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Asking questions and analysing answers about religious experience:
Developing the Greer tradition

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Asking questions and analysing answers about religious experience: Developing the Greer tradition

Abstract

Alister Hardy's initiative in starting a programme of empirical research into religious experience in the UK employing the methods of the social sciences continues through the work of the Religious Experience Research Centres. John Greer initiated a similar research tradition through his questionnaire surveys of the incidence and nature of religious experience among children and young people in Northern Ireland. Leslie Francis and Tania ap Siôn replicated Greer's classic surveys, with ap Siôn extending Greer's analysis into nine categories of religious experience (help and guidance, exam concerns, God's presence, answered prayer, death, sickness, conversion, difficulty of description, and miscellaneous), while also noting their setting and frequency. The present paper develops the Greer tradition further, drawing on more recent data from pupils in the Republic of Ireland, and arguing for a modified analytical process in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of reports of religious experience.

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Introduction

The Hardy tradition of research on religious experience

Serious empirical work on spiritual and religious experience in Britain is often dated to the late 1960s, and largely results² from the initiative of Sir Alister Hardy FRS (1896-1985), Linacre Professor of Zoology in Oxford University (1946-1961), Gifford Lecturer in Aberdeen University (1963-1965) and Templeton Prize winner (1985) (see Hay, 2011). The Alister Hardy Trust, its two Research Centres, and affiliated Society continue this pioneering work, seeking 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' (Mission Statement).

Although Hardy believed that religious awareness and experience had biological roots, he argued that religion had evolved as a genuine response to reality (Hardy, 1965a, 1965b, 1966, 1975, 1984, 1985). Religious experiences were veridical, pointing beyond themselves, and represented 'something of overwhelming importance'. They therefore constituted a field that deserved serious empirical investigation: 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 states (Hardy, 1969).

Hardy encouraged the collection of personal reports of these experience and their effect on people's lives (cf. Beardsworth, 1977), initially through open appeals in the press and later by more targeted questionnaire studies. 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 formed the foundation of a unique archive now comprising over six thousand accounts of first-hand experiences from people across the world (<http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/library/alister-hardy-religious-experience-research-centre/online-archive/>). Hardy himself offered a provisional analysis and classification based on the first 3,000 records (Hardy, 1979).

Research in this tradition continues, either drawing on the historic archive or generating new data: e.g. the survey work of David Hay and associates (Hay, 1979, 1987, 1988, 1990, 2006; Hay & Morisy, 1978, 1985); Mark Fox's studies of near death experiences, unusual light experiences, and the place of love within transcendent experience (Fox, 2003, 2008, 2014); and studies of religious experience in China (Yao & Badham, 2007; Badham,

² Michael Paffard's independent studies of 'transcendental' or 'peak experiences' were also published early (Paffard, 1970, 1973).

2011, cf. Francis, 2013). Other research has focused on childhood religious experience recalled in later life (Robinson, 1977a, 1977b, 1978a, 1978b), and the understanding and incidence of religious experience in British secondary school students (Miles, 1983; Robinson & Jackson, 1987).

The work of Greer, Francis, and ap Siôn

Other research traditions have employed different survey questions to explore this area (cf. Hay, 1988, pp. 224-226; Hood et al., 2009, pp. 344-347). Quantitative studies include those that originated in the work of John Greer and continued under Leslie Francis and colleagues (Francis, 1996; Francis & Greer, 1993, 1999; Greer & Francis, 1992; Francis et al., 2006).

From 1978 to 1992, Greer gathered data from students in Catholic and Protestant secondary school in Northern Ireland, including responses to the question, 'Have you ever had an experience of God, e.g. his presence or his help or anything else'. In some of these surveys those who answered this '*Greer question*' in the affirmative were also asked to describe these experiences. Greer eventually classified their responses under eight headings (Greer, 1981, 1982):

- guidance and help
- examinations
- (depression and) sickness
- death
- answered prayer
- God's presence
- conversion experiences
- miscellaneous

Tania ap Siôn's 2006 study examined data from a 1998 survey that asked the same questions about religious experience of 16- to 18-year-olds in Northern Ireland schools (n=2359). Overall, 33% of the sample reported an experience of God, and 23% provided a description. Greer (1981, p. 24) had acknowledged the limitations of his method of classifying the descriptive responses under only one heading, and ap Siôn (2006, p. 357) confirmed that 'a significant number of the responses' in her survey data 'potentially fell into more than one category'. She therefore recommended following the practice of Paffard (1973) by assigning them to up to two categories. She also found that 15% of the responses fell into Greer's Miscellaneous category, and that by introducing a further category to cover those responses that expressed the authors' 'inability, difficulty, or unwillingness to describe' their religious experiences this could be reduced to 9% (ap Siôn, 2006, p. 357).

