

# Spirituality and extraordinary experiences: Methodological remarks and some empirical findings

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## Abstract

This article is based on empirical data gathered in two qualitative field studies of contemporary Western shamans and practising magicians (occultists) in German speaking countries. It emphasizes the importance of extraordinary experiences in the adoption of heterodox worldviews. The findings indicate that such experiences play a decisive role in the adoption of religious and/or spiritual beliefs as well as in individual conceptualization of spirituality. Some methodological considerations in the investigation of extraordinary experiences and their relation to assumed paranormal phenomena are mentioned. A particular problem is that these experiences often seem to contradict the orthodox, commonly accepted scientific worldview. Thus researchers who want to collect information about religious beliefs and spiritual experiences have to allow for participants' possible fear of stigmatization. An empirical phenomenological approach, following the principle of openness (Hoffmann-Riehm) and the method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss), seems apposite.

In addition to the aforementioned methodological issues the article presents data on aspects of the lived spirituality of contemporary shamans and practising magicians as an example of secondary analysis of interview data.

**Key words:** extraordinary experiences; neo-shamanism; magicians; heterodox beliefs; lived spirituality; communicated versus lived experience; qualitative research; requirements set for researchers

## Introductory remarks

I should mention at the outset that I am neither a religious scholar nor a theologian. Spirituality was not the primary object of my field studies of contemporary Western shamans and practising magicians (occultists), which form the empirical basis of this article, nor did they focus on extraordinary experiences. However, such experiences receive above average attention because of my professional field, that of parapsychology and frontier areas in psychology. In retrospect my affiliation to the *Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene e.V.* was advantageous, because it opened doors more easily than a conventional scientific background would have done. It ensured a certain openness to extraordinary experiences on the researcher's part and elicited information that may have been hard to obtain otherwise. This is a basic point of my paper, on which I shall dwell later. The paper has three main objectives: to demonstrate the importance of extraordinary experiences in the adoption of heterodox worldviews and religious beliefs; to sketch different experiences of spirituality reported by magic practitioners and contemporary Western shamans; and finally, to emphasize the requirements that have to be met by researchers into extraordinary experiences.

## Theoretical approach

To conduct the two field studies that provided the empirical data for the work in hand I chose an empirical phenomenological approach with a broadly data-guided research strategy. Since I could draw on only a few earlier studies with a similar focus, and these were explorative, I observed a principle of openness and used the

method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The principle of “openness postpones the theoretical structure of the research object” (Hoffmann-Riehm 1980: 343),<sup>1</sup> that is it facilitates the emergence of its inherent structure. This general relinquishment of theoretical presuppositions about the research object and, therefore, the nature of the interviewees, is crucial when the research topic relates to heterodox worldviews. On the other hand, a totally naïve approach that professes to be absolutely ignorant of the theoretical structure and knowledge basis of such heterodox worldviews would not be profitable. It is necessary to understand the emic concepts to some degree in order to understand the ‘language’, as it were, of the interviewees. I will return to this point. My studies included semi-structured interviews (open, guideline-based interviews). An inductive (qualitative) research strategy entailing extensive interviews with expert subjects promises deeper insight into the nature of magical and shamanic practice and practitioners’ motivation than a deductive (quantitative, survey-based) approach.

## Empirical data base

Theme-centred, extensive interviews with seven contemporary shamans and eleven magic practitioners were conducted in 2001 (‘shamans’, cf. Mayer 2003, 2008b) and again in 2004-2005 (‘magicians’, cf. Mayer 2008a, 2009).<sup>2</sup> The main focuses of these

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<sup>1</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all translations of quotations from interviews are mine.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to explain the definition of a contemporary magician used in the selection of the sample. To me it signifies a person who performs magical practices either individually or in the context of a magical order, drawing on established Western magical traditions. People who perform magical rituals mainly in religious ceremonies, such as many neo-pagans, were not included. Investigating neo-pagans raises the problem of assessing their magical practice in relation to religious practice. By contrast, I focused on contemporary magicians who perform magical operations in a conscious, volitional way to obtain concrete effects by paranormal means. However, the distinction was sometimes difficult to maintain, because quite a number of practitioners are or were members of more than one group. Thus a Wiccan priest was a member of a magical

interviews were: the biographic framework of these shamanic and magic practices; the use of heterodox bodies of knowledge, methods/particular practices, experiences and evaluation of these practices; influence on beliefs and worldviews; and ethics and value orientation. A key question was how such uncommon practices can be incorporated, biographically and cognitively, into a modern culture with a dominant scientific, rationalistic worldview. The question is particularly interesting because many of these practitioners, while familiar with the discourse of academic rationality, do not conform to those explications. Hence the emic perspective is crucial if one wants to reconstruct their strategies of interpretation and integration of heterodox practices and knowledge. I did not opt for the commonly used cultural-historical approach to magic as an intellectual construct, or seeing it as a relatively homogeneous set of beliefs and concomitant practices, but chose an approach that took into account the biographies and experiences of the practitioners. As a parapsychologist I am particularly interested in extraordinary experiences and allegedly paranormal phenomena that occur in the context of such heterodox practices. The interview topics 'worldview/beliefs', the aforementioned 'extraordinary experiences' and the biographic framework of heterodox beliefs elicited some material on the dimension of spirituality. Hence I can review my interview data from that perspective.

