

**Mark Fox, *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena: Lightforms*
Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2008, 203 pp. ISBN 978 0 7083 2157 7 (hbk).
£67.75**

Dr Mark Fox is, perhaps, not an unfamiliar figure to many readers of *De Numine*. He has contributed to the Religious Experience Research Centre's (RERC) list of publications by way of Occasional Papers. He has also lectured to the Alister Hardy Society and students on the associated Religious Experience MA course on numerous occasions. A lecturer in Philosophy and Religious Studies at the Joseph Chamberlain College, Birmingham, Dr Fox has previously authored *Religion Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience*¹, wherein he includes a study of near-death experience (NDE) cases from the RERC archives. From this and other works in the field of NDE research, as elsewhere, readers and researchers alike will be familiar with reports of people encountering light phenomena. Dr Fox picks up this theme in his new book *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena: Lightforms*. Here he delves into the RERC archives on another mission: to explore four hundred unpublished accounts in which 'lightforms' have been encountered largely outside of the NDE context. Possibilities regarding their origin, nature and common features are pursued. From the outset Dr Fox asks if we have reason to reject 'conventional' explanations for these phenomena '... and look instead to a higher, stranger, supernatural source: a spiritual world, perhaps, coexisting alongside our own but capable of 'breaking through' to it on certain special occasions.' (p. 3.)

The author's own title for the study was: *Lightforms: Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena*. Now reversed by the publisher, the title seems fitting either way. The historical context of the study occupies the first chapter. It observes, biographically, some of Sir Alister Hardy's own thoughts and involvement in the field of religious experience and what led to the establishment of a research facility and the eventual collating of around 6,000 accounts of religious experience – initially at Manchester College in Oxford, and now housed at the University of Wales, Lampeter. This is a concise and informative introduction to pertinent areas of Sir Alister's life and the RERC, thus establishing provenance for the study.

The following chapter completes the first part of the book by locating the study cross-culturally and trans-historically. Throughout history people have been experiencing religious or spiritual encounters with light phenomena. They have been reported across many religious and spiritual traditions: shamanistic, kundalini, mystical, visitation experiences etc. Manifesting as they do in a variety of ways, it is these phenomena that Fox has dubbed 'lightforms'. At this early point in the book consistency and patterning seem apparent. Although this chapter is adequate for its purpose, the author admits that a single chapter is not enough to show the richness and diversity of experiences of mystical light across cultures and centuries. The book then only touches on this area of which I would have enjoyed further indulgence.

Part II of the book, the study proper, consists of eight chapters wherein various accounts of 'lightforms' are categorised and presented with commentary. People have had solitary and shared encounters. The light has embraced and infused. It has appeared as beams, rays, shafts, flashes, auras, and illuminated landscapes and people. It has also been subject to visionary encounter (as in other-worldly visions). Pattern and consistency emerge more strongly here in Part II, indicating several frequently recurring features: that slightly more often than not these lightforms are encountered at times of crisis. They often establish turning points within the crises, introducing positive feelings, calmness and resolution; positive fruits of transformation frequently ensue, ushering in breakthroughs

in belief in God and fearlessness of death. Fox notes the consistency here with early NDE research.

As in his previous book, Fox challenges the critique that religious experience is generated by expectation. He indicates that these experiences are often, and to the contrary, surprisingly unexpected and as such are repeatedly found to be precursors to accommodating changes of attitude and lifestyle. Adding further weight to his argument, he notes that as the pre-1975 NDE-like accounts in the RERC archives pre-date Moody's² seminal work – although consistent with it, they could not have been influenced by it.

In Part III, after two pages of statistical analysis (nothing to be feared by non-statisticians) a model in accord with the common features presented above is presented. Further naturalistic explanations, including some of the foremost, recent scientific research, are analysed in the light of the findings of this study. Theological objections to interventionist interpretations of the phenomena are also examined. Fox's engagement with potential adversaries and his conclusions are both interesting and inspiring throughout. I am left wondering, however, what of the accounts that did not fit Fox's model. I am not supposing that these might undermine the model, but I would be interested to see if they fit into some even larger schema or how they might otherwise be explained. This is an opportunity for a further study perhaps.

This book will be of interest to those studying the field of NDE research, presenting as it does, pre-Moody NDE accounts and similar encounters with 'lightforms' gleaned from a wider context. It reveals other consistencies with NDEs suggesting that NDEs are just one subset of a wider ranging phenomenon. The notion of there being a common core to NDEs and 'lightforms' is raised and supported by this study, though admitting of cultural variation in interpretation. The book will also be of interest in its own right, besides contributing to the wider field of spiritual experience research. It reveals the possibility, if not likelihood, of a benevolent source lying behind these 'lightforms' as they have been variously experienced across cultures, history and accounts in the RERC archive. After three years of investigation Fox takes comfort interpreting these unusual lights as providing proof that this world is not all there is. This will no doubt be viewed as a controversial position, particularly by many prepared to read the likes of this review but not the study itself.

As the author describes it, the book is part biography, part history, part investigation, part discovery – and I would add, overall scholarly produced (including references, bibliography and index). Although the book will be of interest to those specialising in the fields mentioned above, it is nonetheless affable, informative, comforting, and inspirational to the general reader. Fox suggests, 'The pleasure of simply sitting and reading the remarkable experiences that are reproduced in these pages may well be deemed to have repaid the price of admission.' (p. 8.) For those sufficiently interested in the subject he is no doubt correct. Respectfully, however, I cannot help but wonder if he was aware of just how much that admission would cost at £67.65.

Reviewed by Karl Gibbs

Published in De Numine 47 Autumn 2009

¹ Fox, M. *Religion, Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2003

² Moody, R. *Life After Life*. Atlanta: Mockingbird, 1975