A further replication in 2010, which surveyed 1468 Northern Ireland secondary school students, employed both Greer's original analytical framework and ap Siôn's modified framework to categorize the data. It also noted whether the experiences were described as located in a religious setting or not; and if respondents characterized their religious

experience as constant or always present, occurring on more than one occasion, or only occurring on one specific occasion. Setting and Frequency are useful variables to add to the analysis of religious experiences.

In this study, 30% of the sample reported having had some experience of God, and 311 (21%) of the whole sample went on to describe its nature. These responses were analysed as follows (amended from ap Siôn, in progress/*this journal?*).

Table 1 Classification of descriptions of religious experiences under the Greer framework (phase 1) and the ap Siôn modified framework (phase 2), *displaying data for selected categories only*
(Northern Ireland schools; n=311, data collected 2010)

Category	Overall % of responses describing experiences	
	Greer framework	ap Siôn framework
guidance and help	24	26
God's presence	21	26
sickness	17	18
exams	15	15
death	8	9
answered prayer	7	23
miscellaneous	5	5
conversion	3	3
difficulty in describing		<0.5
<i>Setting</i>		
religious		7
secular		93
<i>Frequency</i>		
constant / always		6
multiple		48
single		46

The religious experience of school students in the Republic of Ireland

The present article reviews new data from a further Greer replication, undertaken in 2011-2012 among secondary school students in the (Southern) Republic of Ireland, which is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic in its religious profile.

Method

Sample: A questionnaire was circulated to 31 secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland and completed by 3848 students: 1895 (49%) male and 1953 (51%) female; 326 aged 16, 1373 aged 17, 1553 aged 18, and 596 aged 19. Eighty-six percent attended a place of worship at least occasionally; for all but 13% of these students this was a Roman Catholic church.

Instrument: The questionnaire included the Greer question, 'Have you ever had an experience of God e.g. his presence or his help or anything else?' followed by dichotomous response categories: yes or no. Those who checked a positive response were then asked to respond to the open question, 'Please describe this experience if you can'.

Results and discussion

Overall, a religious experience was reported by 1040 students (27%). Of these, 46% were male and 54% female. 679 respondents (18% of the whole sample) provided some account of their religious experience(s). These descriptions were coded using Greer's original categories together with ap Siôn's additions.

Studying the responses from this survey and attempting to apply the existing analytic frameworks raised a number of issues.

1. The Greer question – unlike Hardy's – is framed in a *theistic form*. As a result, some of the respondents in the present study felt obliged to qualify their responses. For example, 'I do not believe it is the same God as everyone speaks of'; 'I don't necessarily believe in a Christian God . . . More a supreme being kind of thing'; 'It depends on who I see God to be, I have and do feel a presence of something watching over me and looking out for me and helping me through difficult times if that is God to you then yes but to me it's a presence and nothing more'; 'Not an experience of "God" but of something more than this life/world'.

In light of such comments, it would seem reasonable to argue that other respondents may have declined to acknowledge or to describe any of their spiritual experiences that were not specifically theistic. (As responses from another question indicate, 52% of the sample were 'fairly' or 'completely' confident that God exists, but 32% were uncertain and 16% atheistic to some degree.) Where student populations are becoming more agnostic or atheistic, the Greer question may prove to be more restrictive than does Hardy's question in eliciting accounts of religious or spiritual experiences.

Might the results be also skewed by the fact that the Greer question adopts the traditional usage of male pronouns for the deity ('his presence', 'his help')? No one in this sample commented on this – now relatively unusual – gendered language, but nothing would seem to be lost in employing the Greer question in a gender-neutral form in future, by referring to 'God's presence or help'.

