

Ecology and Spirituality: Nature Mysticism



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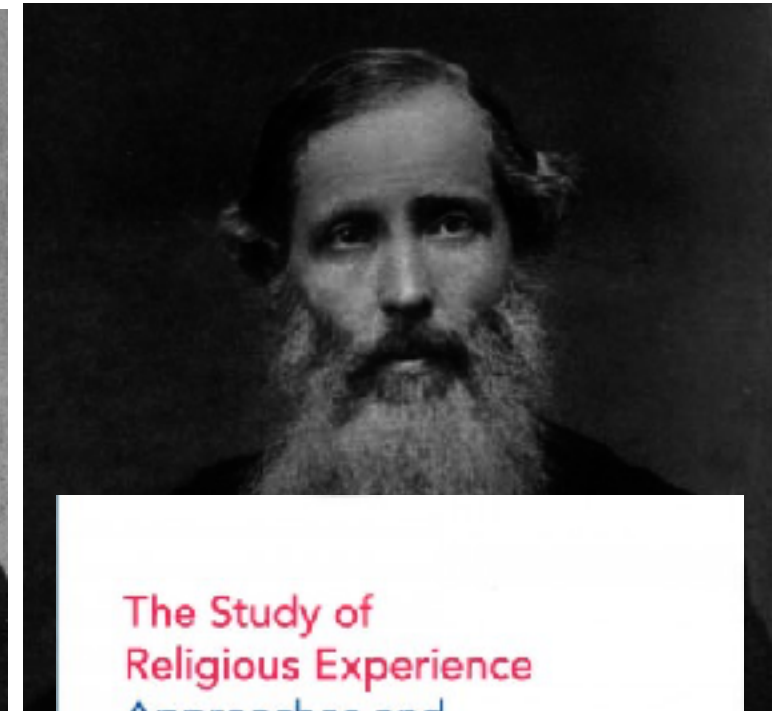
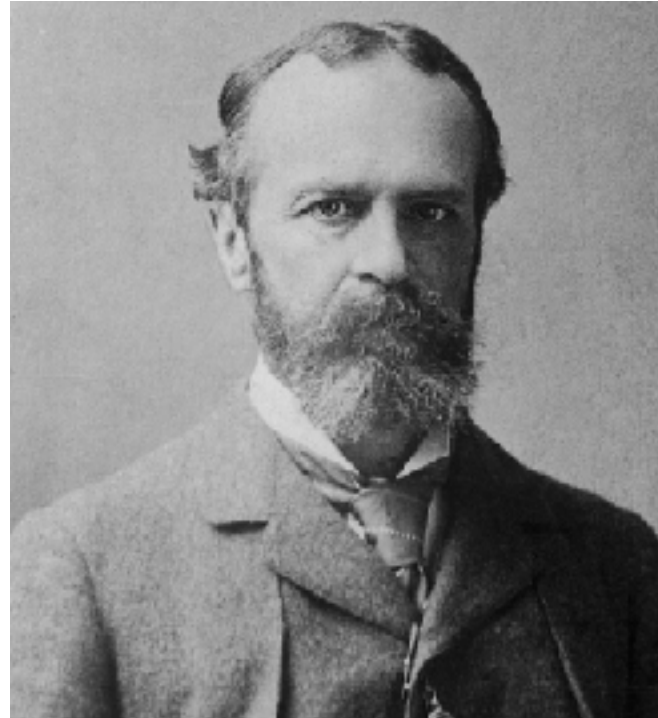
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Overview

- **Religious Experience**
- **What is Mysticism?**
- **Classifications of Mystical Experience**
- **Extrovertive Mystical Experiences**
- **As an organic impulse towards the 'Dark Green Religion.'**
- **Participation in nature.**
- **Mysticism/Paranormal**

Academic Extraordinary Experience Research

- There is a long history of academic research on extraordinary experience.
- The work of the Society for Psychical Research (1882).
- William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).
- Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (1969 onwards).



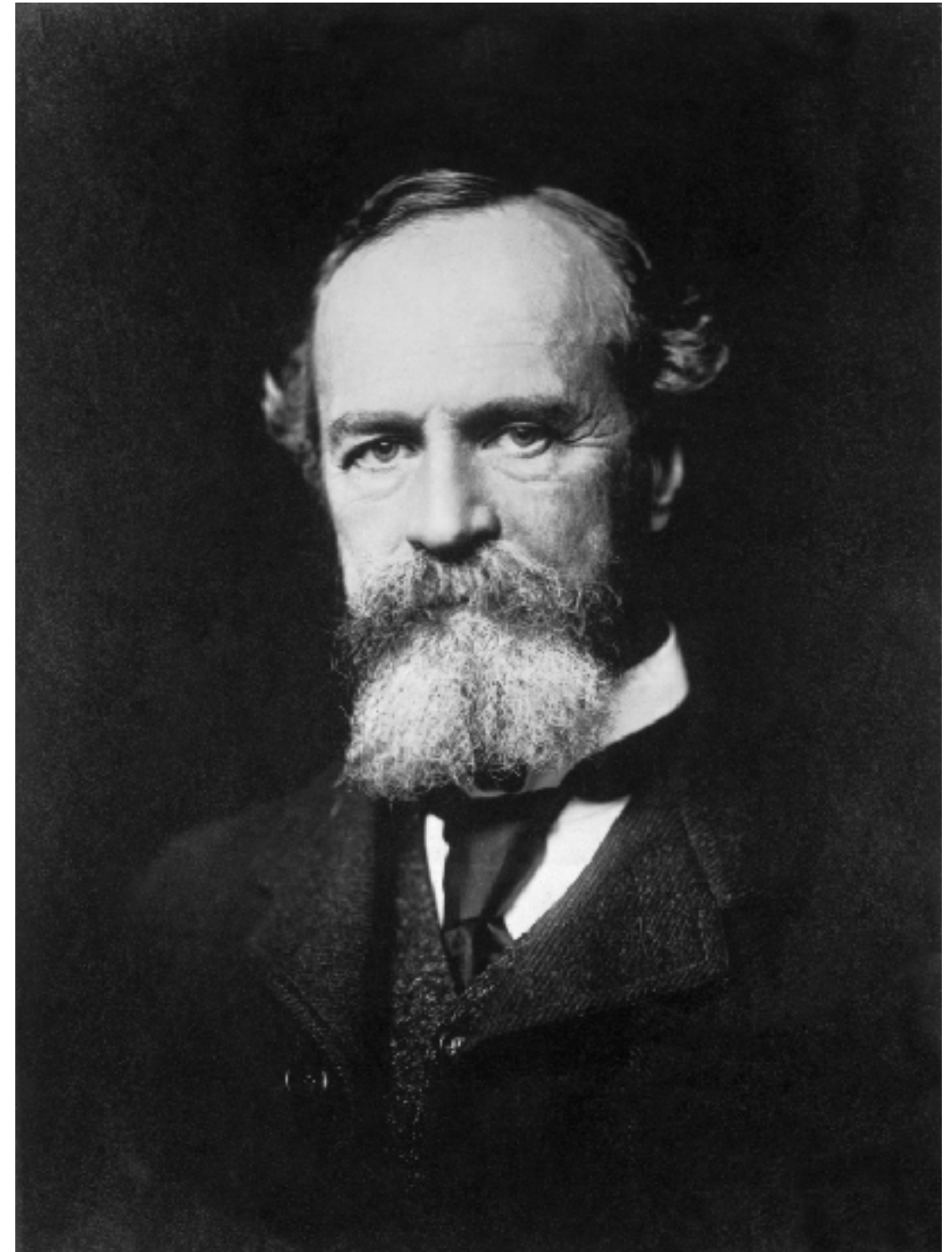
The Study of
Religious Experience
Approaches and
Methodologies



