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Does Extraordinary Experience Play a Role in Establishing a Relationship With Nature?

Introduction:

An extraordinary experience is generally defined as an event that is uncommon, infrequent, and goes beyond the realm of everyday life.¹ Such experiences may be defined through a range of different events, feelings and concepts. For example, philosopher William James in from his work *The Variety of Human Experience* proposes that an extraordinary or ‘mystical’ experience is one that essentially reveals a kind of ‘continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds accidental fences, and into which our minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir’², ultimately taking an individual beyond their perceived concept of their ‘self’. Experiences that take an individual beyond the self may include a moment of simple transcendence in nature, religious experiences, taking psychedelic drugs, near death experiences and contact with beings that a person may consider to be other-worldly. This essay will explore some of the aforementioned experiences and their potential connection in establishing a relationship to the natural world.

Religious Experience and the Natural World

Within most cultures, there has always been a definite crossover between the religious experience and the natural world. In fact, Alistair Hardy, who established the religious experience research unit identified ‘natural beauty’ as one of the most common triggers of religious experiences, marginally more common than religious worship,³ clearly suggesting that the correlation between natural environments and extraordinary experiences is very important. We see this idea of natural beauty as a trigger for religious feelings across many texts, from stories within the bible, to countless theological and philosophical works that speak of the emotion of awe regarding the natural world. Some individuals believe that this feeling of awe and the inexplicable ‘design’ element of the natural world implies the existence of a creator. For example, philosopher Alvin Plantinga writes: ‘It isn’t that one beholds the night sky, notes that it is grand, and concludes that there must be such a person as God... it is rather that, upon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flower, these beliefs just arise within us’.⁴

¹ Amit Bhattacharjee and Cassie Mogilner, ‘Happiness from Ordinary and Extraordinary Experiences’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2014), pp. 1-17, (p.3)

² T. J. Jackson Lears, ‘William James’, *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), Autumn, (1987), Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 84-95, (p.93)

³ Jack Hunter, ‘Religious Experience and Ecology’, *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2021), p.3-16, (p.4)

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2000), (p.175)

However, implication of God through his perceived creation is not necessarily enough to inspire a symbiotic relationship with the natural world. Not all people would arrive at the same outcome from their feelings of awe, and, as Christian theologian Thomas F. Torrance writes, 'nature by itself speaks only ambiguously of God'.⁵ It could be argued that proof of the existence of God may inspire a closer adherence to Bible passages, especially those that denote the Earth as a gift from God unto man whereby man is seemingly entitled to use it at his disposal;

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." ⁶

This idea of Christianity as a deeply anthropocentric religion has been explored by philosophers such as Lyn White Jr, who argued that the ecological crisis can largely be blamed on the cultural ideas about our relationship with the environment that have been underpinned by Western religious ideals.⁷ Through looking at the natural world through a lens where mankind has dominion, monotheistic religions such as Christianity have essentially made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.⁸ In discussing similar ideas, Alan Watts discusses this clashing nature of Western religion with animistic ideas that may otherwise cause an individual to feel at one with the natural world;

The Westerner must borrow such words as samadhi or moksha from the Hindus, or satori or kensho from the Japanese, to describe the experience of oneness with the universe. We have no appropriate word because our own Jewish and Christian theologies will not accept the idea that man's inmost self can be identical with the Godhead.⁹

In this way, the Western man who claims consciousness of oneness with God or the universe thus clashes with his society's concept of religion,¹⁰ and without this feeling of perceived oneness, it is arguably very difficult to foster a relationship with the natural world. This feeling of interconnectedness and self transcendence is often considered vital in order to bring about feelings of nature relatedness. Ultimately, because the kingly concept of God makes identity of self and God, or self and universe, inconceivable in Western religious terms, and because Christians think of God in political and monarchical terms, as the supreme governor of the universe, the ultimate boss,¹¹ this idea of human-nature dualism is ultimately perpetuated and thus a worldview in which a hierarchical structure of man/nature/god is reinforced.