2. The phrase '*or his help*' in the Greer question potentially widens the range of possible responses to include experiences of *natural events* that are regarded as providential or miraculous.³ In some cases these events seem to have been directly 'experienced-as' God's help/influence, as on John Hick's epistemological model; other respondents, however, appear to regard a supernatural source as an additional inference rather than an interpretative element included within the experience itself (cf. Hick, 1973, ch. 3; 1985, ch. 2; 2008, ch. 2; cf. Hay, 1987, p. 190; Astley, in press/*in this journal?*). Philosophers of religion, at any rate, are unlikely to regard such inferential data as offering an account of a religious *experience*.

The following responses from the present survey might be pointed to as examples of the former understanding: 'Watching a butterfly take its first flight after being stepped on twice . . .'; 'I woke up asking for a good day and all through the day good things happened to me'; 'his presence resides with everything, from a bird's call to a noisy street, if God is as powerful as we're told surely experience itself is experiencing God'; and 'I experience God through people'.

One may contrast these examples with others that utilize more inferential language, such as: 'I have prayed for things in the past which seemed impossible but still happened'; 'I fell off a huge wall and people and doctors said that I should have died but somehow I survived and only had a few bruises and scratches'; 'If I would say that he "heard" my prayers, for example after asking for a good sports game on the next day or the "help" to get good grades maybe . . . depends on the point of view'; and 'Surely our existence and all things around us show us that god is present in our daily life.'⁴

3. There seems to be no good reason why a student's recorded response should not be identified as *falling under several categories* rather than just the most (Greer, 1981), or two of the more (ap Siôn, 2006, in progress/*in this journal?*), salient ones. The occurrence of more than two categories within a single reported experience is exemplified in the present study, as in the response 'I believe that when I ask God for help in my prayers I am guided in the right direction, no matter what the issue may be, health problems, school problems etc.'

³ Although the phrase 'or influenced by' in the Hardy question *could* be similarly interpreted, there is little evidence from studies of the Hardy archive that this has happened, other than in a 'sense of prayer answered in events' (Hardy, 1979, pp. 27, 65-66) or in mystical experiences of unity with or a presence in nature (pp. 35, 148-150). (Neither Hardy, 1979 nor Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990 index the words 'miracle' or 'providence'.)

⁴ This last example might be interpreted as a form of the cosmological argument for the existence of God (or even as a form of the argument from design), provided that the ambiguous word 'show' is intended to be understood as 'demonstrate, prove' rather than as 'allow to be seen, appear, display'.

A number of sub-issues arise here, however, in addition to the problems posed by the subjective character of any judgement of salience.

(a) Greer recognized that some responses referred to 'several experiences', which he refers to as 'multiple answers'. Despite the patent ambiguity, it would seem that in referring to these 'different kinds of experience of God' (Greer, 1981, p. 25) Greer was labelling *different dimensions of a single experience*, since at one point he adds the clause 'at the same time' (1982, p. 52). However, 'for convenience' and 'sometimes arbitrarily' he classified such responses under only one of his categories – the one 'which seemed most appropriate' (1981, p. 24; 1982, pp. 51-52). Thus, while acknowledging the multi-dimensionality of the reported experiences, each response was given only one category designation.

(b) By contrast, ap Siôn allowed 'each reported experience to be located within up to two categories' (ap Siôn, 2006, p. 357). Unfortunately, the phrase 'each reported experience' is also ambiguous in those cases where more than one experience is described. This situation occurs in a number of the responses contained in these data from the Irish Republic. Thus in the following examples the word 'also' marks an additional *experience* contained within a single record/response: 'Usually when I pray for something really important it happens and I believe that is because God is looking out for me. Also I don't cope well with death and if it wasn't for God I wouldn't get through it'; 'When I attended a retreat in Knock I felt more connected with God. Sometimes I also pray to God to help me/guide me in something and sometimes this helps.'

However, reports that contained more than one experience were only rarely apparent in ap Siôn's data sets from Northern Ireland. This situation only revealed itself when one response fell under two categories that represent what I shall call their *Situation/Context*, such as exams and death. Further, the Northern Ireland respondents never offered data that fell under *more than* two categories. (I owe these details to ap Siôn, private communication.) The probable cause of both of these disparities appears to be that as part of the process of data gathering in the Irish Republic, the questionnaires were printed in a format that allowed more space for the students' reports of their religious experience(s) when contrasted with the earlier questionnaires used in Northern Ireland. Where surveys include questions requesting descriptive answers, it would seem that plenty of space should be provided if a full response is to be elicited.

