

## The Politics of Religious Experience<sup>1</sup>

I am very flattered to have been offered the role of Vice-Chair of the AHSSSE. This article is an attempt to provide a bit of background about myself and some of my thoughts on the subject of spiritual experience. As far as the academic side goes, I graduated from Keele University in 1997 with a BSc in Biomedical Science. I then gained the MA in Religious Experience from the then University of Wales, Lampeter, in 2008, and most recently achieved a PGDip in Consciousness and Transpersonal Psychology from Liverpool John Moores University in 2011. Since then I have been thinking about studying for a PhD or training in counselling. One of the essays that I wrote for my MA, *On the Side of the Angels: Neuroscience & Religious Experience*, was published by the RERC in 2009 as Occasional Paper #49. This explored the similarities between Sir Alister Hardy's approach to the study of religious experience and that of recent neuroscientists, most notably Newberg and d'Aquili. Since then an article summarising my MA dissertation on spiritual experiences in Western Esotericism has been published in the journal *Paranthropology* (Rush, 2011). I have been a member of the Society for about 12 years now and have been running a small local group in Chesterfield for nearly 10 years. I was invited onto the Committee in 2003 and in 2010 I built the Society's new website. In my spare time I work full-time as an ICT Service Desk manager for a local Council.

Now that I have my academic history out of the way, I have a confession to make. I have never had a religious experience<sup>\*</sup>. So where do I stand in relation to such experiences? The rest of this article is an attempt to answer that question. I stole the title from Brian Smith's wry and witty comment in *De Numine* #46 that 'religion' could be defined as 'the politics of religious experience'. There are several aspects of the politics of religious experience that have interested me over the years.

### Defining Religion

Brian's quip was in response to the question posed in a previous issue of *De Numine* asking readers to propose their own definitions of religion. My response is not to try to define it at all. 'History', it is often said, 'is written by the winners'. Similarly, perhaps, 'religion' is defined by the discipline. Okay, my cliché isn't as snappy so I doubt that it will catch on. However, 'religion' is often defined, intentionally or not, in an *a priori* way that serves the agenda of its definer. For example, Ninian Smart (1996) avoided defining religion by reference solely to supernatural agents because he didn't want to exclude Theravada Buddhism, Marxism or Humanism from his scope. Instead he referred to 'worldviews' and put forward a 'functional delineation of religions in lieu of a strict definition'. This took the form of several dimensions: ritual, doctrinal, mythic, ethical, social, experiential, and artistic. Similarly, Pascal Boyer (1994, P34) admits that his own characterisation of religion depends on the assumptions and models that constitute his own viewpoint. Whereas, Richard Dawkins (2006) characterises religion as extremist and delusional from the outset, in order to make it easier to criticise and dismiss it. In his national survey Alister Hardy

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<sup>\*</sup> I once had a hypnopompic hallucination, which was quite scary at the time. Fortunately, I had already read about such hallucinations so when I experienced it I simply thought "bugger me – so *that's* a hypnopompic hallucination!"

didn't define religion as such but instead asked 'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?' (Franklin, 2006) I suspect he phrased it this way in order not to exclude people who, whilst having this type of experience, did not consider themselves to be religious.

Last year the Alister Hardy Society (AHS) was renamed the Alister Hardy Society for the Study of Spiritual Experience (AHSSSE). One of the reasons for this was that it was felt the term 'spiritual' was more inclusive and related better to current conceptions of these kinds of experiences. It also makes the interests of the Society immediately apparent to anyone not already familiar with it. Currently, Dr. Greg Barker, Co-Director of the RERC, is planning a pilot study to determine what language a new generation of experiencers use to refer to such experiences. This will help inform a future national survey of religious(?) experience.

Definitions and terminology have a very real impact on the Society. Some time ago, at a Committee meeting of the AHS, we were discussing the option of a Society networking website, similar to Facebook, that would enable AHS members to interact socially over the Internet. A demo site was set up with a variety of content. However, the RERC requested that an item relating to séance style mediumship be removed as it may threaten the success of a funding bid to the Templeton Foundation. Personally, I agreed that the bid should not be jeopardised and that the content should be removed, at least until after the bid. This highlights the kind of political issues around religious experience that I am talking about. Is mediumship a valid area of academic study for the RERC? Hardy himself, in one of his letters to a correspondent stated that he was only interested in 'psychic' experiences as long as they were definitely related to religion in some way. Of course, on the one hand the RERC must maintain a rigorous, academic, professional approach to its subject matter; both to maintain academic respectability and to attract funding. However, on the other hand is this approach liable to jeopardise certain avenues of research by pronouncing them off-limits *a priori*?

There is, of course, a danger in having too many or too broad a definition of religion. The more definitions we have the more difficult it will become to compare the results of different studies. How can we be sure they are comparing the same thing? When I undertook the research for my recent MA dissertation using the RERC archive, biographies, contemporary accounts, and Internet forums, I deliberately avoided defining religion or spirituality. This was partly to discover what respondents themselves understood by these terms, and partly because I wanted a more inclusive approach; that is, accounts of experiences that were not only traditionally religious but also less traditional ones too.

