



**Chrtc 390 Module 10 Slides  
by Heather Looy and Paul  
Flaman: Extraordinary Religious  
Experiences**

# Extraordinary Religious Experience by Paul Flaman

## Prophecy and the Bible

- **In the ancient East there were seers and divination**
- **There was a variety among the Old Testament prophets:**
  - True prophets are all called and animated by the Spirit of God. The initiative is entirely God's. The prophets spoke God's word. They denounced offences against God's Law and falsification of true religion. They spoke not only of punishment for sin but of a God of love who pardons, is merciful and builds up. They often experienced their mission as a burden, were often not listened to, and many were murdered (e.g. under Ahab & Jehoiakim).
  - False prophets speak on their own initiative, often what people (sinners) want to hear rather than calling people to be faithful to God's Word and Law. See, e.g., Ezk 13:1-8 and Jer 5:23-31.
  - Prophecy, the priesthood and the king were interdependent pillars of the community for much of Israel's history.
  - Moses was unequalled among the prophets; Israel awaited an Anointed One (Messiah) who would be greater than Moses.

# Extraordinary Religious Experience

## Prophecy and the Bible continued:

- **Jesus fulfills and completes O.T. prophecy and law**
  - As the Word of God incarnate he transcends the prophetic office and inaugurates the New Covenant
  - He warned of false prophets--one can know them by their fruits
  - The Gospels report Jesus as performing miracles and exorcisms
- **Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit**
  - Prophecy is seen as one among a variety of charisms for building up the Church. Charisms should be used in keeping with a God not of disorder but of peace. Paul notes that love (*agape*) is the greatest gift (1 Cor 12-14). He warns Christians not to accept a different Gospel from false apostles; even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). Unclean spirits (demons) are responsible for false teachings (1 Tm 4:1) and can work wonders (Rev. 13). Christians should test the spirits to see whether they are from God (1 Jn 4:1). The Sadducees denied the existence of angels and spirits (Ac 23:8) but not the Pharisees or Paul.

# Extraordinary Religious Experience

## **Prophecy (private revelation) and the Church:**

- Public (official) revelation was completed with the death of the last Apostle; no further public revelation is expected before the Second Coming:
  - Private (unofficial) revelation involves the same charism of prophecy (cf. the Apostle Paul, *Didache*, theologians...)
  - The mission of many saints involves private revelation (e.g., Catherine of Siena, Bernadette). A number of Catholic feasts (e.g., Sacred Heart of Jesus, Divine Mercy Sunday) and approved pilgrimage sites (e.g., Lourdes, Fatima, Gaudalupe) are related to private revelations. Cf. von Balthasar re renewal movements.
  - Karl Rahner: public revelation teaches; private is regarding something to be done (e.g., convert, pray for sinners...)
  - The Catholic Church hierarchy is cautious regarding extraordinary religious experiences since they often involve illusion, even fraud; approval means permission to publish for benefit of the faithful, they contain nothing contrary to faith and morals.

# Extraordinary Religious Experience

## How should we interpret these?

- **Cf. Jordan Aumann (Reading 237-55) and discernment of spirits...**
  - Based on the Bible (e.g., consider “fruits,” anything contrary to what God/Jesus has revealed?), experiences and writings of mystics / saints, e.g., Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross ..., Catholic practise--faith, reason, parsimony & cautious in making judgments.
  - Consider extraordinary religious experiences and various signs of the activity of God, demonic spirits and the human spirit / imagination, and distinctions re: natural created beings’ powers vs. God’s power (cf. miracles).
- **Re: Hildegard of Bingen’s visions:**
  - Oliver Sacks interprets these as migraine hallucinations; a committee of theologians at the time considered them authentic; she is an informal ‘saint’ with many miracles, also after her death.

# Extraordinary Religious Experiences

## **Do God, angels, demons ... exist and cause some of these?**

- Some (not all) theologians ... understand angels and demons as language of mythology to personify good and evil.
- The Church has always taught their existence: God's good creation includes angels--invisible intelligent personal spiritual beings; some of these (Satan and other demons rebelled against God and became malicious through their own free will.

## **Consider, e.g., also:**

- Michael Persinger's helmet using magnetic field stimulation to induce hallucinations (See Reading 211-19)
- John Eccles' dualist interactionism hypothesis (Reading 321-9) and Nancy Murphy's non-reductive physicalism (Reading 311-19) re: various explanations and how God (also angels & demons) could cause visions, etc.
- Extraordinary religious experiences raise interesting questions regarding causality and ontology.
- Re: various interpretations consider, e.g., the presuppositions / beliefs of an atheist/materialist, a deist and a theist.



# Extraordinary Religious Experiences

Dr. Heather Looy's Slides slightly  
adapted by Paul Flaman

- Ancient history of ERE's:
  - cultural rituals, rites of passage/maturity
  - a central part of many foundational stories in religious traditions
  - Eleusinian mysteries: Greek; ergot (kykeon)
  - psilocybin, ibogaine, peyote

# Extraordinary Religious Experiences

## Definitions:

- “direct sensory awareness of God”
- perception that has a numinous-mystical feeling
  - visual, auditory, imaginative, cognitive elements

## Can science legitimately examine ERE's?

- if *solely* aspects of immaterial / supernatural reality--no
- if experienced by *fully* embodied beings--yes



# Extraordinary Religious Experiences

## What has science learned about ERE's?

- they can be deliberately induced:
  - Psilocybin : The Good Friday experiment 1962
    - Walter Pahnke, Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert
  - transcranial magnetic stimulation
    - Michael Persinger
  - meditation & prayer
    - Andrew Newberg, Eugene d'Aquili
  - group rituals (e.g., drumming, dancing, chanting)
- they can occur as a result of disease, brain dysfunction
  - temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE)
  - mental illness/psychosis
  - migraine (e.g., Hildegard of Bingen)

# Extraordinary Religious Experiences

## Interpretation of the scientific data:

- is religion inherently pathological?
  - psychiatry, Marx, Freud
  - contrast with 'truly' psychotic experiences
  - R.D. Laing: psychotics are "in" their minds, not out of them--accessing elements the sane cannot reach
    - affliction may be attempt to find deeper meaning
- are ERE's inherently neutral? (because ambiguous)
  - not necessarily; but God can transform any experience
  - e.g., Hildegard: migraines transformed into deeply meaningful experiences, providing spiritual insight
- does God ever deliberately induce ERE's?
  - not a question science can address

# Extraordinary Religious Experiences

- Can/should scientists *reduce* ERE's to neural / physiological aspects? No.
  - data underdetermine the theory:
    - religious experience “nothing but” abnormal neural activity creating hallucinations
    - embodiment of religious experience evidence that God created us to perceive spiritual reality and relate to it
  - but: how can immaterial reality interact with material?

## Psychiatrists (some) and the Pope agree:

- “a full understanding of an individual must take into account the spiritual dimension and capacity for self-transcendence” (Shorto)