⁵Thomas. F Torrance. *Space, Time and Incarnation*. Oxford:Oxford University Press, (1969), (p.24)

⁶ The Holy Bible Containing the Old and the New Testaments, King James Version, Genesis 1:26-28, Cambridge University Press, (1984)

⁷ Mark Schroll, 'From Ecopsychology to Transpersonal Ecosophy: Shamanism, Psychedelics and Transpersonal Psychology', *European Journal of Ecopsychology* 4: 116-144, (2013), 1-17, p.7

⁸ Ibid, p.271

⁹ Alan Watts, 'Psychedelics and Religious Experience', *California Law Review*, Jan., 1968, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Jan., 1968), pp. 74-85, (p.80)

¹⁰ Ibid, p.81

¹¹ Ibid, p.80

However, in looking beyond Christianity and the Abrahamic religions towards natural religions, (those that may refer to a pantheistic doctrine according to which *nature* itself is divine),¹² an experience in nature may act as a confirmation of the divine as well as a reinforcing idea that nature itself is sacred. Michael York in his work *Paganism as a World Religion* discusses the idea of the pagan mystical experience, which he defines as ‘an overall sense [of] an immediate and direct conscious encounter that contrasts with both reasoning and ordinary sense perception by being focused on something that is extraordinary, miraculous or even ultimate’.¹³ From a pagan perspective, he quotes Jess Hollenback in saying that “there is no reason to suspect that the supernormal phenomena of mystical experience lies outside the domain of nature.”¹⁴ In this way, there is no dualistic separation between God as an ultimate divine figure and the rest of the natural world, thus allowing for greater regard towards the earth. Within animistic belief systems like Paganism, value is found in the whole of nature, including if not especially nature’s physicality, as well as in the holographic part of nature rather than in some final and ‘greatest’ exodus from nature.¹⁵

In modern times, many commentators have suggested that the current ecological crisis has its roots in the perceived disconnect between humans and our natural environment, which has emerged, particularly in the Western world, over the last two hundred years.¹⁶

Following the increasing climate concern, writers such as Bron Taylor are discussing a new resurgence of awe in humankind’s response to nature, prompting a return to ideas and behaviours that regard nature as being sacred. In his book, *Dark Green Religion*, Taylor discusses a rekindling of natural religion that is arising from participatory contact with the natural world, whether this may be through environmental activism in the wake of an ecological crisis, or the pursuit of simple outdoor activities in a world that mankind has taken for granted. He says that a great deal of this recent religious creativity has been ‘dark green, flowing from a deep sense of belonging to and connectedness in nature, while perceiving the earth and its living systems to be sacred and interconnected.’¹⁷ According to Kettner et al, such extrovertive mystical experiences - with their ‘profound emotional effects’ on the experiencer - may represent powerful facilitators of nature connectedness and pro-environmental behaviour. As such, this could be an important area of future engagement for religious experience research going forward.¹⁸

In this way, although extraordinary experience is a vital and frequent part within many religious traditions, it may be more poignant now than ever due to the context of the ecological crisis.

12

¹³ Michael York, *Pagan Mysticism: Paganism as a World Religion*, (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), p.15

¹⁴ Ibid, p.11

¹⁵ Ibid, p.5

¹⁶ Hunter, *Religious Experience and Ecology*, p.5

¹⁷ Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, University of California Press (2009), p.15

¹⁸ Hannes Kettner, Sam Gandy, Eline C. H. M. Haijen and Robin L. Carhart-Harris, ‘From Egoism to Ecoism: Psychedelics Increase Nature Relatedness in a State-Mediated and Context-Dependent Manner’ *Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, (2019)

Shamanism and Animistic Religion

Many indigenous societies lean more towards an animistic perspective and therefore often employ shamanic practices - essentially attributing a spiritual dimension to the natural landscape with which humans interact through the course of their day-to-day actions.¹⁹

The shaman has historically served as a mediator between the spiritual realm and his community,²⁰ often utilising a state of altered consciousness in order to create and sustain communicative relationships with the natural world and entities from what are perceived to be various spiritual dimensions. A shaman typically maintains such relationships through interaction with psychedelic plants and other ritualistic behaviours.

One of the most commonly known rituals involving psychedelic plants is the administration of ayahuasca - a brew made up of two native amazonian plants which remains the basic instrument of shamans and medicine men in the Amazon. It is said to enable healers to see the inner constitution of their patients, and thus establish a diagnosis and perform treatment.²¹ The consumption of ayahuasca usually induces powerful visions as well as hallucinations in all other perceptual modalities.²² Various profound cognitive effects are also commonly recorded. These include personal psychological insights, intellectual ideations, and powerful religious and spiritual experiences. Moreover, according to many anecdotal reports, ayahuasca introduces those who partake of it to what seem to them to be other realities. Those who consume the mixture may thus feel that they are gaining access to new sources of knowledge and that the mysteries and ultimate truths of the universe are being revealed.²³

Ayahuasca is often administered in group ceremonies, and anecdotal reports from informants often report effects such as feeling 'as one with other participants in the session, with plants they were looking at, or with the universe'. Through their role as a mediator between the spiritual realm, the natural world and their community, a shaman can be seen to enable their peers to encounter extraordinary experiences that relate humans to their environment through the strong dominating figure of the shaman, whose rituals are concerned primarily with hunting, fertility, healing, and death.²⁴ In this way, extraordinary experience in an indigenous shamanic context may help to facilitate and strengthen an individual's relationship to the environment.