## **Extraordinary experiences and the adoption of heterodox beliefs**

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order as well and performed both individual magic rituals and religio-magical ceremonies with a neo-pagan group.

First I must define extraordinary experiences as I use the term. It includes concepts such as anomalous, extraordinary, magical, mystical, paranormal, parapsychological, psychic, spiritual, supernatural, transcendent, transpersonal, and the like. According to Hofmann and Wiedemer (1997: 147 – my emphasis), “Such experiences go beyond the scope of the usual frame of reference, and they *seem to be inexplicable by, or explicitly contradictory to, conventional scientific models.*” The term ‘extraordinary experiences’ (hereafter EEs) is used in an ideologically neutral, general sense.<sup>3</sup> Obviously it indicates a ‘Western’ cultural perspective. Rhea White (2000), who did a lot of research in this field, compiled a comprehensive ‘List of potential EE/EHEs’, available on the internet, which gives an impression of the varieties of EEs. Some of the listed items appear odd, others are well-known. Apart from such a phenomenological description, a distinction between two categories of EEs seems useful (Mayer & Gründer 2011), in that it allows for the integration of EEs with the domain of everyday reality. The first category contains EEs with a basically confirmatory quality. They often occur in a religious context and, if so, are interpreted as a kind of mystic/gnostic experience. EEs in the second category display an additional feature that provides strong subjective evidence of being scientifically anomalous (‘paranormal’ phenomena). They go beyond the frame of reference of a religio-magical context in that they are likely to be intersubjectively interpreted as anomalies, independent of a particular worldview. However, the two EE categories cannot be strictly separated, because the characterization and categorization of a particular EE depends greatly on the interviewee’s and the researcher’s respective personal interpretations. The following example illustrates the two kinds of EEs. It is

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<sup>3</sup> White developed the concept of ‘exceptional human experiences’ (EHE) that is similar to the concept of EE. However, it implies “ongoing transformative after effects” in the sense of engaging “in a process of realizing their full human potential”(White 1999, without pagination). Thus the definition includes not only the experience and its interpretation by the person but also the consequences that the exceptional (or extraordinary) experience may have.

taken from a German field study of contemporary magicians (Mayer 2008a). The interviewee, a 40-year old man, had been studying magic since early adolescence and had had many EEs during his first years of practice. These were primarily strange coincidences ('synchronistic' events), interpreted as meaningful, that he considered evidential and that made him believe in magic. Some years later he joined the German section of the *Ordo Templis Orientis* (OTO). His initiation into that magical order was conducted by McMurtry, the former caliph of the Californian branch of the OTO. McMurtry, an elderly invalid at that time, performed an impressive ritual invoking the god Pan. He began to dance and went into ecstatic trance – in no way fragile or weak. Then something extraordinary and startling happened. Suddenly, without any introductory guided imagery, the neophyte observed an intensely glowing red ruby of enormous size appearing in mid air. It seemed to come spontaneously out of nowhere, as though it belonged to a second layer of reality overlying our everyday reality in a translucent manner. The interviewee reported:

"I felt such a fierce energy [...] Thus I really had the feeling: there is someone who can invoke extraordinary energies at will ... even ecstasy ... and self-abandonment ... and at the same time retain total control of it. And that had an impact on me. I think the first thing I wrote in my diary after I left was: Here and now [knocking loudly on the table] I truly realized for the first time that magic exists" (Mayer 2008: 158).

This quotation indicates that there are qualitative differences between EEs with regard to their efficacy in providing strong subjective evidence. Whereas EEs in the first category remain generally in the experiential domain of everyday reality and owe their extraordinary quality to subjective attribution of meaning and estimation of chance probability ('meaningful coincidences'), EEs in the second category concern incidents that transgress the borders of everyday reality.

Next I consider the functions of EEs in the process of adopting heterodox (alternative) beliefs. As I showed, in collaboration with my colleague René Gründer

(Mayer & Gründer 2011), they can fulfil different functions in regard to *personal worldview, identity construction, religious self-location*, and the *confirmation and further development* of a 'new' religious system.