Edited by
Bettina E. Schmidt

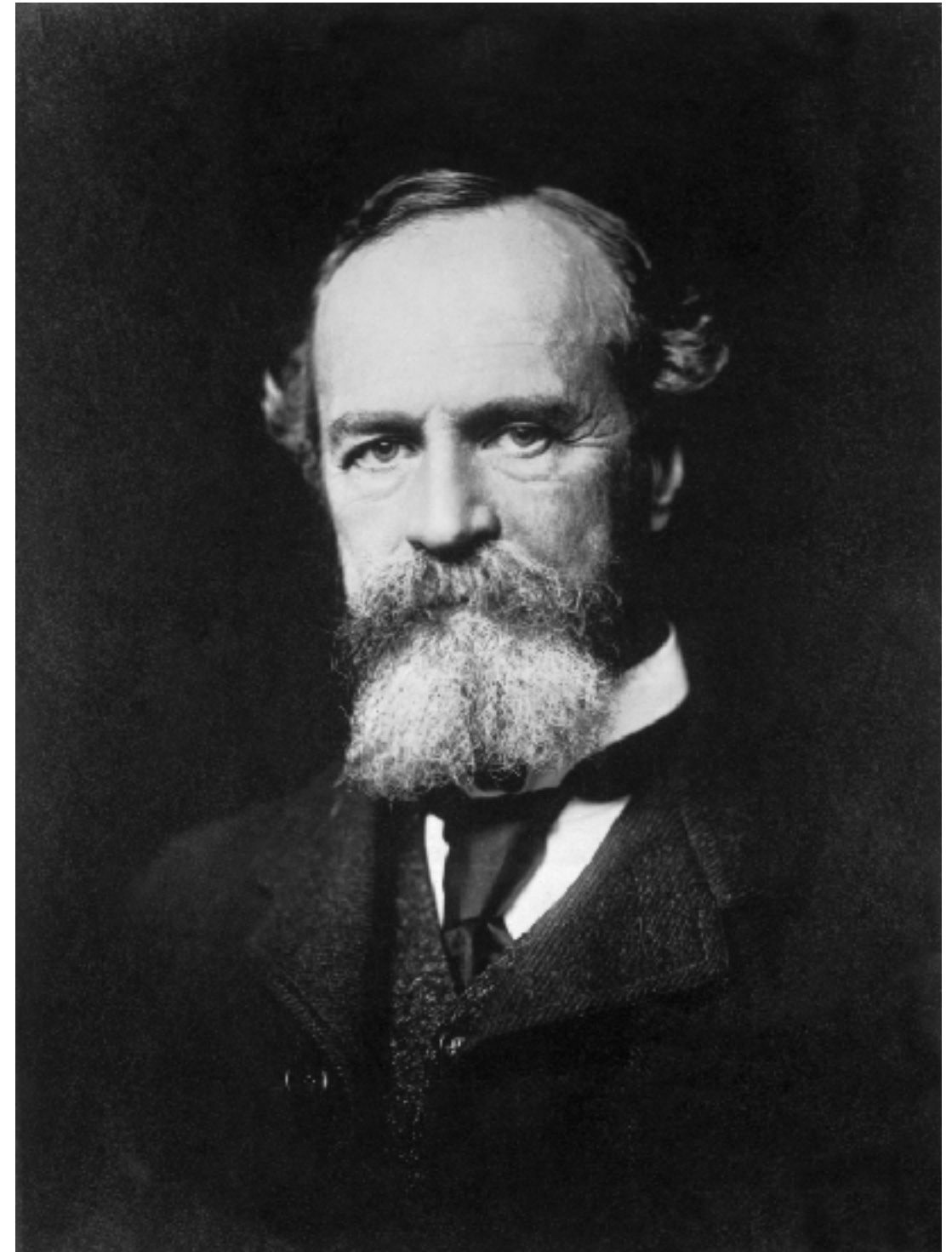
The Study of Religious Experience

- *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) was the first psychological study of Religious Experience.
- It is based on William James' series of Gifford Lectures, given in Edinburgh.
- He analysed religious experiences, mostly from literary sources of peoples' experiences, often using examples from famous people.
- Not necessarily representative of the experiences of the general population.



The Fruits of Religious Experience

- James argued that one of the simplest ways to tell if an experience was a genuine religious experience was to judge it by its 'fruits.'
- The effect of the experience on the individual - did it change their behaviour?
- Obvious relevance here to environmental behaviour - did the experience impact attitudes and behaviours towards the natural world?



Religious Experience Research Centre

- Founded by Sir Alister Hardy in 1969 at Manchester College, Oxford.
- Moved to Lampeter in July 2000.
- Houses an archive with over 6,000 accounts of first-hand experiences of people from across the world who had a spiritual or religious experience.
- 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?”
- Saw religious experience as evolutionary in nature:
“...in my view, religious experience fits into the background of our knowledge of the evolution of life. Whatever its explanation I regard such experience as an essential part of man’s natural history” (Hardy, 1966, p. 9).
- Religious Experience Today Module.



