subject (e.g. a person, or a tree), light is reflected off the subject and passed through the lens aperture (the diameter of its opening which controls the light let in) which allows for the light points entering the lens where each will be reproduced. Those that directly fall onto the focal plane (of the camera sensor) will be sharp (in focus), however, those points that fall beyond that focal plane tend to be visible as small overlapping circles. (Hart, 1996, p.196). However the human eye isn’t able to discern within a certain area when a point is outside the focal plane and it might still be perceived as sharp. That is called the circle of confusion. However, a circle of confusion is also applied as a method for determining the depth of field as the diameter of the circles relates to the diameter of the aperture (the opening in the lens to let the light pass through). For example, a small (narrow) aperture (expressed in “f”), of f20 produces small circles, so the resulting photograph appears “sharper”, while a large (wider) aperture, f4, produces larger circles looking ‘softer,’ blurring the image (also used to create “bokeh”, the degrading of the image sharpness to create a blurred background in an image). Another cause for orbs are “lens flares” or “ghost images.” These are reflections

falling into the lens from bright light sources (such as the sun) and take on the shape of the width of the aperture of the lens or within the lens's glass elements (Creath & Schwartz, 2005, pp.350-351, Hart, 1996, pp.171-174) create shapes such as circles, rainbows, stripes and glows. The puzzling "thing" however, about the orbs was – and still is- their persistence in popular culture as something other, placed within a paranormal or spiritual context. I should also point out that orbs are not limited to digital photography, they surface since the early stages of professional photography, but for the purpose of the 'household name" status the orb gained during the digital imaging era, this is the focus of my present research.

## **Background of the PhD research**

For now, in short, in conventional optic terms orbs are regarded as reflected highlighted particles of airborne material such as dust, insects, pollen by a natural (the sun) or artificial light source (the flash). Despite their dismissal as 'circles of confusion' and the endeavours to make the public aware that orbs can be created purposefully as photographic effects, there is something I came across in my master's research (2016) on the cultural-cosmological impact with regard to orbs during interviews conducted in 2014-2015 with so-called orb enthusiasts. Orb enthusiasts are people who not only claim that they are firm believers of the floating light spheres but also tend to be in contact with them. This contact occurs telepathically with examples of orb enthusiasts who conducted experimental research to direct an orb into a certain position by asking "it" to do so. Then the orb enthusiast would take a picture to prove that indeed, that orb is positioned in that particular corner the orb enthusiast had in mind. It has to be stressed that conventional optic explanations and the considerations as mentioned previously account for a good deal of the orbs in photographs and video footage. By contrast, over the years cases have emerged which account for the presence of orbs in someone's life over a longer period of time. This presence could be in the form of a single orb that becomes of personal importance to the perceiver. This particular orb could be there alone or part of a flock of other orbs or orb-like manifestations. It may suddenly appear, stay along for a while and disappear. To the perceiver, the orb is experienced in the sense of something present, this presence is recognised as resembling being in the same room with another person and it may return repeatedly or just once or twice over a lifetime, with no exception to the effect of its profoundness to the experienter. It should be pointed out that orbs have been reported frequently in other conscious and non-conscious states such as dreams, during the near-death experience (or NDE), out-of-body experiences (or OBE), mystical experiences, clairvoyantly as part of the auric field, UFO encounters and paranormal experiences. These examples fall within anomalous experiences as 'believed to deviate from ordinary experience or from the usually accepted explanation of reality according to Western mainstream science' (Cardeña, Lynn, Krippner, 2014, p.4).

One of the orbs' peculiarities is that people can view them in broad daylight with the naked eye, both indoors and outdoors and instantly capture them with their smartphone or other device that contains a camera feature. Still, there are conventional explanations that might provide satisfying reasons for the orb to appear in the photograph. These may be that (1) although the orb has been observed and its picture taken, it still might be a photographic effect. The link that has been established by the observer between seeing the orb with the naked eye and seeing it on the subsequent photo might also be due purely to (2) the interpretation and imagination of the observer and as such have no cause and effect relationship. It may also be (3) purely coincidental. Still, as I have been researching this "orb phenomenon" since 2013, the problem arises when for instance the orb is positioned right there in the part of the picture where the observer has seen it simultaneously with the naked eye and has the urge to understandably make sense of it. Elaborating on this, what also happens is that (4) enduring experiences with orbs exist (with one or more orbs lingering in the experiencer's direct vicinity), which is something I came across repeatedly in my present research, which is specifically aimed at researching spiritual experiences with orbs.

With regard to the RERC archive and again as demonstrated by other researchers on light phenomena (for example Fox, 2008) who have consulted with the first-hand accounts gathered there over the years and pointed out its invaluable wealth, it gets very interesting when accounts describe anomalous light phenomena which strongly resemble contemporary accounts of orb enthusiasts, forwarded to the RERC archive long before the term "orb" was coined. Nevertheless, a word of caution should be given as definitions of orbs may vary strongly, placed within the context from which they emerge. The aforementioned 'circles of confusion' provide in a conventional materialistic and naturalistic explanation. However, viewed from a paranormal perspective parapsychologist and member of the SPR Council of Spontaneous Cases Steven Parsons (Parsons, 2014, p.44) writes

'Orbs are considered to be generally bright circular anomalies within any part of the image. Other shapes such as angular and elongated forms are also found and described. They may appear as single or multiple anomalies and may also vary both in colour and intensity. To date, tens of thousands of orb pictures have been offered forward by amateur paranormal investigators and lay members of the public as evidence and proof of something truly paranormal being captured by the camera.'

By contrast, people who get orbs in their pictures AND describe interactions with them, the orb enthusiasts, may define them in terms of

'Since 2012, I've taken many photos of Orbs, and know them as 'representations of the soul essence or energy signature of a being,

group consciousness, or craft, existing in a higher dimensional state'. 'Orb' is an umbrella term that covers many subtle manifestations, which can vary in form, colour and kind, and frequency, or dimensional strata, and include projections of the energies of star people, lightships, angels, elemental beings, souls both incarnate and discarnate, and other spirit beings.' Orb-like phenomena can also be projections (or probes) of entities of the lower astral 3-4D strata.' (Heartstar, <https://heartstar.org/orbs/>; retrieved 18 January 2020).