### *Personal worldview*

If a magician experiences phenomena such as exploding light bulbs, malfunction of electric devices or the inexplicable spontaneous combustion of a ritual garment while performing a magic ritual, as was reported, he may well interpret these events as strong evidence that it is possible for the human mind to affect matter by paranormal means. The preferred explanatory models may differ greatly as regards their conformity with scientifically accepted physical models. In general EEs can provide subjective evidence for the existence of some kind of transcendent realm beyond everyday experience and the domain that is accessible to scientific exploration. This does not necessarily include belief in a formal religious system or a divine entity, but it can refer to paranormal beliefs that challenge the validity of familiar, broadly accepted scientific models. An example reported by a female shamanic practitioner touches the religious dimension. During a shamanic healing séance performed by a drumming circle the shamanic practitioner acted as a substitute for the ill person. Suddenly a luminous apparition of Jesus Christ materialized in the middle of the circle and was perceived by all the participants. The interviewee commented:

"I did not care two figs about Christ, that is about Catholicism, (...) but then, woosshh, he came exactly in between, all of us were gazing and were knocked over and humbled, and all at once nobody blasphemed anymore against Christ (...) he stood ... the heavens opened, zzzssshh, light came down, suddenly there is such a huge luminous figure" (Mayer 2003: 116).

This does not mean, of course, that these shamanic practitioners with an apparently critical attitude towards ecclesiastic Christianity were converted by the experience. But it changed their attitude towards Christ and Christian saints in general.

### *Construction of (biographic) identity*

EEs can become an important part of biographic identity construction. This is known from the extensive literature on religious conversion and mystical experience, such as the work of William James (1902) and writings on religious conversion (e.g. Lofland & Skonovd 1981; Hood 2005). In her interview study of the biographical meaning of EEs Schäfer (2012) detected three basic patterns for interpreting EEs in terms of normalization versus individuation (*Besonderung*). The first pattern interprets EEs as evidence or expressions of one's own specialness. The second interprets them as a kind of desirable anomaly in an otherwise normal biography. According to the final pattern EEs are a possible expression of one's own specialness that is, however, continually renegotiated. In my interview data the first pattern predominates. This is obvious in the case of contemporary shamanism, because the myth of the shamanic figure includes his specialness: the shaman is marked by divine election, often manifested in an initiatory sickness (Eliade 1974, pp. 33-64; Mayer 2008b). In this context EEs acquire a clear confirmatory function as indicators justifying the role ascription of a shaman or shamanic healer. But among contemporary magicians, too, we find an affinity with the pattern of specialness. Persons who devote their time intensively to occult and esoteric knowledge and practices have always been seen as peculiar, corresponding to the present-day definition of the social role of a magician. Common biographic features of the



contemporary magicians interviewed in my field study include marked individualism, unusual interests during adolescence, premature preoccupation with philosophical and ideological questions, and an element of rebellion and maladjustment in various forms and to varying degrees (Mayer 2008a, pp. 131-143; Mayer 2009). The following example may demonstrate this. A 39-year-old magician reported a dramatic incident in early childhood that was burned into his memory. One night he experienced two apparitions, which – after a short spell of curious observation – frightened him so much that he loudly alerted his mother. The remarkable thing was that, even as a little child, he realized that the perception was not an everyday event but an anomaly. During his childhood and early adolescence he experienced further EEs, which he only came to understand much later. He now associates his early tendency to self-chosen social isolation with these experiences, because he longed for privacy to reflect on these things.

Regardless of the meaning of EEs for individuation, they are often important landmarks on the biographic path towards magical beliefs or a new worldview. Luhmann (1989) emphasizes this aspect with her thesis of an interpretive shift to the establishment of magical beliefs, and in her aforementioned study Schäfer (2012: 113-170) found three different basic patterns of interpreting EEs as part of biographic change processes. In two of them EEs play a prominent role in the biographic narration: as starting points or triggers for the change process, or as turning points or climaxes in a complex process of change comprising different phases. The following example illustrates the starting-point quality of an EE, which was interpreted – retrospectively – as a synchronistic event in the Jungian sense. During his early teens the interviewee, the 40-year-old magic practitioner mentioned previously, developed a vague interest in the person of Aleister Crowley, evoked by a photograph he had seen in an encyclopaedia of occult sciences, which showed

Crowley as a weird outsider with a turban on his head. Some years later he happened to be browsing in a bookshop and found a photocopied German translation of Crowley's *The Book of Thot*. At that time, during the 1970s, almost no German translations of Crowley's books were available (only some rare and expensive antiquarian books from the early decades of the 20th century). The interviewee reported:

“When I got it into my hands it was like a bolt of lightning [spelled out loud], because ... it is kind of ... how shall I express it? I had a feeling the whole day that something strange was happening (...) At that time of my life I dealt a lot with questions about human consciousness, and at that moment that book came into my hands (...) I was very excited, because I knew: if I take that book with me, it will change my life!”