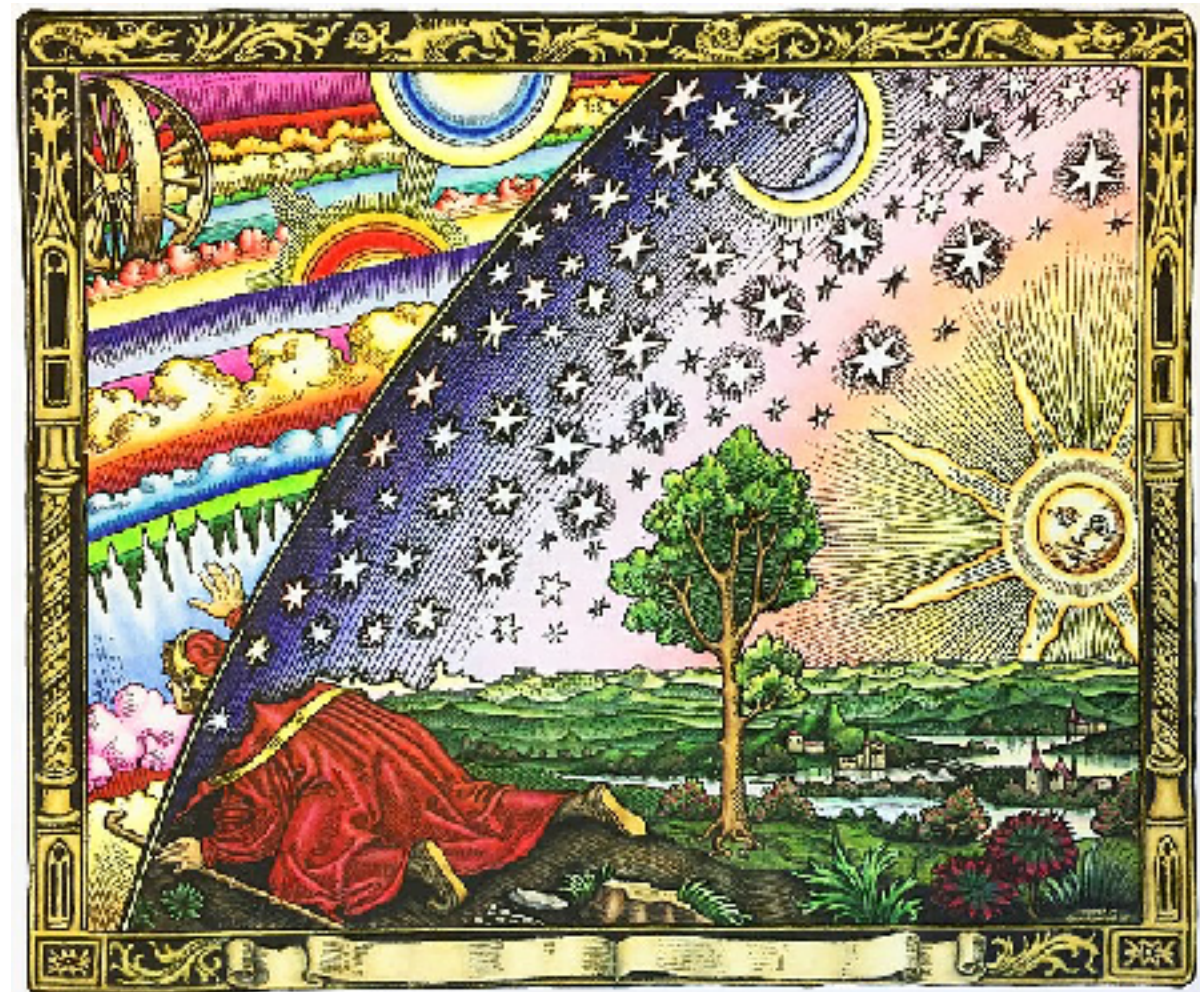
Mysticism

- Difficult to define and often vaguely used:
- “The adjective ‘mystical’, for instance, is commonly used to describe any object, person, event or belief, which has a vaguely mysterious aspect to it. It is also applied to extraordinary experiences of union, whether religious or not, and to the supernatural, the magical and the occult in general” (King, 2005, p. 306).



Etymology of Mystical

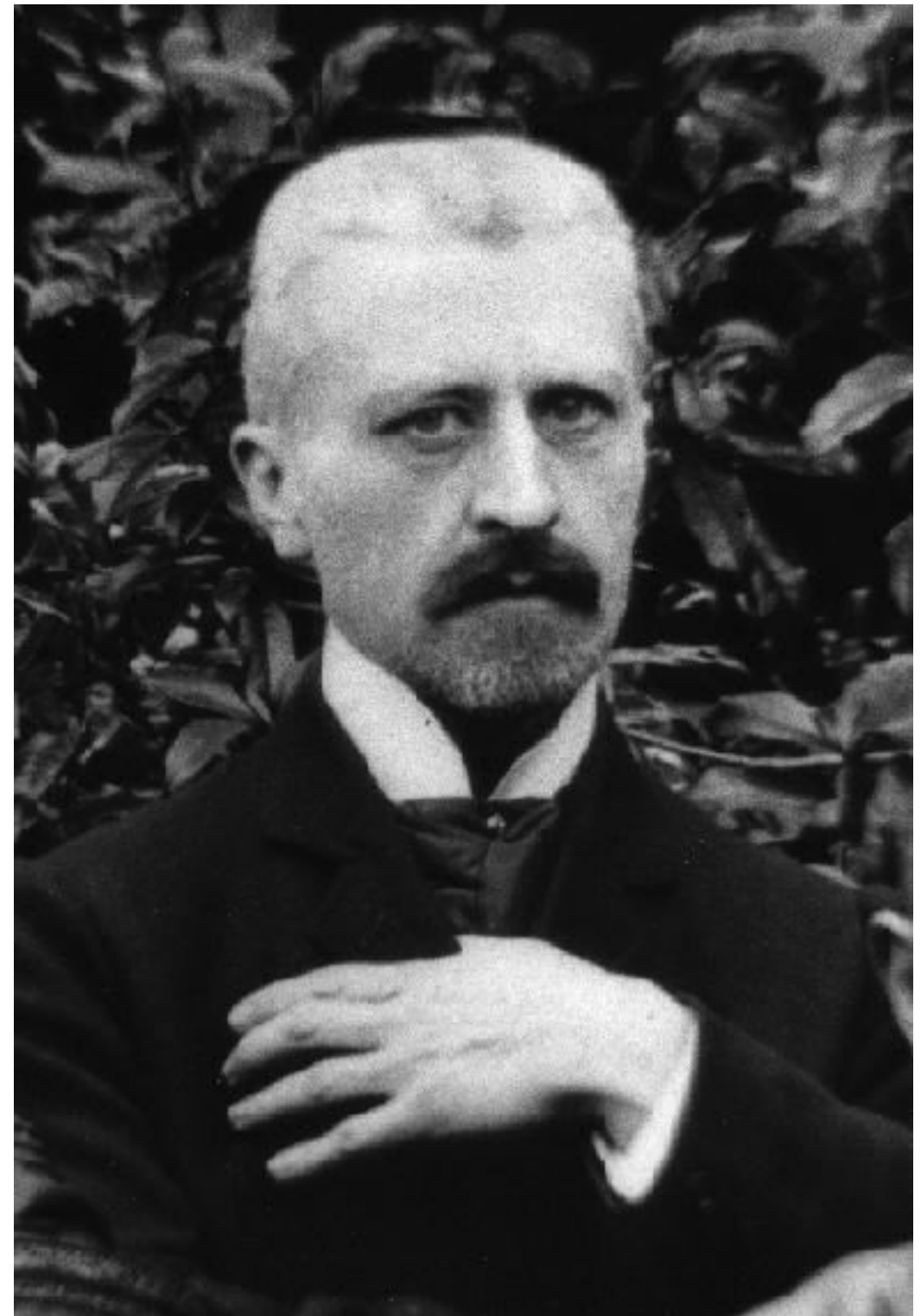
- Greek *muo* - to close.
- Hidden, secrecy.
- *Mystikos* - Initiate in Mystery cults.
- “On the one hand the mystical is often taken to be an experience which goes beyond the range and scope of everyday sensory experiences (such as visions). On the other hand, mysticism is often associated with the ineffable – that about which one should not, or perhaps cannot, speak” (King, 2005, p. 306).