This brings me to introduce you the observation gathered from the literature review and interviews conducted that frequently orbs emerged in the experiencers' lives during or after a personal crisis (losing a loved one, severe illness, mental crisis, religious crisis) whereas before many of them claim they never had orbs in their pictures before or discerned them in their presence with the naked eye. It should be noted however and perhaps it is a finding in itself, that on the other hand the category of sensitives -people with strong psychic abilities- mentioned orbs as part of the common array of paranormal phenomena occurring throughout their lives. Over the past years, both authors of books on orbs disclosing their experiences with orbs (for example Ledwith & Heinemann, 2005), as well as interviewees, find companionship and solace in their presence as well as regard them as tools for personal and spiritual growth.

### **A Preliminary Search of the RERC Archive for contemporary orbs**

As the RERC archive aims to collect accounts of religious and spiritual experiences, according to Alister Hardy's call for experiences described as 'Have you ever had a spiritual or religious experience or felt a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from, or more than, your everyday self?' it comes perhaps as no surprise orbs could be included. Similar accounts to contemporary photographs and their narratives might be found here, as examples brought forward from the RERC-archive may demonstrate. Although it should be stressed that the archive contains accounts only and not photographs, the latter being an intricate feature of the orb phenomenon. However, as the term "orbs" is a recent term, categorisation and therefore comparison should be approached with caution as also Mark Fox (Fox, 2008) explained about his research in the RERC archive on *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena: Light Forms*. Should orbs be equated to floating spheres, globes, lights, stars and circles? As their outer and inner shape, density, colour, size, and patterning may vary as well as their appearance and mode of interaction from a sole presence to a flock determining what serves as an example and what isn't, depends also on the context in which people describe their single brush or repeated and ongoing interaction with orbs.

The search term “orb” entered in the RERC database yields thirteen results (retrieved on 3 January 2020), of which “orb” is included also within the term “absorbtion” or “absorbed”, “motorbike” or “Forbes” as these contain the letters o-r-b. Nevertheless, of these thirteen “hits”, three accounts do in fact refer to orbs in the contemporary designation, being account numbers 005509, submitted to the archive in 2011, hence the search term “orb” yielded this account (this account was pointed out to me earlier, by Marianne Rankin before I accessed the database) and 005479, submitted in 2009. The third account, number 400032 has the date of writing of 1999. The subject is “Orbs of Light” and was experienced in 1947 and it is unclear to me if the subject was added by the person maintaining the RERC database after the term “orb” became a common name at a much later date. In that sense perhaps the high number 400032 is an indication that indeed this is the case. These aforementioned accounts will be presented first to give examples of contemporary use of the term “orb” distilled from the RERC archive.

I have chosen to publish the whole account for the purpose of its context as indicated and *emphasising the text in Italics* concerning what might be direct referrals to orbs. The first account is given by a father who lost his son and is aware of ‘an energy following him’ and he consults two mediums of which one points out that the son has provided directions to indicate proof of his presence on a photograph. The second account refers to orbs as indicators of a health issue and the third is an example of what can be described as seeing glowing balls without further interaction:

**(RERC ACCOUNT NO. 005479, DATE OF WRITING 2009)**

Exactly one year after my heart attack, my son died. He ended his own life after discovering that he had M.S. My wife and I found him hanging from a garden tree. I desperately tried to revive him. At the same time I endeavoured to open his chakras pulling[?] on energy to re-enter his body. My son had died some eight hours earlier just after midnight when we were in bed asleep. Months later on, I was speaking with a Psychic Medium (who had never been to our home) He described the scene we were met with on 24th August 2007 but he went further "Your son saw you trying to revive him. He saw you trying to get his spirit to re-enter his body. He was watching you" said the medium. I attest that no-one was around to see my efforts or hear my calling God to help me so how I ask could the medium provide me with such a detailed and accurate account of the horrendous event? We went to see our son's body in the hospital mortuary. When my wife left the room momentarily I felt that I had to throw something. Was my son's energy soul in that room. The room was square. I went to a corner and felt out for energy (realising it could be static energy or such like). There was none, so I asked my son to come into the corner where I was standing. Moments later, I felt a strong energy presence, I then moved to the corner diagonally opposite. There was no energy/soul presence, then I called out for my son's soul to come into the new corner. The energy soul responded. This action I continued. I was moving, the energy was following me In October of this year, we went to see a different medium. Again, one who had never met or seen my son. The medium referred to a

third person (a young man) standing between my wife and myself. "Would you describe the young man?" I asked. The medium went on to describe my son and the VERY clothes he was wearing How could he do this I asked myself. so accurate down the colour and type of pullover my son had on when he died. I recontacted the first medium some time in our readings. He provided information about our son which only we were privy to. *Suddenly, he went quiet. "Go into your garden as far as your greenhouse then turn to your left. Your son is going to surprise you take photos at this place said the medium. I did as he asked taking my digital camera with me. I fired five shots at this spot discovering that one had captured a beautiful ORB. I'd never seen one before. We had the image enlarged and printed. Maybe I was lucky to have photographed an ORB but how did the medium know that I should go left at the green house? how did he know that I had a greenhouse. He'd never seen my garden nor the layout. Again, only one of five shots (all taken within a split second,) had captured the ORB. Will someone explain!*

**(RERC ACCOUNT NO. 005509, DATE OF WRITING 2011)**

I have lived at my present address in [place name] since 2006, it is now 2011. The first year I needed a Gall Bladder removal, the second year I was referred to the Gynea - Cancer clinic. Cancer was detected in the uterus because I was bleeding profusely, so all my reproductive bits and pieces were removed. It took me a year to not only regain - but enjoy increased energy levels. *Around that time I began to witness orbs shooting across the sitting room, they seemed to start from the wall opposite the very large picture window in my sitting room, zoom across to the window, at such a speed, but stop, at the glass. Quite a phenomena. I became quite hooked.[...] . But, and this is the crux of the story, and connected to the orbs again, this phenomena had still continued from time to time. A few days before my dilemma re the doctors, one orb, a red one, about the size of a ping pong ball, kept hovering by me at just below waist level. I spoke to a close friend who is a medium - about it - she warned me - it was a health issue, possibly complications. What more can I say? After that - no more orbs - I'm sorry not to see them any more, but perhaps it was meant to be a temporary witness in my life and the culminator was to warn me of a health issue. Isn't it wonderful.* From questionnaire: As I wrote of several experiences - I can only say that it was all an awakening over a period of time – moving towards an acceptance and understanding of our True Selves. I have reacted with Tears of Joy, Wonderment, Peace & Love.

