

FIND FORUM 2018

ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH

Subject description

In the course of human history, religion has been defined in different ways and according to different variables (constitution of society, role of institutions, dynamics of power, idea of tradition, etc.), but there seems to be a kind of invariant when it comes to a definition of *religious experience*, individual or collective. This pattern concerns a transformation of the experiencing subject(s) that consists in breaking or surpassing the framework of every-day consciousness to open it to another (broader, deeper, ultimate) reality. Philological, historical and ethnographic data clearly show that in all times and in different societies, human beings attempted to break the boundaries of individuality in order to find, preserve, intensify or expand a “meaning” beyond those boundaries. In this way, their world experience was modified on an individual and collective level. If the semantics of the term “religion” becomes fully detached from this pattern of experience, the notion itself risks losing its concrete basis and becoming a mere abstraction.

The fundamental level of religious experience as a process implying organic, psychic, relational and even environmental changes was largely trivialized, attacked and overshadowed by the institutional power of monotheistic religions (especially European Christianity) due to their exclusive notion of “truth”. As a transmitted pattern of experience, this religious experience survived in different undercurrents of ritualized practices usually rejected or played down as “mystic”, “superstitious” or (worse) “demonic”. Today, with the increasing interest in intercultural studies world-wide as well as the growing awareness of the intrinsic diversity of the notion of “religion”, the question of “altered states of consciousness” begins to regain its terrain and be treated – perhaps for the first time – with a lesser amount of prejudices. Its reinsertion in a broader context of religious experience including ritual, sexuality, dance, psychotropic substances, trance and meditation is a *desideratum* to better understand the human experience.

Alain Daniélou referred to the question of “altered states of consciousness” in different parts of his written production. He spoke about the religious content of the sexual act in books like *The Hindu Temple: Divinization of Eroticism*, *The Mystery of the Cult of Lingam*, *The Phallus*, *Shiva and Dionysus* and even in his autobiography, *The Way to the Labyrinth*. He also treated subjects like ritual, dance and meditation in *Hindu Polytheism*, *Shiva and the Primordial Tradition* and *Yoga: the Method of Re-Integration*. His contribution to the Latin- American journal *Takiwasi* (in 1992) on psychotropic substances and their relationship with Shamans, Sādhus and Yogis bears witness of his open-mindedness and lack of prejudice as well as his sensibility and respect for marginalized or neglected religious phenomena.

Following Alain Daniélou’s intuitions on the roots of religious experience and taking the notion of “altered states of consciousness” as the leading reference for an open discussion on the meaning and value of ritual, trance and possession, sexuality, psychotropic substances and meditation, FIND’s Forum proposes an event in which different experiential frameworks involving “altered states of consciousness” may be expounded and analyzed. The forum intends to approach transformative experiences in different cultural contexts and related to different modalities of religious phenomena: The role of sexuality in Tantric ritual, the way in which possession is viewed in non-Christian contexts (from South India to Africa and Brazil), the patterned dynamics of rituals (as a universal token of religious experience), the value of psychotropic substances on an individual and collective level in Amerindian religions and the perspective of Depth Psychology on certain phenomena defying scientific parameters of explanation, like trance and ecstasy.

Modality of the forum

With the Forum “Transcultural Encounters”, FIND intends to create an open space of reflection where participants meet to share and deepen their knowledge and experience on interculturally related subjects in a three-day exchange at Alain Daniélou’s place: the Labyrinth. The forum will be focused mainly on discussions and will try to reduce monologues and self-referential talks to the minimal necessary amount.

To mitigate the risk of falling back on generalities and missing the main thread that unifies the diversity of viewpoints, speakers are asked to submit their written contributions at least ten days before the date of the forum, so that every other participant may have the opportunity of

reading the texts and thinking out different points of discussion during the forum. The philosophy of FIND's Forum is to arrive at a level of exchange in which scholarly modes of self-immunization are clearly reduced, permitting thus an open debate and an honest consideration of other standpoints than the one each speaker (as the bearer of a specialized knowledge) is familiar with.

The duration of the forum will be three days (tentatively from November 9 to 11, 2018). The venue will be The Labyrinth, a residential place at Zagarolo, Rome. Contributions will be read either in their full extent or in the form of a conceptual summary in a length of time no longer than 30 minutes. For the ensuing discussion, 45 to 60 minutes will be accorded. The stay at the Labyrinth will also provide the opportunity of interactions during breakfast, lunch and dinner as well as during coffee breaks with the possibility of promenades on the premises.