### *Religious self-location and confirmation*

Many New Religious Movements (NRM) emphasize personal experience as an important element of contemporary religious expression (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: passim). In fact, having spiritual experiences, for example, has become essential for contemporary pagan identities. A common narrative in such groups is the experience of homecoming, which among Wiccans has virtually gained the status of a theological principle. This experience of “coming home, of coming back to where your [humanity] started from” (found on the Internet site “AllExperts”, quoted in Mayer & Gründer 2010: 398) helps one to find one's place in the NRM, and it helps with religious self-location. Although the homecoming experience must not be interpreted as an EE according to our definition above, there are some structural similarities, and sometimes it is seen as the “call of the Goddess” (Mayer & Gründer 2010: 398). EEs can promote this process of religious self-location by proving the authenticity of

spiritual experience, as well as confirming faith in a newly adopted religion or spiritual belief system and turning it into certainty.<sup>4</sup> This is illustrated by the report of a female German shaman<sup>5</sup> who performed a so-called neo-shamanic journey in order to help a client's son with recurrent psychological problems. She did not know any particulars or circumstances, nor was she previously acquainted with the client or her son, who were present during the ritual. The shaman reported her experiences combining images from her shamanic 'journey' with perceptions of phenomena which she located in her home environment:

"I went on the journey, and my power animal and my spirit helper went ahead, and I got to Haiti ... to such a voodoo priest, huh? And I sat alone in my house [where she performed the 'journey'] – I know, the house has beams, and when people are walking [somewhere in another room of the house] I perceive that. Well – I was alone in the house ... and I came to the ... house of this voodoo priest, and then ... someone ran through the room, huohhhh [she took a deep breath]. I already felt weak at the knees [laughed], and my power animal said to me immediately: Turn around! Turn around! Immediately, away, huh? And I turned around and away. And thereafter I reported to the mother what had happened, and then she said to me that her son had married a woman in Haiti whose father is a voodoo priest ... and he was totally against the marriage, and she also suggested that for that reason her son behaves strangely like this, huh? .. that was once that I was frightened [during a shamanic journey] (...) but I immediately realized that my power animal protects me and says: You can go this far, turn around, don't move on, not one step further (...), and it was quite unequivocal about it, that that involves a force which you are not able to handle

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<sup>4</sup> I do not want to dwell on the debate on differentiating between religiosity and spirituality (see Zinnbauer, Pargament & Scott 1999 for an overview). On the one hand I follow these authors in trying to avoid polarizations of these constructs and seeing religion as a broad-band construct, with spirituality as a more specific search for the sacred (my etic point of view). On the other hand I respect the interpretation of the experiences by the interviewees (emic characterization). If an interviewee refers to an EE as a spiritual experience I can only speculate about his own conception of spirituality. Thus the usage of the two terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' will have to remain somewhat fuzzy.

<sup>5</sup> Many contemporary shamans in Western societies would reject being referred to as shamans: they prefer to call themselves shamanic practitioners, taking into account the cultural background of 'real' (= native) shamans.

(...) and therefore I totally relied on it (...) Now I don't get into such situations anymore, because I feel it already in my bones, yes, and my power animal protects me, huh? I simply rely on it."

This is not the place to speculate on what 'really' happened during that journey, but the structure of the narration includes various elements that make the confirmatory quality of the EE obvious. We find a pre-existing spiritual belief system that entails a more or less animistic (neo-shamanic) worldview, as well as belief in the efficacy of the communication with some personal spiritual entities based on past experience. On this particular journey the shaman was confronted with darker sides of so-called non-ordinary reality (NOR). The frightening quality of the experience stemmed, on the one hand, from the dark, powerful character of the voodoo priest himself and, on the other hand, from the strange phenomena she perceived in her home environment, which she interpreted as psychokinetic. She reported two forms of confirmation of her belief system: one through the warning and protective reaction of her power animal during the journey into the domain of NOR, and another through the client's statements, which 'validated' the images perceived during the journey and suggested an everyday, reality-based frame of interpretation. Experiencing the helpful and meaningful reaction of a spiritual entity in a critical situation during an altered state of consciousness may strengthen faith in the spiritual belief system and enhance reliance upon and certainty about the efficacy of the spirit communication.