**(RERC ACCOUNT NO. 400032, DATE OF WRITING 1999)**

During the night when I was in bed, on I think *about three or more occasions I saw a glowing ball of light to my left above my head near the ceiling. I sensed that this was something unusual* and I remember pulling my head under the clothes and looking again, I made sure it was still there it could not have been a reflection because the window at the left side of a bed and I was sure that it was something unusual. I think I felt not afraid but unsure of what it was. *As far as I remember I have never seen the.... Glowing balls since then ...,*

## Limitations and pre-orb terminology to encounters with balls, lights, spheres etc.

As this paper concerns only a preliminary search into the archive, other search terms were employed loosely in order to see what the results from the archive would provide for descriptions closely resembling orbs and in the search field "subject" (and not the similar entry in the second field "text") as a "ball of light (1 result)", "floating ball"(0 results), "luminous"(3 results) "disc" (22 results), the combination of "luminous disc" yielded no results; "circle of light" (0 results), "circle"(34 results), "sphere" (62 results, including "atmosphere"), "globe" (0 results), and finally "star" (86 results) to see what accounts would be generated from the database. The determination of other search terms can be contemplated of course in a later stage of the study. The use of distinctive designations employed by contemporary orb enthusiasts such as "soul sphere", "ghost orb" or "spirit orb" already include assumptions about the nature/origin of the orb and were not employed at this time. Yet, to illustrate what kind of accounts from the RERC archive may describe orbs before the term was coined as set against an account from someone who refers to orbs because this is a recent entry to the archive, some examples provide a sometimes striking yet timeless witnessing of what contemporarily refers to orbs and experienced during the following situations: after bereavement with continuous presence(000031) and spontaneous and repeated occurrences(000264), during sleep in a dream and a religious crisis during a vision (000252), during the experience of physical trauma (003123), and after physical trauma (300318). Again I have chosen to present the complete account for its embedding in the context and highlighted the parts that directly may refer to orbs. The first account, no. 000031 was already brought to my attention by Mark Fox (Fox, 2008, pp.86-87) and can be found by the search term "flame-light" in the search field "Text" in the database). The other search terms employed referring to the next accounts were respectively "ball of light" (NO.000264), "circle" (NOs. 000264, 000252 and 003123), "disc" (NOs. 003123 and 300318) in the "subject" field of the database.

### **(RERC ACCOUNT NO. 000031, DATE OF WRITING 1969)**

On 11th November, 1963, about twenty-five days after the bereavement, around 2 o'clock p.m. while resting after dinner, completely alone in the house, I heard a voice, clear, loud, distinct, authoritative, masculine, apparently about ten feet away from me, high up near the ceiling. The Voice said, "I am going to leave you now, a new and better man". Nothing more. Just those twelve words. On 4th December, 1963, twenty-three days later, about 5 o'clock a.m. on awaking and about to get up, the same Voice was heard by me, at apparently the same approximation location, although in a different room, loud, clear and plain as before. The Voice said, "Give him my love. Tell him it's all right". Nothing more. Nothing incidental. On 27th December, twenty-three days later, I heard the voice of my wife. The voice was quiet, a little sad, but distinct and clear to me. It said, "Take me to see him now". Again nothing more. Nothing incidental. This was around 5 o'clock, a.m. Early in February 1964, *strange lights*

*began to appear in all parts of the room where I happened to be. Beautiful pale blue, slowly fading-in, and staying for a few seconds, then slowly fading out. They were at their best in a darkened room while I was by myself and thinking of her. Sometimes they came singly, very bright and large, sometimes numerous and smaller. In about the middle of February, just before settling down for the night, the lights were extra numerous, fifteen or twenty, but more numerous than previously. [While contemplating them and wondering as to their significance, a different light appeared, more like a flame of light, about as large as my hands, golden flame-colour, high up in the room, approximately ten feet away. This startled me and brought an exclamation to my lips, unfortunately so, as the flame-light immediately vanished and has never returned.] The other lights are now a daily experience. Over the five years from my bereavement no day has passed but that they appear. They come at all times of the day and night, in any and every part of the flat where I happen to be. They come when I am thinking of the ordinary business of life or doing the most mundane of things - a perpetual reminder of whatever it is they signify.*

**(RERC ACCOUNT NO. 000264, DATE OF WRITING 1969)**

About 3 years ago as I lay in bed and was about to pass from waking to sleeping I saw before my eyes an extremely {sic} brilliant ball of light - a very intense light in a black background. The room was dark and I think my eyes were open; I saw the light for between 5 and 10 seconds. It was not caused by any physical condition of myself - I have very good health, nor light from outside, it was far too intense. About 3 or 4 weeks later I had the same experience under just the same conditions but this time *the ball of light was surrounded by an equally intense line of light round the circumference*, just a short distance from it. That is all my experience but it seemed and still does seem of significance.

-1978 Alone, after 40 years of joint decision making, I found that *a ball of light, or part of one*, has unexpectedly appeared a few yards away as soon as I had made a decision, lasting a second or two.

-Sept 1978 *My ball appeared again, bright, but less intense in the garden*, through the N. window as I sat alone thinking of what a friend had told me that afternoon, of her having been once aware of a presence. (SAME RERC ACCOUNT NO. 000264 including multiple experiences, DATE OF WRITING 1980)

**(RERC ACCOUNT NO. 000252, DATE OF WRITING 1969)**

At about this age I was tormented by religious doubts (I was baptised into the C. of E. at the age of 5) I remember the mental torment & misery caused by this one wet winter day when helping to load & cart dung on a farm. A few nights later *a vivid dream* put an end to this unhappy state. *In a circle of brilliant light something or someone who loved me said, or intimated "Beauty is Truth; Truth is God. You love beauty; trust in it."* I woke happy & perfectly satisfied with this simple explanation, & have seldom been troubled since.



**(RERC ACCOUNT NO. 003123, DATE OF WRITING 1974)**

THE HEALING DISC Earlier in the evening I had a fall which had left me with two wounded knees. The next day I was due to take a journey I emphatically did not want to fulfil; so apart from cleaning the knees, I applied no curative ointment or fluid. That night as I lay in bed, out of the depths of the darkened room, *I saw a disc the size of a small plate and shimmering with light-colours. Grooved rings circled towards the centre and between each, a space, which formed a raised band. The darkness around the disc seemed to have greater depth than I felt to be normal and I sensed a distinct feeling of intensive movement, although I could see no objects. The disc began to move straight towards my face and then dissolved between my eyes.* The next day I woke expecting to find the usual re-action to my knees, i.e. bruises and stiffness but this time there was little trace of scarring or ache. I undertook the journey.