¹⁹ Jeffrey B. Lutzar and José M. V. Fragoso, Shamanism, 'Christianity and Culture Change in Amazonia', *Human Ecology*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (April 2013), pp. 299-311, (p.301)

²⁰ Ibid, p.299

²¹ Benny Shanon, 'Altered States and the Study of Consciousness — The Case of Ayahuasca', *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, Spring 2003, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 125-153, (p.127)

²² Ibid, p.128

²³ Ibid, p.128

²⁴ Mary N. MacDonald, 'THE STUDY OF SHAMANISM: LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL DIMENSIONS', *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 2002, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2002), pp. 88-107, (p.101)

Furthermore, in looking at shamanism from a culturally wider perspective, Michael York's work *Shamanism and Magic* discusses the way in which New Age and contemporary Western Paganism are developing radically different understandings and applications of shamanism in the modern Western context.²⁵ He references Jon Block in recognising that the constituent features of modern alternative spirituality often include belief in Shamanistic magic, regard the earth as spiritual, and express a willingness to participate in other kinds of spirituality and a disenchantment with organised religions.²⁶ York expresses the idea that although all contemporary forms of Western Shamanism are innovative, the New Age variety is less a re-creation as it is a creation.²⁷ In fact, he regards it as a new religious movement altogether - an animistic belief system that is rising up within Western society, perhaps as a response to the changing times and the climate crisis.

One modern application of shamanism in the West has come through Michael Harner, who conducted some substantial ethnographic work in South America during his time as an anthropologist.²⁸ This led him to develop the concept of what he terms "core shamanism", describing what are reputedly the essential features of shamanism - "the universal and near universal basic methods of the shaman to enter non ordinary reality for problem solving, well-being, and healing".²⁹ The aim in Harner's "core shamanism" is to essentially eliminate the specialist altogether and thus give power directly to the individual themselves, placing emphasis upon what is increasingly termed the 'imaginal' - the imagination made powerful and constituting in some sense a reality of its own.³⁰ This concept of core shamanism and the workshops and retreats run by Harner have spawned numerous groups in the West that encourage a participatory relationship with nature.³¹ According to Garfield and Knight, who run a retreat inspired by Harner, "Shamanic development is a pathway that brings understanding and meaning to your life through mastery and cooperation with the natural world."³² Such retreats involve participatory activities such as stargazing; interconnection of the soul's different parts; mastery of elements; use of yoga, herbs, and power sites; and Vision Quests.³³ Some neoshaman traditions take from traditional shamanism the notion of a mutual dependency of species which inhabit a particular territory, an ecological understanding, and apply that idea to a larger context, carrying out rituals to cultivate healthy attitudes toward the earth.³⁴ It is worth noting here that such participatory activity linked to shamanic rituals are akin to Bron Taylor's theory of dark green religion in that experiences arising from interactions with nature ultimately allow for an

²⁵ Michael York, *Shamanism and Magic*, (University of Pennsylvania Press 2005), p.82

²⁶ Ibid, p.84

²⁷ Ibid, p.90

²⁸ Ibid, p.91

²⁹ Ibid, p.91

³⁰ Ibid, p.91

³¹ Ibid, p.91

³² Ibid, p.92

³³ Ibid, p.92

³⁴ MacDonald, 'The Study of Shamanism', p.98

individual's personal development through nurturing their relationship to the natural world. However, the Shaman as a figure-head is interesting in that they serve a community, potentially allowing for more than just individual flourishing. As such, the term shamanism has provided scholars a somewhat generic designation for an animistic worldview in which special medium technicians link the visible world with the otherworld of gods and spirits for the benefit of the local community.³⁵

