

TOPIC 3: ALISTER HARDY AND THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE RESEARCH CENTRE

The subject of this section is particularly relevant to students on this course. It is devoted to the work of Sir Alister Hardy (1896-1985) and the Religious Experience Research Centre, located in the main library in Lampeter. The archive contains thousands of personal accounts of religious experiences, which you are *highly encouraged* to access and engage with in your research. It is a unique resource which we are fortunate to have in Lampeter.

Hardy was a marine biologist (further testament to the wide range of disciplines the field attracts) who used his scientific training to help formulate his theories. By 'scientific' Hardy meant being objective, not being *a priori* reductionist. His methods were also scientific. When he collected accounts of religious experience as a body of 'evidence' (i.e. the 'proof' required to support the theory of the spiritual nature of humans), he proceeded as might a zoologist or botanist: collecting, classifying, and comparing the material and data. Hardy did not seek to impose on individuals a definition of religious experience, but rather allowed them to express their experience in their own words (he was thus, in part, a phenomenologist). Nor did he attempt to explain them away by reference to social, physical, psychological or other reductionist models.

Hardy believed that the existence of God could not be proven solely by reason, but rather that it could be 'derived empirically from the study of nature, man, and human history.' In addition, like James (who was a great influence on him), Hardy had his own religious experiences, and this informed and influenced his thinking on the matter. Because his experience of, and connection with, the divine was directly related to the natural world rather than to a specific religious institution, he saw religious experience and nature/biology as being interlinked. His two main interests in life thus intersected and converged. Such experience he viewed as part of human evolution (see in particular Hardy 1965, 1975, and 1984; the idea has been expanded upon in relation to psychic phenomena by philosopher, Classicist and near-death experience researcher Michael Grosso [1992]).

He sought to demonstrate a 'Natural Theology' of the 'spirit of man', which he defined as the side of us that 'experiences spiritual and religious feelings and loves adventure, natural beauty and the arts' (1965: 11). His 'theism' was not 'belief in a deity with an anthropomorphic image', but rather 'an extra-sensory contact with a Divine Power which is greater than, and in part lies beyond, the individual self; towards this we have a feeling, no doubt for good biological, or psychological reasons of a personal relationship, and we can

call it God' (ibid.: 16). He hoped to 'reclaim the ground that has been lost in the world through a false belief that science points only to materialism'; and to 'to show the way to a re-establishment of the idea of God as both a philosophical and a scientific reality' (ibid. 267).

He summarised:

A natural theology...could, I believe, by encouraging research and marshalling the facts in a systematic way, demonstrate to the scientifically-thinking world that there is overwhelming evidence

- 1. to show that religious experience has played and can play an important part in human behaviour.**
- 2. that there is a certain consistent pattern in the records of such experience.**
- 3. that on so many occasions men and women have achieved by what they call divine help or grace, that which they, and others who knew them, would have regarded as beyond their normal capabilities (ibid. 26).**

To Hardy, a spiritual dimension is simply part of what it is to be a human being, and he wrote that the feeling of contact with the divine

...seems to be a fundamental feature in the natural history of man.... It would not surprise me if the roots of religion went much deeper down into biological history than is generally conceded, and that it is part of the very nature of the living stream. (1965: 274).

Hardy firmly believed in the value of reports of religious experiences, and this led him to found a centre for a more scientific approach to research into them. Nevertheless, he wrote:

...science itself, as we know it, cannot deal with the real essence of religion any more than it can touch our appreciation of art, our joy in the beauties of nature or the poetry of human love. We can, however, use the methods of science to make a systematic natural history study of religious experience (*The Significance of Religious Experience*, RERC Occasional Paper 12, p.1).

Another important influence on Hardy was a student of James', Edwin Starbuck who carried out an early study into religious experience by sending out questionnaires to obtain accounts from ordinary individuals. His empirical approach was to first classify and summarise the accounts, then to attempt to analyse and explain them. This was particularly influential and important to Hardy, because it focused on the experiences of ordinary people rather than the extraordinary examples of the founders and leaders of religious institutions.

He began collecting accounts as early as 1925, and founded an archive and research unit in 1969 which is still actively growing (originally based at Oxford, and now at

Lampeter). Hardy encouraged the public to send in their own accounts of religious experience, placing advertisements in various religious journals, asking what is now referred to as ‘the Hardy question’: ‘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?’ In recent years, the question used by the RERC has undergone some subtle, but significant changes: ‘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 your every day life?’

One frequent criticism of Hardy’s approach is that those who would reply to his request for accounts would be a self-selecting sample, as opposed to a more systematic sampling across the population. The fact that Hardy initially targeted religious publications also made it less likely that he would get many accounts from atheists or agnostics; and Hardy changed his tactics accordingly, branching out to the national media.

Hardy’s notion of religious experience as an evolutionary, and thus universal phenomenon, was bolstered by similar observations by scholars such as the sociologist of religion Emile Durkheim (*Elementary Forms of Religious Life* 1915). Durkheim argued that religious beliefs ‘rest upon a specific experience whose demonstrative value is, in one sense, not one bit inferior to that of scientific experiments, though different from them’. Hardy also hoped that recognising correspondences between religious experience in different traditions would lead to greater understanding and cooperation.