**(RERC ACCOUNT NO. 300318, DATE OF WRITING 1986, experienced in 1986)**

The night following the operation, when I was best described in a semi coma, I had an amazing and ever lasting experience. I seemed to be drifting through brightly coloured clouds, but unlike anything similar seen on earth. The nearest I can describe them is akin to the colour of old church glass windows with the sun shining through. This seemed to go on indefinitely until I became aware of *a small opaque object, like a paperweight coming toward me. Within the glasslike disc appeared the figure of an old Aunt who had passed on a couple of months previous.* She looked very sad, there then appeared above her a shadow which looked like the head and shoulders of a nun. My old Aunt then smiled and both images drifted away. Two days later we heard that a close friend of my Aunt had passed away at the same time as my strange experience.

## **Preliminary findings and Conclusion**

Accounts found in the RERC archive may demonstrate the occurrence of balls of light long before any mentioning of the term “orb” in their contemporary sense, comparable to the term near-death experience which is also a relatively recent term (Moody, 1975; van Lommel, 2010, p. vii; Greyson, 2014, p.333 ). In particular, the description in RERC accounts numbers 000264 and 003123 describe the “classic” orb: the round shape, often with concentric circles and mostly white. Notably in no.003123, the second account, which the experiencer calls ‘the healing disc’ is especially precise in describing the orb (see Figure 1). Contemporary interaction with the orb is demonstrated in account no.005479 during bereavement, and concerns observation only respectively in the accounts nos. 005509, date of writing 2011 and 400032, from 1999.

What my literature research revealed and my interviews are suggesting is an emerging pattern that has yet to be closely examined. Considering the RERC-account of the

bereaved widower (000031), this is not a mere anecdotal example. It is in fact exemplary for the sudden occurrence of orbs in someone's life after a loved one has died (see for example Hummel, 2017; Underwood, 2014). Somehow bereavement may serve as a trigger or an invitation to orb companionship. Likewise, seeing faces in orbs of deceased loved ones, human or animal has become a common, yet deemed 'paranormal' feature in orb lore. It seems that after the loss of a loved one, be it a spouse or a child, people become acutely aware of orbs popping up in their photographs, in the gardens and their homes and they even travel with them wherever they go. Other triggers may be personal or religious crisis, serious illness or inflicted physical and mental trauma as RERC accounts demonstrate as well. Case number 000264 stands out as the experiencer mentions that the brilliant balls of light turn up spontaneously and for none of the abovementioned triggers, however, she also notices in a second occurrence that they seem to pop up whenever she has made a decision and refers to it as 'my ball', thus personalising the orb.

From the above examples from the RERC archive it may be suggested that this preliminary search only yields results from touching lightly upon the vast wealth of accounts presented in the RERC archive. Many more may stem from it for future research to elucidate the spiritual experiences with orbs, past and present.

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## **APPENDIX 1 - ILLUSTRATIONS OF ORBS OUTDOORS**

NOTE: All Figures are taken with the same compact camera, a Canon Canon SX280 HS set on automatic mode using the flash and all are taken in our back garden. Examples concern the classic orb: which is of a circular form with a variety of colours, size, density and patterning.

*Figure 1:* DAYTIME: Single orb during the early afternoon of January 3, 2020 during a mild rain shower. *Figure 2:* cropped, enhanced sharpness and contrast with coloured inverted version of the orb in *Figure 3*. An example of an orb with the cat's eye effect, resembling to have two eye sockets in the orb.



*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*



*Figure 3*

*Figure 4:* OUTDOORS EVENING- Picture taken in very humid conditions on December 31, 2019 of multiple orbs although the mist was not visible with the naked eye, yet the camera picks up the tiny droplets. *Figures 5 (below) and 6 (next page)* show the cropped, non-enhanced versions of orbs in close up. The orbs appear as loose particles.



*Figure 4*



*Figure 5*



Figure 6

Figures 7 (below) and 9 (next page) demonstrate multiple orbs taken during a dense shower on December 8, 2019 in the evening possibly containing hail stones. The misty haze at the bottom of Figure 7 probably is caused by a water droplet on the lens as subsequent pictures show the same cloudy patch. Figure 8 (next page) is a cropped version of the two brownish orbs in the left hand side of the photograph, as is Figure 10 (page following next) the cropped version of the “shooter” orb in Figure 9.

