

Jeff Astley, *SCM Study Guide to Religious and Spiritual Experience*, London, SCM Press, 2020, pp. 306. ISBN 978-0-334-05796-3 (Softback).ⁱ

Professor Jeff Astley is one of the Trustees of the AHT and the Alister Hardy Professor of Religious and Spiritual Experience at Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln. He is also Honorary Professor in the College of Theology and Religion at Durham University. Ordained in the Church of England in 1970 he also founded the North of England Institute for Christian Education at Durham in 1981. With this experience, and the publication of about 40 books and 150 book chapters and journal articles, he is particularly well equipped to write a study guide on religious and spiritual experience (RSE).

The book is very well structured with a set of thematic chapters that cover the key topics and debates in the study of RSE. Astley also provides a wealth of references for further reading, with recommendations for books and papers at the end of each chapter, helpfully divided into introductory and advanced reading. He also provides exercises, in the form of articles to critically assess, and prompts to encourage the reader to reflect on issues and questions raised by the text. There are extensive footnotes to each chapter which delve deeper into the points raised, and finally a comprehensive reference list and indexes. Prof. Astley has also produced a select bibliography on RSE that complements his book, and which can currently be found on the AHT website at <https://www.studyspiritualexperiences.org/bibliography.html>

A glance at the contents list of the study guide provides a clear view of the themes and debates covered by the text. Astley clearly describes the present state and consensus, or lack of consensus, in these debates. Although the book is an overview of the study of RSE, Astley does provide his own thoughts and perspectives at various points in the text. He offers his preferred definition of spirituality, "...the beliefs and teachings, but more importantly the practices, capacities – and (particularly) – feelings, attitudes (including dispositions and values) and experiences that express what a person takes to be ultimate for her or him," and the potentially useful distinction of spirituality along two dimensions or axes: "human-*horizontal*" and "vertical-*transcendent*". He also emphasises the importance of the continued sense of the spiritual in religious experiences, their transformational fruits, and the cumulative argument for religious experience in considering its evidential value. However, his presentation of these debates is balanced and he is not afraid to draw the reader's attention to differing or more controversial views, for example, those questioning whether spiritual experiences always result in the moral development of the experiencer and the ongoing debates between essentialists and constructivists.

Astley's book will be of particular relevance for those who are interested in RSE in a Christian context. There is a clear emphasis on the discussion of Christian theology and philosophy in the book. Astley explains at the outset that this is largely due to the fact that the SCM Press is a Christian publisher, so this seems appropriate in that context. In addition, many of the arguments he describes apply equally to other traditions. However, some may still criticise the book on the basis that a study guide on RSE in general should be broader in scope and draw on more examples and perspectives from other traditions.

The book also tends more towards the philosophical and theological disciplines than any others. Although Astley does include a couple of chapters on psychology and sociology/anthropology (combined in one chapter), the importance of these approaches could have been emphasised more. Finally, the contribution of the field of neuroscience to the study of RSE is relegated to an appendix in the form of a select bibliography rather than being given a chapter to itself. However, it is inevitable that every book will reflect the interests and expertise of its writer, and in this case, these influences make the book highly effective in what it sets out to achieve. A truly comprehensive and balanced book on RSE would require the efforts of an interdisciplinary team, rather than those of a single author.

Finally, it may be helpful to briefly compare Astley's book with Marianne Rankin's *An Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experience* (2008). Both books aim to provide an overview and introduction to the study of RSE and share very similar themes, such as types, triggers, and fruits of experiences. Both books superbly achieve this aim. However, there does seem to be a difference in target audience. Astley's work seems to be aimed at undergraduate level and above, whereas Rankin's book appears to be aimed at undergraduate level and below, or perhaps is intended more for the lay reader. Also, whilst Astley's book delves deeper into the academic literature and arguments about RSE with some limited use of the RERC archive, Rankin provides far more examples and makes liberal use of the RERC archive to illustrate her themes. Finally, where Astley's work leans heavily towards the Christian tradition, Rankin's book provides a much wider diversity of examples from various traditions. In summary, Rankin's book will probably satisfy the interests of the general reader, whilst both books effectively complement each other for the reader interested in more serious academic study of RSE.

In summary, I wish I knew enough about the study of RSEs to have written this book myself! I also wish that it had been published when I was studying for the MA in Religious Experience at the then University of Lampeter! It is clearly a masterful and comprehensive distillation of a vast and complex field of study comprised of multiple academic disciplines, and should become a go-to textbook for any student of RSE from undergraduate level upwards.

References

Rankin, M. (2008). *An Introduction to Religious & Spiritual Experience*, London: Continuum.

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