The wish to distinguish subjectivist, experience-oriented religions from traditional faith-oriented religions can underlie another function of EE. A growing number of members of NRM such as neo-pagans underscore so-called UPG (= unverified personal gnosis) in the construction of religious knowledge (MacMorgan 2003: 23-31). Although the concept of personal gnosis is not new at all (cf. e.g.

James 1902), it has become an identity marker for many of the younger neo-pagan groups.<sup>6</sup> An example from a study of German Ásatrú, conducted by my colleague René Gründer (2010), illustrates the main functions of UPG. Two interviewees described the transformation of a UPG into a collective ritual and general religious knowledge. To ensure dry weather during an upcoming ritual to be performed together with another Ásatrú group from the Netherlands, the two tried to ‘bribe’ the weather god Thor by offering him a bottle of beer if the weather cleared. The attempt was successful:

“Well, then the clouds lifted a bit, then even the sun was shining a bit, that was a very beautiful atmosphere (...) After that we kept our promise, took a bottle of beer, and because we were a threesome, each of us put one hand on the bottle, we shook it well (...) and emptied it on the ground (...). And yes, since that time, we do this every time we meet the Dutch. And it has nothing to do with the weather any more, but with community – we meet each other and therefore it becomes important that Thor brought us together with this *blót* [sacrifice] to him.” (Unpublished part of an interview, translated by René Gründer.)

This example illustrates the collectivization of EE, understood as a validation of religious knowledge. It confirms the personal and collectively shared worldviews (existence of interventionist gods), shapes the group identity, and works normatively as a way of extrapolating the lore. Because the adherents of modern paganism try to fill gaps in their reconstructions of traditional religions with their personal (or shared)

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<sup>6</sup> In this context, of course, the distinction between the two forms of religion is based on emic conceptions. In many NRMs a striving for demarcation of traditional forms of religion is obvious, as in the aforementioned use of the neo-pagans’ homecoming experience. This narrative is conceptualized as an alternative form of religious conversion experience and it distinguishes – as Harvey (1999) puts it – between conventional ‘conversion to’ a new religion and ‘conversion from’, e.g., Christianity, and reverting to paganism or ‘coming out’ as a pagan; see Mayer & Gründer (2010).

religious experiences, the concept of UPG actually permits the creation of fragments of new religious dogma out of EE.

## **Forms of lived spirituality among contemporary magicians and Western shamanic practitioners**

Neo-shamanic and magical occult rituals can be seen as both pragmatic rites relating to everyday issues and as spiritual practices. This depends on the individual practitioner's approach. Whereas the shaman fulfils a wide range of functions in traditional shamanistic communities, the focus of interested Westerners is manifestly on the functions of healer and spiritual teacher (Mayer 2003). Thus shamanic techniques are seen as part of the fields of complementary medicine, personal growth, self-empowerment and counselling in the broadest sense. For many contemporary Western shamans the introductory courses offered by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies – an organization established by the American anthropologist Michael Harner in 1985 – are a gateway to their practice (Jakobsen 1999; Mayer 2003; Znamenski 2007: 233-272). Harner tries to free indigenous shamanic techniques from their cultural context so as to achieve a universal form reduced to its core elements. He emphasizes that this represents a pure technique. However, the practice of core shamanism apparently combines techniques of altering consciousness with specific religious beliefs.<sup>7</sup> As a result I received varying answers to the question about the nature of the practice and its reference to religion. One interviewee said that shamanism is exclusively about experiencing, not about

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<sup>7</sup> Townsend (2004) counts core shamanism among the individualistic religious movements that have become increasingly prominent in recent decades – a classification that does not accord with core shamanism's self-definition as simply a technique for gaining knowledge. Yet it reflects the approach of most core shamanic practitioners.

believing. A second maintained that at some point shamanic practice leads to a religious attitude. Yet another interviewee commented that shamanism is

“... primarily a technique, an attitude towards life, a way of life, a way of personal development, not a religion, although one would have to talk about religion now. Shamanism brings one close to the fields of religion or belief systems. As time goes by, one experiences that the saying ‘everything is animated’ describes a reality, that a stone has a being, that a leaf has a being, that a plastic cup has a soul. One might say that in this respect shamanism has a quasi-religious quality. (...) It can turn into quasi-religious belief systems for individuals or groups.”

Another interviewee clearly demonstrated this ambivalence in the relationship between neo-shamanic practice and religion:

“For me personally ... [shamanism] is life. It is not a tool or a religion, it is existence, or rather a particular form of existence that is connected with the spirits, with the worlds ... It is not a religion because I don’t necessarily believe it; it is experience (...) there is no theory behind it, and it is experiencing life.”