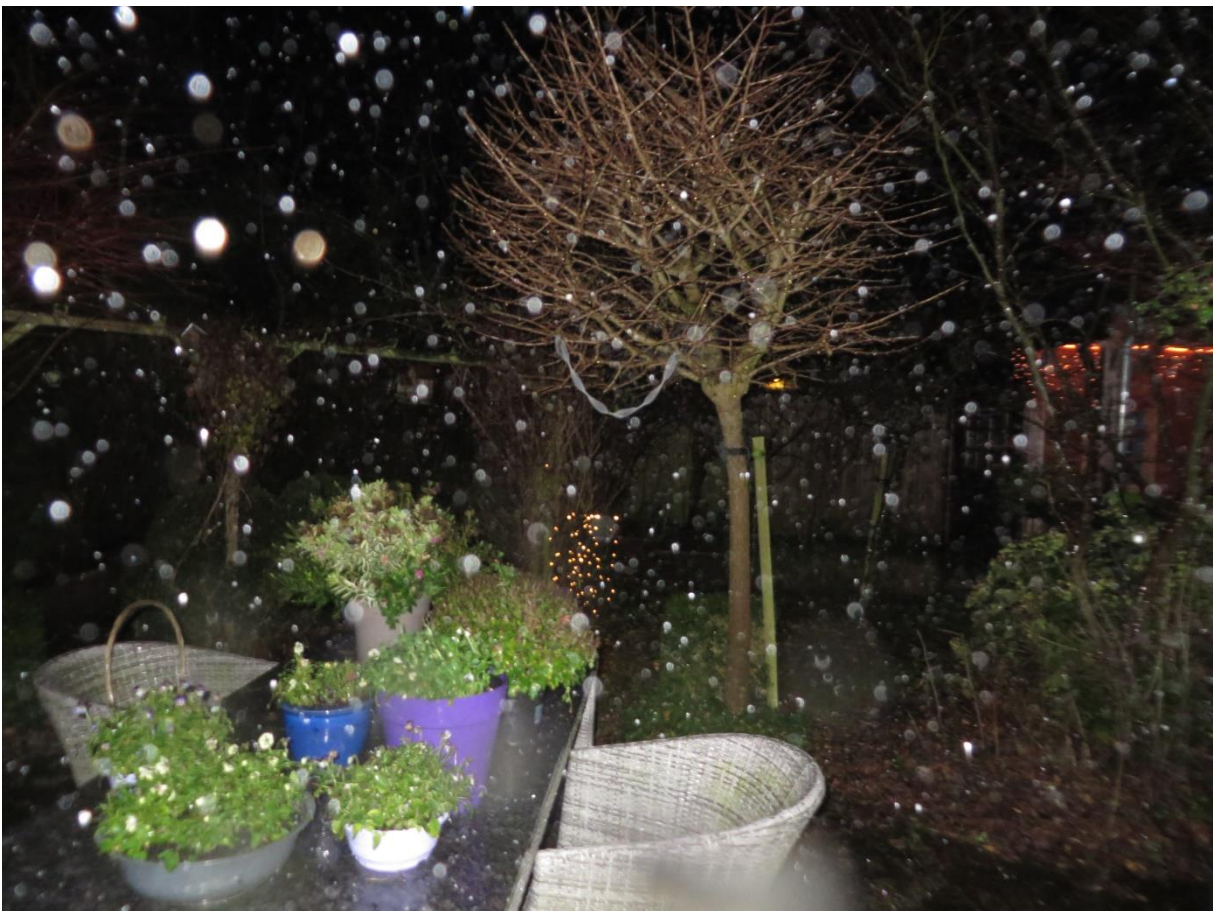


Figure 7

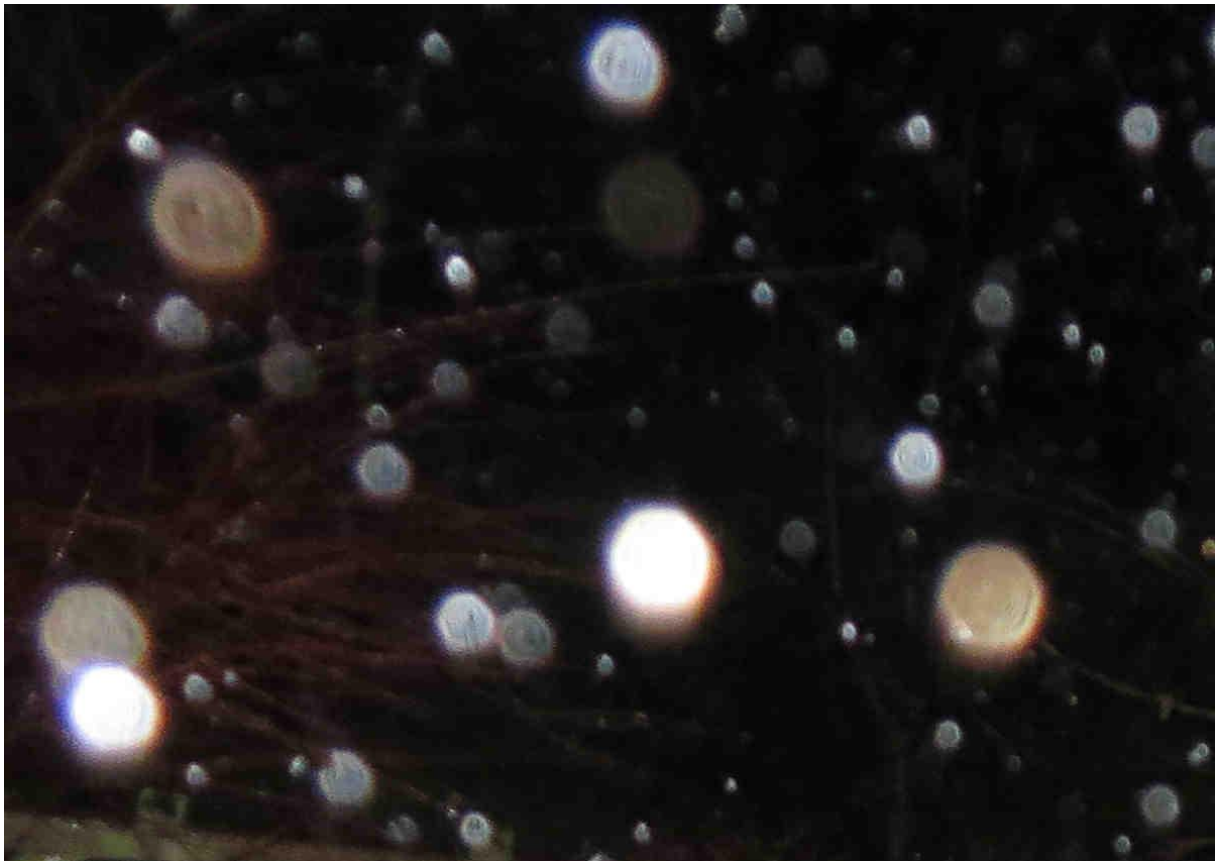


Figure 8

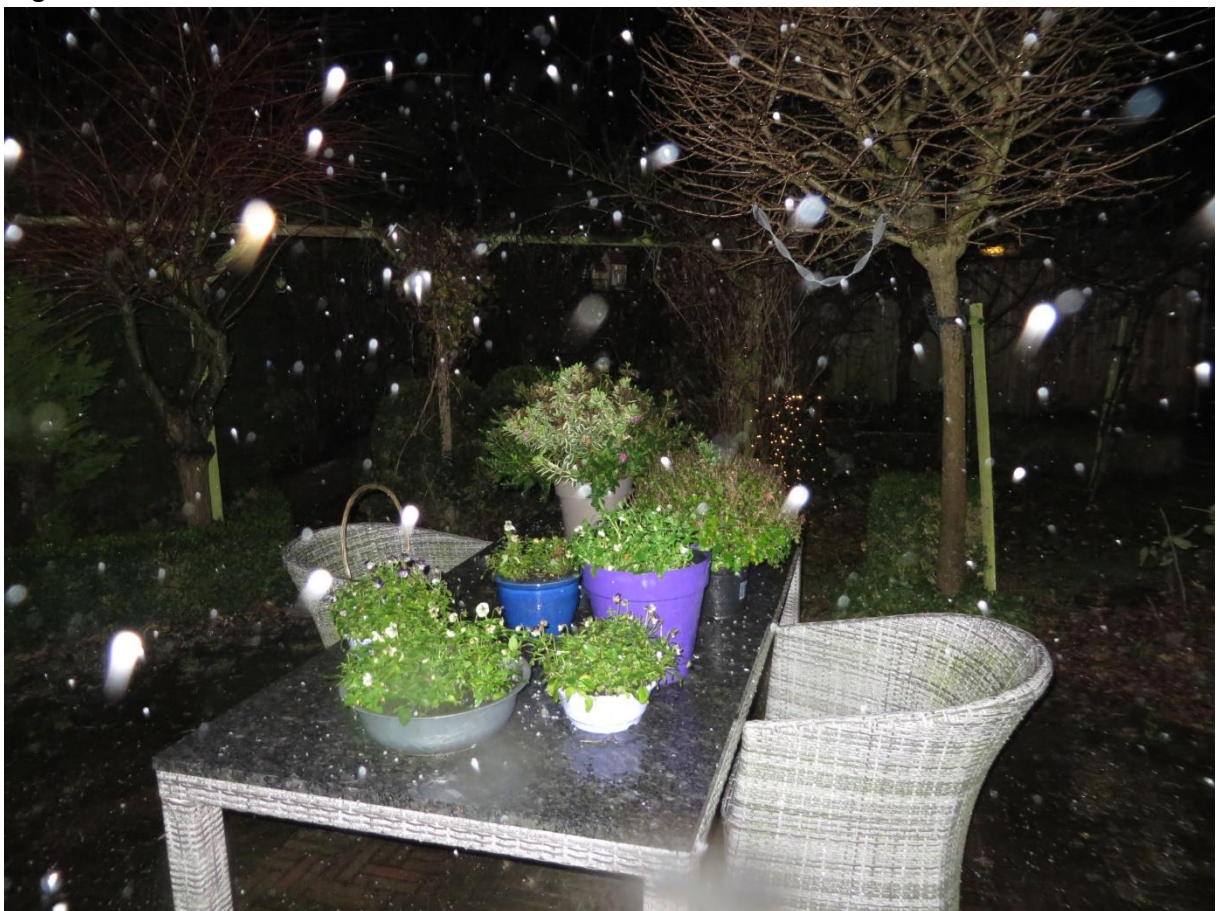


Figure 9





*Figure 10*

*Figure 11 (below):* Single orb taken early evening at dusk (19.00 hrs CET) of 13 October 2019. It was not raining although it had been predicted for the evening. In *Figure 12* (next page) the cropped, non-enhanced version of the orb shows the features of the orbs with the particular concentric rings.



*Figure 11*



*Figure 12*

*Figures 13 and 15* are photographs taken during the rain shower that occurred that same evening 13 minutes later on October 13, 2019. In *Figure 13* note the light phenomenon, in a cropped version in *Figure 14*. As well as *Figure 16*, resembling the “rainbow” orb variety. (All remaining images on next two pages.)



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



# Journal for the Study of Religious Experience



## The etheric place: Notes on finding the supernatural at the boundaries of sleep

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### Abstract

Whilst conducting qualitative studies with both Christians who report hearing supernatural voices and Spiritualists who report 'clairaudience', we have encountered numerous instances of what appeared to be hypnagogic and hypnopompic experiences being deemed spiritual by our participants. Taking place at the boundary between wakefulness and sleep, these occurrences involve voices, visions, and tactile phenomena. We note that they also seem to have common characteristics that may distinguish them from other reported spiritual or religious experiences: 1) Clear and external aurality when involving voices, 2) Ambiguous messages or initial meanings, and 3) Later attribution to a supernatural agent.

Keywords: spiritualism; clairaudience; hypnagogia; dreams; attribution

### 1. Introduction

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James observes that 'in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate responses are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favour of the same conclusion' (2004: 75). This comes shortly after he describes several cases of 'hallucinations' which, he suggests, illustrate humanity's tendency to experience 'a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence...more deep and more general than any of the special and particular "senses"' (ibid.: 61). With these observations, James partly precipitated an approach to the study of religious experience, sometimes called 'attribution theory', that highlights how anomalous sensory/perceptual experiences come to be cloaked in spiritual or religious significance. However, James' illustrative cases also have something contextually striking in common, which he does not note: each took place at night or in bed as the experiencer was either falling asleep or waking up.

