Religion and the Transpersonal
The Alister Hardy Trust
"Soft" Perennialism & Feminist Perspectives
16th October 2026, 2.00–4.00pm (BST)

The first aim of this event is to encourage collaboration between the Alister Hardy Trust and the Transpersonal Section of the British Psychological Society. Both of these organisations are engaged in the study of religious, spiritual, or transpersonal experiences; those that take us beyond our ego and skin limited selves, whether we believe in a God or not. The second aim is to include topics that provide alternative perspectives on, what to most of us, are well known experiences. Dr Steve Taylor will introduce the argument of “soft” perennialism as a perspective on common core phenomenology, and Dr Madeleine Castro, drawing on insights from UK women’s circles, will provide awareness of feminist approaches to religious, spiritual, and transpersonal experiences.

Event Programme

1.45pm **Virtual doors open for arrivals**

2.00 p.m. **Welcome & Introductions**

Prof Leslie Francis, Chair of the Alister Hardy Trust

Prof Bettina Schmidt, Director of the Religious Experience Research Centre

Dr Mike Rush, Trustee of the Alister Hardy Trust

Dr Mara Steenhuisen, Editor of the Journal for the Study of Religious Experience

2.15 - 2.45 p.m. **Dr Steve Taylor**

A New Day for Perennialism: The Argument for a ‘soft’ perennialism

2.45 - 3.15 p.m. **Dr. Madeleine Castro**

Feminist Perspectives on Religious, Spiritual, and Transpersonal Experience

3.15 – 3.30 p.m. **Response from Dr Jeff Leonardi**

3.30 – 3.50 p.m. **Dr Mara Steenhuisen**

Q&A and discussion

3:50 – 4:00pm **Wrap up & end.**

Speaker's Abstracts

Dr. Steve Taylor, Senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University

A New Day for Perennialism: The Argument for a 'soft' perennialism

Abstract

The idea of a 'perennial philosophy' seems outmoded to some academics, who suggest that all religious and spiritual traditions are independent. I will present my approach of 'soft perennialism,' in which the focus is on experience rather than teachings and beliefs. (We could refer to this as a 'perennial phenomenology.') I will show that when we examine mystical experiences from different traditions, we find much more convergence than in beliefs and teachings. This convergence extends to mystical experiences that occur outside traditions, to people who are not religious and have little or no knowledge of spirituality or mysticism. Perhaps most significantly, this convergence extends to children's mystical experiences too. These 'extra-traditional' experiences cannot be culturally constructed, since they occurred outside traditions, to people (and children) who may not have absorbed a religious worldview, or who may even consider themselves atheists.

There is a shared range of expansive experience beyond normal human awareness. In certain unusual states of consciousness – occurring spontaneously or perhaps induced by intense psychological turmoil, spiritual practices, or psychedelic substances – human beings may transcend the limitations of normal awareness and explore these expansive ranges. This expansive experiential realm is accessible to all humans, even people who do not consider themselves religious or follow any spiritual paths and practices. People may describe and interpret what they perceive in slightly different ways, due to different beliefs and traditions, but it is always essentially the same experiential landscape.

Bio

Steve Taylor PhD is a senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University, and the author of many best-selling books on psychology and spirituality. He is a past chair of the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society and editor of the Transpersonal Psychology Review. His new book is *Across the Universe: The Magic and Mystery of the Beatles' Creativity*. His previous books include *Time Expansion Experiences*, *The Adventure*, *Extraordinary Awakenings*, *The Clear Light*, *The Fall*, *Out of the Darkness*, *The Calm Center*, *The Leap* and *Spiritual Science*. Steve's books have been published in more than twenty languages, and he is a regular presenter of Prayer for the Day on BBC Radio 4. He writes for *The Conversation* and *Psychology Today*. Eckhart Tolle has described his work as 'an important contribution to the shift in consciousness which is happening on our planet at present.'
www.stevenmtaylor.com

Dr. Madeleine Castro, Senior Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University

Feminist Perspectives on Religious, Spiritual, and Transpersonal Experience

Abstract

This paper asks what feminist perspectives add to the study of transcendent and transpersonal experience, especially where it is embodied, relational, and communal rather than solitary. It argues that research in this field has often focused on a particular model: solitary, contemplative, and individualised, drawing implicitly on traditions such as Quakerism or Buddhism.

First, a feminist perspective situates such experience within structures of inequality. Access to leisure, solitude, and unstructured contact with nature is unevenly distributed across gender, race, and class. Women's disproportionate responsibility for domestic and caring labour not only limits opportunities for such experiences but also shapes how and whether they are recognised and reported. Class further inflects these dynamics, with working-class women's spiritual lives often taking shape in communal settings that cross over between worship, wellbeing, and mutual support, including women's circles, Spiritualist churches, Black Majority Churches, and other congregational or wellbeing practices.

Second, feminist and womanist scholarship broadens what counts as transcendent and transpersonal experience. It highlights forms that are embodied, relational, and collective, rather than solitary and hierarchical. Women's circles in the UK, alongside examples from Black Majority Churches and diasporic spiritual traditions, suggest that transcendent and transpersonal experience may be expressed in ways that dominant contemplative frameworks have not always been equipped to recognise.

Focusing on women's circles, this paper shows how feminist approaches both expose inequalities in the production and recognition of transcendent and transpersonal experience and open up new ways of understanding its communal and embodied forms.

Bio

Madeleine Castro (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University where she teaches on the BA in Social Psychology and the MA in Interdisciplinary Psychology. Since completing her PhD in 2009, her research has explored transcendent and exceptional human experiences, contemporary conceptions of transcendence, and visual culture, including a forthcoming chapter on "Visualising Transcendence" in the *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Visual Culture*. Her wider work engages contemporary spiritualities and feminist perspectives. More recently, she has focused on The Red Tent Movement and women's circles, with chapters in *The*

Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion, Gender and Sexuality and *Female Faith Practices: Qualitative Research Perspectives*, alongside several academic journal articles. She is an active member of the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society.

Dr. Jeff Leonardi, Person-centred Counsellor, Supervisor, Trainer and Spiritual Companion

Jeff Leonardi is a Person-centred Counsellor, Supervisor, Trainer and Spiritual Companion, and a retired Anglican priest who was for 17 years Bishop's Adviser for Pastoral Care and Counselling in the Lichfield Diocese of the Church of England. He has been a qualified Person-centred Counsellor for the past forty years, and has a PhD in the spirituality of Person-centred Counselling in relation to Christian spirituality, and the implications for Christian ministry and pastoral practice. He continues research into relational spirituality, including holding an Honorary Research Fellowship at the Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales Trinity St David at Lampeter from 2015-25. He has published two books on spirituality and wellbeing.

Spirituality and Wellbeing: Interdisciplinary approaches to the study of religious experience and health, edited by Bettina E. Schmidt and Jeff Leonardi. Sheffield: Equinox, 2000.

Environmental Spirituality and Wellbeing: Integrating social and therapeutic theory and practice, edited by Jeff Leonardi and John Reader. Sheffield: Equinox, 2025.