The Numinous:

Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans

- Theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937).
 - Numinous experience - *the mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans* - understood as the very essence of religion.
 - The sense of the numinous is conjured through our interactions with what he terms “the wholly other” - “something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one” (Otto, 1958, p. 29).
 - “The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship [...] It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost gristly horror and shuddering [...] It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of [...] that which is a mystery inexpressible [...]” (Otto, 1958, p. 13).
 - The numinous arises when we interact with certain places.
- “...the implicit meaning may be rendered explicit. It is already the beginning of this explicative process...when a [person] says: ‘It is not quite right here’; ‘It is uncanny’...‘This place is haunted’... Here we have the obscure basis of meaning and idea rising into greater clarity and beginning to make itself explicit as the notion...of a transcendent Something, a real operative entity of a numinous kind, which later...assumes concrete form as a ‘numen loci,’ a daemon, an ‘El,’ a Baal, or the like” (Otto, 1958, p. 126).



Core Features of Mystical Experiences

- Scholar of mysticism W.T. Stace (1886-1967) identified 8 core features of mystical experiences:
- **1. The unifying vision, expressed by the formula 'All is One.' All things are one, part of the whole.**
- 2. Timelessness and spacelessness.
- 3. Sense of reality - not subjective, but a valid source of knowledge.
- 4. Blessedness, joy, peace and happiness.
- 5. Feeling that what is apprehended is holy, or sacred, or divine. This is the quality that gives rise to the interpretation of the experience as being of God.
- 6. Sense of the presence of paradox and defied logic.
- 7. Ineffability.
- 8. Loss of the sense of self.



Extrovertive Mystical Experience

- Stace distinguished between introvertive and extrovertive mystical experience.
- **Introvertive** - interior experiences, visions, oneness.
- **Extrovertive** - Specifically refers to mystical experiences that are either initiated by, or which transfigure, the natural landscape, revealing an underlying unity and the interconnectedness of all phenomena.
- “The extrovertive mystic with his physical senses continues to perceive the same world of trees and hills and tables and chairs as the rest of us. But he sees these objects transfigured in such manner that the Unity shines through them...the extrovertive experience is sensory-intellectual in so far as it still perceives physical objects but is nonsensuous and nonintellectual in so far as it perceives them as "all one”” (Stace, 1960, p. 15).



Nature Mysticism

- “There is no doubt that as a boy I was becoming what might be described as a nature mystic. Somehow, I felt the presence of something which was beyond and yet in a way part of all the things that thrilled me – the wildflowers, and indeed the insects too. I will now record something...[that] I have never told anyone before, but now that I am in my 88th year I think I can admit it. Just occasionally when I was sure that no one could see me, I became so overcome with the glory of the natural scene, that for a moment or two I fell on my knees in prayer – not prayer asking for anything, but thanking God, who felt very real to me, for the glories of his Kingdom and for allowing me to feel them. It was always by the running waterside that I did this, perhaps in front of a great foam of meadowsweet or purple loosestrife...” (Alister Hardy, as cited in Hay, 2013).



Nature Mysticism

- “...I did not mean a belief in a deity with an anthropomorphic image, but did at least mean a belief in an “extra-sensory” contact with a Power which *is greater than, and in part lies beyond the individual self...*
- Towards this, whatever it may be, we have a feeling, no doubt for good biological, or psychological, reasons...of a *personal* relationship, and we can it God” (Hardy, 1966, p. 9)



Extrovertive Mystical Experience

- As I watched, suddenly the whole countryside changed and everything in it, without exception, simply glowed with numinous light – it seemed no longer to be lit by the sun but by its own internal radiance. Sunlight was not reflected from it, but I myself and everything else seemed to have become light – which now inter-penetrated and shone through our previously dense physical forms...The whole scene shone with an extraordinary golden glow, which included the sky and the atmosphere itself.

(RERC Reference: 10003, Male, no details).

- “As we conversed the situation became unreal. The plants and shrubs and the three pine trees in a copse...became unreal. And yet they were more real than I had ever seen them in the 3 1/2 years I had lived there. Instead of merging into a general familiar pattern, each item of plant, shrub and tree, stood out singularly, vivid, vibrant...The whole area became something on its own, apart from the rest. The whole area became something I had never seen before. I became filled with a feeling of elation and well-being such as I have never before or since experienced...I felt that I had seen Nature as it really is.”

(RERC Reference: 002780, Male, 1941).