In analysing these briefer responses, therefore, ap Siôn practically always employs the Greer categories in only one way: to *label two components within a single reported experience*.⁵

⁵ While ap Siôn's variable 'frequency of religious experience' is available to report multiple *different* experiences, this was clearly designed with reports of repetitions of *the same* or similar experiences, or the same category of experience, in mind.

(c) Many of the individual records in the Hardy archive record several different religious experiences (see Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990, pp. 106, 132), each of which may contain a number of different elements. Where distinctly different experiences are reported in quantitative studies of religious experience, *counting all the reported experiences* as the basis of percentage calculations may be as significant, if not more significant, than employing the lower number of all the *responses/individuals*. In the present data, therefore, it would ideally have been better to distinguish these different individual experiences and note the dimensions of each experience, but the narrative responses did not always allow for that degree of discrimination and I have not attempted it in my analysis.

(d) Cataloguing a reported experience under two categories moves the Greer classification closer to categorizations that allow any particular experience to possess *several 'elements', 'components' or 'dimensions'* (e.g. Hardy, 1979, pp. 25-30, cf. pp. 147-153). Greer's classification includes five substantive categories of the *Content or Object* of the experience (guidance and help, answered prayer, God's presence, conversion experiences, and miscellaneous); as well as referencing the *Situation* that provides the *Context* of the experience (examinations, death, depression and sickness).⁶

I believe that unless *all the categories are employed to characterize an experience*, the introduction of the Situation/Context category muddies the water, as it is not clear why such a category should ever be regarded as the 'most appropriate' or one of the two best descriptors of an experience – 'trumping', as it were, the more substantive Content/Object categories.⁷ It would be better to report the frequencies of the Situation/Context categories and the Content/Object categories separately, as ap Siôn does with her Setting and Frequency variables.

4. I shall now examine the categories of Greer (1981, 1982) and ap Siôn in more detail.

(a) I have used the Miscellaneous category only to mark the 'Miscellaneous Content/Object' of an experience: that is, types of experience or additional elements within a particular experience that do not fall under the other four designated categories of guidance and help, answered prayer, God's presence, and conversion experiences. The examples I came across included dreams and out-of-body experiences. (I have not used the Miscellaneous category to designate another Situation/Context that is different from the three categories of examinations, death,

⁶ These have been described elsewhere as antecedents or 'triggers' of experience (Hardy, 1979, p., 28, ch. 6; Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990, pp. 30-33); Greer describes examinations as having 'triggered some form of experience of God' at 1982, p. 53. Arguably, prayer itself should also be considered as a trigger (of 'Answered Prayer', as well as itself often comprising some experience of God's Presence, Conversion Experience, etc.: cf. Francis & Greer, 1999, p. 6; Hardy, 1979, pp. 84, 119-123).

⁷ Note also that the situations specified are also paradigmatic loci of Guidance and Help, Answered Prayer, and/or God's Presence.

and depression and sickness. But I recommend that an additional 'Miscellaneous Situation' category should be added in this area to cover the entire range of possibilities.)⁸

(b) I have widened the category of Exams (a Situation/Context category) so as to include within it other frequently reported situations in which success is hoped or prayed for in a very similar way, such as sports events, 'rugby trials', and so on.

(c) Guidance and Help is a category that evidently overlaps conceptually with Answered Prayer, as guidance and help are two 'answers to prayer'. The analytical frames of both Greer and ap Siôn seem to suggest that Guidance and Help should not be coded where the experience of God's help is (only) described as an objective, specified event that is thought by the respondent to be the result of their prayer. However, there are occasions when the help that is consequent on prayer is not so much a publically observable change in the world, as a subjective change in the one who prays (e.g. 'When I feel stressed I ask for help and I feel less stressed then'). Indeed, for some scholars this may be all that is meant by God answering prayer (cf. Phillips, 1965; Baelz, 1982; Brümmer, 1984; Moore, 1988, ch. 6; Francis & Astley, 2001, introduction and sect. 5). In some circumstances, the respondent writes *both* of Guidance and Help as an Answered Prayer *and* of a wider experience of God guiding and helping him/her outside the specific relationship of prayer. It is only where I have thought that this is the case that I have coded the response with *both* the Guidance and Help *and* the Answered Prayer categories. This procedure, of course, is somewhat arbitrary, and may not be adopted by other researchers who use the Greer categories. Perhaps this needs to be specified.