First labelled 'hypnagogic hallucinations' by the French psychiatrist Alfred Maury in 1848, the various phenomena experienced as perceptually 'real' during the transition from wakefulness to sleep had already been noted by the theologian and religious visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (1998). For Swedenborg, this liminal state of consciousness was highlighted as particularly spiritually fecund, and he seems to have regarded its religious revelations highly. By contrast, James asserts

that these sorts of experiences only occasionally ‘connect...with the religious sphere’ (2004: 63). Either way, the relevant literature on hypnagogia, a category that includes both ‘hypnagogic’ (between waking and sleeping) as well as ‘hypnopompic’ (between sleeping and waking) hallucinations, is united by a common set of phenomena. These experiences include, for instance, seeing shadowy figures, seeing geometric floating shapes, feeling an emotionally-charged ‘presence’ in the room, feeling pressure on the chest, sleep paralysis, and several others (Mavromatis 2010: 14-52).

Perhaps no one has produced more research on the way in which the seeming objectivity of these experiences can lead to spiritual traditions or beliefs than David Hufford (1982; 2005). Hufford, arguing against the top-down notion of an individual’s cultural expectations causing spiritual or religious experiences, also implicitly counters Jean-Paul Sartre’s exposition of hypnagogic hallucinations as being only ‘quasi-observations’ because they have no connection to the physical environment and do not present as true perceptions (2004: 37). Instead, Hufford notes that it is precisely the profound sense of objective reality, or ‘inarticulate feelings of reality’ as James puts it, accompanying experiences of sleep paralysis and felt presences that has led to many cultures’ folklore concerning entities that visit and often attack individuals at night (1982). For Hufford, too, the spiritual attributions afforded these experiences – the beliefs and explanations of the ‘religious sphere’ – are only salient inasmuch as they accord with the phenomenology of the experiences.