In summary, I believe it is important to be aware of the implications and limitations of such definitions, and to avoid becoming dogmatic about them. Such preconceived categories may obscure aspects of the phenomena that would otherwise be illuminating. We should therefore listen carefully to how experiencers define themselves and their own experiences.

## Unity & Diversity

Over the last few years there seems to be a significant number of people who feel a) that there is a 'common core' to religious experience, b) that this is a constructive contribution towards interfaith understanding, c) that this supports a form of Perennial Philosophy or wisdom tradition, and d) that this is the result of a progressive spiritual evolution. At this point I must make my second confession. Personally, I am a sceptic (i.e. someone who requires evidence and a good argument) and I remain to be convinced about some of these aspects. I am agnostic about many things as this seems to be the only intellectually honest position I can adopt. I also believe in the proven ability of science to explain many phenomena. So, what has the 'common core' hypothesis or the Perennial Philosophy got to do with the politics of religious experience? Well, I would suggest that looking for similarities between experiences and traditions can be influenced by a desire for ecumenicalism or political-correctness. A quote from Aldous Huxley (1993) makes this connection explicit:

The Perennial Philosophy and its ethical corollaries constitute a Highest Common Factor, present in all the major religions of the world. To affirm this truth has never been more imperatively necessary than at the present time.

Marianne Rankin, former Chair of the AHS, concludes her *Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experience* (2008) with the words 'However, as we are faced with an ever-growing need for mutual understanding and global co-operation, a spiritual approach to life may be our best hope for the future of the planet'. John Franklin (2006), Honorary Secretary of the AHSSSE echoes this sentiment regarding unification of world religions and the need for ecumenical concern:

Today, it is of great importance to find a common basis for human co-operation. Much is quietly being achieved, through the Parliament of the World's Religions, the United Nations, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), through Ecumenical and Interfaith movements, and through the attempts to achieve a 'global ethic'. But still the religions divide through their interpretations of scripture and tradition: seeming too bound by the weight of cultural history to look further into the idea of a possible ultimate unity behind the traditions, a vision perceived by the mystics and often revealed in contemporary spiritual or religious experience. This is perhaps where the work of the Religious Experience Research Centre might contribute – by continuing to point to the growing evidence of personal testimony; by showing and sharing with other disciplines the ways in which this relates to revelation and to the core principles of the major world religions; and by "widening the horizons" of perception.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with this, but it should not blind us to the differences between experiences and traditions. On one side we have people such as Frithjof Schuon (1984) or Keith Ward (2005) arguing for the 'common core' and essential unity of religions, whilst on the other side we have people like Steven Katz (1978) and Gershom Scholem (1946) arguing for the uniqueness of experience and tradition. This could be seen politically as an interdependence/unitive stance versus an individual/diversity stance respectively. This suggests that our politics can affect our research and also that our research can affect our politics. Whilst such unitive aims may be laudable there is an inherent danger in any resulting concordance. This is the spectre of elitism or the honouring of one religion over another. For example, when Pico della Mirandola adopted and adapted Jewish Kabbalah to his Christian

philosophy, he did so to convert Jews to Christianity rather than out of respect and empathy for Jewish mysticism (Wang, 2001). Similarly, some scientists who have studied religious experience have encouraged the development of an 'experimental faith' (Hardy, 1979) or a 'mega-theology' (d'Aquili & Newberg); which could be understood as forms of a universally acceptable religion. But does this run the risk that religion will lose its inner meaning, its cultural relevance, and personal impact, what has elsewhere (Daniels, 2005) been referred to as myth-mongering? Does the unitive stance risk the extinction of traditions by blending them into one homogenous whole?

I would like to emphasise that, whilst interfaith dialogue is obviously important, it is also important to preserve traditions and value their differences. Academic integrity should be sacrificed neither to the ideal of unity or an elitism of individuality.

### **Empiricism & Experientialism**

There is a third aspect, not unrelated to the above, of the politics of religious experience. This is the apparent tension between objective, empirical research versus experiential, hands-on spirituality. In his history of the AHS John Franklin (2006, P22, P37, pp45-46, & P49) refers to issues around this area such as pastoral care, counselling responsibilities, and the academic side of the Society. Interestingly, the course I studied on Consciousness and Transpersonal Psychology offered core modules in both empirical research methodology and integrated experiential learning. The danger is, of course, again one of perceived academic respectability. There are a multitude of organisations offering opportunities for experiential practices but the majority of these are not academic.

My view then is that, as far as research is concerned, experiential approaches are useful and necessary provided they are performed for a specific purpose and use a stated methodology. However, as researchers, hands-on spirituality should never be simply an opportunity to experience for experience's sake.

