BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH INTO SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Serious work in this field in Britain is often dated to the late 1960s, and largely results from the initiative of Sir Alister Hardy FRS (1896-1985), who was Linacre Professor of Zoology in Oxford University (1946-1961), Gifford Lecturer in Aberdeen University (1963-1965) and a Templeton Prize winner (1985); see Hay, 2011.

Alister Hardy’s long-standing conviction was that religious awareness and experience represented ‘something of overwhelming importance’ and that the field therefore deserved serious empirical investigation. In order to realise this ambition for ‘a new and more systematic study of religious experience’, Hardy set up the Alister Hardy Research Fund in the late 1960s and became the first Director of the Religious Experience Research Unit (RERU), serving from 1969 to 1976. He had described this new area of study as a ‘natural history’, or ‘exercise in human ecology’, of the human experience of contact with something – a personal ‘power’ or purpose, or ‘whatever it may be’ – that ‘is greater than, and in part lies beyond the individual self’, and which engenders certain affective (feeling) states. In effect, this was to be a study of the phenomenon of religious or (more generally, and less controversially) of spiritual forms of the human consciousness of the ‘spiritual or transcendentalside of the universe’ (Hardy, 1969).

Hardy believed that such experiences had biological roots while resisting the reductionism often associated with such views, arguing that religion had evolved as a genuine response to reality (Hardy, 1965a, 1965b, 1966, 1975, 1984, 1985). Along with many others – but by no means all – he also claimed that such experiences were veridical, pointing beyond themselves. He advocated using the methods of social anthropology and empirical psychology in the study of these phenomena, and concluded a seminal paper by presenting a vision of ‘a number of post-graduate research students working in different aspects of the problem – sociological, anthropological, psychological and theological’ (Hardy, 1968).

Initially located in Manchester College, Oxford, RERU began the work of collecting and analysing personal reports from those who were conscious that their lives had been affected in any way by ‘some power beyond themselves’, whether this was identified as God or not, and who detailed both the experience and its effect on their lives. These reports resulted from widely disseminated open appeals in the press, as well as from more targeted questionnaire studies designed to sample this area of human experience. Both methods employed some version of what has become known 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? (Hardy, 1979, p. 20; Hay, 1987, pp. 114, 117-118; Franklin, 2014, pp. 7-8)

The resulting data collected from 1969 onwards formed the foundation of the unique Alister Hardy Archive, which now contains around 6,500 accounts of first-hand experiences from people in the UK and some other countries.

A number of RERU publications appeared in the 1970s, under the editorial supervision of Edward Robinson, originally a botanist, who became the second director of the Unit and developed a particular interest in childhood religious experience (Robinson, 1977a, 1977b, 1978a, 1978b; see also Beardsworth, 1977). Sir Alister Hardy’s own provisional
classification and analysis of the first 3,000 records was published during this period (Hardy, 1979). Another zoologist, David Hay, later served as director of RERU and also as Reader in Spiritual Education in Nottingham University (Hay, 1979, 1987, 1988, 1990, 2006; see also Ahern, 1990; Hay & Morisy, 1978, 1985; Hay with Nye, 2006). The Religious Experience Research Unit – later renamed a ‘Centre’ – eventually relocated to the University of Wales, Lampeter under the directorship of Professor Paul Badham (see Yeo and Badham, 2007; Badham, 2011; cf. Francis, 2013). It is now part of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, and is directed by Professor Bettina Schmidt (b.schmidt@uwtsd.ac.uk; Library and Learning Resources, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter Campus, Lampeter, Ceredigion, SA48 7ED). It focuses on the scientific examination of personal accounts of religious or spiritual experiences. In 2013 a second research centre was established based at Glyndŵr University, focused on the psychological correlates of religious or spiritual experiences, and directed by Professor Christopher Lewis (ca.lewis@glyndwr.ac.uk; Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, Glyndŵr University, Mold Road, Wrexham, LL11 2AW).

Other research drawing on the Alister Hardy Archive includes Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990; Mark Fox’s studies of near death experiences, unusual experiences of light, and the place of love within transcendent, religious and spiritual experiences (Fox, 2003, 2008, 2014); and various research studies published as Occasional Papers (see Link below), e.g. by Fox, Jakobsen and Tobert.

The Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centres, supported by the Alister Hardy Trust, continue the pioneering work of Sir Alister under their mission statement commitment ‘to seek through research and study to contribute to the understanding of transcendent, spiritual or religious experiences and their role in the evolution of consciousness and religious reflection as well as their impact upon individual lives and on society’. The Revd Professor Jeff Astley worked at the Glyndŵr Centre from 2014, and was appointed as Alister Hardy Professor of Spiritual and Religious Experience at the University of Warwick in January 2017 (j.astley@warwick.ac.uk). Jeff Astley trained as a biologist before moving into the study of theology, the philosophy of religion, and religious development and learning. He has a special interest in the spiritual and religious reflective beliefs of people who are without any academic theological education, whom he describes as ‘ordinary theologians’ (see http://community.dur.ac.uk/neice/ordinary.html).

Links
http://uwtsd.ac.uk/library/alister-hardy-religious-experience-research-centre/ (The Alister Hardy Archive)
http://uwtsd.ac.uk/library/alister-hardy-religious-experience-research-centre/occasional-papers/ (Occasional Papers published by the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre)
http://rerc-journal.tsd.ac.uk/index.php/religiousexp/index (Journal for the Study of Religious Experience, a peer-reviewed journal publishing original papers promoting theoretical, methodological and ethnographical developments in the research on spiritual or religious experience)
Science and Spirituality: A Challenge for the 21st Century
by Peter Fenwick (The Bruce Greyson Lecture from the International Association for Near-Death Studies, 2004)

The Spiritual Brain: Science and Religious Experience
by Andrew Newberg (Chantilly, Virginia: The Great Courses, 2012)

http://www.st-marys-centre.org.uk/resources/Aleveljournal.html (Challenging Religious Issues: Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond) includes the following relevant articles written at an introductory level:

Leslie J. Francis, Researching Religious Experience in China: The Alister Hardy Project
(Challenging Religious Issues, 1, 2013, 8-13)

Leslie J. Francis, Psychology and Mysticism: An Empirical Approach
(Challenging Religious Issues, 2, 2013, 9-16)

Mark Fox, Mind after Death? Substance Dualism, Immortality and the Near-Death Experience
(Challenging Religious Issues, 4, 2014, 2-7)

Jeff Astley, The Objectivity of Religious Experience: Philosophical Arguments
(Challenging Religious Issues, 7, 2015, 2-8)

Mark Fox, All in the Mind? Psychology of Religion and Religious Experience
(Challenging Religious Issues, 7, 2015, 9-14)

William K. Kay, William James on Religious Experience
(Challenging Religious Issues, 10, 2016, 2-7)

References
Beardsworth, Timothy, 1977, A sense of presence, Oxford: RERU.
Fox, Mark, 2008, Spiritual encounters with unusual light phenomena: Lightforms, Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
Franklin, John, 2014, Exploration into Spirit: A power greater than . . . , Lampeter: AHSSE.