Extrovertive Mystical Experience

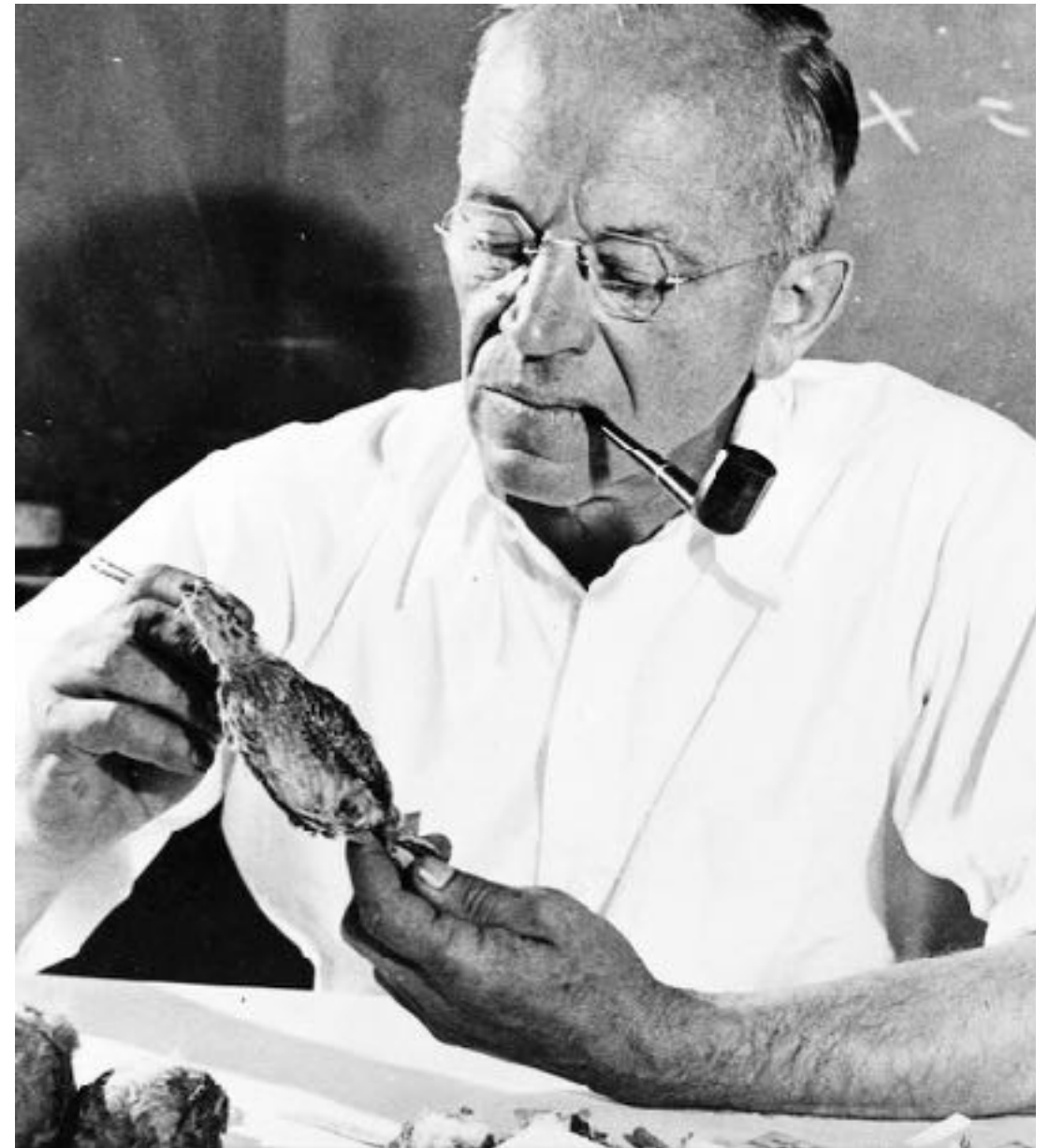
- “My mother and I were walking on a stretch of land...known locally as 'the moors.' As the sun declined and the slight chill of evening came on, a pearly mist formed over the ground...Here and there just the very tallest harebells appeared above the mist. I had a great love of these exquisitely formed flowers, and stood lost in wonder at the sight. Suddenly I seemed to see the mist as a shimmering gossamer tissue and the harebells, appearing here and there, seemed to shine with a brilliant fire. Somehow I understood that this was the living tissue of life itself, in which that which we call consciousness was embedded, appearing here and there as a shining focus of energy in the more diffused whole. In that moment I knew that I had my own special place, as had all other things, animate and so-called inanimate, and that we were all part of this universal tissue which was both fragile yet immensely strong, and utterly good and beneficent. The vision has never left me. It is as clear today as fifty years ago, and with it the same intense feeling of love of the world and the certainty of ultimate good. It gave me then a strong, clear sense of identity which has withstood many vicissitudes, and an affinity with plants, birds, animals, even insects, and people too, which has often been commented upon.”

(RERC Reference: 003039, Female, 1922).

Aldo Leopold

- “We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes —something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters’ paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view”

(Leopold, 1949).



Mystical Animism?

- Religious Experiences in nature may also take the form of a ‘sudden flash’ of animistic insight.
- The following example took place in April 1917, during the First World War, while the author was serving in the army:



Mystical Animism?

- While spending an afternoon hour alone in my hilltop wood, a mood of depression had come down. We were due to move in a few days...After supper in the mess I felt restless. I wondered if the full moon shining down from a cloudless sky had anything to do with my mood. A walk by the canal might make it easier to sleep. I walked eastward for about two miles along the towpath and then turned about. The nearer I drew to the village, the more alive the surroundings seemed to become. It was as if something which had been dormant when I was in the wood were coming alive. I must have drifted into an exalted state. The moon, when I looked up at it, seemed to have become personalised and observant, as if it were aware of my presence on the towpath. A sweet scent pervaded the air. Early shoots were breaking from the sticky buds of the balsam poplars which bordered the canal; their pleasant resinous odour conveyed good-will. The slowly moving waters of the canal, which was winding its unhurried way from the battlefields to the sea, acquired a 'numen' which endorsed the intimations of the burgeoning trees. The river conveyed that it had seen me before in other places and knew something about me. It was now concerned with my return to the village...A feeling that I was being absorbed into the living surroundings gained in intensity and was working up to a climax. Something was going to happen. Then it happened. The experience lasted, I should say, about thirty seconds and seemed to come out of the sky in which were resounding majestic harmonies. The thought, 'that is the music of the spheres' was immediately followed by a glimpse of luminous bodies - meteors or stars - circulating in predestined courses emitting both light and music.