Altered States of Consciousness - Modern Psychedelics

Naturally occurring psychedelics such as psilocybin, mescaline, ayahuasca and lysergic acid derivatives have been employed for celebration, healing and divination purposes by a number of cultures across the world for centuries.³⁶ However, In widening the perspective from shamanic ritualistic ideas involving altered states we can move on to looking at the idea of psychedelics as a whole. We currently find ourselves in the midst of what is sometimes referred to as the 'psychedelic renaissance', with scientific research into the properties of these compounds expanding rapidly.³⁷ These more recent advancements come following years of strict drug regulation post-60s, which for a long time rendered any research on these substances virtually impossible.³⁸ This new resurgence of Western psychedelic culture has coincided with the rapid growth and expansion of the environmental movement, as it had initially in the 60s, which has led some to argue that psychedelic drug use may have contributed to the impetus of modern ecology movements.³⁹

Writer Alan Watts discussed the idea that the extraordinary experiences resulting from the use of psychedelic drugs are often described in religious terms, explaining the experience as 'peculiar states of consciousness in which the individual discovers himself to be one continuous process with God, with the Universe, with the Ground of Being, or whatever name he may use by cultural conditioning or personal preference for the ultimate and eternal reality'.⁴⁰ In the West especially, Watts goes on to explain, an individual will most often have been subjected to cultural and social conditioning, often being 'hypnotised into experiencing himself as an ego-as an isolated centre of consciousness and will inside a bag of skin, confronting an external and alien world'.⁴¹ However, it can be argued that psychedelics may allow us to break out of this idea perpetuated by religion and the culture that follows it. Of the many effects that a psychedelic 'trip' may bring, ego-death and feelings of the dissolution of the self are among the most prominent, which Watts theorises is actually our true state of being: 'the psychedelic experience

³⁵ York, *Shamanism and Magic*, p.82

³⁶ Kettner, 'From Egoism to Ecoism', p.2

³⁷ Ibid, p.2

³⁸ Ibid, p.2

³⁹ Ibid, p.2

⁴⁰ Watts, 'Psychedelics and Religious Experience', p.74

⁴¹ Ibid, p.82

can generate confusion, paranoia, and terror - even though the individual is feeling his relationship to the world exactly as it would be described by a biologist, ecologist, or physicist, for he is feeling himself as the unified field'.⁴² Such experiences may be considered to separate an individual from egocentric and even anthropocentric worldviews through inspiring views of interconnectedness within an out of the ordinary mental experience. Watts goes on to further discuss this perceived interconnectedness during a psychedelic experience, commenting that; "there is no way of separating what any given organism is doing from what its environment is doing, for which reason ecologists speak not of organisms in environments but of organism-environments. Thus the words "I" or "self" should properly mean what the whole universe is doing at this particular 'here-and-now'".⁴³ This deeply felt response that often appears anecdotally regarding psychedelic experience is one that can seemingly foster deep emotional connections between an individual and their surroundings.

Since the 60s, there has been an abundance of anecdotal evidence for the benefits of psychedelics and their proposed effects on an individual and society as a whole. However, following the aforementioned relaxing of drug laws and the resurgence of psychedelic interest, scientists have now been able to continue with clinical trials which had ceased in the 1960s. We can now use clinical trials to determine whether psychedelic use may have a positive affect in establishing a relationship with nature. Several clinical trials have found that Psychedelics such as psilocybin have been shown to increase the sense of connectedness, comprising three distinguishable aspects: a connection to the self, others, and the world at large.⁴⁴ The concept of nature relatedness, according to Kettner et al., can be described as one's level of self-identification and subjective sense of connectedness with nature and is analogous to the concept of "biophilia", which is defined as "the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life."⁴⁵ This feeling of nature relatedness has previously been found to be increased through time spent in nature as well as participatory nature-based activities, especially when evoking themes of meaning, compassion, and beauty.⁴⁶ Based on early therapeutic work, researchers described subjects undergoing LSD therapy sessions reporting a dissolution of boundaries and awe-inducing feelings of unity with nature during peak psychedelic effects.⁴⁷ The experience of awe is considered to be a positive experiential component of both contact with nature and of psychedelic mystical-type experiences.⁴⁸

There are many possible outcomes that one may experience during a psychedelic trip; including hallucinations, extradimensional perceptions, out of body experiences and interactions with