Although many contemporary shamans allow for psychodynamic interpretations of shamanic experiences, considering these a suitable model for Western secularized societies, the shamanic cosmology itself and the experiences resulting from practice incline them towards heterodox models. An animistic worldview and the assumption of universal connectedness, rather than psychological views, accord better with many of their experiences. The latter interpret the manifold actions and entities in the ‘other world’, in the NOR, as an entirely inward experience, while the former take those entities to be externally existing realities. The apparition of a luminous figure interpreted as Jesus Christ illustrates the problem participants may have with a

conventional psychological interpretation: the allegedly identical perception of the apparition by a group of people made a clear impression of an external figure appearing in their spatial midst. On the other hand, the same female contemporary shaman who reported this experience said that sometimes she also perceived the figure of Christ inwardly.

Like neo-shamanic practices, magical practices (in the sense of Western occultism) can be performed as either pragmatic, non-spiritual actions or as spiritual practices. The former are often referred to as 'low' or 'practical' magic, whereas the latter are called 'high' magic. The rituals themselves do not necessarily differ much – it is the purpose that makes the difference, as well as the general attitude of the magician. Another distinguishing factor is the magical system or school the magician adheres to: It makes a difference whether it is one of the so-called Western mystery schools, which are strongly influenced by 19th century Western esoteric traditions, or one of the Thelemic and magical Gnostic groups, a chaos magic order, or a satanic group. But despite substantial differences between these approaches to magic (cf. Mayer 2008a, pp. 29-63 for an overview) I found that practitioners almost invariably had spiritual or religious interests in the broadest sense (Mayer 2008a, 2009). These could concern new-religious spirituality as an alternative to traditional ecclesial religiosity, a search for an individual, experience-based spirituality, or a belief that ceremonial magical rituals are closely related to Christian liturgy. This is not the right place to go into the individual differences in detail. In general one might describe it as a particular interest in transcendental issues.

One interviewee, for example, developed an interest in 'occultism' when he was preparing a talk on that topic in his religion class in grammar school. Later, at university, he wrote a master's thesis on the polymath and occult authority Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535). At the same time he was trained as a magician in a



Western mystery school. Following the prominent Renaissance esoteric, he refers to magic as the science of the soul and of the effects the soul can have. It is the doctrine of how the soul 'functions', how one can deal with it, and how it can be 'used'. Thus for that interviewee magic is linked to a spiritual path, because its aim is to develop the soul, and the purpose of soul development is enhanced self-awareness or self-knowledge. For him the divine is part of the human, and the human is part of the divine.

A female practitioner, who is also a member of a Western mystery school order, uses a spiritual ladder as a metaphor of the aim of her magical practice. Climbing that ladder means reaching 'other' (= non-ordinary) realms of reality where one gets in touch with non-human entities. Taking the notion of such realms of reality seriously is the result of her own early experiences in the context of meditation and yoga practices as well as other consciousness enhancement techniques, before her involvement with magical rituals. She said:

"I often observed a certain seesawing, which simply depended on how strongly one put oneself into which world. ... And eventually, eventually it changed sides. [...] there were, yes, quite individual experiences in which I simply noticed that there is something, and – and there is also, as it were ... there are beings with whom one can work [...] yes, I don't know ... I think it is a decision. It is a decision to say at a certain point: this is now my worldview."

One interviewee, who calls himself a Satanist and who is a member of the organization "Current of Seth",<sup>8</sup> interprets this approach as spirituality without an after

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<sup>8</sup> This version of Satanism does not position itself as an antipode to Christianity (in the sense of a negative copy) but as a particular attitude to life and human existence (cf. Mayer 2008a).

world but with an “otherworld” in this world, understood as a functional working hypothesis. He commented:

“I believe that almost all satanic currents have realized that a human being – most humans, there may be exceptions – feels a need for spiritual experience. But just going a step further by saying: OK, we must not necessarily fill this spiritual experience with concepts of gods and with a rigid religion, such a thing must not be prescribed to us (...) there is the possibility to construct such a spiritual system around the single person, around an individual, in a way that is healthy nonetheless – in my context, that enhances growth.”

For another interviewee, who mostly pursued his ‘magical career’ individually, magic constitutes a means of awareness-raising and mind-altering, which includes aspects of pragmatic coping with life and self-development. The latter he calls an “inner education” that one undergoes, and “that one can enhance with techniques of magic”. “Opening the self to higher issues” automatically results in higher development of the self.

