

**Marianne Rankin, *An Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experience*
London, Continuum, 2008. 288 pp. 978 0 82649821 2 (pbk.) £24.99**

This book introduces the general reader to the types and characteristics of both religious and spiritual experience found in the English speaking world and beyond. The experiences of founders and significant figures in a substantial number of the world's religions (including several that are not often included, such as Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Daoism, Mormons, Baha'i, Unitarians and 'Alternative paradigms') are explored and analysed, as are experiences reported by ordinary people today.

Rankin makes a significant contribution to discussions about authority and freedom in religious understanding, and pluralism and religious truth by drawing on the long tradition of the study of the phenomenon from William James, through Alister Hardy to the contemporary work of the Religious Experience Research Centre. This research shows conclusively that individuals have these experiences regardless of their institutional affiliations or contexts. Rankin's work elegantly exemplifies this in a way that is accessible to the general reader of whatever tradition (or none).

Her work demonstrates that these experiences, though undoubtedly diverse in nature and characteristics, help to assure people of a hope that the material world is not all that there is, as well as leading to a decreased fear of evil and death. Furthermore, the fruits of these experiences tend in general to comprise an increase in a sense of social responsibility and compassion, and a greater sense of meaning and purpose to life itself.

In my view one of the most important features of this book is that it allows the experiences to speak for themselves, and imposes no theory-driven analytical framework on the accounts. Without doubt, theory-informed analyses make an important contribution to scholarship, and Rankin's work cannot of course stand alone. However, there are few studies since James and Hardy, and as vast in scope as this, which accord the experiences themselves the respect of an empathetic hearing.

That said, Rankin does not shy away from the critical questions, from a range of sceptical viewpoints. In an important chapter, 'The Interpretation of Spiritual, Religious and Mystical Experience' she explores the contributions of a number of scholars in the field, and gives a characteristically fair hearing to scholars such as Stephen Katz and Robert Sharf who argue respectively that there is no such thing as unmediated experience, and that there are no experiences, only conditioned narratives. Rankin does not engage with these interpretations, but gives them a clear presentation, often lending them far more clarity, cogency and accessibility than that of their original presentations. The reader is left both thoroughly informed and free to draw her own conclusions.

This work is based on meticulous research, with an ambitious eye to scope, whilst at the same time significant consideration has been given to balance. The grand narratives of the major world religions do not dominate over more diffuse spiritual traditions, or even over the experiences of individuals. The voices of both women and children are heard within its pages.

The book provides contemporary scholars of religious experience with an unparalleled resource bank to quarry, and the general reader with an up to date survey of scholarship in this important field. Students of the MA in Religious Experience owe Marianne a debt of gratitude for the resource she has given them. The Alister Hardy Society and Trust, of which she was for several years Chair, also owes her a debt for her elegant and accessible promotion of the serious scholarship of the phenomenon of religious and spiritual experience. And the

general reader owes her a debt for the wonderful rich resource she has provided, which will open many eyes to the variety, frequency and diversity of this significant feature of the human experience.

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**Marianne Rankin, *An Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experience*
London, Continuum, 2008, 304 pp. ISBN 978 0826498212 (pbk) £24.99**

Marianne Rankin is the former Chair of the Alister Hardy Society (2002-10), which is affiliated to the Religious Experience Research Centre located at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David at Lampeter in Wales. The RERC was set up in 1969 at Oxford University by marine biologist Sir Alister Hardy F.R.S. but is now at Lampeter.

Marianne's book is not about religion itself, its beliefs and practices, but is rather an exploration of what it means to individuals to have various kinds of numinous experience. She begins by distinguishing between these different kinds of experience: religious, spiritual, mystical, transcendental, OBEs, NDEs, and other less well defined types of experience that cannot readily be described in physiological terms yet lead to a change in the psychological state of the individual. These experiences provide an important counter to those who argue that the material world is all there is.

There is usually one particular figurehead who is regarded as 'founder' of a religion but the author makes the point that the founder is really the Divine, in whatever form this is envisaged. She suggests a better term for the initiator of a new faith would be 'mediator' or 'messenger' of the divine inspiration. Rankin perceptively explores the origins and transmission of these messages, some of which are now regarded as scripture, but also discusses how this relationship with the numinous affects ordinary people. The discussion embraces religions of the East (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Confucianism, Sikhism) as well as the more familiar western faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). There are fascinating accounts of several less well-known religions or those with fewer followers, like Baha'i, Quakers, Mormons, Scientology, Christian Science, Theosophy, Unitarianism and even what modern thinkers like Fritjof Capra, Eckhart Tolle and Neale Donald Walsch have to tell us.

The spiritual energy associated with sacred places has always fascinated me since I was a boy: Marianne covers this too, though only briefly. A rationalist would probably dismiss this as 'imagination', but I have always felt a sense of emotional uplift at such places, of which there are several in my homeland of Wales.

This is a clear, well researched and wide-ranging account of the significance of kinds of numinous experience, focussing on those associated with religious faith. It is at one and the same time a resource book of religious experience for students of the subject but also a highly readable account for those seeking a meaningful spirituality in their lives. I'm sure many readers will resonate with some of the experiences described in this book.

A deeper understanding of the nature of spirituality that this book provides should help us achieve a less materialistic and more cohesive and tolerant society. For those with an open mind it should also lessen the fear of mortal death. The many accounts taken from the archives of the RERC provide testimony of how such spiritual experiences have provided

personal life-changing evidence of a cosmic spiritual energy that scientists are increasingly affirming.

There are extensive notes and bibliography at the end of the book with a detailed Index. Despite its wide coverage, this book is easy to read and is a worthy successor to 'The Varieties of Religious Experience' by William James and 'The Spiritual Nature of Man' by Alister Hardy.

Reviewed by Dr Howard A. Jones