⁴² Ibid, p.78

⁴³ Ibid, p.81

⁴⁴ Kettner, 'From Egoism to Ecoism', p.2

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.2

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.2

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.2

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.3

various entities. Within this, there are several such outcomes and individual experiences that may influence an individual's relationship with the natural world, but especially, David Luke has found, experience with plant psychedelics. Through creating a dialogue with nature on a trip, as many individuals report, Luke notes that there is often an eco-oriented message, as might be expected, criticising mankind for its widespread destruction of the earth.⁴⁹ The substance most reported to increase nature-relatedness was psilocybin containing mushrooms, and, interestingly, roughly one third of psilocybin mushroom users reported encounter experiences with the spirit or intelligence of the ingested mushroom, while around 16% reported encounters with animal spirits or communicating with animals whilst under the influence of psilocybin.⁵⁰ Furthermore, 10% reported the experience of being transformed into another species—an experience that was also reported by a full quarter of all ayahuasca respondents.⁵¹ This direct experience of a perceived dialogue or the visceral experience of embodying a part of the natural world seems to have a profound effect on the individual following the trip. In a survey conducted on the contribution of such psychedelic experiences to environmental awareness, Luke found that nearly 80% of the 150 psychedelic using participants reported that their use of psychedelics had increased their subsequent degree of interaction with nature, with almost none of the participants saying it had reduced their interaction. Furthermore, all of the participants indicated that their connection with nature had increased following their use of psychedelics, and more than 60% said that their concern had also increased.⁵²

In addition to this, those taking psychedelics (especially natural ones) say that their experiences not only changed their attitudes but also directly affected their eco-oriented behaviour.⁵³ In another survey conducted by Luke et al., the findings showed that the majority of psychedelic users reported adjusting their diet (toward organic, raw, vegetarian, or vegan) and increasing gardening as a result of their psychedelic experiences.⁵⁴ Some 16% reported changing their entire careers to more environment-focused ones, such as switching to studying PhDs in botany (reported by two people in the sample), and 19% also reported becoming more actively engaged in ecological activism.⁵⁵ The enduring nature of this research is further supported by a follow up to Walter Panhke's 'Marsh Chapel' study, which employed a single high (30 mg) dose of psilocybin among a sample of divinity students in a religious setting, reporting that 24–27 years post-experience, a key theme that emerged in the majority of subsequent interviews was an enhanced appreciation for life and nature.⁵⁶ In this way, we can see that psychedelic experience

⁴⁹ David Luke, 'Anomalous Psychedelic Experiences: At the Neurochemical Juncture of the Humanistic and Parapsychological', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, (2020)

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.24

⁵¹ Ibid, p.24

⁵² Ibid, p.23

⁵³ Ibid, p.24

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.24

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.24

⁵⁶ Kettner, 'From Egoism to Ecoism', p.4

may create lasting change regarding nature relatedness, perhaps due to the viscosity or emotional intensity of the experience.

Near-Death Experiences

Often considered within the same realm as the psychedelic experience due to its intensity and anecdotally interesting evidence, is near-death experiences. Near-death experience involves a number of attributes and has often been found to result in many value and life changes.⁵⁷ These changes, according to Surbhi Khanna and Bruce Greyson, seem characteristic of those resulting from spiritual awakening and personal insight and are typical of mystical experience or psychological growth.⁵⁸ This may be due to an increased perception beyond that of the social world which seems to penetrate superficial social constructs, moving to a conception of, or the very essence of, reality in accordance with aspects of the higher or spiritual self.⁵⁹

Near death experiences tend, according to popular literature, to follow similar steps between individuals. Stages often include: an initial overwhelming sense of peace, an out of body experience, entering darkness, seeing the light, entering the light and returning to the body.⁶⁰ These experiences can be profound and transforming at personal, religious, spiritual, and societal levels as a person may exhibit changes in behaviour, often assuming an altered personality and outlook toward life.⁶¹ They may lead to value and life changes similar to those reported following spiritual awakening, inspiring self-transformation and self-transcendence.⁶² Further to this, interestingly, Khanna and Greyson have also found that these changes are most likely not associated with prior religious affiliation or religiosity, nor are they typical of those resulting from a traumatic experience.⁶³ In fact, in the aforementioned works of Khanna and Greyson, when examining spiritual well-being using Paloutzian and Ellison's Spiritual Well Being Scale, among 224 persons who had come close to death reported greater spiritual well-being than those who did not, and depth of spiritual well-being was positively correlated with depth of near-death experience.⁶⁴

There are many other studies of this nature, reporting a multitude of lasting effects from thousands of near death experiences and like previously mentioned extraordinary experiences, ecological concern is often a consideration. For example, a study by Roger Summers and Gary Groth-Marnat found that individuals who had experienced an NDE reported effects on their

⁵⁷ John Pennachio, 'Near-Death Experience as Mystical Experience', *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 64-72, p.64