While these ideas are certainly admirable, they are open to methodological criticisms. For example, Hardy was explicitly looking for similarities between reports, and did not adequately address the issue of differences. This may distort the degree to which religious experience is similar between individuals and across cultures; while possibly minimizing the differences. Postmodern objections have also been made to the act of cross-cultural comparison *per se*; with claims that they deny difference and the uniqueness of each tradition.

Hardy’s work is also subject to criticisms that he was intending to do ‘theological’ research, as a ‘faith seeking understanding’ exercise rather than an objective analysis in keeping with his perspective that he was using a ‘scientific’ approach. In other words, rather than seeing what emerged from an unbiased enquiry, he was attempting to demonstrate to others what he already believed.

Hardy’s last lecture, *The Significance of Religious Experience*, giving an overview of his life, his ideas, and his research has been published as RERC Occasional Paper 12.

RESEARCH AND THE RERC ARCHIVE

Various scholars have made use of the RERC archive in their research, and many of the most significant books are in the reading list below. Both Edward Robinson and David Hay, former Directors of the RERC, have used the archives in their works on religious experience in childhood (discussed in Section V below). Robinson's general orientation in this and in his books listed below is one of enquiry for its own sake. His goal is not to seek empirical answers to empirical questions, but rather to affirm paradox and mystery. In addition to his books listed here, the RERC library holds a video on Robinson's work.

As a fellow scientist (in fact, a fellow marine biologist), David Hay's approach is more in line with Hardy's own, affirming the study of religious experience as a scientific endeavour. Hay has sought balance in his work, acknowledging that no researcher can be entirely free of biases, and placing value on the subjectivity of reports.

Among the recent scholars who have made extensive use of the archive is Mark Fox for his books *Religion, Spirituality, and Near-Death Experience* (2003), and the forthcoming *Lightforms* (2008). For the latter Fox analyses hundreds of accounts involving references to light in various forms and contexts, and reviews the abilities of various types of theories to satisfactorily explain them. Of particular importance are the accounts of 'light' phenomena which were allegedly experienced by more than one individual. In a critical response to reductionist arguments that religious experience is dependent upon (if not created by) cultural and linguistic context and/or individual expectation (see Section IV, below), Fox points to archive accounts in which the experient clearly did not expect the experience, and it did not conform to cultural norms. Fox also discusses the possibility of a common core to such experiences, particularly in reference to the light radiating feelings of calm, peace, love, and joy (also see Fox's forthcoming Occasional Paper on references to love in the archive, entitled *The Love Project*).

Jordan Paper (2004) drew upon the archive in his study of 'mystic experience' cross-culturally (again, see Section III), placing modern western accounts into a more global context. He focused on naïve reports – the earliest accounts, before they would have been influenced by popular New Age ideas.

Phillip Weibe (2004) has examined religious experience throughout Christian history, particularly encounters with God and other spiritual beings, from Biblical references onwards, including examples from the RERC archives. He argues that such experiences support the idea of the existence of these divine entities beings, and a transcendent reality.

He has also used the archive in his recent research for a forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *Intellectual Vision: In Christian Faith and Beyond*.

Paul Marshall (2005) took a similar approach methodologically speaking, though focussed on mystical experiences involving nature, many of which he drew from the RERC archives. Considering Hardy's own nature-related religious experience, this work is particularly relevant to the RERC. Marshall first examined the phenomenology of such experiences, then evaluated a range of possible explanations for them ranging from the possibility of a genuine metaphysical occurrence, to postmodern and deconstructionist perspectives.

It is noteworthy that the works of both Paper and Marshall were influenced by their own religious experiences. In fact, this is the case with many of the prominent names in the field we have discussed so far.

The archive is clearly valuable in enabling researchers to establish patterns of religious experience, and to identify types of patterns which seem to widely recur. However, there are also many unique accounts in the archive which are often neglected. The diversity of religious experience (or the *varieties*, as James would phrase it) is equally important and requires as equal explanation as the similarities. One key question along these lines is: if there is a common core to such experiences, why is there so much diversity? This will be returned to in Section IV.

Many of the RERC Occasional Papers have also drawn upon the archives, and once again you should explore these and familiarise yourself with the topics they cover. The breadth of subjects and approaches reflects the diverse backgrounds and interests of the researchers, and once again demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of the field.

Of course you are highly encouraged to use the archive for you own essays and/or dissertation. If you choose to do so, it is essential that you look at as many publications that have used the archive as you can, so that you will be familiar with different approaches and methodologies, and the strengths and weaknesses in each when applied to your subject. For example, you may want to compare Hardy's question with the questionnaires used by Jackson in his 1991 study of religion and psychosis (see Section VI below), and that recently used by Lampeter's Prof. Paul Badham and Prof. Xinzhong Yao (2007) for their comparative study of religious experience in Britain and China. One issue is the value of Hardy's single, open question in obtaining the 'purest' expressions of the experience from the experient, free from possibly 'leading' questions; versus the clarity, accuracy, and uniformity of classes of data obtained by a more in-depth questioning process.

Areas of archive-related research which would be particularly welcome are those which would focus on a wider diversity of religious and cultural backgrounds, within the UK and/or abroad; or in comparison with ethnographical reports or with texts and traditions of religious institutions. Such research may even contain an element of original data-collection, involving targeting a specific community (or communities), and soliciting and collecting from them a new series of reports. The scope for original and significant research drawing upon your own skills, strengths, and background is vast. Of course, you are also welcome to submit accounts for deposit in the archive, if you or anyone you know have had a religious experience.