It is worth noting, however, that Hufford’s relatively recent scholarship on sleep paralysis and folklore is important, at least in part, because hypnagogia has been relatively underexplored by mental health researchers, folklorists, and those interested in the study of religious experience. Indeed, as recently as 2009, psychologists established a new self-report measure for hypnagogia, noting that ‘we still know relatively little about the correlates of hypnagogic and hypnopompic experiences’ (Jones, et al. 2009: 30). Peter Schwenger, a literary theorist, believes that this scholarly lacuna is partly due to Maury’s influential attempt to locate hypnagogic hallucinations in the eye itself (thus taken to be a product of purely physiological forces) and Sartre’s subsequent downplaying of sense perception and emphasis on ‘abnormal’ attentional consciousness upon relaxing our muscles in preparation for sleep (Schwenger 2012: 6; Sartre 2004: 40-42). Yet, the considerable lack of research into the potential connections between hypnagogic hallucinations and religious or spiritual experiences may also stem from the very source material informing James’ work in this area. The Census on Hallucinations originally conducted in Britain by the Society for Psychical Research, and subsequently executed in the United States during the early 1890s by James and others, explicitly sought to investigate hallucinations reported by a non-clinical population, excluding dreams and focusing primarily on hallucinations entailing deceased persons (James 1986: 56-78). The results of this survey were influential on both sides of the Atlantic, but it seems likely that the method of eliminating responses related to dreams and/or unrelated to deceased individuals would have effectively removed cases of hypnagogic hallucinations from the study. What is more, the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed a concomitant blossoming of psychoanalysis in Europe, with leading figures like Freud and Jung famously claiming dreams as an important realm of the unconscious. For his part, Jung was interested in the paranormal and spiritual, blurring the line between the unconscious and the spiritual and even recording several cases of extraordinary hypnagogic hallucinations in his writings on ‘occult phenomena’ (1997: 49-53, 65-66).

Even so, and whilst acknowledging that at least one of these cases was reported by a spiritualist medium, Jung did not attempt to connect the emotional potency of the experiences with any spiritual or religious attribution.

Although recent evidence suggests that a number of historical religious experiences may have hypnagogia at their core (Powell 2018), the legacy left by the psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams along with early psychical research's corresponding disregard of the same, plus perhaps Maury's or Sartre's influential arguments concerning the physiology of hypnagogia specifically, has resulted in a relative dearth of scholarship on this liminal state of consciousness and its interface with the spiritual. In fact, we, like James, only inadvertently encountered this connection during our recent research at Durham University as part of the Hearing the Voice project, an eight-year interdisciplinary study of auditory verbal hallucinations funded by the Wellcome Trust. Below are our preliminary observations from the field, noting common phenomenological and attributional patterns for those reporting spiritually significant experiences occurring at the boundaries of sleep. Ultimately, the necessary contexts and frequencies with which such attributions are made may require further focused research. Then again, perhaps James is correct that such an experience only '*occasionally* connects itself with the religious sphere' (emphasis added) (2004: 63).

## 2. Investigation: Method and 'Fieldwork'

Hearing the Voice is an interdisciplinary study of auditory hallucinations which began in 2012. In an attempt to clarify the similarities and differences – phenomenologically, contextually, socio-culturally, and emotionally – between the sorts of hallucination-like experiences reported by those seeking clinical psychiatric treatment and those not seeking treatment, our research team devised several online surveys as well as a semi-structured interview scheme intended to capture the subjective experience of hearing a voice in the absence of a speaker. Based on an initial survey of self-selected voice hearers (clinical and non-clinical, whether religious or not) that investigated the common traits, voice characteristics and circumstances associated with auditory verbal hallucinations (Woods, et al. 2015), we<sup>1</sup> designed several focused studies of similar phenomena among specific population groups and religious communities. Three of these studies provided the data discussed below: 1) A phenomenological questionnaire completed by Christians (N = 58) who report having heard spiritually significant voices at least once (Authors [submitted for publication]), 2) A comparable online questionnaire completed by Spiritualist mediums (N = 65) who report 'clairaudience' (Author 2020), and 3) Phenomenological interviews conducted with Spiritualist mediums (N = 27) associated with the Spiritualist National Union, all of whom also report 'clairaudience'. The free-text questions posed to our participants in the online surveys and the questions asked during in-person interviews are formulated to elicit qualitative responses describing, in as much detail as possible, the individual's hallucination-like experiences.

## 3. Notes and Observations

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the authors, 'we' refers here to Angela Woods, Ben Alderson-Day, and Peter Moseley, all of whom contributed to survey design, interviewing, and other aspects of data gathering and analysis in the studies of Christian and Spiritualist voice hearers discussed below.

Whilst we focus primarily on auditory experiences, several questions ask about other modalities (visual, tactile, etc.) or other accompanying emotions and sensations. What is more, we give the participants opportunities to tell us more generally about their 'first spiritual experience' or other important experiences 'not covered in the questionnaire'. We have noted responses including seemingly hypnagogic language in response to any and all of the above sets of questions.

For example, in describing their first 'spiritual experience' one of our Spiritualist participants recalled seeing geometric lights above them: 'I awoke one night to see two square shaped lights on the wall above my headboard, I lifted my hand to see if the lights would go on my hand, but I noticed that as I lifted my hand it didn't cast a shadow or block any outside light source, the squares remained solid in shape? I then realised there was a luminescence about the squares, I blinked my eyes and they were gone.' Another Spiritualist, when asked to tell us about their first 'clairaudient' experience, explicitly used the language of hypnagogia and sleep disturbances: 'During a sleep paralysis episode...I was fully conscious but unable to move and breathe, someone was talking to me in my left ear.' Similarly, one Spiritualist we interviewed related both auditory and visual experiences, with the latter being 'just like watching television' and occurring when they are 'on the verge of being awake and asleep.'

If these participants are, in fact, relating otherwise ordinary instances of hypnagogia, they may be taken as particularly clear examples of mundane events subsequently receiving sacred interpretations. Embedded in lengthy qualitative responses replete with sometimes vague and idiosyncratic language, the consistent and comparable accounts of apparent hypnagogia have begun to stand out. In our view they seem not only to describe the nocturnal settings and sensory phenomena typical of hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations (including felt presences, bright lights, paralysis, and floating shapes), but they also appear to constitute a pattern of qualities which may distinguish them from other forms of spiritual experience.

### *3.1 Aurality*

First, with our focus on voice hearing it is no surprise that we ask many questions about the aurality of that which is heard. For instance, in both the questionnaires and the interviews, we ask for details concerning the extent to which the voices seem to originate internally or externally to the individual. We also question the degree to which the voices are 'heard' as one hears a speaker in the room, or whether the voice is experienced more like one's own thoughts. Whilst there is variation between the groups – our Christian participants, for example, seem somewhat more likely to hear things as truly auditory (as opposed to thought-like) than other groups – the apparent hypnagogic experiences seem to be experienced as clear and auditory, and nearly always external.

