



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Shamans, Visions and Ghosts: Exploring spiritual and Religious Experiences

Prof Bettina E. Schmidt

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Religious Experience Research Centre



Sir Alister Hardy (1896-1985)

- "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?"



RERC archive

- More than 6000 accounts with personal descriptions of a religious or spiritual experience
- Among them are many examples of people who say that they are not religious

Example from the RERC Archive

- “I was out walking one night in busy streets of Glasgow when, with slow majesty, at a corner where the pedestrians were hurrying by and the city traffic was hurtling on its way, the air was filled with heavenly music; and an all-encompassing light, that moved in waves of luminous colour, outshone the brightness of the lighted streets. I stood still, filled with a strange peace and joy, the music beat on in its majesty and the traffic and the pedestrians moved through the light. They passed on their way, but the music and light remained, pulsating, harmonious, more real than the traffic of the streets. I too moved on.....till I found myself in the everyday world again with a strange access of gladness and of love.” [RERC 000208]

Example from the RERC archive

- “As I sat on a low wall opposite a beautiful tree covered with pink blossom, thrown into relief by the high hill behind it, I was suddenly made aware of my surroundings in a manner difficult to describe in words. The tree became vibrant, 'real' (in the sense that the 'burning bush' did to Moses in the O.T.) and I was transported into what I can only term 'reality', and was filled with a great surge of joy (i.e. like C.S. Lewis's 'Surprised by Joy'). This was fundamental and I was 'caught up into it' and was a part of it. I felt a great sense of awe and reverence, permeated by the presence of a power which was completely real and in which I had my part to play. I knew that all was well and that all things were working together for good.” (RERC 000011)

Hardy's definition of religious experience

- “a deep awareness of a benevolent non-physical power which appears to be partly or wholly beyond, and far greater than, the individual self” (Hardy 1979: 1).

Another example

- “I was sitting one evening, listening to a Brahms symphony. My eyes were closed and I must have been completely relaxed for I became aware of a feeling of ‘expansion’, I seemed to be beyond the boundary of my physical self. Then an intense feeling of ‘light’ and ‘love’ uplifted and enfolded me. It was so wonderful and gave me such an emotional release that tears streamed down my cheeks. For several days I seemed to bathe in its glow and when it subsided I was free from my fears.
“I didn’t feel happy about the world situation but seemed to see it from a different angle. So with my personal sorrow. I can truly say that it changed my life and the subsequent years have brought no dimming of the experience.” [RERC 000071]

Challenges

- Is there a division between spiritual and religious?
- And what is when people describing these kinds of experiences are not religious?

Methodological challenges

- Most accounts are sent in form of letters, without generic data such as age, cultural or religious background etc though gender can usually be guessed
- -> how to compare the data?

Pre-recorded chats

- Tom Pitchford, former RERC Special Collections Librarian
- Dr Marianne Rankin, Alister Hardy Trust