(RERC Reference: 000035, Male, 1917).

Mystical Animism?

- “Some 12 years ago I used to have four tall Elm Trees on our garden lawn; they grew forming a square. I was strongly drawn to these trees and used to stroke the trunks and talk to them especially when I felt depressed or ill. I always felt their response through a strong vibration through my hands then through my whole body. This convinced me that I am One with All Beings; the same life force which flows through my body flows through all vegetation, animals, birds, fish, minerals, under the ground or sea, even the very stones we walk on. Every animate and inanimate thing is held together with atoms which are of the whole 'Divine Being'.”

(RERC Reference: 002384, Female, 1960).

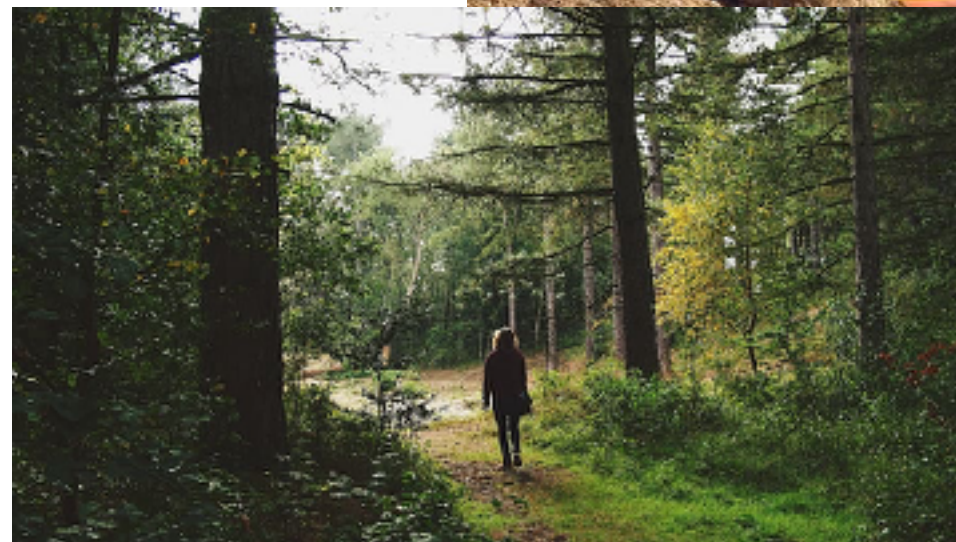
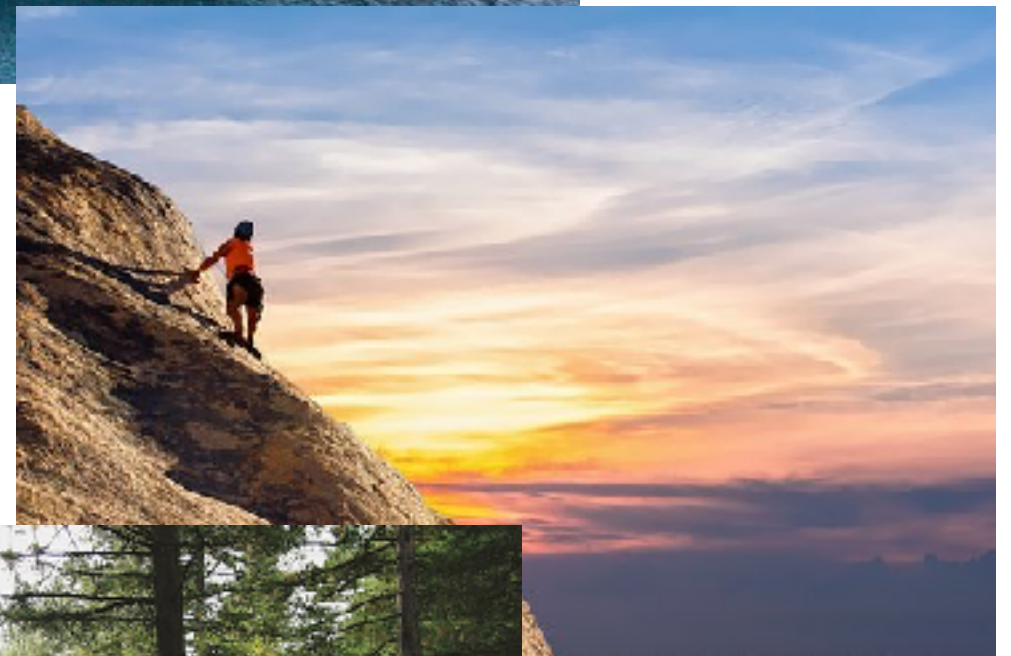
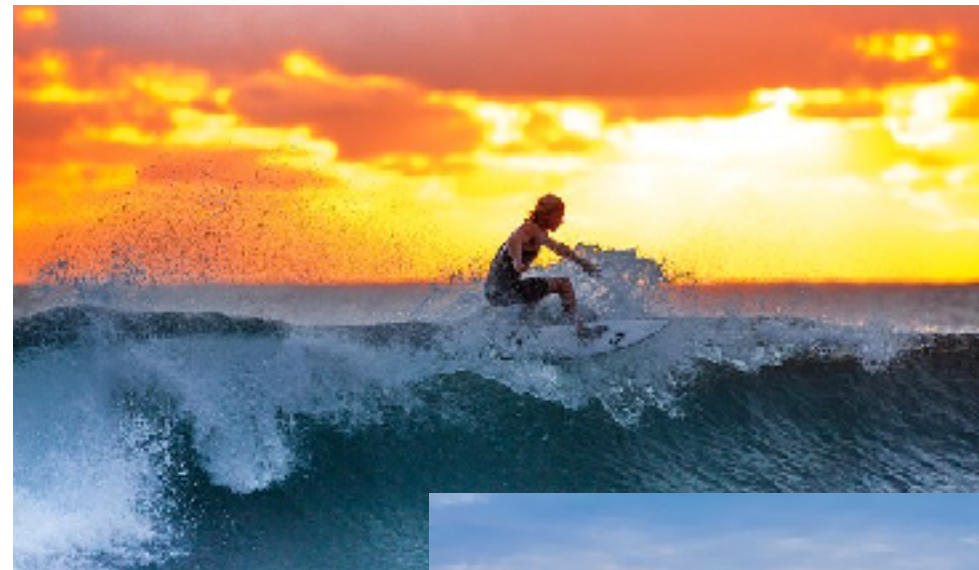
Mysticism/Paranormal

- “...one afternoon in May, I was sitting out in my garden. The rhododendrons were in flower and it was a hot bright sunny day. I was very comfortable and content to listen to the birds and just relax. Unexpectedly I became aware of the golden outline of a figure down at the bottom of my garden. I say outline because it was not solid, but looked as though just its outline had been drawn with golden ink. The figure shimmered and had tall wings, but mostly it was transparent, like a rough sketch. It was about three foot tall and rose up in the air a little way before descending; it did this several times. Then I saw a second winged figure, very much smaller. This was also golden, but I remember seeing a flash of blue and green. My first thought was that it was a dragonfly, but on closer observation I saw that it flew quite differently and its shape was not that of an insect but a small human-like figure.”