### **Science and Scientism**

In some holistic circles it seems (or perhaps I'm just being paranoid?) that there is a certain anti-scientific bias. Science is perceived to be trying to 'explain away' the spiritual aspect of our lives and the world. In criticising Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959), Sir Peter Medawar coined the phrase 'nothing-buttery'. This isn't a sort of low fat spread but the claim that science is trying to say that spiritual experience is 'nothing but' neurotransmitters and brain waves, etc. A distinction is often made comparing evil 'reductionist' science with goody-two-shoes 'holistic' worldviews and a move is afoot to create a new holistic science (whatever this may mean). Paradoxically it also seems quite clear that some people adopt and redefine scientific terminology to support their own metaphysical doctrines. This is most apparent in appeals to quantum physics to support various holistic theories. Is this an attempt to capitalise on the success of science in understanding and controlling natural phenomena?

It may help to understand science in the following four senses. The first is that of the scientific method. This is a process of observation, hypothesis formation, prediction,

testing, further observation, and hypothesis amendment. By its very nature this process is reductionist; an experiment isolates all variables but the one of interest and thereby focuses on isolated parts rather than the whole system. I find it difficult to understand how this could ever be made more holistic. The second sense is science as a cumulative collection of knowledge. This, I would argue, is the holistic side of science; biochemicals are related to organs, organs to physiological systems, systems to the body, the body to the mind, the body and mind to the environment, and so on. Science in the third sense manifests in the form of technology, from toasters to spacecraft. And science in the fourth sense of the word I understand as ‘Scientism’; a Dawkensian worldview where science is gospel. All of this can help to distinguish between science as a body of knowledge and individual scientists. Scientists may believe or disbelieve, have spiritual experiences or not – they are not organising a reductionist conspiracy to ‘explain away’ religion. It also allows that someone can be a scientist and a materialist, a scientist who is spiritual, a scientist who is religious, or a scientist who subscribes to Scientism.

Whilst not wanting to deny that there are militant atheists who preach their own anti-religious gospel of Scientism, it is important not to stereotype science, or scientists, as a whole in this unconstructive way. We need to transcend the myth of ‘reductionist science’ versus ‘holistic spirituality’ and understand how science and spirituality can mutually inform and illuminate each other.

### Spiritual One-Up-Manship

The final form of the politics of religious experience I want to mention is what I think of as ‘spiritual one-up-manship’. It can be seen in the way that, what was originally a small Jewish sect, became a major world religion with its own ‘New testament’. Also,



in the way that Mohammed was the *last* of the prophets, or in the way that Joseph Smith restored the *true* gospel or the way Swedenborg was given the *correct* interpretation of the Bible. In the meeting hall at the Brahma Kumaris meditation and retreat centre at Nuneham House, Oxfordshire, hangs an interesting painting. It shows a tree with its roots in the earth and its branches in the heavens. It’s title is ‘The Tree of Humanity’ and each lateral branch represents a major religious tradition. At its roots sits Brahma Baba, the founder of the Brahma Kumaris and his followers. This is probably just an innocent attempt to convey the unity of different world faiths but the positions of the founders and leaders of the Brahma Kumaris on the tree should be noted.

Self-reflection is therefore important in the politics of religious experience. Everyone, must stand somewhere to make their observations, whether this be on the shoulders of our spiritual leaders or the ivory towers of our academics. Therefore, we need to be aware of the tendency for spiritual one-up-manship, or as Jorge Ferrer (2002) calls it, 'spiritual narcissism', influencing our models and understanding.

### Conclusion

So then, what is my own perspective on religious (or spiritual!(or paranormal!!(or anomalous!!!, etc))) experience? The only thing I can do is to take an intellectually honest position and declare myself to be a sceptical, (but open-minded!) agnostic about these kinds of phenomena. My preferred framework of understanding is a neurocognitive approach but with the oft-quoted caveat that 'correlation does not prove causation'. I agree that the religious, or spiritual, worldview and the potential for such experiences, is a natural part of our biological makeup, regardless of the reality or not of any transcendent realm. This, by the way, also leaves open the possibility that even an agnostic, such as I, can have a spiritual experience. However, over the years I have become less interested in questions about *proof* and more interested in questions about *meaning*. I don't know how best to define religion or spirituality, so I let people define it for themselves. I don't know if there is such a thing as a 'core experience' or a Perennial Philosophy, so I appreciate commonalities whilst valuing the differences. I think that science is the best tool we have yet developed for answering questions about the world, but it cannot answer them all. Quantitative research can go a long way towards answering these questions, but qualitative methods can also contribute much to our understanding. I am comfortable to take the role of co-explorer in the spiritual or metaphysical worldviews of others, whilst I endeavour to understand and respect their own perspectives. Although I recognise the evidential value of spiritual experience for a world beyond, I feel that these experiences have a more immediate, and perhaps more cogent, value for this one. And finally, I don't know if there is life-after-death, so I am happy to wait and see (the longer I have to wait, the happier I will be). As Albus Dumbledore once said, 'To the well organised mind, death is but the next great adventure' (Rowling, 1997).

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