(d) In her Phase 2 analysis, ap Siôn treats her new category of Difficulty of Deciding as an additional substantive Content/Object category. But we should note that the respondent's 'inability, difficulty, or unwillingness to describe' their religious experience (ap Siôn, 2006, p. 357) in principle represents a very broad range of rather different responses: from the theistic agnosticism of the apophatic tradition (e.g. 'My experience is indescribable'); through a response of faith such as 'I have never seen God; but I believe that . . .', or a reluctance to share what seems so private or particular ('I can't, it's personal'); to a straightforward epistemological agnosticism ('I don't know').

In the present study, I have coded 15 responses (2%) solely under this category, as there was no further part of these responses that could be categorized under other headings. Another 13 responses, however, were coded as revealing some Difficulty of Deciding *in addition to* falling under other categories. Examples include: 'I can't describe it. It just helped me'; 'Never can explain it, it sort of felt like a warmth moving through my body and relaxing me'; 'Not comfortable sharing this information but let's

⁸ It is not clear whether Greer or ap Siôn ever use the category 'Miscellaneous' in this way, to designate a different situation.

just say he has got me out of some sticky situation’.

(e) I have followed ap Siôn in classifying all respondents who did not explicitly specify a religious setting for their religious experience (or where such a setting is not clearly implied) as falling under the ‘secular setting’ category. However, in very many responses no setting is explicitly mentioned, nor is it easy to infer what it is. It may be more true to the data, therefore, only to designate the setting as secular where such conditions do not obtain.

These principles have informed the presentation of the 2011-2012 Republic of Ireland data in Table 2. Table 3 then presents a direct comparison of these results with the 2010 Northern Ireland data analysed by ap Siôn.

Table 2 Classification of descriptions of religious experiences *displaying data for all categories*
(Republic of Ireland schools; n=673, data collected 2011-2012)

Category	Overall % of responses describing experiences
guidance and help	56
answered prayer	39
God's presence	13
conversion	<0.5
miscellaneous	13
difficulty	4
<i>Situation</i>	
sickness	13
death	11
exams	10
<i>Setting</i>	
religious	5
secular	95
<i>Frequency</i>	
constant / always	8
multiple	51
single	39

Table 3 Comparison of data

	2010 Northern Ireland data analysed by ap Siôn's framework (displaying data for selected categories only)	2011-2012 Republic of Ireland data analysed using Astley's framework (displaying data for all categories)
Category	Overall % of responses describing experiences	Overall % of responses describing experiences
<i>Content/Object</i>		
guidance and help	26	56
answered prayer	23	39
God's presence	26	13
conversion	3	<0.5
miscellaneous	5	13
difficulty	<0.5	4
<i>Situation</i>		
sickness	18	13
death	9	11
exams	15	10
<i>Setting</i>		
religious	7	5
secular	93	95
<i>Frequency</i>		
constant / always	6	8
multiple	48	51
single	46	39

Conclusions

It would be improper to read too much into the differences between these two data sets, because of the different conditions in which the data were gathered (that is, differences in the space available for writing descriptions of the religious experiences), and the different analytical procedures that were subsequently applied (especially the fact that my practice allows all the coded categories to be displayed and included in the overall percentage of responses). Given more space to set down their experiences, would the Northern Ireland students have produced similarly high percentages for the categories of guidance and help and answered prayer? We cannot know. Similarly, the lower coding figures for God's presence and conversion in the data from the Republic may not reflect a real difference between the two samples, even though some might expect *a priori* that in a broadly Catholic culture people would tend to talk less about conversion, whereas in a more Protestant culture they might talk more about God's personal presence.

The main conclusion of this article, however, must lie in the claims made in the Discussion section about how researchers should ensure that the fullest possible analysis is given of the most complete responses that can be elicited by open questions about religious experiences. These claims apply as much to the Alister Hardy question as they do to the Greer question that lies behind the data presented here. I believe that further consideration of these factors ought to make a positive contribution to the task of classifying reports of religious experiences in a wide range of contexts.

The Greer / ap Siôn framework has much to recommend it, provided that the methods of data collection and analysis allow researchers to listen as fully as possible to the voices of those who are willing to describe their experiences.

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