⁵⁸ Surbhi Khanna and Bruce Greyson, 'Near-Death Experiences and Spiritual Well-Being', *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 53, No. 6 (December 2014), pp. 1605-1615, p.1607

⁵⁹ Pennachio, 'Near Death Experience', p.64

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.66

⁶¹ Khanna and Greyson, 'Near Death Experiences', p.1613

⁶² Ibid, p.1613

⁶³ Ibid, p.1606

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.1613

lifestyle and personal feelings such as increased concern for others, reduced death anxiety with a strengthened belief in an afterlife, increased transcendental experience, reduced interest in material possessions, increased self-worth, increased appreciation for natural phenomenon, and an enhanced awareness of paranormal phenomenon.⁶⁵ Similarly, Kenneth Ring, in his book, 'Lessons From The Light', writes of similar characteristics that may arise from an NDE: an increased sense of self-worth, the loss of the fear of death, an unshakable awareness of the unity of all life and a commitment to environmental activism on behalf of the earth'.⁶⁶

However, it is worth noting that while NDEs in which a person has a positive experience may foster increased nature-relatedness, scholarly material on the matter often does not include accounts of negative near-death experiences. For example, the common three types of distressing NDE; inverse, void, and hellish, are unlikely to foster positive feelings within an individual, and often have a long-lasting negative effect on an individual's mental health.⁶⁷ Despite this, it remains true that the effects of a positive near-death experience are enduring and can offer a profound insight into that which transcends the self, similar perhaps to a psychedelic experience or an experience of the conceptualisation of the enormity and intelligence of nature. This transcendence of self, as previously discussed, seems to play a huge part in an individual's relationship with nature.

Conclusion

It should be noted the overlap of all of the aforementioned topics. For example, the experiences resulting from the use of psychedelic drugs are often described in religious terms,⁶⁸ Shamanism can be grouped under religion in its natural form, and near-death experiences often have religious connotations or are grouped in with that which is psychedelic. The most important aspect of these experiences, it appears, is that feature of self-transcendence; the ability to see beyond the self and the place within the universe with which we stand. As Alan Watts notes, the terms "religious experience," "mystical experience," and "cosmic consciousness" are all too vague and comprehensive to denote that specific mode of consciousness which, to those who have known it, is as real and overwhelming as falling in love.⁶⁹ For William James, who has inspired the writings of many scholars mentioned within this work, mystical experience was not about theistic expressions of Divine unity but, rather, an experience defined by its central characteristics and therefore open to anyone and, more significantly, to all "divine" forms. Most important for James, against the dualistic empiricism of medical materialists, "in the mystic states we both become one with the absolute and we become aware of our oneness" informing

⁶⁵ Roger Summers and Gary Groth-Marnat, 'Altered Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors Following Near-Death Experiences', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, (July 1998)

⁶⁶ Kenneth Ring and Evelyn Elsaesser Valarino, *Lessons From the Light*, (1998)

⁶⁷ Nancy Evans Bush, Distressing Near-Death Experiences: The Basics, *The Journal of Missouri State Medical Association*, (Nov-Dec 2014) p.1

⁶⁸ Watts, 'Psychedelics and Religious Experience', p.74

⁶⁹ Watts, 'Psychedelics and Religious Experience', p.74

the mystic and non mystic alike of the “supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, of rest,” offering the modern world hypotheses that may be “after all the truest of insights into the meaning of this life.”⁷⁰ Years later, these words still remain true as we seem to be seeing a return to animistic behaviours and values in the modern world following the disconnect between man and nature that has gone some way in causing the ecological crisis. This can be seen in work such as Bron Taylor’s, in which he urges for a greening of existing religious and societal structures. Extraordinary experience, regardless of how intense or fleeting, seems to be one important way of inspiring these changes.

While everyday perceptions and societal norms may remain, the awareness that is gained through many different types of extraordinary experience can be seen to provide an individual with an unfiltered conscious experience from which to re-engage with a world that is run by the ego. Through acts of self-transcendence and experiences that bring about a need for deeper reflection, an individual may go some way into dissolving the ego, as well as the societal boundaries and the dualistic structures that separates man from nature. In this way, the extraordinary experience seemingly offers a guide, a sort of mystical outline, from which we may restructure a world bound by an obsession with the self, towards one where each individual can have a symbiotic relationship with nature.

⁷⁰ Morgan Shipley, ‘Hippies and the Mystic Way: Dropping Out, Unitive Experiences, and Communal Utopianism’, *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2013), pp. 232-263, p.248

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