One interviewee has an interesting biography in the context of this paper insofar as he studied theology at the Pontific Gregorian University in Rome and afterwards joined the occult order *Fraternitas Saturni*. His controversial character attracted a lot of attention on the occult scene, because his aim was to make magic rituals public and promote magic to a socially enshrined position. He strived for a ‘de-occultization’ of magic, as it were. After that biographic phase the Christian creed regained importance for him and eventually he was ordained a priest of a Free Catholic church. As a faithful Catholic he refrains from performing magic rituals (in the conventional sense) and only celebrates mass and the liturgy of the hours. However, he acknowledges the merit of his magic/occult phase:

“I adhere to my past as well as to my present and my future. Magic put me in touch with transcendence in the first place, something that neither my family nor communism could do. And in transcendence – and that is a lavish present of faith – I got to know Christ. And then I became aware of ... like a railway ticket when you sit on the train (...) you don't need the ticket anymore afterwards. (...) With my occult time it was exactly the same. I took the train, I have arrived here, I don't need the ticket *Fraternitas Saturni*, occult rituals and so on, Crowley – I don't need them anymore.”

## **Extraordinary experiences as important factors in lived spirituality**

While the foregoing statements about spirituality were more or less abstract, the interviewees reported powerful experiences that can be contextualized in a framework of spirituality. However, the notion of spirituality is not mentioned explicitly in every case. For one interviewee a kind of spontaneous mystical experience (“I define it for myself as a little experience of enlightenment”) was the starting point of his serious engagement with magical practice. Such incidents afford mind-expanding insight, although he has difficulty putting them into words. He described the experience as follows:

“I was sitting as I'm sitting and talking here with you now, and all of a sudden ... something flashed through me, yes, I cannot describe it, I can only say (...) that it really was a kind of light experience (...) as if everything suddenly got brighter inside one's head (...). The interesting thing was that, for a split of a second, you (...) know everything, all possible answers or explanations that you have been searching for all along (...) in that short moment you have that feeling: suddenly it's all there!”

Experiences such as this one that clearly was highly subjective cannot be made objective. Similar accounts are known (cf. e.g. James 1902), but the experience itself is not directly accessible to anyone other than the person herself. It can only be shared by way of a narration that turns the individual life experience into an interpreted experience based on shared knowledge (cf. Mayer & Gründer 2010).<sup>9</sup>

Finally I must mention a category of extraordinary experiences to demonstrate some other aspects of the relationship with lived spirituality. I will call the underlying occurrences 'extraordinary weather phenomena'. The following examples should make it clear. Weather phenomena of highly subjective evidence and intensity are reported by three members of the magician sample and are experienced as non-intentional accompanying effects of magic rituals. The first person described a spiritual fire ceremony that was performed out of doors on a calm, pleasant summer evening. During an invocation of a "certain form of dynamic force" a stormy wind suddenly arose that made the flames flare wildly. At the end of the ceremony the wind calmed down again. In the case of a second magician something happened during an invocation of the god Pan that he performed one night, in the presence of some friends, in the open air under an overcast sky. At the climax of the incantation of the magical spell the heavily clouded sky suddenly cleared and the full moon became visible. The magician commented:

"That was absolutely unforeseeable, and the interesting thing is, I had not intended it at all. It also does not make sense. Well, it is not connected with the purpose of the ritual in any way. (...) But it was kind of astonishing, and all the people present had

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<sup>9</sup> This distinction is reflected in the German language with the expressions Erlebnis (experience in the sense of a purely individual impression – lived experience) and Erfahrung (social experience, based on shared knowledge – interpreted experience).

the feeling that there existed – not causally linked in the common sense, but rather in a higher, a deeper sense (...) – a direct and undeniable connection between the ritual and that natural phenomenon.”

A third magician experienced something very similar during the initiation of a ‘Saturn master’. At the very moment that he uttered the words “Let there be light!” lightning flashed suddenly and unexpectedly. The interviewee took it as an example of a synchronistic event (in Carl Jung’s sense) and commented: “One can also call it ‘chance’, or ‘God’, or neither of these. Anyway, they [the participants] felt somehow that there was something.”

These weather phenomena have in common that they can all be experienced collectively. Thus the experiences become objectifiable to a certain extent. Although every participant in a spiritual ritual is fully aware that such coincidences of ritualistic activity and weather phenomena can occur by chance, the commonly shared experience in a framework of spiritual meaning makes them reject this possibility on an emotional level. The nature of weather phenomena largely defies the possibility of human control. Hence they are a particularly apt realm of alleged divine intervention, since the experience of being at the mercy of benevolent ‘weather gods’ is deeply rooted in human nature.

On the whole such EEs become part of lived, experience-oriented spirituality (conceived of as the search for experience of the sacred in a general sense). For the persons involved the occurrences may sometimes be powerfully convincing manifestations of the transcendent, sometimes less so – for many of them they seem to be highlights of their spiritual lives. However, this hypothesis derives from the way the interviewees talked about such EEs in the context of the interviews. It needs validation through hypothesis testing research.