One of the Christian participants, for example, wrote that one of their two spiritual voice hearing experiences occurred one night when they were 'not asleep and not awake' and a 'distinct and clear' voice spoke one word in Hebrew. Another reported going to bed one night 'in absolute exhaustion' when, 'slipping from consciousness to sleep', a 'clear voice' said, 'As long as you keep on loving, you will never be alone.' Even more strikingly, a practicing Spiritualist medium told of a recurring experience in which they 'occasionally hear words or complete sentences outside [their] ears, as if a living



person were speaking... This happens most frequently when I am sleeping or about to awaken.' Participants in both groups also recalled hearing 'conversations' take place between two external speakers just as they were drifting off to sleep. Perhaps reflecting the norms of their trinitarian religious tradition in which the presence of two speakers would be highly unusual, the Christian participant who reported this experience identified it as 'physiological' and of no spiritual significance. In contrast, the corresponding Spiritualists cited the nocturnal conversations as valid instances of spiritual communication, one even finding the dialogical voices 'soothing'. Of all participants (Christians and Spiritualists) who described spiritually significant voice experiences occurring at the transition between wakefulness and sleep, we have only documented one who identified the speaker as their own 'deeper self'. Even then, the participant seems to describe a clear and audible experience.

### *3.2 Ambiguity*

Interestingly, the content and significance of such voices – indeed of any reported hypnagogic spiritual experiences – is often described as initially ambiguous or even incoherent. A Spiritualist explained that, in one instance, they awoke to a 'huge sound' that sounded 'like the whole street could have been calling'; yet, the sound only spoke two words which 'meant nothing whatsoever.' This is certainly the case for those who experience visual phenomena, such as felt presences or bright lights, the spiritual significance of which may elude understanding. For two of our participants, both currently professional mediums, the ambiguity of the physical and visual phenomena they experienced was related to us in the context of their own efforts to 'develop' the skills of mediumship. For example, one of these two participants stated, 'Sometimes when falling asleep I would see white light and think someone had switched the light on but when I opened my eyes it was pitch black. However, I am developing well...'

As would be expected, auditory verbal experiences naturally present the opportunity for the experiencer to receive a meaningful message. However, it appears that in many cases the experience is somewhat banal or difficult to comprehend immediately. The participant who heard a single Hebrew term told us that they did not know Hebrew at the time. Another, who spoke of hearing a voice tell them, 'As long as you keep on loving you will never be alone', recalled having 'no idea what it meant' at the time. Similarly, one participant awoke from an afternoon nap to the sound of a voice saying 'Gulag'. In recounting the event, the participant claimed to have 'had no idea why [they] were hearing this.' Several participants also recalled hearing their name called (one of the most common hypnagogic hallucinations), and one simply heard the word 'mum'. In these cases, and despite the events being cited as examples of spiritual experiences, there seems to have been no specific meaning attributed to the words or phrases heard.

### *3.3 Attribution*

That being said, ambiguity and attribution are markedly intertwined for both our Christian and Spiritualist respondents. For example, one Anglican Christian minister mentioned two separate occasions in which they heard a voice just after getting into bed. The voice was 'clear' and 'just behind the ear', so clear and external in one of the instances that this participant turned to their spouse and said, 'What did you say?' Despite the voice communicating quite encouraging messages ('You're going to marry [them], you know?' and 'You are the one I have ordained'), it 'was a long time before [they] realised it was God's voice speaking.' Indeed, this has been a somewhat

common refrain. The voices and visions of the hypnagogic state seem to leave the experiencer struck by the event but unsure how to proceed. Much as Hufford's work would predict, our participants frequently demonstrate a sort of meaning-making process wherein they attempt to locate or to align supernatural possibilities with the nature and emotional impact of their profound hypnagogic experiences.

In this regard, our two participant groups appear to differ slightly. For the Christians, attributing the hypnagogic experience to God seems to rely primarily on a process of discerning comfort or peace. Several report not knowing what the message they heard meant, but recognising it was divine because they subsequently slept more soundly than usual. One individual noted that their experience of a 'presence' in the room brought with it a 'growing sense' of 'warmth'. In comparison, the Spiritualists – with perhaps a broader and more inclusive sense of the imminence of the spiritual realm – appear to interpret even vague sensory or perceptual anomalies as moments of encounter with spirit beings and confirmation of their 'mediumistic' abilities. Within the Spiritualist frame, then, hearing one's name when falling asleep is later taken to be evidence of a spirit trying to communicate. Accordingly, recurring but otherwise ambiguous experiences, such as one interviewee's experience of seeing a column of light in their room on several consecutive nights, is understood as an emerging ability to connect with the spiritual.

#### **4. Concluding Thoughts**

Based on currently accepted understandings of hypnagogia (Jones, et al. 2009: 30), we estimate that 8 (14%) of our Christian participants, 11 (17%) of the respondents to our Spiritualist survey, and 9 (33%) of our Spiritualist interviewees report spiritually significant experiences which also fit the definition of hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucinations. Each sample also includes several more who are likely describing hypnagogia but whose language leaves more room for doubt. When one considers that the prevalence of hypnagogia in the general population has been estimated as anywhere from approximately 31% (Ohayon 2000) to 85% (Jones, et al. 2009), our participants do not seem any more prone to reporting such experiences than anyone else. To the contrary, what may be more interesting is that we are finding many examples of this rather common experience being ascribed to spiritual agents or forces, a striking illustration of bottom-up and attributional theories of religious experience.

However, our observations may be somewhat circular. Hypnagogic hallucinations are partly characterised by clear external phenomena and heightened emotions; to highlight the clear aurality or subsequent attempts to explain spiritual experiences that occur in this liminal period of consciousness may be to state the obvious or expected. Even so we did not expect to encounter hypnagogia in our research and believe it is noteworthy. For instance, for those interested in the study of religious experiences, this subset (hypnagogic/hypnopompic spiritual experiences) may provide clear support for attributional theories. The theophanic or revelatory experiences occurring at the boundaries of sleep may not require either pre-existing beliefs/expectations, divine intervention, or the psychological exceptionality (high hypnotisability, high suggestibility, epilepsy, etc.) sometimes posited by theorists in this field. Furthermore, this subset has been included alongside all other hallucinatory phenomena by mental health researchers seeking to compare 'clinical' and 'non-clinical' voice hearers without recognising the qualia and contextual circumstances unique to hypnagogia.

Our findings may indicate that additional attention ought to be paid to hypnagogia's role in the religious experiences used for comparison with clinical forms of hallucinatory experience, as characteristics like the aurality and frequency of hallucinations depend greatly on participants' appraisals of the significance of these relatively common nocturnal events. After all, as one of our interviewees confirmed, 'A lot of people sort of either before going into sleep or waking up in the morning can be in a slightly more etheric place...you might want to look into that.'

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Wellcome Trust [WT108720].

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