Fairy Census, §190, Wales (Rhondda). Female; 2000s (Young, 2018, p. 143).

Engagement with Nature

- “...experiences of nature spirituality are evoked by practices as diverse as mountaineering, neo-shamanic ritualising and states of consciousness induced by hallucinogens...” (Taylor, 2001).
- Surfing.
- Gardening.
- Wildlife wardens, etc...
- Simple interaction.



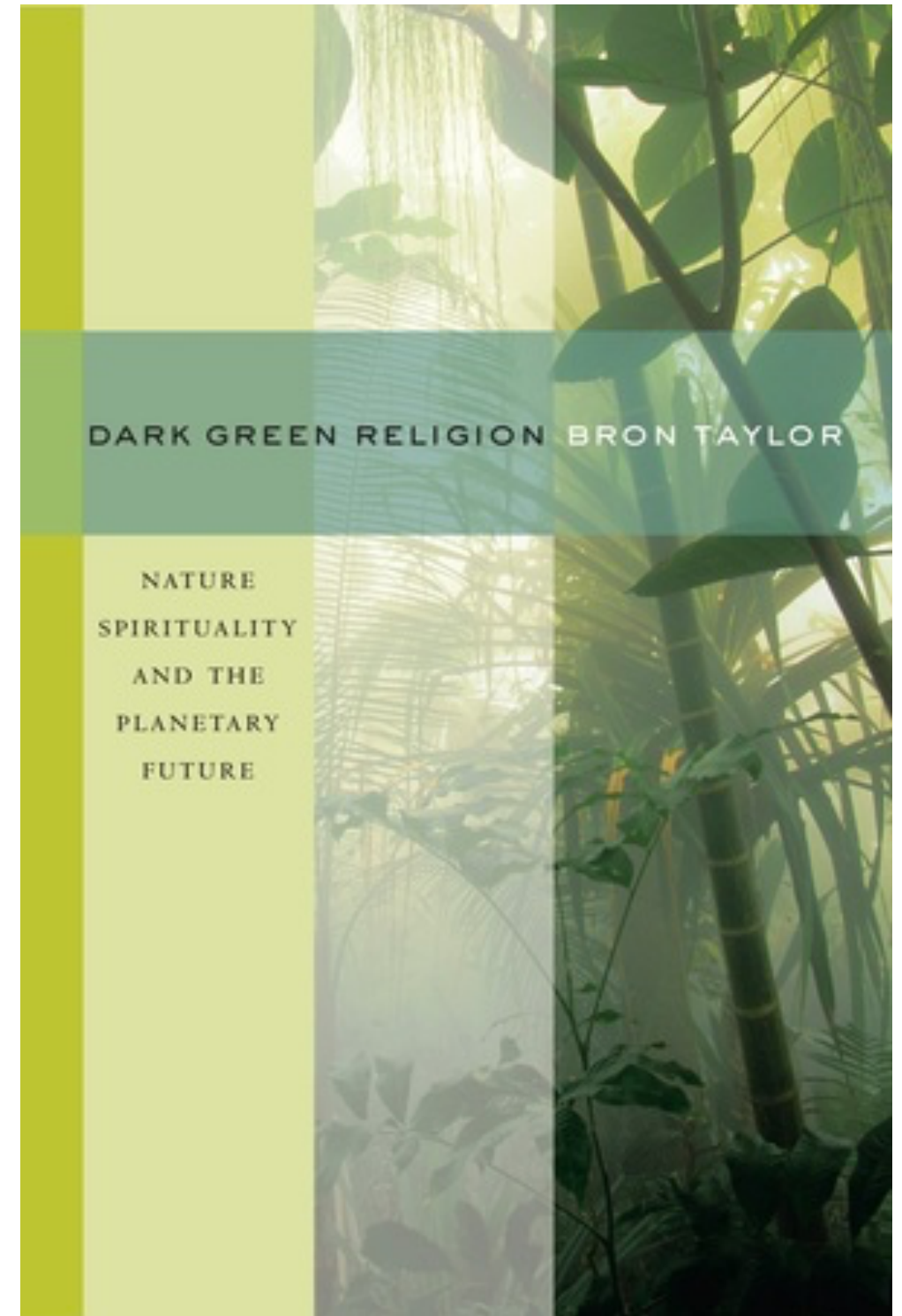
Participation in Nature

- “...mystical experiences in nature are generally recognised as quite common and likely to suddenly occur given appropriate, non-stressful situations...” (Hood Jr., 1977).
- Levy-Bruhl - Participatory consciousness. Tanya Luhrmann summarises:
- “...one experiences one’s mind as participated in by another awareness, and as affecting that other awareness, that the outer world is full of intentional, interactive consciousness, a “mystic influence which is communicated, under conditions themselves of mystic nature, from one being or object to another” (Luhrmann, 2006).



Impulse Towards 'Dark Green Religion.'

- “This value system is generally (1) based on a felt kinship with the rest of life, often derived from a Darwinian understanding that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related; (2) accompanied by feelings of humility and a corresponding critique of human moral superiority, often inspired or reinforced by a science-based cosmology that reveals how tiny human beings are in the universe; and (3) reinforced by a metaphysics of interconnection and the idea of interdependence (mutual influence and reciprocal dependence) found in the sciences, especially in ecology and physics” (Taylor, 2010, p. 13).



Ecology and Spirituality: The Greening of Religion Hypothesis



The Greening of Religion

- Bron Taylor.
- Makes a distinction between **Green Religion** - which suggests that 'environmentally friendly behaviour is a religious obligation.'
- **Dark Green Religion** - 'nature is sacred and, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care.' (Taylor, 2010, p. 10).