## Specific thematically determined requirements set for the researcher

In the introduction I referred to requirements set for the researcher who wants to conduct field studies of heterodox beliefs and EEs. The first requirement I mentioned was openness to the possibility of experiencing paranormal phenomena. Such phenomena are not part of the generally accepted scientific model of reality that dominates our secularized society. Hence people run a real risk of being stigmatized in Western society that is deeply pre-structured by rationality. This usually leads to the use of specific, secure jargon ('shielded communication') that is a hallmark of reports of EEs (Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche 2005). 'Shielded communication' is characterized by various strategies such as the repeated assurance that the reporter is neither crazy nor naïve, stressing that one's powers of recollection are excellent, eliminating other logical possibilities of conventional explanations, citing witnesses and (scientific) 'experts' on the paranormal. Such strategies don't necessarily have to be explicit. They can be assimilated into the very construction of the narration (Wooffitt 1992; Bender 2007; Lamont 2007; Childs & Murray 2010). These strategies highlight a research problem. The interviewee initially scrutinizes the interviewer's attitude towards the contents to be reported as well as his emic knowledge (one magician said to me: "Well, I see you have done your homework"). They tend to shape their narrations according to the anticipated expectations or attitudes. This is not new – Favret-Saada (1980) demonstrated it as early as the 1970s in her impressive field study. Nevertheless it is of major importance, as we found in our own fieldwork. The impression the interviewee gets from the researcher, based on his questions and general attitude, shapes the narration the researcher will eventually hear. Furthermore, and this is a methodological commonplace today, the phrasing of interview questions and the conduct of the interview in general have a great impact

on the outcome. Thus one always has to keep in mind that the interview data reflect the social (inter)action in the particular context in which it is conducted, and that this must be accounted for (Childs & Murray 2010).

Another important issue is the relation between communicated experiences (*Erfahrung*) and underlying lived experiences (*Erlebnisse*).<sup>10</sup> The reported EEs and biographic elements are often embedded in commonly shared narratives (Mayer & Gründer 2010; also see Bender 2007).

In the case of neo-pagan religion the aforementioned homecoming experience is such a widespread narrative. It is a particular kind of conversion narrative. With its serial character it has taken on a life of its own as a narrative ‘identity module’, which literally encases the individual experiential account and its experiential character. This problem is relevant to interview studies of EEs in general. Bender (2007: 214) demonstrated “how account and experience are tied together in a complex relation to each other, and to the embodied cultural and social worlds in which they are experienced and expressed”. If the researcher is not only interested in the question of the knowledge of particular narratives, which are applied to particular contexts, but also in the underlying personal (lived) experiences, and possibly even in the actual events which caused the EE, he has to deal with that.

## Concluding remarks

To return to a point mentioned in the beginning: spirituality was not the primary focus of my field studies, so I didn’t conduct them with a particular theoretical concept of spirituality in mind. Explorative post hoc analysis of my interview data yielded some

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<sup>10</sup> See footnote 9. These two categories can be supplemented with a third: actual (objective) events (*Ereignisse*). Such an actual event indicates a fact, an occurrence, the existence of which is considered independent of the human act of perception (although it demands a human observer to record it as a datum). According to this conception an *Erlebnis* provides subjective, an *Erfahrung* intersubjective, and an *Ereignis* objective evidence.

findings on spirituality experienced in the context of neo-shamanic and magic rituals, as well as some individual approaches to religiosity and spirituality. Although the samples were small and generalizability of the results is therefore limited, a variety of aspects of spirituality can be observed that may stimulate other researchers.

However, because the interviews were conducted with a different aim in view, I cannot provide explicit information on the interviewees' central ideas on (lived) spirituality. Having no training in religious studies, I have to leave in-depth analysis and attempts at systematization to experts.

Secondly, I need to point out another methodological aspect. If one investigates 'difficult' topics such as spirituality in a theory-driven way by addressing it directly, it may lead to predefined results that may accord with existing (etic) conceptualizations but run the risk of disregarding individual understanding based on personal experience. Such results will not reflect the varieties of experienced spirituality. Another possibility would be to examine interview data gathered in the context of a different, albeit related, research problem regarding aspects of spirituality. The benefit of such an approach is that, because the references to spirituality arise naturally from the conversation, the interviewer (given skilled and open conversation techniques) avoids the risk of his own (theoretical) presuppositions, reflected in his questions, shaping the answers too much. If there are enough references to spirituality, one can try to integrate them with existing concepts on the one hand, and test existing concepts against the data on the other. Thus secondary analysis of appropriate interview data can be profitable and thought-provoking for explorative purposes, as I hope I have demonstrated.



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