The Greening of Religion

- Green Religion, e.g. the greening of Christianity, usually occurs in one of four ways:
- 1. Apologetically - “arguing that properly understood their traditions were environmentally friendly.”
- 2. Confessionally - “acknowledging guilt and undertaking internal religious reform.”
- 3. Indifference - “viewing environmental concern as of minor or no importance.”
- 4. Hostility - “seeing a concern as antithetical to [Christianity]” (Taylor, 2010, p. 12)

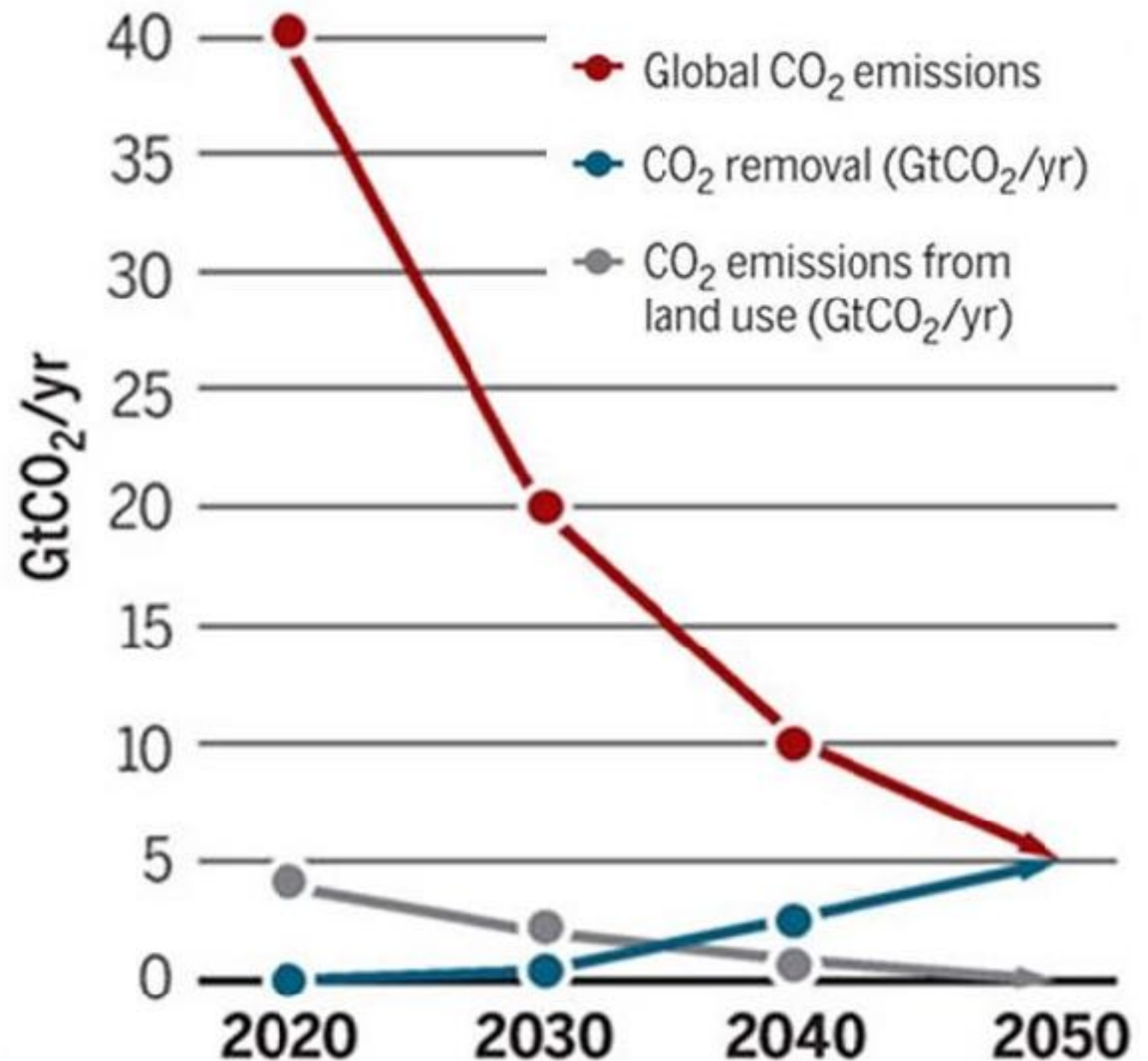


Paris Agreement



IN OUR HANDS
EARTH SUMMIT '92
UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Global carbon law guiding decadal pathways



The Greening of Religion

- *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home.*
- “I urgently appeal...for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all...” (Pope Francis, 2015).



Laudato Si Centre



The 'eco brick' is an indication of the Centre's aims to be a place for practical action, inspired by faith, rooted in prayer and that gives a sense of the sacred for people of all faiths and none. People will have the opportunity to proactively engage with the pressing environmental issues facing our generation and the generations who follow.

The Greening of Religion

- From the Hindu declaration on climate change:
- “...all elements of reality are ‘organs of God’s body...the entire universe is to be looked upon as the energy of the Lord’” (cited in Chaplin, 2016, p. 3).
- Religious narratives can provide powerful alternatives to reductionist perspectives.



Indigenous and Animist Responses

- “Throughout October 2021 an Indigenous totem is travelling across the UK to the COP26 climate change talks in Glasgow. Totem Latamat ("Life" in the Totonac language of its maker, Jun Tiburcio) conveys a message rooted in Indigenous celebration of the larger-than-human community and in the responsibilities that flow from multi-species kinships. The term "animism" has been reclaimed from colonial and primitivist contexts to provide a one-word introduction to conversations about Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. "Kinship" might be equally powerful and provocative. In this talk, I will introduce the totem and its "animist" encouragement of celebration and responsibility, even in the face of dispiriting climate news.”
- https://www.crowdcast.io/e/animism---graham-harvey/register?fbclid=IwAR0jOdI0DxdHiHCyEaHbUek1iUVhAzr_2zz66hHqAxntP3yzonbrwulrNkl
- <https://originsfestival.bordercrossings.org.uk/programme/totem-latamat>



Summary

- There are (at least) two strands to the greening of religion - Green Religion and Dark Green Religion.
- Following international political conventions such as the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and the COP-15 Paris Climate Agreement, world religions begin to advocate green responses.
- Do these green responses really bring about a shift in the individual?
- Do they go far enough, or is it often a shallow response?



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